

December 12-16, 2022 Edition

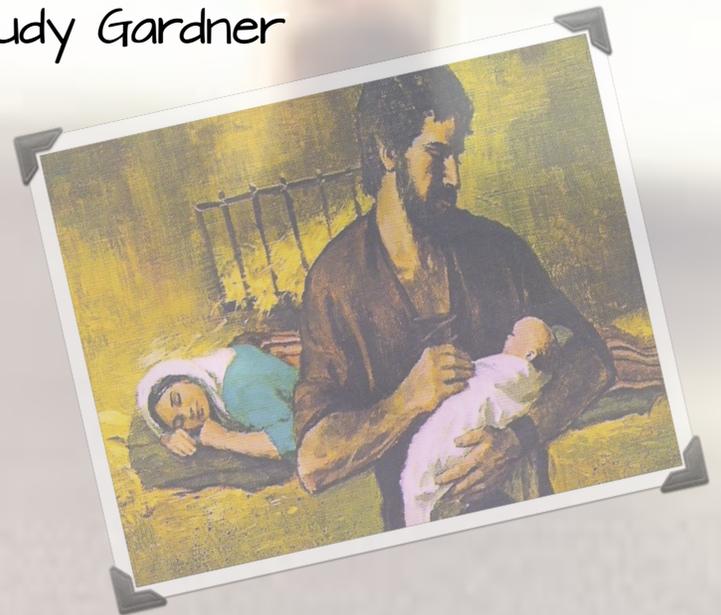
Following
The Year Of Jesus Part 50

Experiencing The Nativity:

Joseph's Courage

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

December 10/11, 2022



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;D) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we're going to look at the life of a man named Joseph- probably best understood as Jesus' step-dad. I never gave him much thought growing up and it turns out I'm not the only one. He doesn't have a lot of lines in the Christmas story. And by the time Jesus grows up and begins His ministry, Joseph's story is over. What happened to him? We don't know. It seems obvious that he must die in between Jesus' 12th birthday and his 30th birthday but he's never mentioned in the Bible again. And so often his part in the Christmas story is relegated to the shadows. I mean, even in Nativity sets you'll often find that Joseph has been mixed up with the shepherds and you'll find a shepherd at the manger with Mary and Joseph standing out in the cold trying to catch a glimpse of the Christ child.

But Joseph's part in the Christmas story is far from inconsequential. And the character we see in Joseph's part of the story is mind boggling when we actually sit down and focus on it. And this year for the first time I've begun to notice how Joseph's part in the story is kind of a coping-model when it comes to living out the kind of life Jesus invites us all to. What's a coping model? Well it's a model of someone who isn't perfect at something but shows how to progress at that thing. Psychologists talk about the mastery model (which in the Bible would only be demonstrated by Jesus) and they talk about the coping model (someone who's doing a pretty good job of working-it-out. They don't mention a warning model but if there was such a thing I think my life would qualify. At least a lot of it would. I'm trying to cope but make lots of spectacular mistakes that leave my wife just kind of shaking her head (and smiling but she'd never admit to that).

Joseph's life is also a foreshadow (or even a rear-shadow) of the teachings found in the Sermon On The Mount where Jesus talks an awful lot about warning models:

Don't do as the hypocrites do... Matthew 6:2 (NLT)

He uses that phrase several times when talking about how-not-to-do something. He also gives us this advice:

Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged. Matthew 7:1-2 (NLT)

What's He getting at? Well, we'll look at that this week as we look at the life of Joseph- a guy who had strong convictions but didn't let those convictions get in the way of what was even more important. What's more important than my convictions, you ask? We'll look to Joseph to illuminate that but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what Jesus means when He say "don't judge."

Tuesday Reflection: Jesus' teachings have changed the world in more profound ways than anyone else who has ever lived. Ever hear of the virtue of humility? That's Jesus. Before He came to this earth humility was never considered a virtue.

Never.

Humility was always about control- namely control over the the humble one. It was a word that was used of slaves and horses. How "humble" a slave or horse was described

how well they followed orders and did what they were told without thinking about their own best interests. This world worked (and it still does today) much like a pecking order. Ever had chickens? The pecking order is real! Every chicken gets pecked except the top banana. As the pecking order descends chickens are pecked at by every chicken above it. And it's not good for the chickens. Farmers spend a ton of energy and money trying to stop their chickens from getting pecked to death. So does God (with His children rather than His chickens).

But it's human nature. It's the way the world works, right? Well, yeah. But not Jesus' world. The number one argument His disciples would enter into over and over was where was everyone on the pecking order. It wasn't phrased in exactly that way but that's what they were asking. And every time He noticed Jesus would stop everything and try to teach them about the upside down nature of His Kingdom:

You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many. Matthew 20:25-28 (NLT)

But Jesus, surely that will never work. That's not how humans are wired. They need a boss-servant structure or nothing will ever get done. It was such a tough lesson to teach His disciples He even had to stop what He was doing during the Last Supper and try to teach them again because they were arguing about it again! It's the reason He washed their feet at the Last Supper:

Do you understand what I was doing? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because that's what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you. I tell you the truth, slaves are not greater than their master. Nor is the messenger more important than the one who sends the message. Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them. John 13:12-17 (NLT)

What a strange, surreal experience it must have been following Jesus around. He lived the most "humble" life ever lived but His statements about Himself were the most outrageous claims ever made. Think about it, He claimed to be the bread of life, the light of the world, the way the truth and the life, the resurrection and the life. Oh yeah, and He claimed to be God Himself. Even here after doing the most humble act anyone had ever seen (God washing the feet of His disciples) Jesus then says, "you call me Lord and Teacher and you're exactly right- that's what I am..." How strange all of that must have seemed.

But it's what Jesus pushes over and over. It has to be placed in the top tier of what a life following Jesus looks like. I once said it was the most important virtue a Christian could possess and immediately my brain said, "what about love?" Ok, yeah, so love and humility are the two most important... "what about faith?". Ok... love, faith and humility... "what about hope?"

The point is humility is pretty important. And Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, had it. How do I know? We'll start diving into the story of Joseph tomorrow but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what you think humility is (and what it isn't) and what is the opposite of humility?

Wednesday Reflection: In the story of Joseph we witness one of the most courageous lives ever lived. It might not look that way on the surface but there are many kinds of courage. Have you ever noticed that the courage of someone who would run into burning buildings to save someone often melts when they're forced to deal with "feelings"? And that people who show tremendous courage when dealing with relationships will melt when faced with physical challenges? That's the thing about courage- in order to live a courageous life you have to be courageous in more than one arena. And Joseph does that- the first kind of courage we see in Joseph is what I guess I'd call moral courage. In other words, he was a good man. One of the first things we read about Joseph is this:

Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Matthew 1:19 (NIV)

I heard this story so often growing up I didn't really give that line much thought. But I learned a few years ago that the term "righteous man" was sort of a title in first century Israel. What it meant was that Joseph was on a life path to become a certain kind of person in his community.

Have you ever read in the Old Testament about the town elders who would hang out at the city gates and dispense wisdom and justice? Solomon talks about them a lot. You ever wonder how someone got to be one of those dudes? Well, it turns out there was a process one went through in his life to get to that point. The apostle Paul gives us some insight into the process in Philippians 3 when he's giving his resume (which he then tosses onto the trash heap and says it's really worthless but this will give you a glimpse into the world of Joseph and what his life's goal was):

I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin-a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault. Philippians 3:5-6 (NLT)

Now you wouldn't necessarily know it but Paul is describing the path of a "righteous man" in the first century. Someone who was born into the right circumstances and then grew up faithfully fulfilling all the requirements to become a respected man in his community. What Matthew is telling us when he says Joseph was a "righteous man" is that Joseph had carefully lived his life in a way that he could one day become an elder in his community. Someone the town looked up to and respected.

And one day his betrothed bride comes to him and tells him she's pregnant. But don't worry- I didn't cheat on you- IT'S A MIRACLE OF GOD!!!

Not only does Joseph not buy it at first (and who could blame him) but his plans are in serious danger. What does a "righteous man" do now? He's kind of in a no win situation.

Even if he accuses Mary of adultery he is left with a stain that he probably can't wash out of his life. He will probably never become the respected man in Nazareth that he dreamed of becoming all of his life.

So what should he do? Well, if he's a man of moral courage- a good man who always does what's right no-matter-what then he will publicly accuse Mary of adultery. But Joseph shows us that the right-thing-to-do isn't always easy to figure out. Especially when the messiness of human relationships meets God's law. Tomorrow we'll see another kind of courage Joseph displays but maybe today spend some time thinking about how messy our relationships can make our lives and how decisions about what to do next aren't always easy or clear.

Thursday Reflection: Yesterday we talked about one kind of courage Joseph (the earthly father of Jesus) displays- moral courage. In other words he was a good man who had decided that no matter what he would always do the "right thing"- even if doing the right thing was a tough thing to do. That's something God wants from all of us. One of my favorite Old Testament passages is found in the very last book of the Old Testament:

The LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8 (NLT)

Did you know God has already told you what He wants from you? I don't know about you but I spent an awful long time trying to figure out what God wants from me. And here it is in black and white. Three things- do what is right, to love mercy and to walk humbly with Him. We looked at the first of those three things yesterday when we talked about moral courage. Today we look at the second of those- to love mercy- and how Joseph shows us what that looked like in his own very messy life.

To love mercy is to be a person of great relational courage- in other words to love mercy is to be a person of great nobility. Now in America we don't have a nobility/aristocracy. But in the rest of the world the concept of being born into nobility is strong. And while nobles are born- not made- everyone knows the best "nobles" are those who use their position and power for the benefit of their people.

As children of God you are born into nobility whether you possess "royal blood" or not. And as a child of God you and I are expected to express our nobility by loving mercy (as God puts it in Micah 6:8). So what do we do when we've decided we're going to always-do-the-right-thing-no-matter-what and then we find that doing the right thing clashes with the instruction of God to "love mercy"? Relationships make it tough, don't they? Ethics teachers and philosophers have been wrestling with this question for as long as there have been people. The classic ethics question is, if you are hiding Jews and the Nazis come to your door asking if you are hiding Jews is it ok to lie? Just about all of us would say yes (not all but those people are pretty much beyond anyone's ability to get through to them so let's not get hung up on them) but where does that line stop?

Ok, let's apply this to Joseph's situation. The right thing to do would be to drop Mary like a hot potato and tell everyone the child is not his. Or would it? Joseph is torn. He has always dreamed of being a "righteous man" but he also is a merciful person as it turns out

and when mercy gets involved with the ethics of always-doing-the-right-thing-no-matter-what things get very murky and messy:

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. Matthew 1:19 (NIV)

A couple of weeks ago we looked at Jesus' words on divorce from the Sermon On The Mount. We talked about any-cause-divorces which were pretty new on the scene in first century Israel. For 1,500 years of Israel's existence there were only three grounds for divorce (infidelity, abuse & neglect) but about 15 years before Jesus was born a new grounds for divorce came to prominence in Israel- any cause at all. Of course this new grounds was only available to men and it was costly- it meant that the husband had to give his divorced wife back her dowry so she had money to live on whereas if he could prove infidelity, abuse or neglect the wife went away with nothing and the husband kept all of it for himself.

So when Matthew says Joseph was going to divorce-her-quietly he wasn't saying Joseph was trying to keep people from knowing. Nazareth was a tiny town (probably around 350 people). If Joseph broke his engagement to Mary EVERYONE was going to know. What Matthew was trying to get us to understand was that Joseph was going to get an any-cause-divorce even though he could have proven infidelity and kept it all for himself.

Joseph was an incredibly noble man that followed the instructions of Micah 6:8. But he didn't do what was "right"; someone might say. I think he did. He did the "right thing" in the situation when you add mercy to the equation. And it's fascinating to me that God tells us to "do" what is right but to "love" mercy. Just thinking about that could keep you busy all day. What does that mean? I'm still trying to work it out in my life but I see it playing out in the life of Joseph. If he divorces her quietly his hope to become a righteous man are pretty much gone. The religious leaders of first century Israel will mock him and accuse him of being too soft with the adulteress Mary. He will never be the man of respect that he had dreamed his entire life of becoming.

But he was going to do it anyways. Why? Because sometimes doing the right thing isn't easy. It's not easy to do and it's not easy to know what the right thing to do even is. I guarantee you the night that the angel comes to Joseph it is while Joseph is wrestling with what to do. We'll talk about the rest of the story tomorrow but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what it means to "do" what is right but to "love" mercy.

Friday Reflection: So far this week we've looked at two kinds of courage that Joseph (the earthly father of Jesus) displayed- moral courage (he was a good man who always wanted to do the right thing) and relational courage (he was a noble man who loved mercy and always looked for how mercy was supposed to color doing the right thing). Today we look at the third kind of courage Joseph displayed: spiritual courage which for me means Joseph was humble.

Remember our synopsis of the Sermon On The Mount and the story of the life of Joseph found in Micah:

The LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8 (NLT)

The religious leaders of the first century had the first part down- they always did what was right. Jesus Himself says the Pharisees flawlessly performed the external requirements of the law but they missed a very important component:

What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things. Blind guides! You strain your water so you won't accidentally swallow a gnat, but you swallow a camel! What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too. Matthew 23:23-26 (NLT)

Can you see how maybe people known for always doing the right thing no matter what and ignoring mercy (among other things) would frown upon Joseph's decision? But Joseph knows that mercy trumps the whole concepts of doing what's right no matter what. And so he's going to divorce Mary quietly (he still believes she cheated on him and he's not going to marry her but he's not going to destroy her life either). Enter the angel:

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Matthew 1:20-21 (NLT)

Can you imagine? After the initial shock of seeing an angel the next thing through Joseph's mind has to be, "Mary was telling the truth!?!?!?" I mean, come on! What are the odds, right? How crazy must this have seemed to Joseph. And how terrifying.

Not just being visited by an angel (there's a reason Angels almost always start out every encounter with humans with the phrase, "don't be afraid" and it's because they are terrifying beings that frighten the most courageous humans to ever have lived) but also because of what it is the angel is telling Joseph to do. To take Mary as his wife means his plans for being a righteous man, respected in his town and a pillar of his community will for sure be crushed but think about what else Joseph will lose if he does what God asks him to do.

He'll lose his dignity (at least to everyone who doesn't know the truth) and everyone will laugh at him. And it wasn't an empty fear- we know that as an adult Jesus was still called the son-of-Mary which was unheard of:

Then they scoffed, "He's just a carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. And his sisters live right here among us." They were deeply offended and refused to believe in him. Mark 6:3 (NLT)

Why did they call him that? Because it was their way of saying, "we know for sure who your mom is, but your dad? We're not quite sure about that." It was an insult and you can

bet Joseph knew it would be coming. He was also going to lose control of his life. He would be raising a boy that wasn't his biological son. He wouldn't even get to name the kid- God through the angel told Joseph what to name Him- Jesus. Joseph had planned to get married, settle down, build a house, start a family, raise his family and become one of those old dudes who sat at the city gates dispensing wisdom and justice and being respected by everyone.

If Joseph says "yes" he will give all of that up. So what does Joseph do?

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded. He brought Mary home to be his wife, but she remained a virgin until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus. Matthew 1:24-25 (NLT)

Wow! Such a few words to explain such a HUGE decision. And what does Joseph get for it? Relative anonymity. Pretty much last place in the Christmas story. But don't let us for a second lose sight of the courage of this man who played such a massive part in our story of faith. This guy lived out Micah 6:8 every day of his life. It turns out he was the perfect candidate to raise God's Son and it cost him so much.

So what's the lesson for us? I guess to live out Micah 6:8 every day of our lives. To become men and women of moral courage (doing the right thing no matter what but never forgetting to let mercy impact what the "right thing to do" is), relational courage (loving mercy and letting mercy guide what the right-thing-to-do is) and spiritual courage (choosing humility- the willingness to go where God leads no matter the consequences- even when God's way doesn't make much sense to us).

People who do that changed the world. They still do today. Memorize Micah 6:8 and try your best to live by it. It's what the Christmas story is all about.

The LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8 (NLT)