

# A Critical Choice for a Dad

Matthew 1: (1-17), 18-25

No matter how early the world starts ramming up for Christmas, the celebration always ends abruptly:

“Next to a circus there ain’t nothing that packs up and tears out faster than the Christmas spirit.” - Kin Hubbard

Of course, retailers quickly found a way to keep Christmas with us year-round. One store advertised: “Make this Christmas one you will not soon forget – charge everything!”

One of the great mysteries of the New Testament is, “What happened after the first Christmas was over?” And one of the most mysterious mysteries within that mystery is Joseph, the man called in to help raise the Son of God. Joseph dutifully fulfills a few assignments early on, but what was his role after Christmas? By the time Jesus began his public ministry, Joseph has vanished from the story. Most scholars figure he’s dead. But, what was Joseph’s job after Christmas was over?

There must be more to Joseph than the Christmas cards depict: the tall guy standing in the stable or leading a donkey that Mary is riding. She has a lead role in the story of Christmas, but Joseph seems almost peripheral. We seldom see a painting of Joseph holding the baby Jesus in his arms? Did Joseph have a role in shaping Jesus’ character? Did the Son of God need a “hands-on” Dad?

The great mystery of Incarnation alerts us to the fact that Jesus was in every respect, God and in every respect, man. God hardly needed a human father. But, if Jesus was human like us, He would certainly benefit from a Dad, so it cannot be irrelevant that God chose Joseph. A huge part of Mary being the right kind of girl to bring Jesus into the world involved her being betrothed to the right kind of man, a man whose plans for his own life could be redirected at the bidding of God, a man who could bear a degree of scandal for the sake of doing God’s will and a man who would obey God at a moment’s notice without asking questions. Joseph was such a man.

So who was this man recruited by an angel to fill the role of an earthly father to God’s own Son? Even though little is recorded about Joseph, what is written reveals the kind of man he was.

## I. A Royal Man (chapter 1:1-17)

<sup>1</sup>A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham ...  
... <sup>16</sup>and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

<sup>17</sup>Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ. – Matthew 1:1; 16, 17

The verses I did not read include a forty-two generation list of who was the father of whom. A genealogy is not the most riveting way to introduce a story, but that is how Matthew begins his account of the life of “the Christ, which is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “*messiah*.” Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience to prove that Jesus was the *messiah*, an anointed king from God sent to Israel of which numerous prophecies spoke. If Matthew really wished to make his case, he would have to come forth quickly with evidence that Jesus had a legal right to reign.

The two names every Jew would look for in Messiah's genealogy were Abraham and David. Abraham was the father of the Israelites, the first man we looked at, who heard the words, "Do not be afraid ..." in connection with the Promise that would prove to be Jesus. David was Israel's greatest king. He was a poet, priest, musician, ruler and "a man after God's heart." But, for purposes of prophecy, David was also the beginning of a line of kings that would reign forever.

We have seen movies and read stories where a nation searches for an heir to a throne. Finally, some unlikely, non-regal burger-flipper is discovered to be the long lost king. When Matthew went through the temple records, his quest ended with a village carpenter named Joseph.

Jesus was born at a time in history when imperial Rome oppressed God's covenant people. Herod, a paranoid old nut who wore the title, "king of the Jews" was only half Jewish, and he only ruled at Rome's pleasure. Rome even picked the Jewish high priest. Hopes that the promised deliverer of the nation was on his way were heightened. But, if any case was to be made that a certain man was the *messiah*, he had better be a true Jew and, more specifically, he had better be descended from of the line of David. All others need not apply.

## II. A Righteous Man (18, 19)

<sup>18</sup>This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. – Matthew 1:18, 19

### A. Joseph's Righteousness Was Put to the Test

To say that Joseph was "righteous" implies that he was an upstanding observer of the Law of Moses. When Mary was "found to be with child" his righteousness and his concern for his name could not simply overlook what appeared to be a cut-and-dried breach of betrothal. Betrothal was a binding arrangement between a man and a woman that lasted anywhere from nine to eighteen months before the marriage ceremony which involved the man taking the woman into his home. This legal arrangement was as binding as marriage. To sever a betrothal required a legal divorce.

But, Joseph was not simply righteous. He was also nice. He "did not want to expose her to public disgrace." He had two options. He could divorce Mary with all sorts of public outrage. She would be branded an adulteress, and everyone in their little town would sympathize with him. Or, he could "divorce her quietly." Before two witnesses, he could give Mary a letter of divorce.

Joseph probably could not have spared Mary some scorn, but he was too nice to fuel it. Being nice was not easy. Mary was not admitting to having done anything wrong. She may have said nothing. Worse still, she may have tried to convince Joseph of the truth, but believing a pregnant virgin was no easier for him than it would be for anyone today. A lesser man's bruised ego and self-righteous indignation would have not thought twice about hanging Mary out for public scorn.

## **B. Authentic Righteousness Never Loses Sight of Mercy**

There was nothing knee-jerk about Joseph's response to the news of Mary's pregnancy. He was thoughtful. He was deliberative. He was nice. Somehow, perhaps, by watching how Pharisees behaved themselves, Joseph detected that there is no self-righteousness in true righteousness. Jesus taught this constantly. He confronted the Pharisees for being legally precise, but mean. He addressed how they would dedicate portions of their wealth to God, while failing to care for their aging parents. When they accused Him of being a lawbreaker for healing on the Sabbath, He reminded them that the Sabbath was God's gift to men, not an occasion to watch them suffer.

How did Jesus know these things? Was the knowledge innate to Who He was? Or, if He was in every respect like us, only without sin, did He have to learn these things. We know that He Who is the very Word of God searched the Scriptures. We know that He availed Himself to teachers in the temple. Did God in the flesh learn that true righteousness is nice from an earthly father? And, even though Joseph's blood never pulsed through the veins of Jesus, was something of Joseph's demeanor stamped on Him? If, as a man, Jesus had to learn the lessons of true righteousness, then, it seems that His heavenly Father picked the right man to fill the role of His earthly Dad.

## **III. A Receptive Man (20-23)**

<sup>20</sup>But after he had considered this, 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. <sup>21</sup>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."

<sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup>"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 1:20-23

### **A. Joseph Must Believe Mary's Story**

Joseph needed a divine nudge to help him believe that Mary was a virgin. When the angel said, "Do not be afraid," Joseph's immediate apprehension had to do with going forward with his plans to marry her. That would require that He share her scandal. If he said nothing about the reality behind Mary's condition, folks would just conclude that they had both misbehaved during the betrothal period. If he tried to convince others that Mary really was a virgin, they would have thought him to be the most naïve hayseed that ever fell off a turnip truck. Joseph would never have married Mary had he not become convinced that she was carrying God's child.

Some churches tell their people to believe whatever they want on this issue of a Virgin Birth, but if Jesus was not born of virgin, then Matthew is a wholly unreliable document, for the author bathes the account of the origin of Jesus in the premise of the Virgin Birth. In the genealogy preceding our text, Matthew records that this man was the father of that man who was the father of the next man. He does this for over forty generations before he abruptly changes his pattern of language:

... Eleazar the father of Matthan,  
Matthan the father of Jacob,

<sup>16</sup>and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.  
- Matthew 1: 16, 17

Then, the text clearly states that Mary was a virgin and would remain one until she gave birth to Jesus. I cannot fathom why anyone who believes that Christ is raised from the dead would struggle to believe that He entered our world in a unique and miraculous way. I cannot fathom how anyone who believes that God created everything could have cause to doubt that He can invade His own handiwork and set aside whatever natural processes that He Himself designed.

## **B. Joseph Must Receive Mary's Son**

Gabriel had already told Mary that the child would be named Jesus, but Joseph, as the legal father, had the authority to make this happen. Jesus was a popular name for little Jewish boys. It was a form of Joshua, meaning “*JEHOVAH* saves.” But, the angel told Joseph why this name was to be given to this child He (literally, He himself) would “save his people from their sins.” Joshua of old, after whom all those other little guys were named, saved Israel by the power of *JEHOVAH*. This Jesus would save His people by His own power, for He would be one with *JEHOVAH*.

Jesus Himself came to “save his people from their sins.” Many did not receive Jesus, because salvation from sin did not interest them. The popular notion of *messiah* was that He would save his people from the Romans, from poverty, from disease and from disrespect. But, the first step to any restoration to God must be to repair that which is at the heart of all our other problems.

The maladies that men tend to think are their greatest problems are of a secondary nature to sin. Sin, not disease – sin, not poverty – sin, not enemies - keeps us estranged from a Creator Who desires to be our Father. Many spokesmen for the modern church, alleged experts in making churches grow, are reluctant to even address sin, much less call it the monstrous evil that it is. I'm not always sure what it is they are growing. Apparently, people prefer to be affirmed, not condemned. That's understandable, but sin must be seen for what it is, repented of and dealt with by the work of the Savior. Before that is accomplished, any affirmations of us are mere plastic.

The name Joseph was to give to Jesus described His work. The name the prophets gave Him would describe His identity. Jesus would also be called Immanuel, meaning “God with us.”

“God is no longer a distant Being sitting on His throne above the heavens. He has descended to this earth. It is difficult to think of God as the Infinite One who inhabits eternity; the very idea is so vast that it seems to melt away into vagueness. It is intangible; we cannot lay hold of it. But Christ we can see and understand. In Christ God looks at us with human eyes, speaks to us in an earthly tongue, touches us with a brother's hand.” - W. F. Adeney

## **IV. A Responsive Man (24, 25)**

<sup>24</sup>When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup>But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. – Matthew 1:24, 25

### **A. Joseph Went beyond Any Man's Expectations**

Joseph was immediate in his response to the angel's instructions. He took Mary home as his wife. It was only at this point that the sexual consummation of a marriage would be considered appropriate, but Joseph chose not to consummate the marriage until after Mary gave birth. This was not overtly stated in the angel's instructions, but obviously, Joseph's understanding was that a virgin would not only conceive a child, but that a virgin would also bear a child.

## **B. Future Mentions of Joseph Reinforce an Obedient Nature**

From Luke, we know that the announcements to Mary and Joseph of Jesus' birth occurred in Nazareth of Galilee. The couple traveled to Bethlehem of Judea for a tax census. This was Joseph's city of record and the hometown of his ancestor, King David. While in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth. When the child was eight days old, the family went to Jerusalem where the Child was circumcised and where Joseph legally gave Him the name, Jesus.

The family settled in Bethlehem. Perhaps, Joseph felt this is where a king descended from David ought to be raised. Perhaps, Mary and Joseph chose not to return to the scrutiny of Nazareth. The family was living in Bethlehem when magi from the east arrived to worship Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. After this, in a second dream, Joseph was told to take his family and flee to Egypt, because a disturbed king Herod was determined to destroy any rival to his throne. Joseph obeyed immediately. He arose from His dream and the family left that night.

Egypt was a comfortable place for over a million displaced Jews, but settling in there was not part of the divine plan. After a third dream, Joseph packed up the family and headed back toward Judea. King Herod had died. His kingdom had been divided amongst his sons. The cruelest and nuttiest of the boys now ruled over Judea, so a fourth dream steered Joseph back to Nazareth, where Jesus would grow up. Apparently, Joseph was easily steered by God and quick to obey

Joseph teaches us that quick obedience honors God. How many worthwhile promptings into some work of mercy, a realm of service or a simple act of obedience did you just never get around to because you failed to act quickly? Passions fade when we are slow to obey. The added cost, trouble, or risk of obedience caused you to delay and nothing ever happened. Joseph is a great example for us in the matter of acting immediately once we know what acting rightly demands.

Little can be known of Joseph's impact on his adopted son, but some clues emerge. When Jesus was twelve, the family was in Jerusalem for Passover "according to the custom" (Luke 2:42). Joseph, a righteous man, likely led his family on the 65-mile trek from Nazareth to Jerusalem four times a year to celebrate each of Israel's great feasts. Joseph raised Jesus to honor the Law.

In Mark 6:33, Jesus is identified not as a carpenter's son, but as "the carpenter." Joseph had taught his foster son the family trade. When Jesus told would-be followers, "My yoke is easy," (or well-fitted), that could have been from a sign posted over any village woodworker's shop.

If you look closely, you'll see that not a word Joseph ever spoke is recorded in the Bible. Off hand, I cannot think of a single Christmas lyric about him, though I can think of lyrics about Mary, angels, shepherds, wise men and even some livestock that may or may not have been present when Jesus was born. Still, Joseph is far from a superfluous fixture in the story of Christmas. God's selection of Joseph was as critical as His selection of Mary. Our world needs men who are righteous in the sight of God, but nice in the sight of people, men who live beyond the letter of the Law and walk by the rules of grace, men who are in all things quick to obey God.

Jesus took all of these virtues to heights never before pioneered. Still, as a man of flesh and bone, He was well-served by an earthly father who excelled in these virtues in his own right.