

ADVENT 2022

Part 4: "Hope in Our Disappointment"

Matthew 1:18–25

Sunday, December 18, 2022 (The Fourth Sunday of Advent Season)

By David A. Ritchie

Scripture Reading

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus" (Matthew 1:18–25, ESV).

Introduction

As we look into this gospel passage for our fourth and final week of Advent, there are a lot of theological threads we could pull on. We could consider the mystery of God speaking to a man through a dream and whether or not God continues to speak through such means today. We could talk about how Christ being born to a virgin is the fulfillment of centuries-long expectations and prophetic promises. We could even rightly wonder before the glorious truth of Christ being Immanuel—the God who is incarnate—the Messiah who is both completely God and yet completely man in one person. However, instead of those points of interest, I want to direct our attention to one of the most often neglected characters in the gospel accounts—and that is the character of Joseph.

Often, Joseph is a mere background character in the story of Jesus's birth. But if we stop long enough to consider the humanity of this mysterious and intriguing figure, we will find that this passage of Scripture recounts what is no doubt one of the most emotionally-charged moments of this man's life.

After all, Joseph isn't just a character in a story. He is a real person with real hope and dreams. He is a man looking forward to his new life as a married man. He has high hopes of beginning his career, loving his wife, starting a family, and perhaps building a

respectable name for himself. He has the whole of his life ahead of him, and he is anticipating that life with joy. But then disappointment crashes in. He finds out that his fiancé is pregnant with a child that is not his (Matt 1:18).

Now, yes, as readers of the most famous story of history, we have the advantage of knowing that all is more than well. Mary hasn't been unfaithful. Joseph has not been betrayed by his beloved. Rather, the Holy Spirit has conceived Mary's child miraculously and supernaturally. In fact, Mary and Joseph have been entrusted by God Almighty with the most important child in all of history! *We* know this.

But Joseph doesn't know this; nor should we expect him to.

No, at the beginning of today's passage, Joseph is likely heartbroken and humiliated. He is wrestling with the universal human experience of crushing disappointment.

When you look back on your life, have ever experienced the searing pain of dashed dreams and disappointment? Have you known those moments in life when you thought everything seemed to be heading toward fulfillment, happiness, and sunshine?

Maybe you had a relationship that was blossoming or an upcoming promotion or a new job that you thought was all but certain. Maybe you were on the verge of being debt-free, and everyone you love was healthy and happy.

But then it happened. A cloud suddenly darkened your horizon, and your best-laid plans were shattered. Your heart was broken. Your career was suddenly ripped out from under you. Someone you love deeply wounded you in a way you never thought possible. You suffered a sudden financial loss. A devastating diagnosis came out of nowhere. You found your name had become a byword and a subject of gossip. And instead of a bright, happy future, you felt the hollow nausea of disappointment.

Disappointment is a theme of Joseph's life at this moment in Scripture, and it is also a theme historically associated with the time of *Advent*. You see, Advent is a time to slow down a purposefully acknowledge areas of brokenness and disappointment in our lives and in all of creation. It is a time to stir our hearts to long for God's coming kingdom and celebrate the surety of this eternal hope. Thus, disappointment and hope are very much related.

This interrelation of hope and disappointment is specifically addressed in Scripture. *"Hope deferred makes the heart sick..." (Pr. 13:12a).* Disappointment arises when our expectations fail to intersect with our experiences. The greater the expectation, the greater the disappointment.

I believe this text shows how the gospel engages disappointment in a beautiful way. To explore this theme, I want to lay Joseph's story on top of our stories by examining three big ideas: *1.) How We Respond to Disappointment, 2.) What Our Response to Disappointment Reveals and 3.) How Christ Gives Us Hope in Our Greatest Disappointments.*

Exposition

1. How We Respond to Disappointment

The night Joseph discovers his fiancé is pregnant, I imagine Joseph lying in bed, tossing and turning in his bed with racing thoughts and a hurting heart. He would have felt crushed and betrayed.

After all, a virgin conception wasn't really a consideration. It had never happened before, and it has never happened since. But look consider for a moment Joseph's response in the midst of his disappointment.

Our text reads: *"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly" (Matt 1:18–19).*

Notice: Joseph doesn't respond rashly. He carefully considers (ἐνθυμηθέντος) his response (Matt 1:20). He is a quiet man who doesn't act or speak rashly. (In fact, interestingly, Joseph doesn't actually ever speak in Scripture). If he wanted to do so, he could certainly punish Mary with vindictive hate and wrath. In Joseph's day and age, infidelity, even during the time of engagement, was a serious offense, one that could merit even capital punishment.

Likewise, he could instead adopt a strategy of avoidance. He could try to brush Mary's perceived sin under the rug, marry her, but then spend the rest of his life distrusting and resenting her.

But instead of either of these sinful responses, before he goes to sleep, Joseph determines that he will have mercy on Mary. When he wakes, he will quietly divorce (ἀπολύσαι) her, which in this context, means that he will break off their betrothal.

But then an angel of the Lord appears and tells him something amazing. The text recounts, *"But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'" All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us)" (Matt 1:20–23).*

This is extraordinary news. It would have been difficult to believe the words of the angel. But it would have even been more costly to obey.

After all, soon everyone else will know that Mary, Joseph's fiancé is pregnant. But unlike Joseph, they will not have an angel inform them of the miraculous nature of this child's

conception. To join himself in marriage to Mary will cost him. It will cost him his reputation. It will cost him his public perception. It will cost him his pride. But Joseph is willing to pay the cost.

As our text reads, *“When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus”* (Matt 1:24–25). Joseph trusts in the word of the Lord, and he obeys the word of the Lord, even when it is costly.

When you encounter the stinging pain of disappointment, how do you respond?

Are you tempted to respond with bitterness? After all, when our dreams are dashed, it is easy to think, “I *deserve* better! I'm owed better than this! Why does everyone else get what they want while I suffer?” When our interior dialogue looks like this, we grow bitter toward God and bitter toward other people, and we think that this bitterness is justified. We might even think that somehow being bitter will right the injustice done against us.

Perhaps, your response to disappointment is not bitterness but instead anxiety. When we suffer loss, it is easy to make all sorts of inner vows. We say to ourselves, “I will never allow this to happen again.” And in this mindset, we seek to control and manage our lives and circumstances in a way that we will never be disappointed again. But we cannot control the uncontrollable. And when we seek to control the uncontrollable, we succumb to a joyless life of worry and anxiety.

Maybe when you encounter disappointment, your greatest temptation is to withdraw or escape into distraction or sedation. This is a profound temptation for those who live in an affluent and frenetically busy society like ours. When we feel the crushing weight of disappointment, we can simply avoid feelings of pain by distracting ourselves with activity or losing ourselves in entertainment, or even plunging into substance abuse as way of finding sedation for our pain.

Think of your disappointments. How do you tend to cope? That question leads us to our second point.

2. What Our Response to Disappointment Reveals

In his initial response to disappointment, we see Joseph is a man who is both merciful and just. Joseph's response reveals that even though he loves Mary, she is not his ultimate hope. He is a man who finds refuge in the Lord and his righteousness when life hurts (19, 24).

Moreover, in his decision to walk in obedience, even when obedience is costly, we see Joseph as a man of great faith. His response shows that he cares more about honoring the Lord than about maintaining his own reputation.

Our response to disappointment reveals where we have placed our ultimate hope. You may be a believing Christian, but when you encounter disappointment you will see if your truest hope is really in God—or if it is in something else.

It is easy to say that Christ is our ultimate hope. But it is just as easy to place our functional hope in a counterfeit god. A counterfeit god is essentially anything that is not God that is functioning as a god in our life. A counterfeit god can be a relationship, comfort, approval, success, or money.

Now notice many counterfeit gods are not necessarily bad things. It is great to have a healthy marriage or a job you want. But when you take good things and make them ultimate things, you set yourself up for brutal disappointment because our counterfeit gods always fail us. Pastor Timothy Keller says it this way in his book *Counterfeit Gods*, “A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.”¹

What does your response to disappointment reveal about your ultimate hope? What are you tempted to run to as a counterfeit god? How might God be inviting you to place your hope on a better foundation that is truly unshakeable?

3. How Christ Gives Us Hope in Our Greatest Disappointment

How was Joseph's disappointment healed? The same way that our disappointment can be healed—in the coming of Jesus!

Jesus isn't just a change of Joseph's bad circumstances; he is the long-awaited Messiah! He is destined to heal not only this particular disappointment, but also all disappointment!

The angel reveals the child will be a boy. Joseph is to raise this boy as his son, and the name of this son will be Jesus (Matt 1:25). In Aramaic (the language Joseph most likely spoke), the name of Jesus is “Yeshua”. In the older Hebrew language, that same name is “Joshua.” Both names mean “God is my salvation.” In this way, Jesus's very name is a preview of his destiny. Jesus is the long-awaited Savior of God's people. His mission is to save people from the power of sin.

Like the famous Joshua of the Old Testament, Jesus will lead the people of God into a true and better Promised Land. He will defeat our truest enemies of sin, Satan, and death and bring us into union with God, in whose presence there is fullness of joy and life forever more.

Matthew tells us this Savior's arrival has also been foretold in prophecy. This means there is a God-ordained purpose in his coming. God has been bending all of history to

¹ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty, Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), xviii.

this one moment of wherein God the Son will dramatically enter into human history. Before his dream of the angel, Joseph likely could have never imagined that God was working in and through his disappointment with more profound meaning than he could ever imagine. Likewise, we need to know that God is sovereign, and, even in the midst of our pain, he is bringing about a greater redemption than we could ever imagine (22-23).

Joseph adopts and names Jesus, who is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary (20, 25). This son will have two natures that are forever united in one person. This child is wholly God and wholly man so that he can alone be our one perfect mediator.

As man, he will take the punishment we deserve. As God, he will overcome the power of death and impute to us his very righteousness. All disappointment ultimately comes from our sin and estrangement from God. Jesus is the only one who could bridge the gap between God and us to heal the very root of our disappointment.

These are more than theological ideas. For the Christian, they have profound, life-changing implications!

The coming of Jesus into our lives means that we don't have to respond with bitterness anymore. We only become bitter because we feel that the wrath of judgment will bring our justice. But instead, we can rest in the fact that Jesus is our justification.

The coming of Christ also means we don't have to respond with anxiety anymore because God is sovereign and good. He is bending all our lives—even our pain and disappointments—toward his glory and our good. Now we can be released from the fool's errand of trying to control every aspect of our lives and circumstances.

The coming of Christ means we no longer have to sedate ourselves with sin because Jesus is our truest satisfaction. We don't have to find ways to sinful escape from the pain of our disappointment because Jesus is our unfailing refuge.

The coming of Christ gives us the true and unfailing hope that one day all disappointments will cease, and the fullness of all joy will be realized.

Conclusion

But the gospel even goes to a deeper, more personal level. For Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us" (Matt 1:23).

As a man, Jesus has experienced all of our disappointments. He experienced the heartbreak of loss as he was told that John the Baptist had been murdered by Herod. He experienced the sting of betrayal as every one of his disciples fled from him when he was arrested. He knows the pain of what it feels like to have a friend like Peter curse the very mention of his name. He knows our disappointment. And that is why he is qualified to heal it.

But even more, *as God*, Jesus accomplishes our ultimate hope. He lived a perfect life we could not live. He suffered death on the cross. But he overcame even the power of death, and one day he will return. He will make all things new, and he will wipe away all tears. Disappointment will be a forgotten dream because the kingdom of Christ will be the realization of our greatest hope and more.

The book of Proverbs states, *“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life” (Pr. 13:12)*. You may have had your hope deferred. Maybe you are living in a moment in which your heart is sick. I cannot change your circumstances, but I can tell you that you can find hope and comfort in Christ despite your circumstances.

Jesus is the true and better tree of life. He is the only one who will fulfill your deepest desires. And the promise of this gospel is a hope that will not disappoint.

Redeemer Christian Church, as this Advent season comes to a close, may we be a people who set our hope in Christ. As the words of Revelation proclaim, *“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true” (Rev 21:4–5)*.

AMEN.

Discussion Questions for Gospel Communities

- 1. Read Matthew 1:18–25. Imagine Joseph learning that Mary, his betrothed fiancé, is pregnant. What would Joseph have felt in this moment? What are the emotions you have felt when you have had your dreams suddenly dashed?*
- 2. How does Joseph respond to his disappointment, and what does his response reveal about his character and truest hope? How do you tend to react to disappointment in life, and what does that response reveal about your heart?*
- 3. How has Christ given you hope and comfort in times of disappointment? How can you train your heart to look to the hope of Christ in moments of disappointment?*