

CHRISTMAS INTERLUDE

God's Stability In An Unsettled World At Christmas

Part II: God's Stability Amid Family Relationship Instability At Christmas

(Matthew 1:18-25)

Introduction: (To show the need . . .)

This Christmas Season, many people, including many Christians, face family relationship instability:

(1) Last Tuesday morning, the hosts of "The Talk of Connecticut" radio talk show told how the late President George H. W. Bush had become a "father figure" to former President Bill Clinton who had had a dysfunctional father.

(2) This problem goes back as far as 1995 when David Blankenhorn in his book Fatherless America claimed: "Fatherlessness is the engine driving our most urgent social problems, from crime to adolescent pregnancy to domestic violence." (David Blankenhorn, "Life Without Father," USA Weekend, February 24-26, 1995, p. 4-5)

(3) However, if even Christians try to live Biblically upright lives in a society marked by dysfunctional relationships, they can face dysfunctional-causing forces from outside the family itself: in his article, "Does Father Know Best?" (Answers, Nov.-Dec., 2018, p. 46-47), Michael P. Farris, of the Alliance Defending Freedom, told of a "13-year-old boy" who "went to his public-school counselor to complain" that his parents took him "to church too much . . . Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday night." The counselor called Child Protective Services, and it "seized the couple's son" and held him for a "hearing" in "Island County (Washington State) Court." The court ruled that the parents had to limit Church for their son "to once a week" to keep custody of him, *Ibid.*, p. 47.

Need: *So, we ask, "If facing family relationship instability or instability pressures, what does God call us to do?!"*

I. When Joseph and Mary planned to be married, they faced a family-threatening crisis, Matthew 1:18:

- A. They entered a year long engagement period that was meant to prove that Mary had been a virgin when the engagement was first formed, Matt. 1:18a; J. D. Pentecost, The Words and Works of Jes. Christ, 1991, p. 357.
- B. So binding was this contract that the couple needed a bill of divorce to break it, *Ibid.*
- C. Thus, when Mary was discovered to be with child during her engagement, Joseph thought she had violated the wedding contract by committing adultery, so he was left with the decision either publically to shame Mary or quietly to divorce her, Matt. 1:18b; A. Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 1972, i, p. 154.
- D. Nazareth was a small town in that day and its Hebrews "impulsive, straight-spoken, hot-blooded, brave" and "intensely national" (*Ibid.*, p. 148), so for Joseph to take negative action against Mary would cause a stir in their Hebrew community that would affect their extended family ties for a long time! It was a big crisis!

II. Joseph responded to this crisis with righteousness, love and cautious wisdom, Matthew 1:19-20a:

- A. He was a **righteous** man, so Joseph was committed to not marrying an immoral woman, Matthew 1:19a.
- B. However, Joseph also **loved** Mary seen from the Greek New Testament text at Matthew 1:19b (as follows):
 1. The pronoun *auten*, "her" is written **before** the verb "*deigmatisai*," "expose, make an example of" (U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 3; Arndt & Gingrich, A Grk.-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 171) in the emphatic position to emphasize the "her" in the context -- to emphasize Mary!
 2. In other words, Joseph did not want to expose **of all people Mary** to open shame, meaning he **loved** her!
- C. Matthew 1:20a adds that Joseph then spent time pondering his predicament before taking action against Mary, indicating he was **cautiously wise**, realizing his action would greatly affect them and their extended families!

III. God then clearly revealed the truth and directed Joseph on how to address the crisis, Matthew 1:20b-23:

- A. The Lord wanted to give Joseph information he would believe so he would do what God willed, so He used circumstantial evidences that were **credible** to **Joseph** to direct him on the action he was to take, v. 20b-23:
 1. God sent an **angel of the Lord** to speak to Joseph, and Joseph knew there had been a long precedent of Old Testament saints who received direction from God's angel, Matt. 1:20b; Z. P. E. B., v. One, p. 162.
 2. God sent the angel to Joseph in a **dream**, and Hebrews like Joseph in his era believed that a good dream was a signal of God's favor to the one who experienced the dream, Matt. 1:20c; *Ibid.*, Edersheim, p. 155.
 3. The angel addressed Joseph as "**son of David**," a positive title to him, Matt. 1:20d; *Ibid.*, p. 154.
 4. The angel's **giving the name** of Mary's baby as "**Jesus**" since He would **save His people from their sins** (Matt. 1:21b) fit a view Hebrew rabbis had of Messiah: a homiletical commentary in Joseph's day claimed that the Messiah would make "expiation for the sins of Israel," *Ibid.*, p. 155, fn. 2. The angel went further than this commentary to indicate that Jesus would actually save His people from their sins!
- B. In addition, the Lord had His angel cite known authoritative Scripture to clarify the truth, Matthew 1:22-23:

1. Commentators usually claim that Matthew inserted verses 22-23 in his narrative to explain its events, but W. R. Nicol (*The Exp. Grk. Test.*, s. v. Matt. 1:22-23 as cited in studylight.org/commentaries) makes good arguments against this view (as follows): (a) it is disorderly for Matthew to give an explanation of the events in the midst of describing those events as is done here and not wait to explain the events at the end of his narration. (b) Also, though Joseph's line fully expected Messiah to come in their line, the *means* of His arrival by a **virgin conception** was *not* expected, so Joseph would **need** the angel to cite credible Isaiah 7:14 to *verify* that miraculous conception that he might be *sure* that Mary was *innocent* of adultery!
 2. We thus hold that the angel cited Isaiah 7:14 to Joseph at Matthew 1:22-23 in his dream, the Scriptural basis for Mary as a virgin conceiving and giving birth to Immanuel, "God with us"!
- C. Thus, in accord with the **precedent** of Joseph's initial plan to wed Mary, the angel of the Lord told him not to fear to take her as his wife, for her pregnancy was caused by the Holy Spirit, Matthew 1:20b. God had let Joseph become engaged to Mary because He had all along intended that Joseph end up marrying her!
- IV. Joseph responded by immediately heeding God's directives to resolve the family crisis, Matthew 1:24-25:**
- A. Being raised from sleep as a result of the striking, informative and settling dream-vision he had just received from the Lord's angel, Joseph **immediately** interrupted the one-year engagement period by taking Mary to be his wife to protect the moral reputations of both her and her infant Son, the Messiah, Matthew 1:24.
 - B. In keeping with the implied spirit of the angel's quotation of Isaiah 7:14, Joseph then abstained from being physically intimate with Mary until she had given birth to Jesus! Joseph revered God and upheld His Word!

Lesson: *When Joseph functioned in righteousness, love and cautious wisdom in response to the crisis of Mary's pregnancy during their engagement period, God gave him multiple, credible circumstantial evidences plus Scripture in line with the past precedent of his engagement to direct him on the truth that Joseph might wed Mary.*

Application: *(1) May we obey Scripture and trust in Christ for salvation for eternal life, John 3:16 with Acts 17:30. (2) If facing family relationship instability or instability pressures this Christmas, (a) may we rely on the indwelling Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16) to function in (i) righteousness, (ii) love and (iii) cautious wisdom. (b) May we then wait for God to provide (i) ample, (ii) credible circumstantial signals (iii) coupled with Scripture and (iv) credible precedents as the Lord may provide on the direction we are to take in the crisis.*

Conclusion: (To illustrate the message . . .)

Our Pilgrim forefathers experienced God's spiritual help similar to what Joseph did that first Christmas.

They had crossed the Atlantic Ocean in the Mayflower to America to escape religious oppression in Europe, to protect their children from the decadence of the Old World and to spread the gospel of Christ to unreached American Indians. (Angie Mosteller, "Why the Pilgrims Really Came to America," November 21, 2013, citing William Bradford, *Bradford's History of the Plymouth Settlement*, trans. by Harold Paget, p. 21)

However, when they landed at Plymouth in the late fall of 1620, unable to navigate further south to warmer Virginia, they had decided to winter at Cape Cod. The cold, wet winter weather then cost them half of their number in death, a trial that proved to be so great, "(t)hey seriously considered returning to Europe." (Eric Metaxas, "The Miracle of Squanto's Path to Plymouth" in *The Wall Street Journal*, November 25, 2015, p. A19)

When all hope seemed lost, the next spring, a Wampanoag Indian walked out of the nearby woods and greeted the Pilgrims in perfect English. His name was Squanto. He had been captured back in 1609 by English sailors who came to the Cape Cod area and was taken to England where he was sold to some Catholic friars who treated him well and even released him so he could return to his tribal people in the Cape Cod area. (Ibid.)

Squanto then gained a job as a translator on a ship from England to Newfoundland, and as the ship made its way from Newfoundland down the coast to Cape Cod, he had disembarked only to find that his whole tribe had meanwhile died of a disease. Squanto then befriended and taught the Pilgrims how to survive in his native land that he knew so well. He "'became a special instrument sent from God' who didn't leave them 'till he died'" according to the Pilgrims. (Ibid.) There is even evidence that Squanto was disciplined by the Pilgrims in line with one of their main objectives. (Ibid.) The Lord had prepared Squanto to help our Pilgrim forefathers that they might achieve their goals of religious liberty, a better spiritual environment for their children and disciplining the Indians. As God had come to Joseph's aid that first Christmas to encourage him to wed Mary as he initially planned, God sent Squanto to help the Pilgrims meet their initial objectives. The Pilgrims were then used of God to influence the forming of our nation.

May we trust in Christ for salvation. If facing family relationship instability, may we live righteously, lovingly and with cautious wisdom while relying on the Lord to give us what more credible insight we need.