

A Strange Thing Happened on the Way to Bethlehem #2

“A VERY STRANGE DREAM”

Isaiah 49:1-7, Colossians 1:24-29, Matthew 1:18-25

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“In his book, *The Case For Faith*, Lee Strobel records a dialogue between himself and author/philosopher Peter Kreeft. Because of his stand for atheism, Strobel was searching for a reason to have Jesus become his Savior. So Peter Kreeft asked him, ‘How can a mere finite human be sure that infinite wisdom would not tolerate certain short-range evils in order for more long-range good that we cannot foresee?’

“I could see his point but needed an example. ‘Elaborate a bit,’ Strobel prodded.

“Dr. Kreeft (a philosophy professor for 38 years) thought a moment. ‘Look at it this way,’ he said. ‘Imagine a bear in a trap and a hunter who, out of sympathy, wants to liberate him. He tries to win the bear's confidence, but he can't do it, so he has to shoot the bear full of drugs. The bear, however, thinks this is an attack and that the hunter is trying to kill him. He doesn't realize this is being done out of compassion.

“Then, in order to get the bear out of the trap, the hunter has to push him further into the trap to release the tension on the spring. If the bear were semiconscious at that point, he would be even more convinced that the hunter was his enemy out to cause him suffering and pain. But the bear would be wrong because his understanding is too limited.’

“Kreeft let the illustration soak in for a moment. ‘Now,’ he concluded, ‘how can anyone be certain that's not an analogy between us and God? I believe God does the same to us sometimes, and we can't comprehend why He does it any more than the bear can understand the motivations of the hunter. As the bear could have trusted the hunter, so we can trust God.’”¹

Humanity was stuck in the trap of sin, and has been there for a long, long time. Our ultimate destiny would have been death and destruction for eternity in God's absence. Sin had so captured the hearts of men and women, that very few were willing to turn from the ways of the world back to the

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 41-42)

ways of the Lord our God. Yet out of compassion for the people of the world, God planned a way for us to be released from our sin, but it had to be done in a way that most of us cannot comprehend. A perfect sacrifice had to be offered that would atone for sin's penalty. However, there was not a perfect sacrifice here on the earth, so how could God make the perfect sacrifice if there was not one here to offer?

God planned for His Son to come into the world, to become just like we are, yet without sin, so that being like us, He could stand in the gap for us as our perfect sacrifice, take our sins upon Himself, and then pay the price for that sin. But few would understand how God was going to bring about the birth of this Perfect Sacrifice. In a way, God would bring about a temporary difficult situation in order to bring about a tremendous blessing by releasing us from our slavery to sin. It would be that temporary difficult situation that brought about a lasting solution. But those involved might consider God to be bringing more suffering and pain rather than freedom through love.

As we saw last week, God invited Mary to become the human mother of the Son of God, the Perfect Sacrifice. So through the work of the Holy Spirit, Mary became pregnant as a virgin, and Jesus began to take on the human form of a baby. It was something that only God could do, and of course, it would demand a great sacrifice for Mary if she would give herself to trust in God's full completion of His plan of life for the world. Mary understood what God was doing and accepted the difficulty in her life, knowing that it would be a temporary struggle that would provide a permanent solution to sin.

Now, Joseph and Mary were betrothed, which means that they were promised to each other to become married, and being betrothed, they were considered husband and wife. The betrothal period was a year long, where the preparations for the marriage would be planned, yet the two would live separately until the day of the marriage. Mary would have continued to live with her parents, and Joseph, as a carpenter, would probably have started to build a house for them.

But a wrench was thrown into the workings of this plan - Mary returns home from her visit to Elizabeth and Zachariah already pregnant for three months. It has become the talk of the town of Nazareth, and Joseph is quite concerned. People are beginning to look at him and accuse him of being

impatient with the betrothal process. Mary is being accused of violating her vows to Joseph, and everyone is up in arms about the whole ordeal. Talk about a difficult situation to be in!

Joseph is an independent contractor, doing the work of an artisan. That means he not only works with wood, but also stone and metal, creating articles of furniture for people, repairing roofs and other parts of buildings, and even building new homes. Despite his insistence of being innocent, Joseph would have been considered the chief perpetrator in Mary's pregnancy, and that doesn't go well with maintaining a good reputation in a small town. There is a chance that he lost work over it, and he is concerned about his future if people continue to see him as an unfaithful man, having rushed the waiting period, and becoming the "father" of Mary's Child.

And that's where our Gospel lesson lays out his dilemma. This is Matthew 1:18-25. (READ Matthew 1:18-25)

Matthew states clearly that Joseph was a righteous man "*faithful to the law*" (Matt. 1:19), which would have been noticed by the people of Nazareth in the way he lived before his betrothal to Mary. Yet, because of Mary's pregnancy, Joseph considers backing out of the betrothal, not only for his own name sake, but also to protect Mary.

You see, if Joseph made a public spectacle of Mary, she would be in danger of being accused of adultery and then stoned to death for being unfaithful to her husband. Being a man "faithful to the law" would have permitted him to do such a thing. However, Joseph determines to pursue a quiet divorce which could take place in the presence of two witnesses. That could have brought a resolution to Joseph's problem. However, Mary would still have been very vulnerable to further accusation and hostile action.

But think about it for a moment. What man wouldn't consider the option of divorce if his fiancé suddenly showed up three months pregnant, and it wasn't his child? Even if he was a righteous man, the thought would have at least come to mind as he considered the situation. There is a certain expectancy that men have that the woman they are marrying is going to be faithful and true to them, and if it is

found to be different, the man would seriously consider the value of marrying that woman. Could she be counted on to be faithful in the future if she could not keep her marriage vow during the betrothal? What else was Joseph to do? He anguishes to make such a decision, but divorce is the only one that seems appropriate.

So that being Joseph's resolution to the situation of his anguish over Mary's unexpected pregnancy, he comes to the point of accepting that plan of divorce as the only reasonable option - **ONLY TO HAVE GOD INTERVENE.** God has all of this planned out, to bring the Messiah into the world miraculously, and He has already started with Mary becoming pregnant through the Holy Spirit as a virgin. But without Joseph's willingness to support and protect Mary in this mysterious plan, it could go wrong quickly. God needed Joseph to remain and become Mary's husband so that the birth of Jesus could take place according to the prophecies, fulfilling God's wondrous plan of grace through the Salvation of the world.

So God sends an angel to Joseph in order to reveal the workings of the Lord. The "dream" that Joseph had disclosed all of the marvelous work of the Holy Spirit that conceived Jesus into the womb of Mary, so that He could become the Savior of the world. God's provision of His Perfect Sacrifice for the "*saving of His people from their sins*" (Matt. 1:21) was in play and the angel lets Joseph know that he was needed as a part of the full equation.

The angel reminds Joseph of all of the prophecies that had been given about God's providing a miraculous birth. Joseph may have known those prophecies, yet in the real time of life, they would not have come to mind as he struggled with Mary's pregnancy.

But this was a difficult request that God was asking Joseph to accept, even as much as it was asking Mary to become pregnant as a virgin. Joseph had the choice of either accepting or rejecting God's request. And because he was a man of faith, Joseph receives the information about Mary, and then accepts the task offered to him by God.

But it is one thing to understand the plan, and another thing to actually put feet to that plan. It

involved Joseph's active participation. The decision needed action to fulfill the request. It was time for Joseph to step up and claim and follow God's request, difficult as it was. Joseph needed to trust that God knew what He was doing, AND that if God had called him to do this difficult task, He would also provide him the strength and courage to make it happen.

“There was once a television interviewer and journalist who described three farmers who gathered daily in a field during a horrible drought. The men were down on their knees, looking upward, and praying that the skies would open and pour forth a much-needed rain. Unfortunately, the heavens were silent, and the petitioners became discouraged, but they continued to meet every morning to lift up their request to God.

“One morning an uninvited stranger approached and asked the men what they were doing. They responded, ‘We're praying for rain.’

“The newcomer looked at each of them and shook his head, ‘No, I don't think so.’

“The first farmer said, ‘Of course we're praying. We are down on our knees pleading for rain. Look around; see the drought. We haven't had rain in more than a year!’

“The outsider continued to shake his head and advised them their efforts would never work. The second farmer jumped in and said, ‘We need the rain; we aren't asking only for ourselves, but for our families and livestock.’

“The man listened, nodded, and said he still wasn't impressed. ‘You're wasting your time,’ he said.

“The third farmer couldn't take any more, and in anger he said, ‘Okay smart guy, what would you do if you were in our shoes?’

“The visitor asked, ‘You really want to know?’

“The three landowners answered, ‘Yeah, we really want to know! The future of our farmlands is at stake.’ The guest announced, ‘I would have brought an umbrella!’”² Our faith needs to have action.

² (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, pg. 96)

So Joseph had the huge decision to make - either go through with his divorce plans and get free and clear from Mary; OR trust the words of the angel of the Lord, and accept God's call to do this difficult task and walk alongside of Mary as her husband. The first option could possibly bring about punishment from the Lord for not obeying His command. The second option would certainly make life difficult for him for a long time. What would he do? Trust his gut, or trust the value of a dream?

Matthew gives us Joseph's decision, "*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave Him the name Jesus*" (Matthew 1:24-25).

Joseph was willing to obey God and endure a temporary hardship to bring about a lasting benefit for the sake of others. The angel had told him that Jesus would "*save His people from their sins*" (Matt. 1:21). But that meant more than just the people of Israel. This would now include all of those who put their trust and faith in Him as their Messiah, and accept that He was the one to pay for the sins of the world. This went far beyond just the people of the tribe of Judah, or of the people of Israel. This would include everyone who would see the work of God for the Salvation of the world through Jesus and lift Him up as their Savior.

Isaiah says it like this: "*The Lord says...It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that My salvation may reach to the ends of the earth*" (Is. 49:6). So this child conceived in the womb of Mary was the One who would be the Perfect Sacrifice for the whole world, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, no matter what nationality they were. Everyone would be able to find forgiveness of their sins as they claimed Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

So this was an awesome task of God given for Joseph to accept. He would become the protector of Mary and Jesus. He would become the "father" of the Son of God while He was here on the earth. And he was soon to find out how difficult that would be, since many would do their best to try to kill Him even before He was able to become the Perfect Sacrifice.

The “*mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations...is now disclosed to the Lord’s people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (Colossians 1:26-27). And Joseph was one of those called by God to enable this mystery to come to the earth.

Joseph stepped up to make it all happen. He became willing to endure the accusations thrown out at him. He would accept the role of being the father of Mary’s child. He determined to be misunderstood so that God’s plan of bringing the Perfect Sacrifice to the world would be accomplished.

But how does this influence us in our own time with regard to our own call to follow God’s invitation to do His work? How might we learn from this example of faithfulness to the Lord by Joseph and apply it to our own lives?

We can start by being willing to trust that the Lord our God desires the very best for us. As we trust in Him, we can accept the same kind of invitation given to us to do what the world sees as unusual and the strange in order to accomplish His work in our world today.

Then we can trust in the promises of God, to be there with us and guide us, and direct our ways so that whatever it is that He has called us to do can be accomplished through us.

“Writer and speaker Lewis Smedes says: ‘Yes, somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to “lost causes.” They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God.

“What a marvelous thing a promise is! When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs her more than she wants to pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the

circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty.

“When a person makes a promise, they stake a claim on their personal freedom and power. When you make a promise, you take a hand in completing the future that God has laid out for you.”³

God is inviting you to do a great work for Him, something that you are in just the right place and the right time to accomplish. Could it be to share the Gospel message with your coworker who is struggling with life issues? Could it be to take on a new position of leadership and begin to let your faith shine out as you lead others? Could it be to do something that you thought was completely impossible, yet God seems to be calling you to get started on it? Could it be to endure the name calling and the persecution you receive as you stand up for your faith in Jesus Christ? Could it be you standing up before your peers against the popular worldly trend to make plain the Word of the Lord? Could it be to keep yourself pure and holy in your relationships with those around you? Could it be to set an example of how God can work in the life of a person who sincerely trusts in the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind and strength? What is it that God is calling you to do? Why not ask God to give you a dream to disclose it to you so that you might be His special servant, too?

But, no matter what, let Joseph’s example of faithfulness be an encouragement to you, and let God guide you for His glory. Let’s pray: Father, Thank You for Joseph’s faith. Give us the courage to be like Him and to pray, “I am no longer my own, but Yours. Put me to what You will, rank me with whom You will. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by You or laid aside for You, exalted for You or brought low by You. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to Your pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, You are mine, and I am Yours. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven” (Wesleyan Covenant Prayer, UMC Hymnal, #607). This I pray in the powerful name of Jesus Christ my Lord and Savior. Amen.

³ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, pg. 220)