

THINKING OF DIVORCE ...

by
James R. Hughes

Thank you for coming, thank you. But why did you come? I hope that it wasn't to rebuke me as so many others have ... Yes, the rumour you heard from my brother John, is true. I have been thinking of divorcing my wife ... Let me tell you, this has not been an easy time, the past five months ...

If you'll permit me, I'd like to take a few minutes to explain it all. I hope that you'll understand what the problem is which I've been facing. I hope that you'll be able to understand the mental turmoil I've had.

Yes, yes, I know what you're thinking: Such a sweet girl, what would she do if he divorced her? Her life would be ruined. Yes, I know, the Bible speaks against divorce ... But hear me out, let me explain the problem. Don't close your minds until you've at least listened. After I've explained the circumstances, I want you to tell me if you think I've made the right decision. I'll ask you to tell me whether I've acted rightly. I do want to do what is right ...

Oh! ... Well, thank you for explaining why you came, but please let me continue. Now ... where to begin? Well, I guess the best point is about five months ago ... That's when the problem first appeared.

My wife had been away for months and she returned from visiting her cousin. And when she came to me I found her to be pregnant ... PREGNANT! And she had been gone for months.

I knew that I wasn't the father of that child. I was speechless. I stood there looking at her for at least two minutes, but it seemed to me that a whole year passed. My mind went through every gyration imaginable. I was angry, I was jealous, I was hurt, I was curious, I was confused ... Time and space were tipped on end. I saw strange colours, heard frightening noises and began to feel sick. Finally, I staggered to a nearby chair. Finally, I said: "what's this?" And she said: "I don't know." "I don't know" -- is that all you can say? You're pregnant! How did this happen? Who did it to you? And again she said, quietly, "I don't know." I became really flushed. I was sweating like a river. I must have looked like a ripe tomato. And she just sat there ... almost a smile on her face. My temples ached from the pounding. My blood pressure must have gone off the scale. And she just sat there ...

How would you have felt? What would you have done? I couldn't take it any more. So I got up and left. I slammed the door so hard when I went out that one of the screws holding the plate popped out. I walked around the block, then down to the river. I threw stones into the river for half an hour.

Finally, I went back, hoping that it was just a bad dream. But, oh no! There she was even more pregnant than before, sitting in the same chair, with that ... almost ... silly smile.

But she said, in a voice that made me melt: "Joseph, Joseph please don't be angry. I really don't know what is going on ... I can't understand what is happening to me ... I don't know why ... Joseph, I love you ... believe me ..." I collapsed into the chair, and I said: "What happened?" Then she knew that I had cooled off enough to listen. She explained to me how an angel had appeared to her and had told her that she was going to be made pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

This was so incredible that I had trouble believing it ... but I wanted to believe her ... oh how I wanted to believe.

After she had told me the whole story, I left her in her father's house and went to my loft above the carpentry shop. I had trouble sleeping. I tossed and turned. I doubted, I questioned. I was hurting all over -- from head to toe and into soul.

It was late, I don't know exactly, maybe about 1:30. I don't know what state I was in. I don't know if I was asleep or awake ... I was dozing and very restless. In my sleep, in a dream ... or was it real? ... an angel appeared to me. I wasn't frightened; so it must have been a dream. If I'd been awake, I would probably have fainted. So, anyway, in my dream an angel appeared and he stood there looking like a phosphorus, super-white sheet. And he spoke. I remember the voice. It was like a big base drum booming inside my head. Each word banged off the inside of my forehead and bounced around until the last echo died away. And he 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. 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." [Matt 1.20,21 NIV]

Then he was gone. I remember nothing else. I must have slept deeply and long after that.

I finally awoke to hear this terrible pounding. I couldn't make sense of it at first, I was having so much trouble coming awake. Then it registered. Someone was pounding on the shop door downstairs; "Bang, bang, bang." Then I heard him call out: "Joseph ben Jacob, open up." I started out of bed, dragged my cape over my shoulders and almost fell down the ladder from the loft into the shop. By the time I landed on the shop floor, I was totally awake and my mind was clear. All of the events of the past few hours flooded back as I reached the door -- The return of Mary, her pregnancy, the talk we'd had, the dream of the angel. It was all there in one rush. But not a jumbled mess of confusion. It was all clear.

I unbolted the door, and there was Justis a friend of mine from the nearby Roman fort. I'd made a nice wooden box for him. It had secret drawers and panels. He really appreciated it, and since then we'd become friends. Yes, I know, it is strange that a Jew would be good friends with a Roman soldier. But I sensed that God was working in this. The times are changing. I don't know what is going on, but the events of history just seem to be heading toward something ... I can't place it ... can't describe it ... but I feel it in my stomach. Something is going on. Anyway, that's off the point ...

Justis came to tell me that in about five months there was to be a census, and everyone would have to register for the count. They'd just received the notice late last night at the fort. The scroll came bound with purple ribbon and the wax seal of Augustus.

There was a lot of excitement at the fort. Things had been so dull of late, but now the soldiers were going to be assigned the job of marshalling everyone during the census. Not exactly a battle ... but at least it was something to do.

Justis had come to ask me to make a fancy table and chair for the census. The commander of the fort wanted to sit at them as each person came to register. I agreed to make them according to his description. I'd get on it right away ... all we'd have to do was settle on the price. But Justis didn't seem too worried about that; so I let him go.

"A census" I thought ... "that's interesting. I was just a kid at the last one. can't remember much about it ... Wait a minute, a census! I'm not from Galilee. My ancestors weren't from the tribe of Naphtali. I am of the tribe of Judah!" I remember once my grandfather explained how his father (or was it his grandfather) had to move up here during the Maacabean rebellion. There was too much fighting around Jerusalem. Anyway, there I was, a descendant of Judah, living up there in Nazareth ... at the edge of civilization. I then realized that I couldn't register in Galilee. I'd have to do down to Judea to register.

Just then another thought came into my head: "That angel who spoke with me last night ... he said to me: "Joseph, son of David ..." ' He knew that I was from the line of David. Now that certainly wasn't a fact known around those parts. Few people knew that my family had come up from Judea, and few cared. Even fewer knew that we could trace our family tree back through Eliud my great grandfather and Akim who was famous during the wars, and right back to Zerubbabel who came back after the Captivity; and all the way back to king David.

I'd really never given it much thought, since who would have believed it anyway. But here I am, a carpenter living in Nazareth, having trouble making enough money to stay alive, and as far as I can tell I am the direct legal heir to David's throne. Wouldn't Herod laugh if I went into Jerusalem and pounded on the gate of the palace and said: "Open up in the name of King David."

But there it was ... the angel said: "Joseph, son of David." Funny how God works, eh? First the dream and then Justis came with the news of the census. It was when I thought about these words "Joseph, son of David", that I believed the angel and believed Mary.

Yes, there was truly something amazing going on. Anyway, the next five months went by fast. I built the table and chair for the commander, and you know, they didn't want to argue about the price! They just brought a bag of silver

worth about 10 thousand dollars. I almost fell over. But here again I saw the hand of God. I'd been wondering where I was going to get the money to be able to afford the trip down to Judea to register for the census. Then the money came from heaven -- well actually from the fort ... but you know what I mean: more than enough.

About a week ago I packed for the journey. I'd bought a good healthy donkey for Mary to ride on. I had to bring her along ... as she is also of the tribe of Judah. We're second cousins or something like that. Ask my mother; she's the one who keeps the family-tree straight. She can tell you all the inter-connections.

Anyway, it was Monday morning when we got ready to go. I was carrying special papers for my parents and for Mary's father. The soldiers had given us permission to leave them behind because of their age. I'm sure that this letter was only made possible because of my friendship with Justis.

Dad really is not well, but he got up early to see us off. All he did though was complain. I wish he'd stayed in bed. He complained about the government, the taxes, the high cost of living, the census, the weather ... He said: "Why do they need to count us all anyway? We're all still here; we can't go anywhere; who could afford to?"

After I'd given instructions to my little brother about feeding my dog at the shop, we headed out. What a journey that was! It was slow. Mary was huge, and we had to stop every hour or so to let her get off the donkey and walk around ... actually, "waddle around" would be more accurate.

Nothing eventful happened on our trip. We arrived in Jerusalem just before sunset on Friday, and barely had time to find lodging before the Sabbath began. We spent the Sabbath in Jerusalem. I have a first cousin there. After the meeting at the synagogue we looked him up and spent the afternoon at his place. This morning we got up early and got ready to come here to Bethlehem. The journey was hard. Mary was so uncomfortable. Just about sunset she started to go into labour and we were still about half a kilometer from the village.

When we arrived, the village seemed so deathly quiet. We enquired of a farmer coming in from his fields where we might find lodging. He directed us to that inn over there. But when we knocked on the door the innkeeper said that he had no room, he even had people getting ready to sleep on the floor in the dining area. I was very discouraged, but Mary from the midst of her labour pains said quietly: "Is there not some place warm where I can have my baby?" You've never seen such surprise in a face. He quickly ran into the inn and got his wife. She brought food and water and led us to this cave behind the inn. She had us settle down where the fresh hay was stored. I went to tend the donkey as quickly as I could and the innkeeper ran back for blankets and cloths. His wife helped Mary through the early part of her labour until the midwife arrived.

I went into shock. I had come to accept the fact that Mary was pregnant, but now I had to accept the fact that she was going to have the baby. Doubts flooded my mind. Had I done the right thing? Her labour went smoothly, and pretty soon there was a healthy little boy at her breast.

I was proud of Mary, and everyone was congratulating me as if I were the father. This wasn't the time to try to explain why I wasn't the baby's father. After things had settled down a bit, I sat beside Mary in the hay, and realized that we hadn't discussed a name for the child. I said: "Mary, have you thought about any names for the baby?" She looked at me in surprise, as if I was supposed to know his name, and said: "His name is Jesus." Almost as she said it, I remembered the words of the angel in my dream: "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."

This was no coincidence! I asked her again to explain to me what the angel had told her, and she repeated it. This time I really listened and began to understand. This baby was no ordinary child. He was to be called Jesus like the great deliverer of old, Joshua. This child would save the nation of Israel.

Then another thought came into my head. I remembered again that I was David's ancestor, and so was Mary. I looked at the child Jesus, and I realized that I was looking at the future king. By natural descent through Mary, he was descended from David; and as my son by inheritance, he was the heir to the throne of Israel. Here in Bethlehem, in the town of David, this very night the King of Israel was born.

I felt like running out into the streets and calling all the village to see the new born king. But I realized that no one would believe me. I realized that they'd all think I was crazy, and ignore me. I wonder, will it always be this way? Will Jesus always be ignored? Will his right to the throne of David be laughed at? Will people treat him as "the carpenter's son" or as the king of Israel? And what do you think as you see him now asleep in that manger? Do you expect this little boy, born here in poverty, to be your king?

I didn't run out into the street and announce that the king had been born. Instead, I just sat there in the hay. Everything was so quiet. Mary and the baby were sleeping. I could hear the chewing of the cows, and their gentle breath. In the silence I again thought of the words of the angel to me and to Mary. To me the angel said: "... what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." To Mary he said: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." [Luke 1.35 NIV]

I was thinking about these words. I was thinking how it was that Mary had become pregnant through the direct work of the Holy Spirit. Then I remembered that back in my days in school I'd read part of Isaiah, and I'd read these words: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." [Isa 7.14 NIV] It all came back to me. I remember the discussion in our class. One of the boys had translated the word *almah* into Aramaic as 'virgin'. But the old rabbi had said that here the translation couldn't mean virgin, "for after all virgins don't give birth to babies." We all laughed. The poor boy who'd made that translation was so embarrassed.

But here it is, the prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled this very night in a way no one could have ever expected. A virgin has in fact given birth to a son ... God's son. God is surely with us tonight.

As I was sitting there thinking on this matter, I heard you men knocking. At first I was too deep in thought to hear your knock. Even when I did, it was so timid; not at all what one would expect from shepherds.

After you'd told me what the angel said to you, I almost couldn't contain myself, because of my excitement and joy. The angel's words to you reconfirmed what I had just been thinking: this child is the son of God, for the angel said:

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. [Luke 2.10-12 NIV]

Men, there is your sign. There is the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. There is Jesus Christ the Lord, the king!

As you can see it is getting late ... I've told you my story, and the story of this child. I've told you why I was thinking about divorcing Mary. But I've also told you of the thoughts which I've been thinking about this child: I've told you how he is the heir to David's throne. I've told you how he is the one born of a virgin. I've told you how he is the fulfillment of prophecy. I've told you how he is the savior of God's people. What do you think? Do you think I am crazy? Do you think that this whole thing is a wild invention? See for yourself, there is the son of God. Do I do the right thing in keeping Mary as my wife and raising this baby Jesus as if he were my own son? What will he grow up to be?

But then, I'm keeping you. After all why did you come here? Was it not because you heard the heralds say: "Glory to god in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests." [Luke 2.14 NIV] I cannot explain all that has happened. I can't understand it. But I can tell you this: there is something amazing going on. God is truly working. Great events are happening. That a virgin should bear a son ...!

Well, quickly now, take one more look at the baby lying in the manger, and let us leave the mother and child in peace.