

JOSEPH, THE FATHER

[based on Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-15 & 19-23]

There is a touching story about a middle-aged pastor whose young son had become very ill. After the boy had undergone an exhaustive series of tests, the father was told the shocking news that his son's condition was terminal. The minister knew that death would usher the youngster into glory, but he wondered how to explain that fact to one in the bloom of youth.

After earnestly seeking the direction of the Holy Spirit, he went with a heavy heart through the hospital ward to the boy's bedside. First he read a passage of scripture and then had a time of prayer with his dear child. He then gently told the lad that the doctors could promise him only a few more days to live.

"Are you afraid to meet Jesus, my boy?" asked the devout father.

Blinking away a few tears, the little fellow said bravely, "No, not if He's like you Dad".

Wow! What a thing for a child to say, and wow, what an incredible thing for a father to hear! He penned these words...

His little arms crept round my neck,
And then I heard him say
Four simple words I can't forget,
Four words that made me pray.
They turned a mirror on my soul,
On secrets no one knew.
They startled me...I hear them yet,
He said, "I'll be like you!"

This pastor must have been a wonderful father, the epitome of what God says a father should be. Perhaps many fathers might look introspectively and think they could not come even close to this standard. Parents make so many mistakes that they may not be sure they can 'get there from here'.

However, realizing that we, as parents, are not perfect, is surely the half-way mark. We may not be able to put right all the damage we have done, but at least hindsight gives us the opportunity to understand where and how we went wrong, so that we can learn from the errors we have made along the way.

Today is Father's Day, the ideal opportunity to reflect upon a man, a father, who is very often overlooked in his role. In some quarters he is overshadowed by the prominence given to his wife. That man is Joseph, the husband of Mary, the adoptive father of Jesus.

Surely it's a significant thing that even as God chose Mary to be the one who would give birth to the Son of God, so, in His mighty providence, He chose Joseph to be a father-figure to Jesus and to raise Him into manhood. Mary and Joseph were chosen together to be parents. He called them as a couple...as a team.

In doing so, God clearly demonstrates for us that the role of father is a most important one. Yes, fathers are needed for the physical act of conceiving a child, but they are also needed for the spiritual responsibilities of raising a child.

The child was conceived in the womb of Mary "by the Holy Spirit". A miracle took place so there was no need for a man to be involved in the conception, but a man was definitely required to fill the role of father in Jesus' childhood.

So, Joseph too was a 'chosen one'. Just as our Father had looked for a godly young woman to bring forth the child, so too He looked for a godly man to be the step-father. And what an inspiring model of fatherhood Joseph was! God made a good choice!

Let's examine some things the Bible shares about this man, Joseph.

Firstly, he was a **loving man**. The scriptures draw the picture for us of a wonderfully caring and affectionate man. We can see this at the onset in his relationship with Mary.

In Matthew, chapter 1, Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant. (He hasn't had his great 'revelation' yet.) What is he to think? What would any guy think? You've fallen in love with this pretty, young girl. You do all the right things. You pursue her in the proper, customary way. In stolen moments you've talked with her about dreams for a future together. Today that might be a cottage with a white picket fence, a family, a business. But then, out of the blue, you learn that this sweet girl who you thought you knew so well, is pregnant...newly pregnant. And you don't know who the father is, but there is one person you know you *can* rule out! How does it make you feel? Angry? Betrayed?

The penalty for adultery in the Old Testament was death by stoning, and this penalty applied to infidelity during betrothal, as well as marriage.

Now by New Testament times, things had changed somewhat, but the matter was still treated as a grave offence. Upon discovery that Mary was pregnant, Joseph would have been obliged to divorce her. Divorce was required to break off a betrothal engagement, and this would expose Mary to public shame and humiliation.

But even before God spoke to Joseph, Joseph didn't have any vengeance or bitterness in his heart. The Bible says he "was minded to put her away secretly".

There were ways in which a divorce could be enacted very quietly, without the involvement of a judge, and Joseph was already considering the best way to do just that.

Joseph was kind. He loved Mary. Forget the Harlequin romance novels, this is an honest-to-goodness love story based on a real commitment. Husbands, the Bible says to us today that we must love our wives with all that we have.

We clearly can tell that Joseph was a loving man towards Mary, but he was also a loving man in his relationship towards Jesus.

When the child came along, the child he had not conceived, there was no attitude in Joseph that "this boy isn't my flesh and blood"! There was no resentment or indifference toward Him - no lack of love at all. Joseph adopted Jesus as his own. He protected Him from the hatred of Herod. He nurtured Him and cared for Him. Evidently he taught Jesus his own trade of carpentry. He adopted the one that the rest of the world would reject.

Today, by contrast, we see men who are prepared to abdicate their role even toward their own biological children. Men are opting out of the 'father role' because of its costs. But do you remember what the Bible says?

"But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever!"

Secondly, Joseph was a **devout man**. He was a man who obeyed God. He explicitly followed the Lord's leading and direction. He didn't follow his own marked-out plan for life - he wanted God's plan for his life. So, when God spoke to him through a dream and told him to marry Mary, even though she was pregnant, he obeyed!

Then, when God spoke and said: "Take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt for safety", he immediately obeyed. He closed up his business and left.

Later, when God Said, "It's okay now...head back to Israel", again Joseph did as he was directed. He was a man of obedience.

Joseph was also a **man of faith**. It takes faith to pack your bags and head off to a foreign country with no prospects and no planning, simply on the basis that God said so. He had faith and obeyed the dream rather than making excuses to stay where the prospects looked good.

He too was faithful in his spiritual duty. He set an example for his family, going to the Temple and attending the feasts. He was a 'regular' in going to God's house.

Finally, Joseph was a **wise man**. He lived as one who redeemed the time, who used every minute of his time wisely.

By all accounts it seems that Joseph had a shortened life. We don't read of him after Jesus' childhood. At the cross, Jesus charged John with the care of His mother, so it appears that Joseph was taken from them prematurely.

But Joseph had used what time he had been given, both honourably and wisely. He had provided for his family. He had set an example for them that they would remember. He had raised them in the nurture and the admonition of the Lord.

Jesus was not Joseph's only child. He raised other boys for the Lord also, and possibly daughters as well. The two sons we become familiar with by name in the scriptures are James and Jude, both of whom wrote books of the Bible. James was even the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

The children of Joseph were greatly used by God. Joseph raised all his children equally in the ways of the Lord, and he left behind him a legacy after his life was over.

Fathers, are we redeeming our time as Joseph did, encouraging our families at every opportunity? It is never too late to set an example.

AMEN and Happy Father's Day!