

Two Men, Two Responses

A Six-Session Study on Joseph, from *Joseph: Protecting the Messiah*

Scripture begins with a man entrusted with something precious. The Christmas story introduces us to another.

Adam and Joseph are not presented in Scripture as a formal pair, and this study will not pretend that they are. But placing portions of their stories beside one another raises a compelling question: what does a man do with what God entrusts to his care?

Joseph left us no recorded words. What he left was a pattern of choices. Mercy when he could have demanded vindication. Obedience when it threatened his reputation. Action when his family was in danger. Faithfulness through years Scripture barely records.

This study is about Joseph. But it is also about us. When God places something precious in our care, what kind of people will we become?

How to use this study

Each session runs forty-five to sixty minutes and stands on its own. No one needs to have read the novel to take part, though chapter references are given for those who have.

Every session includes a box marked What Scripture Says, What the Novel Imagines. Please read it aloud or point the group to it. *Joseph: Protecting the Messiah* draws on Scripture, on Jewish and early Christian tradition, and on the author's invention, and a study group deserves to know which is which. The novel is a novel. It is not doctrine, commentary, or history.

The thread through all six sessions

1. CHARACTER. What do my actions reveal?
2. MERCY. What do I do when I believe someone has failed me?
3. REPUTATION. Who pays the price for my obedience?
4. GRIEF. What do I do when I do not understand God?
5. PROTECTION. What am I willing to sacrifice for what has been entrusted to me?
6. STEWARDSHIP. Will I remain faithful when nobody sees it?

Session One · The Man Scripture Never Lets Speak

Theme. A man is revealed by what he does.

Scripture. Genesis 2:23; 3:6-13; Matthew 1:18-25

Novel. Chapters 1-2, About to Break and A Thread Unbroken

Adam's first recorded words are poetry. Bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh. It is the only song he ever sings, and he sings it over the gift he has been given. After the fall he speaks again, and what comes out is different: the woman whom you gave to be with me. Something has happened to his speech.

Joseph never speaks at all. Matthew gives him no line, not one. What Matthew gives him instead is a verb, again and again. He did.

Central question. If we removed everything a man said about himself, what would his actions tell us about his character?

Discussion

1. What can we say with certainty about Joseph from Scripture alone? Make the list before going further.
2. Adam's first words are praise. His words after the fall shift the weight toward Eve, and toward God. What happens to a person's speech when they are afraid?
3. Matthew tells us four times that Joseph did what he was commanded. Why might a Gospel writer record a man's obedience and none of his words?
4. Is it possible to know someone's character without hearing them explain themselves? Who in your life have you come to trust that way?
5. Where must a novel move beyond Scripture in order to make Joseph a full character at all? What is gained, and what is risked?

For us: Where is there a gap between the faith we profess and the faith visible in our actions?

WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS, WHAT THE NOVEL IMAGINES

Scripture: Joseph's lineage, his betrothal to Mary, his dreams, his obedience. No recorded speech.

Tradition: that Joseph was older, a widower, and already a father. This comes from the Protoevangelium of James, not from the Gospels.

The novel: Joseph's trade and reputation, his father Jacob, his mother Rachel, his daughters Assia and Lydia, and every line of dialogue.

Prayer

To open. *Lord, before we speak about a man who never spoke, make us willing to be known by what we do.*

To close. *Father, let our obedience outrun our explanations this week.*

| **Takeaway.** Scripture gives us no speech from Joseph. It gives us his obedience.

Session Two · When Righteousness Chooses Mercy

Theme. What do you do when you believe someone you love has failed you?

Scripture. Genesis 3:11-13; Matthew 1:18-25; Deuteronomy 22:23-24

Novel. Chapters 8-9, Fear Not and Obedience

Adam has actually sinned, and he points toward Eve. Joseph believes Mary has sinned, and he looks for the way that will not destroy her.

Read Matthew 1:19 slowly. Being a righteous man, and unwilling to put her to shame, he resolved to divorce her quietly. Matthew calls him righteous in the same breath that describes his mercy, and he does it before the angel arrives.

Central question. When we are hurt, do we seek vindication for ourselves or mercy for the other person?

Discussion

6. Before the angel appears, what does Joseph reasonably believe has happened? Sit in that for a moment before moving on.
7. Why does Matthew call Joseph righteous in the same sentence that describes his desire not to expose Mary?
8. What would Joseph have gained by publicly defending his own reputation? What would it have cost Mary?
9. Adam names Eve, and then names God, as the source of his trouble. Joseph, believing himself wronged, names no one. Where does each man place the burden?
10. Is mercy still costly when nobody knows you showed it?
11. In the novel, Joseph is given the law in plain terms and told what he is entitled to do. Does knowing your rights make mercy harder or easier?

For us: When someone wrongs us, or we believe they have, how much of our reaction is really about restoring our own reputation?

WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS, WHAT THE NOVEL IMAGINES

Scripture: Joseph planned to divorce Mary quietly; the angel came in a dream; he took her as his wife.

Historical background: betrothal was legally binding, and Deuteronomy 22 prescribes the penalty. The severity is real, not invented.

The novel: the scene in which the choice is laid out, the men who press him, and everything Joseph thinks while deciding.

Prayer

To open. *Lord, we have all been wronged. Show us what we did with it.*

To close. *Father, make us people who protect before we are certain we should.*

Takeaway. Joseph considers mercy before he knows Mary is innocent. His mercy does not begin after the angel clears her. Matthew places it before the revelation.

Session Three • Obedience That Costs Your Name

Theme. Who bears the cost?

Scripture. Genesis 3:8-13; Numbers 5:11-31; Matthew 1:24-25

Novel. Chapters 14-16, Retrieving Mary, The Road to Bethlehem, Knocking on the Door

God explained the situation to Joseph. God did not explain it to Nazareth.

Numbers 5 is uncomfortable reading, and it is worth reading anyway, because it shows what a community was entitled to do with a woman under suspicion. This is the exposure Joseph marries into. He does not merely accept a rumor. He accepts a legal and social danger that he could have walked away from, and he accepts it for someone he is not yet certain he understands.

Central question. Would you obey God if obedience damaged the reputation you had spent your life building?

Discussion

12. Why does God not publicly vindicate Mary and Joseph? What would have been lost if He had?
13. What would neighbors reasonably conclude when Joseph takes a pregnant Mary into his home?
14. Adam tries to separate himself from responsibility. Joseph accepts responsibility for circumstances he did not create. What does each choice cost?
15. Does Joseph owe the village an explanation? Does obedience ever require us to let people think wrongly of us?
16. In the novel, Joseph and Mary end up in a manger although Joseph has family in Bethlehem. What does the novel suggest about why, and what does that do to the version of the story you grew up with?
17. Which is harder: being ashamed because you did wrong, or being shamed when you believe you did right?

For us: How much does fear of what other people will think shape our obedience?

WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS, WHAT THE NOVEL IMAGINES

Scripture: Joseph took Mary as his wife; they travelled to Bethlehem for the census; there was no place for them in the inn.

Historical background: the shame of a pregnancy out of sequence, and the law behind it, are documented realities of the period.

The novel: the reception in Bethlehem, the relatives, the reason the door does not open, and the arithmetic the village performs.

Prayer

To open. *Lord, we would like to be obeyed and admired at once. Teach us which one to let go.*

To close. *Father, where our name must be spent for Your sake, steady us.*

Takeaway. Sometimes obedience does not restore your reputation. Sometimes obedience costs it.

Session Four · Faith That Still Cries Out

Theme. Responsibility does not mean emotional invulnerability.

Scripture. Psalm 13; Lamentations 3:1-26

Novel. Chapter 3, The Bitter Cup

Adam is deliberately absent from this session. If we force him into every week the comparison becomes a trick, and this is the week Joseph needs to be a grieving man rather than the good example standing opposite a bad one.

A word before you begin. In the novel Joseph is a widower whose first wife was murdered. Scripture says nothing of this. It is the author's invention, built on an old tradition that Joseph had been married before. Treat the scene as a story that opens a real question, not as a fact about the Joseph of the Gospels.

Central question. Can a faithful person be angry, bewildered, or brokenhearted before God and remain faithful?

Discussion

18. What does Psalm 13 permit David to say that we sometimes hesitate to say out loud in church?
19. What is the difference between walking away from God and arguing with Him?
20. Why does Lamentations refuse to hurry from suffering to resolution? What happens to people when we hurry them?
21. In the novel, Joseph's mother does not explain his grief to him. She sits in it with him. Which did he need?
22. Does grief have to end before obedience can begin again?

For us: Have we confused faith with pretending that something does not hurt?

WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS, WHAT THE NOVEL IMAGINES

Scripture: nothing. The Gospels say nothing about Joseph's life before Mary.

Tradition: that Joseph was a widower with children, from the Protoevangelium of James and later writings.

The novel: Melcha, her murder, the dream, and Joseph's anger. All invented, and offered as a way into a real question.

Prayer

To open. *Lord, we bring what we usually leave outside. Hear it.*

To close. *Father, You have never asked us to pretend. Let us be honest with You this week.*

Takeaway. Biblical lament does not walk away from God. It brings the pain to Him.

Session Five · When Obedience Means Running

Theme. Protection as responsibility.

Scripture. Genesis 2:15; Matthew 2:13-18; Hosea 11:1; Jeremiah 31:15

Novel. Chapters 29-31, Doors Hanging Open, Faster Than Blood, The Long Way
Adam returns here, and the text to use is Genesis 2:15. The man is placed in the garden to work it and to keep it. The Hebrew word is *shamar*: to guard, to watch over, to keep. It is given to Adam before anything goes wrong, and it is the plainest statement in Scripture of what he was for.

Adam is given something to guard, and it is not guarded. Joseph is given something to guard, and he carries it four hundred miles into a foreign country to keep it alive.

Central question. Is protection sometimes an act of obedience rather than an act of strength?

Discussion

23. Why does God tell Joseph to flee rather than remove Herod? What does that say about how God usually works?
24. Genesis 2:15 gives Adam something to keep. What does it mean to be given responsibility for something before any danger appears?
25. Matthew says take the child and his mother, and says it twice. What does that phrasing place on Joseph?
26. Why might running look like weakness to the people watching? When has obedience looked like cowardice to someone outside it?
27. Matthew reports the killing of the children of Bethlehem and quotes Jeremiah. He does not explain it. Why not, and what do we do with the silence?

For us: When has protecting what was entrusted to us required giving up something we valued?

WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS, WHAT THE NOVEL IMAGINES

Scripture: the angel's warning, the flight into Egypt, Herod's killing of the children, the return after Herod's death.

Historical background: Herod's brutality late in his reign is documented by Josephus; Bethlehem was small, and the number of children would have been small.

The novel: the route, the pursuit, the man who hunts them, and everything Joseph leaves behind in order to go.

Prayer

To open. *Lord, You gave Adam a garden to keep and Joseph a child to keep. Show us what has been placed in our hands.*

To close. *Father, when obedience means retreat, give us the humility to retreat.*

| **Takeaway.** Joseph does not defeat the threat. He gets his family through it.

Session Six · Faithful When Nobody Is Watching

Theme. Stewardship over a lifetime.

Scripture. Genesis 2:15; Matthew 2:19-23; Luke 2:39-52

Novel. Chapters 34-40, Change of Plans through Released

Both men were entrusted with something. But Joseph's great work is not a single heroic night. It is what comes afterward: a home, a trade, meals, teaching, a marriage, a household, and years for which Scripture gives us almost nothing at all.

Central question. What if the most important thing God asks of you never looks important while you are doing it?

Discussion

28. Why does Scripture tell us so little about Jesus' childhood? What might the silence protect us from?
29. What would ordinary fatherhood have required of Joseph, day after day, for roughly twenty years?
30. Luke says Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature. What does that tell us, and what must we resist imagining past it?
31. Which requires more endurance: one dramatic act of obedience, or twenty years of ordinary faithfulness?
32. Adam was given a garden to keep, and the keeping is where the story turns. How does Joseph's life show us what faithful keeping looks like over a lifetime?
33. What might Jesus have learned simply by watching Joseph work, worship, speak to Mary, and run a household?

For us: What has God entrusted to you that needs tending rather than recognition? And for parents: what are your children learning from watching you that you never intentionally taught them?

WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS, WHAT THE NOVEL IMAGINES

Scripture: the return from Egypt, the settling in Nazareth, the boy in the Temple at twelve, and that Jesus was obedient to them.

Historical background: a village trade, a small town, and a long silence. Joseph is not mentioned during Jesus' ministry.

The novel: the years in Egypt, the household, the work, and the shape of an ordinary life that Scripture does not describe.

Prayer

To open. *Lord, we would rather be useful than unseen. Deal with that in us.*

To close. *Father, make us faithful in the years no one will ever hear about.*

| **Takeaway.** Most faithfulness happens without an audience.

A Closing Word

Joseph is never quoted. He is only ever described doing something: taking, rising, going, returning, settling. The Gospels hand us a man made entirely of verbs.

That is an uncomfortable standard, and it is a hopeful one. It means the question is not what we would say about our faith if someone asked. It is what someone would say about our faith if we never got the chance to explain ourselves at all.

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