

The Surrender of Bliss

Christmas Choices – Part II

Matthew 1:18-25

Introduction

I have read about a man named Wilmer McLean who refused to participate in the Civil War. He adamantly opposed taking sides. He had friends in the North and friends in the South.

In order to keep out of harm's way, McLean retired from his successful grocery business and moved to northern Virginia. He was convinced that by this move, he could escape any conflict between the North and the South. He bought a beautiful estate near Manassas Junction, Virginia, where he settled into a plantation lifestyle.

The trouble began when the very first battle of the Civil War occurred in Manassas Junction on July 21, 1861. The battle was called "The Battle of Bull Run" and more than 50,000 soldiers were engaged in a fight that lasted all day.

This was the famous battle in which General Jackson earned his nickname "Stonewall Jackson" for his unwillingness to back down. And where did Stonewall Jackson do some of his fighting? On Wilmer McLean's plantation.

When the battle was over, McLean's buildings had been destroyed. A cannonball actually went down his chimney and destroyed his home. Even his beautiful stone barn was demolished.

McLean wanted nothing to do with this war, yet he was found in the middle of the very first battle. It cost him nearly everything.

Bitterly, Wilmer McLean decided to move again – this time to southern Virginia. He bought another plantation in a town called Appomattox.

Poor guy – Appomattox is exactly where not only the last battle was fought in the Civil War, but where General Robert E. Lee and General Ulysses S. Grant signed the terms of surrender.

The problem was that the two generals needed a place to meet and agree to the terms. They chose to meet in the parlor of a plantation home – the one owned by Wilmer McLean.

So, on April 9, 1865, the meeting took place in McLean's parlor and lasted two and a half hours. When it was over and the generals had departed, soldiers from both sides, officers, and citizens wanted mementos of this once-in-a-lifetime occasion. They took pictures from his walls, silverware and settings, furniture, and even the drapes. When it was over and the people were gone, nearly everything from Wilmer McLean's home was gone.

This was the man who had just wanted to steer clear of the Civil War, but it seemed to hunt him down. It started in his backyard and ended in his parlor. And it cost him nearly everything.

Poor Wilmer McLean – he longed to stay uninvolved and out of sight, but the conflict just seemed to find him. Then it boxed him in, and there was nowhere for him to run.

If you ask the average Christian what their perspective of the Christmas narrative and Joseph's involvement is, more than likely the mere mention of his name will evoke pity. Poor Joseph – he just could not stay out of harm's way. He got engaged to a girl, planned to get married, have children, expand his carpentry business and – wham! – right in his

backyard, a conflict began that would turn his world upside down.

The average person thinks of Joseph as an unwilling participant, or barely willing, but somewhat out the picture. This is like a school child in the Christmas play who is dazzled into mute silence by the spotlight and the sight of the crowd. Joseph is thrust into the spotlight of human history for a brief moment and then, he is gone.

Have you ever noticed the Christmas plays? Joseph is the guy who leads the donkey around, knocks on the innkeepers door, and asks, “Is there any room?” Then he has a couple of lines in the stable scene and that is about it.

The truth is, Joseph did much more than lead the donkey around and fluff up the hay in the manger. Joseph, as much as anyone in this scene, will model self-sacrifice. He will demonstrate what it means when we dare say to God, “I surrender all.”

Joseph will mirror the humility of incarnation and will embrace the sorrow. He will accept the shame of it all and willingly say, “Farewell to the bliss of a simple, peaceful life!”

As we continue to uncover the choices of Christmas, let us clear away the intellectual debris that Joseph was a man who unwittingly got engaged to the wrong girl and had he only known, would never have given Mary a second look – would never have bought that plantation.

Ladies and gentlemen, Joseph was not an unwilling participant. He was, in fact, a surrendered man who embraced the incarnation of Jesus Christ with his entire life. Do not miss this model of humility and deference and character. It is all there, for those who want to discover what Joseph was really like.

Joseph – A Model of Surrender

Turn with me to the gospel by Matthew and look at chapter 1, verse 18.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together [before they consummated the marriage] she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.

In this verse and following verses, I want to point out at least three surrenders that Joseph made.

1. First, Joseph surrendered his personal pride.

In order to understand the devastating blow that Mary’s announcement was – that she was pregnant – we need to understand something about the Jewish customs of marriage. There were three stages to a Jewish marriage.

- The first stage of a Jewish marriage was called the engagement.

This stage was when the man went out and sold all his livestock, emptied his bank account, sold everything he owned, including the shirt off his back, and bought a diamond ring for his fiancée. Oh, that is the American custom – sorry!

It was worth it though, wasn’t it guys? Amen? It was worth it though, wasn’t it guys? Amen?!

Two thousand years ago, an engagement was something carried out by the parents while the children were younger. Parents normally picked the spouses of their children.

The older my kids get, the more I like this idea.

Many times, the couple never met until the second stage.

- The second stage of a Jewish marriage was called the betrothal, or the “kiddushin”.

This was a formal event, considered binding by both families.

During a brief ceremony, the bridegroom would pay the dowry, or the “mohar,” which was known as the bride price. It was often paid in cattle or clothing or money, or all three, depending on the wealth of the bridegroom.

The dowry was delivered at the betrothal ceremony. It was given to the bride’s father to compensate him for wedding expenses.¹

The “kiddushin” lasted a year. During this period of time the couple still did not live together or consummate their marriage. The bridegroom would spend the year preparing a home for his bride.

By the way, the analogies to our Lord – our Bridegroom – are another study. However, I will at least say that the Bridegroom paid the price for His bride with His own blood. Now we await the time when He will return for us and take us to the home He has prepared for us.

We are already His. His Spirit is our seal – our engagement ring; our wedding feast – and the Marriage Supper of the Lamb will occur in heaven in the near future and could occur any day now. You

are invited to come! Have you accepted His invitation and RSVP'd your response?

In Joseph and Mary's day, the "kiddushin" was binding. They were actually considered husband and wife. They were considered legally married, even though the third stage had not yet been reached.

The only way out of a betrothal was death or divorce. In fact, if Joseph were to die during the betrothal period, Mary would be considered a widow.

The betrothal period was a time when both man and woman prepared themselves for the wedding.ⁱⁱ

The man would be busily preparing a dwelling place and the woman would be collecting all the things necessary to be a wife, a homemaker, a helpmeet for her husband.

- The third stage of a Jewish marriage was called the "hoopa" and was the time when the wedding ceremony would take place.

This ceremony involved several days of feasting and celebrating the goodness of God in establishing another household of faith.

Now do you understand the devastation of Matthew 1:18 to Joseph?

... when ... Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child ...

How could this be? In Luke's gospel, we are told that an angel visited Mary and explained what was going to happen (Luke 1).

So what would Joseph do?

Look at Matthew 1:19a. Notice this verse begins with a reminder of the legally binding relationship Joseph has with Mary.

And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man ...

That settles it, Joseph will bring Mary before the elders and accuse her of sexual sin with another man, thus keeping himself from the obvious accusation that he was the culprit. He could not wait until the "kiddushin" was past. He was the child's father.

Joseph was a righteous man.

Lenski, the Greek scholar, points out that this Greek word for righteous refers to the heart as well as to the conduct.ⁱⁱⁱ

Joseph had a godly reputation that was now on the verge of being destroyed. The only way to clear his name was to tell the truth – publicly. He was not the man.

Joseph did not believe Mary either. However, he loved her. So the text goes on to say, in Matthew 1:19b,

... and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

The rabbinical writings allowed a man in this position to either accuse his betrothed publicly or divorce her as quietly as he wanted. All he needed were two witnesses and the "kiddushin" was over.

Mary could pay the consequences for her sin and Joseph could try to get on with his life.

He was right – she was wrong, but Joseph at this moment, chose compassion over his violated, embroiled emotions that said, "She should pay . . . I am the laughingstock; the pity of Nazareth."

Poor Joseph. Even still, he chose discretion over revenge.

Webster defines "discretion" as, "knowing when to keep silent" – in spite of emotion.

What a model Joseph is for us, even in this.

It is one thing to remain quiet when you are wrong. It is terribly hard to remain quiet when you have been wronged. It is especially hard to remain quiet when you are right!

I recorded in my journal, an incident that occurred when my twin sons were around three years of age. They were in their bedroom arguing – it is the only time I can remember them doing that. The hilarious thing was that they were arguing over what "2 + 2" was. I could hear from my desk, one of them saying, "2 + 2 = 5," and the other one arguing back, "No, '2 + 2 = 4'." Back and forth they went, until finally the moment arrived that I had been waiting for, "Daddy, what's '2 + 2'?" Now, I knew that as soon as I said "4," one of them would say, "Aha! Na na na na na na." Then there would be a great battle until he forced his brother into exile. If I said, "No, '2 + 2 = 5'," I would hinder the development of my sons' intellectual future. So I was caught in a quandary.

Perhaps our greatest test of character is remaining silent rather than being proven right.

Joseph intended to quietly break off the betrothal without any public humiliation for Mary, even though it would have vindicated his own reputation.

The will of God for Joseph involved breaking his heart! He was willing to surrender his pride and live, for the time being, with a broken heart.

Let us notice, however, that God is about to ask Joseph to surrender more than his pride.

2. Secondly, Joseph surrendered his privacy.

Look at Matthew 1:20.

But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, “Joseph, even though you want to go quietly back to life as you once knew it, I want you to make a decision that will launch you into the public spotlight for the rest of your life. You are about to become the stepfather of the Messiah. You are going to raise the Savior.”

Talk about a glass house!

Moments after the birth of Christ, Joseph gets a taste of how much his life would change. Shepherds show up unannounced to worship Him. They deliver the news that millions of angels had only recently appeared in the sky chanting of the Savior’s birth.

Within two years, according to the correct chronology of the gospels, their home will be visited by dignitaries from the land of Persia; by an entourage of Magi that brought with them costly gifts. We can only imagine the commotion that created in Nazareth.

We know from scripture that Joseph was given revelation through dreams at least four times. Three times in three years, he relocated his family. He reestablished his carpentry business. He set up their home once again. Three times in three years that we know of, Joseph had to change, make new contacts, feed his family.

We also know that the first two years of their baby’s life, Joseph and Mary were virtually running for their lives.

What a whirlwind!

“Joseph, that quiet village life you once knew – do you remember? You’ve probably wanted to go back to the way it was in Nazareth. It will never again be like you once knew.”

The will of God would be inconvenient, uncomfortable, surprising, dangerous, tiring, confusing, demanding, and very, very public. Farewell to the bliss of a quiet life, Joseph.

I wonder what God has asked you to surrender for His Son.

God will ask and Joseph will respond with affirmation. Joseph will sacrifice his pride, his privacy, and one more thing.

3. Thirdly, Joseph surrendered his personal priorities.

Notice Matthew 1:21. The angel is speaking to Joseph.

She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.

Joseph chose to give his life to caring for Mary and raising his son, along with other children who will come along later, according to the gospel accounts.

When your son is the Savior of the world, how do you act around Him and what do you say to Him? This was all unrehearsed!

There is no doubt in my mind that Joseph would struggle with a great sense of inadequacy. Where is the parenting manual for raising the Messiah?

Here was a man who had little, if any, formal education, yet he is now responsible to educate the greatest educator of all time.

The Jewish customs related to children’s education were fairly clear. We know that from the time a son was the age of three until he was the age of twelve, the father was responsible to pass down the traditions, customs, ordinances, and the laws of God to him.

Talk about intimidating!

Understand that Jesus’ mind was not already pre-downloaded with Biblical software. Luke tells us that He grew in wisdom (Luke 2).

I can imagine Joseph saying, “Me?! You want me to teach the prophecies of scripture to the One who is the fulfillment of prophecy? You want me to teach the law to the One who will fulfill the law? You want me to teach the system of worship and sacrifices to the One who will be the final sacrifice?”

Why not choose Joseph of Arimathea? Why choose Joseph of Nazareth? They lived at the same time. Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man; able to afford tutors for his children. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court; he knew the law like the back of his hand. The Bible also tells us that he was a righteous man as well, looking for the kingdom of God. He would make a great stepfather for the Messiah. Did the names somehow, somewhere get switched?

My friends, just as God chose who your parents would be, and who your children would be; just as He chose you for them, God chose Joseph of Nazareth and a teenage girl named Mary, to raise Jesus, the Messiah.

Conclusion

Two thoughts come to mind in studying this scene and especially the life of Joseph.

1. **First, being in the will of God is not as much a matter of convenience as it is a sacrifice.**

“Here Lord, use my plantation; move into my parlor! You can have my drapes, my silverware . . . my property. You can put my education to use for Your glory. You can have my children and my house. You can have access to my calendar and my schedule and my wallet and my career . . . You can have my life.”

I wonder how many Christians shuttle between northern Virginia and southern Virginia in an attempt to avoid the battle – anything but engage in the cause of Christ to advance His name.

I got an email this past week, copying me on an article that ran in the North Carolina State University school newspaper.

The headline reads, “This Christmas Card Was Written 500 Years Before Christmas.” Then it goes on to explain:

About 500 years before Jesus’ birth, the prophet Micah wrote that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem; right where Jesus was born. And do you know who knew of Micah’s prophecy? All the religious leaders who advised King Herod. We’re told that when Jesus was born, some wise men from the east went to King Herod in Jerusalem. They asked Herod where the Messiah was born, “For we have seen His star in the east, and have come to worship Him.” Herod didn’t know. So he gathered all the chief priests and scribes and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet...” There are over a hundred such prophecies that describe who this Messiah would be and what He would do – like a prophetic Global Positioning Satellite pointing out the Messiah, the Christ. The amazing thing is that Jesus fulfilled every one of them. Before the end of the first century countless Jews and Gentiles in the Middle

East put their faith in Him; this Christmas is a good time for you to look at the life and teaching of Jesus – and decide for yourself. A good place to start is by asking God to reveal the truth to you – He will. Open to the section of the Bible called “John” and begin reading.

The rest of the page is filled with names – I counted about 120 professors and staff listed in this ad – and just so you can find them, they also list the department in which they teach next to their name. I recognized a couple of the names of professors who are members of our church.

If this was not enough, and in case you wondered why they ran this ad, just above all their names, in a larger font, is a paragraph that reads,

This ad is sponsored by the following NC State faculty and staff who are followers of Jesus Christ. If you have any questions about what it would be like to have a personal relationship with Him, feel free to drop by our offices and talk.

Is this great or what?!

Why risk the inconvenience? Why threaten a career path? Why ask for misunderstanding and even ridicule?

This is the testimony of Joseph. Following the will of God has more to do with sacrifice than convenience.

When we are willing to set aside our pride and give up our privacy, who knows what God what has in mind through us!

2. **Secondly, surrendering our lives for God to use does not require experience, just obedience.**

How many giants did King David kill before he stood in front of Goliath? None.

How many Messiah’s did this son of David raise before kneeling over a manger in Bethlehem? None.

God is not looking for experience, but readiness, willingness, obedience!

Perhaps the most significant words in Matthew chapter 1 – at least to the life of this man – are the words in verse 24.

And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...

It is as simple as that – Joseph obeyed the word of God.

However, make no mistake, it will cost him everything. On that morning, he said farewell to the bliss of a quiet life.

Joseph handed God his pride, his plans for a normal life, his priorities, his dreams, his options, his calendar, and he said, just as his adopted Son will one day say, “Not my will, but Yours be done.”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/17/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ John MacArthur, Matthew (Moody Press, 1985), p. 16.

ⁱⁱ Ivor Powell, Matthew's Majestic Gospel (Kregel, 1986), p. 26.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel (Augsburg, 1943), p. 42.