



This year, enter into the stories of the minor and not-so-minor characters who played a part in Jesus' birth, and see the most important character—Jesus Christ—with new eyes. And with discussion questions and a Christmas song suggestion for each chapter, it's perfect for engaging your whole family.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Joseph, the Unsung Hero of Christmas

*Matthew 1:18–25*

*When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.*

MATTHEW 1:24

As I write this I am about to go with my family to the wedding of one of my former interns. Weddings are beautiful events. The groom stands tall, beaming with joy as his bride walks down the aisle escorted by her father. They grasp hands, they light candles, and they make vows, some with difficult words envisioning faithfulness through difficult times:

For better or for worse  
In sickness and in health  
As long as we both shall live

I remember my own wedding, standing there as a young, nervous twenty-four-year-old. I couldn't have envisioned then what I know now: a union that will bring us untold joy will also test us in ways we cannot see. I repeated the words "in sickness and in health," but

let's be honest. I wasn't thinking of the full implications of that vow. I didn't quite envision emergency room trips, expensive medical bills, and caring for a spouse when they are very sick. And very few who stand and say "for better or for worse" picture bouts of depression, lingering addiction, and aging.

So I watch my young intern tie the knot, I imagine the big dreams he has for his future life with his new bride. It all seems so upwardly mobile, a glide path to success and happiness. Careers, children, houses, vacations, ministry.

And so it was with Joseph in the Christmas story. His longings were probably quite different than the American dream, but as a young man betrothed but not yet married to his bride, he surely had plans. And it was in the midst of this dreaming that his life, his future, and his faith would be tested.

### ✦ Joseph's Bad News ✦

We don't know exactly how Joseph found out that his fiancée was pregnant, but we can imagine the difficult conversations he must have had with Mary. I love how Matthew sums up all of this awkwardness with the understated phrase "it was discovered" (Matt. 1:18 CSB). How was it discovered? Joseph hadn't yet had the benefit of the angelic visit. He only had the word of Mary, whom he likely hardly knew. Even though they were engaged to be married, the custom of those days was that in the year between the engagement and the consummation of their marriage, the bride and groom spent little time together.

Imagine Joseph's shock when Mary told him that she was pregnant. Unlike today, where sexual activity is assumed among couples in

serious relationships, Joseph and Mary had not been intimate. Joseph likely responded with stunned silence. She told him that she was not only pregnant, but that her baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit! Mary believed she saw an angel and may have even written a song of celebration, but Joseph was likely in no mood to party. *Mary, are you serious? How could you do this to me? What do you mean you are still a virgin? That's impossible! Who did this to you? Where is he?*

We read Matthew's account with the benefit of two thousand years of hindsight. We're going through our Advent readings and planning our Christmas calendar. We're putting up cute little nativity scenes and having our kids dress up like Joseph and Mary.

But in this moment, when the shock of his situation hit him, Joseph couldn't see ahead toward what God was doing in the world through his seemingly inconsequential life. This child inside his fiancée may be the Son of God. This child may be the true and better David. This child may save people from their sins and renew and restore the world, but for Joseph, this was his worst nightmare. One commentator says that the breaking of a betrothal like this was considered worse than breaking a business contract.<sup>1</sup> Joseph felt betrayed. He felt alone. He felt stuck.

Put yourself in his sandals. He hadn't seen any angels. He was just faithfully living his life, working as a carpenter, doing his best to build a life for his future family. He trusted Mary to be faithful and devout and had pledged his life to her. And yet, it seemed she had betrayed him.

Matthew says in 1:20 that he "considered these things." Joseph had some serious thinking to do. We don't know how long God waited between Gabriel's visit to Mary and the subsequent visit to Joseph. Was it weeks? Was it days? We know he likely didn't get any sleep in

this time of uncertainty and confusion. We can imagine Joseph's fitful nights, pacing, restless, considering these things.

Joseph really only had two choices. In those days, if a betrothed bride were found to have committed adultery, there were two options. The plan of action most men would have taken is quite drastic. Joseph could publicly shame her by bringing her before the religious authorities, resulting in the forfeiture of the dowry he paid to her father and possibly even her death by stoning. Consider the case of the adulterous woman in John 8, whom Jesus rescues from public execution.

The alternative would be to divorce her privately. He would still endure embarrassment in his community and would face questions of his peers and family for what went wrong, but he'd also be obeying his conscience and doing what is best for Mary. Douglas O'Donnell envisions this agonizing decision:

On one shoulder Joseph has the righteous requirements of God's Law whispering in his ear, "You have to expose her error. This sin cannot go unpunished." On the other shoulder is the compassion and mercy of God's Law.<sup>2</sup>

Matthew tells us that Joseph was righteous, and he tells us this *before* Joseph was told of Jesus' supernatural birth. He was righteous because he was both committed to following the law—divorcing an unfaithful spouse—and doing it in the most selfless, compassionate way. We don't know much about Joseph, but we do know this: he was a faithful follower of God who would do right when it cost him the most. He would be, then, a faithful steward of the Son of God.

There is much to stop and commend, even in this seeming footnote to the Christmas story. Joseph didn't make a decision out of immediate anger. He wasn't irrational and unstable. For a young man

who had just seen his life turn upside down, he demonstrated remarkable grace and poise. He took time and assessed the situation and, seeing the humanity of Mary, made the choice that would be best for her.

### ✦ **God's Good News** ✦

We know the reason Joseph didn't go through with a divorce was because God would send a heavenly messenger to visit Joseph—just as an angel had visited Mary. This time, God spoke to Joseph through a dream, recalling a heavenly word spoken to another Joseph. Just as Jacob's son in Genesis would be asked by God to endure a difficult life he didn't envision and to bear the shame of sins he didn't commit, so too would this Joseph.

And see how the angel addresses his subject. He refers to Joseph as a “son of David.” God didn't pick just any first-century Jewish man to steward the life of His Son. He picked a faithful son of David. The only other person in the New Testament to be referred to as a son of David is Jesus. This title came with authority, reminding Joseph of his royal lineage and preparing him for the task ahead. This is also Matthew telling his readers that Jesus was a rightful son of David, something Paul later affirmed when he said in Romans that Jesus is a son of David “according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3).

Then the angel assured Joseph that the baby in Mary's womb was not the fruit of sin, but was conceived miraculously by the Holy Spirit. She had been chosen by God as the mother of Jesus. We don't know how this made Joseph feel. We don't know if he recalled the Scriptures read in the temple and the words of the prophet that described the future Messiah coming from a young virgin (Isa. 7), but just in

case, the angel reminded him of the Scripture. Perhaps this reality overwhelmed him, that this “fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4–7) had arrived. The march of salvation history, the fulfillment of prophecy, the long-awaited promise was on his doorstep and in his life. What a holy moment this must have been for Joseph. What a time to celebrate with holy awe and kneel in humble adoration!

### ✦ The Rightful King ✦

It should also cause us to stop and worship as well. This is why we slow down in December and feel the anticipation of Old Testament saints as they awaited Jesus’ first advent. This episode in the Christmas narrative reminds us, ultimately, of God’s great faithfulness to His promises. Those words spoken by Isaiah and other prophets were not just inspirational tidings to put on holiday cards and Christmas ornaments. They were a continuation of God’s promise to send a redeemer, an Immanuel, a God-man to live among us and, to quote the angel, “save his people from their sins.”

This is why Matthew opens with such a bold claim that this son of a carpenter from Nazareth was no ordinary man, but was a king, in the line of David, a fulfillment of God’s promise. Jesus had to be virgin born in that He had to be free of the inherited curse of sin. As the new Adam, He would fulfill what the first Adam could not do. What’s more, He’d defeat the sin and death that so corrupts the human race. David Platt explains:

In the virgin birth, Jesus did not inherit a sinful nature, nor did He inherit the guilt that all other humans inherit from Adam. . . . Jesus’ birth was a partial interruption in the line that came from Adam. A



new Adam has come on the scene, a man who would not succumb to sin. In contrast to the first Adam, in Matthew, a man is born who would save from sin.<sup>3</sup>

Matthew sets Jesus forth, in the angel's words to Joseph, as the rightful King, come to save His people. He is the Creator, recreating and restoring what sin corrupted. What a glorious thought, something worth pondering this Christmas season!

The angel reminded Joseph that this was no ordinary birth and that his role would not be that of an ordinary father. And yet in telling Joseph to name the baby "Jesus," he was reminding Joseph of his stewardship. It was the father who named the sons in those days and, by naming him, Joseph would essentially adopt Jesus. Unlike other earthly fathers, he would not be able to pick a name of his choosing and yet, like Adam whom God tasked with naming the animals, Joseph would be assigned a leadership role in naming the future Son of God. Joseph, son of Adam, would steward this baby who would fulfill what the first Adam could not fulfill.

### ✦ **A Devout Son of David** ✦

I find it interesting the way the angel appealed to Joseph in confirming the news of Mary's pregnancy. He first, as we noted above, called him "son of David," appealing to the pride of his legacy. You are of royal ancestry, he seems to be saying to this scared man, you are part of the people of God. Then second, he appeals to him based on Scripture. This is, the angel reminds him, to fulfill Scripture.

This tells us two things about the man who would be the earthly guardian of Jesus: he knew who he was, and he was committed to

Scripture. This is no small thing. This is how the Bible appeals to followers of Jesus today: know who you are as a Christian, and know what the Bible says.

An ungodly person reacts to a difficult assignment by saying to himself, “I don’t care what the Bible says, this is how I feel.” We may not vocalize it that way, but when we knowingly go against what God has said, this is what we are doing. What’s more, we are forgetting who we are.

My daughter currently goes to a public school and is often faced with temptations from her unbelieving friends. I often remind her that above everything, she is a child of God, a follower of Jesus. This not only gives us security in our identity, it comes with a different set of expectations.

And Joseph’s response was what you’d expect from a devout son of David committed to the Scriptures: he immediately obeyed. Matthew tells us, “When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him” (1:24).

Immediate obedience to a difficult mission. Contrast this response to the prophet Jonah, who was also called to a difficult mission. Jonah didn’t wake up and go to Nineveh immediately. Instead he tried to find a way around God’s mission. Craig Keener writes, “Joseph’s obedience to God cost him the right to value his own reputation. Many Christians today, probably much older than Joseph and claiming the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives, have yet to learn his lesson.”<sup>4</sup>

Joseph was a man of few words. We don’t know much about him at all. But we do know he was a man of simple faithfulness. He did the next right thing in front of him. So much of following God is asking, “What is the next right move?”

And let's consider, for a moment, what Joseph was signing up for. This was no easy assignment. In marrying Mary, he would be subject to endless scrutiny. If you think he reacted strangely, at first, to Mary's conception by the Holy Spirit, how well do you think others in his immediate circle would react? Unlike Joseph, they would not have the benefit of an angelic visit. They'd either have to take his word or they'd reject him.

In listening to the voice of God, Joseph was giving up his reputation. Tim Keller writes about the significance of Joseph marrying his pregnant wife in this society:

Everybody in that shame-and-honor society will know that this child was not born nine or ten months after they got married; they will know she was already pregnant. That would mean either Joseph and Mary had sex before marriage or she was unfaithful to him, and as a result, they are going to be shamed, socially excluded, and rejected. They are going to be second-class citizens forever.<sup>5</sup>

By saying yes to God, Joseph was saying no to everything he had worked for, his reputation in the community. It's easy for us to glance over this and not give it another thought as we read this part of Matthew's gospel this Christmas, but we should pause and consider how significant this decision was. Joseph would be a pariah among his own people. He would bear the shame for sins he didn't commit. And yet it only foreshadows the shame that this baby would one day bear on behalf of Joseph and Mary and all who know Jesus. This is why Jesus would later sweat drops of blood in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus would literally become sin for His people, so much so that the Father, who cannot abide sin, turned His face away from His own Son. He was, to quote Isaiah, "despised and rejected of men" (Isa. 53:3 KJV).

Listen to the way the hymn writer Philip Bliss describes Jesus' shame in going to the cross:

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
In my place condemned he stood,  
Sealed my pardon with his blood:  
Hallelujah, what a Savior!*

Joseph could bear the shame in answering God's call, and we can bear the shame that sometimes comes with being a Christian because Jesus bore our shame. We can live as outcasts in a world dominated by the devil because Jesus was the ultimate outcast.

Joseph would not only lose his reputation, he would lose his comfort and safety. He would also not be intimate with Mary until Jesus was born. This was not something the angel told him to do. But he went above and beyond what was required in order to say yes to God. Rather than asking, "How do I feel?" Joseph continually asked, "What's the right and best thing to do?"

We learn later in Matthew that once Herod heard of the birth of Jesus and sought to kill Him, Joseph was commanded by God to take the young infant and his wife Mary and leave Bethlehem and go to Egypt. Again, we tend to pass over this detail as we read Scripture. But let's imagine the difficulty of travel in those days: the added expenses, and the severing of ties with family and friends. And yet when the angel appeared to Joseph in another dream, Joseph didn't hesitate. He, again, immediately obeyed the voice of God and went to Egypt. In this journey to Egypt, we once again see echoes of the Old Testament, where another Joseph was summoned to a hard life in Egypt in order to save the people of God and of Abraham and Sarah's journey to

Egypt for food in the midst of famine. This is why Hosea references this history, when he says of God's care for Israel, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (11:1).

This speaks to Joseph's faithfulness and character. He put the interests of his family above his own comfort. I'm sure the transient nature of their early family life hurt his carpentry business. Living as a refugee in Egypt, where he likely joined other Jewish exiles, probably made his life more difficult. And yet even though Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, he was Jesus' earthly father in every sense of the word. He adopted Jesus as his own and cared for Him. This is why the genealogies use Joseph's name to trace Jesus' heritage.

I'm a father in the throes of raising four children. If you are a parent or help care for children, you know that parenting can be difficult. But imagine, for a moment, the difficulty of parenting the Son of God. We don't have much in the Scriptures about what Jesus' childhood looked like. We only have His birth, His travel to Egypt as an infant, and His time at the temple at the age of twelve. But we can assume that Joseph was a father to Jesus in every sense of the word. Even though Jesus was the Son of God, He still, as a fully human young man, had to learn and grow. Luke tells us that Jesus "increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52).

By all accounts Jesus was an ordinary boy. Consider the way His peers reacted when He returned to Nazareth and began His earthly ministry:

*and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph*

*and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.” And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief. (Matt. 13:54–58)*

*Isn't this the carpenter's son?* When Jesus began His ministry, it was His father who was better known than He. Jesus was, in His childhood, defined by His father. It's hard for us to fathom, but Jesus, fully God and yet fully human, likely learned most of what He knew from Joseph. The Scripture He quoted when tempted in the wilderness was probably first heard from the lips of Joseph. The care He showed toward the weak and vulnerable was probably first exhibited by the self-sacrifice of His earthly dad.

What's more, it seems that in His childhood, Jesus was indistinguishable from His siblings. That seems to be what people in His hometown are saying in Matthew 13:55. *We know His brothers and sisters. They're nothing special.* Maybe I'm reading a lot into this text, but it appears that while Joseph understood the weight of his calling to raise the Son of God, he seems to have parented Jesus with the same care he gave to his other children, who were not divine, who were his own flesh and blood. He didn't favor Jesus, but he didn't ignore Him because Jesus wasn't his biological child.

Joseph exhibited the true spirit of adoption. It is a vivid picture both of God's adoption of us as His children in Christ, but also the call every believer has in welcoming into our homes and communities the world's most vulnerable and forgotten. It was Jesus' brother James who would later write that true religion is defined by care for orphans and widows (James 1:27). With Russell Moore we can specu-

late that perhaps James first learned this by watching Joseph. “Did the image of Joseph linger in James’s mind as he inscribed the words of an orphan-protecting, living faith?”<sup>6</sup>

We can assume, without stretching the story too much, that Joseph patiently fathered Jesus, teaching Him the Old Testament Scriptures, teaching Him to build his carpentry shop, and modeling for his young son what faithful manhood looks like. Perhaps this was one of the reasons the rabbis in the temple were so impressed with Jesus. Yes, His teaching was that of the supernatural. God visiting them. But was some of His recall of the Old Testament due to the teaching He heard at the foot of His earthly father?

### ✦ **Joseph’s Legacy** ✦

Ultimately, we don’t know really what happens to Joseph after he is mentioned in that visit by Jesus to the temple at the age of twelve. He doesn’t show up again in the Scriptures, and there is reason to believe that perhaps he met an untimely death.

In every other passage of Scripture where the family is featured, it’s only Mary and Jesus’ siblings who are mentioned. Given that he was likely older than Mary and life expectancy for a first-century peasant Jew was not great, it could be that losing His father was Jesus’ first instance of human suffering.

And it seems that there is some estrangement between Jesus and His brothers, who are mentioned at one point disbelieving His

**When Jesus speaks of the way the gospel often divides families, He was speaking from His own experience.**

divinity (John 7:5) and even calling Him crazy (Mark 3:21). When Jesus speaks of the way the gospel often divides families (Mark 3:31–35), He was speaking from His own experience. One wonders if Joseph were present, would he be the sort of familial glue that could have kept those bonds together? Would he have rebuked Jesus' brothers for their seeming rejection of Jesus? Only the Holy Spirit, we know, can turn unbelieving hearts to faith, but the absence of their father could have played a role. Thankfully, we know that James later believed and became both a leader in the church and an early martyr.

The most poignant absence of Joseph, however, is seen at Calvary, where just before dying Jesus asks His beloved friend John to care for His mother, Mary (John 19:25–29). In this we see Jesus not only caring for Mary's personal salvation and peace with God by dying for her sins, but caring for her personal needs while He was gone. Apparently Joseph is not on the scene and as the firstborn son, it is His responsibility to ensure that His mother is cared for. In this Jesus was following the law that required children to physically care for their parents in their old age (Deut. 5:16), but He was also following the example of His father in ensuring the welfare of those God had entrusted to His care. Both Jesus and James had seen this ethic played out in the life of their father, who exhibited a faith that cares for "orphans and widows in their affliction."

And so this is Joseph's legacy. Barely mentioned in Scripture, forgotten mostly in church history, but remembered by God as a faithful servant. And for most of us this can be our legacy as well if we are willing, like Joseph, to say yes to God.







## STUDY REFLECTIONS:

1. ***Joseph was an ordinary man willing to be used by an extraordinary God.*** God is calling ordinary people to be part of the extraordinary story He is telling in the world. Are you willing to step into the mission of God?
2. ***Joseph displayed righteous character in a difficult situation.*** In what way are you being tested today? What shortcuts to glory are you being offered? How can you display Christian character in a way that sets you apart in your home, your workplace, and your family?
3. ***Joseph obeyed immediately.*** When he heard the voice of God, he moved. God may not be speaking to you in an audible voice or through an angel, but He speaks to us through His Word. Are you willing to obey, even in the hard things? What hard and difficult calling is God tasking you with today?
4. ***Joseph was willing to suffer reputational harm and loss of comfort for the sake of God and others.*** In what way is God calling you to sacrifice personal comfort and loss of reputation for the sake of others in your care and for the cause of Christ?

**5. *Joseph took spiritual leadership in his family.*** In what ways is God calling to you to spiritually lead in your home and your family? In what ways does He want you to listen to His voice and be an influence toward godliness and maturity?

**6. *Joseph is a picture of Christ's shame and reproach on our behalf.*** The baby Joseph was to bring up would one day suffer the shame and reproach of the world to save Joseph and us from our sins. Have you taken time today to thank Jesus, our suffering servant, for dying on the cross and paying for our sins and giving us new life?

### SUGGESTED CHRISTMAS SONG:

“Joseph’s Song” by Michael Card



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