



What Would Joseph Say?

A Study of the Earthly Father of Jesus

By Rev. Larry Miller

Introduction

It was time for the annual Sunday School Christmas service at church. Thad, a third grade student, had for years longed to act the part of Joseph. But year after year, the role was assigned to someone else. Finally, this was his year! He was thrilled to be cast in the Joseph part until the director of the pageant handed out the scripts. When Thad received Joseph's, was he ever upset. There were no speaking lines for Joseph in the entire script! Just as in the biblical accounts, Joseph had nothing to say.

What Would Joseph Say, if he were to speak? As we study God's Word, let's imagine Joseph's responses and our responses to the real-life situations of Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus.

Prayer

Loving Father, we, Your children by grace, praise You for the humble and glorious birth of Your Son, Jesus! We thank You that according to Your wisdom You placed Him in a family and gave Him earthly parents to watch over Him, teach Him, and, with Your Help, raise Him into adulthood. Give

us a sense of wonder and awe as we study and discuss Your Word. Send Your Spirit to help us grow in faith in Jesus our Savior. In His name we pray. Amen.

Study

What Would Joseph Say ... when he discovered that Mary was pregnant?

Meet Joseph. The first reference in the New Testament Scriptures to this man is **Matthew 1:16** where, as a part of the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew records the name of Jacob, whom, he states is "the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."

Just who is Joseph? From Matthew's genealogy and other historical sources of the time, we learn that he is of the line of David, traced, through the Old Testament patriarchs, to Abraham — talk about some "big names" in the family line!

At the other end of Matthew's list we find his carefully phrased words: "the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus." Throughout every other generation of his genealogy, Matthew simply states that so-and-so was "the father of" so-and-so. Not so with Joseph and Jesus. For a biblical explanation for the change in the wording by Matthew, see the accounts of the annunciation of Jesus' birth in **Matthew 1:20–23**, especially verse 20, and **Luke 1:26–38**, especially verse 35. Jesus was "begotten of His Father before all worlds" as we profess in the Nicene Creed, and "conceived by the Holy Spirit" as we profess in the Apostles' Creed. Joseph would be the earthly father, the legal father, the foster-father, the adoptive father of Jesus and the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

- **For Discussion:** Why, in your opinion, did God give Jesus an earthly father, and why did He choose Joseph in particular to fill that role?

We can learn more about Joseph from **Matthew 1:18a**: "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph." Joseph and Mary were engaged, "pledged to be married," betrothed. Engagement practices in Mary and Joseph's day were a bit different than today. Marriages were traditionally arranged by parents. Engagement involved a public ceremony, was more binding than engagement today, could be broken only by divorce, and following the ceremony the man and woman would be known as husband and wife. Like today, sexual relations were forbidden until after the wedding celebration.

So Mary and Joseph were engaged when Joseph heard the news recorded in **Matthew 1:18b**: "but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit." Good news or bad news?

The Old Testament had specific and strong laws about what should be done in an instance like this. Read **Deuteronomy 22:20–27**. (For further study, see also the births of Perez and Zerah to Judah and Tamar in **Genesis 38**.)

Joseph is faced with a choice, a difficult decision, a judgment to make. Both he and Mary will be disgraced in the community by all who learn of Mary's condition. The law said that Mary must die, but Joseph's noble character, his love for Mary, and his compassionate and caring nature must have left him torn.

• **For Discussion:** What Would Joseph Say ... when told that Mary was pregnant?

- "The law has spoken. Stone Mary to death."
- "Mary, how could you do this to me and to our families?"
- "Because I am a righteous man and do not want to expose you to public disgrace, I will divorce you quietly." (**Matthew 1:19**).
- What Would Joseph Say?

• **For Further Discussion:** What Would You Say ... if you found yourself or those you love in Joseph's circumstances?

What Would Joseph Say ... when the angel told him in a dream that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit?

Read **Matthew 1:20–25**.

The Old Testament prophecy from **Isaiah 7:14**: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" must have been an aid in believing the angel's message, yet ...

• **For Discussion:** What Would Joseph Say ... when the angel told him that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit?

- "You expect me to believe what?"
- "Let it be as you have said." (Mary)
- "Surely this is the Son of God!"
- What Would Joseph Say?

• **For Further Discussion:** What Would You Say ... if you had been given an impossible, seemingly foolish, even inconceivable message from God?

What Would Joseph Say ... when God's angel told him to go where God sent them?

Read **Luke 2:1–5; Matthew 2:13–23**.

What was Joseph's response? His actions speak louder than his words! "Joseph did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him" (**Matthew 1:24a; Matthew 2:14**).

Doing what the Lord commanded him would not be an easy task. Joseph and Mary would have to leave their family and friends, journey to Bethlehem at the order of Caesar Augustus, escape by night some 200 miles across a desert to a

foreign land, return to a dangerous situation, and be diverted back to Nazareth. Not only was it a long walk, it must have been quite a journey ... of faith!

• **For Discussion:** What Would Joseph Say ... when God's angel told him to take a walk?

- "Lord, why do we have to go to such lengths for Your child?"
- "Lord, help me to trust and to follow where You lead."
- "Mary, are you packed yet?"
- What Would Joseph Say?

• **For Further Discussion:** What Would You Say ... if God sent you on a mission that was outside your perfect plans for your life?

What Would Joseph Say ... when Jesus went to the temple?

Joseph's deep love for God and his desire to obey and to glorify God must have had a tremendous influence on Jesus. As Joseph carried out his fatherly duties, he took Jesus to the temple for His presentation and the Passover.

Read **Luke 2:25–52**.

• **For Discussion:** What Would Joseph Say ... when Jesus went to the temple?

- "Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace."
- "Jesus, You certainly taught those teachers a thing or two!"
- "Yes, You must be about Your Father's business!"
- What Would Joseph Say?

• **For Further Discussion:** What Would You Say ... if (what do you say when) you have the opportunity to "go to the temple of the Lord"?

After this trip to the temple, we do not hear from or, for that matter, about Joseph again.

What Would Joseph Say ... at Jesus' birth?

Read **Luke 2:1–20**.

Let's go back for a few moments, back to Bethlehem, back to a stable outside an inn. Imagine what went through the minds and hearts of Mary and Joseph as they witnessed the miracle of the incarnation of Jesus being played out before them. Consider the awe when they realized the lengths to which God was going to give His Son for the world. They must have been amazed that this helpless baby in their arms was the Creator of the world, that He was Majesty in the midst of the mundane, God entering the world as an infant. Joseph's God-given role as father to God's own Son must have been inconceivable to him. It must have been difficult for Joseph to take his eyes off Mary and Jesus. Somehow, unexplainably, Mary is holding God, the almighty God, now helpless and dependent on earthly parents for His well being. Does Joseph foresee his Child dying on a cross for the sins of the world and the infant before him,

wrapped in swaddling clothes, wrapped again in swaddling clothes, laying in a borrowed tomb? Does Joseph imagine this newborn, just beginning His earthly life, risen from the dead and giving new life to all?

• **For Discussion:** What **Would Joseph Say** ... when Jesus was born?

- “Glory to God in the highest” with the angels.
- “O come, let us adore Him” with the shepherds.
- Nothing, just being still, in the awe and wonder of the moment.
- What Would Joseph Say?

• **For Further Discussion:** What **WILL You Say** ... when you see your Savior face to face?

Conclusion

Joseph was certainly a man of few words with not a word from his mouth recorded in Holy Scripture. Yet his godly character, his response to God’s call to service, his love for Mary and Jesus and for God, and his actions speak volumes, louder than words!

What Will You Say? May your thoughts, your words, and your actions be a daily witness to Jesus, God’s Son and your Savior! May your life speak volumes, louder than words, to others as you share with them the Good News about Jesus!

Prayer

Gracious God, move us, we pray, to respond as Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus did. Help us, by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit, to be humble, obedient, caring, willing to risk, and faith-full in response to Your love. Give us awe and wonder to celebrate not only the amazing events that occurred during Jesus’ time on this earth but especially the gifts of forgiveness and life and salvation that Jesus won for us in His life and death and resurrection! Thank You, O God, for Your love. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Closing

Sing “Away in a Manger, No Crib for a Bed” (*LSB* 364; 365; *LW* 64) or “What Child is This Who Laid to Rest” (*LSB* 370; *LW* 61).

Other possibilities: Listen to “Strange Way to Save the World” by 4Him, or “I Could Only Imagine” by Casting Crowns.

Rev. Larry A. Miller, pastor of First Lutheran Church in Helena, Montana, is married to Shari and father of their children, Joshua and Johanna. He served as LWML Pastoral Counselor from 2003–2007. The author of the children’s book “Who Loves You Best?” and co-author with Shari of Mustard Seeds “Faith-Filled Parenting,” he has written other Bible studies and resources published by LWML.