

The Dreams of Saint Joseph: The Other Side of the Annunciation

Why Two Stories?

When we read the infancy narratives in the Gospels, we notice something striking: Matthew and Luke tell the story from completely different perspectives. Luke gives us Mary's experience—the angel Gabriel appearing to her in Nazareth, her dialogue with the angel, her visit to Elizabeth, her Magnificat. Matthew gives us Joseph's experience—no angelic visitation while awake, but four dreams that guide him through the most bewildering period of his life.

Why the difference? The early Christians preserved multiple traditions about Jesus's birth, each carrying its own theological emphasis. Luke, writing for a Gentile audience, emphasizes Mary's faith, the role of the Holy Spirit, and God's care for the poor and lowly. Matthew, writing for a Jewish audience, emphasizes Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and presents Joseph as a new patriarch—recalling the earlier Joseph, the dreamer of Genesis, who also went down to Egypt and saved his family.

These aren't contradictory accounts but complementary ones. Together they give us a fuller picture: Mary's conscious, verbal "yes" to God, and Joseph's obedient response received in the vulnerability of sleep. Both were necessary. Both said yes. The Annunciation needed Joseph's dreams to be complete.

We might say that the Annunciation to Mary is a message to all of us—men and women alike—about faith, openness to God, and the courage to say yes to the impossible. But the dreams of Joseph speak in a particular way to the heart of men as husbands and fathers. They show us what it means to receive a vocation we did not choose, to protect those entrusted to our care, to lead by serving, and to remain faithful when the path forward is unclear.

What Matthew Tells Us That Luke Does Not

From Matthew alone we learn:

- Joseph's inner struggle when he discovered Mary was pregnant, and his decision to divorce her quietly rather than expose her to public disgrace
- The angel's explanation that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit
- The name "Jesus" and its meaning: "he will save his people from their sins"
- The visit of the Magi and Herod's murderous plot
- The flight into Egypt and the family's time as refugees
- The return to Israel and the settlement in Nazareth

Luke tells us nothing of Joseph's turmoil, nothing of the Magi, nothing of Herod's threat, nothing of Egypt. Without Matthew, we would not know how Joseph processed this upheaval or the dangers the Holy Family faced in those early years.

The Four Dreams

First Dream (Matthew 1:18–25): The Call to Trust

Joseph has discovered that his betrothed is pregnant, and he knows the child is not his. He is described as a "righteous man"—meaning he takes the Law seriously—yet he does not want to disgrace Mary publicly. He decides on a quiet divorce. Then, in a dream, an angel speaks:

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20–21)

Matthew adds that this fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" (Matthew 1:23; cf. Isaiah 7:14)

Notice what the angel does not do: he does not explain everything. He does not tell Joseph how this happened or what the future holds. He simply says: do not be afraid, take her as your wife, and name the child. Joseph wakes and obeys:

"When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife." (Matthew 1:24)

No recorded words, no questions, no bargaining. Just obedience.

This first dream speaks to every man who has faced an unexpected turn in his vocation—an unplanned pregnancy, a family crisis, a situation that was not part of the plan. Joseph shows us that faithfulness does not require understanding. It requires trust.

Second Dream (Matthew 2:13–15): The Call to Protect

After the Magi depart, Joseph receives a second dream:

"Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." (Matthew 2:13)

Again, Joseph rises immediately—Matthew says "during the night"—and takes his family into exile:

"Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod." (Matthew 2:14–15)

He becomes a refugee to protect his wife and the child entrusted to him. Matthew sees in this another fulfillment of prophecy: "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (Matthew 2:15; cf. Hosea 11:1).

This dream speaks to the husband and father as protector. Joseph does not fight Herod; he flees. Sometimes protecting your family means swallowing your pride, leaving behind everything familiar, and starting over in a foreign land. True strength knows when to stand and when to go.

Third Dream (Matthew 2:19–21): The Call to Return

After Herod's death, the angel appears again:

"Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." (Matthew 2:20)

Joseph obeys and begins the journey home:

"Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel." (Matthew 2:21)

This dream reminds us that exile is not permanent. There comes a time to return, to rebuild, to reestablish roots. Joseph models the patience to wait for God's timing and the readiness to move when the word comes.

Fourth Dream (Matthew 2:22–23): The Call to Discern

Upon reaching Israel, Joseph learns that Herod's son Archelaus now rules Judea:

"But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth." (Matthew 2:22–23)

This final dream shows Joseph not simply reacting but actively discerning, weighing circumstances and remaining open to God's guidance. He uses his reason—Archelaus is dangerous—and remains attentive to divine direction. The two work together.

For husbands and fathers, this dream teaches that leadership in the family is not autocratic decision-making but prayerful discernment. We gather information, assess risks, and remain open to God's correction. We do not act alone.

Video -

What the Dreams Say to Men Today

Joseph's dreams offer a pattern for Christian manhood that cuts against much of what our culture tells men to be.

Receptivity is strength. Joseph receives God's word in dreams—in sleep, when he is not in control, when his defenses are down. He does not demand a waking vision or an explanation. He trusts what he receives in vulnerability. For men trained to be self-reliant and always in command, this is countercultural. Sometimes the most important guidance comes when we stop striving and simply rest in God's presence.

Obedience requires no audience. Joseph never speaks a single word in the Gospels. He acts. He obeys. He protects. He provides. He does not need recognition or applause. His righteousness is hidden, interior, expressed in faithful action rather than public performance. In an age of self-promotion, Joseph models a masculinity that does not need to be seen.

Protection is sacrificial. Twice Joseph uproots his family—once to flee into Egypt as refugees, once to resettle in Galilee rather than Judea. He abandons his plans, his homeland, his livelihood to keep his family safe. True masculine strength is not domination but sacrifice. It asks: what must I give up so that those in my care can flourish?

Discernment is ongoing. The fourth dream shows that obedience to God is not a one-time decision. Joseph remains attentive. He reads the signs of the times—Archelaus is dangerous—and stays open to further guidance. Faithfulness is not a single heroic act but a lifetime of listening.

Fatherhood is more than biology. Joseph is not Jesus's biological father, yet he is truly his father. He names the child, which in Jewish culture means claiming him as son. He teaches him a trade, raises him in the faith, protects him with his life. Joseph shows us that fatherhood—whether biological, adoptive, or spiritual—is defined by presence, protection, and self-giving love.

Conclusion

The Annunciation is incomplete without Joseph's dreams. Mary's yes was spoken in the brightness of day to an angel she could see. Joseph's yes was whispered in the darkness of night to a voice heard only in sleep. Both were essential. Both models of faith are given to us.

Mary's fiat speaks to every Christian soul—the call to be open, to receive, to bear Christ into the world. But Joseph's dreams speak with particular force to men: to husbands navigating the unexpected turns of married life, to fathers carrying the weight of protection and provision, to all men who must lead without having all the answers.

Joseph shows us that God speaks to those who are willing to listen—even, perhaps especially, when we are asleep to our own agendas and awake only to his voice.