

ZION, JANUARY 3, 2021

When it comes to the account of Jesus' birth, we certainly remember Mary's part in it. She had the lead role. We remember the shepherds who were told about the birth of Jesus. They spread the word concerning what had been told them about the baby they saw in the manger. We remember the angels who spoke to the shepherds. We recall the visit by the Magi. They came and gave gifts to the newborn King.

But what about Joseph? What do we remember about him? Is he just part of the background scenery? No words of Joseph are recorded in the Bible. When an angel appeared to Mary, and Elizabeth, and Zechariah they all spoke some sort of response. But Joseph seems to have just listened to the message given to him.

Although silent in Scripture we know that Joseph did play an important part in the process of God bringing his Son into the world. Today, we see most vividly the role that Joseph had when the time came for the Savior to be born. We see him as an example of a faithful husband and a caring father. But most of all Joseph is a shining example of trust in God's protecting care. He listened to the commands and promises of God. He obeyed the commands of God and trusted his promises. May each of us have the same. **A TRUST IN GOD'S PROTECTING CARE.** May we have a faith like Joseph's that listens. May we have a faith like Joseph's that obeys.

Even before the events recorded in our Gospel lesson Joseph demonstrated the fact that he was willing to listen to God and obey Him. After Mary broke the news to him that she was pregnant while maintaining that she was still a virgin Joseph considered filing for a divorce from her. But then he was told by an angel in a dream to keep his engagement to Mary and to still receive her as his wife. Joseph listened and obeyed.

Then the government (under God's control of course) told Joseph to go to Bethlehem with his very pregnant wife. Again, he listened and obeyed.

After Jesus was born some foreign visitors came to worship the Son that the Holy Spirit had conceived in Joseph's wife. They gave Him gifts of gold, and incense, and myrrh. They were barely out the door when God sent another message to Joseph.

"When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.'"

As he had done in the past Joseph put his trust in God's protecting care. He did that with a faith that listened and with a faith that obeyed.

Perhaps we don't fully appreciate how significant it is that Joseph listened attentively to all the messages the angels brought him. Think about what Joseph was told to do. At first, he was told to take his wife and her young son to a strange land where he had no job or home. Then after he was settled in Egypt for a while an angel of the Lord appeared to him again with another message.

"After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.'"

And then he was given another message in a dream with yet another change of plans.

"Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth."

I am sure that not all of God's commands made perfect sense to Joseph. No doubt he could have offered God a few alternative plans.

We can imagine Joseph saying, **"Well, Lord, your plans sound okay but why don't I go and hide out at the home of one of my relatives instead of going to Egypt."**

Or Joseph could have complained about God's plans for him. **"Look, Lord, I didn't ask to be the foster Father of the Christ child. You are going to have to take care of Herod. I am not going down to Egypt."**

But we don't hear any of those kinds of things from Joseph. He trusted in God's protecting care. He did that with a faith that listened.

Trusting in God's protecting care begins with a faith that listens. Although we may not receive a message from an angel in a dream, we have the clear Words of God printed in our own language. In the Bible He tells us how to avoid things that would harm us. With a faith that listens to God's warnings we are kept under His protecting care. When we disregard what God says we place ourselves in danger.

Now it is important that you understand that I am not saying that God's protecting care has a limit. He can protect us wherever we go. But we can reject his protecting care by our unbelieving actions and by not listening to his Word.

But what reason do we have for trusting in God's protecting care? Why should we have a faith that listens to His commands and promises? In the verses before us we are given some strong encouragement to listen to the commands and promises of God. Three times Matthew tells us that as God worked out His plan in the life of Joseph, Jesus, and Mary, Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled.

When Joseph took Mary and Jesus down to Egypt Matthew tells us, **“And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said thru the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’”**

Even Herod’s wicked attempt to kill Jesus fulfilled the words of the prophet Jeremiah.

And the fact that Joseph finally settled in Nazareth **“fulfilled what was said through the prophets: ‘He will be called a Nazarene.’”**

These and dozens of other prophecies were fulfilled by Jesus just as God had said. The facts of Jesus’ birth, His life, His words, and even His suffering, death, and resurrection were all outlined in God’s Word before they happened. Why can we trust in God’s protecting care with a faith that listens to His commands and promises? Because God always keeps His Word.

Of course, there are going to be times in our lives when God’s commands might not seem to make sense or fit with what we want. Will we still listen? Will we like Joseph receive the commands and promises of God with a believing heart?

That brings us to an awesome truth about God’s Word. What God asks of us and what He promises contain the power to move us to obey and to believe. Joseph was no less a sinner than you or me. He too had a sinful nature that wanted to ignore what God told him to do. But the messages that God sent him created faith in Joseph’s heart. When we look at what is happening in our lives and we are asked to trust in God’s protecting care promises like this one from Romans 8:28 will create a faith in us that listens to what God says. **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”**

A promise from God like this one from Jeremiah 29:11 will enable us to trust in God’s protecting care, **“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”**

And no matter how out of control things seem in our lives we will trust in God's protecting care when we listen to promises like this one from Isaiah 43:2-3: **"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."**

There really is no secret to following the example of Joseph and placing yourself in God's protecting care. It begins with a faith that listens to the commands and promises of God as Joseph did. That faith is God's gift to us through His commands and promises.

We also see in this Gospel lesson that Joseph not only listened to the LORD he also obeyed the LORD. Trusting in God's protecting care begins with a faith that listens and leads to a faith that obeys. Three times Joseph did exactly what the LORD told him to do. After the first warning that Joseph was given, we are told, **"So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt."**

Joseph didn't roll over in bed and wait until morning to leave. He didn't wait for good weather or for another message from God. Immediately he obeyed. When the angel told him, it was time to go back to Israel we are told, **"So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel."**

And finally, when he was given a warning in a dream about not living in Judea we are told, **"he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth."** When God spoke, Joseph obeyed with humble and childlike faith.

Once again, I must add a word of caution about how we apply the example of Joseph to our lives. He wasn't given God's protecting care because he listened and obeyed. God protects His children because of His own mercy and love. We don't earn or deserve it. But we can choose to ignore the commands and promises of God. We can also choose not to obey His commands. Then we may remove ourselves from His protecting care and suffer the consequences.

Perhaps we are reluctant to connect obedience to God's protecting care. And we must be careful not to give the impression that God protects us only when we are good. But the rest of the Bible certainly speaks about the blessings of obedience.

Jesus said, "**Blessed ...are those who hear the word of God and obey it.**" He told His disciples in John 13:17, "**Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.**"

The Psalm writer declared, "**Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands.**"

We enjoy God's protecting care the most when we obey His Word. Through Isaiah the Lord said, "**I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea.**" (Isaiah 48:17-18)

James 1:22 encourages us, "**Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.**"

When we trust in God's protecting care, we also must be willing to obey what He commands. Solomon said this simply, "**Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.** (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

Joseph did his duty because he loved and respected God. This kept him in God's protecting care.

When it comes to trusting in God's protecting care one Christian writer noted that we can learn all we will ever need to know from the example of Noah. He wrote, "All I will ever need to know I learned from Noah.

One, don't miss the boat.

Two, remember that we are all in the same boat.

Three, plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark.

Four, stay fit. When you're 600 someone may ask you to do something big.

Five, don't listen to critics. Just get on with the job that needs to be done.

Six, build your future on high ground.

Seven, speed isn't everything. The snails were on board with the cheetahs.

Eight, when you're stressed, float awhile.

Nine, remember the Ark was built by amateurs, the Titanic by professionals.

Ten, no matter what the storm, with God there's always a rainbow waiting."

As we look back on the events of 2020, we may wonder about what lies ahead. What will happen to us or our loved ones? How will the stock market and the job market fare? All of those things are in God's hands and we are in God's hands. We are asked to serve Him in all that we say and do. He is to be our first priority and obeying His word is the mission He gives us for the new year.

Joseph stands out as a shining example of one who listened to God's commands and obeyed them. May the Holy Spirit lead us to such trust in God's protecting care. May His precious Word work in us a faith that listens and a faith that obeys. Amen.