

# The Carpenter's Son

by Steve Zeisler

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One famous carol reflects the usual focus of Christmas with the words: "Silent night, holy night, All is calm, all is bright, /Round yon virgin mother and child." The first Christmas is about the birth of a baby and centers on a mother and her child. Clearly, Mary's experience is one of the central events of Christian faith, and she is one of the most important individuals in history.

But I would like to consider the Christmas story from Joseph's perspective as the other parent in this picture. Historically, Joseph is much less significant than Mary. But it is interesting to me to see that modern Christmases now emphasize the role of men perhaps more than the role of women. Fathers play a more significant role than mothers. This is the season when fathers, in their role as providers for their families, give gifts. The figures that are popular in our contemporary culture are Father Christmas in Europe and Santa Claus in this country. We sing of God's rest to merry gentlemen and good King Wenceslas. Annually we hear the account of Ebenezer Scrooge being transformed from a hardhearted miser into someone who appreciates the spirit of the season. All of the main figures in our contemporary celebration of Christmas are men. Since our modern thinking gives men a significant place in this season as providers for those they love, it may be helpful for us to consider what Christmas meant to Joseph. What part did he play in the story?

The gospel of Luke was probably written with Mary's memories providing the facts behind the story. In Matthew's gospel more attention is given to Joseph's role in these events, and we should turn there to see Joseph most clearly. Matthew 1: 18-25:

**Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins." Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel," which translated means, "God with us." And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife; and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.**

Mary is the dominant figure in the Bible accounts of these days. She and her role were foretold to us by the prophet Isaiah whose words are quoted in this passage: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive." Mary was anticipated centuries before her time. She lived through the life, death and resurrection of Christ and was, we can assume, a member of the early church.

The angel Gabriel promised her that every generation after her would count her blessed. And certainly they have! She has been revered and honored, and her example has been followed in generation after generation. The hymn that she wrote to the greatness of her God, The Magnificat, is one of the most well-- known passages in Scripture. Beloved and chosen of God, she has had an influence in every generation.

Joseph had none of these things. His role in the birth and growth of Jesus is not predicted by the prophets. We can assume that he did not even live to see Jesus' adulthood. There is no mention of Joseph after Jesus' twelfth birthday. The best guess is that he died while Jesus was a teenager, so he did not figure in the gospel accounts of Jesus' adult ministry. Joseph has exerted little influence upon the generations that followed him. There was no angelic promise that his name would be blessed in every generation. Clearly, Joseph is less prominent in the Scriptures than Mary.

Because of the different responsibilities they were given by God, I think we must assume that Mary and Joseph asked different questions in their response of faith. As the birth of her baby took place under unusual and dangerous conditions, Mary must have asked, as the contemporary carol reminds us, "What child is this?" He was her baby and would become her Lord, a process that Simeon predicted would "pierce her soul."

Joseph's question was perhaps a simpler one. Since his role was not predicted for him, Joseph may well have asked, "What may I contribute to this one? How may I serve him?" When the wise men from the East came bearing gifts, recognizing that the child deserved their offerings of gold, frankincense and myrrh, Joseph must have wondered what he could offer.

Joseph was in a unique position to ask because he was chosen of God not only to be present at Jesus' birth, but he was also the man from whom Jesus would learn as he grew.

Joseph would be the one who would first set in the mind of Jesus Christ what it means to be a man of God. Joseph asked, "What can I give this one?" An answer suggested to us in Scripture is his godly character which came from a heart submitted to and shaped by his Lord. Throughout his life, what Joseph had to offer was the example of what it means to be God's man.

His heavenly Father could have taught Jesus godliness through any means. Certainly, Jesus learned from the Scriptures. He spent time in the temple as reflected in the event on his twelfth birthday when he stayed behind in Jerusalem to worship and said, "Must I not be in my Father's house?" Jesus also learned directly from the Spirit and from his prayer communication with his heavenly Father. But I am convinced that he also learned from the example of his stepfather. Thus, in his longing to give something, Joseph gave Jesus the example of what it means to be God's servant. Because Jesus accepted his gift and learned from him, we can see in Jesus' maturity not only his heavenly Father reproduced in him but also an echo of his earthly stepfather as well. "What can I give him?" a heart that loves God. This is what Joseph offered to this newborn baby.

Let me suggest three of Joseph's qualities that will help us to see what kind of man he was. These same characteristics will show up in Jesus' adult life because he learned them in some measure from Joseph.

First, Joseph was a man with a sympathetic and tender heart. Look at verse 19: "Joseph, her (Mary's) husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly." Among Jews of the first century, the period of betrothal was a significant time. Engagement to be married was much more important to them than it is to us. Since it was a binding, legal arrangement, a partner could not lightly call it off. In effect, there had to be a public divorce. Because of the deep commitment between the man and the woman, Joseph could be spoken of as Mary's betrothed and as her husband even before their marriage.

To his sorrow, Joseph must have heard that his betrothed, who had been away for three months visiting her cousin, was pregnant. Before he even had a chance to speak to her, his instinctive response was, "How can I take care of her reputation?" We can only assume that Joseph must have believed that Mary preferred some other man to himself. He could not have guessed that it was the activity of God that produced her pregnancy. He must have thought that Mary had chosen to be intimate with someone else.

And yet, instead of claiming his rights, defending himself or salving his own wounds Joseph instinctively responded, "Let me put her away secretly so that she doesn't have to face public shame." He sought some way to be good to Mary even at a time when he must have assumed that she had been unfaithful. I think this inner commitment to be tender--to be good to others, to not assert his own rights, to look for a way of being a blessing--was what Jesus must have seen time after time, day after day, all the years that he grew up. This is the kind of man Joseph was; he was always looking for a way to do good and to bring blessing to the people he loved even though they might have hurt him.

I often have occasion to look closely at Christian marriages (including my own) because of my work as a pastor. What I see as a characteristic pattern is an announced willingness from the beginning to be loving "no matter what" to have agape love fill the relationship. We say, "I will give with no expectation of being given to in return." The announcement is made from the first, but then comes the terrible difficulty of learning to live

this way. The awful realization dawns on us that what we really want is to be given at least as much as we give. We are willing to serve but have every expectation to be served in return. There is a price to everything; it may be subtle and difficult to quantify, but it is there. In the back of our minds, we keep track of how much we sacrifice, and we expect to be given that amount in return. Agape love does not come to us quickly or naturally.

The maturity of Joseph's love for Mary is striking, therefore. He might have said, "This is unfair! I don't deserve this. I will be treated differently!" But he chose to say, "How can I bring a blessing to this one whom I have loved? How can I put her away in secret and give to her the freedom to be with whom she wishes without shaming her in the process?"

Joseph offered Jesus, as he grew into manhood, the example of a heart that had been taught by God to respond in a loving fashion. Joseph modeled agape love and Jesus learned from him.

Secondly, Joseph provided for and protected his family. First, he provided the protection of marriage to Mary. When he realized that she was pregnant not because she preferred another man but because of the sovereign activity of God, he married her immediately to protect her as much as he could from whatever accusations might be made against her. He also protected her when they took the difficult journey from Galilee to Bethlehem during the ninth month of her pregnancy. As the story continues in Matthew 2, he protected the mother and child from the murderous intent of Herod, a maniacal king who would not hear of another named king of the Jews.

When God sent them to Egypt, it was Joseph who protected his family from all the buffeting of the dangerous travel to a strange land. And Joseph led them home to Nazareth when it was safe. He also provided for his family a home and sustenance through his carpentry. He chose to give to the Lord Jesus who was born into his home all the protection and provision that a father can offer to his family. With whatever courage was required in whatever difficulties that arose, Joseph surrounded his family with a protective hedge.

One of the awful tragedies of our modern society is the desertion of families by fathers. We read today of the feminization poverty, women raising children without fathers in city after city and town after town. Sometimes, the fathers have been defeated by their circumstances. They have sought employment and could not find it. Though they long to serve their family, they have somehow been prevented from doing so. In other cases, the choice has been made for self-serving reasons--men preferring to serve their own interests rather than to care for their families. For whatever reason, the result is a great tragedy. The modern world is seeing many of its children raised without fathers to protect and provide for them.

Joseph offered a father's protection as a gift to his family. The Lord had called him to be the one to lead, to care for and to protect this mother and child throughout the difficulties they faced--the hatred of Herod and all the violence aimed at this child from the time he was born. Joseph had to stand between his family and danger. I'm convinced that Jesus' willingness to care for the needy and unprotected was learned, in some measure, from Joseph's life.

Joseph had a third characteristic that I would like to emphasize. In verse 20, the angel said to Joseph, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." In verse 24, we are told, "Joseph arose from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took her as his wife." In 2:13, 14, we read:

**Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise and take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." And he arose and took the Child and His mother by night, and departed for Egypt;**

In verses 20 and 21, we read of the angel speaking again:

**"Arise and take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead." And he arose and took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.**

The pattern is repeated three times in almost the same words. It cannot be an accident! Matthew is telling us something about Joseph. His obedience is immediate. He does not argue, nor does he hesitate. He does not think of some way to postpone it. He does not rationalize. He does what he is told to do by the Lord. Joseph was an obedient man, and he offered this unhesitant obedience to his son as a picture of the way a man of God should live.

Jesus met a centurion, a Roman officer, during his ministry and was impressed by him for this very reason. During their discussion, the centurion made an interesting point about himself, "I am a man under authority with soldier, under me. I have a commander, and I do what my commander tells me. And it is precisely on that basis that my men follow me. I expect obedience from them. I am someone who obeys the one who commands me, and I am in a position to lead and command those who are subordinate to me." Jesus saw in his stepfather the same character as that of the Roman centurion. Joseph obeyed God and was able to direct Jesus toward a life of obedience.

There are many things I wish my children would do, but they steadfastly refuse if I am hypocritical. For example, I have a terrible habit of neglecting to use a seatbelt when driving. However, I want very much to teach my children to always wear theirs. But every time I suggest that they wear them, the lecture falls flat unless I am belted in myself. Their response is, "You are not under authority. You don't obey the rules. Why should we obey you?"

It is difficult to pass on the notion of obedience to someone when you do not obey yourself. I command, in stern tones, "Say 'please' and 'thank you' to your mother when you speak to her!" Do I say "please" and "thank you" to her? This determines whether or not they are going to learn what they ought to obey. Do they see their father exhibiting the same kind of obedience to proper authority as he expects of them?

Joseph was a man who was under orders. When the angel of the Lord said to do something, he said, "Yessir!" And he did it without hesitancy or reservations. He wanted to do what God asked of him. And God the Father chose Joseph to raise the boy who would one day obey the commandment to give up his life. Jesus learned obedience from the example of Joseph.

Joseph had himself to offer to the newborn baby. He stood out because of the agape love with which he responded to circumstances. If Mary had betrayed him, and he must have assumed that she had, that did not matter as much as the blessing he could be to her. He was also a man willing to do the long, hard work of providing for and protecting his family because they needed him, despite circumstances that were dangerous and demanding. And he was a man of consistent obedience. When God spoke to him, he obeyed from his heart without fighting against the one who had spoken. These qualities he offered to his son as a gift.

He was not a prominent player in the drama. He was not a figure predicted by the prophets. He was not even allowed to live to see the adulthood of Jesus and to see him sacrificed to save the world. In fact, there is no record in the New Testament that Joseph even said a word.

Certainly he did speak, but we have no record of his words. Even the angelic visits took place at night in his dreams. Mary and Zechariah both spoke face to face with angels, but Joseph had angels tell him what to do without any interaction. At the incident in the temple when Jesus was 12 years old, Mary and Joseph both returned for the boy, but it was Mary who interviewed him. Joseph said nothing. Mary was a voluble and outspoken person. The magnificent burst forth from her as a hymn of praise. It was Mary who pondered and asked questions, who interacted with people and who questioned her son as to his behavior. But we have no record that Joseph said anything.

The implication is that the impact he has on Jesus' life was not because of his vocal teaching of the truth. He was not an outspoken man. He was not someone who could influence the world with his language, his ideas, or his genius. He was not a leader in the community, nor was he admired as a rabbi or teacher. He was not a wealthy man who could pass on his authority. He was an ordinary man, a quiet man. But he was chosen by God to be the father figure for Jesus because of his character.

Compared to Mary, he was a minor character in the drama. But he must have come asking, "What can I give? What role can I play? What service can I offer?" He learned over the next years of his life that what he had to offer was his heart and his character. He offered agape love, provision and protection, and obedience without questioning. These things he could give, and I am convinced that Jesus accepted this gift. In his adult ministry, you can see not only the heavenly Father's imprint on his personality, but Joseph's in some measure as well.

Jesus is spoken of as a "son" in many ways. The Scriptures tell us unequivocally that he is God's Son. He is also Adam's son. Descended from Adam, he became the one who reversed the tragedy of Adam's race. He also rules in Israel with the scepter of David as David's son. But an interesting incident in Nazareth suggests one other way in which he was a son. At one point in his ministry, when his fame was spreading everywhere, Jesus returned to his home town. The people did not want to believe that he was a prophet, nor did they want to believe all the rumors about him. Therefore, they said, "We know this man. He is the carpenter's son, whose family we also know." Even though they chose not to believe what they had heard about Jesus, the people of Nazareth paid an interesting tribute to the quiet husband of Mary. What they saw in Jesus was Joseph. Some skill or likeness, some memory of Joseph, remained with him. Thus, they called him the carpenter's son.

At Christmas, we should not just ask, "What will I give to my loved ones? How much can I spend on family and friends?" It is worth asking as well, "What will I give to the Lord who has given so much to me?" He has everything. He is exalted at the right hand of God. He is the Sovereign of all creation. "What do I have to offer him?" Joseph may have been the first to ask this question.

What does he need from us? What can we give him that he would appreciate? Remember David's words in Psalm 51:15 17:

**O Lord, open my lips,  
That my mouth may declare Thy praise.  
For Thou dost not delight in sacrifice,  
otherwise I would give it;  
Thou art not pleased with burnt offering.  
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.**

What David learned through his own hard and tragic life was that the thing God wants from us is a broken and repentant heart given to him--a heart that will be changed by the love of God. The character that grows from this kind of heart is beautiful to behold. We can offer him agape love as Joseph loved, a willingness to care for the needy and the dependent as Joseph did, and an obedience that does not hesitate as Joseph's did not. These can be offered to the Lord as our gift.

Think about your own life. In what specific area of your life can you repent and be changed? Are you willing to have your heart broken? What choice of obedience and renewal of character can you give to the Lord? In what areas have you resisted him? Allow him to direct your thoughts, and then pray that he will make you the kind of person who has something to give him, who has a Christian character to give to him, the carpenter's son.

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