

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 1 January 2012

No. T0709

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Forgotten Lives of the New Testament: Joseph, the husband of Mary

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are embarking upon a four-week study of the almost forgotten lives of four persons from the New Testament. Before I introduce this, however, I want to wish you all a very happy New Year, and pray that 2012 may be a year in which we grow in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, and know more of the blessings of the Lord in our lives. If this is true for us, then, may the prayer of the Apostle John, in 3 John 2, be also our prayer for each other: "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth."

I am sure that we can all add our "Amens" to that short prayer.

Now to return to our study for this morning, this, as I said previously, concerns an almost forgotten life from the New Testament, namely Joseph, the husband of Mary. Others in the series will be John the Baptist, James, who was killed early in the church's history, and Luke, the friend and travelling companion of the Apostle Paul.

It is particularly opportune that Joseph, the husband of Mary, has been scheduled for this time of year, as I have no doubts that many of us will have been listening to the Christmas story over the last few weeks, with its references to Joseph. If, in the course of the broadcast, I refer to Joseph as the father of Jesus it is only in the sense that Mary does in Luke 2:48. I hold strenuously to the Biblical account of the birth of Jesus, which I shall read now from Luke 1:34-35: "Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered, and said unto her, The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the highest shall overshadow thee; therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God."

I am convinced that to be a Christian, in the New Testament sense of the word, involves belief that Jesus is God incarnate, born of the virgin Mary. The only references that will be used to outline the character and life of Joseph will be all from the New Testament, and not from tradition or apocryphal stories. If we turn to the Matthew 13:55 we read with reference to Jesus: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?"

Without a doubt, this informs us that Joseph's trade was carpentry, a trade that called for strength and skill. It would also involve more than the manufacture of wooden implements and furniture, as a carpenter in those days would have to turn his hand to small building projects, even including masonry. As he is referred to as a just man, in Matthew 1:19, we can assume that he was honest, honourable and hard-working in his daily toil. We shall have more to say about his occupation later on in our study, so we will move on to consider further details given for us at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel.

From the genealogy of Jesus, in Matthew 1:1-17, we learn that Joseph is from the line of David, the great king of Israel. Matthew 1:16 states: "And Jacob begot Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."

I wish to point out two things from these details. The first is concerned with the importance of the Davidic line, as the future Messiah must be in the kingly line of David, the heir to the promises and the distributor of divine blessings to the Gentiles. Matthew emphasises this, Matthew 1:6, where he speaks of David as the king before going on to include Joseph in this line. Paul stresses the importance of this when in Romans 1:3 he writes: "Concerning his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who was made of the seed of David according to the flesh."

That Jesus was the Christ, or Messiah, was always an element in the Gospel preached by the Apostles. We have only time to cite one illustration of this which was when Paul was preaching to the jailer at Philippi (Acts 16:16-34). When the question was asked, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30) the Apostle's answer was, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 16:31), or to paraphrase Paul, "Believe that Jesus is Lord and Messiah." Secondly, I wish to point out that the verse we have quoted earlier, from Matthew 1:16, states that Joseph was the husband of Mary, not that he begot Jesus, as is stated in all of the other relationships in the genealogy. The integrity of the incarnation of the Lord is thus preserved in the details of the ancestry of Joseph.

From the Gospels, we gather that after the angel Gabriel had told Mary that she would bear a child, she departed in haste to a city of Judah, in the hill country, to the home of Zecharias and Elisabeth (Luke 1:39-40). When she returned, we take the story up again by reading Matthew 1:18-19: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was in this way: When, as his mother, Mary, was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph, her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privately." We will stop there for a moment to consider the implications of what we have read.

It is obvious that Joseph was very upset when he learned that his betrothed, who had abruptly departed for the hill country some weeks before, was pregnant when she returned. Most men in the same circumstances would have been deeply distressed. Even then Joseph did not publicly disown her, but intended to deal with the matter privately and 'in house'. This says much for the deep affection that Joseph must have felt for the young lady and also for the gracious character of the man who was nothing more than a carpenter. If we continue to read, from Matthew 1:20 and 24, we will be reminded how Joseph had a change of mind that led to his reconciliation with Mary: "But while he thought on these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary, thy wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit ... Then Joseph, being raised from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife, and knew her not till she had brought forth her first-born son; and he called his name Jesus."

I trust you noticed that the relationship between Joseph and David is mentioned in this passage, further consolidating the link we emphasised previously regarding Jesus and His place in the genealogy of the Davidic line.

What strikes me from this passage is the obedience of Joseph; for, despite his indignation when Mary told him of her condition, he responds to the instructions of the angel, when these were communicated to him in a dream. It would seem that he did not waste any time either, for the Scripture states that he took her as his wife on being raised from sleep.

There are many lessons that we can learn from the example of Joseph, yet none is as important as obedience to the voice of God when He speaks to us through His word. Obedience, however, is one of last lessons we seem to learn. We did not read the verse where Joseph was told by the angel the very name that Mary's baby was to be called.

From the passage we read, we can see that Joseph was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, in that he positively acquiesced in the naming of Jesus (Matthew 1:21). One of his sons, born in later years was called Joseph. Even if he had wanted to call Jesus after himself, he did not, for in humility he obeyed the instructions of the angel. This is yet further evidence of the obedient spirit that marked this humble man, who was to have the earthly care of the Infant, whose destiny was to open the way into the presence of God for all who believe in Him.

This concern for the welfare of his family is exemplified once more in Matthew 2, when Joseph is again spoken to in a dream. This is recorded in Matthew 2:13-15: "And when the [wise men] departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word; for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord through the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son."

It is not the fulfilment of prophecy that I wish to comment on, but rather the way in which Joseph took charge of his wife and child, acting as most fathers in Israel would have acted. Truly, he was the head of his house, and recognised by God as the head, as all the divine instructions were delivered to Joseph. This is another lesson for those of us who have responsibility for families. Joseph might not have understood much about God's purposes for the Infant, nor does it seem that he grasped the significance of the shepherds' visit, or the words spoken on the journey back from Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve years old. We can read this in Luke 2:41-50 when Jesus explained to His parents that He must be about His Father's business. Despite this, Joseph still demonstrated great diligence and vigilance for the safety and welfare of those who been entrusted to his care.

A few weeks ago, many schools all over the UK will have enacted the nativity story, when parents would be invited to attend to watch the children, dressed in a variety of oddments that were supposed to represent eastern clothes. I am sure most of us can recall watching our children take a major, or more likely a minor part, in these productions. You will remember the visit of the three wise men to the stable to present the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Despite this sentimental portrayal of the Christmas story, which touches the heart strings when we watch our children or grandchildren taking part, the scene of the gifts was not the stable.

If we read the account of the visit of the travellers who followed a star, presented to us in Matthew's Gospel, Matthew 2:1-12, we find that they visited Mary and the young Child in a house, not a cave or cattle shed (Matthew 2:11). Though many Bible commentators suggest that this event took place sometime after the birth, the sequence of events that first Christmas is not my concern here, for I want to emphasise that the young family were living in a house. This

again, I suggest, is down to the overarching care exercised by Joseph towards Mary and her child, when he diligently sought to provide them with suitable accommodation, if it was at all possible.

Another, yet different, feature of Joseph as a father was his concern to establish Jesus in the religious tradition of his people. We can read this from Luke 2:21-24: "And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called Jesus, who was so named by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; (as it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord), and to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons."

We must remember that Joseph, in spite of knowing that this child was not his, took him to Jerusalem, along with Mary, to fulfil the various requirements of the Law. This demonstrates his zeal for the ancient teachings that made the Israelites the people of God. We also see in these verses the material status of the young couple, in that all they could afford for a sacrificial offering was two pigeons. I think it can safely be assumed that for as long as Joseph lived as head of the house, he directed its affairs with a single eye for the honour of the Lord, and that Jesus was brought up in a household where God and the Scriptures were revered.

For any who have just joined us, can I welcome you to *Truth for Today* where, on this first day of 2012, we are considering the life of Joseph, the husband of Mary. I now wish to read more verses from Luke 2, where there is an account of an incident which must have further settled Joseph's mind to accept his divine commission to act as a parent to the holy Child. The context is Simeon's prophecy, given in the temple at Jerusalem, so listen carefully while I read Luke 2:33-35: "And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things that were spoken of him. And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary, his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against (yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

There is much more that I could have read about Simeon's predictions that Jesus would be a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Israel. What I did read, however, is summarised by the phrase where Joseph marvelled about the things spoken concerning Jesus. You might ask, "Why is this important in the context of a talk about Joseph?" I suggest that many times during the years of the boyhood of Jesus, on which Scripture is mainly silent, Joseph would have been the object of cynical remarks about the mysterious origins of the birth of Jesus.

For instance, there is an interesting discussion in John 8 regarding Abraham being the father of the nation. John 8:39-41 state: "They answered, and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth which I have heard of God; this did not Abraham. Ye do the deeds of your father. Then said they unto him, We are not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God."

It is this last sentence that I want to draw your attention to where they say that they were not born of fornication. One meaning which could be deduced from that, is that they were accusing Jesus of being illegitimate and referring to his birth in a nasty, derogatory way. Even if that is not the case, I am sure there were occasions when Joseph did have to bear insulting comments, from maliciously motivated persons, about the doubtful parentage of Mary's first born son. How often, then, would he turn in faith to the words of the angel, of Simeon and of Anna spoken when they journeyed to Jerusalem, when Jesus was a baby. I am confident that Joseph had the faith to cope with any taunts that were breathed against him and his family.

As we near the end of this morning's study, I have one last point to bring to your attention about Joseph, and we can trace this from Mark 6:2-3, which I shall read from the Authorised or King James Version as I have done all through this broadcast: "And when the sabbath day was come, he began to teach in the synagogue; and many, hearing him, were astonished, saying, From where hath this man these things? And what wisdom is this which is given unto him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joseph and Judas, and Simon? Are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him."

Perhaps some of you are saying that Joseph, the husband, is not mentioned in that long quotation. What is mentioned, however, is that Jesus was recognised as a carpenter and it must have been Joseph who taught Him the secrets of the trade. Further evidence, I suggest, of the care and affection that Joseph devoted to Jesus. It might be significant that here Jesus is described as the carpenter, and not the carpenter's son, as we saw earlier. This might suggest that by this time Joseph had died. This could be the reason we read nothing further about him in the latter part of the Gospel record.

We have now almost used up our allocation of time for this morning's broadcast in this study of a man who is but a shadowy figure on the pages of Scripture. For me, it has been an interesting and enlightening study of a character who I have not thought much about until I received the title of my talk for today's study.

Joseph is an example for all of us, but especially we who are fathers. I trust that I have drawn attention to the care he lavished upon his family, and the amount of time he must have spent with Jesus when he trained Him to be a carpenter. His obedience to the heavenly commands, given to him even if he did not always understand, is something that all Christians need to copy. As I said earlier, obedience on our part to the demands of the Christian life is something that should concern us all.

As we close this morning, can I thank you all for listening and pray that we all might enjoy the blessing of the Lord throughout 2012, or until the Lord Jesus comes again. Good morning to you all.

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