

“To Be My Lawfully Wedded Wife/Husband”: Mary and Joseph’s Submission to God’s Righteousness

LUKE 1:26-38; MATTHEW 1:18-25; 2:13-23

A common but dangerous teaching in today’s church is that God speaks to a wife through her husband by means of a “chain of command”: God-husband-wife-children. But the most famous couple of the Bible, Mary and Joseph, present a different model. Here the wife was the first to have the call of God on her life to a unique vocation of service for God. Joseph, in submission to God’s righteousness, had to submit himself to his wife’s vocation. But in due course, Mary herself had to trust what God was doing in Joseph’s life. So their mutual submission was an act of reverence to the Lord because they loved God more than they loved each other. This couple has much to teach us about being married God’s way and for God’s glory.

1. What do you think couples miss when they live together without being legally married?

READ LUKE 1:26-38.

2. What thoughts do you think Mary would have had upon hearing the angel's message?

Note: According to the custom of the day, the betrothal of Mary and Joseph was more binding than modern engagements. Their pledges to each other could be broken only by a divorce, though they would not join together sexually until the wedding feast a year or so later. According to the marriage design in Genesis 2, they were not yet married; their relationship could be seen as a presexual marriage.

3. What encouragements were given to Mary that helped her welcome the call of God even though it would complicate her future marriage to Joseph?
4. What could Joseph, and perhaps all men, learn from Mary's spiritual pilgrimage?

READ MATTHEW 1:18-25.

5. How was Joseph's original plan for coping with this unplanned pregnancy a sign of righteous behavior?

Note: According to Old Testament law, if a man discovered that his betrothed virgin had given herself sexually to another man, she could be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 22:13-29). The alternative to a court case leading to public punishment was a private divorce.

6. What difference would it make that both Mary and Joseph loved God more than they loved each other?

READ MATTHEW 2:13-23.

7. On what basis could Mary trust Joseph's experience of God's leading for their family?
8. In what ways were Joseph and Mary mutually submitting and not just complying with each other's demands or wishes?

How did their direct, individual submission to God affect their mutual submission?

9. Based on this passage, which do you think is more conducive to Christian maturity: mutual submission out of reverence for the Lord (see Ephesians 5:21) or a one-way “chain of command” (God-husband-wife-children)? Explain your answer.
10. How might the story of Mary and Joseph help couples make a godly decision when they are pregnant before their wedding day?
11. What have you learned as a couple about putting God’s righteousness and purposes first in your marriage?