

## What are you still doing Here?

For those of us who have been with New Hope since our birth in summer of 2001, this is our 9<sup>th</sup> Christmas together as a church, as a family, as friends. How many of you have been with us since that first Christmas? Back then Larry had color in his hair, Deane had hair, and Randy was tall and slim. (nah)

I'm quite sure by now, especially those of you who've been around for at least awhile, that you have figured out that I am flawed. Pastor Frank is flawed. All the deacons, teachers and ministry leaders are flawed. Our entire church is flawed. We are a unique sea of humanity with diverse needs, interests, gifts, talents, ideas, experiences and flaws. It is no less than a marvelous, miraculous work of God that we are still a vibrant, healthy, purposeful, and functioning church.

So why are you still here? Testimonies. What's all this have to do with a Christmas message? I'm getting there.

**18** The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After His mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> So her husband Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly. **Matt 1:18-19 (HCSB)**

It was prophesied that Messiah, who's coming was spoken of throughout the Old Testament, would be born of a virgin.

**14** Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel. **Isaiah 7:14 (HCSB)**

So it is significant to note that Mary and Joseph had not “come together” sexually before their marriage. Luke’s gospel spells out even more clearly that not only had Mary and Joseph not come together but that she had in fact been a virgin throughout her life.

**26** In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. **Luke 1:26-27 (HCSB)**

The very normal, human young man- Joseph must have been devastated. The girl he loved, the girl he thought he knew and trusted was now carrying someone else’s child. Though terribly hurt, confused and disappointed, he chose not to publicly humiliate her. He would just quietly break off the engagement.

Joseph’s original response to the news that Mary was going to have a baby, and that it was not his, was quite reasonable. He logically assumed she had been unfaithful. He had been hurt. Things didn’t go his way. This wasn’t the way he had always dreamed it would be. He didn’t understand. He must have been a wreck. At that particular time, the only reasonable thing he could consider was to protect his own reputation, pride, and integrity. He would split, dump Mary, go find another girl. But he was a decent guy, so he chose not to make a big deal out of it. He would

just break it off and move to another town where no one knew him or Mary.

**20** But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.” **Matt 1:20-21 (HCSB)**

Why did God leave Joseph in the dark even for this short period of time? A few days, weeks, two or three months at the most. Why did God wait to speak to Joseph in dream after the child had already been conceived by the Holy Spirit rather than before the child’s conception as He did with Mary? Was it a test? Had He spoken but Joseph just didn’t get it?

We don’t know why God delayed convincing Joseph of the miraculous conception and divine identity of the child to be born. But we do know that Joseph stuck it out. He stayed with his bride to be though this was not going to be the wedding, honeymoon, and life he had always dreamed about.

**24** When Joseph got up from sleeping, he did as the Lord’s angel had commanded him. He married her <sup>25</sup> but did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son. And he named Him Jesus. **Matt 1:24-25 (HCSB)**

What amazing, sacrificial obedience! He did as the Lord’s angel had commanded him. He gave up much of his dreams and preconceived ideas of what this marriage to

Mary would and should be. His apparent love for God and his love for Mary exceeded his personal desires and plans.

Of course, Mary has been much more the center of study, discussion and attention over the last 20 centuries, and reasonably so. But you've got to hand it to Joseph. He stepped up, stuck it out, and hung in there. That's probably a lot more than most men would have done under those circumstances, but then that's must be why God chose Him. He knew his heart.

This is an interesting discussion about a detail of the Christmas story, but does it have any relevance or application for us today? I think so.

When you became a believer, began to grow as a follower of Christ and to develop a myriad of dreams, experiences, and expectations, I'm sure you have often, if not right now, been disappointed that something in your life or church didn't go or isn't going as you hoped, dreamed or expected it to go. You, like Joseph, have been faced, are faced right now, or will be faced, with whether to bail or stick it out. This may be a matter concerning your family or your church.

We know what the bible clearly says about remaining faithful to our marriage vows until death us do part, but what about church, your commitment to the local body of believers? Why should you, when you feel like Joseph-disappointed, hurt, confused, discouraged, or let down continue to support, participate, serve and love your church- New Hope Baptist Fellowship?

**Why stay?** If you perceive things to not be going well or the way you think they should go... What's the big deal about checking out some other churches?

### **1. Church is not about you**

Throughout my 33 years in the ministry, I have often heard, "I am not get anything out of Sunday School. I don't like the direction the church is heading. I'm not being fed. I don't like this. I don't like that." What is the problem with those statements? "I"

The church's primary function, possibly to the surprise of many, is to bring glory to God and be His kingdom building agency on earth. Many, if not most, people come to church to "get." And, if they don't "get" what they want, they either get very unhappy or they leave often leaving a wake behind. (boat illus.)

Joseph didn't get what he wanted or expected, but he unselfishly obeyed God and hung in there and because he obeyed God and hung in there, he had the privilege of being the earthly daddy of the creator of the universe, God incarnate, the Son of God.

**2. You**, much like a marriage covenant, **made a commitment** to God and your church and you should take that commitment very seriously.

**4** When you make a vow to God, don't delay fulfilling it, because He does not delight in fools. Fulfill what you vow. **Ecc1 5:4 (HCSB)**

Joseph, even before the Lord revealed the truth of Messiah to him, as far as we know, was never critical, harsh or

judgmental of Mary. He never bad-mouthed her in to his buddies nor did he try in any way to publicly disgrace her.

The **great wisdom** of Joseph's initially righteous, quiet and secret response is that he, especially at first, did not have all the complete, true information. He didn't know what God was up to. He didn't know the whole truth about what had happened to Mary, so he **wisely** didn't overreact, lose his cool, make a scene, or cause a riot.

What if Joseph had made a public example of Mary, ridiculing, shaming, accusing, and condemning, then found out she was to be the mother of Messiah? Would he have missed out on possibly the greatest privilege any man on earth could have, being Jesus' earthly dad? Would two of his and Mary's own sons have become followers of Christ and New Testament writers?

Point- Your commitment to your church and your family should be deeper and stronger than how you "feel" at a certain time.

**9** The heart is more deceitful than anything else and desperately sick—who can understand it?<sup>l</sup> **J**er 17:9 (HCSB)

You owe it to yourself, your spouse, children, and church family to sit down and work out perceived concerns and problems, not just bail and run.

### **3. God has great things in store**

That's a pretty bold claim. How do I know?

**9** But as it is written: What no eye has seen and no ear has heard, and what has never come into a man's heart, is

what God has prepared for those who love Him.<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 2:9 (HCSB)

What are the qualifications to receive this promise? Love Him.

I am quite sure of this, that though I'm quite sure that we are all flawed, this church is quite full of people who truly know and love God. Thus God has great things in store for us.

One of the advantages of having served and remained as pastor of New Hope for 8 ½ years is that I have come to know most of you quite well, and that's a good thing. It's a good thing because I know and testify that you love God, and because you love God, I know that He has prepared things for us that are beyond our wildest imaginations. Good things, amazing and miraculous things, life-changing things. We just have to seek the Lord and then wait on Him. And of course, as we wait on Him, we love, serve, give, minister and persevere.

Joseph gets my vote for the Bible heroes hall of fame because he:

Didn't lose his cool and bail when things weren't going his way

Stuck with Mary even though his life would never be what he had always dreamed and perceived that it should be.

He obeyed God even when things seemed to really be going crazy.

Why are you here? Why are you still here? Will you still be here tomorrow? Can your class count on you? Can

your church family count on you? Can the ministry you're involved in count on you? Can God count on you?