

A CARPENTER NAMED JOSEPH

Matthew 1:18-25

November 28, 2021

Jesus left His hometown of Nazareth when He was around thirty years old to start His ministry of proclaiming that the Kingdom of God had arrived. During His time away from His hometown Jesus calls twelve men to follow Him as His chosen disciples, plus Jesus also has many others that followed Him, both men and women, as He went about teaching, healing, casting out demons, and performing miracles, demonstrating that He is the promised Messiah. Then one day Jesus returns to His hometown of Nazareth, with His disciples and followers in tow and **Matthew 13:54-57** records what takes place: *“Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. ‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?’ they asked. ‘Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?’ And they took offense at him.”* Let’s keep these verses in mind as we journey back to time of Jesus’ birth!

Typically, during the Advent season as we explore the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus – we focus on Mary, the shepherds, the wise men, but rarely does anyone focus on Jesus’ step-father, faithful Joseph. Joseph’s role in the birth and life of Jesus are usually ignored; however, like many of our own fathers, no man played a more important role in Jesus’ early life than Joseph. Although not His biological father, since Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Joseph adopted Jesus as his son, protected Him, provided for Him, taught Him a trade, and mentored Him during Jesus’ formative years. There is very little mentioned about Joseph in the four Gospel accounts of Jesus life, and he is never mentioned in any of the Christmas carols we sing. So, we have to read between the lines plus use our imaginations to get a good picture of Joseph’s life; however, his is an important story and should especially speak to us men – as Joseph is a role model to follow for husbands, fathers, step-fathers, grandfathers, plus those men that have the opportunity to mentor others.

Jesus’ earthly father Joseph is only mentioned in the Gospel’s accounts of Matthew and Luke. In these two Gospel accounts we are never told Joseph’s age, whether he was a teenager, a young man, or a much older man when Jesus was born. Some early church writings claim that Joseph was an elderly widower when he became engaged to Mary, and the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in Matthew 13,

were Joseph's children from a previous marriage. This would make sense to the Roman Catholics who believe that Mary, the mother of Jesus, remained a perpetual virgin her entire life. She never had any sexual relations with Joseph and didn't give birth to other children after Jesus' miraculous birth!

It also turns out that once Jesus began His ministry, Joseph had already died, leaving Mary as a widow, so it makes sense that Joseph could have been an older man. However, when we look at the two Gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke and no other writings, then we would never think of Joseph as an elderly widower; instead, the story of their engagement sounds like a typical engagement between a young man (most likely around 18 years of age), and a young teenage girl (most likely around 14 years). In ancient Israel, back when Jesus was born, most of the marriages were pre-arranged by parents when their children were still fairly young. The girl would become engaged to be married when she first began her menstrual cycle and marry a year or two later, while boys were usually slightly older, since they were required to be working at a trade by the time they got married, so they could support their wife and family. Today, most Protestants reject the idea that Mary remained a virgin for life – or that Joseph was an elderly widower. They view Joseph as a young man when he married Mary and believe that the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in Matthew's Gospel were the biological children of Joseph and Mary, born to them after Jesus' birth.

In **Matthew 13:54-57**, when Jesus first returned to His hometown of Nazareth after beginning His ministry, we are told that the townsfolk were highly offended at His teaching and ended up rejecting Him. Why was that? I believe it was because they had known Jesus from His early childhood, they knew His parents and siblings, who most likely still lived in the area. Some of them would have gone to school with Jesus, played with Him as a child and hung out with Him when He was a teenager, or worked along side of Him at His trade. So, from where then did Jesus get all this revelation, understanding and power? How could this local, hometown boy be the promised Messiah? It's impossible! The citizens of Nazareth couldn't accept their hometown boy Jesus and His teaching and turned against Him. That's why Jesus said in **Matthew 13:57-58**, ***“There is only one place a prophet isn't honoured – his own hometown! And their unbelief kept him from doing many miracles in Nazareth.”*** They took offence at Jesus! Jesus wasn't accepted by those He grew up with!

You will notice that Jesus' mother Mary is named in this passage, plus Jesus' four brothers are named, but Jesus' sisters are not named for some reason; however, it was mentioned that His sisters were living in Nazareth, so they also were known by the townspeople. What is not mentioned by the townsfolk here is Jesus' earthly father by name, which indicates that Joseph had already died by this time; however, Joseph's occupation was mentioned: "*he was a carpenter,*" and some translations say, "*he was a craftsman.*" Indicating that Jesus' father Joseph was a blue collar labourer, who would have worked with wood or stone, or possibly both, and the townsfolk mentioned Joseph's lowly profession to discredit and mock Jesus, saying, "*How can a lowly carpenter's son have such wisdom and power and claim to be the Son of God?*" Jesus' lowly beginnings were used against Him! Luke's Gospel also gives us some additional information from Jesus' visit to His hometown of Nazareth. Telling us that after Jesus read in the Synagogue on that Sabbath from the scroll of Isaiah, He claimed, "***Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing***" (Luke 4:21). When Jesus claimed that He was the promised Messiah, it was the last straw, the townsfolk became so furious that they took Him to the brow of a high hill outside of Nazareth, intent on throwing Him off the cliff. But, **Luke 4:30** tells us that God spared Jesus that day, "***He walked right through the crowd and went on his way.***"

In the Gospel accounts, Jesus was not only described as a carpenter's son, but as a carpenter Himself – which tells us that Jesus must have been trained by His father in the family business, and most likely worked alongside of His father, and then worked on His own when Joseph died to support His widowed mother which was the obligation of the eldest son. Jesus was a carpenter or craftsman until He began His ministry around the age of thirty, so Jesus could have worked as a carpenter for about 15 years. Today, we mostly think of a carpenter as someone who works with wood, but wood is not very plentiful in the Galilee area where Jesus grew up; instead, stone would have been the main building material used by carpenters. So, it would be more accurate to think of both Joseph and Jesus as stonemasons, who may have also worked with wood on some occasions. This theory seems fairly accurate because Jesus, his father and many other men in the area would have worked on King Herod Antipas' capital city of Sepphoris, which was about six kilometers North-West of Nazareth, and contained many large stone structures that were built by Jewish tradesmen.

What else does Matthew's Gospels tell us about Joseph? We are told that Joseph's father was Jacob, and his family hometown was Bethlehem located about 5 km

South of Jerusalem, the birthplace of King David. The Genealogy of Jesus that we find in the first chapter of Matthew states that Joseph was descended from the royal line of King David, so when Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census be taken of the entire Roman world, everyone had to go to their hometown to register. That meant Joseph had to travel from Nazareth with his pregnant wife Mary to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. That meant a one-way trip of about 150 kilometers through hilly terrain. Today, it takes about 2 hours to drive that distance by car on paved highways, but 2000 years ago they had to walk that distance or have the good fortune to ride a donkey. The average rate of travel back then was about 25-30 km/day, which meant it would have taken about 5 days to travel that distance, and likely longer because of Mary's condition. Another fact we know about Joseph is that he was a poor man, because when he and Mary presented Jesus in the Temple, eight days after His birth, they could only afford a turtledove to bring as a sacrifice. Jews were allowed to offer a turtledove when they couldn't afford a lamb. We are also told that Joseph was a religious man, a devotee keeper of the Law, which is critically important to the Christmas story, and most likely the reason Joseph was chosen by God to be Jesus' earthly father.

Now, let's look at this Christmas story more closely as recorded by Matthew – after recording Jesus' genealogy from Abraham to Joseph, Matthew tells us Joseph's story. **Matthew 1:18**, ***“This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.”*** The Christmas story begins by telling us this important fact, *“Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph,”* which not only means they were engaged like we think about engagement today, but this pledge was considered by the Jews as sacred as marriage itself; thereby, equal to marriage. So, during that year or two of engagement, the couple were called husband and wife, but they could not live together or have sexual relations, and the only way to break off the pledge was through a legal divorce. As well, if the man died during that year of engagement, the woman would be considered a widow even though the wedding ceremony and the consummation of the marriage had never taken place. In essence, *“the pledge”* to each other meant the same as we would think of the marriage ceremony today, except you could not live together or consummate the marriage until your wedding day. The whole idea of the one or two year waiting period was meant to be a time

of preparation for a life together as husband and wife, plus a time for testing the couple's commitment and faithfulness to each other.

Now here's where the Christmas story gets complicated – according to the Law of Moses found in **Deuteronomy 22:20-21**, concerning virgins, ***“If the charge is true and no proof of the young woman's virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done an outrageous thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge the evil from among you.”*** If a woman pledged to be married was found to be pregnant during this engagement period that could only mean that she had been unfaithful to the man she was pledged to be married to: thereby, guilty of adultery, in which case the law commanded that she be stoned to death. When Mary turns up pregnant through the Holy Spirit, we have this huge problem for both Mary and Joseph. Mary could be stoned for adultery and Joseph would no doubt be humiliated, disappointed, frustrated, and may even become filled with rage and anger to think Mary slept with another man while they were pledged to be married.

We are never told the exchange that took place when Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, but it must have been devastating and a real stretch for Joseph to believe the unbelievable story that Mary had not slept with another man but was visited by an angel. I imagine Joseph acted like a typical young man when he heard the devastating news of this *“unwanted pregnancy.”* Thankfully, Joseph and Mary didn't have the option many teenagers have today for an *“unwanted pregnancy.”* Abortion was definitely not an option back then for a Jewish girl, and in ancient Nazareth they wouldn't have a safe place for Mary to go to have the child in seclusion and then put the child up for adoption. They had to face the consequences head-on, so it definitely wasn't the peaceful Christmas story displayed on our greeting cards!

The one aspect that saved the Christmas story was that Joseph was a righteous man, a man of integrity – who wanted to do the right thing and not see the love of his life hurt or humiliated, even though he believed that Mary had been unfaithful to him. As we are told in **Matthew 1:19**, ***“Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had a mind to divorce her quietly.”*** Joseph as a devote Jew had every right, according to their law, to divorce Mary for unfaithfulness. This divorce could take place in two ways:

1. He could get a public divorce by going before a judge at the public gates of the city, which would mean that the whole town would know about Mary's shame.
2. He could get a private divorce by giving her the papers in the presence of two witnesses, avoiding Mary's public shame and humiliation in front of the entire town.

Having made his decision to follow option number two, to divorce Mary quietly, for some reason, Joseph didn't carry out his plan right away. Joseph hesitated, and in his hesitation; thankfully, he was visited by an angel of the Lord in a dream, and the angel's words are recorded for us in **Matthew 1:20-21**, "***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.***" To us this encounter may seem strange, but not to Joseph. God often spoke to people through dreams, so Joseph knew this was God telling him what he needed to do in this difficult situation, and he was most likely relieved to know that Mary was telling him the truth after all!

Joseph believed, so this was all the encouragement that he needed to take Mary as his wife, and deal with the difficulty that would come their way: the coffee shop gossip, the shunning from family and friends, the nasty looks and shame they would experience from the townsfolk wherever they went. That day, God met Joseph in his time of need and gave him the confidence he needed to do what was right for Mary and the baby, as we are told in **Matthew 1:24-25**, "***When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.***"

Every step that Joseph took in this difficult situation testifies to why a carpenter named Joseph should be included as an important figure in the Christmas story:

- By marrying Mary quickly, he put himself at fault, protecting Mary's reputation and possibly even her life. Mary was pregnant and he knew that he wasn't the father, but by marrying her quickly, he took the blame upon himself in a selfless act of love and devotion to Mary and her unborn child.
- By not consummating the marriage and keeping Mary a virgin until Jesus was born, Joseph also protected the miracle of Jesus' virgin birth, confirming what the prophet Isaiah had predicted hundreds of years earlier –

Isaiah 7:14, “The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel,” which means “*God with us.*”

- By naming the baby, “*Jesus,*” Joseph accepted and exercised a father’s right and privilege, by officially taking Jesus into his family as his own legal son.

In the Christmas story we always give Mary more attention than Joseph – and rightly so, but Joseph deserves a great deal of credit as well since they were both chosen by God for this divine task of bringing the Saviour of the world to become one of us. Joseph is a model of a great man of faith! Even though he struggled with his doubts, he did the right thing and believed what the angel of the Lord revealed to him, and followed through despite the gossip, shame and shunning he would have to face by the townsfolk of Nazareth. In all of these ways, Joseph is a wonderful model for us of what a godly righteous man looks like:

- He took the hard road, when he could have taken the easy less difficult road of divorce, leaving Mary to deal with this problem on her own.
- He was tender hearted, wanting to divorce Mary quietly when he could have been harsh and vindictive, and make a public spectacle of her.
- He was loving and thoughtful to Mary putting her needs first when he could have abandoned mother and baby, leaving Mary to raise the child on her own as a single mother.
- He believed and trusted the Lord when he could have doubted and dismissed the dream as bad pizza.
- He was a man of integrity and decided to continue on with the marriage, “*for better or for worse,*” enduring the shame and disgrace that would come his way.
- He was self-controlled, when he could have demanded his rights as a husband to consummate the marriage before Jesus was born and nullify the prophesy spoken by Isaiah.
- In every way Joseph sacrificed and thought of Mary above himself when he could have been self-centered. God definitely chose the right man to raise His Son!

The next thing we need to consider is this – what does it tell us about God that He would choose a lowly carpenter named Joseph to serve as Jesus’ earthly father and raise Jesus as his own son? When God could have chosen a priest serving in the Temple, or a highly educated teacher of the law, or a Pharisee, or a wealthy and

successful businessman, or a king and have Jesus live in a palace. So, why would God choose and entrust His Son to a humble, poor working man, a blue-collar carpenter? If we remember the Old Testament story of King David – of God sending the prophet Samuel to select and anoint the youngest, scrawniest, and most unlikely son of a man named Jesse to be the second king of Israel to replace King Saul, we have our answer: ***“The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart”*** (1 Samuel 16:7). With Joseph, God continued that same pattern, looking at Joseph’s heart, He choose an unlikely candidate to carry out His important mission of raising the Messiah who would save the world from their sins.

We know from the four Gospels that Jesus had a wonderful relationship with God, His heavenly Father – and perhaps that points toward the kind of relationship Jesus had with His earthly father Joseph as well. Though the Gospels tell us very little about Joseph, I believe we can learn a great deal about Joseph by listening to Jesus’ many stories and parables. **For example:**

- In the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus likened the merciful loving father who took back his wayward youngest son, after he had squandered all of his inheritance on wild living, to how God treats us. Had Jesus also seen this kind of unconditional love and forgiveness in His father Joseph?
- When Jesus taught His disciples that true greatness is found in humble service, might He have been describing what He had seen in His carpenter father’s humble sacrificial service towards others while He was growing up?
- When Jesus said that we’re not to look at a woman with lust in our hearts, was He repeating what He had heard Joseph tell Him when He was a teenager wrestling with His hormones?
- When Jesus said we should treat others the way we want them to treat us, is it possible He saw that trait in His earthly dad, both in Joseph’s work ethic and his personal life? Jesus undoubtedly learned a great deal from His earthly father in His formative years, who must have truly been a man of God that Jesus could look up to, admire and model!

This year, when we think about the Christmas story and once again celebrate the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus – let’s also be thankful for Joseph, who married pregnant Mary to protect her from shame, who adopted Jesus as His own son, and helped to shape His life by modeling love, faith, and grace, and possibly even helped to shape Jesus’ ministry in some way. And then the role that Joseph

played in Jesus' life should help us to also think about the role that we play in shaping the lives of our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren that have been entrusted to our care. And this would also include those young people who might be nieces or nephews, or those we may have coached in sports, or the young people in our neighbourhoods. How have we impacted their lives? What are we teaching them about life, especially modeling for them in how to humbly serve God, how to love their wife, and how to serve their family and community? These are all important questions for us to think about as we move into the Christmas season!

I like the quote from **Winston Churchill**, "*We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.*" The legacy that we leave behind in the lives of those who follow us speaks volumes. How we give of ourselves to others speaks volumes. How we invest our time in a life that lives on in those who follow in our footsteps from one generation to the next is what will be remembered once we are gone from this world. What we have invested in others will live on!

None of us here will ever be asked by God to do what Joseph did in raising the Messiah; however, God wants each one of us to tell and show others what a loving and merciful heavenly Father we have, teaching them what it means to be a child of God. When we do that, we follow the example of Jesus' earthly father, a carpenter named Joseph, leaving a legacy that will last for generations!