

## **Dec 18<sup>th</sup> 2011: "Joseph"....Matthew 1:18-25**

Of all the characters in the Christmas story I think it is Joseph who gets the least attention. Of course our major focus is on Jesus but we also tend to think a lot about Mary, the wise men, the shepherds and the angels, while Joseph is somewhere in the background. Dependable, solid, yet somehow easily forgotten and passed over.

It is Matthew who tells us most about Joseph in his Gospel and whereas Luke emphasizes Mary's part, Matthew focuses more on Joseph's dilemma. Look at Matt 1:19 and note how the character of Joseph is introduced into the story.

*<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.*

This Joseph, who was already set apart to be married to Mary, was a righteous man. Some translations call him a good man. He lived out the Faith he had in God in terms of how he acted. He was honest, dependable, and God fearing.

And then, from what Matthew writes next, we see that Joseph was not just a good man and upstanding citizen, but he was also sensitive and kind as far as Mary was concerned. Though he must have felt betrayed and badly treated when he first heard the news of her pregnancy, his thoughts seem to be of her more than of himself. Something that the husbands amongst us would do well to aspire to when we feel let down or hurt by our wives.

It seems that Joseph was also sensitive to the deep things of the spirit and responded immediately to the instructions given him by the angel which came through four separate dreams. The first is listed here in Matthew 1 and occurs after Mary tells him that she is with child by the Holy Spirit. The second is in Matt 2 when he is told to leave Bethlehem instantly and to flee to Egypt because Herod was intent upon killing the child. The third dream was the one he had in Egypt telling him to return with his family to the land of Israel, and the fourth occurred in Israel itself when he was particularly fearful about proceeding further. That was a dream that didn't give him all the answers—but left him to work some of it out for himself.

The other major thing that both Matthew and Luke tell us about Joseph is that he was of the line of King David. Matthew has the angel announcing this fact when he talks to him and Luke emphasizes this as the reason that Joseph and Mary have to go to Bethlehem for the census. The fact that he was a carpenter is not mentioned in the nativity story at all. Indeed, we would never have known what his occupation was except for a statement made about Jesus in Matthew 13:55 when he was preaching in Nazareth.

*<sup>55</sup> "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?"*

So that is all the Bible actually tells us about Joseph, but I believe that there is something else that his story reveals to us that relates to the cost of being obedient to God. For out of all the nativity characters, including Mary, I believe it was Joseph who had to cope with the most stress. All were obedient to God in some way, but in the case of Mary and Joseph—and in particular Joseph—that obedience was super costly.

The cost began when he realized that Mary was pregnant. The upheaval in his life started from that moment. It was one of those moments that change one's life completely. Suddenly he had a decision to make about his future with Mary and it seems he had decided that the best way out for himself was to divorce her. He had obviously discounted any thought of marrying her. It was only after he heard from the angel that he did so. And he did so because he was obedient to the Lord's command. So straight away being obedient meant taking the pathway of the greatest cost.

Then, even after he had chosen to be obedient, things didn't go smoothly. I often find Christians believing that if they are in the Lord's will then everything will go fantastic with no hiccups or problems. Well that was not the way for Joseph. First was the census and the journey to Bethlehem with a very pregnant wife—a journey of some 140 kilometres. Just about the worst thing that could have happened, Joseph may have thought.

That was until he found that the birth would happen in a stable of all places, with him acting as midwife, provider and security all in one. I'm sure if I had been Joseph I would have been desperately praying..."Lord not tonight..Not here....Just keep the baby safe in the womb for a little longer"...But the Lord had other plans.

And then after the birth when he had settled his small family in Bethlehem, the wise men arrive, rapidly followed by the horrible threat that Herod poses, and the midnight dash to safety in Egypt. How terrible that would have been.

And you can be sure that it was far from easy for Joseph to commit his family to being refugees in a strange land. To establish himself anew in another culture without the benefit of government assistance or the Red Cross.

But again that was all part of being obedient to the Lord. All part of the plans God had for him. And sure enough they all survived....got themselves established, only for the Lord to tell them that they needed to move back to Israel. Move back to a land where Herod's son now reigned. A fact that terrified Joseph and it took another dream to get him moving.

Joseph never stepped out of the centre of God's will, yet for a time there, life moved, it seemed, from one stressful moment to another.

But I'm sure that when Joseph reached the end of his life, he did not focus on those hard times, and other hard times that the Bible doesn't mention. But on the joy he felt

because he had been used by God in His plans for this world. That he had been willing to obey and had persevered despite the cost.

Consequently the Bible verse that I connect with Joseph is a statement that Paul made in 2 Corinthians 4:17

*<sup>17</sup> For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. <sup>18</sup> So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

Or as The Message paraphrase puts it:-

*<sup>16-18</sup> So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever.*

Now I'm sure Joseph would have said "amen" to that. And we who believe in Jesus and have chosen to follow Him need to do so too, because life will not be without its hardships.

We are never told to expect life to flow without any problems once we choose to follow Jesus. But we are promised that God will be alongside us in every problem that comes our way, and will not allow our suffering or our difficulties to be wasted. God will use them to show His love or His power.

There's a Persian legend that tells of a certain king who needed a faithful servant. Two men were candidates for the office so he took both at fixed wages, and his first order was to fill a basket with water from a neighboring well, saying that he would come in the evening and see their work. After putting in one or two bucketfuls, one man said, "What is the good of doing this useless work? As soon as we put the water in one side it runs out the other." The other answered, "But we have our wages, haven't we? The use is the master's business, not ours." "I am not going to do such fool's work," replied the other. Throwing down his bucket, he went away. The other man continued until he had exhausted the well; looking down into it he saw something shining—a diamond ring. "Now I see the use of pouring water into a basket," he cried. "If the bucket had brought up the ring before the well was emptied, it would have been found in the basket. Our work was not useless." Christians must believe that their divine Master knows what is best, and obey His commands, and in due time they will know and understand.—*Christian Herald*.

That's how it was with Joseph. I'm sure there were many times when he couldn't understand why things kept going from bad to worst. Why life seemed so difficult when

all they were doing were obeying God. Yet he persevered, and God used him in a most amazing way.

Bill Hybels' The Power of a Whisper (p.110-111):

"Don't ever buy into the idea that everything God prompts His followers to do will be uncomplicated or low-cost. Sometimes God asks His children to carry heavy loads, as He did with the apostle Paul. But even--and often especially--under those backbreaking burdens, God's purposes are fulfilled. When our (whispered) task is tough, the reward of knowing we've helped further His Kingdom and bettered our broken world is all the sweeter.

"If you ever find yourself with a difficult assignment, why not try giving God thanks for trusting you with something that needs your particular strength. He assigns tasks to the right person every time. He did it throughout history, and He still does it today. As you walk whatever potholed path He has asked you to walk, never forget the tough journey that Jesus Himself once made. ...Christ was asked to bear the most difficult assignment of all--to lay down His life as a redemptive sacrifice for humankind. He chose to obey. And because of His obedience, you and I enjoy our redemption today."