

CHRISTMAS INTERLUDE

Relating Rightly To Relatives At Christmas

Part I. Heeding God Above Family Ties With His Encouragement (Luke 1:26-56)

Introduction: (To show the need . . .)

Though the Christmas holiday season is ideally a time when relatives gather to celebrate and enjoy each other's company, relationship problems can often afflict those who attend these gatherings:

(1) Annie Lane's "Ask Annie" column in the November 28, 2016 Republican-American, p. 8A, posted a letter by a man who had married a woman with children, and due to tensions that had developed between the man and her children, he was refusing "to be at 'her home' during any family gatherings" and it was "assumed that" he hated her children when he just didn't "like being disrespected." He was "angry" that his "wife" did not stand "with" him, *Ibid.*

(2) Beyond such tensions typical of many extended families in society, believers often find themselves at odds with relatives over spiritual issues, and many in our congregation have told of this concern. In one case, a member of our Church told me that once when he was visiting extended family members, a relative turned on the living room TV set, switched to a channel where a priest was saying the Roman Catholic mass and tried to influence the children in the gathering to participate in following the priest's lead! The relative ended up on his knees in front of the TV going through the motions as a participant in an alleged congregation in trying to get the children to copy him!

Need: So, we ask, "This Christmas season when I gather with relatives and I am cornered into having to decide between heeding the will of a relative or heeding God's will, how should I respond effectively?!"

- I. When God sent the angel Gabriel to tell Mary that she would bear Jesus, she faced a great conflict between Gabriel's actions and words and her relatives due to her role as a betrothed virgin, Lk. 1:26-28:**
 - A. Mary was a virgin betrothed to Joseph (Luke 1:26-27), bound by a marriage contract arranged between her bridegroom Joseph, herself as the bride, her father and the local religious authorities in Nazareth. (Alfred Edersheim, Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ, 1974, p. 147-151)
 - B. The marriage was not completed where the bridegroom and the bride came together to live with each other "until at least twelve months after the betrothal contract was drawn up," and this "(t)welve-month waiting period was deemed necessary because of the low state of morals of that day. That period gave sufficient time to reveal whether the woman was pregnant when the contract was drawn up," and "(t)he interval also allowed time to see if she would become pregnant by an unfaithful act after being joined by contract to her husband." (J. Dwight Pentecost, The Words and Works of Jesus Christ, 1991, p. 357)
 - C. If the betrothed woman proved to be immoral, her bridegroom was not required to marry her, and he could end the engagement with a bill of divorce, *Ibid.* The termination of the marital contract under these conditions left the bride far less qualified for marriage, and so risked the loss of her having a fulfilling future life.
 - D. Yet, God sent the angel Gabriel to do and to say what directly countered these customs of Mary's relatives:
 1. First, God sent Gabriel to "come **into**" (*eiserchomai*, U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 201; The Analyt. Grk. Lex. (Zon.), 1972, p. 120; Arndt & Gingrich, A Grk.-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 231-232) Mary in her private room (Luke 1:28a), what in view of the low morals of that era would have been very troubling to a betrothed virgin, Luke 1:28-29. Understandably, she was "greatly perplexed" (*diatarasso*, *Ibid.*, p. 138) and "pondered" (*dialogizomai*, *Ibid.*, p. 185) what sort of greeting it was for Gabriel to enter in unto her in her private room and to announce that she was highly favored and blessed among women, Luke 1:28!
 2. Second, though Gabriel told Mary not to fear, that she had found favor with God (Luke 1:30), he added that she would conceive and bear a son and call his name JESUS, Luke 1:31 KJV. A pregnancy and birth was the last thing a betrothed virgin wanted to experience before her wedding, for it would give grounds for her bridegroom to divorce her, effectively ruining her future happiness! (Luke 1:32; Matthew 1:18-19)
- II. Gabriel sought to settle Mary by explaining that Jesus would be the long-promised Messiah, that God would give unto Him the throne of His great ancestor David to rule Israel forever, Luke 1:32-33.**
- III. There was no Biblical precedent for a betrothed virgin to conceive and to bear a child, so Mary asked the angel Gabriel how she would conceive and bear a son without her having had relations with a man, and he explained that God would perform the miracle of the Incarnation of Jesus, Luke 1:34-35.**
- IV. Then, to make this unusual arrangement that so greatly violated the customs of her relatives of that day believable and acceptable to Mary, Gabriel announced that her aged, barren relative Elisabeth had**

conceived, what had a Biblical precedent in the experience of Old Testament Sarah (Genesis 18:10-12; 21:1-2). Thus, nothing would be impossible for God to accomplish, Luke 1:36-37 NIV.

- V. Armed with this encouragement from the Lord, despite the threat of Gabriel's message to her betrothal, marriage and future life with her relatives, Mary believed and yielded to the message, Luke 1:38.
- VI. Then, she took advantage of the angel's encouraging news of Elisabeth's miraculous pregnancy to travel quickly to Elisabeth in the hill country of Judah to interact with her for edification, Luke 1:39-56:
- A. Mary made a hasty journey from Nazareth south to the hill country of Judah 70 miles away (Luke 1:26, 39; The MacMillan Bible Atlas, 1968, map 225) to visit her relative Elisabeth, Luke 1:39-40.
 - B. When she arrived and Elisabeth heard Mary's greeting, Elisabeth's unborn son leaped in her womb for joy, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit and complimented Mary for not only being favored of the Lord to bear the Messiah, but for accepting God's call through the angel Gabriel that she bear the Messiah, Luke 1:41-45.
 - C. Drawing encouragement from Elisabeth's words, Mary voiced her Magnificat, Luke 1:46-55. She was filled with the Holy Spirit and edified in God for accepting her assignment to bear the Messiah though an espoused virgin, leaving with God the difficulties she yet faced with her relatives due to her assignment from God!
 - D. Mary stayed with Elisabeth for about three months, until shortly before the birth of Elisabeth's baby (Luke 1:36, 56). She thus gained 3 months of encouragement by her fellowship with Elisabeth before returning to Nazareth to face the challenge of interacting with relatives in her pregnancy as a betrothed virgin! (Luke 1:56)

Lesson: *When faced by the Angel Gabriel in his unsettling entrance to her in private and his news of her conceiving and bearing Jesus in her betrothal, what seriously violated customs held sacrosanct by her relatives and threatened her future happiness, Mary took advantage of God's encouraging evidence of Elisabeth's miraculous conception in old age to heed His Word from the Angel Gabriel, trusting God to handle the relatives' reactions.*

Application: *If we face a conflict between heeding the Lord and His Word and the beliefs or traditions of relatives, (1) may we trust in Christ to become a child of God as was Mary to come under God's "much more" care, John 3:16; Romans 8:32. (2) Then, as GOD provides us tangible encouraging fellowship with others of like faith as He provided Elisabeth for Mary, (3) may we UTILIZE that fellowship for motivation to (4) heed God's Word (5) and to let the Lord handle the details regarding relating to the relatives.*

Conclusion: (To illustrate the message . . .)

Over 30 years ago, two senior ladies who have since gone on to be with the Lord attended our Church, and both of them had accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. Their names were Marge and Ruth.

Both had trusted in Christ after marrying unsaved men, both of their husbands were still unbelievers, and both of these ladies would come in the same car together to Nepaug Church without any other family members.

Ruth in particular one day told me that every Sunday when she prepared to come to our Church services, her relatives would criticize her for not holding to their beliefs or for not attending their churches. When she told me this, Ruth also explained, "Pastor, when I come to this Church and hear the Bible teaching and meet with other Christians of like faith, I get so pumped up and encouraged that it makes me able to face what I do with the relatives! I wouldn't miss this Church's ministry for anything in the world!"

Accordingly, when I would start to teach the Adult Sunday School Class each Sunday, and look out to see Marge and Ruth faithfully seated in the pew and eagerly waiting for what they would learn from God's Word that day, it left me feeling forced to put aside what trials I had recently faced and just minister the Word! Their example gave me no excuse for self pity!

After the Sunday School and morning Worship Service on many occasions, Marge and Ruth would speak with me, expressing how wonderful it had been for them to be in Nepaug Church that day! It made me feel like Moses in Exodus 3, that I was standing on holy ground to be privileged to minister to such people!

If we face a conflict between heeding the Lord and His Word and the beliefs or practices of relatives, may we trust in Christ to become a child of God. Then, armed with God's spiritual equipping, may we do what God directs us to do -- to take encouragement God sends our way to do His will like He did for Mary in directing her to visit Elisabeth, letting God handle the tension that our obedience to Him produces with the relatives!