

**THE ANGELS OF ADVENT**

**MATTHEW 1:18-25**

# **THE ENCOURAGING ANGEL**



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**FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH**

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# INTRODUCTION

Michael J. Fox, the award-winning actor famed for movies such as *Back to the Future* and TV shows such as *Family Ties* and *Spin City*, was diagnosed with early onset Parkinson's disease about 29 years ago when he was just 29-years-old. I've always been impressed by how he's handled his very public deterioration with such resilience and dignity. He's also kept his marriage and family together through it all which is remarkable. I've been listening to his autobiography and, amidst all the humor and funny asides, he lets us into his unseen seasons of deep discouragement and disappointment. He's like us all in that respect. We put on a brave public face but conceal a discouraged private face in the face of deep disappointments.

Fox, an optimistic fighter, has tried numerous practices and activities to overcome his frequent discouragement and disappointment. However, I couldn't help but notice that the one thing he did not turn to was the Word of God. Though converted to Judaism, he didn't seem to find any solace in God's Word.

In Matthew 1 we find another Jewish man, Joseph, devastated and discouraged by God's providence. But we also find God's Word encouraging and supporting him. **God's providence can discourage, but God's Word always encourages.**

## CONTEXT

In Hebrews 1:14, we learn that angels are **all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation**. Last week we observed how one angel was sent out to serve Mary by teaching her about her role in the coming of the Savior. This week we'll notice how another angel served Joseph, by teaching him about his role in the coming of the Savior. He desperately needed this because he was desperately discouraged. **God's Word encouraged him out of his discouragement.**



Why was Joseph so discouraged?



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# 1. GOD'S PROVIDENCE CAN DISCOURAGE US (18-19)

## A Happy Engagement

*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. Mary had been betrothed to Joseph (18).*

In that culture, no one got engaged quickly or lightly. It involved a serious, public, and legally binding commitment by the man before two witnesses. From that moment on, Joseph and Mary were regarded legally as husband and wife (Gen. 29:21) and could only be separated by legal divorce. However, they did not live together until the marriage, usually about 12 months later. Any sexual activity in that waiting period was regarded as adultery, punishable by death (Deut. 22:22).

## A Shocking Discovery

*Before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit (18).*

How did Joseph find this out? Did Mary tell him before he suspected anything? Did he notice the physical change and ask about it? The wording of verse 18 suggests that Joseph found it out rather than Mary told him. Either way, it involved Mary explaining to Joseph that she was carrying a baby boy, that no other man was involved, that the Holy Spirit had put the baby in her womb, and therefore that there was no sexual contact, but rather spiritual contact.

When we read this passage today, we can look at it in *historical* context: we know the future supernatural history of this baby boy and therefore virgin birth is not so shocking to us. We can also look at it in *theological* context: with the benefit of the rest of the New Testament, we know how necessary the virgin birth was to preserve the holiness of Christ.

However, Joseph did not have either the *historical* or *theological* context. He saw the *personal* context (the impact of reduced trust in Mary) and the *social* context (the impact of people's reduced respect for him). He was a moral, upright, honorable, principled man who knew that he was not the father of this child. Even if he could bring himself to personally believe his future bride, what about the social cost as no one else would believe their story. And did he believe her? Not initially.



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## A Merciful Break-up

*And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly (19).*

Joseph was torn. He was a just man and, therefore, as far as he could see, his only option to protect his reputation was to blame Mary for immorality and divorce her. However, he was also a merciful man and did not want to humiliate Mary via a public trial for adultery, to secure a divorce. Instead, he decided to privately pay the fine and privately give her a bill of divorcement. (Deut. 24:1). That would be the best way to protect his and Mary's reputation. Decision made, he puts his head on his pillow and tries to sleep, his life shattered in a million pieces. Why did Mary do this to him? Why did God do this to him? What a devastating and discouraging providence.

## CHANGE YOUR STORY WITH GOD'S STORY

**A good life does not protect us from deep disappointments.** Like Joseph, you may be a faithful believer, and have been for many years. However, as Joseph learned, that does not mean you will never experience painful and discouraging providences.

**Our answers are rarely the right answers.** Joseph made a plan that he thought would be for the best, but he had not consulted God. His plan was logical but not theological. It came from his mind not God's mind.

WHEN GOD'S PLAN ASKS US QUESTIONS  
LET'S WAIT FOR GOD'S ANSWERS



So how did God lift Joseph out of this painful providence?  
With his Word.



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## 2. GOD'S WORD ENCOURAGES US (20-25)

God encourages with our identity

*But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David" (20).*

On his bed, wrestling with God's providence, Joseph was trying to understand what had happened, what the future held, how he would tell Mary about his decision to divorce her. It was now time for God to speak. When Joseph finally fell asleep, God sent an angel into his dreams with a message for him. What are the first words he hears? "Joseph, son of David." It's unlikely Joseph the carpenter had ever been called this before. Perhaps he didn't even know his family genealogy. "Why would anyone identify me like this?" It was to encourage Joseph that although things looked bleak for him, that God had a plan he was unfolding and that Joseph was about to be given a central role as a legal descendent of David and, therefore, a royal status. Through Joseph's royal lineage, Jesus had a legal right to Israel's throne.

God encourages with Jesus's identity

*"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" (20-21).*

"Joseph, don't be afraid of offending God, don't be afraid of the mockery of others, and don't be afraid that Mary has been unfaithful, don't be afraid of losing your reputation." How can he say this? Because of who Jesus is.

God, through the angel, is effectively saying, "Don't be afraid of what people think you are; instead think about who Jesus is. The father of this baby is as Mary said. It is the Holy Spirit and therefore this birth is the first ever and the only ever virgin birth (a contradiction in terms of there ever was one)." This virgin conception and birth was the greatest ever work of the Holy Spirit.

"You shall call his name Jesus." Giving the child a name was the act by which a father accepted a child. "He will save his people from their sins," means not just salvation from the consequences or from the guilt of sin, but from the sins themselves, the actual sins. That's what Jesus will do. That's who Jesus is.

This is the truth we must grip tightly in the midst of all the discouragements of life. Whatever else is happening, we can say. Jesus is my Savior, Jesus saved me, is saving me, and will save me from my sins.



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God encourages with the Bible's reliability

*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 (22-23).*

This is a reference to Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 7:14. To put it another way, "Joseph don't doubt my word because this is God's Word." God is going to be with us in a way he's never been before.

*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 (24-25).*

Duly encouraged with the Word of God, Joseph believed and put his entire fate, his entire future, in the hands of God. He believed and obeyed, contrary to all his former thoughts and feelings. **Faith in God's Word conquered his feelings about God's providence.**

Joseph re-engaged his heart and followed up with a formal marriage before witnesses, followed by a benediction by the priest, a marriage-feast, and Mary moving into Joseph's home. No doubt, Joseph's reputation would be badly damaged by this act of association with 'immoral' Mary, but he was willing to suffer that loss and count all things but loss for the sake of his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He denied self, took up his cross, and followed Christ.

## CHANGE YOUR STORY WITH GOD'S STORY

**Praise God for his providence in Joseph's life.** Our salvation is wrapped up in this as Mary needed Joseph on board to provide protection and care for our Savior and his (Matt. 2:13-22). What faith Joseph displayed in his submission to God's will through faith in God's Word. He accepted a shame-filled role and was given a glory-filled role.

**Praise God for his Word in our lives.** This doesn't deny that providences can be extremely painful and fearful, but it calls us to believe in the God of providence through his Word. When surrounded by discouraging events and disappointing feelings, fill yourself with faith in your God-given identity, Jesus's identity, and the Bible's reliability.

WHEN GOD'S WORKS FILL YOU WITH FEAR  
USE GOD'S WORD TO FILL YOU WITH FAITH.

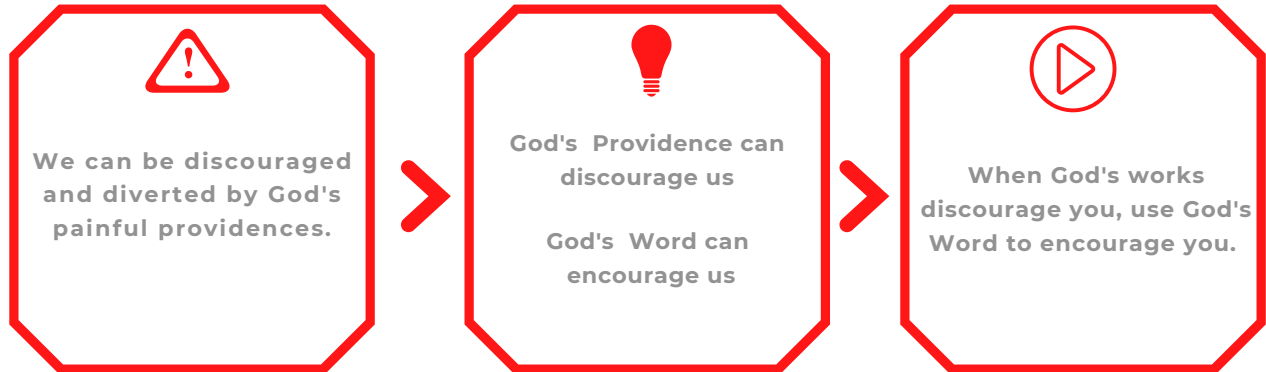


Hear God's Story > Change your story > Tell the story



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# CONCLUSION



**PRAYER:** God of providence, I confess I'm sometimes discouraged by your providence. Help me, therefore, to find courage in your Word. Amen.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When have you been discouraged in God's providence?
2. How did God's Word encourage you out of that discouragement?
3. In what way have your interpretation of and answers to God's providence been wrong?
4. How can our identity encourage us? How can Jesus's identity encourage us? How can the Bible's reliability encourage us?
5. How will you use this story to change your story this week?
6. How will you use this story to change someone else's story by encouraging them this week?

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