

Christmas 2023

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12/23/2023

CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF JOSEPH
MATTHEW 1:18-25

INTRODUCTION

This week journalists and reporters and editorialists will be reviewing the past year and expressing their views about the most significant events of 2023. They will cover the world of sports and entertainment and science and religion and news in general. On the top of the list of many will be the Hamas attack on Israel and the resulting trouble in the Middle East. There is also the war in Ukraine to consider, and political events setting the stage for the presidential election next year.

I wonder how significant these issues will be regarded 200 years from now. If we were asked if we could remember anything of significance that happened in the year 1809, most of us would draw a blank. If newspaper editors had been voting on the event that year which had the greatest significance to the course of world history, they may have referred to the fall of Austria to the advancing French armies. For Europeans the progress of Napoleon's army's through Europe was a big deal. The recent movie "Napoleon" has brought his life back to the attention of some of us.

If historians today were voting on the most significant event of 1809, the fall of Austria would have stiff competition with the activity that was happening in delivery rooms around the world. Few of the British today would remember anything about the fall of Austria in 1809, but they would remember one of their most famous prime ministers who was born that year (PROJECTOR ON--- WILLIAM GLADSTONE), William Gladstone. They would also remember the great poet Alfred Lord Tennyson (ALFRED LORD TENNYSON), who arrived on the scene in 1809. The entire world would be impacted by a boy named Charles (CHARLES DARWIN), born that year, who would develop an interest in biology. His father was an English doctor named Darwin.

Over in France Louis Braille (LOUIS BRAILLE) entered the world. His contributions to the blind would leave a lasting legacy. Across the German border in Hamburg Felix Mendelssohn (FELIX MENDELSSOHN) was born.

Across the Atlantic Oliver Wendell Holmes (OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES) was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He would become a famous physician, medical school professor, writer and father of a noted Supreme Court Justice of the same name. Just a few miles away Edgar Allan Poe (EDGAR ALAN POE) began his short but significant life. In a log house in Kentucky a famous western explorer by the name of Kit Carson (KIT CARSON) was born on Christmas Eve in 1809. A few months earlier in another Kentucky cabin an illiterate, wandering laborer and his wife heard the first noise out of a baby whom they bore. He was born on the same day as Charles Darwin. The Kentucky parents named their son after the Biblical hero whom we have been studying on recent

Sundays. For he was Abraham Lincoln (ABRAHAM LINCOLN). Some historians would regard him as the greatest President in US history.

So was the destiny of the world really being shaped on the battlefields of Austria in 1809? (PROJECTOR OFF) Or was it being shaped in makeshift delivery rooms somewhere else? If we go back in history 1800 years before this, it is not so surprising that few people attached much significance to the birth of a Jewish boy to penniless parents in a backwater village in Judea. The big event of that year, recently argued to be 2 BC (Andrew Steinmann, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Oct.-Dec. 2021), was the decision of the Emperor Augustus, who called himself the son of God, and had the Latin words for that, *divi filius*, imprinted upon his coins, to conduct a census throughout the Roman Empire for the purposes of the efficient collection of taxes.

Or was that the most significant event? Was that census decree merely the vehicle that would be used to get a young couple to a village called Bethlehem to fulfill prophecy concerning the birth of the most significant boy who would ever be born into the human race, one who truly was the Son of God?

I.

Let's consider then THE BACKGROUND OF JOSEPH (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE BACKGROUND OF JOSEPH). Certainly the primary concern of Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth, was the birth of that little boy. Outwardly there did not seem to be much that was special about Joseph. Nazareth (NAZARETH MAP) was not exactly the center of the world, let alone the center of the Roman province of Judea. It was a small village far off the beaten path in the northern highlands of Israel, in Galilee. It was not even mentioned in the Old Testament. But God has this tendency to use seemingly insignificant towns and seemingly insignificant people and even seemingly insignificant churches to accomplish His purposes.

Nazareth (NAZARETH SOUTH) did have a scenic location perched on a hill. To the south it overlooked a broad plain. To the west on a clear day (NAZARETH MEDITERRANEAN) one could see the Mediterranean Sea. But there was really nothing much in Nazareth that would attract visitors, and nothing of any significance to the rest of the world ever happened in Nazareth. (PROJECTOR OFF)

It is true that royal blood flowed through the veins of Joseph. He was a descendant of King David and King Solomon. But that was not exactly an asset in the difficult days in which Joseph lived. King Herod, who ruled in Judea under the authority of the Romans, and his predecessors had been quick to wipe out anyone who had any kind of remote claim to the throne of David. Perhaps it was for that reason that Joseph's ancestors had left their original home in Bethlehem and moved to this obscure village in Galilee.

Joseph was a common tradesman, a carpenter. That was a respectable occupation. Even the famous rabbi Shammai had been a carpenter by trade. But Joseph was certainly not a rabbi. He was a village carpenter, probably following in the steps of his father. That was likely the occupation that his own sons would take up.

In a small village like Nazareth their family may have been the only carpenters in town, although it is possible that they did much of their work in the larger town of Sepphoris, three miles away. (PROJECTOR ON--- SEPPHORIS NAZARETH MAP) Sepphoris was a Roman outpost on a major trade route through the middle of Galilee. During the time that Joseph was a young man Herod Antipas undertook a major rebuilding project whereby he made Sepphoris his capital city in Galilee. (SEPPHORIS) Joseph and his son Jesus may have learned more about the wider world through their work there.

Being the village carpenters (PROJECTOR OFF) meant that the family of Joseph did not have the luxury of specializing in a particular product. They had to be jacks-of-all-trades. They probably worked with stone as well as wood. The Greek word translated in our Bible versions as “carpenter” was used of stone masons as well as what we think of as carpenters. These tradesmen were expected to make doors and chairs and tables and beams for roofs and yokes for the cattle and plows. They had to go out and find the right trees, of which there were precious few in that area at that time, and they had to take the raw timber and fashion it into the desired product.

The tools of the trade were simple: an adze--- which was a hammer, chisel and plane all in one--- a saw, an ax, a knife and a bow and drill. They probably had some additional hammers and chisels for work with stone. Wood may have been scarce, but stones were all over the place.

II.

We come then to THE ENGAGEMENT AND MARRIAGE OF JOSEPH. (II. THE ENGAGEMENT AND MARRIAGE OF JOSEPH) As the young carpenter approached his later teens, one of the most important events in this simple existence loomed on the horizon--- marriage. It was time for Joseph’s parents to find him a wife.

The inventory from which to choose was limited in a small village like Nazareth. The choice perhaps was not too difficult. Mary was also from the tribe of Judah and a direct descendant of King David. She was probably a couple of years younger than Joseph. Like her fiancé, she had a reverence for the Law of Moses and was a person of noble character. The two young people knew each other--- for that matter everybody in Nazareth knew everybody else. That was later to be a problem. But for the present it seemed like a good arrangement, and everyone was agreeable to the union.

Joseph, I imagine, was excited as the day of engagement arrived, Mary would make a good wife. She was a quality girl. She came from a solid family. She was a strong young woman who would hopefully bear him lots of children. So he joyfully went to Mary’s house on the appointed day. There before witnesses, family members, and friends Joseph presented Mary with his piece of money as the pledge of his commitment. He uttered the words, “**Behold, you are engaged to me.**” Mary responded appropriately, and they were now legally bound to each other.

Following the celebration, however, Joseph and Mary had to separate. For the Jewish custom was that the man and woman had to remain with their parents for a year before the marriage could be consummated. The original purpose of that was to demonstrate the faithfulness and purity of the bride. If the woman was fooling around with someone, pregnancy would show her unfaithfulness and unsuitability as a wife for an upstanding man of Israel.

Joseph and Mary could still see each other, and the year would pass quickly. But then strange and mysterious things began to happen. With little warning Mary announced that she was going to visit her older cousin Elizabeth down toward Jerusalem. Something was clearly bothering Mary, but she would not reveal to Joseph what it was. So she headed south.

That was not so unreasonable in itself, but the time of her absence stretched on from days to weeks to months. Joseph missed his bride-to-be. He wondered and worried about her. Perhaps at times he was a little angry about it. It was hard to keep his mind on his work. Was she safe? What was she doing? Why was she gone so long?

At long last Mary returned. But it quickly became apparent that something was horribly wrong. Matthew #1 v. 18 tells us that it was discovered that Mary was pregnant. Women wore flowing robes, but it was impossible to hide this baby bump. Joseph was flooded with a variety of emotions. On one hand he felt anger and betrayal. His bride had gone away for a few months and had gotten involved with another man. Or did it happen with someone else here in Nazareth before she left? Maybe that was why she left. How could he and his family have so misjudged her character?

On the other hand Joseph felt grief and sorrow for her and for what this pregnancy would mean for her family. This would bring shame to her whole family. Joseph did care for Mary and her family, and he knew how people in Nazareth would talk about her.

To make matters worse Mary had a crazy story about an angel and some "Holy Spirit." Joseph knew about making things. He was a carpenter. He knew that there were physical laws that governed the universe, and he knew that in order to have a baby, there had to be a man. He also knew that he was not that man.

Marriage to Mary was now out of the question. To marry her would be to admit that he was the guilty man, that he was the one who got her pregnant before marriage. That just was not the case. So Joseph had two options: He could take her to the officials of the town and publicly present witnesses against Mary. The Old Testament Law said that she then ought to be stoned, although that was not done any more. It would only mean a public divorce. That would be humiliating enough for Mary and her family. At times when those feelings of bitterness came over young Joseph, that public hearing felt like a tempting option.

But Joseph cared too much for Mary and her family to really go through with that. He decided instead to choose the second option. He would write out a notice of divorce and

have it delivered privately to Mary by two witnesses. That would put an end to their relationship.

As Joseph was contemplating these options, something else strange happened. Joseph had a dream. It was like no other dream that he ever had. It was not just the product of his own wishful thinking. This was a supernatural dream. It was a dream that was vivid and convincing and frightening. There was a Jewish saying that there were three marks of God's favor. One was a fruitful year, the second was a good king, and the third was a good dream.

This was a good dream, in a sense, but it was also a dream that shook Joseph to his core. We pick up the story in Matthew #1, which is p. 807 in the black Bibles. In v. 20 an angel appears to him and says, "**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. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.**"

Joseph had lots of questions. But his dream fit exactly with the story that Mary had told him. He was convinced that this dream was not a product of his own imagination. It was too vivid and real and unlike any dream that he had ever experienced. He was not sure that he even wanted it to be true. But it was too compelling. This child in Mary's womb must indeed be a special child. The easier way out would be to end the engagement, but Joseph could not ignore the divine message that he had received.

The next day I imagine that Joseph made a bee line to Mary's house to tell her what had happened. Mary must have been very happy and relieved. At least one other human being besides her cousin Elizabeth believed her. Their rejoicing, however, was short lived as they began to talk about the reality of their situation. Nobody else would believe them. Mary's own family did not understand, and people in Nazareth would talk.

Joseph was obedient, though, to the heavenly vision. He took Mary home to be his wife. That was not an easy thing to do. He could not give Mary the proper wedding that she deserved. Worse than that was the reaction of the other villagers. They maybe did not say all that much. But he knew what they were thinking, and it was not true. Even Joseph and Mary's families did not understand. Mary came to live in a house with in-laws who may have suspected that this young woman had led their precious son astray.

Joseph, however, persevered in doing what was right. He did not even yet consummate their marriage. Verse 25 of Matthew # 1 says, "**...but [Joseph] knew her not until she had given birth to a son.**" When the angel said that the virgin was to give birth to a son, Joseph understood him to mean that he better wait until after Jesus' birth to have relations with her. Only Mary and Joseph and cousin Elizabeth--- and the Lord--- knew their integrity. It was hard, because all of the outward evidence pointed to a different conclusion.

III.

We come then to THE BIRTH OF JOSEPH'S STEPSON. (III. THE BIRTH OF JOSEPH'S STEPSON) When the decree from Caesar Augustus came down shortly afterward that everyone was to return to his ancestral home to be counted in the Roman census, Joseph may have greeted that announcement with a sense of relief. Only he as a male was obligated to make the three day journey to Bethlehem. But perhaps this was the opportunity that he and Mary needed to make a move, to get a fresh start.

Though Mary was fast approaching her delivery date, they set out for Bethlehem. (NAZARETH BETHLEHEM MAP) When they arrived in Bethlehem, probably they stayed with relatives. The old Christian tradition is that they were turned away at the inn. The more common meaning for the Greek word in question, however, is "guest room." There was another Greek word that was commonly used for a commercial inn. Bethlehem was probably too small at this time to have an inn, and it was only five miles from Jerusalem. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So they may well have stayed with relatives. Often first century homes had a guest room. But this guest room was occupied. Perhaps there was an older relative there, or someone who was sick. We know from archaeological excavations that many of the homes of this time and place did have side rooms at the front of the house where animals would be kept at night in the winter. Perhaps it was in such a place that Jesus was born. Perhaps it was in a nearby cave, for which there is a long tradition.

The circumstances were not quite what Joseph would have envisioned for the birth of his children. If indeed this was such a special child, why did not the Lord provide better surroundings? Joseph could not even afford to hire the musicians and singers that typically sang and played at the home of a family where a baby boy was born.

But then more strange things happened. That night an excited assortment of shepherds showed up in their borrowed house, or borrowed cave, with a story about angels that they had seen out in the fields. These excited shepherds claimed that an angel had told them that a Savior, Christ the Lord, had been born, and that they could find Him in Bethlehem lying in a manger. The shepherds also reported that they had witnessed a heavenly choir of angels praising God. It was an amazing tale. Joseph took it as further confirmation that this child was indeed special. Perhaps God Himself had provided a choir to serenade this special boy and his family. But the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament? Could it be?

News about these things spread quickly in town, and Bethlehem became a much more inviting place in which to live than was Nazareth. Joseph was soon able to get his own house and to set up shop as a carpenter.

Six weeks after Jesus was born, Joseph brought Mary and Jesus up to the temple (TEMPLE 01) in Jerusalem so that she could be given the rite of purification that was required by the Old Testament Law for mothers of newborn babies. They also had to pay the five shekel tax that was required by the Law to be paid in the temple for every first born son. (TEMPLE 02)

While they were in the temple, more strange things happened. An old man came up to them and began saying things about Jesus. He called their baby **“the glory of God’s people Israel”** and **“the light of revelation to the Gentiles.”** The Gentiles?

There was more. An old prophetess named Anna approached them and said similar things. (LUKE 2:33) According to Luke #2 v. 33, **“And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him.”** It was tough for Joseph to put all this stuff together.

Back in Bethlehem some months later these magi--- these wise men, astrologer government advisors from the East--- showed up to worship Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF) They had a story about a star appearing in the sky and bringing them to Bethlehem to see Israel’s future king. These Gentiles wanted to worship their son. It was strange. Before they departed, they left gold and frankincense and myrrh. This was expensive stuff. This was more riches than young Joseph had ever laid his eyes on in his life, and it was given to them for their child.

Sometime later Joseph had another dream. The angel was back again. He told Joseph that he had to flee with the family to Egypt, because Herod was going to try to find and kill Jesus. Why would anyone want to kill a baby boy in southern Judea? According to the *Times of Israel* (12/4/2023) Hamas on October 7 killed 12 children between the ages of one and nine, ten of whom were boys. Maybe things haven’t changed that much in 2000 years.

But to go to Egypt? Joseph didn’t know anyone in Egypt. He didn’t know the culture. He didn’t know the language. He didn’t know if he could find work. Things had just seemed to be settling down and going well in Bethlehem. But that angel was real, and Joseph knew that King Herod had a reputation for brutality and paranoia. He knew the stories that Herod had killed several of his own family members.

So Joseph took Mary and Jesus and headed off for Egypt. They became refugees, immigrants. But at least they had the valuable gifts of the wise men to sustain them in this foreign country. Perhaps that is why God had sent these Gentiles. Perhaps it was His plan for these valuable gifts to be used to sustain his family in Egypt.

IV.

We come finally to THE LESSONS FROM JOSEPH. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE LESSONS FROM JOSEPH) The toughest circumstances of life reveal the true character of an individual. Such was the case for Joseph. This young man faced incredible pressures. He was misunderstood. His character was wrongly attacked. He was forced to leave family and friends to go to Bethlehem. Then he was forced to leave his country by the danger posed by a paranoid king. It would have been a whole lot less complicated for Joseph if had chalked up his initial dream to the vivid workings of his own imagination, and if he would have followed through on his initial plan to divorce Mary. He would also have received a lot more support from his family and friends.

A.

But Joseph did the right thing. So the first lesson is simply: IN THE MIDST OF CHALLENGES PERSEVERE IN DOING THE RIGHT THING. (V. THE LESSONS... A. IN THE MIDST...) Joseph's behavior in the face of great challenges revealed the true quality of his character. As one writer put it, "**Joseph demonstrated that God knew to whom to entrust a treasure more precious than the human mind could conceive.**" We have words recorded in the New Testament which Mary spoke. But we have no recorded words from Joseph. Yet his actions in the face of great challenges leave us a great and honorable legacy.

God also brings tests along the paths of those of us who are Christians. Sometimes in the midst of our trials down seems up and up seems down. Right seems wrong and wrong seems right. People misunderstand us. They question our motives. They impugn our integrity. Sometimes no one really seems to understand. The temptation in such circumstances is to bail out, to throw in the towel.

Perhaps some of you are faced with such a set of circumstances right now. Will the knowledge that you are pleasing God be enough to motivate you to persevere in doing the right thing? Will you obey God's Word, or will you cave in to other pressures? We ought to keep doing things God's way.

Psychiatrist Scott Peck points out in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, "**He who behaves nobly in easy times... may not be so noble when the chips are down. Stress is the test for goodness. The truly good are they who in time of stress do not desert their integrity, their maturity, their sensitivity.**"

B.

The second lesson that I find from this story is that we need to MAKE SURE THAT WE HAVE ESTABLISHED A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS. (IV. THE LESSONS... B. MAKE SURE THAT...) Joseph had a unique, twofold relationship with Jesus. Jesus was entrusted to Joseph's care as a son. Jesus was also to be his Savior, his Messiah. It was this second relationship with Jesus that must have been the most challenging. Joseph knew that the Old Testament spoke of a coming deliverer, a Messiah. But his understanding of this Messiah was limited. Now Joseph was being told that the Messiah was his son. It must have been tough to process that.

The Lord graciously brought along certain events that helped Joseph's understanding about the true identity of his son to grow: a vision from an angel, discussion with Mary about her own vision, the visit from the shepherds, Anna and Simeon in the temple who had messages from God about their son, the wise men, and a second appearance of the angel warning him to flee to Egypt.

As Jesus grew and matured, Joseph developed a personal relationship with Him not just as a Father to a son but also as a sinner to his Savior. What a strange and unique situation that must have been. He was raising a son who was sinless. At the same time

this Jesus was to be his Savior from sin. I suspect that godly Joseph came to recognize Jesus as His Messiah. The four New Testament Gospels imply that Joseph died before Jesus began His public ministry.

There is a parallel here to the development of our own relationship with Jesus. We live in a culture that has much exposure to Christianity. From our earliest years most of us have known something about Jesus Christ. Our reactions and our attitudes toward Him have varied. Frequently our attitudes toward Jesus have varied within the course of our own lives. At times we may have rejected Him. At times we may have felt confused about Him. At times we may not have thought much about Him at all. At times we may have had doubts about Him. At times we may have felt attracted to Him.

Some of us have come to the point of trusting Jesus as our Messiah, as our Savior. We have come to recognize that He was truly God who became man and that He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. Some of us have come to trust in this Jesus and what He did for us as the only way to have eternal life.

Perhaps you have not quite reached that point in your spiritual journey. This may be so for a variety of reasons. You may have some intellectual doubts about this gospel deal. The thing that holds many of us back is fear--- fear of what might happen to our lives, fear of what this Jesus might do to our lives, fear of surrendering control of our lives to God, fear of what others might think about us. How will people react if I really do become a born-again Christian? That fear of what others might think must have entered Joseph's mind when he considered marrying Mary after she was pregnant. He knew that he would take flack for doing the right thing. But he obeyed God.

There was a fellow early in the 1800s by the name of Adoniram Judson who eventually became a famous missionary. Judson grew up in a Christian home in Massachusetts, in fact, his father was a minister. But Judson had not quite bought into this Christianity thing himself. He had doubts about Jesus. When he went away to college, he became best friends with an avowed atheist whose name was Jacob Eames.

Jacob Eames and Adoniram Judson had a lot of what they thought was fun in college. After college they headed in different directions. Adoniram Judson became involved with a traveling drama group. A couple of years later Judson was heading to Boston from New York City to visit his parents. It was December, and he happened to spend a night at an inn in Plymouth, Massachusetts. He had trouble sleeping that night. For next door to him there was a man who moaned and groaned all night, obviously very sick. It sounded like the poor guy was dying. Adoniram Judson lay awake much of the night thinking about what would happen to him when he died. He thought about Jesus Christ and the faith of his parents. But he also thought about his college friend Jacob Eames and how he would react if Judson told him that he had become a Christian. He would take a lot of flack from him if he ever made that decision.

The next morning Judson asked the innkeeper about the man next door: **“The poor old man in the next room. How is he?”** The innkeeper replied, **“He died. But he wasn’t**

old. He was about your age.” Judson happened to ask what his name was. The innkeeper replied, “**Jacob Eames.**”

It was his college friend. He had died that night, lying only a few feet away from his friend who was considering matters of his spiritual destiny, who was thinking even about Jacob. Adoniram was deeply affected. A couple of months later he decided that he must put his faith in Jesus.

I don't know where you are in your spiritual journey. But it would be a mistake if you were to leave here today with your understanding of Jesus limited to a picture of a baby born in Bethlehem. For this baby would grow to become a man. As the God-man He would die on the cross to pay the sins of the world. Three days later He would rise from the dead. Some day He will return as Judge of the living and of the dead. He will hold all of us accountable for how we have responded to Him. The best gift that we could receive this Christmas eve is the gift of forgiveness of sins and eternal life, which are ours if we will only trust in this Jesus and welcome Him into our lives.