

Bite Size Bible Study

Christmas Story – 4 Joseph #220

By Pastor Lee

This is the fourth in a series of studies that are part of the Christmas Story.

Joseph

Joseph was a direct descendant of King David (Mt 1:16; Lk 3:23) and betrothed to Mary, the mother of Jesus. They lived in the city of Nazareth.

Jesus was identified by people around Nazareth as "Joseph's son" (Lk 4:22; John 1:45; 6:42). It is only through references identifying Jesus that we learn of Joseph's trade.

Jesus is referred to as "the carpenter's son" (Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3). Joseph was not a carpenter in our sense of the word, because houses were built mostly of stone and earth. He was a *tektōn* and could have built things from many different materials, not just wood or stone. A better English translation for *tektōn* might be "craftsman".

Joseph was most likely also the father of James, Joseph, Simon, Judas, and unnamed sisters (Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3).

Joseph a "Just Man"

Another surprise in the birth narratives appears immediately after the genealogy and is found in Matthew 1:18-19, which reads:

*Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a **just man** and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.*

What does it mean to call Joseph a "just man"? The phrase usually refers to a person who obeys the law and applies rules fairly to all and does not bend the rules for his friends.

In the book of Deuteronomy, it states that if a betrothed virgin meets a man in the city and lies with him, the two of them are to be stoned (Deut. 22:23). But Matthew 1:18-19 affirms that because Joseph was "just" he decided to break the law of Moses and divorce Mary quietly rather than publicly exposing her. Such a bold act invites serious reflection.

Joseph clearly applied an extraordinary and unexpected definition of justice to this crisis with Mary. Justice for him was more than "the equal application of law." Joseph went beyond the legal expectations of the law in his obedience to a higher definition of justice.

Joseph looked beyond the penalties of the law to reach out with tenderness to a young woman who was no doubt bruised and exhausted if not physically at least mentally.

The prophetic definition of justice seen in Isaiah 42:1-6 about the "suffering servant" requires a compassionate concern for the weak, the downtrodden and the outcasts in their need. In his dealings with Mary, Joseph acted out of this prophetic definition of justice. Without that prophetic understanding of justice embedded in Joseph's mind, Jesus would not have been born. Joseph is, therefore, not a passive, mute figure. Rather, he acts as a strong, thoughtful person whose bold decision at a point of crisis saves the life of the mother and her unborn child.

Matthew not only tells his readers what Joseph does, but also describes his feelings. He had not yet had the vision from the angel informing him that her pregnancy was an act of God. How might he have felt on hearing such devastating news? The common English translation of one critical Greek word is legitimate but misleading. English texts read, "as he considered this ..." The Greek word here translated "he considered" (*en-thymeo-mai*) has two meanings. To be sure, one of them is "he considered/pondered." But a second meaning is he "became angry". That is, he became very upset.

Anger and disappointment are a natural emotion for him to have felt. After all they were betrothed and were considered married in all aspects except for sexual unions. They were in the process of building and furnishing their home to be. Besides the apparent betrayal there was all the effort and work that had been done, and all of that was now undone.

His understanding of justice led him to "do the right thing" and treat Mary in a humane fashion. But that did not prevent him from feeling the anger of betrayal.

The root of the Greek verb used here is *thymos*, which occurs once in the Gospels where it is used to describe the "wrath" of the congregation in the synagogue when it rose up to stone Jesus (Lk 4:28). A literal meaning of the Greek word has to do with anger within the person involved. This profoundly fits the feelings of Joseph on first hearing the shocking news.

The oldest Arabic translation of this text, which dates from the eighth century or earlier, translates this phrase, "While he was disturbed over this matter..." to "while he fumed over this matter" is a more accurate translation of the original Greek and better captures the authenticity of the human response.

In a dream he was reassured by an angel. '*Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit: she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*' (Mat 1:20b). Thus, having been reassured of her virginal conception,

Joseph took Mary to his home and, when the child was born, duly named him 'Jesus'.

Matthew adds as a credential to his account the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14: *'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel'*. which Matthew explains means 'with us God.'

Matthew presents Joseph as a human being of remarkable spiritual stature. He possessed the boldness, daring, courage and strength of character to stand up against his entire community and take Mary as his wife. He did so despite forces that doubtless wanted her stoned. His vision of justice stayed his hand, in short, he was able to reprocess his anger into grace.

Joseph completes the marriage to Mary. When Jesus is presented at the temple 40 days after his birth Joseph legally adopts Jesus as his son. This, for all intents and purposes, makes Jesus the actual son of Joseph with all the rights and privileges of a birth son.

References within the Gospels suggest that Joseph was a humble, kindly, generous, and conscientious parent who probably taught Jesus the *tekton* trade. Perhaps Jesus' respect for Joseph is, in some measure, reflected in his deliberate adoption of the affectionate title of Abba (Daddy) for God, in his deep personal appreciation of the fatherhood of God.

When Caesar Augustus issued a decree that everyone had to register in his native city for purposes of taxation, Joseph and Mary returned to Bethlehem, where Jesus was subsequently born. Jesus is born in Bethlehem of Judea, during the reign of Herod the Great (perhaps in or around the year 6 BC) (Lk 2:1-6).

In the Middle East, men usually represent their families in any official or legal matters. Joseph would have been the only one who was commanded to go to Bethlehem. So, why did Joseph take Mary with him to Bethlehem for the registration? The easiest explanation is that he was unsure what might happen to her if he left her in Nazareth without his presence to protect her. He could not rely on anyone else in the town to protect her from harm. It is important for us to see Joseph as a hero of the story, without whose courage and understanding of the prophets there would have been no Messiah.

Forty days after the birth, both parents are described as taking the child to the Temple for him to be presented and redeemed by sacrifice. Both Joseph and Mary are described standing there, wondering at what was said about him by the old priest Simeon.

Sometime later (anything up to two years) some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east (probably astrologers from Persia or Arabia).

After the visit of the wise men, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." (Matt. 2:13)

Joseph's escape was amply justified by Herod's massacre of the children in Bethlehem. Upon the death of Herod, an angel similarly advised them to return to Israel. Distrusting Herod's successor Archelaus, Joseph took his family up to Galilee and settled in the town of Nazareth. Matthew again adds the prophetic He shall be called a Nazarene.

Luke further describes the regular Passover visits of the parents to Jerusalem, with reference to the visit when the boy Jesus was twelve years old (perhaps to celebrate his 'confirmation' as a 'son of the Law').

When Jesus was found missing on the first day of the return journey, and later discovered him among the elders in the Temple, his mother said, *'Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously? How is it that you sought me?' he replied. 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he meant. 'And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart.* (Luke 2:48- 51)

Luke's account of Jesus's later visit to the synagogue at Nazareth evokes the comment 'Is this not the carpenter's son?' But there is no gospel mention of the survival of Joseph after the Jerusalem Passover visit, when Jesus was twelve years old. It was his mother and his brothers who came to look for him (Mt 12:46-50; Mk 3:31-35), so it is assumed that by this time Joseph had died.

In the 2nd century some felt that Joseph may have been elderly at the time of his marriage to Mary. His comparatively early death might account for there being no mention of him at the crucifixion, and it would certainly help to explain why the public ministry of Jesus did not begin until he was nearly thirty years old, if he was needed for family and business reasons within his own home, although there are other reasons possible.

**Joseph, a man of character
and devoted father and husband.**