

Joseph: A Love Story

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Good morning! My name is Joseph – yeah, *that* Joseph. You might say I’m the famous Joseph that no one really knows or cares about. Every Christmas people set up their manger scenes, and I’m always included, but I’m really just a prop. Everyone knows about Mary – she was there at the beginning of Jesus’ life, and at the end. I missed the end. We had other children, a happy home, and my carpentry business flourished in Nazareth for years, but Jesus’ public ministry, and the awful events of the cross came after my death.

When people think of me, they usually think I’m kind of a wimp; mild, passive, weak, the kind of guy who stays in the background and never does much. Well, you’re wrong. I may not have been a famous prophet or one of the apostles, but I was what I think every real man should be: I was a loving husband and father, in fact, my story is a love story, and if you think that means I was weak, well, you’re wrong.

Remember, I was a carpenter. That was no profession for a weakling. I cut wood and worked with my hands. I don’t want to brag, but I would have beaten just about any of you at arm wrestling. And I had my own business – in fact, that’s how I ended up in Nazareth. I was born and raised in Bethlehem, not far from Jerusalem, our capital city, but I left home and moved to Nazareth.

Of course, that’s where I met Mary. Before I tell you our love story, I think you should know something. If you ask me, people living today don’t know much about love. You hear a lot about love in movies and songs and romance novels, but love is a lot more than all that mushy emotional stuff. Don’t get me wrong: I like that as much as anyone, but by itself, it’s cheap and shallow. It’s like the wood veneer you have in your homes. It looks like the real thing, but it’s not. As a carpenter, I like solid wood, and real love is strong and solid like that.

What attracted me to Mary wasn’t just her looks, though if you ask me, Jewish girls are the most beautiful girls in the world. But one of our proverbs says, *Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised* (Prov. 31.30). That was Mary.

She was just over 15 when I started noticing her. That probably sounds young to you, but in our culture that was the marriageable age. Girls grew up thinking about becoming a wife and mother, but – and forgive me my gushing, but Mary was the best of them all.

Everyone loved her, but she had a humility that never took advantage of that. She had a wonderful combination of youthful optimism and a mature spirit. Her eyes sparkled and danced, and her laughter bubbled. Other times, her passion for Yahweh brought her to her knees. There was something authentic about her, no façade, no ‘veneer.’

If it had been today, I guess I would have asked if she wanted to go to a movie or out for dinner. That wasn’t the way it happened in our day. I knew her family, and had spoken with her a few times. The interest I showed to her was reciprocated. She didn’t flirt, but girls know how to let a guy know how they feel. But before I could pursue her, I had to meet with her father. I expressed my desire, and after he talked with Mary, he gave me his blessing.

Soon after we had a small betrothal ceremony. I gave her a ring, and she accepted it, formalizing our union. Afterwards we went to our own homes, but from that point on Mary was legally my wife; her status could only be changed by divorce or death. We called it *kiddushin*, a word that comes from the same root as *kadosh* (“holy”). Just as *kodesh* (holy things) are set apart for certain people, so too after betrothal a woman was set apart from all men but her husband. We talked together almost daily, and looked forward to living together. We planned the house I would build for us and our children to live in. You might say that our growing love was like a dream come true.



It's funny how sometimes dreams can turn into nightmares. One day I noticed that Mary was quieter than usual. It wasn't like her. She was withdrawn. When I asked her, she said she couldn't talk about it, that I wouldn't understand. I wracked my brain: Had I offended her? Was it possible her parents didn't like me? Had they found something in the temple lineage that said we couldn't be married? It consumed me. The next time we were together I begged her not to keep me in the dark. So reluctantly, she told me. She whispered, "I am pregnant." My mouth fell open. She began to cry.

Time stopped. It couldn't be. The idea that Mary had been unfaithful to me was incredible. My mind filled with all sorts of new questions: I knew she wasn't pregnant by me, so who was it? And how? She still loved me – it was obvious from her expression, so what had prompted this unfaithfulness? I didn't want to ask, but I had to. And when I did, my disbelief only grew.

Mary told me of the angel appearing to her, telling her that she would give birth to Israel's Messiah, and that the Spirit of God had put the baby in her womb. I know it's hard for you to understand the mixture of feelings I had: On one hand, who would believe a fairy tale about getting pregnant without, you know, being with a man?! I couldn't, and you wouldn't, either! But on the other hand, I couldn't shake my love for Mary. I was devastated, tormented, humiliated, and angry.

I thought of my reputation. Someone has said, 'God made countries, men made cities, but the devil made little towns.' Nazareth was a little town. Everyone knew everyone. I had a good reputation in Nazareth; what would this do to that? Mary would start showing soon, and the people of the town would turn against her. And me, too – since they'd all assume this was my doing. I wanted to tell everyone that I was a tsaddik – a righteous man. But who would listen?

My thoughts returned to Mary. Our law had severe penalties for a woman who committed fornication, but I couldn't do that to Mary. She was so innocent, so pure. Even now, my love for her was undying. But I couldn't just go on and marry her. I decided to quietly divorce her. I know – we weren't married yet, but breaking a betrothal was a lot more serious than when you break an engagement nowadays. It was

usually a formal thing, with witnesses. I decided to do it privately. I'd figure out some way to explain it to the people of Nazareth.

It was hard to be with Mary, so I was glad when she decided to travel down south to visit her cousin Elizabeth. By the time she returned, she would be showing, so I would take care of things while she was away. But of course, you all know what happened: I had a dream. An angel appeared to me, and said, "Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The baby in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." I told you this was a love story, and after that dream, my love which had never died, suddenly was stronger than ever. I was relieved, then filled with joy. I couldn't wait to be with Mary. I packed my things and hiked all the way to Hebron and found her. I told her about my dream, and begged forgiveness for doubting her word. We returned to Nazareth together, and had a quiet wedding. We were united now in something that was far more significant than both of us. Although we were married, I kept her a virgin until after Jesus was born.

You know, one thing that's true of all the best love stories is that they have trials. Something comes along that tests love, and it is proven in coming through difficulties. Show me a couple that is deeply in love, and I'll show you a couple that has gone through tough times together. That was true for Mary and me.

First, there were the whispers, the gossipers. We heard the rumors, the things people said about us. It just drew us closer. Then in the ninth month of her pregnancy, Caesar Augustus wanted to make sure he was getting all the tax money he needed, so he decreed that everyone in the entire Roman empire had to return to their home town for a census. I would have to go to Bethlehem. I wrestled with whether or not to take her with me, but decided that whatever the difficulties of the journey, it wouldn't be as bad as being alone in Nazareth with people's harsh comments. So in the last month of her pregnancy, we headed south.

It was a hard trip – about 80 miles, four days on foot. I didn't know what we'd do when we arrived. I had relatives in Bethlehem, and figured some of them would take us in. But the town was crowded when we arrived. King David had lots of descendants, and we were the

last to arrive, it seemed. No one had any room. Then Mary told me she was beginning to feel the cramps of birth. I was desperate.

I remembered from my boyhood that there were some caves in the hills around Bethlehem. On the back side of a hill, I found a cave a farmer used to shelter cattle in winter. It stunk of urine and dung and sheep, but like I said, I was desperate. And that's where Jesus was born. After it was over, and Mary started to get tired, I looked for a place to lay him; I finally put him in a cow feeding trough, because the only other place was the filth of the cave floor.



The manger scenes you set up today seem beautiful and peaceful, but it wasn't. But Mary and I were together, and as we faced the hardships of those early days, our love just grew stronger.

You know about the visit of the shepherds – I'll tell you about that another time. When the town emptied out after the census, we got a little house, and I got work as a carpenter. We never had much, just enough to get by. We wondered together what was going to happen with Jesus – what we should do, or if God would speak to us again.

A few months later, we had visitors – astrologers from the east. They said they had seen a star, and followed it to Bethlehem. They came in and worshipped our son. And they gave him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh – very valuable! Little did we know how much we would need them. Those men had told King Herod they had come to worship the king of the Jews – which Herod was. And he was paranoid. So he commanded all the little boys in Bethlehem put to death. But when his killers came, we weren't there. An angel appeared to me in a dream and told us to leave for Egypt immediately – and we did, that very night. Another long, arduous, journey, this time to a country we didn't know at all. We lived like refugees; if not for that gold, frankincense, and myrrh, we would have starved.

After a year in Egypt, we heard that Herod had died. Another angel appeared to me in a dream, telling us to return to Israel, and eventually we returned to where it all started, Nazareth.

There is so much more I could tell. Mary and I had other children, and we did our best to raise Jesus and all our kids well. But I was just a carpenter – not a scholar. I couldn't teach Jesus everything he would need to know. But I think God knew what He was doing when He chose me to raise the Messiah. Because if there is one thing that you would feel it our home, it was love.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying everything was perfect. Far from it! And I made mistakes, too. There were days when I struggled with my faith, when I believed my doubts and doubted my beliefs. Life is like that. But there is one thing we did very well: I loved Mary, and Mary loved me. And that love – well, it marked us all.

The rest of the story, Jesus teaching and performing miracles, I never saw any of that. I died before that happened. But the love that marked Mary and me at the very beginning in Nazareth lived on. And just as our love had grown strong through trials, so it did with Jesus.

We had been ridiculed, and he was, too. We had hardships, and He did, too. Much worse. Mary had to live through Jesus being mocked, spit on, beaten, condemned, and crucified. But her love never waned.

And when Jesus rose from the dead, the real 'love story' of Christmas became known. All those years of questions, and Mary's agony at the cross, suddenly burst into the light of love – God's love.

You know, the story of Christmas isn't just a 'love story' about Mary and me. It's a love story about God and the world. God wants you to know His love. It was forged through trials and hardship, and death. But that's the real love story of Christmas. *God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him, shall not perish, but have eternal life.* You are not alone. There's someone who loves you, will never leave you, always be there for you.

In fairy tales, the stories often end with a line like this: *And they all lived happily ever after.* Our problem is we always want "ever after" to

be right now, and it isn't. *Ever after* is the 'forever' that comes 'after' this life is over. My life wasn't easy, but I'm living happily ever after.

How do you live *happily ever after*? Believe in Jesus. He loves you. He was born for you. He died for you. He rose from the dead. He's coming again. It's the 'love story' of Christmas.