

Adult Teaching Resources

December 18, 2016



Season of Advent

(November 27-December 25)

Psalm 122 – “Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem”

Matthew 3:1-12 – “Starving for Hope”

Matthew 11:2-11 – “The Real McCoy”

Matthew 1:18-25 – “The Invisible Man”

Season of Christmas

(December 25 – January 1)

Titus 3:4-7 – “Why Christmas Matters”

www.nurturingfaith.net

Subscribe to *Nurturing Faith* to access the core Bible content for this lesson. Find links and videos related to this lesson.

The Invisible Man

Matthew 1:18-25

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

Make sure to be familiar with these concepts and parts of today's passage. The more you know about these pieces of the story, the better informed you will be during your lesson.

Engagement—make sure to read the lesson writer's explanation of marriage and engagement in the first century. Arranged marriages were common in Jewish families and were a binding agreement between families. The engagement period could easily last a year before the wedding ceremony.

Joseph's angel—like Mary's story of Jesus' birth, Joseph has a visit from an angel. God spoke through the angel to help him understand the situation. Joseph wanted to do the righteous thing and planned to dismiss her quietly, but the angel came to him with a word from God.

The angel's message and prophecy—the lesson writer explains in good detail the significance of how the angel addresses Joseph—"son of David"—and provides great theological information of the angel's message. The prophecy, quoted in this passage, comes from Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah's prophetic message about the coming messiah—born of a virgin and to be named Emmanuel (God with us).

Opening

Gather your class into smaller groups of 3-4 people in a group. Ask them to discuss these questions.

Where did you grow up?

During what period or decade did you grow up?

How would you describe the family structure during that time?

What was the "norm" where and when you grew up?

Was the "nuclear family" the norm, or was divorce and single parenting prevalent?

What was the mother's role?

What was the father's role?

Was one role more important than the other?

Opening *continued*

- How would you describe the family structure today?
- What would you consider the “norm?”
- What is the mother’s role?
- What is the father’s role?
- Is one role more important than the other?

Reading the Bible

Today’s story is the Joseph version of the birth story. This version is only found in the book of Matthew. In the previous verses in Matthew 1, Jesus’ lineage is traced through the line of Joseph, an important factor for God’s chosen people. Going through Joseph’s lineage helped God’s chosen to make the connection from the old covenant to the new messiah, and was essential that Jesus was recognized as the son of Joseph, since Joseph was a descendant of David.

Ask someone to read today’s passage, Matthew 1:18-25, and then ask these questions to ensure a basic understand of the story.

According to this version of the birth story, what is said about Mary’s pregnancy? How is this different from pregnancies we are more familiar with?

How was Joseph described? What did he plan to do after he learned of her pregnancy? What would have been your plan if you were in Joseph’s sandals?

When did the angel appear to Joseph? What message did the angel share with Joseph? How do you think Joseph felt to hear a different message than his original plan?

What did the angel say that Jesus would do? Was that what the world needed? Which prophet did the angel quote? What does Emmanuel mean?

What did Joseph do after his dream?

Making Connections

Joseph is a part of the Christmas story, but not as prominently featured as Jesus, Mary, or even the shepherds. His role in the story is important, and we can learn a lot from his experience and obedience.

How important is lineage for you and your family? Are you named after someone in your family? Who? Why did you get that name? What is the significance of Jesus having his lineage go through Joseph?

How is God revealed to you? Does God speak to you in dreams? In quiet moments? At all? When do you most need or expect a word from God?

When have you had a really good plan, like Joseph deciding to dismiss Mary quietly, to then totally change that plan because of a revelation from God? What was the situation? What happened? What has been the result?

Making Connections *continued*

What is your position on angels? Have you had an angelic experience? Have you had an angel speak or show you a word from God? What was the word? What happened? Have you ever been convicted to “do as the Lord commanded”? What was the situation? What happened?

What is the significance of the name Emmanuel? How does that name differ from the way believers related to God before the birth of Jesus?

So What?

In the Christmas story we tell, Joseph is a peripheral character. He does not have many speaking lines. He gets to lead the donkey and sit next to Mary after Jesus is born. But, Joseph is an important part of the Christmas story. As our lesson writer reminds us, Joseph’s obedience to God and willingness to do what the Lord commanded, protected Mary’s reputation and gave Jesus a stable home.

As we move through Advent and get closer to the manger, what do you think is your role in the Christmas story?

In what areas of life and faith can you display Joseph-like obedience to God?

How will that obedience glorify Jesus?

The Challenge

This week’s challenge starts in the class and will go with your learners this coming week. It is an individual silent prayer activity, moving each person to listen to God and then acting obediently with their prayer experience.

Move your group through the activity by leading them with questions like these. In the silence, ask a question and give them time for silent reflection before moving to the next question.

Spend some time in silence, allowing God to fill the space. Listen to what God is saying to you as you get closer to the manger. Is God asking you to do something? Is God nudging you to a certain ministry? Is God encouraging you to mend a broken relationship? Is God hoping you will grow closer with your faith relationship? Does God have a special task that only you can do? What can you do this week to respond obediently to God? How will you begin? Pray silently for God to guide you with your obedience this week.

Prayer

Close your group with a time of prayer. Thank God for Joseph and his willingness to listen and remain obedient to God, especially when the alternative was an easier path. Ask for God to give us the strength we need to be obedient, like Joseph.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Statistics—According to U.S. government figures, 40.2 percent of children born in 2014 were to unmarried mothers, down one percent from the previous year (*National Vital Statistics Report* 64:12 [Dec. 2015], http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr64/nvsr64_12.pdf).

Statistics on the number of children living in traditional family settings with two parents in their first marriage are from a December 2014 Pew Research Report (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family/>).

Women in Jesus’ ancestry—Matthew’s genealogy follows the tradition of citing male ancestors, but notably mentions four women in addition to Mary, all of whom might be considered outside the norm. The first is Tamar, a Canaanite widow who tricked her father-in-law, Judah, into getting her pregnant after he refused to allow his youngest son to marry her in keeping with the Levirate custom (Gen. 38). Rahab, of Jericho, was widely considered to have been a prostitute before casting her lot with the Israelites (Josh. 2:1–21). Ruth was a non-Israelite native of Moab (Ruth 1:4) and an ancestor of Jesus despite the rule that Moabites were not allowed in “the assembly of the Lord” (Deut. 23:3). David’s wife Bathsheba may not have been a native Hebrew: she was originally married to a soldier known as Uriah the Hittite before David committed adultery with her and orchestrated Uriah’s death.

It is hard to imagine a less likely set of ancestors for the Messiah: perhaps Matthew’s intent is to remind skeptical readers that God works in mysterious ways and is not bound by human conventions or expectations. Mary’s pregnancy might have seemed scandalous to many, and the presence of these women in Jesus’ line might show that God had long been willing to work outside of typical norms. Another possibility is that Matthew was preparing his audience to understand that Jesus came to save both Jews and Gentiles: several of Jesus’ ancestors were not born Jewish.

Matthew and Luke—Matthew’s genealogy, along with its internal inconsistencies, is also notably different from the one in Luke 3:23–38. While Matthew begins with Abraham and goes forward to Jesus, Luke begins with Jesus and goes backward to Adam, largely following a different line of ancestry. The differences begin with Joseph’s father, whom Luke names as Heli, rather than Jacob, as in Matthew. A traditional proposal for explaining the differences is to suggest that Heli was Mary’s father, so that Luke’s genealogy follows Mary’s ancestral line. This is in keeping with the greater emphasis Luke’s nativity story places on Mary. According to the argument, Joseph was named rather than Mary because genealogies typically list only males. Joseph could be included, proponents say, because he was the son-in-law of Mary’s father.

Digging Deeper *continued*

Passive activity—In v. 20, the phrase “the child conceived in her” (more literally, “what is conceived in her”), translates a passive participle. This emphasizes the passive cooperation of Mary and Joseph, while it is God who plays the active role.

Isaiah’s prediction—Isaiah reinforced his prediction of a son named “Immanuel” with further references in Isa. 8:8-10 and surrounding passages that speak of a golden age in which the wicked will be judged and the righteous will rule.

Perpetual virginity?—Verse 25 notes that Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary “until she had borne a son.” This clearly implies that he did have relations with her afterward, and the New Testament speaks several times of Jesus having brothers and sisters. Mark 6:3 names James, Joses, Judas, and Simon as brothers, along with unnamed sisters. Luke speaks of Jesus’ mother and brothers wanting to see him (Luke 8:19-21). John says that Jesus “went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples” after turning water to wine at Cana (John 2:12). In Acts 1:14, we read that “Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers,” were among those who constantly devoted themselves to prayer after Jesus’ resurrection.

Some early Christians with great adoration for Mary as the mother of Jesus could not imagine her having sex or birthing other children, however. A tradition developed in the Catholic Church holding not only that Mary herself was conceived by the Holy Spirit (the so-called “immaculate conception”), but that she remained a perpetual virgin. According to this view, Mary and Joseph never had sex, and thus Jesus’ siblings mentioned in the New Testament were not Mary’s biological children. Some propose that they were cousins, the children of Mary’s sister, while others speculate that they were step-siblings, children of Joseph by a former marriage. The latter proposal conjectures that Joseph was an older widower, with children, when he and Mary were married. Since Joseph is not mentioned after Luke 2:41-52, when Jesus’ parents took him to the temple at age 12, it is often assumed that he died before Jesus began his public ministry, explaining his absence from those stories. While adherents of Mary’s perpetual virginity cite this in support of their theory, it remains speculation. Few people lived into old age during the first century.

Between times—In this Advent season we find ourselves caught between remembrances of Jesus’ long expected birth and ministry on the one hand, and our own hopeful anticipation of Christ’s return on the other. It took some serious faith for Joseph to believe Mary’s story, even when supported by an angel who visited his dreams. It can also be hard for us to trust in Christ’s promised future, and to respond with obedience in the meantime. What helps to keep your faith alive?

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Why did Joseph want to divorce Mary?

On the one hand, the answer seems obvious: we might assume that Joseph didn't believe Mary's story about being pregnant by the Holy Spirit. If he assumed that she had committed adultery, it's understandable that he would want to terminate the betrothal before the marriage officially began.

The story is not so simple, however. In some circles, the only acceptable ground for divorce was adultery, and the official penalty for adultery was death by stoning (Deut. 22:20-21, 23-24). We cannot be sure how regularly the penalty was enforced during the New Testament era, but John 8:3-11 recounts how Jesus prevented the stoning of a woman caught in adultery.

Joseph did not want the pregnant Mary to be publicly shamed as an adulteress or to face a potential public execution, so his plan was to "dismiss her quietly," which would probably involve a behind-the-scenes divorce before two witnesses, after which Mary could move to another town where she would not be well known.

But what can we say about Joseph's personal feelings? Donald Hagner notes three possible ways to interpret the description of Joseph's motivation in v. 19, based on different understandings of the prepositions used. One option is to see tension in the text, so that one could translate "*although* being righteous" (and thus beholden to the law concerning adultery), he was "*yet* not willing to make an example of her." This implies that Joseph's "righteousness" had to do with his desire to obey the law, in contrast with his personal wishes, which may have been to stay with Mary.

Another option sees greater harmony between the clauses, so that the second would read "and *therefore* not willing to make an example of her." This view assumes that Joseph may have believed Mary was guilty, but still cared for her and wanted to protect her from undue embarrassment or harm.

A third option is to assume that Joseph believed Mary's story that her conception was of divine origin, and was so overcome with awe that he felt unworthy to go through with the marriage with one who had been so touched by God. This is unlikely, since vv. 20-21 appear designed to convince Joseph, who had already decided to divorce Mary, that her pregnancy was due to the Holy Spirit.

The first option appears most in line with Matthew's purpose, accounting for Joseph's compulsion to remain "righteous" while also showing benevolence to Mary. (For more, see Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], 18, or other quality commentaries.)