

Journey of Obedience Matthew 1:18-25

I don't usually listen to country music; but when I do ... it's usually a story song.

Country singer/songwriter Brad Paisley sings a rather touching song titled "He Didn't Have to Be" about a boy who is the only child of a single mom. Whenever a man asks this young mom on a date, the relationship quickly dissolves when the aspiring suitor sees that she has a little boy. Time after time, the boy watches hopelessly as his mother loses what he thinks is another chance at happiness, knowing all the while that it's because of him.

One day a man comes to call and with a smile invites the little boy to come along with them on their date. A bond of love and appreciation grows between the boy and the man who eventually becomes his stepfather. He celebrates growing up with the love and acceptance of a stepfather who made their house a home and their twosome a trio. Now married, the young man stands outside the observation window of a hospital nursery looking at his own newborn baby, with his stepfather at his side. His longing and prayer is that he will be able to be half the dad his stepfather "didn't have to be." The man that he had grown to love as his father could have turned around and walked away. Others had. Instead, he chose to be what he didn't have to be: he chose to love and be a dad.

The song reminds me of another man who had to make a similar choice. He also could have walked away. Instead, at great personal cost, he choose to be what he didn't have to be. Joseph was a carpenter in Nazareth and most probably a simple and practical man. We can imagine that he, like many young men, envisioned an orderly and ordinary life pursuing his trade, maintaining a good name in the community, attending the synagogue, and raising a family. Certainly Joseph's life was proceeding in that direction as he prepared for his wedding day.

Jewish weddings of that day were much different than ours today involving three stages. The first was the engagement, which might have been arranged by the parents even while the two were still children, though evidence suggests this was becoming less and less frequent. The next stage was the formal betrothal, a legally binding relationship lasting for one year. During this year the couple lived apart and had no sexual relations; their purity was under scrutiny. Should either party not wish to go ahead with the marriage a divorce was required. If the groom had died between the betrothal and marriage, the bride would have been his legal widow. If, in the same period, another man had relations with the bride, she would have been punished as an adulteress. As you can imagine, this stage was very serious. The final stage was, of course, marriage.

With this knowledge, listen to Joseph's predicament (**Read Text**).

Imagine Joseph's heartache when he heard that Mary, his pure and godly fiancée was pregnant! Her apparent betrayal must have rocked his world. How could she do this? What was he going to do? If word of Mary's pregnancy got out *he* would be publicly humiliated, an object of ridicule and scorn. The heartbroken groom-to-be weighed his options. He could demand that his intended bride-to-be be stoned to death for the sin of adultery (that was the Law of Moses), which would publicly exonerate him. Or, he could arrange a quiet dissolution of the marriage contract that would remove her from his life.

His response was not one of revenge or even a demand for justice. In fact his thought is not for himself but for Mary; Joseph's heart was with Mary. "*Joseph, her fiancé, being a just man, decided to break the engagement quietly, so as not to disgrace Mary publicly. As he considered this, he fell asleep ...*" (Mt.1:19-20nlt). The word *considered* is significant. It speaks of deep meditation and intense thought and shows the degree to which Joseph wrestled.

Ever have a time when you wrestled long into the night with a problem, knowing that how you responded would have a profound effect not only on you but more importantly on others? You don't want just what's right; you want what's best. And when you finally fall asleep you are still wondering. That's what happens to Joseph.

Into this state of sleep, Gabriel comes with a third option. By human standards it's not the right option; but, by God's standards it not only right, it's best. *"Do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. The child in her is conceived by the Holy Spirit. His name is Jesus. He's the Messiah"* (Mt.1:20-22). The message is both good news and bad news. The good news is that Mary had not been unfaithful to Joseph after all; she had remained pure and committed to him. The bad news ... how to explain to family and friends the true nature of Mary's pregnancy; such a story will surely be seen as absurd. If he says nothing, his own reputation will be tarnished as everyone will believe him to be the father out of wedlock.

Once again Joseph is at a crossroads. He must choose between self-protection and obedience. *"When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded"* (Mt.1:24). Obedience was Joseph's response to a difficult life situation. He chose to be what he didn't have to be: he chose to love and be a dad.

It was not easy or painless, and it did not come without cost. While Scripture does not specify, we can assume that there was much ridicule and scorn for both Mary and Joseph to endure. But more than that, the fact that this boy he accepted as his own was the Son of God required many similar choices. We really know very little about stepfather Joseph. But what the Bible does reveal tells us that Joseph continued to choose obedience over self-protection. Today we know Joseph's name because of his faithfulness and obedience in following every instruction that God gave him.

The beauty of obedience has been tarnished in our “have it your way” world where “I did it my way” has become more standard than not. But if in our Christmas journey we truly want to encounter Jesus we must first choose between self-protection and obedience. Like Joseph we must choose to live a life of obedient trust in a world that discourages long-term commitment in favor of instant gratification.

And that’s hard. Most of us have been programmed for a lifetime to get what we want now, to protect our own reputation, to make our own happiness, and to guard against anything that might compromise our happiness and wellbeing. If this is you (be honest) are you happy? Do you feel secure? How’s your reputation? There is a right and wrong that this world has established. And yet how many people are lost, alone, and unfulfilled even though they have done all the “right” things. The reason is that God offers a third option: best.

A much loved hymn tells us why: *“But we never can prove the delights of his love until all on the altar we lay; for the favor he shows, for the joy he bestows, are for them who will trust and obey.”* God has exactly what we need and knows exactly how we will find peace and joy and satisfaction. But it means placing on the altar every propensity for self-determination and self-protection. It means making the choice to do as God leads and directs. It means giving up the right to be right in order to experience what is God’s best. It means we must trust and obey.

If we do not first trust God, we will never surrender our choices and destinies to God’s purposes. If we do not obey God, we will never see the great and humbling things God wishes to accomplish in and through our lives.

Joseph could have walked away. Instead he was obedient, choosing to be what he didn’t have to be. And because he did, Joseph had the excitement of participating with God in the greater plan of salvation. Now you must choose: You can walk away or obey, go your own path

or follow the Master. Yes you are free to choose. One thing I know for certain; God wants you to participate in the best - the plan of salvation. But it means choosing to be what you don't have to be. If that is your choice then you can be assured of this:

*“Then in fellowship sweet we will sit at his feet, or we'll walk by his side on the way;
what he says we will do, where he sends we will go; never fear, only trust and obey.”*