

LOVE WINS

Love in Action

There is a heresy that some Christians seem to believe. It is that the victorious Christian life is one where problems, if they happen, are swiftly overcome. It is that the victorious Christian life is always clear and easy to navigate. It is that the victorious Christian life is doubt free because faith is certain. It is that the victorious Christian life overcomes fear in a simple prayer and by claiming particular verses of scripture as always true. It is that the victorious Christian life has no room for doubt or fear or confusion or problems or being human.

My best guess is that, in truth, that kind of victorious Christian life is the Christian life that many of us, if not all of us, actually aspire to live. We aspire to live a life following God in which our problems simply vanish because of our faith. We aspire to live a life following God in which doubt vanishes like the morning breeze. We aspire to live a life following God in which fear does not stop us from doing nothing or going nowhere. And, my best guess is, that none of us really live like that and are feeling guilty as I speak, that we don't.

Friends, it is true that sometimes, to live a victorious Christian life we are able to overcome problems, address our doubt and conquer our fear. And I hope that is, and has been, true for you as you have chosen to follow God in the best way you know how. But, I wonder if the Bible might not present a different way of living a victorious Christian life, one that might be much closer to the truth of the kind of life lived out in lives like yours and mine. Which, friends, is good news, at least for me.

So, I'm wondering if the victorious Christian life might look like this.

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 fulfil 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 (Mathew 1 v 18-25)

Joseph is an ordinary young man, maybe as young as 14, living an ordinary life as best he knows how. He has plans and dreams just like any other young man, and he is going to be married to a young lady called Mary. But Joseph is about to be hurled into a very different world to the one he was hoping for and expecting.

If Joseph had any thoughts of living a victorious life following God, it would certainly not have looked like what was about to happen. To get married, have a family and do a good job as a carpenter, following the Jewish faith in which he had grown up – that’s a victorious life for Joseph. Joseph is an ordinary young man, living an ordinary life.

Friends, ordinary people, living ordinary lives, can live a victorious Christian life – whatever happens. Maybe you need to hear those words today: ordinary people, living ordinary lives can live a victorious Christian life. The truth is, God comes to ordinary people. Maybe, God wants, longs, to come to you.

God comes to Joseph through an angel, and the words of the angel will change everything for Joseph. If Joseph had a six-word life story, it might be this: Not quite what I was planning!

The words of the angel turned Joseph’s world upside down. Whatever Joseph thought his life would be like, it was, in a moment, very different. In fact, truth is, from the moment the angel spoke, Joseph was plunged into one huge mess.

Joseph, Mathew tells us, was pledged to be married to Mary. Here’s how that worked in the time of Mary and Joseph. It involved the Jewish custom called Kiddushin. Kiddushin meant a man and woman would get legally married but they had to wait a year before they could live together or sleep together. It’s

very different from our understanding of a couple who are engaged to be married. When you were pledged or betrothed, you were already legally married. If you wanted to break off the marriage you had to get a legal divorce – which is why Mathew describes Joseph as Mary’s husband and says Joseph was going to divorce her quietly!

So, why the wait? One reason was about purity – to make sure there was no baby already on the way – proving purity! Mary becoming pregnant in the year of betrothal is a game changer! For Joseph and Mary, the shame and guilt would have been almost unbearable. It is one huge mess!

We now look back on Joseph and Mary as two young people who followed God with all their heart. And they did. But they did it in the mess. In fact, truth is, we only know their story because it happened in the mess. And, it seems to me friends, that many of us, most of us, probably all of us, live in what we might describe in some area of our lives at least, as a mess. Life is, certainly not for most of us, quite what we were planning and yet, and yet, it is in the mess, most often, that we can live a life of following God.

No doubt as soon as Joseph realised that Mary was pregnant he would have been filled with fear. Everyone would find out that Mary was pregnant – it’s something you can’t hide in the end after all – and they’d all know Mary was impure.

It would have been humiliating for a young Jewish man trying to live his faith well. So, Joseph opts for a quiet divorce rather than a public disgrace or stoning for Mary because he’s a kind young man. But the angel tells Joseph that God is at work and that means Joseph is to live in the mess.

Joseph, in the mess, will most likely face ridicule and disbelief from those around him – who will believe what Joseph will tell them? The angel speaks to Joseph’s fear: Do not be afraid. Joseph and Mary’s reputation in the community had been shattered – yet the angel tells them not to be afraid, and somehow, Joseph and Mary are able to follow God in the mess. Perhaps we might even say they lived victoriously in the mess. After all – we have their story – the story of the birth of the greatest gift ever given.

Joseph, after everything he’d seen and heard, chose to believe the impossible and risk everything on it. Joseph took Mary home as his wife and the rest, as they say, is history.

Joseph, we know, was afraid, and probably had his doubts. But Joseph was also a young Jewish man, no doubt, steeped in the Jewish scriptures. When the angel spoke, something he said resonated deep within Joseph's heart. He heard something about God and who he is, that maybe, maybe, was enough for Joseph. Through the prophet Isaiah, God promised that the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son who will be given the name Jesus. Joseph knew that and now God was fulfilling his promise. Perhaps in that moment, in that dream, Joseph is able to recognise that God is at work and that this is the God who keeps his promises.

Way back with Isaiah, King Ahaz rejected God's help and God's promise, but God has a bigger and better story than one just for Ahaz and his people. The son born to the virgin will be called Immanuel, God with us, the saviour of his people. Joseph woke up and did what the angel had said, because he was willing to believe the impossible and risk everything on the God who keeps his promises.

That might just be victorious Christian living. But make no mistake, friends, it doesn't make life easy. For Joseph and Mary to accept the pregnancy out of wedlock could literally have been a death sentence for Mary under Jewish law. Joseph and Mary certainly had to die to dreams of a good name and perhaps their hopes and dreams of life as they had expected it to be.

Perhaps too, for us, following God means we have to die to dreams and expectations. But, in doing so, Joseph and Mary and we too, choose to live in God's bigger and better story.

Joseph would have chosen a quiet divorce, but the angel told him to take Mary home as his wife. Self-denial is part of victorious Christian living too, it seems. To follow God means to choose to live his way and sometimes to deny ourselves.

To take Mary home as his wife and live with all that would follow was certainly not convenient. The truth is, it probably messed up his relationships with his friends and family, maybe his job. And he would, of course, have to escape to another country for a time. But, friends, following God is rarely convenient, and often involves making life more complicated in some way or other. To serve others is not convenient; to serve in church is not mostly inconvenient. To live by the truth is not always convenient. Perhaps, to live a victorious Christian life means to embrace inconvenience. Joseph, it seems was willing to do exactly that.

Joseph was an ordinary young man from an ordinary Jewish family. Joseph became part of God's bigger and better story. Joseph did not live an idyllic life, one that turned out exactly as he had hoped or expected. Joseph did not live a life that was exactly as he planned. In fact, Joseph was plodding along just fine until God turned up. From then on Joseph found himself living in the mess, his life turned upside down. Yet, remarkably, this young man chose to believe the impossible and risk everything on it. To die to his dreams, deny what might have been and embrace inconvenience.

Maybe, maybe, life feels like that for us to sometimes, maybe right now. Maybe we want to follow God, to live well as best we know how, but its challenging. Maybe we can do what Joseph was able to do: risk everything on who God is.

"You are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." (Mathew 1 v 21) This is the God who did everything he could to win you back. This is the God whose son was born to die, so that he could welcome you back. This is the God who now waits for you to come to him. This is the God who wants to know you and be known by you. This is the God who loves you because he loves you because he loves you...So, he came as a tiny baby and was called Jesus.

"The virgin will conceive and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means God with us). (Mathew 1 v 23) This is the God who comes to us to be with us. This is the God who will never leave us or forsake us. This is the God who is as close as the air we breathe. This is the God who is to us like water is to a fish. This is the God who has your best interests at heart.

God came to Joseph, an ordinary young man. God still comes to ordinary people, people just like you and me. Joseph chose to fully embrace God's bigger and better story with all its challenges and uncertainties. He chose to immerse himself in God's great and magnificent love. He chose to risk it all for the God who is with us.

Maybe we would do well to do what Joseph did – maybe that would be to live a victorious Christian life.