

Christmas and You: Joseph

If your youth group is like mine, they do not like it when I do all of the talking. They like to be a part of the conversation as well. This is important because it is often the things that they say on their own that end up being the things that they and their friends remember the most. So for this two part series I like to start off with some open-ended discussion questions that lead us into the topic for the evening.

1. How would you describe grace?
2. How have you experienced grace from other people?

Both of these questions have the potential to go deep very quickly. In fact, you might even find the Holy Spirit providing an opening for you to be surprised yourself and take the conversation in a completely different, and powerful direction. Go with it!

Have one of your students read Matthew 1:18-25 out loud (I like the NLT version here personally). This is a good way to involve a student that maybe doesn't answer a lot of questions out loud but still needs to participate.

Then you can provide some explanation of the passage. Due to the historical background necessary here, the explanation is a little longer than from part one. Make it as long or as short as you need to for your group. If your group is hungry for deeper Bible study, don't be afraid to throw into the conversation the importance of understanding the historical context of Bible stories to truly grasp their meaning. However, if your group is younger middle school age or mostly new to the faith you may want to make this a little shorter.

I know that a lot of you may have heard this story before. There are some things in this story that might sound really strange to us living in the 21st century. Sometimes that is because our culture is so different, and in the case of this story there are some supernatural things going on that we don't see everyday. Even though this story is really old, we believe that it is true because God inspired it and there is truth in it for us that really matters for our lives today.

So without sounding too much like one of your history teachers I want to tell you a little bit about what happened back when this story took place when a girl got pregnant without being married. Back in Mary and Joseph's day, instead of getting dating for a while and then getting engaged people had arranged marriages. So Mary and Joseph knew they were supposed to get married for a long time, probably since they were really young. Instead of getting engaged like we do today, when they got older they would get "betrothed" which is like a contract as serious as marriage. Then the groom would go prepare a home and get financially secured for marriage while the bride stayed away from the groom and other men and waited for around a year for the official marriage to take place. Sounds romantic doesn't it?

Now, here is the important part. When Mary told Joseph she was pregnant, he knew it wasn't his. He didn't know who the baby daddy was (and the explanation that it was "God" probably didn't help). This probably left Joseph feeling hurt, betrayed, and angry.

Back in Joseph's day the standard way to handle a situation like this was to have the girl who "cheated" be publicly humiliated, shamed in front of all of her friends and family, and possibly even killed for her "crime".

If Joseph had wanted to he could have let all of those things happened and no one would have blamed him. He could have done these things and still be considered a good follower of God's commandments by his friends and family.

We are told that Joseph is a righteous man, and we see that he truly was when his concern immediately becomes how to get Mary off the hook in the most gracious way possible. This was truly an unusual act of grace at the time, and you can see why God chooses Joseph to be such an important earthly influence on Jesus.

Jesus lived that same way in His earthly life, offering grace to people who in no way deserved it. In fact, you and I are recipients of that grace.

Without anyone talking out loud at this moment, I want you to think of someone at school or in your circle of friends who has hurt you or made you angry. Maybe you didn't even do anything wrong to deserve it.

Jesus calls us to give grace to people who do not deserve it. That is how people see that God is at work in your life. That is how people who don't know God see living examples of the grace that God wants to give THEM even though they don't deserve it.

At this point transition to your handout. Let the questions there guide your discussion. For the last two questions, put on some music in the background that is conducive to contemplation and prayer and encourage the students to take five minutes to write and pray. All of them may not be comfortable with this exercise based on where they are in their walks with God, and that is ok. Encourage them to use the time to pray or sit quietly and listen to what God might be telling them. There may or may not be a need for follow-up discussion, but when they are finished close in a prayer for the group to be empowered by the spirit to show grace to others as they go into Christmas break.