

# RTM

reaching/teaching/ministering curriculum



**December 14, 2008**  
**Responding in Crisis**  
**Matthew 1:18-24**

## MINISTERING HELPS

### Group Prayer

Before praying, remind your group that Christmas is not always the easiest of times for people. Do you know of people we need to be praying for who are dealing with the following issues this Christmas season...

- First Christmas following the death of a loved one
- Dealing with a life-threatening illness
- First Christmas following a divorce or separation
- Dealing with a recent job loss
- Other?

Is there more we can do than pray for these?

### Stay Connected

If your group has not yet started a weekly e-mail newsletter, this would be a great time to do it. During the holiday season, people may not be able to attend every week; but if they get an e-mail letting them know prayer requests, upcoming events, and highlights from the lesson, they will feel connected and challenged to get back to class as soon as they can!

## REACHING HELPS

The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering is a long time tradition for FBC Allen. Last year, out of all the Southern Baptist Churches in America, FBC Allen was recognized at one of the top 100 in the money we raised for this important offering.

Last June, when I was in Benin, Africa I was able to meet Bob and Becky Coutts who are Baptist missionaries there. When they came to Porto Novo, there were NO Baptist congregations. Now, there are around 30.

As we were talking, he pointed to his four wheel drive vehicle which we desperately needed to get to many of the places we needed to go. He said, "tell your church thanks, because Lottie Moon offerings paid for this vehicle."

Talk up REACHING with your class by encouraging them to give this year to the Lottie Moon Christmas offering.

## TEACHING HELPS

Times of crisis can be packaged differently for folks. A bad doctor's report, a lay-off at work, or the loss of a loved one all can throw us into crisis mode.

For some, crisis causes us to want to run away. For others, crisis makes us want to fight with all our might against it. But for those who are children of God, God wants us to trust Him so that our faith will grow.

Let today's lesson be a challenge to your group to "faith it" when times of crisis come.



## Responding in Crisis

### Matthew 1:18-24

Test pilots have a litmus test for evaluating problems. When something goes wrong, they ask, "Is this thing still flying?" If the answer is yes, then there's no immediate danger, no need to overreact. When Apollo 12 took off, the spacecraft was hit by lightning. The entire console began to glow with orange and red trouble lights. There was a temptation to "Do Something!" But the pilots asked themselves, "Is this thing still flying in the right direction?" The answer was yes--it was headed for the moon. They let the lights glow as they addressed the individual problems, and watched orange and red lights blink out, one by one. That's something to think about in any pressure situation. If your thing is still flying, think first, and then act.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Joseph during his engagement to Mary adequately reflects this principle. Joseph was cool, calm, and collected as he determined the right response to dealing with his very own crisis, *BEING ENGAGED TO A WOMAN WHO WAS PREGNANT WITH A CHILD THAT WAS NOT HIS*.

Matthew records the most Jewish account of Jesus' life. Matthew's purpose was to convey that Jesus is the prophesied Davidic Messiah. To do so, Matthew focused on the teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Nazarene. True to his purpose, Matthew began his account with the legal, paternal genealogy of Jesus. His genealogy and account not only linked Jesus directly to the Davidic line, but also "answered the important questions a Jew would rightfully ask about anyone who claimed to be King of the Jews."<sup>2</sup>

NOTE: Matthew 1:18-24 must be understood in light of Hebrew marriage custom. Marriages were typically arranged by parents and a dowry paid to the girl's father. A contract was signed by both families and the man and woman were considered husband and wife. For one year the two remained separate and lived with their own families. The husband was responsible for preparing a place for his wife, often attached to his father's house. The wife was to demonstrate her purity and faithfulness by continuing in abstinence. After a year's time, the husband would retrieve his bride. If the husband found his wife to be unfaithful (with child) he could have the marriage legally annulled through a written divorce. If she was found to be faithful (without a child), great celebration and festivities ensued, during which, the marriage was consummated with a sexual union.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Responding to Crisis ... In every crisis, there is a righteous response (v18-19)

*<sup>18</sup>This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

<sup>1</sup> Capt. Alan Bean, USN, Apollo Astronaut, in *Reader's Digest*.

<sup>2</sup> The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Walvoord and Zuck, 18.

<sup>3</sup> The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Walvoord and Zuck, 20.

### Teaching Points

#### Introduction...

Why not rent a copy of the movie THE NATIVITY, or JESUS OF NAZARETH, or the JESUS FILM from your local video store. To set the tone for today's lesson, show the portion of the movie that deals with the birth of Jesus.

**OR**

Have class members recall from memory the story of the birth of Jesus. Have them turn to Luke 2 and Matthew 1 for reminders.

Ask class members to share their favorite part of the Christmas story. Ask, "How was Mary and Joseph's story incredibly different from our life and times? How was their story incredibly similar to our life and times?"

While Joseph sometimes gets lost in the story, the truth is that Jesus' birth created a great crisis for him. How he chose to respond to the crisis enabled God's will to be done in the birth of Jesus.

Let's take a look at Joseph's story and see if we can learn how to respond (effectively) in times of crisis.

Joseph was not Jesus' paternal father. Matthew is clear, Mary is Jesus' mother, Mary and Joseph are in the engagement or betrothal period, and most importantly, Mary is pregnant. *Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child.* From Joseph's perspective this could only mean one thing, Mary had been unfaithful. At this point Matthew gives his readers insight unknown to Joseph, Mary's pregnancy was caused by the Holy Spirit. This act, the Immaculate Conception, was the Jews' dream come true. God was preparing a way to for His people to be freed from the tyranny of outside rule and establish His kingdom forever. Joseph was oblivious.

The timing of Mary's pregnancy is unclear in relation to the marriage ceremonies. It is evident that Mary became pregnant after the legal marriage contract had been signed. According to Luke's account, Mary spent about three months with Elisabeth after conception (Luke 1:56). This would indicate that when Mary returned home to Nazareth, she was in the midst of her 2<sup>nd</sup> trimester. Mary would have been showing as she walked into town. Joseph, no doubt, learned quickly about the state of his wife. Joseph needed a plan.

Scripture emphasizes that Joseph was righteous. Matthew clearly conveys, *Joseph her husband was a righteous man.* Righteousness would prevail through Joseph's actions. This was more than desire, Matthew's language assumes action. Therefore, Joseph, having learned of Mary's pregnancy, was determined to divorce Mary. The action Joseph decided upon, although resulting in the same outcome, was quite different than action Mary deserved, had she been unfaithful. Joseph chose to divorce Mary selflessly.

According to law, Mary deserved to die. Joseph had every right to drag her through the street to the city gates where the elders sat. There, he could publicly ridicule and slander Mary's character. He could use his words as revenge to strip her of her dignity and batter and bruise her emotional spirit. His rant would lead to the recommended sentence, death by stoning (at this point in Jewish culture, stoning did not occur frequently. The Jews were quick to judge but slow to condemn. John 8 gives insight to the public humiliation and sentencing process with infidelity). This was not Joseph's response however.

Confronted with the most tragic news of his life (his future spouse was pregnant), Joseph's righteousness lead him to selfless thinking. "I must divorce my wife, but for her sake, I will do in private." Joseph did not think about himself when the news of Mary's pregnancy reached him. Instead Joseph's love for Mary caused her to be the foremost on his mind. Had she been unfaithful, in Joseph's mind there was no doubt. Yet his concern for Mary exemplifies the same righteous character Christ portrayed on the cross. Joseph was willing to put righteousness above self. He had every right to make a public example of Mary. He had every right to demand that she be stoned. However, he knew these were not options of righteousness. Instead, he would annul the marriage through a quiet divorce.

Much application can be learned from Joseph's example. In crisis, there is a right and a wrong way to think. Paul records in Philippians 4: *<sup>8</sup>Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.* The right way to think in a crisis, according to Joseph's example, is selflessly. Selfless thinking leads to selfless action. Matthew makes it certain that had not verse 20 and following occurred, Joseph would have acted upon his thoughts. Responding to crisis takes righteous intent.

### 1. In crisis there is always a RIGHTEOUS RESPONSE... (v.18-19)

- Using info found in the introduction of the commentary, help class members to understand the difference between an engagement of today and the engagement to be married that Joseph and Mary shared.
- Though Mary knew the baby inside her was of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1), Joseph did not know. As Mary's pregnancy was revealed, let the group discuss the crisis Joseph faced, as he thought through all this prior to the angel's visit to him.
- Before Joseph had this crisis, he was known as a righteous man. Now he was a righteous man with a crisis.
  - How does a crisis test just how righteous we are?
  - Does God know our real condition of righteousness? Does a crisis show God what we are made of, or is it designed to show us what we are made of? Explain...
  - Is it spiritually dangerous for us to walk with God in a "false sense of righteousness?" Explain...
  - How did Joseph show that even in a crisis, he would be merciful to Mary and do the righteous thing?

Crisis demands calculated righteous action. No one would have blamed Joseph if he had acted upon his thoughts prior to verse 20. Although Matthew does not detail Joseph's options, a public or private divorce would have been legal. Joseph knew that only one would be righteous. Simply because something is legal does not mean it is righteous. Again, Paul explains this in 1 Corinthians 9:19, 22, and 10:33. Although Paul was at liberty to participate in activities, he refrained knowing that one revealed more Godliness.

Death, job loss, tragedy, health, home issues, etc., all illicit a response. That response has the ability to spread righteousness or selfishness. Today just about any response is acceptable, but they may not be righteous. The question one must ask is, "Am I responding to this situation in a right way?" According to Joseph's example, if energy is poured into self, then that energy is misplaced. In every crisis, there is a righteous response.

## 2. Responding to Crisis ... In every crisis, God is Sovereign (v20-23)

<sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,<sup>[e]</sup> because he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup>"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"<sup>[d]</sup>— which means, "God with us."

After Joseph had determined a path of action, God intervened through an angelic dream. This angel not only affirmed Mary's faithfulness to Joseph but also her faithfulness to God. She would bear the promised Messiah, a son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, sent to save His people. Without doubt, Joseph's thoughts must have turned to the prophetic writings of the Psalms, and O.T. prophets. If those weren't enough, the excitement of Isaiah's promise of the virgin birth would have instilled a sense of awe. His son would be the one to save the Jews. Could he be responsible for raising the Promised One? God's sovereign plan for the ages took on specific instruction; *take Mary home as your wife*.

Matthew interjects as the narrator the meaning of this event. Joseph was to be part of God's sovereign salvific plan. This plan, prophesied by Isaiah 700 years earlier, that a virgin would bear a son who was "God with us," would change the face of the world. The magnitude of this message must have been immense. Joseph's only responsibility then was to obey.

Joseph understood that God had a greater purpose than he first realized. God was going to take his crisis and make it into the world's greatest blessing. Ultimately, the only choice Joseph had was whether or not he was going to be part of God's plan.

Unfortunately, all too often in crisis, individuals neglect to see God's sovereignty. Let's be honest, it was only through

### 2. In crisis, God is sovereign... (v20-23)

- How did Joseph get the word on what God wanted him to do? While we probably won't get an angelic visit, what are the ways God usually speaks to us about what he wants us to do? (Bible, Prayer, Church) Will God ever tell us to do something that is against the Bible?
- God told Joseph to do two things... what were they? (take Mary as his wife, and name the baby JESUS) Why did the angel say it's OK to marry Mary? (the baby was because of the Holy Spirit) Why did the angel say Jesus was born in these special circumstances? (because He would save people from their sins and because it was prophesied about Him)
- How did this information help Joseph in his crisis? How do you think it might have made his thinking about it even more difficult?
- Does God always tell us the details of why we are going through a crisis? What does it mean to know God is sovereign, even when we don't know all the details of WHY? When we don't know the details of our situation, what can we hang onto that will give us hope in God and peace in our situation?

<sup>26</sup> And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. <sup>27</sup> And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. <sup>28</sup> And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. <sup>29</sup> For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

**Romans 8:26-29 (NLT)**

an angelic message that Joseph realized this, nevertheless, the message was clear, God is at work. When crises arise, do we allow God to work? ... Do we expect God to work? ...Have we identified where God can work? Are we willing to be part of God's plan? Although God is not the source of tragedy, He can use it for good.

God is sovereign; and at some point in any crisis situation, one must fall upon God's rule, reign, and plan. Sovereignty does not mean that God is the cause of crisis, often it is man's own fallenness. Sovereignty simply allows God to govern through the rules which He has preordained in the universe. This concept is similar to national sovereignty. No government is the cause of all bad within its citizenry, nor is it responsible for all wickedness. Sovereignty allows each country to address its problems through its prescribed form of government protocol and practices. The hope becomes a peaceful prosperous plan through which citizens can live harmoniously. The sovereignty of God will fix man's problem in the future, i.e. sin. But how God articulates that on a daily basis is up to Him. The only appropriate response man has when identifying sovereign acts of God, as Joseph will emulate, is obedience.

### 3. Responding to Crisis ... In each crisis, obey God (v24-25)

<sup>24</sup>When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.  
<sup>25</sup>But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Joseph was obedient in crisis. Matthew told his readers that Joseph followed God's instruction to the fullest. He *took Mary home as his wife*, a decision that would not have been very popular. Many of the town's people would have known about Mary and assumed fornication. Even worse, maybe Joseph had married Mary knowing she was unfaithful. Both would receive looks and actions of disgust for the rest of their lives. Yet Joseph responds obediently. He immediately took Mary home and began caring for her and the expected child. Obedience for Joseph was not a matter of feeling, convenience, social status, or fame, obedience was righteousness. His act re-enforced his selfless character.

#### 3. In each crisis, God wants us to obey... (v24-25)

- God asked Joseph to do two things, but he did three? What were they? (married Mary, named the baby Jesus, had no sexual relations with her until after Jesus was born) What does all this say about just how righteous Joseph really was?
- Did Joseph's obedience mean all his crisis went away? What new problems might have been or were caused by Joseph being obedient? What does this say to us about our choices during a time of crisis?

Joseph also *had no union with her until she gave birth to a son*. He had every legal and ceremonial right to consummate his union with Mary; but out of obedience, he waited until Jesus was born. Joseph had all the responsibilities of caring and providing for Mary, but no physical benefits. Once again Joseph's character is brought to the fore-front. Obedience was more important to Joseph than his personal rights and needs. Having brought Mary to his home, they determine that the child will be called Jesus as prescribed by the angel.

When crises arise, God expects obedience. Joseph's response to the crisis through obedience gives the reader insight into parenting Jesus received. Joseph took literally the prophet's words, "it is better to obey than sacrifice." It would have been easy for Joseph to say no and divorce Mary. It would have been easy for Joseph to turn his back on the angel or to obey half-way, but he was a righteous man. Obedience propelled him through the crisis to promote the glories of God by his example.

### Conclusion...

While we will never have the exact crisis that Joseph faced, the reality that we will face times of crisis is probably one hundred percent. We can use Joseph's story to lead us to respond in a God-honoring manner in our own personal time of crisis. Here is a prayer for those in crisis...

Dear Lord,

While there are multiple ways I can respond, I know there is a way that is the highest and most God-honoring. I will always be able to find people who would even justify the “human ways” I could choose to respond. Lord, show me your higher way.

I know that this crisis is no surprise to you. I believe you allowed it to happen, not because you hate me, but because you know that if I walk with you through it, I will be more in love with you and my character will become more like the character of Jesus Christ.

I know you will be faithful to show me how to respond. Help me to obey you in what you show me and what you want me to do.

Thank you for walking with me through the fire,

Your child, \_\_\_\_\_.

#### Application Points...

- In a crisis, most people are looking for relief or escape through what they do next. Joseph's story reminds us that there is something more important than relief or escape... what is it?
- If you are not in a time of crisis, Joseph's story reminds us that being righteous BEFORE the crisis hits is important. If someone is looking to get righteous, what would you tell them to do? (first, let Jesus make you righteous through His forgiveness offered by His death on the cross... then respond to His forgiveness through a life of discovering God's will for us in the Bible and being obedient to it)
- If you are in crisis, have you made a commitment to God to honor Him in it like Joseph did? Have you prayed more to be righteous IN the crisis rather than only praying to escape it?