

Finding the Gift of Purpose (Joseph)

Series: Finding the True Gift of Christmas

Brad Bailey – December 3, 2023

INTRO

I would venture to say that **most of us have come here today...with a sense about our lives...that is related to the hopes and dreams we have had.** ... that is... we have ideas about how we hope our lives will go...goals and plans... and **how we feel about our lives...is generally related to those plans.**

If things are going according to our plans... life is good...we sense we are blessed...and if not...our lives can be marked by regret.

We tend to see our lives in relationship to our plans.

When we look at the nativity scene ... the lives engaged in the actual events we celebrate at Christmas... we see something very different.

When we engage **the actual events at the very root of Christmas...** what we see are lives that have been **confronted by something much bigger than themselves.**

Look again at a nativity scene... every life was marked by changes and challenges.

being disrupted...none of their lives and near chaos... and the good news?.... God was in it.

What lies in the lives that we see in the nativity... is not elusive sentimental peace... but the very substance that changed their lives forever.

Today...we are launching into the Christmas season... and a series entitled Finding the True Gift of Christmas.

Series... The true gift of Christmas changes everything... in each of those drawn into this **intersection of divinity and humanity** when Christ was born... their lives were changed forever... not merely added to... but changes forever.

Today we **begin with Joseph.**

Matthew 1:18-19

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

For many...these lives seem familiar... for others... perhaps a bit vague.

- They lived in the **village of Nazareth...in Israel....** which probably had **300 to 400 people** at the time.
- Each would have been **living in the home of their parents...**
- Every reason to believe they were devout... at a time in which God seemed to have left His people.

Joseph was a man who lived with the roots of simplicity and the longings for significance.

He was a common man...but his name carried the weight of significance

Joseph's name was a proud name, recalling the ancient Jewish name of one of the twelve patriarchs, Joseph the son of Jacob who was sold by his brothers into Egypt and who later became second to Pharaoh in power over all Egypt, saving his family from famine (Genesis 30-50). His name means "to add."

And he may have been a **simple man** ...but **his lineage spoke of significance... family line...** flowed from the **great heroes** who **carried the promises of God**.

Two figures stand out in this list: **Abraham and David**.

Two thousand years before Jesus, God made a promise to Abraham: **all the peoples of the earth** will be **blessed** through your nation of offspring ([Gen. 12:3](#)). In Jesus, God kept that promise.

One thousand years before Jesus, God made a promise to David. When David became king of Abraham's nation, **God promised to raise up one of David's descendants** to rule over an eternal kingdom ([2 Sam. 7:11-16](#)). Jesus was the fulfillment of that promise: the anointed one, the Messiah, who would rescue the people and establish an eternal kingdom.

> **His lineage speaks of hope... of God's purposes amongst such people.**

As for wealth...we know that Joseph would be deemed among the general poor of their day...

The offering Mary and Joseph brought to the temple on the occasion of Mary's purification from childbirth was the offering of a poor man, a pair of doves or pigeons (Luke 2:24; Leviticus 12:8).

...but Joseph would also have the respect and advantages of his trade as a carpenter...which Matthew's Gospel tells us of. (Matthew 13:55).

Being ... In the agrarian society of rural Galilee, a **carpenter amidst such a small village** didn't become rich... they would have also had a home farm...but when people needed to build homes or plows... they relied on the carpenter. (As a rule the common man built his own house, probably with the help of family and neighbors. A family might have a knife and hammer of some kind. But a carpenter would possess both specialized tools, some fairly expensive, *and* the skills to use them -- saws, axes, awls, drills, plumb lines, chisels, and planes, some of which have been recovered by archeologists.)

> so Joseph had some added respect among his people. [1]

Most of all... he was now betrothed. ("pledged to be married")

... dear Mary was pledged to him.

It's helpful to understand that this is not the same as a couple getting engaged in today's culture.

Betrothal in the Jewish culture is taken very seriously. Jewish couples were normally betrothed for the period of one year...before living together and consummating their marriage. During this year, the commitment was considered so legally binding that a divorce was necessary to break it.

This is the result of what may have been arranged between the parents over time. It represented what his parents had longed for... and Joseph had waited for. He would now begin his own family.

> **So Joseph has come to a point in which he is proud and he has plans.**

His life may have been simple... but he had plans for finding significance.

We all do.

Human nature has an inherent search for significance.

And part of that search is to form plans for success.

Well... it appears that Joseph had done the right things that should serve that path... and now the plans he had for his life were about to unfold.

What does a man like this value? The honor of his wife to be...and the respect of his people.

“but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.”

With those words... everything he has lived for is over.

It's clear that Joseph **could only imagine that Mary had been unfaithful**. He was likely proud to have been faithful and not slept with her... but now he could only imagine that she had slept with some other man. And when it becomes obvious that she is pregnant, the people will assume that he has been unfaithful. He alone knows that he is not the father. Others will never look at him the same. His trade as a carpenter... may be lost as people avoid associating with him.

He faces a life of unfaithfulness and dishonor.

If Joseph wanted to maintain his honor, he was obligated to divorce Mary.

Matthew tells us that before the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, Joseph was contemplating how he should divorce Mary ([Matt. 1:19](#)). It is important to remember that since a betrothal was legally binding, a divorce was necessary to break it. It should also be noted that **Joseph was not contemplating *if* he should divorce Mary, but *how***. ***“Jewish, Greek, and Roman law all demanded that a man divorce his wife if she were guilty of adultery”*** (Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 91). Even Jesus allows for divorce in the case of adultery ([Matt. 5:32](#)). If Joseph does not divorce Mary, he faces one of two possible dilemmas. Keener states, *“Mediterranean society viewed with contempt the weakness of a man who let his love for his wife outweigh his appropriate honor in repudiating her”* (Keener, p. 91). The other possibility is that, if Joseph followed through with the wedding, then it would be an admission that he had slept with her. Either way, Joseph would experience the shame and contempt of his society. For Joseph to be considered a “just” man ([Matt. 1:19](#)), he must divorce Mary.

But being “just” also involved a level of compassion... and Matthew tells us that Joseph desired to put Mary away “secretly” or “privately” ([Matt. 1:19](#)). The fact that Joseph is willing to put Mary away privately suggests that he is a man who puts compassion above his own hurt and shame.

In the midst of his plans for life being lost... he seems to try and manage the mess the best he can.
> Maybe you have faced something that brought an end to what you had dreamed of...what you had plans for. Maybe you have felt like you are just trying to make the most of a life that will never be significant.

Matthew 1:20-23

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

With those words... God is revealing that something much bigger is at hand... God's purposes.

He was being called into a bigger story.

Important to know... that God is not against our hopes and plans for a better life... it's that He knows our hopes and dreams are **far too small... the problems and pain cannot be resolved by the fixes that our plans represent.**

We think "if only" Mary and I could have our easier life... if only...this change of circumstances change...

God knows our plans and He knows his purposes are bigger... not smaller.

Joseph faced a crossroads... between his plans and God's purposes.

This is what Joseph discovers.

Matthew 1:24-25

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Important to see... this wasn't going to make life easier.

God entrusted Joseph with His great purposes...but in this world... that **will involve sacrifice and surrender.**

He would find **strength and resolve to stand amidst hardship....**because he knew he was called by God.

Whatever Joseph could feel proud of... it wouldn't be understood by others. The public honor was gone... his place in the community... gone.

He chose to marry Mary... despite his *own* reputation. Can you imagine the whispering and gossip swirling around a wedding with a pregnant bride? Joseph knew people would condemn him for getting Mary pregnant before their marriage, but he married her anyway (1:24).

Joseph chose God's purposes and surrendered his plans.

He surrendered his pride... and endured the shame.

And now the **Empire calls for taxation...** he will have to pay taxes...in his hometown ([Luke 2:4-7](#))

A call went out for having to register for taxes... by returning to one's place of birth. This would mean Joseph would have to travel all the way to Bethlehem with Mary at the very time of birth. (There are many images... look almost serene... but I imagine every step he faced the change in his life and plans.)

Because of the census... there was no room... so she gave birth where the animals were kept.

We can only imagine how hard it was to give birth with no home... and no family.

And in due time...we could imagine **Joseph was ready to return to his hometown** of Nazareth and get back to his carpenter business... but Joseph is awakened at night and we read...

Matthew 2:13

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

The local **Roman king Herod** would come to kill this child... and so he must immediately leave Bethlehem and begin a journey to Egypt. And so... with no travel plans... no hotels... they grab what they have and begin the journey... fleeing to Egypt. [2]

Living as outsiders in a new land.... For about 4 years.

Epitomizes what God says **we are all refugees in this world... never yet home.**

Embraced hardship...realized heaven was writing another story.

Giving up on plans for easier life.

Proverbs 19:21

Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.

Joseph discovers that our ultimate significance is in relationship to God... it is God's purposes that will last.

This is what Joseph discovers. He names the child... but not from the role of authority in which a father would choose the name. The name has been chosen. It comes from what precedes him...and what represents something bigger than himself.

The angel tells Joseph the name to be given to the child -- Jesus. "Jesus" (Greek Iēsous) was not an uncommon name at this time, since the Hebrew name Yēshūa is a shortened form of Joshua, which means "Yahweh saves."

*"... You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (1:21)
Jesus' name from the time he was a baby was to indicate his mission.*

They would ever forget who he was -- Yahweh's salvation embodied in human form. His destiny was to save. And the angel made it clear to Joseph that this salvation would not be political or military. Jesus' mission was not to overthrow the Roman oppressors and reinstate the Jewish kingdom. His mission was to save his people from themselves... from their own sin and separation from God.

Joseph is commanded to personally name the child. This is deeply significant. It means that Joseph, in naming the child, acknowledges him as his own son and thus becomes the legal father of the child according to Semitic law. As a result of this legal adoption, Joseph's ancestry as a descendent of David transfers also to his legal son.¹⁸ Biologically, Jesus is begotten by the Holy Spirit and is thus the "Son of God" (Luke 1:32a), but legally he is the son of Joseph and heir to the promises of David, Joseph's ancestor. The angel Gabriel had promised Mary, "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David" (Luke 1:32b). In Joseph naming the boy, and therefore adopting him, David becomes Jesus' earthly ancestor.

And for Joseph... it redefines his whole life.

He is surrendering to a different role. This child... is the center of everything.

He would now be defined by his relationship to Jesus. At the time...it would diminish his value in the eyes of some. He found freedom to let go of his plans... and find a more true purpose.

Joseph may stand quietly in the background of the Christmas story, but that's precisely what makes him a hero of the faith.

His significance is not about his plans...but about God's purpose and plans.

When you look at the nativity scene... we see Joseph is there... why? Because of his relationship to Jesus.

In fact... when you look at the nativity scene ... no one is there that isn't surrounding Jesus.

At the core of the actual events of Christmas... God's plans interrupt everyone.

But they find themselves at the center of God's purpose...of all that is good.

God is with us in the unexpected.

Our lives are centered in that reality....in something bigger than ourselves... and you become bigger because of it.

That is what God has for each of us...as we prepare for what Christmas represents. : to find freedom to loosen or let go of our plans... and find a more true purpose.

Christmas tells us that our lives are not defined by our plans...but by God's purposes.

CLOSING:

Some of us **feel anxious** about our lives **not having a plan...** or **having gotten off the plan.**

Some of us **live with regret** because life didn't go as we expected.

Your life is not defined by your plans...but by God's purpose.

Life won't always be easy, but if we seek God and listen to His voice, **we'll end up where we are meant to be in life.**

Resources:

The Forgotten Figure in the Nativity Scene - DECEMBER 18, 2019 | DANIEL K. ENG

[here.](#)

[Craig Keener's commentary on Matthew.](#)

Note:

1. Joseph the Carpenter – From <https://www.jesuswalk.com/christmas-incarnation/joseph-father.html>

2. It is clear that Luke's account does not include the reference to Egypt and Matthew's account does not include a reference to a previous trip to Jerusalem and Nazareth. There is no inherent contradiction as neither presumes to be including every element of their lives. See: When Did Jesus Go to Egypt?, ERIC LYONS – [here](#)

There are different ideas about the travel distance and time involved. I think this summary by a post captures the options well:

“to understand travel distance in that time you have to know something about the way people traveled. If Joseph and Mary traveled over land to Egypt, they would have followed the trade routes and gone first from Bethlehem to Jerusalem and then down the mountain road to the sea to Jaffa. From there they would have followed the coast road, “the way of the sea” which would be the shortest route to Alexandria, Egypt. Why here? This was the largest community of Jews in this part of the world at this time. It would have been easy to find help and support and to get work. Joseph is described in the bible as a “tehton” which is a craftsman or artisan. This would commonly denote a worker in the carving of wood, metal, or stone for building. Where

they lived in nazareth was nearby the large city of sepphoris which at that time was being rebuilt and required the use of many stone masons and builders of all types. Joseph likely worked there and would have been a member of a guild of tradesmen. Alexandria would afford him an entry to the same guild of tradesmen and access to work and a supporting community. Distance wise the trip would have been about 300 or so miles. A donkey goes about 12 to 15 miles a day depending on the geography. So this would have taken them maybe the better part of a month. However, the better more likely way was for them to travel down to Jaffa about 40 miles from Jerusalem and get passage on a boat at the port. A 285 mile journey from Jaffa port to the port at Alexandria at a sailing speed of around 8 miles an hour would get them there in a little under two days. They had the money to do such a trip from the gold brought by the magi. Also, it was likely from the warning given them by the angel that time was of the essence. They could be easily overtaken on the road by the soldiers of Herod. They could have made the trip from Bethlehem to the coast in two days and been safely away from Herod's jurisdiction." - [William Campbell](#)