



A Very personal dilemma

By Peter Amsterdam

The world in which Joseph and Mary, Jesus' earthly parents, grew up was substantially different from our world today, and they were probably still very young when they were betrothed. In ancient Israel, a couple became betrothed when the man gave the woman either a letter or a piece of money, no matter how small, directly or through a messenger. It was also required

that he expressly state, before witnesses, that he intended to make the woman his wife. At the time of the betrothal, the marriage contract was written and agreed upon. Once the woman was betrothed, she was legally considered the man's wife.

It was within Mary's betrothal period, after the contract had been made with Joseph, that she was visited by the angel Gabriel, who told her she had found favor with God and would conceive a son who would be the Son of the Most High. She asked how she could conceive, since she was a virgin. Gabriel told her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, and the power of the Most High would overshadow her. Gabriel was revealing to her that her pregnancy would be from God and would have nothing to do with a man.¹

Mary clearly had a decision to make. She was going to be pregnant during her betrothal period, before she was living with her husband. If she consented to what the angel was saying, she was, at the very least, going to devastate her husband, seriously damage her reputation, bring shame to her parents and family, and harm her relationship with her village community. Mary chose to accept the consequences when she said, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."² This was a huge leap of faith on her part.

And it did have repercussions. Joseph was devastated when he found out she was pregnant. Scripture says that "he considered these things,"³ he thought on them, he mulled them over. The Greek word used for "considered" means "passion, angry, anger boiling up." He had no reason to think anything other than that she had been unfaithful to him. In his mind, she had clearly broken her marriage vows and had committed adultery. Joseph was a normal guy, so of course he'd be angry and hurt.

But the Bible says he was a just man. He didn't want to make a public example of her or disgrace her, so he made the decision to divorce her quietly.

It was after he made the decision to divorce but not to expose Mary that he had the dream in which an angel told him that the child was from the Holy Spirit and that he shouldn't fear to take Mary as his wife. Joseph had to make a decision at that point: should he believe the dream? Like Mary, he had to take a step of faith. God showed him what to do and he had to make a choice to believe and trust God or not. Thankfully he had the faith and courage to believe and act upon what God had showed him.

Joseph and Mary were each faced with a huge personal dilemma. Both of them showed great faith and courage. Both chose to follow God in spite of the risks, and by doing so, they made it possible for God to use them to fulfill His promise to bless the world.

Of course, no one knows exactly how Mary conceived the baby Jesus, any more than anyone knows exactly how God created the universe. What we do know is that God created a human being with two natures, divine and human, who was fully God and fully man. It had never happened before nor has it since. Luke simply says that the Holy Spirit, the power of God, came upon Mary and overshadowed her. He used the same word when writing about the transfiguration of Christ when he said that a cloud overshadowed them and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My chosen One; listen to Him."⁴ The Spirit of God overshadowed Mary and brought forth the chosen one, the God-man, Jesus Christ.

It was through Joseph's willingness to follow what God showed him that Mary's child was born the son of David.⁵ It was through Mary's willingness to yield to what God asked of her that she bore the Son of God.⁶ And Jesus, the Son of God, yielded to what His Father asked of Him, and made it possible for humanity to be redeemed.⁷

You might sometimes struggle to act on a nudge from God. When that happens, remember Mary and Joseph. God sometimes calls us to step out by faith and to follow how His Spirit is leading. You never know what the outcome might be.

1. See Luke 1:35.
2. Luke 1:38 ESV
3. Matthew 1:20 ESV
4. Luke 9:35 ESV
5. See Matthew 1:1.
6. See Mark 1:1.
7. See Titus 2:13–14.