

...FOR THOSE SEEKING THE EMPOWERING PRESENCE OF THE *Holy Spirit*

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When a *Dream* Turns Into a *Nightmare*

by Paul Anderson

Hearing God's voice can prove a difficult test. Try listening while in panic mode, when Satan's voice rings louder than God's.

Things were going well for Joseph. Then Mary delivered the shocking news: "I am with child." He would have preferred hearing that she had died. At least the disaster would not have included shame. He was thrown into a crisis. He knew that he could not marry a woman carrying someone else's child. Out of deference, he decided to divorce her quietly. Though only engaged, betrothal was considered as binding as marriage, with the only thing left being to consummate the promise.

Then God stepped in. Joseph, a godly man, had already made a good decision by choosing a pure bride. Now he would be directed to make the hardest decision of his life, to receive a woman with child and not to touch her until the birth.

God came in a dream, and Joseph recognized it as a heavenly visitation. The angel presented the same report that Gabriel had given to Mary in the same town only weeks before. No doubt she tried to explain to her beloved what Gabriel had told her, but it must have sounded painfully inappropriate.

"Joseph, son of David..." The angel identified his subject: "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." So Mary was telling the truth. He had found

it strange to picture her like the adulterous women in town. "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." What looked like shame just turned to honor. Mary and Joseph had been singled out for an extraordinary assignment.



We take on the job of listening as if it rests on our ability to hear rather than on God's assignment to speak clearly. Scripture puts the ball in God's court. He was neither thrown by what was assailing Joseph, nor was He limited by what restrained the carpenter. The disturbing news that just destroyed his future had not tampered with God's. Whirling contradictory thoughts bombarded Joseph's mind, but not God's.

As we read the story, we know what Joseph does not, and we feel for him. Fortunately for Joseph, so does God. And He is going to communicate so that His will is made clear. Every time! He knows how to do it. Some truths surface from this touching story that can help us through our difficult hour and allow us to hear God speak.

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We take one step at a time. God does not lay out the entire scenario. He gives Joseph the next step: *“Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife...”* He could do that. We often confuse the matter of guidance by asking for more than God in His wisdom chooses to give us. If you stand at point A, ask B questions, not E questions. *“The steps of a righteous man are ordered by the Lord,”* and He will give the next one to you. He could have said like Zechariah, *“How can I be sure?”* He could have insisted on more of the big picture before taking such a foolish leap. Dear brother, dear sister, you only need the next step. Nothing more.

God’s will is good. The angel said, *“Do not be afraid,”* because Joseph was terrorized by a dreadful option: *“Divorce the lady and forget that you ever knew her.”* God’s strategy proved just the opposite: *“Marry your beloved and raise the Son of God as your own.”* Fitting into the purpose of God does include suffering, but the presence of the Almighty giving purpose to pain makes it worth the hardship. We need to say in the midst of trauma, *“This is not as it appears.”* Divine solutions often hide behind human disasters.

God speaks with clarity. He doesn’t stutter. *“His sheep hear his voice.”* The more confident we grow in God’s ability to speak, rather than in our ability to listen, the more we will hear. By morning, Joseph knew what God was calling him to do. Those who find themselves paralyzed by indecision, struggling over the will of God, need to break out of passivity and do something, even if it looks wrong. Those committed to putting God first do not need to tip-toe around, afraid of ruffling God’s sensibilities. We walk in the assurance that we are hearing. *“Waiting upon the Lord”* does not mean that we remain in motionless silence until God has unmistakably spoken. He probably already has, and He is waiting for us to take the next step so He can reveal more. If you are wondering about which graduate school to attend and if

you have prayed sufficiently and truly want God’s will, go ahead and pick one. You have a renewed mind, and it will either be the right one or it doesn’t matter which one you choose. If you wonder if the girl you have been dating is God’s choice and if your heart is right and you love her, go ahead and slip her the question unless you strongly sense God’s stop sign. God’s will is worked out

most often in the simplest ways. And if you get off track, assuming that you’d rather be *on* track, God knows how to get you back. Quit worrying that you might miss His “perfect” will, and affirm that He lets you walk in it.

Confusion is not the same as not knowing. For those who want to know the Father’s will, they will be given enough to act upon it. When we say, *“I’m confused,”* what we might, in fact, be saying is, *“I know too much, and I don’t like it.”* Joseph was not confused. He took what information came and considered making a decision based upon the evidence. But he was wrong. God made it His responsibility to give him understanding so that he could make a better decision. Don’t muffle the voice of God by saying that you are confused if you are not.

He was dealing with divine mystery, not with rational analysis. This causes us to bow before the God who crafts supernatural plans, then calls humans to participate.

God’s messages are often counter-intuitive. They don’t spring up in our minds as if created by interior logic. They sound more like God than like us. When Joseph heard the words from the angel, he probably didn’t say, *“Well, of course, I should have known that the Holy Spirit did this. How stupid of me.”* He was surprised—and relieved. He was filled with awe. He was dealing with divine mystery, not with rational analysis. This causes us to bow before the God who crafts supernatural plans, then calls humans to participate.

And yet those who learn to walk in the Spirit find that their intuition begins to track beautifully with the will of God, and their redeemed sixth sense proves accurate more often than not.

What God **says** agrees with what God **said**. God proves the present word with a past one. He links destiny with history, making His will concrete and verifiable, not ethereal or mystical. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is also the God of Teresa and Luther, Jessica and Uncle Herman. So Matthew adds his own personal commentary to the beautiful narrative: *“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him ‘Immanuel’—which means, ‘God with us’”* (Matt. 1:22,23). If we want evidence for the next step, we might find it in previous steps that others have taken. The God who is the same yesterday, today, and



forever remembers all His words, and this one does not eliminate the past one. Prophecy and fulfillment form an exquisite tapestry in the unfolding of the divine epic, and no matter where our particular journey is played out, it finds rhythm with the past and the future in the unbroken story of God's love. And Matthew masterfully links Joseph's present assignment with a seven hundred-year-old prophetic word.

On a trip to Finland, I was told of a couple on the leadership team who defied the will of God by sleeping together. Although the woman acknowledged her indiscretion, she still felt it was the will of God to divorce her husband and marry her new lover. Can't be—if what she thinks she heard does not agree with what He has already spoken! We may be caught in confusion, but don't think for a moment that God ever is. The streets down through history are marked with signs that travelers can easily follow—if they want to.

Hearing means obeying. To hear and not to obey is not to hear. Can God talk? Most agree that He can, but listening for His voice often remains a difficult challenge. Joseph, however, heard—and heeded. This righteous man sought to walk in a way that brought God glory. Now he needed some information in order to make another moral decision. "God, you must speak clearly and in a way that Joseph cannot misunderstand or misinterpret." God's job description has never changed. He has been speaking His will for multiplied centuries. He could have spoken audibly as He does on rare occasions. He could have sent a prophet. He could have sent an angel while Joseph was awake, as He has done on many occasions, just to name three workable options out of many more. He chose to come to Joseph in the night, and the message came through. And "when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife." Obedience followed the divine message.

We desperately need to hear from God—and desperate people do! Those more casual, more tuned into the spirit of the times, but who from time to time come to a

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Mathew 1:22,23

crossroads and panic because they don't know which way to go and decide to try God, will not discover His will. They will turn guidance into a technique and say, "Give me three sure-proof steps," while men like Joseph know that it flows out of a relationship, out of a heart of integrity that is determined to walk in a way that pleases God. Those demanding the recipe will compromise even the steps they receive, then expect God to come through anyway. They haven't spent the time to develop the relationship, and they do not know the God that they push to speak to them. God remains unconvinced and uncommitted to their folly. He does, however, feel an obligation to people like Joseph, for "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way" (Ps. 25:9). How kind God is!

The story could have read, "When Joseph woke up, he divorced Mary." He could have said, "It was only a dream." And he would have missed his

God-appointed destiny of shaping the tender life of the Son of Man. Obedience brings us into our destiny, even when we don't know it, while consistent disobedience robs us of the presence and purpose of God. Saying "yes" to His plan proves His goodness and brings us pleasure. And God's assignment for us fits us into the ongoing plan of the ages to bring salvation through His Son.

So Joseph took Mary home. The man whom Jesus would call "father" put himself in the center of God's will. And they lived happily ever after! Not exactly. The birth took place ninety miles from home in a stable, not an inn, and with shepherds as witnesses, not family and friends. God's plan is clear enough to take the next step, but not always easy. Joseph could have declared, "I'm not sure if that was the Lord speaking." But because he was submitted to God's will as best he knew it, he was in a good position to obey it. And when he stood before the Roman officials to take care of the business that created the unpleasant trek, he gave them his name, his wife's name, and the new arrival's name. He called him what the angel had directed: "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."



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