

## In Joseph's Sandals

Matthew 1:18-25

December 10, 2017



One of the challenges to understanding God's Word is that it was written thousands of years ago. The culture and practices of people living back then are often incredibly different than those of today. So, today, I'd like us to "walk a mile in Joseph's shoes." And this already illustrates my opening point: Joseph didn't wear shoes! At least, not the kind of shoes most of us wear, especially this time of year. Joseph wore sandals! With that image in mind, perhaps we can now begin to understand just a little better what it may have felt like to walk in Joseph's sandals.

One thing we'll notice if we walk a mile in Joseph's sandals is that...

1. Joseph was a man with a special lineage. The Jewish people tended to keep track of their ancestry. For example, keep your finger in Matthew 1, but turn briefly in your Bible to Luke 1. Last week Scott Engelstad taught us that Luke 1:5 says, "In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron."

People from prominent Jewish families likely kept even closer track of their lineage. Therefore Joseph, as a descendant of KING David, likely knew his lineage quite well.<sup>1</sup> But, like most of our family trees, Joseph had more than a few awkward relatives and embarrassing details in his family tree. When Matthew records his Gospel, he doesn't even try to hide these details, rather, he is pretty upfront about them.<sup>2</sup>

For example, turn your Bible back to Matthew 1. Matthew 1:3 mentions Tamar, whose pregnancy came about as the result of Judah's empty promise to her as a grieving and lonely widow. Tamar then went on to devise a plan of trickery through prostitution which led to her pregnancy. And yet, despite this reality, God included this unfortunate scenario in accomplishing His purposes. Matthew 1:5 mentions Rahab, the woman who hid the Israelite spies in Jericho. Our understanding is that she was a prostitute in that city. And yet we see her in the lineage of King David, and then that of Joseph and Jesus as well. God wove Rahab's life and her story into His grander purposes. Matthew 1:5 also mentions Ruth, an amazing young woman who happened to be a Moabite. The Moabite people were bitter enemies of Abraham's descendants. And yet, God included her in Jesus' royal lineage. This seems a bit strange and yet it's right there in our text. Matthew 1:6 mentions Bathsheba. Well, actually it calls her Uriah's wife, making it abundantly clear that King David's sexual pursuit of her was way out of line; in fact, it was sinful. And yet, God forgives David's sinful behavior and later uses this very couple to move the Messianic lineage forward.

So, as we stand here in Joseph's sandals, learning what he must have already known about his own family background, I wonder if it might have encouraged him a little bit, to reflect on his own royal lineage. As Joseph tried to process this incredible news that he was going to be the dad who would help raise the Messiah, He probably had more than a few moments when he felt totally inadequate for God's calling on his life and completely overwhelmed by this responsibility. Joseph may have drawn some solace from the human imperfections of the relatives who lived before him. Perhaps he is somewhat encouraged to know that God often uses imperfect people and strange, even difficult circumstances to accomplish His perfect will. Be encouraged Joseph, everything's going to be fine. Just trust God; He's got you! Quietly obey what He has called you to do. And we can do the same today, with whatever challenges God allows in our lives, we can trust that God's got this!

Here is how Joseph's family tree comes to an end in Matthew 1:16, "Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah." If you have your

<sup>1</sup> See discussion by H.N. Ridderbos in his commentary on *Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> The lineage recorded in Matthew's Gospel has some irregularities including 4 women, other than Mary, being listed. This was unusual. But maybe that's kind of the point, the Messiah was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Mary's virginal conception was unusual and it followed a history of other irregular unions. Yet, God worked in and through these unique situations to bring about the Savior of the world.

Bible open, the thing we should notice here is the shift in the pattern from the previous 15 verses. There's a phrase that occurs some 39x, "the father of," repeated over and over. But now, ONLY in Matthew 1:16, it switches from "the father of" to "the husband of." In a pretty obvious way, Matthew underscores at the very beginning of his Gospel that Jesus' was no ordinary child. And he makes it clear that "Joseph was not Jesus' father in the ordinary sense of the word."<sup>3</sup> Joseph's son was made his son not through DNA but through a miraculous act of God Himself. None the less, even though, "Jesus is not the physical son of Joseph, he is the legal son and therefore a descendant of David."<sup>4</sup> Legally speaking, Matthew 1 lays out Jesus' clear connection to King David.<sup>5</sup> And this is essential evidence that's needed to make the incredible statement at the end of v. 16, "Jesus who is called Messiah." Matthew 1:20 goes on to say, "an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Joseph was a man with a special lineage. And that was part of what made him the right guy to take on the role of being Jesus' earthly father.

Another thing that we'll notice as we walk in Joseph's sandals is that...

2. Joseph was a man of godly character. We see this godly character evidenced in at least 3 different ways: First of all, we see it in...

**1) Joseph's gentle response.** Understandably, when Joseph first heard the news about Mary's pregnancy, he assumed that she'd been with another man. Matthew 1:19 says, "Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly." There are 2 cultural pieces that help us better understand his response. First of all, Joseph was a practicing Jew. Holiness was a really, really big deal to him and he did not want to marry an adulterous woman because he didn't want to be linked with her sinful behavior. By Old Testament law, Joseph could have raised a ruckus! He could have had Mary stoned to death for violating her engagement to him.<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 22:23-24 tells us, "If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death..."

Joseph's initial response must have been anger and hurt: "What? How could you do this to me Mary!" Joseph believed that he had formal grounds for divorce. But Joseph didn't take a vindictive course of action. Joseph was a man who was faithful to the law but he was not willing to expose Mary to public disgrace. His heart chose to be kind and gentle about the matter. This is what verse 19 is getting at. Joseph was planning to just quietly file the paperwork.<sup>7</sup> He had no intention of ignoring her supposed adultery nor in any way of joining her in it, but that didn't mean he needed to be harsh about it or demand his rights. So, as hard as this was for Joseph, he wanted to be a gentleman. He didn't want to make this any harder for Mary than it already was.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> cultural piece here is that this phrase in verse 18, "pledged to be married," is something stronger than our modern-day engagements. Joseph and Mary were already called husband and wife even though the marriage had not yet been fully completed. The only way that this marriage pledge could be undone at this point was through a legal divorce proceeding.<sup>8</sup> So a lesson we can learn from Joseph here is that rather than loudly demanding our rights and taking full advantage of some power that we have over others, we can be gentle. Now, I don't mean to suggest that any of us should rush to a quiet divorce! That's not AT ALL what I mean. If you're going to rush to anything, rush to marriage counseling and try to save your marriage! But the lesson we learn from Joseph, more broadly, is that we can be kind in dealing with our disappointments and frustrations in life. Philippians 4:5 says, "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near." I find this verse to be one of the most challenging in Scripture. This is not easy to do but it's the right thing to do if we want to live a

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<sup>3</sup> H.N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1589.

<sup>5</sup> This is also why Jesus ends up being born in Bethlehem. The familiar words from Luke 2:4 tell us, "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David." This was prophesied back in Micah 5:2.

<sup>6</sup> Although this may be debatable in that the Jews were living under Roman law at the time. However, also note Acts 7:59.

<sup>7</sup> See text note in *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1590.

<sup>8</sup> See text notes in *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 1462 (Joel 1:8) and 1590.

godly life. We can choose to show godly character and a spirit of grace toward others; an unmerited favor toward those who have wronged us. We treat others out of consideration of how well we have been treated by God, despite our sinful attitudes and actions. Joseph's godly character was demonstrated in his gentle response.

Another way that we see this godly character evidenced was through...

**2) Joseph's commitment to sexual purity.** Matthew 1:18 tells us, "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit." To use more modern terms, just to be clear, Joseph was engaged to be married to Mary but they had not been together sexually. In fact, verse 25 later clarifies that Joseph and Mary did not consummate their marriage until after Jesus had been born. Joseph and Mary were people of godly character, who saved sex until marriage.<sup>9</sup>

Verse 18 says that Mary was found to be pregnant "through the Holy Spirit." We often hear the term "virgin birth," however, more precisely what we're talking about is a virginal conception. Mary conceived apart from any physical contact with a man.<sup>10</sup> This was miraculous. So actually, both Mary and Joseph displayed godly character with their commitment to sexual purity.

A 3<sup>rd</sup> way that we see Joseph's godly character is in...

**3) Joseph's quiet obedience.** In fact, if I were to summarize Joseph's character with one phrase, I'd say "Quiet Obedience." Matthew 1:24-25 says Joseph "did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife...And he gave him the name Jesus."<sup>11</sup> The fact is, Joseph may have been the only one who truly believed Mary. As one Bible commentator puts it: "Mary's pregnancy had no natural cause...The miracle that stood behind it was hidden and unprovable...the Son of God seemed an illegitimate child. Mary had to suffer the consequences of this."<sup>12</sup> Despite the clear message that the angel gave to Joseph and Mary, we don't see any clues that would make us think that anyone else heard this divine message. Therefore, it's fair to assume that although Joseph chose not to expose his wife to public disgrace, now he himself made the decision to take on the public disgrace of what people probably assumed about him and Mary: they must have been sexually active before their wedding day.

Joseph and Mary both knew that God calls His people to sexual purity, but their particular situation was like no other. Joseph bore this difficultly with quiet obedience. Joseph believed this message from the angel and he stood by Mary's side, quietly, obediently, and faithfully. What a commendable, godly example for us!

Some of you know that part of my personal story is that I was born out of wedlock. I can relate, at least in part, to the public shame and embarrassment Joseph/Mary must have felt. Perhaps there are others who are reading this manuscript who can relate to some aspect of their story. It's important for us to understand that God can redeem any situation of misfortune or impurity in our lives. We just need to choose to obediently follow Him, from whatever point we are at in our own lives today. That's all we can do BUT, the good news is that, this is all that we need to do.

This quiet obedience in Joseph's life seems to continue as we move further into the Gospel of Matthew, and the rest of the New Testament for that matter. We never really hear much more about Joseph. He and Mary do have other children. And there is an interesting story about when Joseph and Mary have to go and look for Jesus because they lose track of him. Ever lose track of your kid? Scary right! Until about the 50<sup>th</sup> time, then, it's like, oh well, they'll turn up eventually! 😊

Luke 2:48 says, "When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." Jesus

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<sup>9</sup> In Matthew 1:20 Joseph is told to "take Mary home." They were not living together yet, but Joseph is told to take her home with him. What an incredible sense of comfort and protection this must have given to Mary. Now, they were in this together, and she had a godly man by her side.

<sup>10</sup> *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*; IV Press; Downers Grove, IL, 1992, p. 70. "As such this story is without precedence either in Jewish or pagan literature."

<sup>11</sup> In Matthew 1:21 Joseph is told, "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." In Luke 1:31 Mary had also been told to name the child Jesus. What a joy it must have been to share their stories with each other and realize that they weren't alone in this challenging but marvelous calling. The name "Jesus" means "the LORD saves." (See text note in *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1590.) Verse 22 tells us that another name for Jesus was "Immanuel" which meant "God with us."

<sup>12</sup> H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew: Bible Student's Commentary*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, p. 26.

replies in Luke 2:49, ““Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” But after this incident when Jesus was 12 years old, we don’t ever hear about Joseph again. In fact, he is noticeably absent toward the end of the Gospels. We read specific mention of Mary and Jesus’ brothers and sisters. Partway into Jesus’ public ministry Mark 6:3 says, “Isn’t this the carpenter?<sup>13</sup> Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.”<sup>14</sup> So, Jesus came from a pretty good-sized family; He had 4 brothers and at least 2 sisters. But, there’s no mention of Joseph. Now possibly Joseph had passed away at this point. But here is another possibility. Maybe Joseph was just a quiet, behind the scenes kind of guy. Maybe he understood that Jesus was much more important than he was. Perhaps Joseph was a strong supporter of Jesus behind the scenes, throughout all His years of public ministry, but never needed the spotlight.<sup>15</sup> It’s just a thought. This is purely conjecture. But, it would fit with what little we do know about Joseph. He was a man of godly character who practiced quiet obedience.

*My NIV Study Bible*, has a subtitle heading for Matthew 1:18-25, “Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son.” That phrase really grabs my attention because I grew up without my own biological father. But I was blessed to have a man named Ken Eades commit to be my dad growing up. He accepted me as his son. It’s a very honorable thing to take on the responsibility and care for a child who is not actually yours by birth. Many of you in this church have either had someone do that for you or you have decided to do that for someone else. What an incredible way to bring God glory in the midst of a less than ideal situation!

Let’s pull together our two main ideas this morning:

1. Joseph was a man with a special lineage.
2. Joseph was a man of godly character.

Taken together, these 2 truths seem to make Joseph an ideal match and a natural partner for Mary. But the Messiah’s birth was not destined to come about through natural means. God’s predestined design was to do something miraculous with the birth of Jesus.<sup>16</sup> But that doesn’t mean Joseph is unimportant to the Christmas Story. Joseph was destined to humbly serve in the role that God gave him and nothing more. Joseph quietly obeyed the God to whom he was fully devoted. He shows no signs of griping or complaining, just quiet obedience.

Consider the Nativity scene you probably have displayed in your home or over in your neighbor’s yard. Standing in Joseph’s sandals, here is his perspective on Christmas: “Remember that this child we worship at Christmas is no ordinary child, He is a son of David; He is the promised Messiah. His mother and I named him Jesus because He will save His people from their sins! **Therefore, let us worship Him together by living lives of quiet obedience.**

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<sup>13</sup> Thus, Joseph taught his son Jesus how to work with his hands, how to build things. This is incredible to consider: Joseph was teaching the One who’d been there before the very foundations of the world were laid. See Luke 2:52, John 17:5, and Philippians 2:6-8. See also *NIV Study Bible* 2011 text note on Mark 6:3, p. 1664.

<sup>14</sup> See also Mark 3:31 and John 19:26-27.

<sup>15</sup> Whether Joseph just stayed quietly in the background or whether he passed away at some point before Jesus’ public ministry, for at least his first 12 years, Joseph was Jesus’ earthly dad, perhaps we could say a foster-parent of sorts. We can’t help but wonder a bit what this must have been like. Perhaps it was really cool. Perhaps it was disappointing to Joseph because he probably expected his son, as Messiah, to be a conquering king, yet Jesus came in this first advent to be a suffering servant instead.

<sup>16</sup> H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew: Bible Student’s Commentary*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, p. 28.