

Whether we remember waiting for our own children to arrive into this world or whether you think about family members who are pregnant, that period of waiting is mixed with great excitement and a fear of the unknown.

This fact was especially true as we read about the stories of faith in the Old Testament. Many of the stories in the book of Genesis had to do with families waiting for the birth of their first born. The great mothers of the Old Testament like Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel all experienced some difficulty in bringing a child into the world. Each woman prayed and waited and then waited some more.

For Rachel, she began to blame everyone and everything for her barrenness. She blamed God, then she blamed Jacob and finally she blamed herself. Her life was so miserable that she wanted to die. Then one day the Bible tells us in Genesis 30 that the Lord remembered Rachel and allowed her to bear a child. Her days of being barren were over.

When her son was born, Rachel gave him a rather unusual name. She did not name him after Jacob, Isaac or even Abraham. She named him Joseph, a name that contains both a praise and plea. Rachel praised the LORD for the birth of her eldest son but she also prayed for more children. The name Joseph actually means - "Lord, give me one more just like this one."

As we read Joseph's stories in the Old Testament we read that he became a very Spirit filled and anointed man. A man who was known for more than having a coat of many colours and being sold into slavery by his brothers. We read about a man who lived a very holy and sacred life.

And today, we come across another Joseph, who demonstrates a similar commitment to holiness that his ancestor had done. The more you read and meditate on Joseph's story the more you fall in love with Him and the way he learned to walk with the Lord. So let's look more closely at his specific characteristics.

1. Firstly Joseph had a spirit of compassion and sensitivity

In ancient times, when a couple were engaged, the betrothal was almost like a marriage. Once a couple entered into a betrothal relationship it was both legally and spiritually binding. The betrothal period would last for about a year. During that time the couple would be addressed as husband and wife, however, until the actual day of their marriage the couple were to practice celibacy.

Furthermore, the only way the relationship could be dissolved was through a legal and spiritual divorce. If for example, the prospective groom was to die for some reason during the betrothal period the young woman would be considered a widow.

And so it is during this betrothal period that the Angel appears to Mary to reveal to her the news of the baby. It may have been good news in heaven, on earth it was scandalous. It could have resulted in the death penalty.

So what about Joseph in the middle of this? I'm sure he felt abandoned, mistreated, deceived, confused and many other emotions. How could Mary do this to him? Now, what should he do with her? But Joseph's actions are incredible. He doesn't shame Mary. Instead according to Matthew's account, Joseph reaches out and attempts to

rescue Mary (and the baby) while staying true to his convictions. He cannot acknowledge that the child is his for that would be a lie. He doesn't want to harm or injure Mary or the unborn child. At the same time though he knows he can't go through with the marriage.

So, he sets forth the plans to divorce her quietly. He doesn't show any act of retaliation. Instead he chooses the pathway of compassion and sensitivity.

His compassion and sensitivity speak to us today. How in the midst of difficult decisions can we choose compassion and love, rather than anger.

2. Secondly, we see that Joseph displayed a spirit of Openness

I was with a patient in hospital just yesterday and he was so full of fear being in hospital for the first time that he couldn't sleep at night. Can you therefore imagine Joseph? I wonder what he was thinking? The Bible doesn't tell us very much other than he had resolved himself to dismiss Mary quietly. I'm sure if we could have looked in on him night after night we would have seen him pacing the floors, thinking and crying out to the LORD asking what he should do with Mary and her baby.

And then we read how the LORD sent one of His holy angels to speak to Joseph in a dream. And the Holy Spirit guided both of them to recognise that God had his hand on the whole thing. All of this took place because Joseph was open to the leading of the LORD.

I believe today that God desires that we are open to hear him. When we think about it, it only makes sense. Why else would the LORD create us, make a way for us to be saved and fill us with His Holy Spirit if He didn't want to talk to us? God wants to speak to us through His Word, through direct encounters, through dreams and visions and through other people. I believe the question this morning is not whether or not God wants to speak to us, the question is will we be open to receive God's message? Joseph was open.

3. Finally we see that Joseph cultivated a spirit of obedience

To be obedient to the LORD, Joseph had to let his whole life get turned upside down. After obeying God's directions in that dream Joseph's life was never the same. But as he allowed his life to be more and more turned upside down by the LORD, the more he grew closer to the LORD, to Mary and to Jesus.

The Bible tells us that Joseph and his family were on the move a great deal those first few years of their marriage. They first moved to Bethlehem where they stayed for around two years. Then they moved to Egypt where they stayed for a few more years. Finally, they moved back to Nazareth and settled down.

And yet because of that obedience, Joseph would have had a ringside seat watching this amazing miracle grow in front of him. He would witness his son at 12 standing in the Temple amazing the elders with his spiritual wisdom and knowledge.

And so there we have Joseph. A man, who when the LORD said go, Joseph put on his sandals and went. Joseph cultivated a spirit of obedience. And then the

incredible thing is that we don't hear much more about Joseph – he obeys and then his role is done. He doesn't look to capture the limelight – no – he obeys and ensures that all the praise goes to God.

So Joseph teaches us the importance of:

- Being compassionate and sensitive
- Being open and being receptive to the LORD
- Cultivating a life of complete obedience

And so in our own journey with God, as we look in and ponder at the faith of this man, we have the opportunity to declare the following to God :

- Let me become a person led by a compassionate and sensitive heart
- Let me become a person who is open to all of your leadings no matter what they may entail
- Cultivate within me a spirit of complete surrender and obedience

In the midst of all we long for in Christmas, I don't think you could give your family a greater blessing than those virtues – compassion, openness, and obedience. May that be our desire in our own lives this Christmas and into 2023.