



***Theme: Christmas Wisdom***  
***"The Courage of Joseph"***

Christmas Eve Sermon preached by Jeff Huber, December 13-14, 2025

**Weekly Memory Verses:**

***<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. – Matthew 1:24***

**VIDEO                      Sermon Starter**

**SLIDE                      "The Courage of Joseph"**

Today we continue in this series of sermons we're doing on the wisdom we find in the Christmas story. We began 2 weeks ago by looking at the family of Jesus and then last weekend we focused on Mary. Today we turn our attention to Joseph whose story we hear most fully in the Gospel of Matthew, which is the same place in which we find the Magi. We are going to focus on the visit of the Magi on Christmas Eve this year but as I was thinking about Joseph and the three wise men, I remembered a cartoon that one of you sent me years ago. It depicts Mary and Joseph and the wise men with their gifts and one of them says to Joseph, "OK, Joseph, it's your turn. You can either take Mary's gift or open one from the pile."

**GRAPHIC                      Okay Joseph Cartoon**

I know it seems a bit silly, but the humor does remind us that this story is full of surprises when it comes to Joseph and his role. Very little in the story goes the way I'm sure Joseph had planned when it came to both his marriage and his first-born child. Both Matthew and Luke, who give us the details of the Christmas story, infer that Joseph is from Bethlehem. Since we're doing cartoons today, I thought it would be good for us to look at a map that might be helpful for kids as we think about the route that Mary and Joseph took from Nazareth to Bethlehem which also gives us our bearings on the country.

### **GRAPHIC Israel at Jesus Birth**

The Mediterranean Sea is on the left and the sea of Galilee is at the top of the map. You see the Dead Sea below and Nazareth is up by the sea of Galilee in the north and Bethlehem is below Jerusalem in the South. Most Jewish people would have taken a route around the mountains that avoided Samaria because it was seen as a place where the people were unclean. When he becomes an adult, Jesus will travel down the middle of the country, but most would have taken this route which would have taken between 9 and 10 days. Jesus is born in Bethlehem which is the hometown of Joseph and then the Holy Family will head to Egypt for a few years until they return when Jesus is a toddler to Nazareth where he will grow up.

So, Joseph is from Bethlehem which is also known as the city of David, and Joseph is of the lineage of King David. We often talk about Joseph as a carpenter and we sometimes assume he builds houses, which is a bit misleading. Houses, however, were not built out of wood in the 1st century in the area where Jesus lived. Most homes were built out of stone so most likely Joseph worked with wood in other ways. The word that's used for Carpenter in the Greek New Testament is Tektōn.

### **SLIDE Tektōn**

A Tektōn Could be a handyman or someone who is skilled at building doors or windows or furniture. We also know they built farm

implements. The truth is that we don't know exactly what kind of woodworking Joseph was involved in but we know he was someone who worked with his hands and was a tradesman. It can be assumed that Jesus probably learned that trade when he was growing up and I've always wondered if Jesus ever cut a board too short or made a mistake in his woodworking craft. We don't really know about that either or if he had the ability to fix a board that had been cut too short. I would often have kids discuss this as we were building homes on mission trips and it made for a lively conversation.

What we do know is that Joseph was engaged to Mary and it's helpful to understand what engagement was like in the 1st century. Marriages were most often arranged in those days in Judaism, and it typically happened shortly after what we might today call a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah, so the bride and the groom were often early teenagers around 13 or 14, and possibly 12. The groom's family would give gifts that would be substantial to the parents of the bride. That wealth would be saved by the bride's family in case something happens to the groom and he dies or he leaves his wife. This was called the “brides’ price.” In essence, the groom’s parents were purchasing a bride for their son. Dowry was the opposite, which is what was paid by a woman's family to the parents of the groom because that family would be losing a bread earner.

**SLIDE**                      ***Mohar = “Bride’s Price”***

This is still practiced in different parts of the world. I heard of one pastor who was traveling on a mission trip with his daughters in a nation in Africa and a gentleman came up and offered him 10 chickens for one of his girls. The pastor wasn't sure if the man was serious or not, so he began to bargain with him which did not make his daughters happy at all. The practice in that community as it was in the 1st century was to purchase a bride and be sure to provide for them if anything happened to the groom or the **groom chickened out**, pun intended.

**SLIDE                      *Mattan* = “Gift”**

The *Mattan* Was an expensive gift given to the bride by the groom. This was hers to keep if anything ever happened to the groom or he decided to leave, she would keep the gift. If there was a divorce, this would essentially be the alimony that was paid as part of the divorce settlement. After the gifts and the bride price were exchanged, a marriage covenant or contract would be signed by the groom.

**SLIDE                      *Ketubah* = “Marriage Contract”**

This marriage contract included a list of promises that the groom would make in terms of how he would provide for his wife and his family. It also would include an amount of money that the husband would have to pay if he ever left his wife.

**GRAPHIC    *Decorated Ketubah* from Livorno in 1698**

This ancient Hebrew document was often very artistic such as this one. Above the text, a panoramic view of the walled city of Jerusalem is surrounded by six small medallions illustrating verses from Psalm 128 traditionally sung at Italian weddings. Bordering the text are twenty-four elaborate vignettes. Twelve of these feature emblems, each of which signifies one of the twelve tribes of Israel; each of these emblems is, in turn, coupled with a corresponding zodiac sign. The remaining twelve scenes depict the four Aristotelian elements (Water, Earth, Wind and Fire), as well as the four seasons of the year and the four senses (Taste, Sight, Smell and Hearing.)

Many Jewish families will use these today although they now include promises from the bride to the groom as well as from the groom to the bride. In the time of Joseph, it was only the groom making these promises. This means that in the case of Mary and Joseph, the bride’s price has been paid by the groom's family, and the gift has been given by the groom to the bride. The marriage contract has been signed, which means they have a legally binding agreement.

## **GRAPHIC Israel at Jesus Birth**

Mary then finds out that she is pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. Coming back to this map, Mary is going to take this same route that she and Joseph would take several months later. She's going to go to the Hill Country of Judea which is right outside of Jerusalem. She will spend 3 months with her older cousin Elizabeth who is married to Zechariah who is a priest. They are an older couple who were never able to have children until Elizabeth became pregnant late in life. She also was having a miraculous birth, and her son would be John the Baptist, the second cousin of Jesus.

Notice on the map that Jerusalem is very close to Bethlehem and during those three months no doubt Mary begins to show. Joseph, being for Bethlehem, is not far from Elizabeth and they may have even known each other or been family friends who are the ones that arranged for the marriage. My guess is that Joseph found out about this pregnancy when he was visiting his family or when he went to see Mary outside of Jerusalem.

Luke tells us that Mary has a visit from the Angel Gabriel and so she must have shared that with Joseph and told him how exciting it was that she was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. What's clear in Matthew's version of the story as it's told through the eyes of Joseph is that he's not buying it. Here's what we read happens at this point in the story in Matthew one.

## **BIBLE**

**<sup>18</sup> This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.**

Let's be honest, who would have bought this crazy story? Even during the time of the 1st century people understood how babies were conceived and born. It wasn't rocket science. Virgin birth was not a common way for conception to happen, except for maybe in parts of the Roman world with the gods. There was nothing like this among the faith of the Jewish people and so it must have seemed outrageous to Joseph to hear this story and to believe it. Even with Elizabeth and Zechariah backing up Mary and telling him that the story is true, he can't believe the story and so he decides to dismiss Mary quietly.

One of the reasons I love this story and I believe the gospels are true is because this is very believable that Joseph would be one of the first people to have doubts. I often remind people who come to our Christmas Eve services that if you have doubts about the virgin birth you're not alone. Joseph didn't believe it and he was in the story. Joseph becomes known as one of the first Saints and yet he struggled with doubts, just like any of us do on a regular basis. People often tell me that they love Jesus and want to follow him, but they're not sure they can believe everything like these miracle stories in the Bible. Many people's doubts begin with this virgin birth, and I always remind them that they are in good company. The first person to doubt the virgin birth was the first one to hear about it after getting word directly from the source which is Mary, and then even having two other witnesses in Elizabeth and Zechariah.

## **SLIDE                      Doubts are key to faith**

This story reminds me in a profound way that it's OK to have doubts and it's good to ask questions. Doubts are key to faith that is meaningful. I often remind you that I want you to think and don't check your brain to the door when you come to church. If you struggle with something I say or something you read in the scriptures, that's good because it means you're thinking and you're developing your own faith which is what we need if we're going to get through especially challenging moments like when our world is turned upside down. Joseph's faith becomes his own

when he must wrestle with these doubts. This is why I remind you constantly that you can't have my faith or even the faith of Joseph or anyone else. Your faith comes by your willingness to ask difficult questions and to wrestle with doubt.

The truth is that some things are hard to believe and take more time and more life to figure out. I have heard some people say that we can't really become a Christian unless we believe in things like the virgin birth. What I would say is that the first documents that we have in our New Testament are not the gospels, but they are the letters of the apostle Paul that were written around 49 to 55 AD. None of those mention the virgin birth. My sense is that if this would be essential to believe if you want to be a follower of Jesus then Paul might have mentioned it. Paul does tell us that Jesus is God in the flesh, but he doesn't tell us any other details. Maybe he knew about it and maybe he didn't and maybe he thought Jesus was conceived in the ordinary way. We don't know the answer to that question.

Matthew and Luke are written in the late 70s so around 50 years after the birth of Jesus. John is written in the 90s so around 70 years after the birth of Jesus. Mark's gospel is the earliest and it was written in the late 60s so around 40 years after the birth of Jesus and it does not mention the virgin birth. Luke also is the author of the book of Acts where we find preaching in the early church and nowhere in that preaching do we find mention of the virgin birth. I want to be clear that I don't have any problem with the virgin birth and I believe in it but those first followers of Jesus that were coming to faith in Christ in the early church, as near as we can tell, we're not concerned with that doctrine in order to say "yes" to Jesus Christ as Lord and savior. It must have been possible for people to be Christians without knowing about the virgin birth or believing in it because it is not mentioned in those places in scripture or in much of the early church history documents.

As the church begins to gather more documents together, including the gospels of Matthew and Luke, this idea of the virgin birth became

more important and it was included in the early church creeds. It eventually becomes a part of the testimony of faith of what it means to follow Jesus. I don't actually find the virgin birth that hard to believe in because it's not even one of the greater miracles. I also understand why some people have doubts and they question it. I would say the first step is simply to trust in Jesus and then see where that takes you. Follow Jesus and then begin inviting the Holy Spirit to speak to you about these things like the virgin birth.

I think it's also important to remember that the virgin birth is not just a story about biology but it's more about what we call theology, or how we understand God. There is no other religious tradition that says that God cared enough about humanity to come and live among us. In the 1st century, people understood that the woman's womb was the garden in which a human being developed. The animating spirit it was believed came from the husband's seed. The understanding was that God began to knit the soul of each human in the seed of the man and the physical body is knit together by what is inside the woman.

**SLIDE                      Jesus was fully God and fully human.**

So when the earliest Christians began to think about this idea they understood that the body of Jesus was woven together by Mary. The soul or the animated spirit didn't come from Josephs but it came from God. God was involved in this physical reproduction of human flesh. God took up residence in the womb of Mary and the child that is born is both truly God and truly human. While God is the father of all of us, the creator of all living things, for Jesus God was a father in a different way. Jesus was the unique son of God unlike any other human.

In the 1st century, they didn't understand about genetic material or chromosomes that come from the man and the woman. Even when I think about it from a genetics perspective, if God created the universe out of nothing then what is it for God to provide the material of a baby in a womb. If God created DNA through the process of evolution in God's

intervention in our creative processes, what is it for God to provide half of the genetic information and write the software to join with Mary's genetic code and create a child.

## **SLIDE                      Faith is mystery**

One of the things that challenging for us in our western, scientific, enlightenment minds is to remember that faith is also a mystery in many ways. We know how to do artificial insemination, and we know how to clone animals. We now are developing artificial intelligence which some would argue is an oxymoron and is the reason we're doing an entire sermon series on that beginning in January. What I've discovered is that the more I have learned and think I know the less I understand and the more mystery there is in the world. Personally, I kind of like the idea that I can't know everything and that there is mystery when it comes to our faith and saying yes to Jesus and understanding the virgin birth.

What I find most helpful in the story of Joseph is that we learn from him and that it's OK to ask questions and to struggle with things that we don't understand, wanting more certainty. The reason that we know that Joseph didn't believe the story is because he decided to dismiss Mary quietly, meaning he wasn't a big believer.

What is also powerful about Joseph is that he could have been vengeful about the fact that his bride to be was pregnant with someone else's child. She has violated the marriage agreement according to Jewish law and he could have torn up the marriage contract and asked for the bride's price and the gift he had given her back. Mary would have been publicly shamed or worse for her perceived infidelity. The Hebrew Bible tells us in the book of Deuteronomy 22 what happens in this situation.

## **BIBLE**

**<sup>23</sup> “Suppose a man meets a young woman, a virgin who is engaged to be married, and he has sexual intercourse with her. If this happens within a town,<sup>24a</sup> you must take both of them to the gates of that town and stone them to death.**

It appears this penalty was not always enforced but it could have been applied to Mary. She would at least have been ostracized and faced ridicule. We read that Joseph instead decides to send her away quietly. Breaking off the engagement was the equivalent of divorce. But if he is going to do this quietly that means that he will take the blame for her pregnancy. It's going to appear as though he slept with her but wasn't pleased with her and so he discards her. This means that she will keep the bride's price and the gift and he will pay the alimony in the marriage contract. He will then be the one publicly shamed.

Why would Joseph do this when he is the one who's been hurt? He no doubt feels violated and cheated on. Why would he make this sacrificial decision? The only answer I can come up with is that he has come to love his bride to be and he wants to show her mercy and live out in many ways what we might call sacrificial love. The text tells us that he's a righteous man which means he's merciful and compassionate. I think about the divorces I have seen over the course of my life where someone has hurt someone else and then there's a desire for revenge or to get even. I understand it's our human nature to want to get even or payback hurt for hurt.

#### **SLIDE      Joseph shows courage and mercy through divorce**

Joseph gives us a picture of what it means to offer mercy instead of vengeance. I often have reminded couples who decide to go through divorce that if they have children, they will always be co-parents together. They will be a witness to their children during the divorce proceedings, and it may determine their relationships with them and any eventual grandchildren. I've always been grateful to my parents who divorced when I was 6 but actually became friends even after they both had remarried. While I'm sure there were difficult moments that I wasn't privy to as a child, they never said bad words about the other in front of me. Joseph gives us a picture of what it means to sacrifice not just for Mary but for an unborn child that he is sure is not his biologically.

## **SLIDE      Joseph slept on the decision, and it changed everything.**

The truth is that Joseph could have begged out of this story at any point and not been blamed by anyone for his decision. Instead of preparing a letter of divorce for Mary, something else happens. He decides to sleep on it, which is another great place to pause in this story and remember that sometimes the best decision is the one that we don't make because we took some time to think and to sleep and to rest and to pray. My guess is that Joseph is exhausted by everything that's happened and we typically don't make great decisions when we are exhausted.

We find 4 different places in the birth story of Jesus where Matthew has a difficult decision to make, and he sleeps on it and God speaks to him in those dreams. It's helpful to know that Matthew was writing his gospel for a Jewish Christian audience who is trying to convince that Jesus is the Messiah. He continues to lift up places in the story that point back to the Hebrew Bible, and this is one of those places where his audience would have remembered that another Joseph in the book of Genesis had dreams.

We learned in the genealogy of Jesus earlier in Matthew's gospel a few weeks ago that the father of Joseph in the birth story of Jesus had a father named Jacob. Joseph who has dreams in the book of Genesis also had a father named Jacob and this would not have been lost on the Jewish audience. Even if you haven't read the book of Genesis, you might know Joseph as the one with the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat 1500 years before the time of Christ. Here's what happens to Joseph, the one who would become the earthly father of Jesus, when he sleeps and dreams.

## **BIBLE**

**<sup>20</sup> As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived**

**by the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”**

**SLIDE                    “Do not be afraid.”**

Here is one of the places we find the story of Mary and Joseph colliding as they are both told by the Angel who visits them, “do not be afraid.” This is the most frequently given command in the Bible. The truth is that many of us struggle with anxiety and being afraid and this would have been the experience of both Mary and Joseph when they were told this life altering news that shattered their dreams and would take them in a totally different direction, even being dangerous or possibly deadly. Joseph makes a decision that would be frightful for anyone but would also take him into a wonderful new adventure.

**BIBLE**

**<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife.**

Joseph would become an example of what it means to adopt a child and to invest in a child that is not his biologically. Joseph appears to have died by the time Jesus begins his public ministry, but at least into his early teens and possibly 20s Joseph is the male figure that provides for Jesus and raises him as his own. I imagine him being a mentor and an encourager and a protector.

**SLIDE                    Joseph invests in a child—the next generation.**

Some of us are adoptive parents. Some of us are stepparents. Some of us are foster parents. Some of us teach or have been mentors of children here in our church. Some of you are aunts and uncles or grandparents that are raising children. Some of us are Big Brothers and Big Sisters. These are all challenging jobs, and Joseph gives us a picture of what it means to say “yes” to investing in the next generation.

What I think is clear is that who Jesus becomes is a result of not just who Mary was, but who Joseph was as his earthly father. Joseph has no

lines in the gospels. He doesn't speak a word. But I have often thought we hear Joseph when we listen to the words of Jesus. I imagine that many of the things which Jesus said, including his mannerisms and his actions, reflected the heart of Joseph. I am pretty sure that Joseph shaped the heart of Jesus as much as any biological parent.

I realize we are not all called to adopt children, or be foster parents, or stepparents. We may not be called to be biological parents. But there is a gospel imperative when it comes to following Jesus that we invest in the next generation and in the lives of children. I have sometimes heard people complain about paying taxes for public education when they don't have children in school anymore, and it disappoints me greatly and makes my heart hurt because someone did that for us and we are called as followers of Jesus to not just invest in the next generation but care about them and bless them.

One of the key things we find the Bible calling people to do is care for orphans. James, the brother of Jesus, writes in his letter, chapter 1, these powerful and commanding words.

## **BIBLE**

**<sup>27</sup> Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.**

Jesus was a rabbi and he was not an earthly parent, but he called children to his lap and he blessed them. This was something no self-respecting rabbi would do in public, and yet it was a common occurrence for Jesus because he modeled what it meant to bless children and my guess is he learned that from his earthly father Joseph. While one of the highest callings in my life has been to care for and raise my children, I have always felt that I am called to invest in the next generation and in the children of this church. Every church I have served I have seen as a sacred responsibility helping children and students grow to full humanity as we see it in Jesus Christ our Lord.

The next generation needs you. I read the latest research this last week that discovered that 71% of young people aged 13 to 20 have an AI companion and 31% of those said they would rather talk to that AI companion than a real person. How does this happen? It happens because we adults have stopped having relationships with younger people that are meaningful and thoughtful and caring. We all should be asking, because of the witness of Joseph and the Christmas story, how we can care for children that are not our own.

**GRAPHIC            OCC**

**GRAPHIC            Christmas Offering Recipients**

We did Operation Christmas Child shoe boxes this year and you all gave more than 800 boxes as a congregation, and we collected several thousand in our collection center in our garage from churches around the area. Each one of those will invest in and bless a child. Every one of our Christmas Offering recipients serves children. There is a medical clinic in Mali; a trade and Education Center that will help children and students have a brighter future; Manna Soup Kitchen which feeds hundreds of children through its daily meals and backpack program; and Alternative Horizons that provides shelter for children in abusive homes. Hundreds of children will benefit from your Christmas offering. While we're not mentoring them directly, we are investing in that generation in ways that will change many of them forever. I am so proud of you as a congregation for being willing to give away our largest offering of the year because this is what Joseph did when he gave his entire life and future to raise this child.

Let's be honest and recognize that most of us will be shopping this Christmas season for people that really don't need anything. I realize some of you are shopping for people who need things, but most of us are desperately trying to find gifts that no one is really concerned about getting. That is why every year I have reminded you that Christmas is not your birthday and it's not anybody else's birthday in your family. Well,

we do have a few people who are born on Christmas Day, but you get the idea. I challenge you every year to buy a birthday gift for Jesus at least as big as what you're spending on all those gifts that people don't need. I ask that to be your gift at the Christmas Eve offering. I realize not everyone can do that, and many can do more. What I know is that Joseph and his story remind us of what sacrificial love looks like. My invitation is for you to participate in this Christmas Eve offering in whatever way possible.

### **GRAPHIC            Josh Shipp One Caring Adult Method**

Josh Shipp is a motivational speaker featured in Ted talks and other places where he talks about how, “Every Kid is 1 Caring Adult Away from being a Success Story.” He talks openly about his experience in the foster care system and how he was angry at 14 years old. He went to a new foster home with an overweight gentleman named Rodney. He came up with many mean things he could say to Rodney about his weight and other things so he would get kicked out of that foster home as well. As hard as he tried to be mean to this family, and as much as he messed up, this family refused to give up on him. They told him they didn't see him as a problem. They told him they saw him as an opportunity and as someone with value and possibility. They refused to stop loving him and finally his life was changed.

On Monday, we did a funeral for Natalie who was just a week shy of her 16th birthday when she died. Her family asked that we sing happy birthday to her at the end of the memorial and we did that. What struck me most were the people that were here to celebrate Natalie's life. There were teachers and other students and paraprofessionals and principals and many others who had poured into the life of this young girl who had had seizures since she was born and who struggled her entire life with health. She was a true warrior and because others invested in her they were blessed by her joyful and vibrant spirit. She was severely delayed in her development but always was ready to greet others and encourage them and it was beautiful to hear from many

people as they left the service how they had invested in Natalie and how that investment had blessed them.

What I know is that there are children around us who are not our own who need us. Joseph not only changed the life of Mary and Jesus, but he changed our lives because he cared for that child 2000 years ago. He was willing to sacrificially love, and I believe that Jesus learned that lesson from his earthly father. We all have opportunities in our early Learning Center and with our summit kids and summit students to invest in the next generation.

### **GRAPHIC          Sleeping Joseph on Pope Francis desk**

I remember hearing about Pope Francis having a special sleeping statue of Saint Joseph on his desk in his office. He would place prayers every night under the statue and things he was struggling with as a way of sleeping on difficult decisions or prayers. I thought this was a wonderful idea and this might be a step that each one of us can take this next week as we move towards Christmas. Find a place next to your bed and get yourself a sleeping Joseph statue if you want but write down and place prayers or concerns or anxieties or fears you might be having to give those to God during the evening and the sleeping hours.

### **SLIDE          Prayers to... (have fly in)**

- **Listen for God's dreams**
- **Trust God with my concerns and fears**
- **Invest in the next generation**
- **Follow God's lead**

Let's pray.

### **SLIDE          Prayer**

*Gracious God, you know each one of us who is listening to this message. Give us wisdom to sleep on important decisions and trust in you and not just our own thoughts. Guide us and help us to hear your voice. Fill our hearts with your dreams. Help us to see your will for our lives. Use*

*us to invest in the next generation and give us the courage to follow your lead. Help us to trust in you and not be afraid. In the name of Jesus, Amen.*

### **December 13-14 Order**

1. Jenny welcomes people.
2. Song: "Noel"
3. Song: "Hark the Herald Angels Sing"
4. Jeff welcomes people:
  - a. QR Code and Connect Card
  - b. Invite people to greet each other, however comfortable and be seated.
5. Jeff introduces Advent Candle lighting
  - a. Advent Candle Lighting
6. Sermon
  - a. Bumper
  - b. Sermon
  - c. Prayer
7. **Meditation Moments**
8. Offering (Memorial Service)
  - a. Christmas Offering
9. Song: "Messiah"
10. Caring Ministers
11. Welcome Center
12. Christmas Invites
  - a. Christmas Eve Service times
  - b. Come to service OTHER than 5
13. Christmas Day ONLINE
14. Weekend after Christmas ONLINE
15. Closing Prayer