



The Forgotten Person in the Christmas Story

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As the Christmas season approaches, the believer's thoughts are focused once again on the miracle of incarnation. The Apostle Paul, in awe of the marvelous event, observes that "without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16). Much of the teaching and preaching of the account of the first Christmas rightly focuses on the One who as the eternal creator God became man in order to minister to man and give His life for man's redemption (Matt. 20:28). As the story of Christmas is recounted, special emphasis is usually placed on a variety of individuals who play an integral part in that delightful event. Besides the infant Immanuel, preachers, teachers, and parents focus naturally on His mother Mary, the surprised shepherds, the heavenly host, the haughty Herod, the searching scribes, the worshipping wise men, and even the shining star. There is one person who normally receives little or no recognition in the drama of the incarnation. That individual is Joseph, the legal father of Jesus, being "the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ" (Matt. 1:16).

The Humble Individual

While Joseph is frequently ignored in the Christmas story, and the Gospel statements concerning him are few and simple, he nonetheless holds a very important place in God's plan for His Son. After all, Joseph gave Him protection, gave Him His name (Matt. 1:21, 25), a home and a vocation (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3).

Joseph was a carpenter, an artisan either in wood or stone (Matt. 13:55) who belonged to Nazareth (Luke 2:4), of Davidic descent (Matt. 1:20; Luke 2:4).

After the divine urging to take Mary as his wife he traveled with her to Bethlehem to be taxed. It was there that Christ was born and visited by the shepherds (Luke 2:8–20) and worshipped by the Magi from the East (Matt. 2:1–11). Escaping Herod's wrath, Joseph took Mary and his child to Egypt (Matt. 2:13, 14). Upon Herod's death he returned with them to Israel, eventually settling in Nazareth (Matt. 2:22, 23).

Subsequent to the birth of Jesus, there were sons and daughters born to Joseph and Mary (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). When Jesus was twelve years old, Joseph and Mary took Him with them to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. There the divine record concerning Joseph ends. It is fairly certain that Joseph died before the Lord's crucifixion (John 19:27), being apparently advanced in age.

Digging Deeper

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The High Importance

Joseph is of great importance in several respects. It is worthwhile to note his ancestry, spirituality, and fidelity. As a legal heir to the Davidic throne (Matt. 1:20; Luke 2:4) he passed on the royal right to his adopted Son to be the future Davidic ruler who will occupy the throne of David during the Millennium as promised to Mary (Luke 1:32, 33).

Further, Joseph was a man of exceptional spiritual caliber. He is called a just man. He was righteous in his standing and in his actions and thus a suitable instrument for God's gracious purpose in the incarnation of Immanuel. Thirdly, Joseph was a man of fidelity. He was faithful not only to Mary but also to God. He was completely dependable. When God spoke to him he responded with immediate and unquestioning obedience. What an illustration for each believer! Joseph must not be ignored. He is important as a progenitor of Christ a protector of the Savior, and a pattern for believers.

The Heavenly Instructions

Not a single word by Joseph was ever recorded and yet he was blessed with repeated revelations from God. Interestingly, each time Joseph was asleep, and apparently each time God used an angel. In each case a divine command was given and Joseph responded immediately. Each imperative related to the divine-human infant of whom Joseph had been appointed the paternal protector. Christ's heavenly Father assigned to the earthly father the task of caring for and protecting the holy Child and His mother. The first divine directive, given in Nazareth, was to "Marry Mary!" (Matt. 1:20). The angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. Perhaps it was Gabriel, the same angel who appeared to Mary earlier (Luke 1:26). He was betrothed to Mary who was pregnant. Ignorant of the reason for Mary's condition and not wishing to expose her to public disgrace, Joseph had in view to divorce Mary quietly rather than institute a public lawsuit. In his love for Mary, he was willing to take on himself the dishonor.

The angelic message must have filled him with joy, for Mary's and his own sake. He would be Mary's provider and protector, defending her honor. The angel further instructed, "You are to give him the name Jesus" (Matt. 1:23).

The second angelic command is, "Escape to Egypt!" (Matt. 2:13). God took action to protect him, warning him to "arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt." Egypt was a natural refuge. It was nearby, a well-ordered Roman province outside of Herod's jurisdiction. According to Philo (c. A.D. 40) Egypt's population included about a million Jews.

Joseph promptly obeyed. In the middle of the night he set out on the seventy-five mile journey to the border. Joseph asked no questions and did not even wait until he could purchase provisions. He waited on God to guide and provide. The believer might well emulate Joseph's piety.

The third dream occurred upon the death of Herod. The command was, "Proceed to Palestine!" (Matt. 2:19). Herod, the human monster, died of a most loathsome disease on April 4, 4 B.C. Josephus summarizes Herod's life thus: "He was a man of great barbarity toward all men equally, and a slave to his passions." The angel instructed Joseph to take the young Child and His mother back to the land of Israel. He was not told where to go and yet he demonstrated once again immediate obedience. In his faith and obedience Joseph is a man of spiritual simplicity. May every believer learn to walk one step at a time until further guidance is given.

The fourth revelation came in a dream while he was back in Israel. The command came to "Go to Galilee!" (Matt. 2:22). Joseph apparently purposed to settle in Bethlehem near Jerusalem, the holy city and the temple, for the sake of his foster Son. Yet he was fearful when he heard that Herod's son Archelaus was now ruling in Judea. Archelaus had inherited his father's malicious nature. Joseph's hesitancy as to where to live was removed when God appeared in a dream. Perhaps God used an angel as He did three times previously.

In moving his family to Nazareth, Joseph was fulfilling a general Old Testament prophecy that Jesus Christ would be called "a Nazarene." The term was probably a synonym for "disdained," "despised," or "contemptible." The reputation of Nazareth made it a most unsuitable place for the residence of the Messiah. And yet here, too, Joseph's godliness was displayed in humility. He did what the heavenly Father commanded the earthly father of the Savior to do.

Four commands are given to Joseph: "Marry Mary!" "Escape to Egypt!" "Proceed to Palestine!" and "Go to Galilee!" In each situation Joseph showed an aspect of his spirituality. He who never spoke a word in the Scriptures speaks volumes through his life. As a man of loyalty, piety, simplicity, and humility he is a pattern for every believer. May he not be the forgotten person in this year's Christmas story.