

Living a Shared Spirituality:

What Jesus' Parents Can Teach Us about Marriage

by Beulah Wood

Christians are used to hearing about Joseph and Mary, usually around Christmas. Then, they're the supporting cast, and Jesus is the focus. They certainly don't often come up in conversations about Christian marriage. Perhaps they should. If we pay attention, Joseph and Mary point us toward what makes a good marriage.

Humility

Mary and Joseph's lives were turned upside-down by the news that Mary would give birth to the Messiah. While not wealthy, we can speculate that both came from respectable families in a world where honor was the currency of society.

The gospels don't mention Mary's parents' names. We can guess, however, that she sprang from a respected family. She was related to Elizabeth, who was descended from the line of Abijah, of the tribe of Aaron (Luke 1:5, 36). More than that, the first opinion anybody in the Bible gave of her was "highly favored," voiced by Gabriel. We call her Mary in English, but her Hebrew name was Miriam, named for Moses' sister, who helped lead the Jews out of slavery in Egypt. Like her namesake, she was of humble origin yet hand-picked by God to change the world.

When God chose her to deliver the Messiah, her life changed. Mary did not live in a world where women dreamed of career success, but her dreams were no less shaken by her unexpected pregnancy! No respectable, peaceful life bringing honor to

her family. Being pregnant and unmarried would shame her family and Joseph, perhaps the worst shame possible in her society! And being the mother later of a controversial prophet would not provide the honorable, peaceful family life she likely dreamed of. Yet, with humility, she accepted God's call on her life.

Joseph was descended from King David and his name means "God will add/increase." Ironically, Joseph is forever after known not by his ancestral line or by his father's name. Instead, he is "Joseph, husband of Mary." In most societies, including ancient Israel, women are known by their relationship with a father or husband. Men do not expect to be known by their relationship with their wife. Joseph accepted the possibility that he would be eclipsed in prominence by his family members. He accepted the less prominent part, and has been identified by his wife for 2,000 years. There is humility.

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Agency in Decision-making

Agency is the capacity and acceptance of the capacity to have one's own agenda and carry it out, rather than merely carry out the wishes of someone else. It includes the right to make decisions, alone or jointly, for oneself and for those in one's care.

Did Mary have agency? Could she make her own decisions? Or did she rely entirely on her parents until she married Joseph and then rely on him or his parents?

Well, look what the angel Gabriel did. In Luke 1, Gabriel comes to Mary to announce God's intention that she should give birth to the Messiah. This was a surprise in more than one respect. Most mothers and fathers then, and in many parts of the world today, would say, "I make the decisions for my daughter—definitely all the big ones."

So, did Gabriel get it wrong? Was he confused? Should he have gone to Mary's parents? Well, no. Surely he was under instruction from the king of heaven. There was no mistake. Mary was the one who must

consent. God expected Mary to be able to respond to this major life-changing news. That is still true today—women have to think for themselves and give their own answers. Fathers or husbands cannot do their thinking for them.

Joseph must have looked at his fiancée and thought as he made his marriage vows, “This girl can think for herself. She can listen to God’s messenger and make a decision and carry it out. I respect that.” Perhaps he thought further, “I doubt if I’ll be making all the rules about our life. She has already chosen to accept this path for our life.” We can’t say what he thought, but it is significant that he allowed Mary’s actions to change his life, too. Just as God honored her agency by sending Gabriel to her, Joseph respected her agency by choosing to marry her.

And what about Joseph’s agency? In a traditional society parents make decisions for adult sons, too. They argue that they have more experience in decisions, and that sons must honor them by obeying, including over whom they marry. So here was that exact scene needing special wisdom. Joseph heard that Mary, whom he was to marry, and whom he had not yet ritually taken to his home, was already pregnant. Parents in such circumstances would say, “Don’t marry such a dreadful girl. Where is your honor? And you would shame us too. We can get someone much better for you.”

But Matthew’s gospel tells us, “He was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace.” Righteous? To many families he would be righteous by NOT marrying Mary. He would be well within his legal rights to expose her, but he chose not to.

He had a deep consideration for the needs of a young woman. He trusted in God and in Mary’s honesty. He was prepared to be laughed at himself rather than hurt her. He chose instead to give her protection, shelter, the warmth of his home, and his love. He made a costly commitment to his wife.

So Joseph listened to the angel from God. His parents must have felt mortified. The angel gave Joseph the needed wisdom, and expected him to make his own decision, and he did. He married Mary. He too had agency and he too could make a big decision.

What would Mary have thought? Perhaps her heart said, “Phew! What an unbounded relief! I need someone to take care of me and to be a father to my child. Joseph is leaving his parents to join with me. He will not be controlled by his parents. That gives me confidence. He makes his own decisions. Good decisions that support his wife and family.”

Looking back, we can see a couple who could each look up to the other with great respect. As a couple, they exercised agency that was unexpected. They made their own decisions—decisions that their families would not have approved of. And, they respected each other’s agency to make their own choices. They trusted each other’s wise decisions. Their choices were guided by God and directed to honoring God’s purpose, and they benefited each other and their child. What a great start to a marriage.

Spiritual Sensitivity

Spirituality is another topic in which we may examine Mary and Joseph’s personal steps and relation to each other. Was Mary a



spiritually sensitive person? I think there is no doubt on this. She could probably already read, though most girls could not. She was able to sing Mary's Song, the Magnificat, and record its words. She was familiar with the past and present economics and history of her nation. These suggest literacy and education. But there was more than education.

- She practiced worship: "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. . ."
- She lived with humility: "the humble state of his servant. . ."
- She knew God's work: "his mercy extends to those who fear him. . ."
- She cared about the poor: "he has filled the hungry with good things. . ."
- She knew her people's spiritual history: "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. . . He has helped his servant Israel. . ."

Joseph could have felt threatened by her spiritual maturity. Or, he could look to Mary with admiration. He could say, "Look, here is a girl who loves the honor of God, who observes God's work around us locally and nationally. What a wonderful wife to walk through life with. We will

seek and serve God together." He chose to stay with her and honor her spirituality.

So what would be Mary's view of Joseph? She too could hold her spouse in the highest regard. Why? There are not many men in the whole Bible who heard from God four times and obeyed God four times as Joseph did. He was most certainly spiritually sensitive.

Let's detail the four times.

1. In a dream he recognized an angel from God with the message to marry Mary. When he woke he did what the angel commanded.
2. In another dream, he recognized the command to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt for safety. He did as he was told.
3. An angel of the Lord told him to take Jesus and Mary back to the land of Israel. He did it.
4. Yet again warned in a dream, he learned that they should not go to Jerusalem but to Nazareth. He obeyed.

There was something more. Joseph walked away from his business for the sake of his wife and child. Really? Yes. Think about his carpenter's workshop in Nazareth—hammers, saws, chisels,

planes, selected timber. He left that for two years. His wife and child and their shared work for God were more important than the task of making money. Perhaps he worked as a carpenter in Egypt, but his family life certainly cost him.

Mary could hug herself and think, "This is wonderful. God has given me a highly spiritual man. How he has blessed me. We are in this together, this listening for God and obeying. What spiritual oneness we will have in our life together."

I'm delighted as I weigh up the things that spiritually and emotionally bind Mary and Joseph. From their example, we discover a model for both spouses to walk in our marriages: humility, agency in decision-making, and spirituality. There is marriage mutuality.



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Reflect With Us by H. Edgar Hix

Over Forty Years Together

We've had doubts, debates, disasters, and delights.

Sometimes, we haven't liked each other.

Sometimes, we haven't liked ourselves.

We've been unloving, unwise, unsure, but always unrelenting.

Through success and failure, we have had these:

God before, beside, and behind us, and

we've had each other's backs.