

## **Joseph, Did you Know? The Christmas Story is an Adoption Story (Luke 1-2, Matthew 1-2)**

The Christmas story is very familiar to many of us; Jesus, Mary, an in-keeper, shepherds, angels, Gabriel, Herod, Caesar Augustus. In the story earlier, the priest Zecharias and his wife Elizabeth, and later in the story, wise men, and in the temple, Simeon and Anna see baby Jesus (we looked at those 2 often overlooked characters last year). But there's another key character I haven't mentioned yet in the Christmas story, who is often overlooked, but without *this* character, none of the Christmas story happens, Jesus can't be the Messiah, and we can't have the good news and we can't be saved. Our focus is often on the other Nativity figures, but the character the Christmas story turns on I want us to turn to in Luke chapter 1.

The easily neglected but essential name in the Christmas story is Joseph. Without Joseph and what he does, nothing else happens. If you've think of Mary as the *real parent* of Jesus and Joseph not really a father, or if you think of Joseph as a minor character who is just there to round out the manger scene, rather than a major and pivotal person who is essential for the claim of Jesus to be the King the OT prophets promised, you've missed an important part of the Christmas story in Joseph, a man forgotten by many in the Christmas story, but he's foundational to it and to our salvation.

I've heard Russell Moore tell the story of how when he was in 1st grade he was in a Christmas pageant, and he had the role of a cow in the manger set, complete with velvet ears and styrofoam horns, and even so, as the cow he had more lines than Joseph. At least the cattle were lowing in the stable, but Joseph had nothing to do or say in the play except to help the donkey and stand by the little girl playing Mary at the innkeeper's door before Joseph escorts her to the Nativity set. Joseph is a stand-in or supporting actor only until he gets the main actress Mary to center stage and then he fades into the background having fulfilled his only useful role as an usher. He is basically like the manger, a prop on the stage, not a major player on it. But the NT presents him in a different light. Look at Lk 1:26:

<sup>26</sup> *Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was **Joseph, of the descendants of David ...***

Critical detail #1 about the Christmas story, before even the name of Mary is given, Joseph's name is given with *his* ancestry from King David. The inspired text emphasizes this first in the story.

Why is this important? The angel tells Mary at the end of v. 32 that the Messiah would be given "*the throne of **his father** David.*" For Jesus to assume that throne, his father had to be legal heir to it with David as His forefather. In v. 68 Zecharias says after he hears the news of a son who would announce the reign of Messiah-King: Look at v. 68 *Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people,* <sup>69</sup> *And has raised up a horn of salvation for us **In the house of David His servant—*** <sup>70</sup> *As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old ...*

So this was essential, the redemption and salvation promised in the OT prophets had to come through the house of David. And only one fathered in David's lineage could have legal right to his throne. And so when Scripture unfolds the Christmas story in Luke and in Matthew, in both cases, the first thing Scripture emphasizes is that *Joseph* is descended directly from the line of King David. Mary's lineage is traced in chapter 3, but Jesus could not be raised by a single mom and still be Messiah and legal heir to David's throne if he had no legal father linking him to the royal kingly line of David.

Being the Son of God born of a virgin was not enough to establish the claims of Jesus as Messiah-King. The biblical world knew that the right of rulership depended on your relationship to human royal family lineage father-to-son. More often than not in NT times, that was passed on by legal adoption of a son not biologically begotten by or related to the king/emperor. That's exactly how Joseph is so vital this story as Joseph becomes an adoptive father of a baby not biologically begotten by him, but really legally Joseph is the father, by his legal marriage to Mary. In Matthew 1 Joseph becomes legal father by marriage, so her child is full legal heir to David's lineage.

In a very real sense, the Christmas story is an adoption story, and it unfolds in Luke 2 by decree from a Caesar who wasn't biologically related to the prior Caesar, but he was adopted by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. and in 14 B.C. this adopted son became Caesar Augustus, the next legal rightful royal real son and ruler as legal son of Julius.

**Lk 2:1** *Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus [this is that adopted son of Julius Caesar who had authority over the whole earth by that adoption], that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth ... **4 Joseph** also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the **city of David** which is called Bethlehem, because **he was of the house and family of David** ...*

Again here in v. 4-5 Joseph is mentioned before Mary because his ancestry is vital, even though her baby isn't biologically related to Joseph, just as Caesar Augustus wasn't to Julius. Joseph becoming legal father of Mary's son would make Jesus legal rightful real heir to Joseph's house, family, lineage from King David. Heaven's King had promised to a future descendant born in King David's line a true rulership over all the earth, in fact, as Emperor of the Universe

[in NT times, the emperors ascended thrones by their adoption]

Trevor Burke's scholarly work on adoption in NT times explains: 'Adoption was a means by which succession to power was brought about; from the late first century to the middle of the second ... successive Roman emperors [5 in a row from Augustus to Nero] adopted men not related to them by blood with the intention that an adoptee [become the next]...emperor...Adoption became crucial'<sup>1</sup>

No one in NT times would say Caesar Augustus wasn't really a son of Julius Caesar because he was adopted and didn't share his DNA. And in Luke 4:22, they say of Jesus when He comes back to the synagogue hometown He grew up in, He's called "**Joseph's son.**"

But it's not only the Jewish people who considered Joseph to be the father to Jesus; look at Mary, speaking to 12-year-old Jesus in 2:48

*When they saw Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, **Your father and I** have been anxiously looking for You."*

Notice even Mary herself speaks of Joseph first as "*your father and I.*" Mary knew Joseph wasn't His biological dad, but also knew by adoption, the reality is, to Jesus she rightly calls Joseph *your father*

But look at v. 27 and don't just take the word of Jesus' hometown community that He's "Joseph's son" and don't just take the word of His biological birth mom that Joseph is His Father, God's inspired Word itself calls Joseph His parent and father: 27 *And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, 28 then he took Him[baby Jesus]into his arms...33 And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him.*

Again, Joseph as "*His father*" is mentioned first, even before Mary, the "mother," and both are called "the parents" of "the child Jesus." Again in v. 41: "*Now **His parents** went to Jerusalem every year...*" End of v. 43 also calls both of them (not just Mary) "*His parents.*" It's not that Joseph is a prop, Mary is the *parent*. Both are parents.

Turn to Matthew chapter 1 and I want you to see the Christmas story is an adoption story from the first page of the NT as well. I know most of us when we come to a genealogy tend to skim past or even skip past the names, if we're honest, the "begats" bore us. But the "begats" in old English, showing who was begotten from who, to the Jews Matthew is writing to, was essential for Messiah

Matthew 1:1 *The record of the genealogy of **Jesus the Messiah, the son of David**...*[out the gate, Messiah must be David's descendant] ...<sup>16</sup> *Jacob was the father of **Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah**.* [NT opens by showing Joseph, legal father of Jesus, is David's direct descendant]

Matthew begins with the line of the father, before mentioning the mother in v. 18: *Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.*<sup>19</sup> *And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.*

As someone has said, when Joseph found out Mary was pregnant, he didn't burst forth with singing "It's beginning to feel a lot like Christmas." His betrothed who he's never been intimate with got pregnant. He justly could annul their betrothal if she was unfaithful

<sup>20</sup> *But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "**Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.**"*<sup>21</sup> *"She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus ...* [that was the duty of the father]

The angel reminds Joseph he is a descendant of David and so he tells Joseph to take Mary as wife, which in the biblical language entailed taking on any children as one's one legally, and taking on the duty of father, and as a true father would do, naming his son, and the legal ramifications would include making him a full heir.

<sup>24</sup> *And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and **took Mary as his wife,***<sup>25</sup> *but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and **he called His name Jesus.***

Mary didn't name Him as the parent, Joseph did that fatherly task.

The angel makes clear to him and others he has the father's role. And after the birth in Bethlehem, it is Joseph, not Mary, that the angel speaks to as the primary parent and protector of this family in Matthew 2:13 when Herod wanted to kill the newborn King. It is Joseph protecting this boy from a murderous slaughter of babies and again in v. 20 an angel tells Joseph to bring his family back.

Each time the Lord speaks to Joseph, not Mary. v. 22 says Joseph *'when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Then after being warned by God in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, <sup>23</sup> and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: 'He shall be called a Nazarene.'*

Because Joseph was a Nazarene, Jesus became a Nazarene. Sons took on the identity of their father, and this was important to fulfill prophecy. The virgin conception through Mary was important to fulfill prophecy, but so was the identity of Jesus through Joseph. If Joseph does not do all those things we just read, if he is not a legal adoptive actual father in every way to Jesus, Jesus can't be Messiah

In John 1:45 a man named Philip (great name) said to Nathanael: *"We have found **Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.**"*

In John 6:42 other Jews said of Him: *"Is not this **Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?**"* In the minds of the community, His disciples, and NT writers there was no question as to the validity and reality of Joseph as the earthly father to Jesus, legally although not biologically. Jesus was virginally conceived as the uniquely "only begotten Son of God," yet equally "son of man." As fully God, and fully man, He was fully heir of David's lineage through Joseph, and therefore He is able to fully save His people.

Turn to Matthew 21 where the people on Palm Sunday grasped this as Jesus, legal descendant of David by Joseph, rides into Jerusalem and v. 5 says He fulfilled the prophet's words "behold your King": <sup>9</sup> *The crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting, "Hosanna [Heb. "save us now"] **to the Son of David...**"*

Jesus is called "son of David" 7x in Matthew's gospel (4x asking "have mercy on me/us, Son of David," 9:27, 15:22, 20:30-31), and this chapter is the finale, "Hosanna [save us now], *Son of David!*"

So what is the application for us today? Let me give you three:

### 1. Recognize Jesus as your King

Jesus only saves those who truly cry out in faith to Him as King, "Son of David, Hosanna, save me now," trusting in what He did that same week, dying on the cross for sin, and then rising from the dead and ascending to heaven where He sits on His rightful throne.

If you do not recognize Jesus as rightful King of your life, ruler of your heart which bows in worship before and seeks to do whatever your King tells you, because you are His subjects, if He is not your Lord, your Master, your Monarch, then you're not in His Kingdom. To enter His Kingdom, you must recognize you're unworthy to be in it, but you cry out in faith, "*have mercy on me, Son of David!*" In other words, recognize Jesus is rightful King, beg Him for mercy.

In the words of the Christmas carol "What Child is This?": The King of kings salvation brings, Let loving hearts enthrone Him.<sup>2</sup>

[inside your bulletin see "Plan of Salvation" in Romans"]

Don't "accept Jesus into your heart," you need to accept that you are a sinner at heart, and your heart is wicked and in need of being changed by King Jesus to love Him from the heart, enthrone Him. We don't *make Him* Lord, He *is* Lord, we need to be made subject. Ask Him to change your heart in repentance, to worship, love Him. Join herald angels who sing "Glory to the newborn King. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled."<sup>3</sup> *Turn to Gal. 4*

The only way you as a sinner can be reconciled to God is through the work of King Jesus in His life and death and resurrection and reigning position seated on the throne of His heavenly kingdom. It is there where He represents all those who've come under His rule. From that executive chair He can legally give presidential pardons, because He satisfied God's Law in His flesh as the legally adopted son of an earthly father, and now He is our attorney in court for the adoption of us by His Heavenly Father, paying our legal fees for us

Gal. 4:4: *But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born **under the Law** [i.e., meeting legal requirements]<sup>5</sup> so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, **that we might receive the adoption as sons.**<sup>6</sup> **Because you are sons [real sons], God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"<sup>7</sup> Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.***

## 2. Rejoice in the reality of the father's adoption

If the Joseph-Jesus connection confuses us because we think what matters is biology, we've missed the significance of this and what the gospel message and much of the NT is celebrating in adoption, both on a human level, and on a spiritual level, the reality it creates

Russell Moore, in a message he gave this month "The Christmas Story is an Adoption Story," explained how people often miss the reality of Joseph's adopted fatherhood of Jesus, and Russell Moore illustrates it by own his experience in adopting 2 boys from Russia. People often asked about his 2 adopted sons, "Are they brothers?" He would reply "they are now," but they would ask "yeah, but are they *really* brothers...you know what I mean." [He explains] "I did know what they meant and that was precisely the problem ... there is a tendency to think of reality being simply about bloodlines and DNA, as though at least if these 2 boys were biologically brothers then there would be something that is *real* and lasting. And I in my frustration as a new father was trying to say, "the adoption itself creates something that is *real*." The reason, I think, I was frustrated [he says] is it was an indictment of the way I had been thinking.

When my wife first came to me after years of infertility and miscarriage and suggested that perhaps the Lord was leading us to adopt...I said "I would love to adopt someday but first I would like for us to have our *own* kids" (that was the language that I used, language that indicts me now). I didn't know what I was talking about. I assumed that you had 2 categories: *real* children and adopted children, a Plan A and a Plan B, but my mind was totally changed and my life was totally changed once God created a *real* family through adoption in a way that I never would have planned<sup>4</sup>

Jesus was adopted by an earthly father so that He could be rightly and really heir of David's kingly line and promise, and Jesus dies for us so we can be adopted by His Heavenly Father. We are *really* children if our faith is in Jesus, He is *really* our brother, He is now!

He suffers to bring "*many sons to glory*," real sons that "*He is not ashamed to call ... brothers*," according to Hebrews 2 for all those Christ called "*the children whom God has given me*" (Heb 2:10-13)

At the Last Supper, Jesus said to His disciples that rather than call them slaves, He would call them "friends" (John 15:13), but after He dies and rises, the first thing He wants them to hear is this: "*go, tell my brothers...I ascend to My Father and your Father*" (20:17)

That's part of what Gal 4:5 means as it says Christ redeemed us "*that we might receive adoption as sons.*" Then v. 6 says "*you **are sons***" (not 'adopted' sons, or second-class or another category, but "sons") and the end of v. 7 says as real sons we are real heirs. The language of "sons" includes daughters, but the term "sons" means we have the same standing in God's eyes as His only begotten Son, as far as love and inheritance shared with us, all adopted children God gave Him are now, as Romans 8 says, "*co-heirs with Christ*" who has the pre-eminent place of "*firstborn among many brothers*" and so God will "*with Him graciously give us all things* (v. 17, 32)

1 Jn 3:1 (NIV) *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that **is what we are!***

Recognize the King, Rejoice in the reality of His adoption for us...

### **#3. Remember Joseph in this story as an example for us**

For those of us who already know Jesus of Nazareth, don't forget Joseph of Nazareth, who Scripture honors and wants us to emulate. As Joseph takes on a role of committed provider and protector for a teenage pregnant mom and father to a child that was not naturally his own flesh and blood, Joseph is reflecting the heavenly "Father to the fatherless," a God who does that for us not naturally His own

And when Joseph and Mary's biological son James writes the book of James, he says true Christianity that pleases God the Father also visits or takes care of orphans and widows in distress (James 1:27). Some Christians here God calls to take care of orphans by taking in some by adoption. Not all are equally called or qualified, but all of us are called by that passage to express care for orphans. One way to help others adopt for those who desire is by an adoption fund we have with Lifesong you can give to and help GCBC families adopt. Inside your bulletin it mentions how to do that, and the info table also has packets, good organization doing many James 1:27 things. The bulletin also mentions Pregnancy Counseling Services needs, which helps local unmarried moms whose kids are often fatherless.

What Joseph does for Mary and Jesus, we're to do for His family. Matthew 25 says when we see Jesus as King, He will say to us "as you did to the least of these my brothers, you did to me...you gave me food...you gave me drink...I was a stranger [not related to you] and you welcomed me [took me in]...clothed me...visited [or cared for] me...as you did to...my brothers, you did to me." This is what the King will say to those who inherit His kingdom (Mt 25:34-40).



Joseph did that for Jesus who calls us to do that for Jesus through caring for His brothers in need. Let's remember that this Christmas. Remember Joseph. Don't forget Joseph in relation to Jesus and us. Don't leave him in the manger shadows with cattle who have more lines than him. Don't have in your mind a Joseph who does nothing more than his ceramic statue who's off to the side of your Nativity.

If Joseph isn't a real part of the story, Jesus isn't a real king. And if Joseph doesn't have a real relationship with Jesus as a father, there is no real Messiah or real salvation, and we're all in real trouble.

Don't think of Joseph as a secondary supporting actor with a token part in the play. He's not the guest that as you take family pictures, he isn't sure if he should be in them, but you don't want him to feel bad so you say, "no, you too, get in there." Joseph's not awkwardly standing around as a 3rd wheel, not sure he really belongs. Joseph deserves his rightful place next to Christ in the Christmas picture.

I searched an Internet hymnal site with thousands of hymns and I only found one even mentioning Joseph (we'll sing it in a moment) but there are many hymns that not only mention Mary the mother of Jesus, many songs are all about Mary, or her name's in the title. "O Little Town of Bethlehem" mentions Mary but not Joseph. "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" mentions Mary 3x, Joseph 0x

We sing in "Silent Night," "round yon virgin, **mother** and child"  
Or 'What Child is this who, laid to rest, On **Mary's lap** is sleeping  
... Haste, haste, to bring Him laud, The Babe, the Son **of Mary.**'

One song by Trisha Yearwood about Joseph is 'It wasn't his child':  
"I believe he did his best...all he could...[but] it wasn't his child"

Mark Lowry wrote another modern song "Mary Did You Know?"  
I decided to write a new song entitled "Joseph Did you Know?"

Joseph did you know? That this newborn boy you just washed clean with water,  
would cleanse you for adoption by your Heavenly Father?  
Did you know when there was no doctor or midwife to help you,  
That this baby you helped to deliver was born to deliver you?

Did you know when you went to Egypt to keep Him safe from danger,  
The One who delivered Israel from Egypt was lying in that manger?!

Joseph did you know? When the angel told you to name Him as His father,  
His name would save your biological sons and daughters?  
Oh Joseph did you know?

Joseph did you know? That this baby boy who's sleeping on your chest,  
 Created the world in six days and on the seventh took His rest?  
 From the stable to your table, you raised the King of the Jews,  
 The Lord you must submit to, as your son submitted to you!

Did you know when you brought your boy to synagogue for teaching?  
 one day He would stand in that place and He would do the preaching?  
 Did you know when He was 12-years old back in the temple lost,  
 those feet you taught how to walk would one day be nailed to a cross?

When he was young and first asked you about criminals on the tree,  
 Did you know He would die like that at the age of 33?  
 Did you know that the teenage son you caught the carpenter's trade,  
 His hands you taught to work with wood would be nailed to wood to save?

Joseph did you know that your little boy, the one who calls you "Abba,"  
 Would later cry that to heaven before bearing the wrath of The Father?  
 Did you know that your little boy you'll teach to tie his shoes,  
 That this son that you adopted would die to adopt you?

Congregation, did you know?

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<sup>1</sup> Trevor Burke, *Adopted Into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor*, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> William Dix, "What Child Is This?"

<sup>3</sup> Charles Wesley, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing."

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.christianpost.com/news/russell-moore-the-christmas-story-is-an-adoption-story-demonstrates-gods-plan-for-the-church-86092/>