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JOSEPH DECIDES TO DIVORCE MARY

A Matter of Trust

Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly.

Matthew 1:18–19

WALK WITH JOSEPH

It wasn't supposed to be like this. When Joseph dreamed of his life with the young woman named Mary, he could not have imagined that there could possibly be anyone else. But now she was expecting a child? How could this be?

Arriving at his shop early in the morning, when the skies were still dark and lamplight scattered shadows around the planks and

sawdust and tools, he saw all the unfinished work he had yet to do. But there was not just the work with wood that was incomplete. What about the marriage plans, their future together? People would talk. It would be a scandal. This girl who had seemed to him, to everyone, the model of purity and piety, now with child. What was going on? Did she love someone else?

For days, Joseph agonized. When did this happen? She seemed so innocent, so trusting, so faithful and steadfast. Was it an illusion? Had it all been a mistake? A misunderstanding?

Pray one Our Father and one Hail Mary and meditate on Joseph's story.

How often do we wonder if we have misread or misjudged a situation? How often do we think we've made a terrible mistake, and we just want to fix it and make it right? So many times we worry about just what "making it right" means, and what it means to do the right thing. How can we know?

From the first moments we meet him in scripture, Joseph, the man destined to be the earthly father of Jesus, is plagued with problems. The greatest story ever told doesn't begin smoothly. There is mystery and uncertainty, doubt, and whisperings of divorce. Scandal is in the air. We're never told just how he learned of Mary's condition or the circumstances that led him to believe that the only option was a quiet divorce. But we can imagine the news left him feeling sad and confused—possibly even betrayed. He surely would have been anxious. Joseph is a man beset with problems. And for good reason.

In ancient Judaism, betrothal was essentially the same as marriage, even though a couple might not be living together. Breaking it off would have signaled to the world—or, at least, the neighbors in Nazareth—that something had gone horribly wrong.

For centuries, theologians have puzzled over just what Joseph knew and when; like so many elements of the saint's life, scripture is silent on the question. Some writers suggest that his faith was so deep that he somehow knew that this child was of the Holy Spirit, and he wanted to end the relationship with Mary out of fear. Pope Benedict XVI, among others, has written that he thinks that Joseph suspected the worst and feared that Mary had broken their engagement. Joseph thus needed to be reassured by an angel that all would be well.

Benedict writes in *Jesus of Nazareth*, "After the discovery that Joseph made, his task was to interpret and apply the law correctly. He does so with love: He does not want to give Mary up to public shame. He wishes her well, even in the hour of his great disappointment."² We have no magisterial teaching about what motivated Joseph to end his betrothal to Mary. It remains a mystery. But in the middle of this mystery, we get a glimpse into the man who will serve as the earthly father to God's Son.

Among the many extraordinary details of Jesus's entrance into human history—amid the angels and miracles and awe—we meet someone so very much like us. It binds him not only to the human reality that the Christ child will face but also to generations of us who will follow Jesus and call ourselves Christian. We see in this tender and worried figure a father, a worker, an ordinary man thrust into extraordinary circumstances. He's one of us.

We also see a man whose best-laid plans and most beautiful dreams have suddenly and astoundingly been dashed. Here, we meet someone whose ambitions and hopes are not only thwarted—they are twisted into something he could never have imagined. What he must have felt was more than disappointment. It was heartbreak.

Joseph was a man destined to play a singular role in human history, and it may well have all begun with immense, soul-crushing sorrow.



Bent over his bench, Joseph worried. He worried for her. He worried about her. He worried about the child, from an unknown and unnamed father. Who did this? What would she do? What should he do?

Anxiety became grief as he saw so clearly that the life he had imagined—a life with her, a life with a growing family, a life of quiet Sabbaths and family weddings and, eventually, grandchildren playing in his shop, a life saturated in the simple pleasures of a carpenter in a small town—would never come to pass. It was done. It was dead.

“Forget it,” a voice told him. “Forget her. There are other women. Be patient. You’ll find another. Or maybe you’ll be better off alone, free, unshackled.” He would think that way sometimes, and something would catch in his throat and it was all he could do to keep from weeping. “Poor old Joseph,” they’d be saying one day, long after others in the town had married and raised children and watched them grow into adulthood. And they’d see him alone and speculate “Whatever happened to that girl Mary? What went wrong? They seemed so happy.”

After all the sleeplessness and worry and wonder, hours spent planning how to work out a divorce so that Mary would not be subjected to gossip, he fell into bed one night and slipped into a deep, enveloping sleep. But it didn't last.

Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:


"Behold, the virgin shall be with child and
bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means "God is with us." When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus. (Mt 1:20–25)

Was this what he was meant to do all along? As Joseph put together the pieces of his life, he could feel his heart pounding in his chest. As a carpenter would, he habitually measured and sized things up, to see how they might fit together; to see what new plan he could create. God was calling him to do something incredible. Could that really be true? The dream had been so clear. He couldn't ignore it.

When he awoke the next morning, he knew what he had to do. The first light broke over the horizon. He heard the sounds

of voices, the chatter of women heading to the well, and children being fed. Nazareth was the same as always. But everything was different. The world had changed. Joseph had changed. And that anxious pounding in his chest slowly gave way to something he could not even have anticipated the night before—excitement, exhilaration, joy.



We don't know if Joseph was given to wild and extravagant dreams, or if this was just the first time an angel came to visit and give advice. Maybe it had happened before. Joseph may have had a mystical streak—he had the blood of kings and prophets coursing through his veins—but for whatever reason, at this moment, in the middle of a dark night of the soul, he saw light.

Joseph didn't just see it. He heard it—the amazing news that God had shown Mary favor, that he need not fear, for the Lord was with him—with them both. He took this seriously, accepted that this was not an accident. Joseph was a man who trusted. More important, he believed. He must have believed that God had something planned for his life and so he surrendered everything—his anxiety, his suspicions, his doubts—and chose, during a moment of uncertainty, to make a decision.

He chose to let go and let God lead. Could any of us do as much?

So often we make choices from a place of fear. I can't relocate. I can't quit my job. I can't get married. The timing is wrong. The circumstances aren't right. The risks are too great, the dangers too real, the pitfalls too terrifying. But do we ever

seek out a second opinion? Do we ever ask God, “What should I do? Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening.”

The simple fact is that Joseph did all that and more. He trusted mystery. He believed a dream. He took what for so many of us would have been an impossible leap of faith. That choice, his yes, gave God a home on earth—a dwelling place where salvation history could unfold.

One of the great questions for each of us is: What do we do when life doesn't go the way we planned? How do we face disappointment, pain, thwarted hopes or ambitions? How do we trust God's hand when he seems to be rewriting or redirecting the story of our lives? We might begin by looking to Joseph.

A priest once told me when I was in formation, “God has a dream for you. Your job is to figure out what it is.” How do we do that? We begin by asking him to guide us. And then we ask him to open our hearts to be ready to dream. We need to be ready to listen to angels, to let God enter our lives in unexpected ways. Otherwise we aren't really building or creating or continuing God's work on earth. We're just sawing wood and hammering nails.

Pray for an answer to the great, haunting question of life: How is God calling you to make something new? Pray for the courage you need to trust and say, “Yes, Lord.”

REFLECT

In which circumstances of my life do I have a hard time trusting?

What do I think has caused me to be untrusting in those situations?

When have I heard or felt God urging me toward a difficult change? How did I respond?

Did my response draw me closer to God?

What can I do this week to help me become more trusting?

PRAY

Holy Joseph,
you lived the simple and predictable life of a carpenter,
planning and building, dreaming and praying.
Yet you saw God take the clean lines and sharp angles of an
ordinary life
and bend them with his perfect hand.

Righteous Joseph,
God chose you, just as he chose Mary,
to help bring his Son into the world.
Through the mysterious beauty of a dream,
you said yes to God's will,
yes to accepting a role unrivaled in human history,
yes to being the guardian of God's most precious treasure,
and the father of humanity's hope.

Trusting Joseph,
when I receive news I never wanted to hear,
help me to open myself to God's will.
comfort me in my fear, console me in my anxiety,
and remind me in this fallen world of God's never-failing
grace.

Patient Joseph,
teach me to trust as you trusted,
to believe when I doubt, to hope when I despair,
and to follow the voices of angels.
Help me every day to live as you lived,
with trust in God that ultimately brings true joy.
I ask this through the source of your joy,
the one you loved as your own son, Jesus Christ.
Amen.