

STUDY GUIDE

Monday, December 5 – Read Matthew 1:18-25. The 2006 film *The Nativity Story* showed Mary washing Joseph's feet as he slept, worn out from the strain of their trip to Bethlehem. To the unborn Jesus she said, "You will have a good and decent man to raise you." That's a fine summary of Matthew's portrait of Joseph. He obeyed God, and nurtured and protected his bride (pregnant, but not by him) and her child. Matthew identifies the child three ways. It's the story of the birth of "the Messiah [God's anointed one]" (verse 18), named "Jesus [Greek for "Joshua"—"God saves"] because he will save his people from their sins" (verse 21) and they will call him "Immanuel (which means 'God with us')" (verse 23). Which of these three ways of identifying Jesus speaks most deeply to your heart this Advent season? Luke 1:38 showed Mary saying, "I am the Lord's servant.... May your word to me be fulfilled." Matthew 1:24 says Joseph "did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him." What is God calling you to do or be this Advent season?

Tuesday, December 6 – Read Matthew 1:18-20, Deuteronomy 22:20-24. In Israelite culture, a betrothal was as binding as marriage. Mary's pregnancy led some (like Joseph at first) to the "obvious" belief that she had slept with some other man. Some must have condemned her (and Jesus as illegitimate—see John 8:41). It was even possible that she might be stoned to death (see John 8:3-5), as the law in Deuteronomy said. What would you have felt if you had been Joseph when Mary told you she was having a baby—but by the Holy Spirit, not another man? Whatever Joseph felt, Matthew says he "did not want to expose her to public disgrace." What do you learn about Joseph's inner qualities from his measured response ("he had in mind to divorce her quietly")? The *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* says Joseph was "a devout Jewish man willing to give up what was often perceived to be a Jewish father's greatest privilege—siring his first-born son—in order to obey God's will." What cherished dream have you had to give up? How are you and God working to bend that loss to produce good results?

Wednesday, December 7 – Read Matthew 1:1-17. The way Matthew started Jesus' story feels strange, even boring to most of us. But family records were of critical importance in Jesus' day. King Herod the Great, despised by most Jews because he was half Edomite, actually destroyed official registers so that no one else could prove a purer ancestry than his own! In verse 1, Matthew said three significant things about Jesus: he was "the Messiah," the "son of David," and the "son of Abraham." The Hebrew word "Messiah" meant "anointed one." ("Christ" meant the same in Greek, by the way.) What do you believe made Jesus' link to Abraham and King David so key for Matthew? In what ways does it matter to you that God kept his ancient promises? In an unusual move for his time, Matthew named five women (including Mary) in Jesus' genealogy. Scholar R. E. Brown suggests that Matthew chose the other four because, like Mary, God used each of them although they faced obstacles, even scandal, in their lives. Does God still work through unlikely people? What is God doing through you?

Thursday, December 8 – Read Genesis 37:1-11, 39:6-10, 41:39-43. Joseph was named for a great man in Israel's history. The first Joseph was the patriarch Jacob's favorite son (born to Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel). His story filled Genesis chapters 37-50. Known for his integrity and faithfulness, he eventually became first minister of Egypt. In that role, he saved Egypt (and Jacob's family) from a great famine. And, like the later Joseph, he recognized God's messages to him in dreams. In Bible times, parents usually chose names that captured the character they hoped and prayed their child would develop. What traits from his great namesake in the Hebrew past could a humble working man like Joseph emulate and live into? Do you bear a name associated with some admirable person, either in your own family or from history? If so, what qualities does that name suggest to you? What qualities is God working into your character through the challenges and opportunities you face in life? In what ways do you want your "name" to be remembered?

Friday, December 9 – Read Matthew 2:13-16, 19-21. Joseph did far more than stand by the manger while the shepherds worshipped the baby. Matthew said Joseph kept Mary and baby Jesus safe from Herod's murderous paranoia. Herod killed some of his own sons who were potential rivals for his throne. He certainly didn't flinch from murdering boys in Bethlehem to try to wipe out the promised Messiah. In Jesus' day, the population of Alexandria, Egypt was probably about one-third Jewish. There were also other Jewish communities in Egypt. This made Egypt a safer refuge for Joseph, Mary and Jesus than it would be in today's conditions. What people or places have given you safety or comfort in times of trouble in your life? God used dreams to guide Joseph (as he did the Old Testament Joseph before him). Many Christians believe it makes sense that God can communicate directly with our brains, without the need for sounds or visual cues. When have you sensed an "inner nudge" from God? Are you open to receive God's direction, however it arrives?

Saturday, December 10 - Read Luke 2:41-52. This is the last time we see Joseph in Jesus' story. When Jesus began his public ministry, 18 years later, Joseph was apparently no longer living. Here he and Mary were worried parents. And we sense the unique challenge Joseph faced. Mary said "your father and I," meaning Joseph. Jesus, while valuing and obeying (verse 51) Joseph, said being in the Temple meant being in *his Father's* (God's) house. And Luke says Joseph and Mary struggled to understand. Jesus taught, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy... everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Matthew 5:7, 7:24) How might we see the effect of merciful Joseph, a wise and careful carpenter, in Jesus' teaching and life? Who has shaped your life for the better, through example and actions? Are there people who, given that chance, let you down and hurt you? Whose lives are you seeking to shape for the better?