

# CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF JOSEPH

## MATTHEW 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: after His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.

But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus.

This Christmas season Calvary Chapel has hosted multiple parties: *for ladies, for young adults, for Middle School and High School, for Senior Adults, for teachers and staff* - we've had party after party... We've enjoyed Christmas decor, delicious food, oceans of eggnog, some seasonal tunes... Christmas has filled the air!

We've interacted with *merry people* - dressed in *merry colors* - wishing each other a *Merry Christmas*. I love a good holiday party. It adds to the Christmas joy.

Imagine though, attending one of these Christmas parties. It's in full swing, when a guest enters the room. *He's an older man, a little grey tints his receding hairline... He's wearing jeans and a denim jacket. He's soft-spoken, but his strong handshake* tells you this is a simple, hardworking, blue-collar kind-a guy.

And when you look into this man's face you can tell he's having a difficult time. He's not into the party like everyone else. You figure a warm welcome will help him feel more at home. You shake hands with him and introduce yourself... That's when he responds politely, *"And I'm Joseph of Nazareth, nice to meet you, too."* *Imagine, Joseph of Nazareth at our Christmas party!*

*What if Joseph came to one of our Christmas parties? How would he act?* I think he would mingle among us for awhile - he'd see the smiles, hear the laughter, watch all the holly and jolly - then he'd start to wonder, *"how did Christmas become so merry?"*

I think there'd come a point when Joseph would have all the celebration he could stomach. He'd throw up his hands in frustration, and shout, "You guys keep saying, 'Merry Christmas...' Well, that's easy for you to say!"

Don't get me wrong. I'm not implying Joseph was a Scrooge. I'm sure he was a pleasant enough fellow, but for him Christmas was anything but a celebration. Christmas for Joseph was full of *trepidation, consternation, deliberation, and lots of dedication*.

I have no doubt the first Christmas had a much different meaning for Joseph, than Christmas has for folks today. *Christmas through the eyes of Joseph* provides us a unique and challenging perspective...

Before the city of Jacksonville, Florida renovated the dilapidated Gator Bowl, the old stadium had problems. In December 1989 the temperature in northern Florida dipped below freezing - a rare occurrence. The old plumbing in the Gator Bowl had the tendency to freeze.

That meant on the day of the big game the 503 toilets and urinals in the stadium had to be continually flushed to keep the pipes from bursting. The city of Jacksonville hired twenty-three workers for the sole purpose of walking around the stadium just to flush the toilets... **Now, how's that for a real bowl game!**

On game day, thousands of fans filed into the stadium in a celebratory mood. This was a bowl - a reward for a successful season - a festive occasion. For thousands of fans the mood was lighthearted and jubilant, but for the twenty-three toilet-flushers it was just another day at the office - *far more duty, than party*.

And that helps me illustrate the contrast between Joseph's attitude toward Christmas and ours... If Joseph came to our Christmas party he'd probably act more like a *toilet-flusher* than a *party-goer*. I'm not saying, his Christmas was just *another day at the office*, but for Joseph I'm sure his first Christmas carried more a sense of *responsibility than merriment*.

We think of Christmas as a *treat*, but for this man, Christmas was a *test*... **It was a test of family... It was a test of faith... And it was a test of fortitude...**

Years ago, someone published a Christmas card that featured a happy family opening presents around a beautifully decorated tree. The inscription on the inside of the card read, "Make merry, and send gifts to one another." It's actually a Bible verse... Revelation 11:10.

The quote is accurate. The problem though is that Revelation 11:10 has nothing to do with Christmas.

Revelation 11 predicts the future. It foresees an evil ruler who rises up and takes over the institutions of the Earth. This dictator is anti-God and anti-Christ. He mounts a full-scale attack of blasphemy and idolatry. He leads the world in open rebellion against God.

In response, God sends two faithful witnesses to testify of His truth. This Anti-Christ murders the good guys in Jerusalem's streets, and Revelation 11:10 tells us, "**Those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them, (now recall the Christmas card) make merry, and send gifts to one another.**" It'll be an anti-Christmas in honor of an anti-Christ. *We use gift-giving to celebrate Jesus. One day, folks will give gifts in defiance of Him.*

And as with the Christmas card, the front (*or on the surface*) Christmas is seen as a party, but through the eyes of Joseph we see it for it really was and still is - *a battle*. Good and evil slugged it out. The sword of the madman, King Herod, and the Bethlehem blood of innocent babies - was for Joseph, as much a part of Christmas as *the appearance of the star, the angel's announcement, and the arrival of the shepherds.*

God made Joseph responsible for dealing with the harsh realities of a wicked, jealous, bloodthirsty world.

Through Joseph, God navigated the infant King around angry tyrants, to predetermined rendezvous with strange admirers, on to Egypt as precautionary exiles. *Mary knew the mystery and marvel of Christmas. Joseph knew the conflict and combat.*

Don't get upset with Joseph if he doesn't understand why we're wishing each other a "**Merry Christmas.**" He saw Christmas stripped of any cheesy idealism. Joseph held to a harsher, more realistic perspective.

If Christmas through the eyes of Mary makes us *giddy* - from Joseph's perspective Christmas forces us to be *gritty*. You could say, "**Mary danced with God. But it was Joseph who got her to the dance on time.**"

**Joseph added a practicality to Mary's spirituality.** *Mary praised God.* You recall it was Mary who wrote the famous "**Magnificat.**" Well, Joseph *served God.* He swallowed his pride, and signed *the birth certificate.*

Viewing Christmas through the eyes of Joseph will add some *consternation* to our *celebration*. Joseph's perspective may not be as pleasant to consider as was Mary's, but if your desire is to be faithful to God in a turbulent world; then it is every bit as profitable.

When we examine our text in Matthew, and Joseph's assessment of that first Christmas... we realize first, it was **a test of fidelity to his family**. The depth of his devotion to his bride-to-be was severely examined!

Today, the formation of a marriage occurs in two stages: *engagement* followed by a *marriage ceremony*. But in Hebrew culture it was a three-stage process...

The parents saw to the engagement. Marriages were often arranged when children were infants... Then when the couple came of age they entered into what the Hebrews called the "**kiddushin**" or "**betrouthal**." The *kiddushin* usually lasted a year. It was a binding relationship. It took a bill of divorcement to end a betrouthal. Legally the couple was considered married, but during **this** time they lived under separate roofs, and were forbidden to engage in sexual relations.

At the conclusion of the year a "**nissuin**," or Hebrew wedding, took place. And it was quite an event. Jewish weddings sometimes last a whole week. At the conclusion of the ceremony the couple enters the bridal chamber and consummates their marriage.

Yet it was during their *kiddushin*, or betrouthal period, that Joseph discovered Mary was pregnant. *Can you think of a greater test of a man's love for a woman?*

On the one hand, he imagined a wicked tryst with another man - *but this wasn't the Mary Joseph knew and loved!*... On the other hand, how could he believe the preposterous story she'd told of a miracle birth? Joseph didn't know what to think. *His heart was broken. His plans were ruined. His pride was bruised.*

The Bible tells us Joseph was a carpenter by trade. His partners were *a level* and *a builder's square*. The craftsman's motto is "**measure twice, cut once...**" Well, you can be sure, Joseph *measured* his next move. He couldn't just ignore what had happened, yet he still loved this young maiden. The Law of Moses allowed him to have her stoned, but Joseph opted to send Mary away privately. She could start over in another village.

But it was then, as he grappled over his decision that an angel visited Joseph in a dream, verse 20, "**Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.**" Verse 24 tells us how he reacted. "**Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel... commanded him, and took to him his wife, and did not know her (that is, have sexual relations) till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And He called His name Jesus.**"

With angelic confirmation of his own, Joseph ordered *the nissuin*, and the couple married - but the text is careful to inform us Mary remained a virgin until after Jesus

was born. With their eventual wedding a hurdle was crossed, and a commitment sealed, *but the lives of Joseph and Mary would never be back to normal...*

Josh Martinez was a 13 year-old who lived in Little Rock, Arkansas. Josh's mom had cancer. She was undergoing chemotherapy. As a result she lost her hair.

Josh loved his mom, and wanted her to know it, so he shaved off his blond locks as a symbol of solidarity. Josh's haircut was a wonderful gesture of love and support, but the kids at his school didn't see it that way.

Some of the kids accused Josh of being a skinhead. They screamed "KKK" at him. One day outside the gym, a group of thugs jumped him and beat him up.

His mother, wearing her blond wig, told a reporter, *"It was out of love for me that he shaved his head. It's tragic that someone would have to take a beating for a haircut."* And of all people, Joseph would know exactly how Josh Martinez felt. For Joseph took a beating for showing his love and loyalty to his betrothed Mary.

Joseph took Mary to be his wife because *he loved her and he trusted God*, but don't think for a minute other people saw his actions in the same light. Joseph's marriage, and the birth of Jesus, carried social consequences far worse than a shaved head.

In ancient Israel few sins brought greater shame than infidelity and illegitimacy. For the rest of his life Joseph would father a boy everyone else knew was not really his son - and he would remain faithful to a woman everyone else assumed had been unfaithful to him. *Joseph loved the mother and child, but don't think it was an easy decision to embrace them as his family.*

Joseph made a difficult commitment. He chose to be a devoted dad and husband, yet for it he got no public appreciation. His reputation took a definite beating.

Realize, Christmas is a family holiday not because we Americans have made it such. No, when God sent His Son into the world He entrusted the Savior into the care of a family - *not a tribe, or community, or kibbutz, or institution, or commune, or nanny, or a school, or to trained professionals in a child development center.*

God gave His only Son to a family comprised of one man and one woman committed to each other for life.

Evidently, God felt a family could do the best job in rearing His Son. God dignified and honored the nuclear family when He sent Jesus into the world. **Christmas is as much a celebration of family as it is of faith.**

And that's why this Christmas I want to challenge us all to **focus on our families!** *And I'm not talking about trying to buy everyone's affection with cheap gifts.*

Joseph gave *himself* to his family. He sacrificed his dignity, and pride, and reputation - by embracing *a disgraced mother* and *a stigmatized son*. Joseph even left his home in Bethlehem to take the child and his mother to Egypt to escape the jealousy of King Herod.

*Who mowed Joseph's lawn in Nazareth while he was away? Who tended to his pet projects? Who used his membership at the fitness center? Or ran his carpenter's shop while he was gone? You mean Joseph put his family before his business? You betcha!*

In a small town in Florida there is a woman who runs a shelter for unwanted boys. She's poor, but kind. Her approach is *small-budget*, but *big-hearted*. This woman really loves the boys that are placed into her care.

Once, a prospective couple came to the home to interview a child they were wanting to adopt. The potential mother asked the boy, *"do you have a bicycle?"* He said, *"no ma'am."* She continued, *"do you have your own set of roller blades?"* *"no ma'am."* She continued, *"do you have a baseball bat?... or your own bb gun?... on and on she went."* Finally the little guy stopped her, *"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but if that's all you're going to give me, I'd rather stay right here!"* Joseph gave his family the best gift of all - *he gave himself!*

It reminds me of an army chaplain who returned home from war just in time for Christmas. He'd been overseas for two years, and hadn't seen his family. His bus pulled in after midnight on Christmas Eve.

Rather than wake the kids, dad and mom planned a surprise for Christmas morning. All the gifts were stacked up by the hearth, and the father huddled among them. His wife had draped a sheet over him so that he blended in. Their children didn't see dad.

As the kids started opening their presents suddenly the sheet began to rustle, and the dad rose up from among the packages. *The kids went bonkers!*

Moms and dads, what would it mean to your children, if this Christmas you gave them more of yourself? And kids how delighted your parents would be if you chose to spend some time with them! We all could sacrifice a little more time and attention - set aside our pursuits to be with our family. *What would it look like for you and I to let our family know we care?*

Perhaps your spouse, like Mary, has been an embarrassment to you. He's been inappropriate and brought shame on the family... *She's done things, said things...* Maybe a child has humiliated you... Joseph dealt with all these scenarios. He bore a shame caused by his family; yet he didn't stop loving them.

Joseph became a major player in the Christmas story only after he realized *he was not what mattered.*

Christmas for Joseph was not about *his* happiness or *merriment*, but about a *special mother* and a *mysterious child*. Joseph became a hero because he sensed that two other lives were at stake, more important than his - a spouse and a child were hanging in the balance, dependent on him and his protection.

If you're a spouse, and if you're a parent - Joseph should remind you that *it's no longer just about you!*

George Mason was a bank president who's whole life revolved around his business. He lived alone - had no time for family - had even turned down his brother's invitation to Christmas dinner. On Christmas Eve he was locking up his bank when he walked into the vault to get some extra cash. The huge door swung shut, and George Mason was locked inside his own vault.

At first he felt a sense of panic, until he found the safety air hole. Since he'd declined all Christmas invitations, no one would think it strange that he was missing. There was nothing else he could do except sit back and wait out the next forty-eight hours.

George Mason spent Christmas Eve and Christmas Day surrounded by what he loved most - *his money*. But he soon discovered that all the bank's money couldn't ease his loneliness, and convey a warmth.

By the time the bank reopened and George was rescued from the vault his attitude had changed. He wrote these words and hung them in his office so he would never forget the lesson he'd learned, **"To love people - to be indispensable, somewhere; that is the purpose of life. That is the secret of happiness."**

This was no doubt Joseph's attitude, **"to love people, to be indispensable somewhere."** This prompted him to pack up his whole life - as well as a woman with child - put it on the back of a burro and travel to Bethlehem.

Christmas through the eyes of Joseph is all about accepting responsibility for people you love, and committing yourself to them for the long haul, *even when it's inconvenient*. Christmas is about giving yourself away - **it's about you belonging to others.**

But Christmas through the eyes of Joseph was not only a *test of family*, it was also **a test of faith**. *Should* Joseph believe? *Could* he believe? *Would* he believe? **All he had to go on was *the Word* and *a word*...**

**THE Word** was Isaiah 7:14. The prophet predicted, **"Behold, a virgin shall be with Child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel."** Joseph knew this name **"Immanuel"** - didn't it mean, **"God with us!"**?

*And A word...* An angel appeared and told him, "For that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit..." *THE Word and A word* kept bouncing around in his heart... *would that be enough for Joseph to believe?*

Did you hear about the elephant who was enjoying a swim in the river? He was playing and splashing and spewing water everywhere, having a *trunk-load* of fun, when all of a sudden a mouse appeared on the beach.

This little mouse was in great distress, and started yelling at the elephant to get out of the water. The elephant didn't want to end his swim, but the mouse kept screaming. Finally, the elephant realized if he wanted any peace and quiet he was going to have to get out of the river and see what the mouse wanted.

The huge pachyderm lumbered up onto the bank and towering over the little mouse, said, "Now, what do you want?" The mouse replied, "Ah, that's okay, I just wanted to see if you were wearing my bathing suit."

Actually, its easier to imagine a huge elephant in a mouse's bathing suit than it is to comprehend how the infinite God could wrapped himself in flesh, blood, and bone, and become the tiniest and weakest of humans.

Listen to one author's description of the mystery, "The omnipotent made Himself breakable. He who had been spirit became pierce-able. He who was larger than the universe became an embryo. He who sustains the world with a word chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a young girl. God became a fetus."

*Do I understand it? No way. But do I believe it? For sure!* Its a sad, shallow, self-obsessed person who believes only what they can grasp with their tiny mind.

*Do you really understand how a simple acorn can fall to the ground, and in time, become a giant oak? Can you explain the mystery of DNA? Or how the brain turns chemistry into thoughts? Or the development of language? So much in the physical realm is a mystery.*

**Now try to comprehend the spiritual realm!** *How can you reduce to terms the unrestricted, unbounded power of God? Try to dissect the intricacies of God's triune nature? Or the wisdom that spawned our salvation? Or the logic behind God's love? Impossible.*

The real question Joseph had to answer was not, "do you believe a virgin can conceive?" or "can the divine become human?" - it was rather, "are you going to limit the power and potentials of an Almighty God?"

In a sense, it wasn't much to go on - *the Word* and *a word*, but in another sense it's all any of us need to go on. For it's **a word from God, and the Word of God.**



Christmas through Joseph's eyes was a test of faith. Christmas challenges us - *do we know where our logic ends, and God's omniscience begins? Do we realize our limits, and God's limitlessness? Do we recognize our resources as finite, but God's as infinite?*

For Joseph, Christmas was a time to stop *figuring how*, or *formulating why* - and engage his soul to trust. Christmas is about believing in God's promises, being astonished at God's power, trusting in God's grace.

Through Joseph's eyes Christmas was a test... *A test of family, a test of faith, and finally, a test of fortitude. How strong was Joseph's commitment?*

In verse 24 we're told, *"Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the Angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife..."* And this will not be the last occasion when God arouses Joseph from a deep sleep, out of a concern for his wife and this child...

It happens again in Matthew 2. After Jesus is born the angel appears a second time to Joseph, and tells him to flee the madness of King Herod - pack up and escape with his young family to the safety of Egypt.

And that was just the beginning of his sleepless nights... All fathers get aroused from sleep from time to time out of a concern for their families... A creak in the night, *"okay honey, I'll check it..."* The baby cries, *"okay honey, I'll go get him..."* A car squeals its tires - *"okay, I better check that out, it's past the boy's curfew."* Getting aroused from sleep is a rite of parenthood.

The question was, *"would Joseph stick with it for the long haul?"* We get a clue in verse 25, *"Joseph did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son."*

*And understand what this meant practically* - Joseph took a cold shower on his wedding night! That's a tough way to start a marriage, yet that was just the beginning. For several months into the marriage Joseph took cold showers in obedience to God's command! He had all the duties and responsibilities of marriage, yet was forbidden one of its chief pleasures.

Joseph made the startling discovery, *as all new spouses and parents do*, that the commitment he'd just made was going to greatly complicate his life. But he embraced the changes, and stuck with his obligations.

In fact, eight days after the child is born, Joseph and Mary take the boy to the Jewish Temple to have Him circumcised, and to name Him before God. And again, Joseph follows orders precisely. He resists the urge to go with *"Joey, Jr."* - *you know he was tempted to do that* - but rather he obeyed God and named his son - *as the Angel of the Lord had instructed him, "Jesus."*

In Joseph's first three years of marriage - He pushed his way through busy city streets, and cleared out cow patties in a stable so his wife would have a place to deliver a baby... He abandon his carpentry business, left his hometown, became an outcast and outlaw... He moved three times, struggled to understand Egyptian, and find work in a foreign country... All that and more, is why Christmas through Joseph's eyes was a test of fortitude and courage, stick-to-it-ness and toughness.

The English word "reliable" is a compound word. "Liable" means "responsible." The suffix "Re" means "over and over again." *And this word depicts Joseph.* He never tired of his responsibilities. He honored his commitment to his family, *over and over and over again.* In the end, this man Joseph proved **reliable**.

Joseph wasn't a flashy fellow, or charming, or charismatic, or articulate, or witty - yet God found in him a man *who listened to heaven; then did as he was told.* And he did it over and over and over again!

In God's eyes that made *Joseph... no ordinary Joe.* Joseph was obedient to God and faithful to his wife and family... And in today's world, that's extraordinary!

It's interesting, after Jesus turned twelve years-old we read nothing else of Joseph. Most Bible scholars believe Joseph died before Jesus began his ministry.

*Did he come down with a fever? Did he die of a heart attack? It's not like Joseph was under any undue stress or pressure - all he had to do was protect and nurture the Son of God!* Joseph carried a heavy load.

Joseph from Nazareth, didn't live a very long life, *but can you imagine a more fulfilling and significant life?* Talk about a contribution! The "earthly father of God" might just be the grandest gig in the Christmas story.

God chose *this man*, Joseph, for the most important mission *any man* has ever been assigned. Apparently, God is pleased with a person **endeared to family, engaged by faith, and energized with fortitude.**

Author Max Lucado has a chapter on Joseph in his book, "**God Came Near.**" It's entitled, "**Limb-climber or Branch-sitter.**" He concludes that Joseph was not a branch-sitter. He wasn't content to stay close to the trunk. He valued obedience over convenience.

What mattered to Joseph was what mattered to God. When God called this man to climb out on the end of a shaky, flimsy limb - *he was willing to go, no questions asked.* Over the years, when the winds blew and the leaves fell, Joseph stayed out on the end of that limb.

Joseph was faithful. Again, the memorial to Joseph's life are the words in verse 24, "**He did as the Angel of the Lord commanded him...**" The man followed orders.

This Christmas we should all add some *examination* to our *celebration!* What about you, do you hang out next to the trunk of the tree? Do you play it safe, or are you willing to go out on a limb for God... *to serve Him, to love your family, to honor your commitments?* Hey, **are you a branch-sitter or a limb-climber?**

It's been said, "If we learn anything from the Christmas story let it be courage. **Christmas is a feast day for the stout of heart.** It's a call not just to bake cookies and sip cider, but to be strong, to proclaim our faith more boldly, and to make real sacrifices for our relationship with God." Joseph embodied that courage.

When you see Christmas through the eyes of Joseph you see another side of **worship.** Mary's love was *emotional, but* Joseph's love was *practical.* Joseph had a "Git-R-Done kind of love." His love for God and family were rooted in responsibility, and expressed in deeds.

As we've noted, Joseph wasn't particularly talented or gifted. In one sense he was *very, very ordinary.* But when *convinced of the truth and called on by God,* the man stepped up! ***This is what a Joseph does!***

Now you know why Joseph would be puzzled if he dropped in on our party, and heard our greeting, "***Merry Christmas.***" Christmas through Joseph's eyes was a test - a test ***of family, and of faith, and of fortitude.***

And the good news is that the grades are still out on us - *our testing isn't over.* There's still time for you and me to look at Christmas through the eyes of Joseph!

It's not complicated... just listen to heaven, then do what God says do! That'll make you ***no ordinary Joe!***