

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about[a]: 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. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet[b] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, 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. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,[c] because he will save his people from their sins."

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"[d] (which means "God with us").

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus

Joseph's Nightmare Before Christmas

Generally, my dreams aren't worth remembering but every now and then one stands out and I can't forget. As a child that dream woke me up in the middle of the night, sweating, shaking in fear because the house was on fire and I couldn't move. Maybe you've had similar dreams? But over time the dreams changed and I no longer had nightmares about the house being on fire rather my nightmares come after every Sunday afternoon nap. I wake up sweating, shaking, wondering what day it is, thinking I've got to prepare something to preach. I want to be prepared.

We all have hopes and dreams. We chase the American dream. We have this idea of what we want and then we aim for it be it the perfect Christmas, the best wedding, the greatest job opportunities, or retirement. But sometimes those dreams turn into nightmares and leave us shaking in fear because we can't do anything.

I wonder if that's how Joseph felt. He's prepared for the best. He's dreamed of stability, a wife, a future family, when suddenly that dream turns nightmare and becomes reality. His fiance, the one he loved, is pregnant and the child is not his own. His dream of a future came to a screeching halt. This was his nightmare before Christmas. But even in his nightmare God sent a messenger inviting him to dream again.

Joseph is living the dream. Mary is his fiancée. He's a carpenter. What more could you ask for? Joseph could even assume that God was blessing him because of his righteous life. He obeyed the law and now all he has to do is wait for the wedding day. All was well until Mary went off to help her cousin Elizabeth who was in her sixth month. But three months later, Mary returns home and our lesson doesn't say Mary told Joseph but rather he found out. You can almost imagine the excuse, "It's not what you think, an angel did this to me."

Joseph was a righteous man but that doesn't mean he was stupid. He knows how babies are made. There is a reason he has in mind to divorce her quietly. It's because he didn't believe Mary. He thought that she was a liar and that the child was from another man. All he really knows is that this child isn't his and this happened during their betrothal. The purpose of a betrothal is to guarantee the purity of both parties. Betrothal was a legal contract. This is not like our engagements which can be called off without serious consequences. Mary was promised to him. They were married in every sense of the word but they had not yet come together. But those dreams are gone.

This is a nightmare. Joseph has been betrayed. He's angry and hurt. Mary has not only ruined her reputation but his as well. Two options stand before Joseph. He can save face and expose her publicly or he divorce her secretly and send her off. The consequences for adultery (public exposure) was often death. What Joseph has in mind is to save the reputation of his wife and assume the reputation of a deadbeat dad who ran out on this poor innocent girl. Joseph was ready to take the blame and save her life even though his dream has become a nightmare.

Like Mary and Joseph we too dream big. We have plans and goals in life, where we will go and what we will do. We set out in this world to live the American dream. But then dreams turn into nightmare. Maybe you have felt the heartache and betrayal of a loved one who cheated on you. Maybe your health has failed. Maybe you've lived through a nightmare and relive those moments every day of your life. It's at those moments when you wonder, "Where is God in all of this." Some well-meaning Christian comes along and attempts to comfort you with, "God will work all things for your good." In those nightmare moments that sounds a lot like the excuse of Mary, "An angel did this to me." Like Joseph, "We're righteous, not stupid."

But unlike Joseph we may not have a same righteous reaction. Sometimes we'll overreact emotionally and make accusations before the dust has even settled, and the

facts have come out. Sometimes we'll react logically without any emotion or care for the other person. At times we point fingers and place blame on the wrong person and in the end even more people are hurt. Often the one who is blamed is God. In the meantime we may excuse actions even using stupidity as an excuse, "I didn't know" Just try using ignorance in the court of the law and see how that goes.

We don't like the thought that we could do the wrong thing for righteous reasons and still be held accountable for our actions. The truth is we often are so focused on our problems that we miss the purpose that God has in mind with our nightmare. That purpose is often for us to trust him above all things. But slowly that stops. We stop dreaming, abandon hope, and the cynicism starts.

God wants you to dream big. It's not that the American dream isn't too big but too small. He doesn't want us to put our hope in something that will let us down. In order for us to know God's will and what he has done he must reveal that to us. We cannot by our own reason or strength come to these conclusions but only but God.

That's why God sent an angel to Joseph to upset his plans because what Joseph had in mind to do was against God's will. The problem wasn't with Mary or the child conceived in her. The problem was with Joseph. He either didn't know or believe and as a result he was about to walk away. Joseph was doing the wrong for the right reason. The only way that he could know the truth of the matter is if Holy Spirit revealed it to him. In fact it took a visit from an angel to calm things down and point Joseph to God's plans.

There was a third option. Take Mary to be his wife and raise the child as his own. Take on the disgrace and shame of having a child out of wedlock, and go on with life. The angel came to Joseph in a dream. *Don't be afraid. Mary wasn't unfaithful to you. She's done nothing wrong.* Suddenly he wakes from this nightmare and the weight of the world is off his shoulders. He took Mary into his home. He did nothing with her until after she gave birth to a son.

He followed the instructions of the angel and named this child. In naming Jesus Joseph was saying, "This is my son." But more important is what his name means. Jesus is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Joshua - The LORD saves. Joseph may have taken Jesus as his own but this child would do more than he could imagine. *"because he will save his people (including his foster father) from their sins."*

The angel of Christmas past pointed Joseph back to Isaiah, to another nightmare under King Ahaz, God's people called out for deliverance. Isaiah's message was that Assyria would come but that would not be the end. Instead, *"The virgin will conceive and*

give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). They would live their nightmare but even then that was not the end. They will wake from their dream, God will come to his people and reveal to them his will, his word, his promise.

The word we need to hear. We are unaware of where we will go or what God has in mind for us. We don't know what path we will take through this world but we know where we are going. God sent his Son and he gives us his word to reveal to us what he has done. Just as Joseph took the shame of an illegitimate child and an unfaithful wife. So also Jesus took on ours. He actually entered into our nightmare. He became that rumor for us. When creation betrayed him, he lived our nightmare and he didn't wake from it. He lived it. He died it. He came back still bearing the marks of that nightmare that started in Bethlehem and ended at his ascension where he promised, *"I am with you always to the very end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20). Immanuel is with us.

That knowledge has been revealed to you. In contrast to wicked King Ahaz who wouldn't feigned piety and wouldn't even ask for a sign, Joseph believed and obeyed his command. Joseph repented of his wrong. He heard God's sign and believed what God had said about this child. We too are invited to believe. We are given hope. This child is Immanuel. He comes to forgive. He forgives our every sin even those we are unaware of. He comes to save. Believe the promise. Live in the reality of who this child is. Immanuel God with us.

Everyone has a different nightmare. Sometimes they live it. Sometimes they dream it. But the great thing about a nightmare is that you wake up and realize it's all a dream. The house isn't on fire. I didn't sleep through Sunday morning. I didn't show up unprepared. It was just a dream. But Christmas isn't just a dream. It's a reality. God really did send his Son. We really have his promise. He wants us to dream big - not just for this life but life eternal, with him.

That is why he has come. That's why these words are written, so that you may believe that he is the Christ the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name. Amen.