

HOW SHOULD WE PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS?

Running up to Christmas is a very busy and sometimes stressful time. There are many things to do, presents to buy and decorations to be put up. In spite of this, we all really love the season - in great part because of the lights that go up throughout the community. And there is no mistaking how much satisfaction and enjoyment we get by putting up those trinkets and ornaments on the tree. For most of us, this is our way of preparing for the Christmas season. But is this the right thing to do? How should we prepare for the Christmas? This got me thinking, so I went back to where it all started. How did Mary and Joseph prepare for their first Christmas morning? And is there something we can learn from that?

For example, they must have prepared for their trip to Bethlehem. There was all the planning; all the packing; and then, there was that long trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem (approximately 65 mile by foot). I noted that the distance was about as far as from here (Sandown Park) to Southampton. So Joseph and Mary would have had many preparations to make for that long trip. Yet, long before they set off, there was another kind of preparation that had been done. And in fact, it was because of this special preparation, which they had undertaken beforehand, that God ultimately chose them for the honour of being parents to the Christ child Jesus.

So how had they prepared? Matthew 1:19 tells us that, “... **Joseph her husband was a righteous man**” First, Joseph and Mary had prepared to be used by God because they were righteous people. But, what does that mean? What does it take to be “righteous”? 1 John 3:7 says, “**He who does what is right is righteous, just as He is righteous.**”

People become righteous because they strive to make the “right” decisions (in the same way God does). And they make such decisions because they know that some things please God and others don’t. People who are righteous make their resolutions; not because those decisions make them feel good, or because those decisions help them meet their goals and objectives. Rather, righteous people make righteous decisions because those decisions are the “right” even when it hurts! This was the heart of David (Psalm 15:4-5). A righteous man, or a righteous woman, is not driven by personal pleasure. They are driven by a desire to please God. This is the attitude we should embrace while preparing for Christmas. We must remember to always do what is right before God and not be selfish and inconsiderate. Note, your righteousness is most often reflected by how you treat others.

This concept of righteousness is illustrated in how Joseph treated Mary. Matthew 1:18-19 tells us that, ***“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”*** At this point Mary and Joseph are not technically married, they were only engaged. They aren’t living together, they are not sharing the same bed. But now she’s pregnant and Joseph knows he’s not the daddy. It doesn’t take a genius to realise that if he isn’t the daddy someone else must be. He doesn’t yet realise that the child within her is from the Holy Spirit. So as far as he’s concerned; she has betrayed him; she has publicly humiliated him; and she has insulted him before his neighbours. The angel has not yet appeared to him to explain the situation and so all he knows is that he’s not the father of this child, and he’s convinced Mary’s betrayed him.

Now he had every right (according to Jewish law) to drag her into the public square and have her stoned to death. Yet, he was “unwilling” to hurt her or even shame her publicly, so he seeks for a way to deal with this matter privately and quietly. Jewish law allowed Joseph to give her a bill of divorcement without a public trial. However, he had to give her the writ and pay the fine. So he proposed to do this privately (with only 2 or 3 witnesses), to avoid any scandal.

Joseph’s intention was to deal with Mary’s “sin” against him, but not to hurt her. He showed his righteousness in how he treated the woman he felt had scorned and humiliated him. Now, we all know that Mary was a virgin and that she hadn’t slept with Joseph. In fact, she hadn’t slept with anybody. Matthew 1:18 says, “**Before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.**” Even afterwards we’re told that Joseph “**...had no union with her until she gave birth to a son**” (Matthew 1:25). Mary and Joseph had kept themselves morally pure throughout their relationship. They were people of personal integrity. Joseph and Mary were truly special in the eyes of God. They sought to please Him by doing the right kind of things in their lives and so God rewarded them. He chose them for the honour of being the earthly parents of the Messiah. He chose them because they had prepared themselves for that very first Christmas day. They both always did what was right in the sight of God!

We often prepare for Christmas by stringing lights together. We do it outside our homes, inside our homes, inside our businesses, inside the church. And we put up these lights because of their beauty. They are very pleasing to the eye. The Bible tells us that we can prepare for Christmas by putting up a different kind of light. Jesus said, “**Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven**” (Matthew 5:16).

That's how Mary and Joseph made their lives pleasing to the eyes of God. The righteousness they pursued in their lives, was a thing of beauty to Him, and they prepared for that first Christmas by living lives that pleased Him. They pleased Him by how they determined to treat others - even others that may have hurt them or offended them. Can you see something? That's not how the rest of the world decorates their lives. Their lives are too often darkened by the way that they live and the choices they make. It's so easy when we are caught up in the "spirit" of Christmas to become more selfish than usual and act like those without the Light. After all, we probably feel that we deserve to enjoy ourselves during the festive season.

Mary and Joseph had only one intention, and that was to focus their lives on the birth of Jesus. In so doing, they kept their eyes on God and they made sure that everything they did was right in His eyes. Likewise, in preparation for Christmas Day we should focus our lives on the Light of the world (Jesus Christ) and make sure that everything we do is pleasing to God. Note, joy only comes when we make the right decisions. Otherwise we are merely fooling ourselves and living in the shadows. So let's come out into His glorious light this Christmas! Remember what Jesus said in John 8:12, ***"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."*** Let the festive lights remind us of the true Light that came into the world to give us the light of life! Therefore, we can only have one mission this Christmas, and that is, to let our light shine brightly.

Matthew 5:16, ***"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."*** If we join John 8:12 with this verse we get, ***"Because I am the light of the world, let your light of life shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your heavenly Father."***

Yes, let the “light of life”, the glorious light that is in you (Jesus Christ), shine before everyone you come into contact with this Christmas. Let them know that He is alive! Then, prepare yourself for a very special season of goodwill, joy and peace. Prepare yourself to give and receive gifts with an attitude of thanksgiving. Christmas is full of wonderful gifts. And not just the ones residing underneath the tree. We experience gifts of family and friends. Gifts of food and fellowship. In this regard, we can all say, “We are truly rich!” And yet, we can sometimes fly through this season, taking for granted all that we have been given. This worldly mentality can rob us of our joy, if we fail to recognise and appreciate that every good gift as coming straight from our heavenly Father (James 1:17). Therefore, if, when we receive a gift, we stop and allow our minds to “run back up the sunbeam to the Son,” if we adore the One from whom all gifts come, we will find our joy multiplied a hundred-fold this Christmas.

Mary and Joseph must have treasured the most precious gift ever given to any human being. They had the awesome pleasure and responsibility of caring for the Gift to mankind that would change lives for eternity. Let us thank our heavenly Father for loving us so much that He gave us His Son - the greatest love gift of all!