

Joseph – the Stand-In Father

Matthew 1 + 2, Luke 2

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My name is Joseph, son of Jacob – no, not THAT Joseph and Jacob. They were my ancestor, for I descended from the proud line of the kings of Israel, and before that, could trace my lineage back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Rather, I am Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth. I could build the finest cradles, tables, chairs, and other furniture; carve the best plows, and build homes. I had my own shop in Nazareth, a small village about 8 miles from Sea of Galilee. It was the shop that my father Jacob owned before me, and his father Matthan owned before him. So it was passed down several generations until I took it over.

Nazareth is a quiet village where you know everyone – and their business. When I turned 25, my parents chose a young girl in the village to be my wife. I understand that parents don't choose a bride for their sons anymore – at least in YOUR culture. But in Nazareth, and indeed in all of Israel, that was the practice.

The one they chose for me was a 12-year-old girl named Mary. Now Mary was a beautiful girl and I loved her dearly, even though her family was poor and could not afford a rich dowry. My own family was poor too, so that was not an issue. We would become betrothed and that would last for a year. At the end of the year we would be married. She had the prettiest smile that would light up a room – or a carpenter's shop in my case. Did I mention that I loved her? That is important because something happened during that year that shook my faith in her and challenged our relationship.

Mary was a quiet girl, and a dreamer. She planned carefully before making any rash decisions. She often kept things to herself – her thoughts, her plans, her feelings.

One day Mary announced to me, and to her family, that she was going away for a short time to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who lived in Judea with her husband Zachariah, a Levite who served in the Temple. I watched her go as she disappeared in the distance. I wondered at the time why she would go so far away – for no apparent reason – during our betrothal. Later I found out that Elizabeth and Zachariah were going to have a baby – A BABY – in their old age – and Elizabeth was six months along with her baby that was due in the summertime.

When Mary returned, I noticed she was not the same. She was withdrawn and staying to herself. What could be wrong? What had happened? Then it dawned on me – Mary was with child – My MARY was going to have a baby, and I knew it wasn't mine. I

was in a terrible predicament. How would I deal with this? I knew that the women of the village would soon know about Mary's baby. Gossip would begin each day at the well outside the village where the women of the town gathered each morning and evening to get fresh water for their family – and to catch up on the latest gossip – I mean news.

Something like that would soon get around. I knew the law and knew that I had to take some kind of action. But what could I do? I knew the options. I could marry her right away; I could divorce her publicly; I could divorce her privately; or I could accuse her of adultery and have her stoned. I decided that I would sleep on it before making any hasty decision. In the morning I would give her a private divorce so that she would not be stoned, and I would keep my reputation.

That night I had a visit from an angel – a real, live angel in a dream who told me not to be afraid to take Mary as my wife, for the child she was carrying was placed there by God Himself. Has an angel ever spoken to you? If it has, then you know it is a momentous occasion. It would not be the last time an angel spoke to me, but it scared me, nevertheless.

Well, in the morning I made my way to Mary's house and asked to speak to her. Her mother brought her to the door. I could see that Mary had been up all night and crying – knowing that she might be stoned that day at the worst, or divorced by me at the very least. She did not want to lose me, but she knew that was the probable outcome. Instead, I put my arm around her and told her what the angel of the Lord had told me last night in a dream that I was to marry her right away. I told her that the angel said she was going to have a son and we were to give Him the name Jesus, which is a shortened version of the name Joshua. The angel also said that Jesus would also be known as Emmanuel – which means “**God with us**”.

Then she told me how the angel of the Lord had appeared to her several months earlier – before she went to see Elizabeth, and told her the same thing and asked her if she would be willing to be the mother of the Messiah. That day Mary and I were married in a private ceremony, attended only by her family and mine.

That didn't stop the gossip, of course, but I learned how strong my Mary was. She held her head high, and I continued to work in my carpenter shop.

Then word reached the village that Augustus Caesar – that despicable ruler in Rome, who wanted excessive taxes from every Jew already, was requiring that every male Jew go to the town of his ancestors to register. We weren't sure why we were registering. Was it to get even **more** taxes from us? Was it to force us to fight in his armies? Was it to know how many people he was ruling over? Whatever the reason, every one of us men was going to go back to our ancestral heritage. That meant that I would need to travel to Bethlehem, a little town about six miles south of Jerusalem – about seventy-three miles from my home town of Nazareth. It would be an arduous journey to say the least, and I almost decided not to go because Mary was about to give

birth to her child. I couldn't leave her in Nazareth and travel so far away at a time when she needed me the most.

Mary decided that she was going to go with me. Well, there was no way she could handle a trip like that in **HER** condition. What if she had the baby on the way? What if she had a problem with the delivery? Where would they find a midwife in the wilderness? No, she would have to stay home until the baby was born – there just wasn't any other option.

I hadn't counted on the stubbornness of Mary. Once she makes up her mind, **NO** one is going to change it – least of all **ME!** So I took our donkey, loaded it with supplies for the journey – and with Mary and our soon-to-be-born son, we began the long wearisome trip across the Jordan River at the southern end of the Sea of Galilee, and along the Jordan River as it made its way toward the Dead Sea.

We weren't the only ones traveling toward Jerusalem or Bethlehem, of course. Lots of people were going to register at the home town of their ancestors. It was a journey we [or at least **I**] have made – going to Jerusalem to visit the Temple at least three times a year, when possible. I went there for the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, and Yom Kippur [our holiest day of the year when we fasted until sunset and spent the day in prayers and offering sacrifices to God]. So the journey was not a new one for me.

The travelers stayed together so that we would be safe from thieves and wild animals. There is strength in numbers, you know. I didn't mind the journey, but I knew it **HAD** to be so hard on Mary in her condition, riding that donkey – mile after bumpy mile. And the donkey could get downright temperamental as we traveled. But Mary did not complain. She **DID** say that she would be glad when we arrived in Bethlehem where all the descendants of King David were headed. After all, it was known as the City of David.

I didn't realize there **WERE** so many descendants of King David. It seemed like all the Jews were headed in the same direction. We crossed the Jordan again to the side of Israel where we were near the town of Jericho. On the steep climb from Jericho to Jerusalem, Mary and I had to slow down and the caravan got ahead of us. Up in the distance we could see the Holy Temple and the walled city of Jerusalem, and our hearts were filled with joy. We knew that it would not be long now until we were in Bethlehem.

It was late afternoon when we arrived in Jerusalem. We stopped to eat for Mary was hungry and thirsty – and then we headed for our destination – Bethlehem.

The sun was beginning to set in the west over the Mediterranean Sea when we arrived at our beloved city. Now it was up to me to find a place for us to stay until we were registered as Augustus Caesar had commanded, and a comfortable room where

Mary could have her baby. She had begun her labor when we left Jerusalem, so it was imperative that I find a room quickly.

I knew that it would not be easy finding a room because the town of Bethlehem usually had only a thousand residents, but now there were easily eight-thousand filling every space and room in town. But I had to try because I knew the birth of the baby was very near. In desperation, I asked the innkeeper if there was any room available.

“Not one.” was his reply.

Then after seeing Mary and her condition, he offered a small space to be shared with the animals. It was the best he could do. I took it so I could get Mary to a secluded place where the baby could be born.

And so it was when we had both settled into our cramped quarters, surrounded by the lowing of the cattle, the bleating of the sheep, and the hew-hawing of the donkeys – and the odors of the stalls, that a Son was born – not just **ANY** Son, but the **SON of GOD**.

Any birth is special and every parent is sure that their child is more beautiful than any other baby, but we knew – God had sent His angel to tell Mary and then me – that **THIS** baby would become the **Savior** of the world, and the **King of the Jews**.

What an entrance into the world – for the God who created the universe to become one of us – a human baby who would change the history of the world.

How happy I am that I did not quietly divorce Mary because I thought she had been unfaithful to me. I am thrilled that one day an angel came to me – to **ME**, Joseph the son of Jacob – and gave me the good news that our Messiah would be born to my beloved Mary.

I still have trouble believing the miracle of God being in human flesh. Thank you for taking the time to hear my story. I hope you will tell my story to others, until the whole world knows about Jesus.

We never celebrated what you good folks call Christmas. But our family never stopped thanking God for the privilege of personally knowing Jesus. Do **YOU** know Him? I hope so.