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## MATTHEW 1:18-25

Surprise! The idea of surprise has different reactions from different people. I know some people like surprises and some people don't like surprises. Let's take a little poll here. If you were to have a surprise birthday party, how many of you would say, "Yes, I'd kind of like a surprise birthday party. That would be okay with me to do that." How many of you would say that? Okay, a few of you. Alright, good. I thought you would raise your hand, honey. You wouldn't like a surprise birthday party? Well it's a good thing I never threw you one. Okay, good. That's interesting. Now how many of you would say, "Definitely not. I do not want a surprise birthday party." Alright. And I suppose the rest of you are in the "it depends" category, right, on what kind of surprise it is.

There are a lot of surprises in the Christmas story. There's a surprise on the hillside when the shepherds were there and the angels broke out in their song. The Bible says they were terrified at that surprise. When Mary was approached by the angels it says she was afraid. That was quite a surprise for her. Herod himself was surprised to find out there's another king in town. And so he got angry and he wanted to do something about that.

The surprises that take place in our lives are important because we need to know how to respond to them. If you have a surprise that has something good attached to it, then we are delighted. Right? But if you have a surprise with something bad attached to it, then we are disappointed or feel some other negative emotion. You know, like when you're surprised you get on the road and ah surprise there's traffic, or you get a bill in the mail and you go, "Oh man, I wasn't expecting to have to pay this bill." Those are minor disappointments, but we're surprised by them. But then there's the big surprises of disappointment, like the loss of a loved one or the loss of a job or something like that. Those are painful losses. I think we all face surprises. And we will in the next year experience surprises. They're disappointments. They're just part of our life. I'm not predicting anything. I'm just saying that's just how life is. We live in a broken world. And there's all kinds of things that happen in our lives. Will we be prepared for the surprises that take place in this next year?

Well today we're going to look at Joseph, one guy in the Christmas story. We're going to take a break from Philippians today. We're going to go into the Christmas story in Matthew 1:18-25, so you can open your Bible there with me. As we do, we're going to look at the story of Joseph. Now I'm really impressed with Joseph because he's the kind of guy that's not really referred to any other place in the Bible. You don't see him when Jesus is doing His earthly ministry. He's probably passed away by then. But the things we have about him in this story are remarkable. We learn a lot about him.

He had integrity to face the surprise that he's going to. Now he's going to face a surprise that his girlfriend's pregnant and this is going to be difficult for him. We're going to look at that. But I want you to see what happens in the story. Because here's what I think the takeaway is today. I think we're going to learn in our lives how we can handle the surprise disappointments that we face in our lives. That's what we're going to learn today. We all need to be ready for them. Because invariably, they take place. Will you be ready? Joseph was. Let's see what happens in Matthew 1:18.

Matthew tells us *this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about* because he wants us to know the story. And he says this: *His mother Mary was pledged in marriage to Joseph*. The words *pledged in marriage* or the idea of being *betrothed*. Now the betrothal period is like an engagement. There are some significant differences. In our society, if you get engaged then there's a period of time that you're engaged and you can break it off, give back the rings and you can go on. But that's not how it was in Bible times. Because betrothal period was a part of the marriage. Once you agreed to be betrothed to marriage then you are locked in at that point. And that betrothal period of time was a significant time for the husband to go build the house or find the house or deal with the dowry issues and so on. There was a year of time there. And if you decided, hey, this isn't for us, then you had to go through a process of divorce in order to separate. So it's a significant period of time before marriage or part of the marriage experience that Joseph was in. That's the backdrop of our story.

It says – *Mary which was pledged in marriage to Joseph, but (very significant but there) before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit*. Surprise. Disappointing.

Now I know you know the angel's coming and the angel is going to make it better because the angel is going to give direction. But if you could just pause for a moment and get into this part of the story, where he's still pondering all of this. Because he doesn't know yet what to do. And he actually comes up with two ideas. So he's pondering all of this. And he has two choices, and he's going to choose one over the other. So here he is trying to figure out what to do.

When we have disappointments and surprises, they rattle us. They're challenging sometimes. How do you respond in the midst of the disappointments that come? But they all come. You know, we all experience them in one way or another. Will we be ready for them? That's the question. So he has this disappointment. I'm imagining that the disappointment he's experiencing is one of betrayal, maybe. Maybe he's hurt. I'm sure he's hurt by the whole thing. I can imagine that he's imagining all of these great things about marriage and family. How he's going to be a husband and a father, and he has all these hopes about that experience. And now this event is changing everything for him. He finds out his girlfriend, his wife-to-be is pregnant. He's just trying to figure out. What am I supposed to do now?

So he's got two ideas. Let's look at the ideas that he has. It says in verse 19 – *Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and was unwilling to disgrace her publicly...* That's option number one, unwilling to disgrace her publicly. Number two...*he resolved to divorce her quietly*. So we had these two options. Now I can imagine why he might disgrace her publicly. The reason one might do that is because, well, when you're hurt by someone, you want to lash out, you want to

hurt back. There's this tendency that people have when they're hurt to hurt other people. So that difficult experience is facing him, but it says that he's going to choose the high road. Actually *he resolved*, it says, *to divorce her quietly*. He chooses not to disgrace her publicly.

Oh you see it today. I mean if someone wanted to disgrace someone publicly today, what would they do? They'd put it on Facebook, right? Well he doesn't disgrace her publicly by putting it on Facebook. But that's what people would do today. Every once in a while you see someone going into a rant on Facebook about some bad thing that's happening to them.

I like the app Nextdoor. I think it's called the Nextdoor app. Have you seen that one? You got to get on that. That's such a cool app, because it's all the people in your neighborhood talking and selling things and saying what happened in their neighborhood. But I saw a lady got onto on the Nextdoor app in our area and she was complaining about some business or some person. It was some kind of business entity. She was complaining about it. One of the responses to her complaint was "there's always two sides to a story and then there's the truth." I thought, well, that's remarkable. That's good. And we know that, don't you. When you someone gets on starts ranting about something, that often says more about them than it does about what really happened. Because we don't know what really happened. We just see this person complaining, we see this person ranting. When you see someone going off on Facebook, you go that person really has a problem.

Joseph decided he wasn't going to do that. He wasn't going to disgrace her publicly, he was going to take the high road, so to speak. He was going to quietly divorce her, which essentially means that you'd have to pull together the group of people who are going to make this divorce official and quietly divorce her so that it's not a big deal. And then he's going to go on with his life. So he has these two options, these two choices that he's going to do, and he chooses the high road.

I say the high road because it seems to me, and I think the scriptures are saying here, it was the better of the two options. It just revealed something about his character. What allowed him to do this? This is where I find the application for me in the passage. What allowed Joseph to take the high road? It tells us in verse 18. It says – *Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man*. He was a righteous man. What that means is that inside of him already before the disappointment came, he already had the internal stuff necessary to face the disappointment that would come into his life. He didn't wait for the disappointment to say, "Oh boy, I better get my act together. I need to go to counseling." What he does is he's already ready for it. And so when it came, he was able to take the high road. He already had something going on.

I'm thinking what is it that Joseph had because whatever he had I want to have in my life. So that whatever disappointments come I can take the highest road. I don't get sucked into all of the stuff that I could get sucked into, by getting hurt and upset and disappointed. Because all those things are going to happen. I'm going to get hurt, upset, and disappointed in my life. And what am I going to do with those? I'm thinking it's like this container inside of his heart where he puts the hurt, he puts the betrayal. Where does he put it? He puts it in this container that's managed by some truths, some beliefs that we don't just learn in Sunday school, but they impact our whole life. Truths like God is in control, no matter what happens. I know we can say that in church. But can you say that on Monday morning? God is in control, no matter what happens. It's a very

important truth that I think forms the space that disappointments are thrown into. Another one is that we live in a broken world and people are broken. And so broken people do foolish things in life. We live in a broken world. I think this container contains theology that helps us process the disappointments of life.

It seems that Joseph had already grown to a place in his life where he was ready. If any of us can ever be ready for the hurt and disappointment and pain of life, he was ready for that and could respond as a righteous person would. He would not disgrace her publicly, but rather divorce her quietly. He had two choices, the choice he saw would be the one he would take that would be the better of the two. The more righteous one. He had what it took. Those are two truths.

I'm going to give you another one that's later on in the passage, because I think we're going to want to embrace these ideas. These ideas that are embedded in the Christmas story, that God is in control. He's got the big picture under control and the details as well. That we live in a broken world and that's why Jesus Christ came to save us out of our brokenness. And another truth is coming. But before we get to that, let's just look at these two choices. And which one would he choose? He chose to divorce her quietly. But here's the interesting thing about our humanity, that sometimes we think there are only two choices when God says there's another choice. God is going to reveal a third option. We often don't realize there's a third option, but God in His grace is going to give to Joseph another option that he hadn't thought of before. Well I need this too.

Let's read the story and then we'll talk about it. It says – *But after he had pondered these things...* That means there's a period of time when he was thinking about this, and he's trying to decide what do I do? He's pondering these things, then here's what happened – *an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid (to do choice number three) to embrace Mary as your wife. Oh what an interesting idea. I hadn't thought of that before, Joseph is essentially saying. Do not be afraid to embrace Mary as your wife for the one conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*

Choice number three: Embrace Mary. Now there's two things that happen here. Not only does he get the third choice, but he gets some perspective. In other words, here's why choice number three is the best choice of all: Because God has a bigger plan. Now I find that this is what happens to us on a regular basis. Doesn't this happen to you? That sometimes you have a struggle in your life and you go to the word, or you go to church, or you listen to some Christian thing on the radio, and you go, "Wow, I know what I need to do now," and God provides another option for you. And you follow that option. That's really what's happening here.

I think that's one of the benefits that we have of coming to church. Not just watching it, watching a speaker online or worshiping with great music. But by coming to church we have the opportunity to interact together because you never know what God is going to say. See, when we come to church, sometimes God is going to speak to us through the worship, and we sing those songs, and we go, "Wow, yes." God speaks to us through the worship. Certainly God speaks to us through the teaching as we open God's word and we hear Him speak through His Word, and we get the message that He has for us. We go away changed people. But there's also that interaction that we have together. I like to say that sometimes the most important words that are

said on a Sunday morning don't come from up front. They come from the interactions that we have. You come to church, and you say, "Oh you know, I had a hard week and this happened to me," and someone else comes along and says, "Yeah, boy, that sounds like you had a hard time. Hey, can I pray for you?" or "God's grace is in the midst of that," and as they do, then you're going, "Wow, I needed that." God passes His grace onto us in different ways. And so being part of a fellowship like this allows God to speak to us in some really good ways.

Now in this story, God's grace is being passed through a dream with an angel in it. And the angel's telling him there's another option here. He says, "Okay, this is what I need. I'm going to take the other option." He's still sleeping, by the way, in the passage here. He hasn't woken up. As he's sleeping, he gets this other idea. This idea that comes straight from an angel, straight from God that says you can take Mary and here's the reason why. And there's this perspective that exists here. You see, I think, sometimes in our disappointment, we're caught in our own little box and we don't see the bigger things that God is doing. So that's what God is doing in Joseph's life to reveal to him this very important understanding of who He is, what He's doing, and I've got a plan for you, here's what you need to do.

Now here's what's interesting about the story. While Joseph is still sleeping, Matthew, who's writing the text is going to zoom out of the text and tell us about an Old Testament Bible verse that Joseph is going to need and that we need to put in our container inside of our hearts to handle disappointment. Are you ready for that? Okay. Let me say that again. Matthew is going to come to zoom out of the passage. Joseph, we're going to see, is still asleep because Joseph needs this idea. But we need this idea because it fills this container so that when our disappointments come into life and they're mixed up in that container, we're able to manage them better. Are you ready now?

Let's go to the verse that as we continue on in the passage in verse 22, Matthews tells us this – *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: Behold, the virgin will be with child and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means, God with us).* Do you see verse 24? *When Joseph woke up...* So he's still sleeping when this verse comes into the story, because this is such a powerful thing that Joseph is going to experience in his life. He's going to experience the fact that God is with him, just by virtue of the angel coming and giving the statement and telling him what to do. So he's going to experience it in real time. Whereas we're going to put it in our box to wait for the disappointments to come.

Because here's what we need. We need to recognize God is in charge. He's in control of everything. That's our first truth. The second truth is that we live in a broken world and so bad things happen in a broken world. And the third truth is, I will be with you. God says – *I will be with you.* The whole Christmas story is about Jesus coming to earth so that He could be with us. And we need Him to be with us. We need to recognize, yes, I need Jesus in my life. He's with me and I appreciate Him in my life. But there's this sense of unknown.

Let me tell you why people complain on Facebook when they're disappointed about something. They complain on Facebook or in just in general complainers complain because they feel isolated. They feel alone, they feel like they've been damaged or hurt, and that nobody cares, nobody knows. I'm all by myself. They feel despairing. That's what disappointment does. It tends

to marginalize us. And we feel like, “Oh poor me. Nobody loves me. Everybody hates me. Right? That's why people do that. And what they want is somebody to come alongside and say, “Oh yeah, I agree. Men are terrible,” or “women are terrible,” or whatever, or “I don't like that business either.” And so people come alongside it to join them. So now they feel okay, I've got company in my misery. That's why people do that. What people do need often is comfort and say, “Okay look, I can be with you. But there's truth here that we need to consider and not be complaining about it.” But there's a sense of isolation that people have. What do they need to know? When we're disappointed we need to know that God is with us. That completes this bucket here where our disappointments can go so that we can manage them appropriately and be able to deal with them. I think this is big.

I was talking to a woman this week who's trying to stop swearing. She really doesn't want to swear. She's a Christian. But when she was a teenager, she picked up this habit of swearing. And she doesn't swear, really, except when something bad happens in the surprise. When she's disappointed and she's surprised when something bad happens, words come out of her mouth that she didn't mean to say. She doesn't like saying those words, but she says them because she's surprised by disappointment, surprised this bad thing happens. You know what it is. What happens is you get an egg out of the refrigerator and you drop it, it splats on the floor, and what comes out of your mouth? You know or you bump your head you go “ah” and something comes out of your mouth that you say. Or your computer freezes at just that time when either you're watching the good game or you're writing something you need and you lost it. You know and you go “ah” and something comes out of your mouth. This is really real. Okay.

Joseph was a righteous man. He knew how to handle the disappointments of life. And I think when those disappointments come into our lives, if we have habits that's when they'll tend to come out. Because we're surprised. I think it takes a lot of training to not just say, “Okay, I'm not going to swear anymore. I'm not going to use foul language.” We're going to have to ask the question, what should I say instead? We're going to have to practice saying the right thing in our hearts. Because what happens when disappointments come, they not only affect our speech sometimes in bad ways, but they affect the things we say inside of ourselves. I am an idiot, or that person's an idiot, or I'm never going to get it right, or whatever. We start saying things that are wrong. And they need to be processed in this container where disappointment belongs. Maybe we need to finish the sentence. Instead of saying, “God,” maybe we should say, “God, be with me.” Or maybe instead of saying, “Jesus,” we should say, “Jesus, please help me.” We want to finish the sentence in a way that brings these words where even we're cursing into a way that just describes that God wants to work in our lives.

I was working with a six-year-old girl this week. We were out in my park and I have this little flying saucer I bought that I think is pretty cool for young children. So we took it outside into the park. I wanted to take it to the park because it flies and I didn't want it to hit the house and go somewhere. So we took it out and I gave it to her and she threw it up in the air. It landed in a tree 40-feet up and it's spinning up in the tree. She looks at me like this. You can imagine the situation like this. And so I said to her, “Oh no, what are we going to do?” And she says, “Let's pray. God, can you help us get that out of there?” I'm going wow, that's amazing that she would think... So her parents must really be training her well, because I didn't think about praying. I was thinking about what I could throw up in the tree to get this thing down. And we did get it

down. We had a great time. But I'm imagining this little girl is being prepared now in her heart to be able to respond to surprises in a good way. Surprises come into our lives. They're challenging. Will we be able to take them and respond to them?

You see, the truth in the passage is that Joseph already had the stuff he needed in order to face the surprise. Didn't he? It wasn't like, okay, surprise comes, I better go get some help. He was already a righteous man. He already had integrity. I define integrity as having the inner strength to match the temptations or challenges that come our way. Integrity requires work. It develops that inner character. Joseph had that. God had done some work in his life. So when surprise, the disappointments come, he was able to handle them.

This week Carrie and I were spent some time with a missionary friend of ours. His name is Phil Morrison. You may get to meet him someday. Certainly you'll meet him in heaven. But you may get to meet him here at the Barn someday. But he's writing a book. So he says let me tell you about the book. The book is called *In the Same Room with Jesus*. That's the name of the book. So he started to tell the story of how this book came about. He said, "Well I was down in Sao Paulo, Brazil and I had a dream." As soon as he said that my ears perked up because I'm studying about a guy who had a dream. And so I'm thinking, wow, this might be an interesting story for me to share on Sunday. But he says, "I had a dream. And in the dream God told me I needed to get a spiritual mentor." Here this guy who's 71 years old now. Maybe this happened the last few years and God's telling him he needs to get a spiritual mentor. So he comes back to Lancaster and he gets a spiritual mentor. This mentor helped him see something he had never seen before. That he, my friend, is in the same room with Jesus. See, Phil is saying, "I used to think that Jesus is always in the next room. That I always had access to him. I could always go into the next room where he is. But now I'm realizing he's in the same room with me." That's what Immanuel means. In the same room with Jesus. God be with us. That's the picture that's being described here. And Phil is learning that. He's writing this book, I asked him if I could have a copy. And maybe it's one of those copies that I would like to give out to everybody in our church. We'll see when the book comes out in 2022.

This idea of handling disappointments is very important. If we look at this man Joseph in the Christmas story, we see some things that he experienced that were very disappointing and upsetting, very challenging. I suspect that we will face some of those things at some point in our lives. Maybe this week, maybe this month, maybe this year, I have no idea when. But when we do, will we be prepared? The idea is right now we need to be prepared by taking these theological truths and making them real to our own hearts. Do you really believe that God is in control of everything? Do we really believe that there are broken people and bad things happen, and that's part of what happens in our world? Do we really believe that God is with us wherever we are? See, I think when we understand those truths, we can be like Joseph. We can be like the person who says, "Yes. Okay. When a bad thing happens, I'll know how to deal with it."

This idea of God with us is so pervasive in God's word. I tried this week to count up how many times the Lord says *I will be with you*. It's many times in the Bible, it says, *I will be with you*. There's sixteen I found, but I think there's other ways that God said it sometimes, which I'd have to do some more research. But you remember the story of Joshua, who got a new job. When the new job took over Moses' place, he was a little timid. And so God says, "Be strong and

courageous.” And then he says, “I will be with you.” I will be with you. You're going into a new job; I'll be with you.

There's Jacob who's leaving home and he's going to find a wife or going off to college, or whatever he's going to do. And when he's leaving home, he puts his head on this rock pillow and has angels ascending and descending. In the midst of that, God says, “I will be with you. You can go ahead. Wherever you go, I will be with you.”

But it's the unknowns of the world, it's the unknowns that are going on that often create this dissonance in our hearts that cause us to feel anxious. That's why Jesus when He was leaving the earth and His disciples were a little bit concerned about this, He says to them, “I will be with you always, even to the end of the earth,” as He's going up to heaven. *I will be with you.* God with us. This idea of Jesus being the Godman who came to be with us is powerful. It's what I need. It's a very practical truth because it's going to help me deal with disappointment in my life. I hope it will help you deal with your disappointments as you experience them, that you'll be able to process them and be able to experience what God has for us.

Here's one more just interesting truth here. Surprise with bad things creates disappointment. But there are some times when we're surprised by bad things, as in Joseph's case, that were really not a bad thing. It was something new that God was doing. Sometimes we think that they're bad things, but it's God really redirecting the traffic in our lives to move us in a different direction. So we might think that this loss of a job is disappointing and surprising and a bad thing. But really, God's moving us into some other thing in our lives. God is in control. Even the disappointments that we experience can be processed well so that we don't end up with all of this negativity inside of our hearts. God is in control, broken things happen, and God is with us.

Would you stand with me and let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Most importantly, Father, we are grateful that you have designed this whole plan, this huge plan that Joseph didn't understand and we now do and see, although it's hard to grasp that you came to earth to be among us, that you are Immanuel, God with us. So Lord, thank you. We need that. We cannot live our lives alone. We can't process all this stuff by ourselves. We need you. To know that you are with us and wherever we're going you're going with us is so powerful and important. So we just want to thank you for being the Immanuel in our own hearts and lives. Lord, bless us as we serve you and live for you. In Jesus' name, amen.