

“Joseph of Bethlehem”  
by Rom A. Pegram (12/9/18)

As we hear the Christmas story over and over and over again, we sometimes become numb to what it really says. Why? Because we’ve heard it all before... But, have we? When many of us think of the town of Nazareth, that we talked about extensively last week, we tend to think Nazareth is the town where Joseph & Mary are from—where Jesus was raised from his youth into adulthood. But, is that right?

Last week, we listened to the start of the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 1. This was primarily the story of Mary and of *the annunciation*—the announcement of the birth of Jesus in Mary’s life by the angel Gabriel. Do you remember?

This week, however, we’re going to be moving to the Gospel of Matthew—to hear Matthew’s version of the start of the Christmas story. Written to two very different audiences, these versions are not exactly the same—two different perspectives of the same story. Let me explain it this way...

If you and I both had witnessed a very exciting event ... and were then telling other people about it, do you think our stories would be exactly the same? Because, after all, we did witness the exact same exciting event! The answer, of course, is ‘no!’ Why? Because, even though it was the same event we witnessed, we’d both have our very different perspectives of that event—very individual ... and maybe colored by a variety of previous experiences in our lives. (It happens between Jane and I all the time; she’ll stop me and say, “No, Rom. That’s not how it went” ... and she’s generally right!)

Today, we’re going to hear from Matthew, writing his account of this story. He’s concerned more with the ‘dad’ of the story (writing to a primarily Jewish audience). That’s where the heritage comes from—in *their* culture. So, let’s go to our scripture today—the start of the Christmas story from the Gospel of Matthew... Listen (Matthew 1:18-24, NLT):

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. <sup>20</sup> As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. ‘Joseph, son of David,’ the angel said, ‘do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ <sup>22</sup> All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet: <sup>23</sup> ‘Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’ <sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife.”

Folks, let me set up how things probably took place, based on these two Gospel accounts. Though we love to blend the Gospel narratives, if we do a careful study of these two Gospel accounts, we’ll find that Nazareth was Mary’s hometown ... and I’m

pretty sure Bethlehem was Joseph's hometown. (Joseph living in Nazareth is not mentioned until later on in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus would have been a young boy.)

Well, Joseph & Mary were engaged at this time; they'd gone through a legally binding ceremony. *In a Middle-Eastern sense, they were already married.* All that was left was the official ceremony, the consummation of the marriage, the honeymoon, and the move to *Joseph's* home, which typically happened one year after the betrothal. It was during this in-between time that Joseph found out Mary was pregnant...

If you remember, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth (Ein Karem), who she'd found out (from the angel) was 6 months pregnant. While staying with Elizabeth (a short distance from Bethlehem), Joseph would have come there to visit Mary ... and that's when he would've found out she was pregnant. Folks, here's what you need to know about Joseph, the "dad" in the Christmas story: Joseph was...

**A CARPENTER (from Bethlehem)...** Joseph was a craftsman; since there was little wood in Israel, he probably made specialty items like furniture, farm tools, or doors or roofs for houses. (The language also lends itself to the possibility of Joseph being a stonemason, since that was the primary building material of this area...)

In the language of the day, Joseph was a *tekton*. He was not an *arch-tekton* (architect), but only a *tekton*—not a master-builder, but a humble woodworker. Joseph, folks, was blue-collar. He was more than likely a man with a great work ethic—a hardworking man of great humility. That's who I think of when I think of Joseph. And...

Joseph was also *from Bethlehem*—not originally from Nazareth... Unlike Nazareth, this little town of Bethlehem (though about the same size) was *very well known!* *This was the birthplace of King David*—also known, along with Jerusalem, as the City of David. *This was the burial place of Old Testament (Jacob's) Rachel*—just outside of Bethlehem.

*It was also a place known because of the prophets*, like Micah (5:2, NLT), who said: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past." They were famous because of prophecy and...

Like Nazareth, Bethlehem was a place of special meaning! Bethlehem = House of Bread; in other words, as its name suggests, it was known for its bakers—their bread sold in Jerusalem. Let's go on; Joseph was also...

**A RIGHTEOUS MAN...** When we meet Joseph in Matthew's story, he has just found out his fiancé was pregnant!

Apparently, Joseph didn't believe her story about the angel, a baby from God, and so on; the first thing he did was try to break off the engagement. The only logical explanation was that Mary'd been unfaithful to him...

You can just imagine how Joseph felt upon learning of Mary's apparent unfaithfulness. He would have felt 'betrayed.' He would've been devastated by this news! How could Mary do this? Betrayed? Yes! And *dishonored ... and humiliated ... and hurt* by Mary and 'the other man.' As Mary tried to explain how she came to be pregnant, I can just see Joseph rolling his eyes, hurt giving way to anger! Joseph's

whole world would've been shaken by this news. *His trust had been violated*. Scripture doesn't tell us this, but you could just imagine that in his anger, he might've reminded Mary of what the law says about women who were adulterous and how they were to be put to death—by stoning...

But, folks, I want you to notice something: ***At the very moment Joseph felt at his lowest, God was at work in Mary's womb, doing the greatest thing he'd done since the creation of the world!*** When it comes to following God, *sometimes we need to take a breath ... and take the time to look beyond the pain ...* because that's usually where God is! And, also know this (from Joseph)...

***When we open up our hearts to God—truly allowing God to steer our lives, we'll always choose relationships over law!*** That's exactly what Joseph did; once the anger subsided, he listened to God and chose Mary for his wife. He was a righteous man—a man who would follow God's lead, no matter what ... and do it humbly! But, also, let's not forget this Joseph of Bethlehem became...

**AN EARTHLY FATHER...** When my kids were younger, even though I feel sometimes that I failed more often than I succeeded, my prayer was always that my kids—through my life and my actions as their earthly father—would come to know the Heavenly Father in a personal way in their own lives. Again, I feel many times that I failed more often than I succeeded, but that was my prayer—*always!* In other words, through my very life, I wanted them to know what God the Heavenly Father was like...

While we don't see this explicitly in the Gospel narratives, we can infer from the life & teachings of Jesus what a profound impact Joseph had on Jesus...

- When Jesus looked for a metaphor to describe his relationship to God, his primary way of addressing God was *Abba*, which literally means 'daddy'—more than likely how he referred to Joseph, too...
- In Jesus' teachings (Prodigal Son), he likened God to a father who showed mercy to a son who was rebellious, while showing patience to an older son who had judged the younger; could this be a reflection of Jesus' life with Joseph?

We learn from our fathers, don't we? We can't help (for better or worse) to be shaped by those who raise us. Here's something else...

Assuming Joseph was a younger man when he married, and Jesus was born, he would have lived his life under one ruler—*Herod the Great*. If we look to Herod's activity around Bethlehem, during Joseph's life, we can see quite a contrast between Herod the King and Joseph the carpenter. This is worth considering, if you'd take a moment with me; look at these contrasts...

Herod  
Desperately wanted praise, admiration, and love of others...

Hoped to be seen as the Messiah

Joseph  
He got no lines! He was a humble man...

Content with being the earthly father of the

the prophets foretold (even if he didn't meet the criteria)...	Messiah...
Hoped to restore the greatness of the Jewish kingdom through massive building projects...	No ego; a humble carpenter who worked with his own hands...
Loved the wealth & power that came with being 'king'...	Lived a life of simplicity and humility, seeking primarily to please God (not self)...
Constantly working to prove his own greatness to others (left monuments: Herodium)...	Left no monuments, except for his righteous influence on Jesus and rest of family...
No servant's heart!	A total servant's heart!

Herod's palace, folks, was located adjacent to Bethlehem—seen from nearly anywhere in Bethlehem, Joseph's hometown... Whether they liked it or not, their lives were a *daily* contrast! So, let's end here with this part of the Christmas story: Who will you choose to be: a *Herod* or a *Joseph*?

- Will you be Herod, who spent his life seeking to win the praise of others and pursuing wealth, power, and material possessions, and who by his actions seemed to say, "Here I am, notice me!"?
- Or, will you be Joseph, who was a humble servant of God, who never sought the limelight, and who was willing to say, "Here I am, God. Use me."

It's true God favors the humble over the proud. God's greatest work in our lives may be difficult and challenging, and we may never get recognition or praise from others, but is that the point? We're called to serve anyway, seeking nothing more than God's approval. The only glory we should be concerned about ... is the kind God gets... Will you choose to be a Herod ... or a Joseph? Which would God be more pleased with?