

THE FORGOTTEN CHARACTER OF CHRISTMAS
Matthew 1:18-25

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
December 2, 2018

Have you ever been in a play? I was lost – a 9th grader in high school, trying to find my place. I know you'll find this shocking, but none of the coaches came knocking at my door, none took note of my athletic prowess – so the football team probably wasn't going to be a fit.

During my soul searching, I saw a poster proclaiming a school play was about to be underway and that any and everyone was welcome to audition for a part. I was comfortable in front of people. I could memorize lines. Maybe that's the place for me – the Wade Hampton High School Players.

I showed up for my audition, was handed some lines and asked to read several parts from the upcoming play. All was going well...until...until the drama director asked me come over to the piano and sing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," while he accompanied me.

What? The poster didn't say anything about this being a musical. What does singing have to do with this? He started playing, and I started butchering – butchering a beloved song, doing a dishonor to both the music and mankind.

The drama coach had the most pained look on his face as he pounded away on the piano. The more I sang, the louder he played, as if to, mercifully, cover up the catastrophe. It was a monotone massacre. "Thank you," he said, and quickly showed me the door.

Those of you who have tried out for these very important parts know how it works. They post the parts awarded on the door. You have to go by the next day and see if you are in the play. Hoping against hope that I had sounded better than it seemed, I checked the drama director's door. I looked at the lead part – no. Looked at the supporting cast – no. Looked at the crowd scenes – no. Believe it or not, this play actually had a part for a few trees. Surely there would be an ego-saving tree part for me. But no, my name was nowhere, which meant, as a ninth grader, I was a nobody. I couldn't even play the part of a stand-still tree. I mean, how card can this be? [Hold out hands like you're a tree with branches]

Rejected.

Let's travel back to your childhood. It's the annual children's Christmas play. Your teacher is assigning the parts. Great part, Mary. Mary beams and acknowledges all the visitors. She even has a solo part. And how swell it is to be a shepherd, who gets to adore the Christ-child. The angels get to form a choir and flex their wings. The wise men get to carry all the gold and goodies to God. And even the sheep and cows get to put on the furry costumes and make some animal noises.

But what about Joseph? Joseph always seems so very small in the Christmas story. Through the ages, for some unknown reason, Joseph has become a peripheral figure to the story. A stand-still tree! Nobody wants to play the part of Joseph, the forgotten character of Christmas.

But I'm not sure that's fair.

Luke tells the story from the mother's perspective – from Mary's perspective. But Matthew tells the story from Joseph's perspective.

The whole miracle of Christmas momentarily rested on Joseph's shoulders, awaiting his free decision to accept or reject the stunning news of an impending Messiah and the shocking way in which this salvation would enter the world. It is one thing to read and venerate the prophets and their words (Isaiah 7:14, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son...") It is quite another thing to have one's own fiancée suddenly become pregnant and to accept it all in stride. As one writer said about Joseph, "He opened his heart and spirit, his home and his whole future to the intrusion (which must have seemed more like an invasion) of the divine."

Let's start all the way at the beginning of Matthew. Luke, of course, has become the favorite Christmas text over the ages. You won't go to many Christmas Eve services where the Christmas story is from Matthew. No, we all want to hear from Luke. "There went a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed...." But not today. Today we're going to hear from Matthew.

How does Matthew start? It starts with one of those long lists of names that none of us really appreciate in the Bible; we rarely take the time to read them.

Matthew 1:1

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

To Abraham was born Isaac; and to Isaac, Jacob; and to Jacob, Judah and his brothers;

You get the picture. A list of names. But can we look at it more deeply than that? Can we treat it as more than just a list of names and travel back in time to see what it might have meant to those who first read the book?

Tracing one's family pedigree is regarded by many societies as enormously important – really part of who you are. I've never really explored the genealogy of my family, neither my father's line nor my mother's line, because once you discover it you have to deal with it. Turn over enough rocks down my family line and you're probably going to find a snake – or at least a mountain man from up in yonder hills who makes moonshine.

But genealogies could not be ignored or discounted in antiquity. In traditional societies, family trees are a vital part of who you are. In such ancient worlds, the telling of one's ancestry was as important a way of disclosing one's identity as producing a good resume is today. In fact, in the ancient world you might imagine a drum roll, a trumpet fanfare, and even a town crier calling for attention. "Pay attention. Here's the list."

Any first century Jew would find Matthew's list both impressive and compelling. Like a great procession or parade down the city street, we watch the figures who come at the front and we pay attention in the middle. But all eyes are waiting for the one who comes in the position of greatest honor – right at the end. You know, like Santa Claus ending the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

Most Jews would begin telling their ancestry with Abraham. But only a select few, by the first century A.D., would be able to trace their line right through King David (v. 6). And even fewer would be able to continue by going through Solomon (v. 7) and the other kings of Judah all the way to the Exile.

To list those kingly names to tell your story was making a political statement. And you wouldn't want Herod's spies to overhear you boasting that you are a part of the true royal family. But that's exactly what Matthew is doing for Jesus. A lot of kings in Jesus' list.

But it's more than that. Not only does Jesus have this great kingly lineage, but He is the apex of that lineage. He's the real fruit from the family tree. Matthew arranges the genealogy into three groups of fourteen – or you could say six groups of seven names. The number seven was, of course, the most powerful, symbolic number in Judaism. And to be born at the beginning of the seventh list of seven in the sequence was to be clearly the climax of the whole parade. This birth, Matthew is saying, is what Israel has been waiting for thousands of years.

Interestingly enough, there are also some “shady ladies” who join this lineage of kings. Tamar, who played the part of a prostitute (v. 2), as well as Rahab, the prostitute (v. 5).

But finally in this list we make our way down to verse 16, where we have, “Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus...”

Matthew is making clear that Joseph is the legal father of Jesus, but he is born biologically only to Mary. “By whom” refers to Mary.

Joseph, the forgotten character of Christmas. He makes Matthew's list.

Let's look at verses 19-25.

Joseph had a crisis on his hands. His fiancée was pregnant, and he wasn't the father of the baby. While reproductive science wasn't nearly at the state then that it is now, everybody knew how babies came into the world. Joseph knew. And even though he was not yet aware of the workings and way of God, he didn't want to embarrass Mary. He wanted to avoid the extreme. He didn't want to make her a public example or to cover his own shame with hers.

What do we know about Joseph, this forgotten character of Christmas.

I. He was a righteous man.

Look at verse 19. Interestingly enough, righteous is the same word used to describe Jesus later in Matthew's Gospel (27:19, “Have nothing to do with that righteous man,” Pilate's wife). Joseph,

like Jesus, is righteous. His righteousness is seen in his kind attitude toward Mary. In his anger, he could have desired to expose her as a presumed adulteress, but, instead, as a righteous man, he was kind, willing to end the relationship quietly.

II. He was a man of radical submission.

Over the years, Joseph had cultivated a reverence for God and a sensitivity to hearing His voice. He must have created silence. He must have created space for God in his life. And when God was present through the person of the angel, he both heard and obeyed the word of God.

The words of God could have sounded like this: You, Joseph, have been chosen. You will name him Jesus, Savior. You will raise him, care for him, protect him and his mother. Emmanuel will live under your roof and sit upon your lap. You will change his diaper. Teach him how to walk, paddle a boat, and use a saw and a hammer.

Being obedient was a way of life for Joseph. Surely he had imagined an ordinary life – being a good construction worker and following the laws of God. But God intervened, interrupted, changed his life forever through this dream.

Notice that after the angel told him not to be afraid to take Mary for his wife, to end his divorce plans because that which was within her was of the Holy Spirit, that the birth of Jesus was, in fact, the fulfillment of a prophecy, look how Joseph responds with this radical submission (verse 24): “And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife.”

Look at Matthew 2:13-14.

Now when they had departed [speaking of the wise men], behold an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Arise and take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.” And he arose and took the Child and His mother by night, and departed for Egypt.

Look at 2:19-21.

And when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, “Arise and take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child’s life are dead.” And he arose and took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

Joseph always listens to the word of God and obeys the word of God. He is a righteous man as seen through his radical submission to God’s word.

III. He has a risky faith.

Think about it for a moment. Who had the greatest faith – Joseph or Mary?

We don’t have to have a competition, but both of them were told that Mary was going to have a child. Mary knew she had not been with a man. Joseph had to believe the impossible. Think

about it. As a woman with child, Mary knew her body was changing. She knew the child was growing in her womb. She had absolute knowledge that she had not been with a man. So she had no reason to doubt the promise whatsoever.

But for Joseph there must have been times when it seemed, after the angel disappeared and the dream was distant, that there might have been another explanation for Mary's pregnancy. Times when he was torn between doubt and belief. When he wrestled with the power of the laws of nature versus the word of the angel. And he was willing, as we saw in Matthew 2, to move to Egypt – a faith like his forefather Abraham – not even knowing exactly where he would go.

IV. Joseph had remarkable devotion.

In his marriage to Mary and the responsibility of raising baby Jesus, Joseph took on a new number one priority. All of his other pursuits, goals, and dreams took a back seat to his purpose of taking care of the holy family. In fact, he even set aside physical relations with Mary (Matthew 1:25) until after the birth of Jesus.

V. He was a role model father.

When Jesus spoke of Father, he was speaking of God. When Jesus gave the Model Prayer, He said, "Our Father, who art in heaven." And He even said, "I and My Father are one." Jesus clearly identified God as His Father.

But where did Jesus as a human get the impression of what a father could be like? On the human side of the equation, He understood what it meant for someone to be a loving father through what He had learned from Joseph. You can go home and think about that one for a while.

VI. He had the responsibility of naming our Lord.

Look at verses 21-23. Joseph was told to name this boy Jesus and then told in verse 23 that the virgin shall bear a son and he will be called "Emmanuel," which means "God with us."

Maybe we see who the Baby is through His two names. The name Jesus, of course, was a popular boy's name. It was the name "Joshua" in Hebrew – the one who brought the Israelites into the Promised Land after the death of Moses. It was a name that held great meaning for the sons of God's people (Yahweh saves).

But this new Joshua, this new savior – look at verse 21. "He will save His people from their sins."

Notice His second name, Emmanuel, from Isaiah 7:14. It was not given to anyone else. It wasn't like the name Joshua because "Emmanuel" was too much to say about any other child – he was "God with us." With this baby boy, Matthew knows that it will be different. Matthew closes out his gospel with Jesus' promise is that He is Emmanuel. He is God with us. Jesus' last words in Matthew are "For lo, I will be with you, even to the end of the age."

God is present with His people. He doesn't intervene from a distance, but is always active – sometimes in the most unexpected ways.

Joseph's eyes dart around the stable. Not a minute to lose. Quickly. A feeding trough would have to make do for a crib. Hay would serve as a mattress. Blankets? Blankets? Ah, his robe. That would do. And those rags hung out to dry would help. A gripping contraction doubles Mary over and sends him rushing for a bucket of water.

The birth would not be easy, either for the mother or the child. For every royal privilege for this son ended at conception.

A scream from Mary knifes through the calm of that silent night. Joseph returns, breathless, water sloshing from the wooden bucket. The top of the baby's head has already pushed its way into the world. Sweat pours from Mary's contorted face as Joseph, the most unlikely midwife in all Judea, rushes to her side.

The involuntary contractions are not enough, and Mary has to push with all her strength, almost as if God were refusing to come into the world without her help.

Joseph places a garment beneath her, and with a final push and a long sigh her labor is over.

The Messiah has arrived.

Except for Joseph, there was no one to share Mary's pain. Or her joy. (Ken Gire, "Meditation," Calvin Miller, *The Book of Jesus*, 160-161).