

God's Difficult Assignments

Matthew 1:18-25

In 1979 I transferred from the University of Southern Mississippi to Louisiana State University to study architecture. I was clueless about what I wanted to do with my life, so I took a career interest inventory that suggested that architecture might fit my interests well. So I enrolled in architecture school at LSU as a third-year sophomore.

Our first major project was called Whiz Bang Instant City. We were put onto teams of 5 or 6 students. Our assignment was to design and build a tent in which the whole team could sleep. Each team designed and built their tent. Ours was an odd-shaped purple and green monstrosity. Then the entire class of 145 students went to a State Park for an overnight campout in our tents. We set up our tents (20 or 25 of them) and . . . “whiz bang” . . . we had an “instant city.” One last part of the assignment was to draw a sketch of each of the tents that had been built.

I spent hours and hours refining my sketches, but the fact of the matter was that I really didn't have any drawing skills. I'll never forget how I felt when I got a D+ on that assignment. I'm sure my professor agonized over whether or not to add the “+” to my D. When I got that D+ it was as if God said to me, “Son, maybe we should find you another major. . .” It was that assignment – that difficult assignment – that showed me I was never going to be an architect.

As you and I walk with Christ, God gives us assignments. He doesn't ask us ahead of time; He gives us assignments – non-optional things that He wants us to do. Like Whiz Bang Instant City, God often gives *difficult* assignments. At least they're difficult to *us*. Other people may be able to handle them with no problems, but we sometimes feel like God has given us an assignment that will take every ounce of spiritual and emotional energy we've got – and even then we'd be fortunate to get a D+.

For example, God may have assigned you to a difficult family situation – either the family in which you were raised or the family in which you now live. You may look around and think, “My situation is more difficult than most people's.” God may have given you a difficult work environment; day after day you face things that challenge your convictions and character. God may have given you a difficult assignment in the body of Christ; your gifting and calling demand that you make sacrifices that others don't have to make. God may have given you a challenging assignment in relation to your finances or your health. Scriptures such as 1 Corinthians 7 and 2 Corinthians 12 suggest that these circumstances and roles aren't as random as we might think; God is sovereign over these issues of our lives.

There's a huge difference between Whiz Bang Instant City and the assignments God gives His children. Whereas 2nd-year architecture students are given assignments that are meant to weed them out of the program, God gives us difficult assignments to *prove that we belong to Him*. His assignments are meant to prove the genuineness of our faith. And His assignments always further His purposes in the world. They are never frivolous or trivial – even if we don't know exactly what purpose they serve.

On this third Sunday of Advent we are going to look at the assignment that God gave to a man named Joseph a little over 2000 years ago. We are going to see that Joseph was prepared ahead

of time for the assignment God would give him and that Joseph was willing to accept God's assignment once the will of God became clear. Please turn with me to Matthew 1:18-25.

Preparation: becoming the type of person prepared for God's difficult assignments (1:18-19)
Beginning in verse 18 we have this simple description of the birth of Christ.

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.

Try to put yourself in Joseph's place; it's hard to imagine a worse scenario for a young man who would soon be married. Joseph was "betrothed" to a woman named Mary. In those days such a pledge to be married was legally binding; it required a divorce to break off a betrothal. But sometime before the wedding Mary was "found to be with child" – it became obvious that she was pregnant.

Apparently Mary hadn't told Joseph that earlier an angel had appeared to her and told her that she had been chosen to give birth to the "Son of God" (Luke 1:32). She hadn't told him that that angel had said that "the Holy Spirit would come upon [her] and the power of the Most High would overshadow [her]" (Luke 1:35) with the result that she would conceive. All Joseph knew was that his fiancé was pregnant. How would you respond? Verse 19 tells us how Joseph responded.

19 And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

We learn a tremendous amount about Joseph's character in this statement. In calling Joseph a "righteous man" Matthew is saying that Joseph was faithful to the Old Testament law; he sought after God in the context of the truth revealed in the old covenant. He brought sacrifices, meditated on the law day and night (Psalm 1), he honored his father and mother, he gave to the poor, etc. He was a righteous man. Unlike the Pharisees, however, he wasn't self-righteous; he didn't think that his obedience to God gave him permission to condemn others.

As a matter of fact, Matthew mentions that when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, he did not want to disgrace her. The Law allowed for an adulterous woman to be stoned to death. Joseph didn't want her to be stoned to death; he didn't even want her to be disgraced. As an expression of compassion, Joseph "planned to send her away secretly." Remember that Joseph believed that Mary had been with a man. Up to that point in the history of the human race, that was the only explanation for a pregnancy. Joseph wanted to make things as easy for Mary as possible. He would quietly give her a certificate of divorce and go on with his life. This was a very compassionate thing to do.

Joseph's plan to divorce Mary was only the first of many threats to God's plan for the Messiah recorded in the gospels. The plot of Matthew involves the Messiah being born into this world, growing up, showing people how to live in God's kingdom, being crucified, buried, and raised from the dead; Jesus then gave His disciples the mission of making disciples of all the nations. Throughout the gospel of Matthew, this plotline was threatened. A jealous king tries to kill Jesus by killing all the boys two years old and younger in the vicinity of Bethlehem (2:14-18). Satan,

the Adversary, tempts Jesus in the wilderness, trying to get Jesus to do anything but take the road to the cross (4:1-11). Peter rebukes Jesus for saying that He must go to Jerusalem and be put to death (16:21-23). But the first threat to Jesus' well-being involved Joseph's plan to "put Mary away."

We'll see how this threat was resolved in a few minutes. But the thing to notice for now is that God put Joseph in this position. And God knew how Joseph would react when he found out that Mary was pregnant. He knew that Joseph was a righteous man and that he was also full of compassion. These qualities made Joseph the type of person who could receive an incredibly difficult assignment from God.

He was the type of person who had learned how to submit to the will of God (he was "a righteous man"). He was the type of person who had learned how to respond to disappointment with compassion (instead of vengeance). We don't know anything about Joseph's personal history; we don't know whether he had experienced great hardship in his life or relative ease. But we do know that God had prepared him for his specific assignment of being the earthly father of the Son of God.

Joseph illustrates that our walks with God should prepare us for the difficult, challenging assignments that God might give us. Like Joseph, we really can't predict what those assignments might be, but we know that they will come. They say, "You don't start weaving the parachute after you jump out of the plane." In the same way you and I don't wait until we receive a difficult assignment to begin cultivating endurance in our lives. No, we "discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness" – we cultivate these qualities in our lives that will serve us well when the difficult assignments come.

Seeking God week-in and week-out is a most strategic thing to do. Worshiping, meditating on Scripture, trusting God, serving God, etc. will prepare you for the difficult assignments God gives. Job did these things. When God allowed Satan to take away his children and his wealth, he was able to say, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). When God allowed Satan to take away his good health, Job said to his wife, "Shall we accept good from God and not adversity?" The comment is then made, "In all this Job did not sin with his lips." Because Job sought after God, he was the type of person who could receive a difficult assignment from God. In the same way, seeking God will prepare us to be the type of people who can receive difficult assignments from God. We should let this realization add intentionality and purposefulness to the way we seek God.

Willingness: Accepting God's assignments once His will becomes clear (1:20-25) In these verses we see that once God made clear to Joseph that he was supposed to marry Mary, Joseph was willing; he accepted that assignment from God.

20 But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

Significantly, the angel identifies Joseph as "son of David." We learned in the genealogy earlier in Matthew 1 that Joseph was a descendant of David, Israel's greatest king. He appealed to Joseph's royal lineage because David had been promised that one of his descendants who would

“sit on his throne forever.” Joseph had been given the assignment of being the early father of that descendant.

The angel explained to Joseph that he shouldn't fear violating his righteous by taking Mary as his wife because the Child within her was “of the Holy Spirit.” How this happened isn't explained; the point is that God the Holy Spirit had brought about Mary's pregnancy. For that reason Joseph shouldn't be afraid to take Mary as his wife. We learn more about the identity of the Child in verse 21.

21 "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

The name Jesus is equivalent to the Hebrew name Joshua which means “YHWH is salvation” or “the Lord saves.” Jesus wouldn't merely come to save the people from the Romans or any other human enemy. A human enemy might kill the body, but sin can kill the soul. Sin keeps people enslaved to their passions and worst impulses in this life; sin condemns a person to hell, a Godless existence in the next life. The angel tells Joseph that Mary's Son would save people from their worst enemy, sin! As the Savior, Jesus would have unparalleled significance in the history of the human race. Even though Joseph was being given an incredibly difficult assignment, it was also incredibly strategic.

In verses 22 and 23 Matthew inserts an editorial comment concerning the fulfillment of a prophecy in Isaiah.

22 Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."

The quotation is from Isaiah 7:14. Isaiah the prophet was sent by God to give a message to the king Ahaz concerning two nations that threatened to invade Judah (the southern kingdom). Isaiah told Ahaz to ask for a sign. When Ahaz refused, Isaiah said, “Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.” Isaiah goes on to say that before the child would be very old, the two nations threatening to invade would be wiped out. This prophecy obviously had a fulfillment in Isaiah's day.

Yet as we read on in Isaiah it becomes clear that this Immanuel prophecy wasn't entirely fulfilled in Isaiah's day. This Immanuel would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, and Prince of Peace. Matthew is claiming that Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's promise. Matthew also reminds us that Immanuel means “God with us.” In this Child, Jesus, God would become one of us, be with us, and save us from our sins.

With that understanding of the identity of the Child, notice Joseph's response:

24 And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, 25 but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

Once it became clear that God had chosen him to be the husband of the woman who would bring Immanuel into the world, Joseph was willing. He awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He accepted his God-given role because he understood the significance of Jesus as the Savior of the world.

Joseph doesn't play a very prominent role in the gospels after Jesus' birth and infancy. The last time we hear about Joseph is when Jesus is twelve years old and He has stayed behind at the temple. By the time of Jesus' public ministry Joseph was apparently dead. He had fulfilled his assignment. He played the role God wanted him to play in the Kingdom of God.

If you read through the Bible, you will see that difficult assignments were the norm, not the exception. Abraham was given the assignment of leaving his home country for another land "not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). Moses was given the assignment of telling a hard-hearted Pharaoh, "God says, 'Let My people go!'" Jonah was given the assignment of preaching to Nineveh. Hosea was given the assignment of marrying a prostitute as an acted-out parable of the people's unfaithfulness. Paul was given the assignment of being an apostle to the Gentiles, knowing full well that he would suffer terrible things for the cause of Christ. Of course Jesus Himself was given the most difficult assignment of all: the incarnation, living a sinless life, and bearing the sins of the world. Difficult assignments were not the exception but the norm in Scripture. People didn't always *want* the assignment God gave them, but those who walked with God were eventually accepted their assignments because they furthered the purposes of God in this world.

It seems to me that we too need to recognize when God is giving us a difficult assignment, and we need to be willing to accept that assignment once God's will is clear. We can apply this approach on a couple of different levels. On one level we can apply Joseph's example at the level of our circumstances. When it's clear that God wants us to do something difficult, we need to be willing to say, "Okay, God, I accept this assignment and trust that You will give me everything I need to be faithful."

Several weeks ago God very clearly impressed upon me that I needed to mend a relationship. God made it very clear that I should take some initiative and do my part to make things right. I decided that it would be best to write a note—apologizing for some things and expressing my heart toward this brother. I even had in my head what I should write.

Three weeks went by and I still hadn't written the note. I think that a combination of pride and fear were holding me back. You may have heard the riddle: Three frogs were sitting on a log; two decided to jump off; how many were left on the log? Three – the two frogs only *decided* to jump off. I was like those two frogs; I'd decided to write a gracious, apologetic note but I hadn't done it yet. I had told a friend what God had impressed upon me to do. This past week – out of the blue – he sent me a message, "Have you written that note yet?" Immediately I was convicted to the core; fifteen minutes later the note was written, the envelope was addressed and stamped. I was willing (sort of), but the encouragement and accountability of a friend was huge.

Chances are you can think of circumstances in which God has given you a difficult assignment – something you know He wants you to do. We need to accept God's assignments once His will becomes clear.

On another level we can apply Joseph's example to difficult assignments that last for years (or our whole lives). Such assignments are more challenging because they require long-term commitment and resolve. Here I'm thinking about a difficult assignment as it relates to your family life, your role in the body of Christ, or difficult ongoing circumstances related to your health or your finances. To fulfill these assignments well, we will need massive amounts of grace from God; human willpower will quickly run out.

For some people, accepting a difficult ongoing assignment will mean that you need to quit comparing yourself to others, acknowledging that God knows what He's doing when He makes assignments. For others, accepting such assignments will mean that you give up the ideal of a "nice, controlled, comfortable life" and accept that the life God has given you might feel "out of control" and chaotic at times.

Another way to say it is found in Matthew 16:

24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 25 "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.

What we find is that when we abandon ourselves to the will of God – like Joseph did – we may lose the life we always wanted for ourselves, but we will find the life that God wants for us. And that life will be infinitely more satisfying. That's because these assignments draw us into the plans and purposes of God in this world.