

Topic	Christmas Through the Eyes of Joseph
Reference	Matthew 13:54-56
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Christmas is around the corner. We are all filled with different traditions of Christmas that occupies our attention. Sometimes it is easy for us actually to lose track of the real significance of Christmas.

With the oversimplification of Christmas, we tend to lose a lot of the human drama that are actually associated with the Christmas story and it is with this human dramas that we learn the real significance of Christmas. So, I think, it is very useful as we approach Christmas that the church leadership has decided to take a fresh look at what Christmas mean to us through the eyes of three individuals who participated directly with the Christmas story. I am going to kick off this mini series with Christmas through the eyes of Joseph.

We will see how...

1. God uses ordinary people to accomplish his extraordinary work.
2. Joseph exemplifies the Selfless Spirit of Christmas
3. Obedience, a hallmark in our Journey of Faith

Who is Joseph?

He is mentioned directly in two passages in the Bible and one of them is our today's passage. The other is the Christmas account that is to be found in Luke. Apart from this, there are couple of indirect references but that's about it. When you think about Christmas, Joseph doesn't normally come to your mind. We think about Mary, because she is the mother of Jesus. We might even think of three wise men. If there was a play here about Christmas, the character Joseph probably wouldn't even make it as a supporting actor. In fact, his part has got no dialogue. Joseph never said a word in the Bible, yet God has chosen him to do a pivotal work right in the Christmas story and God choose Joseph to be Jesus's earthly father.

In some sense, the Catholics have perhaps done a better job than the protestants have in honoring the heroes of faith in the Bible. If you go to Europe you will see a lot of cathedrals that are named after people like St. Peter, St.

Paul. A few months back my wife and I were vacationing in Rome and our tour guide actually took us to this place which is actually a church. It is called St. Joseph of the Carpenters. This church is at least 500 years old and the fraternity of carpenters actually raise money to refurbish this church in honor of Joseph.

Joseph is also often portrayed in the arts and the Catholics envision him to be an old man. This idea was really started in the 5th century probably because the Catholics want to support the idea that Mary was a perpetual virgin. So, the story goes that Joseph was actually 90 years old when Mary was betrothed to him and he had children and the children that are spoken of in the Bible who are Jesus' brothers and sisters were actually Joseph's children from a previous marriage. I find it a little bit difficult to believe. I think it is a fabricated story personally, although you can say that it is unlikely, remotely likely, but it is definitely not probable.

More likely Joseph was a young man according to customs and tradition. Why? Because the lifespan of the people in those days, average about 35-40, in fact the average lifespan today is about 70-80. So, to say that Joseph was 90 years old was a little bit far, but the idea is right that he was so old that he actually had no interest in any sexual union and therefore Mary become a perpetual virgin. More likely Joseph was a young man. At the time of the story, he was probably in his upper teens. How do we know that? Because in ancient Jewish marriages, the girl is typically betrothed around about the age between 12-14 years. The boy would typically be about 2 or 3 years older, because when the boy reaches puberty he would have entered into a trade. In order to start making a living to support the bride.

So, Joseph as the Bible tells us was a carpenter. In fact, we read in Matthew chapter 13:54 to 56. This was when Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth and he was invited to preach in the synagogue.

Matthew 13:54-56

54 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? **55** **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? 56** And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"

So, in this particular verse, we are told that Jesus's father was a carpenter and the Greek word that was used for carpenter is the word, 'tekton'. Tekton is actually a general term to refer to a workman. In this case, probably a workman

that uses a lot of wood, but in those days in ancient Israel most of the houses were made of mud or they stayed in caves. So a workman or a tekton in those days were not building fanciful buildings. They were more likely building things like window, door frames, small furniture and also farm implements. So the picture that we get of a tekton in those days is not a master craftsman. They have another word for that and that would be "architekton", from where we derive the word architect from. So, in all likelihood, the profession of tekton or carpenter was not a very highly regarded profession. Sure, it is not as lowly as a shepherd or somebody who does mining or take out the rubbish, but it certainly wasn't the same echelon as the rabbi or the scribes or the pharisees or physician for that matter. In other words, Joseph can really be called an average man.

What does this tell about God that He chose Joseph to serve as Jesus's earthly father and raise Jesus as his own son? Why didn't he choose a priest, a rabbi, a physician, an educated lawyer or even an architect?

Well, you may remember another story that provides us the answer. If you remember how God chose his anointed king in Samuel chapter 16. Now this was when the people of Israel choose Saul as king on the basis of his physical appeal and Saul failed God and the nation miserably. God then commanded Samuel to seek out Jesse and from amongst Jesse's son to choose a king.

1 Samuel 16:6-7

6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before him." 7 But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Men choose Saul because of his outward physical appearance, God choose David because David was after God's own heart. So similarly, we read that Joseph was just and righteous man and when Joseph was referred to as a just and righteous man, this is actually a Hebrew term that means he was actually a believer, just as Noah was a righteous man, Joseph was a righteous man. There is something very interesting as Matthew recounts the story of Christmas. Before he got into the story, he actually spends the first chapter in Matthew stating the genealogy of Jesus and therefore the genealogy of Joseph. Genealogy is not something that we often read but notice something very interesting in this genealogy. There are four names that are mentioned that is quite unusual, but Matthew purposely inserted it into the list. They are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah who was Beersheba.

- Now for Tamar, if you would read Genesis. Tamar is the daughter-in-law of Judah and she disguised herself as a prostitute in order to trick the father-in-law in sleeping with her. She did all that thing just to have an offspring in order to secure an inheritance.
- Rahab the prostitute who hid the spies as they scouted out the Promised Land before they entered it.
- Ruth the Moabite, who was a foreign woman considered an outcast, but set her faith on the God of Israel.
- Beersheba whom David the king took advantage of. Sent her husband to the battlefield to have him killed, so that he could marry her.

Each of these 4 women knew pain, brokenness and hardship. In one way or another, each had been despised as unclean or as a sinner and shamed by the people in their communities. But ultimately in spite of their background, in spite of their circumstances, God used them, blessed them and their offsprings and they became a part of God's redemptive work in the world.

Throughout the Bible, God's Modus Operandi is to not use people with pedigree. He makes it a point to use people who are lowly, who are weak, who are considered rejects and outcast.

1 Cor 1: 26-29

26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards,[a] not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. **27** But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; **28** God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, **29** so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

How many times when people are asked to serve in a ministry, to serve God, have you heard of their excuses, "no brother, I am too young". Consider David, he was only 13 when he was anointed king. Some say, I am too old. Consider Moses, he was 80 when God called him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Some say, "I am not qualified". So as none of us are qualified. That's a given. Not being qualified is a given. God must save sinners like us, sanctify them and then transform them into instruments he can use. God chooses the humble, the weak, the lowly, the meek and the weak, why, so there is no question when their lives change the world, it is the power of God that gets the credit and not us.

So, the first thing that we learn from the account of the Christmas story is that, God uses ordinary people to accomplish his extraordinary work. That includes you and me!

Let's see how the Christmas story began for Joseph...

Matthew 1:18

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way: When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit

There was a big scandal, and this is a big deal. In the Chinese custom, we call it wearing the green hat. That means you have your girlfriend or your wife like sleeping with somebody and that is a big deal. In order to understand the magnitude of this problem, we have to understand a little bit about the Jewish marriage custom.

Nowadays when two people get engaged, after a while, it may be a very short time if they don't like each other, they just break off the engagement. This is specially very common in Western culture and it is true, but unfortunately this has also seeped into the Eastern culture, but back in those days, marriage was not just an affair between two people, it is actually a business transaction between two families. When we talk about engagement or betrothal, we are talking about one family going into another family and very likely a girl maybe betrothed when she was a child.

So, the marriage is actually divided into two parts. The betrothal and then the wedding ceremony and the feast. Between these two events, the timing could be at least 12 months to anywhere upwards of 12 months. In the middle of this is actually a marriage contract. A contract is actually signed between the man and the woman with the man promising to provide for the woman and most usually some of money would have changed hands. The bridegroom's parents would have paid quite a large sum of money to the bride's parents. Now if they were to break the engagement for any reason, they will have to call the priest and they have to announce the reason for breaking up and that would be considered a divorce. So, in other words, in the ancient days when two people get together to marry, at the betrothal stage they were already considered effectively husband and wife. Although the marriage is not consummated yet until you reach the wedding ceremony.

So, the marriage contract which is actually called the Ketubah was an important document. Why is this significant? It is significant because when Joseph found

out that Mary was pregnant, the customary thing and the socially acceptable thing is for him to breakoff the marriage. Now to say that Joseph was disappointed with Mary would have been really an understatement. Joseph must have felt really confused, betrayed and even angry and I am sure although he wanted to believe Mary was a virtuous woman, conventional logic would tell him, it was impossible for Mary to be pregnant without being involved with another man. Now remember Joseph at this stage, didn't know anything about God's plan.

Now in such circumstances, it would be customary and socially acceptable for Joseph to call off the marriage. If he wanted to, he could have gone through a public divorce to declare that he had nothing to do with the pregnancy in order to maintain his honor and the judge may even allow him to take back the bride money, but that would mean putting Mary through public humiliation as an adulterer. We know from the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 23 that the punishment for being an adulterer would be death by stoning. Now although they were leaving in Roman times where they were not allowed to execute anybody, only the Romans were allowed to carry out capital punishment, you can imagine the disgrace that Mary would have to go through if Joseph were to want a public divorce. Mary would immediately be considered as an outcast and no man would ever want to touch her.

19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

This is where Joseph's character really shines through. He decided to quietly divorce her, with the intention of not putting her to shame. In other words, Joseph was prepared to forego his rights, his reputation in order to protect someone who had sinned against him. He would just allow people to assume he had taken advantage of Mary and now he had a change of heart! What a guy! What a gentleman!! What a spirit of forgiveness that Joseph is exhibiting here.

But God wasn't finish with Joseph yet! We continue the story.

Matthew 18:20-25

20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21** She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). **24** When Joseph woke from sleep,

he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, **25** but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus

After what must have been a long struggle and probably crying himself to sleep, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and corroborated Mary's version of the story. So, he must have gotten some relief. Wow! At least Mary was faithful to me. Still consider the implication of what the angel of the Lord is commanding Joseph to do. The angel of the Lord is telling Joseph to go ahead and marry Mary. What is the implication of that?

It means that for the rest of his life, Joseph would be remembered by his friends, his family and the community that he was responsible for the short gun wedding. Now, we do not know what stage of pregnancy Mary was at and whether or not it was visible or not that she is pregnant. Joseph's honor would have been compromised not only to his friends, his family but to the community at large. In those days, they don't live in big cities, the village is probably a few hundred people and everybody knows everybody. If he had kept quiet and let people assume that he was responsible for the pregnancy he would have been disgraced, but if he wanted to tell the truth and if somebody would ask him, is Jesus your son and being a righteous man he couldn't lie that means he would have admitted that he married an adulterous woman. So, either way, it is a lose-lose situation for him. Yet what did Joseph do? Now he had a choice to make. He could follow his original plan and divorce Mary quietly and just walk away, but he saw God's mission. He knew that Mary was bearing the child of God and that the child of God would one day save his people from their sins. I am sure this was not lost on Joseph and that's why he agreed. He agreed that in spite of the public humiliation that he would endure, that the fact that he would be stigmatized for the rest of his life, he agreed to go ahead and marry Mary. This can only happen when Joseph put God's glory ahead of his own glory. So compassion, forgiveness, sacrifice and emptying of one self for the sake of others isn't that the spirit of Christmas.

Now Joseph, remember, he is the aggrieved party here, yet for the sake of Mary and for the cause of God, he was prepared to empty himself of his pride, his reputation and his ego. Does that remind of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Philippians 2:5-8

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6** who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7** but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8** And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Joseph embodies the spirit of Christmas. Now all of us are familiar with the hymn Amazing Grace written by John Newton. Now John Newton if you remember, he was a slave trader at the height of the British empire. William Wilberforce was a contemporary of John Newton. He became a politician at a very young age. He was very spendthrift with his money and he did not use his time very wisely. That was until his conversion in his early 20s. When he became a Christian, which he labelled as the great conversion he had a passion for abolishing the slave trade. So, it was John Newton who persuaded him to remain as a politician in order to fight for the rights of the slaves.

Now during his life, William Wilberforce was threatened more than once. He was publicly criticized. He lost many friends and he faced extreme political pressure. In fact, his health often suffered because of what he tried to do. As a parliamentarian, as a politician he relentlessly submitted bill after bill to abolish the slave trade. Finally, in 1807 victory came after 20 years of perseverance, but he did not stop there. He fought another 26 years in order to abolish slavery altogether in the entire British colonies.

What is remarkable about William Wilberforce is that when he became a Christian, he reoriented his life for the service of God. So instead of asking how God could help him to be a better politician, he asked how being a politician can help to advance God's agenda in the world. A lot of us when we talk about our relationship with God, we say how can God be a part of our lives. Some of us, God plays a small part in our life. Some of us while we are very active in church, God plays a bigger part in our life, but you know something, this is not the way William Wilberforce view his relationship with God. God is not just a part of our life, we have to start viewing us as part of God's kingdom. So, William Wilberforce did not do social justice work, just for the sake of saving the blacks as an end in itself. He saw God's agenda, he saw God's glory being dishonored when wicked man sent people into slavery. He wasn't praying to God to help him to become a better politician in order to glorify himself. He was asking God, how can I be a part of your agenda, how can I glorify you by being better at what I do. I think in the same way, Joseph was able to see the big picture. He was able to see, I am now going to be part of God's plan. God is now asking me to be part of his redemptive work in order to take care of his earthly son.

So, God not only uses ordinary people for his work. Joseph exemplifies the Selfless Spirit of Christmas

- + A spirit of compassion, humility and sacrificial love
- + That involves also looking at the world from God's perspective rather than our own little compartmentalized perspective.

God was not finished with Joseph yet. After the birth of Jesus Joseph had a dream

Matthew 2 : 13 - 15

13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 14 And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Amazingly, silence actually speaks volume. Joseph never once questioned God, never did he bargained with God or challenged Him. If you remember when God called Moses, he gave an excuse. Gideon tested God. Jonah went the other way. Joseph just did it. He was the quiet achiever. What God told Joseph to do was not easy. The journey from Bethlehem to Egypt is a very-very long journey, something like 700 kilometers and this is a journey not to go on a holiday. Joseph had to uproot, pick himself up, his family, his little child in order to escape persecution. If he had stayed his child would surely have died, because Harod was executing all the boys under 2 years old.

In Egypt Joseph, Mary and Baby Jesus were essentially refugees. In an unfamiliar environment, having to rely on the charity of others, but yet Joseph trusted God and God provided for Joseph and his family.

Now how did God provide for them?

The wise man brought along gold, frankincense and myrrh and these are precious stuff, and this is how God provided for Joseph and his family to see them through their time in Egypt. So, we are all on a journey. What journey you are on. What kind of journey has God called you to take. Our journeys are always filled with obstacles, speedbumps, but remember as with Joseph, God is always there to see us through. He will provide for us. How do we know? Because God himself did it. Jesus Christ himself took the ultimate journey when he went to the cross.

There is an irony here. When God took Joseph and his family out of Bethlehem to go to Egypt, God was saving them out of danger into a safe haven, but with Jesus God did not do that. God sent Jesus into danger. The danger of the cross in order to save us. So, brothers and sisters in Christ, we can take comfort that whatever journey that God has given us, he will surely be faithful to provide and to take us through. All we need to do is to obey.

I want to remind us the story of Christmas and as we approach Christmas Day, let us not be too taken up with traditions. Let us be reflective. Let us remember that God can use ordinary people like you and I to accomplish his work. Let's take heart from the example of Joseph that he exemplifies the spirit of Christmas, the spirit of forgiveness, the spirit of love, the spirit of caring for others and maybe during this Christmas season we will be more keenly aware of the people around us and especially people who are going through a tuff journey at this time.