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Howard Schaap

Dordt College, howard.schaap@dordt.edu

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Joseph the Imperturbable

Abstract

"I would like to think that I would do as much, on faith and a dream, as Joseph did, 'because he was a righteous man.'"

Posting about Joseph's role in the Christmas story from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/joseph-the-imperturbable/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Joseph the Imperturbable

 inallthings.org/joseph-the-imperturbable/

December 5,
2016

Howard Schaap

In the few verses we have about him, Joseph comes off as imperturbable. Unflappable. Calm. Unable to be upset. But let's be real for a second: imperturbable is easier to spell than to achieve.

For example, how did the news first come to Joseph—the news that his betrothed, Mary, was already pregnant? It must have been the worst sort of news for a man who had finally achieved some stability and standing in the world, a man who had invested years to learn a craft and had finally decided to take on a wife in hope for the future. It must've first come to him as a rumor on the wind, one that wrinkled his brow as he worked, caused him to brood in the late afternoon, to pound and cut and plane a little more harshly until he worked it out in his mind: "It must be just a rumor...doesn't fit the character of the family...consider the source."

But the rumor persisted, the nightmare was true. Perhaps some representative of Mary's own family came to discuss the matter privately with Joseph. Imagine that he chases other customers out, closes the door. His heart sinks, but he's already moving on, already closing down his emotions in that age-old method of survival: resignation. He can find another girl to marry; better to find out now than later. The embarrassed envoy from Mary's family is amazed at his graciousness and the good word about Joseph the carpenter begins to spread.

Imperturbable.

The term Matthew actually applies is "righteous": "Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose [Mary] to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly" (1:19). "Righteous" might be taken to mean "one who wants to uphold the law," but the law was very much on Joseph's side here, clearly against Mary. "Righteousness" might have meant justice—Joseph could have made Mary and her family feel the wrath of the law. Think of the woman caught in adultery and dragged before Jesus.

But no, for Joseph, righteousness means to take care of the matter privately, to allow some dignity to the woman and her child, to square up one's shoulders to reality and move on.

Yet, God's not done with Joseph. The Lord has chosen both Mary and Joseph for a reason, and as this story plays out, we can see why.

With his face set toward a different, unknown future, Joseph lays down to sleep, and the dream that Joseph has next changes everything.

It's a dream of strange comfort. "Joseph, son of David," the dream begins, a salutation that affirms Joseph's character by putting his name in the same breath with the man after God's own heart. "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife," the instruction continues. Strange terms: "do not be afraid." No doubt, fear is the last thing that Joseph has been feeling in the days since the rumor turned nightmare. Then again, maybe there was fear for the dishonored Mary and the punishment her situation would bring down on her family; maybe Joseph had considered still marrying her, potentially bringing the dishonor down on his own head.

Or maybe "fear" is tied to what comes next—"because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." In other words, "Marry the woman you were planning to marry, but know that her child, what other people will think is your firstborn son, is really my son, is really the Son of God." To handle God's own son is certainly a fearful task.

The next morning, there seems to be no second-guessing on Joseph's part. He doesn't wonder if the stew he ate the previous night had turned bad. He doesn't run away to Nineveh to see if God might not choose Jacob the

candlestick-maker to marry Mary instead. No, Joseph the imperturbable does what the angel of the Lord commands. He takes the woman, pregnant with God's son, into the life he has been planning for them both. There is room in his heart for this mystery.

Of course, Joseph's dream and the Christ-child that it promised held no real comfort for Joseph himself. "He will save his people from their sins," the dream promises, but it's a future promise and tremendously broad, almost abstract. For Joseph, there is little comfort in store. He will take in a wife about whom others whisper. He will make a cross-country trek with this wife while she is large with child, walking while she rides a donkey, only to see her give birth to the child not only among strangers, but among animals in a stable—the only place that Joseph could find for her.

A different man might have thought, "Couldn't God make this a little easier on his son—and me?"

But not Joseph the imperturbable. His thoughts were probably closer to, "Oi, what God must think of how I've treated his son."

Years later, there is some comfort, of course. A small fortune is delivered to Joseph's doorstep by foreigners. "Strange and wondrous," thinks Joseph the imperturbable.

Before he can consider how to hide or invest this fortune, however, he once again must square his shoulders to reality, this time to flee from the genocidal Herod, to Egypt.

There are two more dreams Joseph has that Matthew notes in passing: one that gives the "all clear" to return to Israel, and another that says, "Just kidding, stay away from Herod's son Archelaus."

Joseph must have dreaded dreams, because for him they meant danger, flight, fear. No, I take that back. Joseph the imperturbable may have loved dreams: the idea that he could play a role in God's large plan, that he was entrusted with the Son of God who would save God's people from their sins—what could be more comforting than that?

And so at least four times within only a few years, Joseph wakes up, squares his shoulders to the world, and does what the Lord commands.

I would like to think that I would do as much, on faith and a dream, as Joseph did, "because he was a righteous man."

Joseph the imperturbable.