



Look... Learn... Lead Study Guide

Looking for the Holy Spirit's direction
Learning through God's Word
Leading others in a personal relationship with Christ

Sermon Series
"Simple Joy"
WEEK 3

Sunday, December 16, 2018 — Finding Joy on the Back Side of Sorrow (Matthew 1:18-24)

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

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. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

Monday, December 17, 2018 — Joseph Accepted the Hard Call to Parent his Savior (Matthew 1:18-21)

Matthew, to say the least, didn't swamp his readers with facts about Joseph. Matthew just wrote that "before they were married," Joseph's fiancé Mary "became pregnant by the Holy Spirit." The fact was terribly painful at first; the story she told was incredible. Joseph was going, sensibly, "to call off their engagement quietly." Then, in a dream, an angel from the Lord verified Mary's story. Even more, Mary's child would "save his people from their sins."

- Matthew concisely reported one other key fact about Joseph: "Joseph her husband was a righteous man ... he didn't want to humiliate her." What do you learn about Joseph's inner qualities from his measured response ("he decided

to call off their engagement quietly")? Cloud and Townsend's book *Safe People* helped identify Biblically-based qualities of "safe people." How safe are you for others? Like Joseph, do you choose not to humiliate others?

- Joseph was "a devout Jewish man willing to give up what was often perceived to be a Jewish father's greatest privilege — siring his first-born son — in order to obey God's will." ² Have you ever had to give up, or alter, some cherished dream to obey God, or might you have to? If so, how are you and God working to bend that loss to produce good results?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, the story of your miraculous conception pointed to the fact that your life would upend business as usual in our broken world. Fill me with the courage to let you reshape all the parts of my life that need it. Amen.

Tuesday, December 18, 2018 — How Matthew led the Story to Joseph (Matthew 1:1-17)

You might feel like saying to Matthew, "Really? You're going to start Jesus' story with 17 verses of genealogy? How boring!" But family records were a key source of identity in Jesus' day (even without mail order DNA kits available). King Herod the Great, despised by most Jews because he was half Edomite, ordered official registers destroyed so no one could prove a purer ancestry than his own! In verse 1, Matthew named three key points he meant his genealogy to show: Jesus was "Christ," the "son of David," and the "son of Abraham."

- The Greek word "Christ," like the Hebrew word "Messiah," meant "anointed one." It was widely used to identify the deliverer God had promised to send. What do you believe made Jesus' link to Abraham and King David so key for

Matthew? In what ways does it matter to you that, in Jesus, God kept the ancient promises made to those men, albeit in ways different than many people expected?

- In a male-dominated culture, Matthew named five women (including Mary) in Jesus' genealogy. The other four (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and "the wife of Uriah" — i.e. Bathsheba) had all, like Mary, faced obstacles, even scandals, in their lives. Yet God had worked with each of them to advance God's redeeming mission in the world. What kinds of people do we ignore or undervalue in our culture? Does God still work through people like that? In what ways is God at work through you?

Prayer: O God, you have always been willing to work with anyone willing to work with you, no matter what their past. I want to be a part of your big redeeming story in the world. Please work through me. Amen.

Wednesday, December 19, 2018 — Fulfilment, Marriage, and Birth (Matthew 1:22-25)

After he quoted Isaiah 7:14, Matthew interpreted the Hebrew word "Emmanuel" for his Greek readers: Emmanuel means "God with us." Scholar William Barclay summed up Matthew's message: "Jesus is the one person who can tell us what God is like, and what God means us to be. In him alone we see what God is and what man ought to be." ³ Joseph "did just as an angel from God commanded," reaching beyond what seemed logical or understandable.

- Jesus would later tell his disciples, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). In what ways have you chosen to make the person of Jesus central to your understanding of what God is like? Has that helped you to set aside

some of the negative, frightening images of God that limit too many people's willingness to relate to God? If so, how has that worked?

- Joseph followed the angel's instruction (in Matthew 1:21) to name the child "Jesus" (the Greek form of the Hebrew "Joshua," which meant "Yahweh is salvation"). Many Hebrews wanted salvation from the occupying Roman army. But the angel didn't talk about the Romans. This child, he said, would save people from humanity's greatest enemy: sin, missing God's path for living a fully-human life. How confident are you that Jesus can in fact save you from any life missteps, that he is the savior from sin that we all need?

Prayer: Lord, Matthew wrote that "When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded." Awaken my heart and give me Joseph's willingness to live my life as you direct me to. Amen.

Thursday, December 20, 2018 — Joseph's Life Beyond Christmas (Luke 2:41-51, Matthew 13:54-57)

We'd love to quote even a short speech by Joseph about the glory and challenge of being Jesus' earthly father. But, as Adam Hamilton wrote, "Unlike Mary, Joseph has no 'lines' — we don't read a single word he speaks in the Gospels ... He is the patron saint of those who serve and do the right thing without seeking any credit."

⁴ We do get a few more glimpses of his influence on Jesus. We see him as a worried parent looking for a missing boy in Luke 2. And we see that Jesus' hometown looked down on him for being a carpenter's son.

- His worried parents asked Jesus why he was in the Temple, not with them. Jesus replied, "Didn't you know that it was necessary for me to be in my Father's house?" "My father's house" clearly didn't refer to Joseph. Adam Hamilton

Prayer: Lord, the gospels suggest that you and your earthly father were carpenters. Sadly, many people in your day added the word "just" before carpenter. Help me to value all people, not only the ones who are like me or impress me. Amen.

Friday, December 21, 2018 — The Unwanted, Important Journey to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-4)

Caesar Augustus' purpose was purely earthly and pragmatic: to collect more taxes for his far-flung empire. But God "bent" Caesar's decree to divine purposes, using it to bring Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, a difficult trip for pregnant Mary. That the trip was necessary also cast light on Joseph's family connections being in Bethlehem, and not in Nazareth where Mary lived.

- The Christmas story shows God's Great Reversal. Augustus, a human who thought he was a god, forced Mary and Joseph to make a hard trip with just a decree. That night Jesus, God become human, was a helpless baby born to two poor peasants. Two millennia later, Jesus is revered around the world, and Augustus nearly forgotten. Where do you see God's power in the Christmas story?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I don't live anywhere near Bethlehem, but your love and grace nourish my soul. Thank you for being a God who does big things even through the small things of earth. Amen.

Saturday, December 22, 2018 — God came to earth as a baby in a manger (Luke 2:5-7)

We know this story so well: the crowded town, the heartless inn-keepers, the wooden barn full of animals. Or do we? "Notice that there is no mention of an old wooden barn. It doesn't state that they arrived just as Mary was going into labor ... the word inn does show up in most English translations, but this is largely due to tradition. In these verses, the Greek word *kataluma* is more accurately translated as "guestroom," as we find it in the Common English Bible. The *kataluma* was the equivalent of a spare bedroom ... it's likely that putting Mary and Joseph in

wrote, "Did you ever wonder how Joseph felt when Jesus spoke those words?"⁵ Skip Ewing's song, *It Wasn't his Child*, said that "like a father [Joseph] was strong and kind and good... But it wasn't his child; it was God's child."⁶ Are you, like Joseph, able to set aside your own ego needs to serve others at God's call?

- The texts mention Jesus' mother and siblings, but not his father. Most scholars believe Joseph died sometime before Jesus' public ministry began. (The gospels simply don't say.) Joseph apparently had a 12- to 30-year window to help protect and shape Jesus growth. What opportunities do you have to serve, bless or shape people and events? Are you ever tempted to think those opportunities will last forever?

How does that redefine our sense of how "power" works?

- Micah was a prophet in Jerusalem about 700 years before Christ. As the armies of the mighty Assyrian Empire threatened Jerusalem, he wrote that God would send a deliverer, born in the small town of Bethlehem. Hebrew scribes quoted Micah 5:2 to tell King Herod the Messiah's birthplace (Matthew 2:4-6). When have you seen God do something big through something "little"? Bethlehem meant "house of bread," and Jesus, born there, later told his followers: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). How will you allow Jesus to nourish your soul this Christmas season?

the stable was an act of compassion... so that Mary could have privacy as she gave birth."⁷

- Inn or guestroom, Jesus' birth took place in an animal shelter because the other options were too crowded for Mary to be able to give birth in them. Year round, and particularly at holiday seasons like Christmas, many of us live very crowded lives. What role is Jesus playing in your Christmas celebration this year? How are you making room in your heart, and in your life, for him?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were born in an animal shelter, and laid in a feeding trough. Be born in my messy, yearning heart this Christmas, Lord, and dwell in me forever. Amen.

Family Activity

Many Christmas movies include selfish, self-centered characters such as Scrooge or the Grinch. However, toward each movie's end, those characters have learned to be more kind, giving, joyful and Christ-like. Choose a Christmas movie and identify a character who grows more loving, kind and joyful throughout the story. Discuss what qualities the character had in the beginning, which ones they showed at

the end and the event(s) that caused the change in their behavior or attitude. Ask each family member to share one behavior or attitude they can work to change this Christmas season. How can they be more joyful all year? How can they share this Christ-like love and joy with others? Ask God to grow your heart to be more like Jesus, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.

¹ Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend, *Safe People: How to Find Relationships That Are Good for You and Avoid Those That Aren't*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995. The book provides much greater depth, but on p. 143 it identifies three broad traits of safe relationships: "1) Draws us closer to God, 2) Draws us closer to others, 3) Helps us become the real person God created us to be."

² B. Witherington III, article "Birth of Jesus" in Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, ed. *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992, p. 63.

³ William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew—Volume 1, Chapters 1–10 (Revised Edition)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 21.

⁴ Adam Hamilton, *The Journey: A Season of Reflections*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011, p. 45.

⁵ Adam Hamilton, *Faithful: Christmas Through the Eyes of Joseph*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017, p. 131.

⁶ "It Wasn't His Child" – songwriter: Skip Ewing, Lyrics © SUSSMAN & ASSOCIATES.

⁷ Adam Hamilton, *Faithful: Christmas Through the Eyes of Joseph*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017, p. 107.