

Christmas Message

Joseph's story, Matthew chapter 1

Today we are going to look at the story of Joseph, beginning in Matthew chapter 1. Joseph is one of the most overlooked men in the Bible. He was a simple carpenter whose voice we never hear but who God chose to be the guardian of His Son Jesus Christ.

Matthew takes time in the first chapter of his Gospel to trace the genealogy of Jesus Christ. The genealogy highlights two great men of faith. The first is David, the shepherd boy who saved his nation and became their greatest king. The record of David slaying Goliath is a striking Old Testament illustration of Christ, the good shepherd, going down into the valley of death to undertake the work of salvation. The second is Abraham, the great man of faith, and "the friend of God." Abraham was prepared to offer his only son believing, as Hebrews 11 tells us that God would resurrect him. God stops the sacrifice but uses Abraham's experience as an astonishing illustration of God the Father ultimately giving His only Son to be the Saviour,

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Matthew traces the lineage of Jesus Christ from Abraham to Joseph. Although the genealogy begins in an illustrious way, it appears to lead to a sad end. The genealogy also reminds us of the other great men of faith like Isaac, and Jacob. But we also discover Judah's failure in his relationship with Tamar, which led to the birth of Perez. In spite of this failure, Judah became the man, and the tribe, through whom the kings of Israel would descend. Later we see the inclusion of Rahab, who was saved out of Jericho and married Salmon. Their son, Boaz, married Ruth, the Moabitess whose own son, Obed, was the grandfather of David, the king. David was the father of Solomon. Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon, had been the wife of Uriah. David arranged the death of Uriah, his faithful and brave servant, in a battle to cover up David's adultery with Bathsheba.

So, in this genealogy, we see the failure of two great men of faith, Judah and David, and the faith of two remarkable women, Rahab and Ruth. God does not hide His people's sinfulness but demonstrates His ability through grace to bring good out of evil. God does not excuse evil, as David discovered, but evil never confounds the purposes of God. The genealogy goes on to describe the division of the kingdom of Israel during the reign of Rehoboam and then the nation's gradual decline. This decline eventually led to Judah going into captivity in Babylon. Although the exiles returned to Israel, the royal line ended in the obscurity and the poverty of Nazareth, where we discover Joseph.

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush in the desert, He said these words,

"I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land into a good and large land..."(Exodus 3:7-8).

I had always thought that when God said these words, He was also looking forward to the time when He would come down in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Joseph was part of that story. Verse 16 introduces Joseph as "the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ." Matthew goes on to give his account of the birth of Jesus. He starts with the betrothal of Mary and Joseph.

"to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary" (Luke 1:27).

Betrothal means to promise "by one's truth" it was an engagement to be married. In New Testament times, this took place at least a year before marriage. Betrothal is used to beautifully describe the spiritual relationship between God and His people in the Old Testament.

"I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me In righteousness and justice, In lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, And you shall know the Lord." (Hosea 2:19-20).

I think Matthew emphasises the betrothal of Mary and Joseph not only as a fact but to introduce us to a man of faith, Joseph, whose actions would illustrate the lovingkindness, mercy, and faithfulness of the God described by Hosea. The plain fact of the matter was that Mary was pregnant. The only conclusion was that she had become pregnant by another man. There was no other possibility, naturally speaking.

Luke 2:26-38 gives us the details of how Mary became the mother of Jesus. But Luke doesn't record the distress Joseph goes through when he found out that the woman he loved and was to marry, was pregnant. It is at this point we begin to see the qualities of Joseph emerge. It is easy to skirt over them when God would have us pause to reflect on Joseph's character. He was a just, merciful, loving, faithful, obedient, resourceful, hardworking family man who was to become known as the father of Jesus. The first thing Matthew tells us about Joseph was that he was a just man. Joseph wanted to act in the right way. He was not seeking revenge or retribution; he was trying to do God's will in the most difficult of circumstances. So often in such circumstances, and especially when we feel ourselves to be the wronged party, we are prone to think and act in a self-righteous way. When we find failure in others, it is easy to take the moral high ground and look down on those who have done things we judge to be wrong.

The actual facts about Mary were only known when they were revealed supernaturally. We often make judgments before we know all the facts. The tendency to judge quickly is a very present danger. Joseph had a royal heritage. The faith of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David and the wisdom of Solomon were part of his heritage.

I remember as a child being told about the capture of Richard the Lionheart shortly before Christmas 1192 in an inn near Vienna. He was captured because his royal bearing was inconsistent with his lowly disguise. Joseph was a man stripped of all the privilege and blessing of his natural ancestors. Still, his lowliness never disguised his spiritual and moral attributes. It was these attributes, which God had always sought in men who became kings over His people. Matthew also tells us Joseph was not willing to make Mary a public example. Joseph was not only a just man, but he was a loving and protective man. There is no doubt Joseph loved Mary, and although deeply hurt and confused by the circumstance he was in, he would not harm her. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13,

"Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not

rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (verses 4-7).

I think Joseph demonstrates these beautiful features of love as he comes to terms with his situation. He sought to protect the woman he believed had betrayed him by quietly divorcing her. There is no sense of rage and revenge in Joseph. He had a quietness of spirit and a desire to act in a protective and discreet way. Discretion does not appear to be greatly valued in our society today. Information about the private lives of people is broadcast in the most detailed way across the whole world, and nothing is left to the imagination.

But Solomon one of Joseph's greatest ancestors wrote,

“Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all sins,” (Proverbs 10:10) and
“He who covers a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates friends.” (Proverbs 17:9).

Joseph was also a man who sought to deal with problems in the most thoughtful and caring way. He gave significant consideration to the situation he and Mary faced. Joseph didn't rush into a decision. And once he had clarified what he was going to do, he continued to reflect on it before taking action. His actions speak volumes about the character of Joseph. He wanted the best possible outcomes for Mary and himself, and even when he identifies the steps to take to achieve these, he still wanted to be sure he was making the right decision. It is so important in our lives as Christians that we learn from this process. Decision-making is such a vital issue, and we should reflect in the presence of God on the steps we should take before rushing into action. It is especially important when our decisions affect the lives of others.

Joseph's story shows also how God exercises Joseph's faith and then intervenes to explain what he did not know. Reflection is critical because it allows time to review our thought processes and for God to direct us along the path He wants us to take. The concept of "waiting upon the Lord" is woven throughout the Old Testament. It describes the habit of going into the presence of God in prayer, committing our way to Him, and waiting for His direction. In the words of Proverbs 3:5-6,

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
And lean not on your own understanding;
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct your paths.”

Joseph's answer came through a dream. Today we have the whole of the Bible and the indwelling Holy Spirit to direct and guide us in our daily lives. But God still exercises our faith to learn what it means to live in accord with His will for us. God's will includes what is common to all the children of God. It includes what is specific to our local fellowships and it includes what is specific to our personal lives. In a world and society resistant to the claims of Christ, we are constantly challenged to live for Him in difficult circumstances. Joseph's example encourages us to be just, loving, merciful, thoughtful, patient, and reflective in the steps of faith. His story also teaches us that the Lord will make clear to us the path He wants us to take if we seek His presence.

The angel of the Lord directed Joseph in the most precise way,

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” (verses 20-21).

He begins by reminding Joseph who he was – “the son of David.” Sometimes when we come into God's presence, we do so with a genuine sense of our unworthiness. But God always reminds us of our position before Him in Christ. He assures us of our dignity in Christ. Joseph was a carpenter. But he stood before God as a son of the great king David. And, as with David, “God wasn't looking on the outward appearance, He was looking on the heart .”(see 1 Samuel 16:6-7).

The angel lifts an immense load from Joseph's heart by explaining the miraculous event in Mary's life. She was to be the mother of the Saviour of the world. Joseph was told to call the Child, Jesus, for He would save His people from their sins. Joseph must have experienced joy and peace as he heard the words of the angel. All doubt about Mary's faithfulness was removed. Joseph now knew she would be the mother of the Messiah, and he had the responsibility of being a guardian of the Saviour of the world.

In verse 22, Matthew explains that this revelation was a fulfillment of what God had promised to do in Isaiah 7:14,

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and you shall call His name Immanuel.”

At the end of the chapter, Joseph awakes from his sleep and begins immediately to take up his responsibilities. In obedience, he marries Mary and awaits for the birth of her Son. When the Saviour is born, it is Joseph who calls Him Jesus.

“Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus.” (verses 24-25).

We need to return to the Gospel of Luke to learn the next stage of Joseph's story.

“And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.” (Luke 2:4-5).

It is remarkable to see how God fulfils His prophecy that the Saviour would be born in Bethlehem. Joseph is key to this fulfilment,

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child” (Luke 2:1-5).

Joseph was the lowly relative at the end of a long line of kings. He came from King David's city, Bethlehem, and, in a stable, he witnesses the birth of the Saviour of the world. As a descendant of King David, Joseph was there to welcome into the world, King David's greater son. He witnessed the Creator of the universe entering His creation. Joseph was there too when the shepherds arrived to tell the story of the heavenly host announcing the birth of a Saviour,

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

It is striking that simple local shepherds witnessed the arrival of the Good, the Great, and Chief Shepherd. Eight days later Joseph named Jesus,

“And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb” (Luke 2:21).

Joseph was there with Mary when Simeon, who was told by the Spirit of God that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ, took Jesus in his arms, (see Luke 2:28-33). Astonishingly, the One of whom it is said, "And underneath are the everlasting arms," rested in the arms of Simeon. Joseph and Mary were the subjects too of Simeon's blessing and also heard Anna, the prophetess, giving thanks to God for their Son. All these occasions of joy verified in Joseph's heart who Jesus was. These events must have encouraged him in his responsibility as the guardian of the Son of God. This encouragement increased when the wise men arrived in Bethlehem at the house of Joseph and Mary. I suspect the house the wise men entered was very simple, but in that home, they fell and worshipped Jesus (Matthew 2:11). This was further evidence of the glory of Christ. First, Jesus was worshipped by His faithful people; the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna. Then, Joseph welcomed into his home, Gentile wise men who worshipped Him before presenting their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. God ensured His Son was welcomed into the world by men and women of faith. These events confirmed to Joseph and Mary, the majesty of the Person who was their child.

After the wise men returned home, Joseph's in warned in a second dream to take his family to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). Joseph was a remarkable man of faith. He quietly obeys God and protects his family. Joseph witnessed the incredible story of Christ's entrance into the world. God acted in love and grace. It was while this love and grace were dawning on this world, evil became evident. King Herod, in utter wickedness, slaughtered infants in and around Bethlehem. Joseph fled with Mary and Jesus into Egypt. He stayed there until God told him, in a third dream, that it was safe to return to Israel. Again Joseph immediately responds to God's word and returns to his homeland with Mary and the young Child.

Joseph comes across as a man who was always alert to his surroundings and protective of his family. Spiritual alertness is vital in a world where spiritual, psychological, and physical dangers abound. The Lord Jesus instructs us to watch and pray. This instruction means to be alert to dangers and to take action to avoid them for the well-being of ourselves and those we care about. When Joseph learned Herod's son was reigning over his father's territory, he doesn't go to Bethlehem. Once more, God responds to Joseph's faith, in a fourth dream, to direct him to Galilee and to the town of Nazareth. Matthew refers to a prophecy saying Jesus would be called a Nazarene. This prophecy may be a reference to Isaiah 11:1-2,

“There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.”

These verses refer to the Messiah. The Branch in verse 1 is the Hebrew word, "netzer". Commentators think "netzer" and "Nazarene" are connected. Indeed, the whole idea of Christ emerging out of the obscurity of Nazareth into His powerful ministry fits with this passage. So Nazareth became the home of Jesus Christ. When Nathaniel said, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth" in (John 1:46). It appears it was a place not held in high regard. But it was the town where the Eternal Son of God, who occupied the centre of heaven, grew up. He lived in the home of Joseph, the carpenter. Luke tells us that Jesus went to Nazareth, "...where He had been brought up." The title above the head of Jesus at Calvary was "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

Peter healed the lame man in Jerusalem with the words, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." (Acts 3:6). Paul recalls his conversion on the road to Damascus in Acts 22. In verse 8, he remembers the words spoken to him from heaven by the resurrected and ascended Christ, "I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting." Jesus was not ashamed of Nazareth, which reminds us that Jesus came from all the glory of heaven to where we were. It was from Nazareth the family went each year to worship at Jerusalem. One year when Jesus was twelve, they visited Jerusalem for the feast. As they returned home, Joseph and Mary thought Jesus was with their relatives, but after discovering this was not the case, they went back to the capital. After three days of searching, they found Jesus sitting among the doctors, listening to them, and asking questions. Everyone was astonished by His understanding and answers.

Mary says to Jesus,

"Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously."
And Jesus answered, "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?"

It interesting that Mary spoke of Joseph as Jesus' father. But Jesus spoke of His Father in heaven. They did not understand what Jesus meant, and Jesus returned with them to Nazareth. He was subject to them, and as he grew up in the home at Nazareth, Jesus is described as increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men. That home was the home of Joseph, the carpenter. When Jesus begins his ministry, one of his first disciples is Philip. Philip immediately finds his friend Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." It is a reference to the dignity of the man who cared for the Son of God.

In Matthew 13:55, Jesus is called the "carpenter's son." In Mark 6:3, Jesus is called the "carpenter." Jesus was not only known as the son of the carpenter but as the carpenter. Mark teaches us, in his Gospel, about Jesus as the servant of God. That service embraced an ordinary manual job and even that of a household slave when he washed the disciples' feet. Never let us underestimate the value of every aspect of service for God; however menial it may be. There is a famous story of President Kennedy on a visit to Cape Canaveral. He asked a cleaner what his job was. The cleaner said, "I'm helping to put a man on the moon."

Joseph disappears from the pages of the Bible as quietly as he appeared. Commentators believe he had died by the time Jesus began his ministry. We don't know. But it is incredible to think that day by day for thirty years in the obscurity of Nazareth, the Son of God grew up and worked alongside Joseph. In fact, Jesus probably spent more time with Joseph than anyone else. And it was Joseph, a humble man of royal descent, who was used to give Immanuel the title of "Jesus of Nazareth." I said at the beginning of this talk that Joseph is one of the most overlooked men in the Bible. I believe we should not continue to overlook the spiritual qualities of the man into whose care God chose to place His Son. We never hear Joseph speak. Joseph's voice is the quiet but powerful voice of humility, faith, goodness, mercy, lovingkindness, obedience, courage, provision, protection, peace, hard work, and sacrifice. These attributes are desperately needed in our world today. And Joseph's life is a challenge to every Christian man.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Joseph's story, Matthew chapter 1, talk number T1124.

New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless stated otherwise.

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