

The Forgotten Joseph

What do we know about Jesus? Why did He have such a great effect upon the people around Him? Why are millions following Him today? Why was He born? Nothing stirs so many questions as the birth of Jesus! Each Christmas we celebrate the birth of the One Who was God became a man. He was the Ancient of Days, yet He was born at a point in time. He created the universe and companied with heavenly beings, yet He came to earth as a helpless baby born of a young virgin.

In the Christmas narrative in the Gospels, character upon character appears and disappears. One of them is Joseph. He was named after one of the twelve sons of Jacob. He was "a son of David" and could claim royal or priestly descent (Matt. 1:20). His family belonged to Bethlehem, David's city. He was a carpenter who was present at the manger when Jesus was born, even though he was not His father. While Jesus came as the Son of Man, He was never a son of man. God was the heavenly Father of Jesus. Joseph was His "foster father." But of all the people in the Christmas story, Joseph remains in the background. Poets and writers have written extensively about Mary, the mother of our Lord. In a certain sense, this stands to reason. Is she not the "highly favoured" among women? Is she not the virgin who gave birth to Jesus? Is the truth of the virgin birth not the guarantee of salvation of God's people? But who has thought about Joseph? Ask what the shepherds had done, and what Simeon and Anna said in the temple, and many people will know the answer. But ask what Joseph had done, the answers are not quickly forthcoming. But the Bible does not leave us in the dark about Joseph. Matthew especially gives many particulars about the life and lineage of Joseph. He also shows how Joseph became involved in God's work of redemption. In the eyes of the world, Joseph was an ordinary man. In God's eyes he was a special man. The folk in Nazareth knew him as a pious Israelite, faithful in all the ordinances of the Temple, a diligent worker. Joseph, knowing and believing the Scriptures, looked forward to the coming of Israel's Saviour. He spent much time thinking about the mysterious and wonderful prophecies, which had been given throughout the ages to the Israel of old. But how the Saviour would come, he did not know. When he saw Mary, his betrothed, "great with child" Joseph was minded to put her quietly out of his life. He never acted rashly toward her, although he was totally baffled by her condition. Not knowing the reason for Mary's condition and drawing the natural conclusion, namely that Mary had been unfaithful to him, Joseph could not see his way clear to take Mary home with him and live with her in the usual marriage relationship. Had she not broken her solemn pledge? Yet Joseph loved Mary and wanted her with him as his wife. He was a righteous person, a man of principle, one who with his whole heart wanted to live according to the will of God, the God who took so very seriously the breaking of the marriage vow. Unlike Joseph, Mary knew that the cause of her condition was the powerful life-imparting operation of the Holy Spirit. She knew it because the angel Gabriel had told her that this would happen.

But God solved the mystery for Joseph and overcame his anxiety. He revealed to him what happened to his beloved Mary. He sent an angel to tell Joseph that it is by the power of the Holy Spirit, and not in the natural way, that Mary had conceived. To

strengthen and comfort him the angel addresses him as son of David. The angel told Joseph that he must not hesitate to take Mary, his wife, into his home. Joseph was overjoyed! Mary had not been unfaithful after all! Joseph could safely take her into his home; in fact, he was even told to do so. He showed a willingness to take whatever risks there would be in welcoming Mary and her child in his home. He appeared in public as if he were the natural father of Jesus, thus shielding the virginity of Mary and reputation of Jesus. His acceptance of the message of the angel gave Mary a safe place, a haven of refuge and love. After predicting the birth of a son, the angel commanded Joseph to name the child Jesus, Saviour, who "will redeem Israel from all their sins" (Ps. 130:8). Joseph's actions in naming Jesus showed that Joseph was the head of their household. His headship was acknowledged as such by Mary (Luke 2:48). Joseph was a carpenter by trade. In the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, Joseph is the saint of the working man. In 1955, Pope Pius XII proclaimed May 1 **The Feast of St. Joseph** the Worker. The choice of May 1 was made to counteract atheistic communism's celebration of May Day and to emphasize the dignity of labour, Christian ideals in labour relations and the example of Joseph as a workman. In Joseph's workshop, Jesus was among people who worked with their hands. In Mark 6:3, Jesus Himself is called "the carpenter." Before He proclaimed His Gospel, He earned His daily bread with the labour of His hands. His occupation stamped labour with honour and dignity. It acquainted Jesus with the feelings of the working man, and helped Him to know about the life of regular folks. But the Christmas story is neither about Joseph nor even about Mary. It is about the wondrous message of salvation, of the only way to the House of the Heavenly Father. Although godly Joseph had a vital role, he was only God's instrument in the plan of redemption. By naming Mary's child Jesus, the forgotten- Joseph proclaimed the reason for Jesus' coming to earth. The Son of God, though infinitely rich, became poor, assumed our human nature, entered into our sin polluted atmosphere without ever being tainted by sin himself, took upon himself our guilt, our shame, bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, and was wounded for our transgressions. The hands, which made tables and chairs, cured the lepers, gave sight to the blind, and brought the dead to life, were pierced with nails upon the cross. Forgiveness of sin can come from God alone, who in and through His Son, saves His people. While some trust in physical strength, knowledge, reputation, political promises, influential friends, or military might, none of these is able to deliver us from the world's most destructive power – sin. It takes no less than the atoning death of Jesus and the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit to cleanse hearts and lives. When Joseph stood beside the manger in Bethlehem, he knew that his long awaited Messiah had come. He remembered the message of the angel. God's Son had come to this world to bring hope and redemption to this world, to break the power of Satan and to complete redemption.

Johan D. Tangelder
2006