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—Jack W. Hayford, Chancellor,
The King's University



UNREASONABLE LOVE

DEAR FRIENDS, SINCE GOD
SO LOVED US, WE ALSO
OUGHT TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

1 JOHN 4:11

Introduction:

The word *love* is a commonly used word in our language. We love pizza, puppies, shopping, chocolate, chick flicks, our spouse or significant other, and our children. Hopefully, we don't mean the same thing every time we use the word. Love at its best is the height of human affection and loyalty. In New Testament Scripture, the word used to describe the divine love of God is *agape*—a selfless love which gives and sacrifices expecting nothing in return, a love that has the best interest of the recipient at heart, an unconditional love—a love you might describe as “unreasonable love.”

The Apostle John in one of the most intimate writings in Scripture uses tender terminology such as “dear children” and “dear friends” as if he is writing a family letter from the heavenly Father to His “little children.” He essentially looks at the evidence and gives clear proof of the incarnation of the Son of God—Jesus Christ. Based upon this demonstrative, extravagant, unreasonable fact, he challenges us to love one another with these words:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:7–11)

When you stop to think about it, the Advent narrative (Matthew 1:18–25) is one of the most unreasonable stories in all of Scripture. Miriam Webster defines “unreasonable” as “not governed by or acting according to reason... absurd . . . exceeding the bounds of reason or moderation.” How absurd that God would send His Son to be our Savior—One begotten not made, One who shares the nature of the Father—God manifested in human flesh! As Paul reminds us, “For in Christ all the fullness of deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9).



Click here to download the dramatic monologue of *The Christmas Dance*, as performed by author Kay Horner.

Colossians 3:16 Moment:

“Let the Word of Christ dwell deeply in you . . .” (Col. 3:16).

Pastor/Teacher: Reflect on the apostle John’s admonition that “we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11) and share about a time when another Jesus-follower startled you with love.

I remember when (name) _____ surprised me with love by _____

Have you also considered how unreasonable that God would ask a young, virgin handmaiden, engaged to be married to a righteous man, to conceive an unplanned pregnancy and endure the shame and risk that would involve? How ridiculous that Joseph would be requested to follow through with his wedding plans and then have no union or marital relations with Mary until the birth of Jesus had occurred! Unreasonable! Could it be possible that God is challenging us to move beyond mere human reasoning and respond in unreasonable ways to His absurd and extravagant love?

Have you noticed we somehow tend to divorce or separate ourselves from these accounts in God’s Word? All this occurred more than 2,000 years ago to some characters in Scripture. It is an interesting story about someone else. Nothing like that would ever happen today. No, we will never have another virgin birth of a Savior. Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the One and only begotten of the Father. Yet, experiencing unbelievable encounters with God that move us into deeper levels of His unreasonable love than we’ve ever known before can still be reality.

In reality, as we reflect on this New Testament story, where are we in this story? What could be asked of us as recipients of God’s unreasonable love poured out in salvation history? Let’s explore Matthew’s account of the birth narrative and how to fulfill our role in God’s “Unreasonable Love” story when we:

- Face an *Astounding Discovery*
- Are confronted with an *Amazing Declaration*
- Must make an *Absurd Decision*.

I. Astounding Discovery

To understand how shocking the discovery of Mary’s pregnancy would have been for Joseph, we need to be aware of some cultural aspects of the story. The ancient Hebrew engagement period or betrothal was as binding as a marriage. A couple would usually wait about a year before they actually consummated the marriage. This was to be a time to demonstrate their commitment to purity and a violation of this period would require a divorce to end the engagement. You can only imagine the extreme embarrassment this breach of promise would have been to the couple as well as their respective families.

Abortion was an option even in this era because historians have learned that ancient cultic practices involved the chemical inducement of miscarriage or still births followed by the sacrifice of the unborn—hopefully not a consideration of upstanding Hebrew families. However, Joseph had three choices available to him as a righteous man:

1. He could publicly disgrace Mary because of what he perceives to be impurity. Under the Law according to Deuteronomy 22:13–21, this could lead to her death by stoning for the disgrace of being promiscuous while still in her father’s house.
2. He could give her a bill of divorcement and quietly walk away, leaving her to raise the child in humiliation and poverty. This would have been permissible according to Deuteronomy 24:1 and the best action to keep from shaming her by privately dealing with the matter.

“Behold, children are gifts from the Lord” (Psalms 127:3).

Today we also continue to face choices from unexpected pregnancies and the challenges of child well-being.



Care Net's mission is to provide compassion, hope, and help to women and men facing pregnancy decisions. Through our network of affiliated centers and our real-time Pregnancy Decision Coaching call center, we present women and men with realistic alternatives to abortion so that they choose life for their unborn children and abundant life for their families. Learn more at: care-net.org



The Christian Alliance for Orphans unites more than 140 respected Christian organizations and a national network of churches to inspire and equip Christians to reflect God's heart in caring for orphans in adoption, foster care and global orphan care initiatives. We seek to help grow communities in the local church known for "defending the cause of the fatherless" (Isaiah 1:17). Find out more at: christianalliancefororphans.org



P-8 Taking courageous initiative as a peacemaker, reconciling relationships along life's journey

3. He could marry her and raise the child as his own, but this option would rarely have been chosen by a Jewish man. Yet, Matthew 1:19 foreshadows his decision by revealing to the reader Joseph's character as a righteous man. No doubt, the fact that he walked by faith in the Lord prior to these events reveals his heart and what would come to the surface in times of trouble. How we respond toward God in a time of crisis reveals the depth of our character and commitment to Him.

If we could imagine ourselves in this story as the character Joseph or even the extended families, what would be revealed about us? How do we respond when we have been humiliated and hurt? Do we retaliate in anger or respond with compassion? What would be the indicators of our spiritual walk? Would we become a visible demonstration of God's unreasonable love to the world—even toward those who hated Him? Paul described this absurd love that goes beyond human reasoning in this way:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:6–8).

Absurd love! Unreasonable sacrifice! That, my friends, is truly an astounding discovery. "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11 NIV).

Our love of others is often clearly demonstrated through our forgiveness and confession, as seen in the life of Joseph.

Experience Scripture

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:3–32).

The power to forgive others in many ways comes from our being a grateful steward of how we have first been forgiven.

Forgiveness is an issue of stewardship. We choose to share with others the unmerited gift of God's forgiveness as we have received it from Him. In reality, the forgiveness we share is not really ours; it is his. Will you share with your family, friends, and others some of the forgiveness God has shared with you? It may help to briefly journal below your gratitude.

Thank you, Father, for forgiving me and prompting me to forgive others. I especially am grateful for _____ and I sense it is important for me to demonstrate my forgiveness to _____

II. Amazing Declaration

How does Joseph respond to his astounding discovery? Did God leave him in the middle of his dilemma? A wonderful part of Matthew's narrative the other Gospel accounts omit is the amazing declaration Joseph was given by an angel of the Lord in a dream:

“But after he had considered this [astounding discovery], 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. 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” (Matthew 1:20–21).

At times, God will allow us to exhaust all human reasoning before giving us providential insight into the situation we are facing. One definition of the Greek word for “considered” in verse 20 is “revolve in the mind.” Do you ever feel your mind is racing or your thoughts running in circles when facing a difficult dilemma or decision? You play and replay the scenario over and over again. Although we are not given a time frame, we can imagine Joseph experienced a few sleepless nights deliberating about what he was going to do with this young pregnant fiancé.

This compassionate man, chosen by God to be the earthly, stand-in father of Jesus, “considered” divorcing Mary privately. Eventually, the angel of the Lord appears to help with the process. The only problem is this messenger of the Lord gives Joseph a very unreasonable explanation. In fact, the world still grapples with this message of a virgin birth.

Joseph is told that Mary will have a son, conceived in her from the Holy Spirit. This Immaculate Conception is to be named Jesus. The angelic messenger also gives the amazing revelation that Jesus will be the Savior of the Jews. Essentially, Joseph is made aware this child is no ordinary baby. He is in fact the Son of God. His name confirms this because it means “Jehovah is Salvation.” Of course, Joseph doesn’t know all the future life story of this miracle child Mary carries in her womb. He is only looking through a glass darkly, but he knows enough to be sure the child is a divine provision for the sins of the world.

However, God sees the entire picture. To Him, there are no surprises! He knows the end from the beginning. He never challenges us to live unreasonably without accompanying us on the adventure. When Joshua was challenged with an illogical task, he was assured: “Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid of them! The LORD your God will go ahead of you. He will neither fail you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6). The wise writer of Proverbs reminds us, “Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe” (29:25).

Where are we in the story? Are we at a point where we feel our agendas have been vastly altered? Maybe our dreams have been shattered? The events of life are confusing and puzzling? We’ve seen God act in response to our faith in the past. We know He has the potential to do it in the future, but His love seems a bit obscured by the limited perspective we have in the present. We may feel as though we’re living the role of a Joseph or a Mary, and long for some divine revelation—an angelic messenger with a divine declaration! Could it be we need a reminder that God has given us the Holy Spirit as His revelatory agent in our lives? Paul writing to the Corinthians about the revelatory power of the Holy Spirit said:

“The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us” (1 Corinthians 2:11–12).

Colossians 3:16 Moment:

“Let the Word of Christ dwell deeply in you . . .” (Col. 3:16).

Pastor/Teacher: Recall a time when you:

- Reached a dead end
- Experienced shattered dreams
- Were not sure which way to go

BUT

His Spirit brought direction and hope.

“Now we have received . . . the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God” (1 Corinthians 2:12).

For what may seem unreasonable to the world, God has given us His Word and the Holy Spirit to help bring understanding and insight. Joseph was allowed to see that his hurt, his anger, and his confusion were part of bringing about the greatest miracle the world has ever known: God clothing Himself in human flesh and entering the world to die for our sins. Joseph's perspective was changed to see the bigger picture. Consequently, he made what seemed to his world an absurd decision.

The Father still longs to make Himself known to his followers.



L-2 Listening to and hearing God
for direction and discernment

Engage Fellowship

Proverbs 3:32 reveals that the Lord “takes the upright into His confidence.” Can you remember a time when you have sensed that the Lord has, in a sense, taken you into His confidence? It may have been while reading the Scriptures, praying, talking with another believer, singing praise, or even possibly listening quietly to His Spirit. Can you remember a moment when you have experienced His revelation?

I remember having a personal encounter with God when _____

- *He drew me close to Him by...*
- *He gave me specific direction about...*
- *He provided a warning about...*
- *He revealed Himself as ...*
- *He confronted me concerning...*
- *He affirmed me concerning...*
- *He reassured me concerning...*

Now pause to share this with one or two others and then prayerfully celebrate together that God longs to reveal Himself to you.

III. Absurd Decision

As soon as Joseph's understanding is enlightened, he responds in faith, is empowered by a supernatural love, and takes Mary into his home and his heart as his wife. He still doesn't know what the final result will be, but he knows that God is working and that is enough for this just man. Matthew inserts a commentary for his Jewish audience, assuming they would be familiar with Isaiah's prophecies of the Messiah:

“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’—which means, ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:22–23).

What an amazing privilege this would be for a Jewish man and woman who have heard of the God of Moses and Abraham, the frightening Lord, who appeared in fire and smoke on the top of Mount Sinai. How unreasonable that He would actually come and dwell among us. How bizarre that He was asking a poor, humble carpenter and young handmaiden to join Him in an important, heavenly mission. Joseph respects God's plan, and instead of demanding what was lawfully his as Mary's husband, he willingly lays aside his privileges so that God's plan might be accomplished.

Regardless of the call God places on our lives, we will encounter times when the world, the flesh, and Satan try to make us ashamed and fearful. Obedience will require great humility and keen spiritual insight, but oh the joy of submitting to God's design and plan for our lives—regardless of how unreasonable it might seem (e.g., church missionaries serving in challenging circumstances).

Conclusions:

We look into the mirror of God's Word much like a bird will look at its reflection in a window, pecks, and flutters its wings but doesn't know that the reflection is him. Is it possible that we can do the same thing with the account of Jesus' miraculous conception and birth? This is just an interesting tale about someone else. We may be confronted with devastating news, but we don't really believe that an angel would ever visit us in the middle of it, much less ask anything unreasonable of us. There's no way the Holy Spirit could ever overshadow us and conceive a miracle in our lives. The story might talk about Immanuel, God with them, but is He really present with us or revealed in and through us?

- If you have never received the Lord as Savior or there is an area of your life where peace has escaped you? If you question how anyone can be at peace in a world of chaos, you are invited to allow the unimaginable peace and unreasonable love of God to embrace, fill, and empower you.
- As you review your life, I encourage you to ask yourself, "What have I done for God that seemed totally unreasonable to my world?" God may be calling you to a new faith walk with Him. He may be challenging you to a new level of ministry and outreach. If He is, you can be assured that what lies beyond the unreasonable is the supernatural. A step of faith and obedience will undoubtedly be accompanied by a new level of anointing and love.



L-10 Practicing the presence of the Lord, yielding to the Spirit's work of Christ-likeness

Encounter Jesus

Just as Joseph and Mary yielded to the Lord even before knowing all that would be involved, so also we are called to yield.

"If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself" (John 7:17).

Let us meditate before the Lord upon the following question: Consider for a moment revelatory love: yielding to God's revelation. Are you committed to yielding this way?

Take a moment to pray a prayer of yielding to the Father—to give expression to your heart's commitment to yield to whatever the Father asks of you, even when you do not really understand what He is asking or what He is doing. Consider your life circumstances at present. Think about your relationships, critical decisions to be made, unanswered questions, pain and struggles, and your own view of God. With these in mind, compose your own prayer of commitment to yield, and then offer it to God. Use the examples below for help:

My Father, before I hear your voice concerning...

- My calling as...
- A husband/wife to...
- A parent to...
- A friend/co-worker to...
- A mentor to...
- The decision regarding...
- Family
- Work
- Friends
- How I should handle...
- Conflict
- Helping someone...
- Life
- How I should trust You with...
- My health or the health of someone I care about
- Future...etc.

...I yield to You all that I am, and all that the future holds. By faith I commit to live out all that You reveal. I ask for Christ to be formed in me as I yield to You, Lord, and that Your love would grow in me so that it would spill out in this world. I commit to risk for You, Lord, and ask that You would affirm me with significance in this step of faith. Speak, Lord, for Your child listens now...

Amen.

