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Introduction

Meet Tyrel and Joanna (picture on screen). When Tyrel was seven years old and living in Idaho, he packed an Operation Christmas Child shoe box, which is still a part of Samaritan's Purse outreach around the world. Seven-year old Tyrel put a picture of himself in the box and the box ended up in the hands of then eight-year-old Joana, who lived in the Philippines. Through information that was in the box, Joana came to be a Christian, and so did her father, who eventually became a pastor! Some years later, Joana wrote a letter to Tyrel to tell him how the Christmas shoe box impacted her life and that of her family. But, he never received it. Eleven years later, and still having Tyrel's picture, Joana tried to find him on Facebook. She did, and the two began to correspond. Tyrel saved up enough money to fly to the Philippines. They personally met—and started dating! Fourteen years later, the two were married in October this year! What did they want as wedding presents? Shoeboxes filled with gifts for children around the world. What a great story of a great young married couple. It's just like God to do the greatest of things in the least likely of ways.

Today, we look at the story of another young couple. It's not only a well-known story, but they are a well-known couple. Their story reads like this.

Matthew 1:18-25

18 "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 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." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). 24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

This story has been told through the ages and throughout the world. You and I have heard it so often that we could "tell it in our sleep;" so goes the saying. So, to help us see it with fresh eyes, we are going to look at their story as if reading four chapters comprising a short story.

Chapter 1: Ordinary Lives

The two young people in this story were very common, living ordinary lives. We know from Luke's account that Mary was a virgin, and she called herself a "servant" of God. Joseph was called a *tekton* (see Matthew 13:55), meaning a construction worker. In the first century, he would have been known as a carpenter, a worker of wood. Both of these young people were common, ordinary people. They were not

highly educated or wealthy. Not only were they ordinary, but they were doing what was ordinary for young people their age. They were getting married.

The story reads that "Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph" (v. 18). Marriages were arranged by parents then. Joseph's father would have negotiated with Mary's father for their children to marry. This happened when boys were in their mid to late teen years and girls were in their early to mid-teen years. When they agreed on the arrangement, the young boy and girl were formally engaged to be married, and this was called the *kidushin*. The bride-price would have been paid and that was called the *mohar*. This engagement was now legally binding. In the eyes of everyone, Joseph and Mary were husband and wife. They were married. Mary would then live in the home of her parents for the next year while Joseph prepared their home. Once finished, they would have a ceremony called the *huppah*, which was known as the wedding feast lasting seven days! At the beginning of the *huppah*, Joseph and his buddies would walk to Mary's home, where she was waiting with her bridesmaids and then there would be a wedding procession through the streets of Nazareth to their new home. During the week, Joseph and Mary would consummate their wedding physically.

Chapter 2: Oppressed Lives

Israel had been invaded by an enemy army. The entire nation was living under the tyranny of Roman rule. Roman centurions brutally treated the Israelites, flogging and crucifying them. History reveals that there were so many crucifixions that Rome had to ship wooden beams to Israel as they had a shortage of trees in many areas to use for crosses. The Jews lived in constant fear of the Romans. At any moment, children could be taken as slaves. Women could be brutally disrespected. Men could be taken captive and tortured. Moreover, the Roman rulers took what they wanted from the Israelites, primarily in the form of taxes. They stripped the land of its wealth by extorting vast sums of money from the people in the form of taxes. Every city, town and village had tax-collectors who forced the Israelites to hand over what little money they had on which to live. In Luke's version of the birth account of Jesus, we are told that Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem because a census was being taken (Luke 2:2-3). The census was not for the purpose of demographic research or to get a total head-count of the nation. It was for the purpose of collecting taxes. It was mandatory, and it did not matter that Mary was in her final days of pregnancy. She had no choice but to travel mile after mile to Bethlehem, taking great risk to her life and that of her unborn baby. These two ordinary people were living oppressed lives.

Chapter 3: Overwhelmed Lives

There are two birth accounts in the New Testament; one by Luke, the physician, and the other by Matthew, the tax collector. Dr. Luke provided the account through the eyes of Mary. Whereas, Matthew provided the account through the eyes of Joseph. They both have their own distinctive focus, yet there is a part of the story that appears in both. Both Mary and Joseph were afraid. The angel in both accounts told each one of them, "Do not be afraid." Fear gripped their lives!

Think with me. "Mary was found to be with child" (v. 18). The pregnancy test was positive! Joseph's young wife was pregnant and it was not with his child! For Joseph, this meant great shame and embarrassment. His dream had turned into a nightmare. His family and friends would urge him to divorce her, and quickly. Not only would this cost Joseph emotionally, but remember, it would cost him financially. He or his parents would have paid a bride-price to Mary's father for just a time like this. Once the marriage was ended with divorce, Mary would be her father's responsibility for the rest of her life. No man would want her or the baby. At worst, according to Old Testament Law, Mary could be stoned to death for adultery. Though it was not likely that she would be killed, she would certainly be shunned and rejected by society for years to come. They were living overwhelmed lives.

Chapter 4: Out-of-the Ordinary Lives

But, we all know that the story didn't end there. Something out-of-the-ordinary happened.

Joseph did something unheard of in that day. He did what was out-of-the-ordinary. He rose from his sleep and immediately obeyed God. He listened to the angel communicate God's message to him, and he acted on it. He believed that his wife was pregnant with the son of God through the Holy Spirit. Joseph took action that was against all human common sense in that day. His family and friends would have urged him to divorce Mary, and that was Joseph's original plan. Even then, he "did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly" (v. 19). He loved her! He did not want to hurt Mary, but he knew that he had to divorce her. That all changed once Joseph heard from God what had happened, and Joseph immediately acted on what God said. "He took Mary home as his wife" (v. 24). As a young husband, he "had no union with her until she gave birth to a son" (v. 25) Joseph surrendered his life to God.

Mary did something that was out-of-the-ordinary. She gave birth to the Son of God! Mary carried the Son of God in her womb. A miracle was happening in her life that as a girl in her early to mid-teen years would have been so difficult to understand. Mary surrendered her life to God. Though Joseph and Mary were ordinary people, they did what was out-of-the-ordinary for people in their day; they surrendered their lives completely to God.

God did what was out-of-the-ordinary. Jesus was born. God did the greatest of things in the least likely of ways. Jesus came. Joseph gave the boy the name Jesus. In Hebrew, the name is *Yeshua*, meaning "the Lord saves." The Old Testament form of His name was Joshua, which was a very popular name in the first century for boys. They were named after Joshua, who led God's people into the Promised Land. Jackson is one of the most popular names trending today for boys. Still, Jesus remains popular today. ***Christianity Today*** recently reported that the name "Jesus" is the 21st most-common password used for websites today (from SplashData.com). So, just as Joshua helped save the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and led them into the Promised Land, Jesus would "save His people" from being slaves to sin and lead them into heaven, the eternal Promised Land. The name Jesus appears more than 150 times in the book of Matthew, and every time it is used, His name declares that He came to save people from sin.

Now think with me. Jesus came into the ordinary lives of Joseph and Mary; people who were both oppressed and overwhelmed. When Joseph and Mary surrendered their lives to God and Jesus came, the Roman soldiers did not leave and their suffering did not end. Times would still be hard. But, they now had hope because God arrived in their present-day world. "Immanuel," meaning "God with us" is now reality. What Isaiah spoke of more than seven hundred years previously happened for Joseph and Mary. Their Messiah was born.

Segue

Their story sounds like your story and mine. We are **ordinary** people. Don't get me wrong. I'm all for us having a healthy esteem, but the operative word is "healthy," not over-the-top infatuation with ourselves. We are **ordinary** people like Joseph and Mary. It doesn't matter how many degrees we have, how many people we supervise, what size of department we manage, how many square feet are in our home, how many dollars are in our accounts. The sun doesn't rise and set on us. We are not the center of the universe. With sincere humility, we are **ordinary** folk.

As we move through our story to the next chapter, like Joseph and Mary, we lived **oppressed** lives. They lived under the misery and bondage of Rome, while we live under the misery and bondage of sin. Those who have read and studied the New Testament would agree that one of the strongest, most spiritual powerful Christians was the Apostle Paul, and even he said, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Romans 7:15). He went on in verse 24 to describe himself, saying, "What a wretched man I am!" He was under the misery and bondage of sin, and so do we.

What makes matters worse, an enemy is present in our present lives who makes the oppression all the more intense. Joseph and Mary lived with Roman soldiers occupying their land, and we live with the reality of Satan occupying our land. Yet, growing numbers of people—including Christians—deny his literal existence.

After Jesus resisted the attack of Satan in His life, the text reads that Satan "left Him until an opportune time" (see Luke 4:13). The enemy had every intention of attacking again and again and again. In Revelation 12:7-12, we read of war in heaven at the death and resurrection of Jesus. The context of these verses is the resurrection of Jesus for that is when the "salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ" occurred. When Satan failed at killing Jesus by some other means than crucifixion, when he failed at keeping Jesus from the cross and he failed at keeping Him in the grave, Satan's fate was sealed. The resurrection of Jesus is our spiritual D-Day. It was decided then who would win the eventual war between good and evil, and our V-Day is the second coming of Christ! Until that time, "woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury because he knows that his time is short." Our misery and struggle with sin is all the more intense because the enemy is present in the land of our lives—the here and now—making our **oppression** all the worse. We are his target. We are in his cross-hairs. Do not be naïve to that fact.

As we move through our story to the next chapter, like Joseph and Mary, our lives can become **overwhelmed** from time to time. Just as their world was coming apart at the seams, it appears the same is happening to ours. Violence continues in Ferguson, Missouri and in cities across America. Protests rage in Hong Kong. Bombings rip apart the bodies and lives of people in the Middle East on a weekly, if not daily basis. Citizens in Ukraine continue to be killed as Russia refuses to back off. The Muslim terrorist group Isis is determined to kill anyone and everyone who gets in their way, as they try to conquer the Middle East and beyond. As we listen to the news, life looks **overwhelming** on a national and international scale. But, the same is true personally in our lives. Just when we think it can't get any worse, it does. In rapid succession, the righteous God-follower, Job, lost his fortune, his family, his fitness and his fame. There was little left to his life and he declared, "What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me" (Job 3:25). Suddenly and without warning, the lives of Joseph and Mary became incredibly complicated. The same happens to us. Bad things do happen to good people. We are not immune to suffering. We are not guaranteed what we call "the good life." The problem is with us and how we define "good." God is always good, and His sense of good for us may look entirely different from our definition of good. Our lives can be **overwhelming** at times.

The best way in which your story and mine resembles that of the story of Joseph and Mary is that something **out-of-the-ordinary** has happened for us. Jesus has come! He is Immanuel, He is God with us and He alone can rescue us from the sin in our lives. He alone is the ultimate strength when we are overwhelmed.

Soldiers jump into LZs. They train for it, and it is full of risk when they have to do it. Some LZs are hot. An LZ is a landing zone, and when it is termed "hot," it is filled with enemy fire. There are times when

Marines or men of the Army Air Calvary are called up to deploy into a hot LZ. As the helicopter is flying closer to the LZ, the soldier's heart pounds with anxiety, sweat is beading down from the forehead, some puke not from the rotating blades of the helicopter, but from the turning of their stomachs knowing what awaits them the moment they jump to the ground. Battle. Instant fighting. Jesus jumped into a hot landing zone. "But the Son of God came to destroy the works of the Devil" (1 John 3:8). The moment Jesus jumped into ministry down here from up there, He went on the offensive. Jesus was not a pacifist. He did not walk around in a flowing white robe carrying a handful of flowers for sale. He was a fighter, a valiant warrior, who hit the ground fighting the enemy on our behalf. He had no intention of playing it safe, of being comfortable. Whatever it took—if even His life—He was ready to fight. He didn't have to be pushed or dropped down here. He deliberately jumped into a hot LZ. Moreover, Jesus conquered sin, death and the grave for us by dying on the cross. Jesus came, not to stay in a cradle, but to make His way to the cross. "For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus has rescued us from the misery and the bondage of our sin. We no longer need to live under its **oppression!**

As our Immanuel, Jesus is always with us and always working in our personal lives and circumstances – in this present moment – through the person of His Holy Spirit, God in us. So, no matter what may **overwhelm** us in life, Jesus promised to never leave us or forsake us.

The *New York Post* (9/26/14) ran a story about Joseph Brucato, a US Postal mail carrier who was recently arrested. His crime? Hoarding the mail. The Brooklyn mailman spent the last ten years NOT delivering the mail on his route. In September, this year, Brucato admitted to hiding over forty thousand pieces of mail, 2,500 pounds to be exact. A postal supervisor became suspicious that Brucato was up to something weird when he noticed his personal car was stuffed with undelivered letters. It took five postal workers five hours just to remove the massive stash from Brucato's apartment. If convicted, Brucato faces up to five years in prison. Thousands of people went without hearing whatever news was sealed in those envelopes. Let it never be said of us that we are hoarding the Good News of Jesus Christ. Jesus has come. He is Immanuel, God with us! Hope lives here!

Yet, there is one more important parallel between the story of Joseph and Mary and ours. They made an **out-of-the-ordinary** decision. Both of them surrendered to God. Have you and I? Jesus described what it looks like to be a Christian when He said, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). That's a life of surrender. With every day that we live, do we surrender more and more to the Lordship of Jesus Christ? Joseph and Mary did. Do we? Do we "play" with Jesus just like children play with boxes on Christmas morning? Many of us have sat stunned when our children or grandchildren have been more fascinated with the box than with the gift that came in that box. Right? It's no different for older "children" of God in that God has given to us the most indescribable gift in the person of His one and only Son, Jesus Christ. What do we do? We "play" around with Jesus. We're interested in Him when life is difficult and hard. We worship Him with others at church only when we find it convenient with our schedule. We can spell "Bible" but don't ask me what's in it or to actually read it. We pray when we want something. We give when we feel like it. And we think of ourselves as Christians, followers of Jesus. Does He, though? Have we actually made the decision to surrender our lives to Christ?

What of those who are here today and have yet to make a decision to surrender your lives to Christ? Don't put off this decision, friend. It's in the human DNA to wait, wait and then to wait some more in the making of a decision. Octavio and Adriana Martinez proposed to his wife and she said, "yes!" That was

sixty-seven years ago. They finally married when they were 82 years-old. Is it taking you years to decide to surrender to Christ? Wait no longer because in doing so, you are making a decision and the decision is, "No, Jesus. Not interested."

Does anyone remember when Coca-Cola launched New Coke in 1983? Bad decision. The late Steve Jobs was fired by Apple in 1985. It was a bad decision that drove Apple to near-bankruptcy. People can—and often do—make bad decisions, particularly when it comes to surrendering his or her life to Christ. The rich, young ruler decided to reject Jesus Christ, and the text reads that he walked away sad. A sadness prevailed in that young man's life. He knew that he made a bad decision. Don't do the same, please.

Harvard Business Review (2013, p. 104) reported that four out of ten shoppers will purchase a department store gift card and three out of ten shoppers purchase a restaurant gift card. Yet, many cards are often misplaced, partially used, or accidentally thrown away. Between 2005 and 2011, \$41 billion in gift cards went unused. God has given to you the most priceless gift and that being eternal life through His Son, Jesus Christ. "Redeem" that gift today by surrendering your life to Christ.

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