

# A MAN CALLED JOSEPH

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“A man whose name was Joseph.” Thus, almost casually we might say, is St. Joseph introduced to us in the Gospel. Yet how much interest, almost romantic interest, is gathered round that name! How many thoughts and scenes the name of Joseph can conjure up! “A man whose name was Joseph”—that is, the man who was husband of the Virgin Mother of God, and was called Father by the Son of God; the man who received from heaven the revelation of what Israel had waited for through thousands of years; the man who prepared the manger and adored the new-born Saviour on the first Christmas night; the man who talked with the shepherds and heard from their own lips the story we read in St. Luke; the man who redeemed the Redeemer with five pieces of silver, and stood by in wonder while Simeon and Anna uttered their prophecies; the man who was interrupted in his daily toil by the arrival of distinguished strangers from the East, and saw them worship and offer princely gifts; the man who, under Divine Providence, cheated Herod of his prey and fled in the starlight from Bethlehem; the man who, day after day, watched God made Man grow from babyhood to childhood, from childhood to boyhood, from boyhood to manhood, under his very eyes; the man who taught a trade to the Creator of heaven and earth; the man whom Mary loved, and Jesus trusted and obeyed—“a man called Joseph.”

When we first set out to glean what we can about St. Joseph in the pages of the Gospel, we seem to be told very little. Of course, we cannot expect to find a complete biography of him there. Even of Christ Himself we do not get that. But we might expect many details which are not given us. We know the story of the birth of John the Baptist; we know who were his parents, where he was born, where he grew up; we can discover his age; we are told what he ate, how he was dressed, many of the things he said, where and how he died. In the case of St. Joseph we know not a single one of these details. Yet what we do know is of great interest. We know some of the places where he lived, we know the things he saw and some of the words he listened to, and we know a little of what he thought and felt. The sketch of him which we get may be only an outline drawing, but it is by a master hand. The Holy Spirit is St. Joseph’s biographer. The reason, perhaps, why there is such an air of unreality about St. Joseph in our minds, why even pictures and statues of him seem so unlikelike, is that we do not study him sufficiently in the only authentic record of him we possess, the Gospels. Let us take our Gospels, then, and see what we can learn about the real St. Joseph and his life. He is not mentioned by St. Mark, and only indirectly by St. John. Most of our information about him comes from the first two chapters of St. Matthew and the first two chapters of St. Luke. It would be well in reading these pages to keep those chapters of St. Matthew and St. Luke at hand, as well as a map of the Holy Land. We cannot expect that this short booklet will exhaust the subject. It will be enough if it sends the reader back to read the Gospels again with fresh interest and a more observant eye.

*(Pope Benedict XV., in his Encyclical on St. Jerome (15th September, 1920), expresses the wish that the Gospels and Acts may be put in the hands of as many people as possible, “so that every Christian family may have them and become accustomed to reading them.”)*

## 1.—NAZARETH

We do not know whether St. Joseph was a native of Nazareth or not, and, in the absence of evidence, it is idle to speculate. His family, of course, came originally from Bethlehem in the south, for he was of the house of David. Two genealogies are given for St. Joseph, one by St. Matthew and the other by St. Luke, and the two do not agree. Into the question of their reconciliation it is not necessary to enter here. Needless to say, there cannot be any real contradiction between them, but with the knowledge we at present possess we cannot give a certain explanation of the apparent disagreement. The most likely one is that St. Matthew’s genealogy gives the natural descent of St. Joseph, and St. Luke’s his legal descent, or vice versa. On the question of St. Joseph’s age we are again without any evidence. The earliest representations of him make him a young man; it is only later that he began to be portrayed as an old man. Though this latter view has become the accepted one nowadays, it is hard to see why it should be so, and there is no reason why we should not, if we wish, imagine him at the time of his marriage with Our Lady as not far advanced in years.

Though the language used by St. Matthew admits of the other interpretation, it is much more probable, all things considered, that when the Gospel story opens, St. Joseph was only betrothed to Our Lady, and that the marriage had not yet been celebrated. Betrothal among the Jews was a very solemn contract, practically as binding as marriage, and giving the same rights. During the time of betrothal the bride-to-be remained in her own home. We may take it, therefore, that this was the state of affairs when that fateful message was brought by Gabriel to Nazareth. Mary was still living with her parents or guardians, and Joseph, the carpenter, who was betrothed to her, worked at his trade, waiting till the time came to bring his bride to her future home. From the reply Mary made to the angel's announcement of the birth of a son, we can see that Mary and Joseph had agreed that in their case marriage was not to involve the surrender of virginity. Were this not so, Mary's reply would have no meaning. When, after the Annunciation, Mary went off hurriedly to visit her cousin Elizabeth in Judea, Joseph, as after events proved, knew nothing of the wonderful event which had just taken place in Nazareth, a place which is here mentioned for the first time in the Bible.

We may be inclined sometimes to think of Nazareth as of places we see in our dreams or read of in fairy tales. The Nazareth where St. Joseph lived and worked is a real place, as real today as it was in St. Joseph's time, and probably little changed in the slowly changing East. It has been remarked by those who have travelled in the Holy Land that its sights fill the silences of the sacred books. So it is important for us when dealing with St. Joseph's life, where there are so many silences in the inspired record, to form some picture of the scenes amid which most of his life was passed.

Take the map of Palestine and find the spot on the coast where Mt. Carmel, of sacred memories, juts out into the sea on the south side of the Bay of Acre. Follow the River Kishon, on the north side of the Carmel range, upstream through the narrow gorge (100 yards wide) by which it enters the Plain of Acre, and you come out into the Plain of Esdraelon. This is the only break in the long line of hills which run like a backbone down the centre of the land, and affords the only level passage east and west, from the Jordan to the sea, for the whole length of Palestine. The whole plain swarms with historical memories—of Elias and the priests of Baal, of Gedeon and the Madianites, of Saul and the Philistines, of Judith and Holofernes. It has been the battleground of nations from the dawn of history down to the time of Napoleon, who fought a battle there, and even to our own day. In shape the Plain of Esdraelon is a triangle, and the northern side, running east and west, is formed by the southern edge of the hills of Galilee, which drop sharply into the plain. About midway in the line of hills a narrow valley cuts in, rises steeply, and opens out into a high, flat basin. Here in this upland valley, 1160 feet above the sea, overlooking the plain, Nazareth lies. A little amphitheatre of hills runs round it behind, and two prominent bastions protrude into the plain, one on each side of it. From these hills on which Nazareth is built you can look, as St. Joseph looked, over the whole land, from snow-clad Hermon in the north to the hills of Judea in the south, and from the mountains of Gilead across the Jordan to the waters of the Mediterranean.

It is altogether against the evidence we possess to suppose, as is often done, that Nazareth was a very obscure, out-of-the-way place. It is always called a town or city in the Gospels, and contained, as far as we can estimate, about 5000 inhabitants. Important trade routes passed, if not actually through it, as some maintain, at all events quite close by. The capital of the province was in sight from the hill above it. Flourishing cities on the coast and by the lake of Galilee were within a few hours' journey. It lay in the midst of a beautiful and fertile country, with a teeming population and the hum of trade all about it. We must not picture St. Joseph, then, as the inhabitant of an isolated village. In Nazareth he was in touch with the manifold life of the Palestine of his day.

When Mary returned to Nazareth after her three months' sojourn with her cousin, and it was brought to St. Joseph's knowledge that she was to be a mother, he received a cruel blow. He could not believe that Mary was guilty of any sin; yet he could not shut his eyes to the fact of her present condition. The mystery of the Incarnation was beyond his imaginings. Whatever way his thoughts turned seeking a solution of the problem, he was met by apparent impossibilities. One thing seemed clear—his happiness was wrecked forever. Then, when he had taken the bitter resolution which duty pointed out to him, to break the contract of betrothal with Mary, as secretly as possible for her sake, the revelation of God came to him. An angel told him not to be perturbed; it was the Holy Spirit Who had wrought the wonder in Mary; "and you shall call her son Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Thus was the shadow lifted from his life, and—

what had seemed impossible—happiness in increased measure given back to him. Then the marriage was celebrated with the rejoicings which were customary at the time, and of which we find an echo elsewhere in the Gospels.

## 2.—BETHLEHEM

Very few months passed and the quiet life of Joseph was broken into by an event which threw the whole countryside into commotion. A decree was issued by the Roman Emperor Augustus that a census was to be held of all the Jews, and that each was to register in his family's place of origin. It was a harsh reminder of the foreign domination to which they were subjected, and which they hated with a passionate but impotent hatred. The Son of God, too, at the very hour of His birth, was to be Himself subject to that domination, and the place of His birth determined, to all appearances, by the orders of a pagan emperor. Yet God, in His unfathomable wisdom, was but using human plans for His own divine ends. Thus, by chance, as we term it, by accident, by the whim or wilfulness of man, God's will in our regard is worked out. The prophets had foretold the birth of Christ at Bethlehem; on the eve the Nativity it was the decree of Augustus that brought Mary and Joseph there.

As we shall see later, it is highly probable that Joseph had no intention of returning to Nazareth. So he would have settled up his affairs, disposed of some of his belongings, and taken the remainder with him. This may suggest to us that the tradition which puts an ox in the stable where Our Lord was born has historical probability behind it. If St. Joseph was transferring his home from Nazareth to the neighbourhood of Bethlehem, he would have brought his beast with him. Mary and Joseph, then, set out on their journey southwards. We can follow on the map the route they took. Though at times caravans from Galilee on their way to Jerusalem had to take the longer route by the Jordan valley, on account of the hostility of the schismatical Samaritans, the ordinary way, as is clear from a passage in the Jewish historian, Josephus, was the direct one through Samaria. The distance in this case would be about 76 miles. Joseph would travel slowly, necessarily, in the circumstances, and may have taken five or six days on the way. He went down the steep track from Nazareth, crossed the Plain of Esdraelon, past Tabor and all the familiar landmarks, then up through the valleys of Dothan and the wooded hills of Samaria to the high, bleak ridge which forms the centre of Judea. As tradition tells us it was the winter season, the journey across those bare uplands would not have been an easy one. Bethlehem, six miles south of Jerusalem, lay 2360 feet above the sea.

There is no need to rehearse the well-known story of what happened when Joseph at length reached Bethlehem. The inn—the khan of the East—was full. We can enter into St. Joseph's feelings. Mary's needs and his own love made him eager to do his very best for her. The best was a stable, a rough shelter for beasts. There the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity appeared among us, and Joseph worshipped in wonder the little Baby Who was God. Meanwhile, in one of the valleys close by (Bethlehem lies on a hill) the shepherds listened to angels singing, and were given the strange sign by which they were to recognise Him Who had been foretold as "Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty." (Is. ix., 6)—"an infant wrapped in swaddling bands and laid in a manger." "They came with haste, and they found Mary and Joseph, and the Infant lying in the manger." And still in the thought and devotion of Christendom these three are inseparably linked. St. Luke tells us that Mary stored up in her heart all she saw and heard on that wonderful night. It is hardly unwarranted to suppose that the same is true of St. Joseph. Eight days later he exercised the authority which had been conferred on him, circumcised the Child, and gave Him His name. So it was through St. Joseph's act we now have that Name which is above every name.

When forty days had passed Mary and Joseph travelled the six miles northward to Jerusalem, to carry out a twofold prescription of the law. The first-born male child of every Jewish family belonged to God, and had to be presented in the Temple and bought back with five shekels. On the same occasion the mother underwent legal purification, and offered a lamb. Those who could not afford a lamb, however, offered two doves instead. Mary and Joseph, then, came like other pious Jews to carry out what the law prescribed. It is worth noting that the first time Jesus visited Jerusalem it was that He Himself might be redeemed with five pieces of silver, but the last time He came there it was to redeem its, "not with corruptible things, as gold or silver, but with the precious blood of Christ." (I. Pet. i., 18, 19.) We learn from this portion

of the Gospel that Joseph was a poor man, for Mary made the offering of the poor. St. Luke tells the story of what followed: how Simeon saw the little group, and, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, took the Child in his arms and blessed God that he had lived to see with his own eyes Him Who was to be the Saviour of all peoples, the light of the Gentiles, and the glory of Israel. Then, while Mary and Joseph were filled with astonishment at his words, he turned to them and blessed them, as well he might; for if he was so highly favoured in seeing the Promised One, how blessed was the family into which He had been born! But the mystery of evil and the rejection of grace here presents itself, and to the words of joy and blessing Simeon adds the solemn prophecy of the ruin that would come to many through this very Saviour, and how the heart of His Mother would be pierced with a sword. Joseph stood by and listened to these strange words, and his own heart felt the prick of the sword that awaited Mary.

We do not know exactly how long a time elapsed before the Magi came, but from indications in the Gospel we can form an opinion. Herod, we are told, enquired accurately of the Magi the time the star had appeared to them. As he afterwards put to death the children of two years and under, we have good reason for supposing that the Magi came to Bethlehem when Our Lord was more than a year and less than two years old. The custom which gives the Magi a place in the Christmas crib is thus not true to historical facts. Indeed, the Gospel explicitly says they found Jesus in "a house." Neither have we any authentic information or even constant tradition about the number of the Magi. It was a fresh surprise in the quiet life of St. Joseph at Bethlehem when these rich strangers suddenly arrived, entered the little house, adored the Infant Child, and offered the products of their country in sign of homage as to a king. Joseph's name is not mentioned in the story. We can imagine him in the background in silent wonder.

### 3.—EGYPT

Joseph was not left long to ponder over the thoughts suggested by the visit of the Wise Men. Straightway he is warned in sleep to take the Child and His Mother and fly to Egypt, and stay there till he is told to return. Soon Herod will be seeking the Child's life. And so, while the Magi stole away eastward, avoiding Jerusalem, Joseph took the road to Egypt before morning dawned. Egypt had always been the ordinary place of refuge for those who had to fly from Palestine. There was a numerous Jewish community all about the delta of the Nile. Bethlehem was the usual starting point for caravans to Egypt, and in the course of his sojourn in the former place St. Joseph would have picked up information about these caravans and the route they followed. So we can understand how he was able to set out at once without even waiting for daylight. There must have been a terrible fear gnawing at his heart till he crossed the River of Egypt, 70 miles away, and passed out of the jurisdiction of Herod. He knew enough of Herod to realise that anyone who incurred his displeasure or excited his jealousy need expect no mercy. Once beyond the boundary of the Holy Land the little party was comparatively safe, and the rest of the journey might be made with less haste. Joseph may then have joined some small caravan for greater security.

What were St. Joseph's thoughts during this long journey of 260 miles? Wonder had followed on wonder. Joy and sorrow had come one upon the other in quick succession. First his trouble at Nazareth; then the consolation of the angel's message, with the wonderful forecast of the Child's future; next the unwelcome bidding to go to Bethlehem, and the cold welcome that awaited him in the home of his fathers; and after that, in bewildering sequence, the birth of the Child, the marvellous tales of the shepherds, the mingled joy and sorrow of Simeon's prophecy, the visit of the Wise Men from the East, and the sudden warning in the night. As Joseph followed the desert route to Egypt and looked at the Child asleep in His Mother's arms, he could not foresee an incident in that Child's later life when another storm would rage around Him, and threatened to destroy Him and His companions while He slept. But, then, He was to awake, and with a word quiet the storm. Not so now. While behind them the blood of the Innocents flowed and their mothers' cries rose to heaven like the lamentation of Rachel for her children, it was left to St. Joseph to guide Mary and her Child to safety in a strange land.

We do not know from the Gospels where the Holy Family took up its abode in Egypt. Tradition points to Heliopolis, a few miles from Cairo, and, at all events, we can say that there seems no reason why St. Joseph should go further. He had been told by the angel to expect a message bidding him return. But how long he had to wait for that message we cannot

say with certainty. We have only one fixed date in the course of all these events, the death of Herod in B.C. 4. Then it was that Joseph was told to return to his own land. We do not know, unfortunately, with certainty, the year of Our Lord's birth; but the date that has most authority, perhaps, is B.C. 8. (*Lest it may be puzzling to some to find Our Lord's birth assigned to a date before Christ, it may be recalled that when, in the sixth century, the system of dating our era from the birth of Christ was inaugurated, the date of the Nativity was wrongly calculated, and a year was fixed on as the year 1 A.D., which was really several years later than the actual year of Our Lord's birth. So when we say Our Lord was born in 5 B.C., it only means He was born eight years before the date which was originally calculated as the year of His birth..*)

We saw above that the flight into Egypt took place probably more than a year and less than two years after Our Lord's birth. If we suppose, then, that St. Joseph left Bethlehem for Egypt in B.C. 6, this leaves an interval of two years, more or less, for the stay in Egypt.

When Herod died, the angel spoke again to Joseph in his sleep and Joseph left Egypt, its temples, its pyramids, and its idolatrous worship behind, and set out for Palestine. The visit of the Magi reveals to us that he had remained at Bethlehem after Christ's birth instead of returning to Nazareth. And now his intention was again to settle in Judea. This shows he had definitely abandoned his former home in Nazareth. But when he reached the confines of the Holy Land he learned that Archelaus, son of Herod, had succeeded his father. What was Joseph to do? His intention had been to bring up the Child, Who was to inherit the throne of David, in David's town of Bethlehem. But he could not place Him again in the danger from which He had before so narrowly escaped. Archelaus was fully as bad as Herod. God came to Joseph's assistance, and indicated Nazareth, or at least Galilee, as the place to which he should go. The journey from the neighbourhood of Cairo to Palestine and up along the coast to near Caesarea, the seat of Roman government, then across a pass in the Carmel range to Nazareth would be about 820 miles, a long distance to bring a Boy of four or five years old. It must have been with feelings of satisfaction that Mary and Joseph reached once more the familiar scenes of fertile Galilee, and made their way across the Plain of Esdraelon and up the steep road on its northern side, which led into the pocket in the hills where Nazareth lay.

#### 4.—NAZARETH AGAIN

The rest of St. Joseph's life, so far as we know, was spent at Nazareth, amid the scenes we have already described. The details of his life become still more scanty, till his name disappears altogether from the Gospel record, like a river lost in the sands. Three things, however, we learn about his life during this period. The first is that he led the life of a poor carpenter. The Gospels are quite clear on this point. He was known and remembered by the people of the district as "Joseph the carpenter." The word which we translate "carpenter" may mean just as well "smith," and it is not unlikely that St. Joseph's work was a mixture of both trades. It was afterwards said of Our Lord, "How came this man by this wisdom and miracles? Is not this the carpenter's son?" (Matt. xiii., 54-5.) We gather, then, that Joseph was a simple, uncultured artisan. Like all the common folk of Galilee, he would have the rough accent of that province, the accent which later betrayed Peter among the servants of the High Priest in Jerusalem. As we have seen, St. Joseph was a poor man, and it cannot have improved his position that he had been obliged to move from one place to another so often during the past few years. He had to bend himself to his work, therefore, during the remainder of his life at Nazareth to provide for Mary and the Child, as well as himself; any failure in his efforts would mean that they would go hungry.

We learn from the Gospels, in the second place, that Joseph led a religious life. We are told that he went every year to Jerusalem at the solemn day of the Pasch. Though the Evangelist, concerned only with an incident which occurred at a feast of the Pasch, makes no mention of the other two yearly festivals, we may take it that Joseph went to Jerusalem three times a year. We get confirmation of this in the seventh chapter of St. John, where we find the "brethren" of Jesus going up to Jerusalem for the feast of tabernacles. It was on the occasion of one of his visits to Jerusalem that the event took place which is the sole one recorded at length in St. Joseph's life after his return from Egypt. There is not sufficient reason for thinking that this was Our Lord's first visit to Jerusalem for one of the festivals, as is commonly supposed. It is more than likely that He had already accompanied Mary and Joseph frequently on these pilgrimages. All the Gospel says on this

occasion is that, "When he was twelve years old, the Child Jesus remained in Jerusalem." We can suppose, therefore, that the Holy City and the ceremonies of the Pasch were already familiar to Him when He reached His twelfth year. A good deal of mystery is sometimes made of what is called the "loss" of the Child Jesus. We must remember that Our Lord was twelve years old at the time, and was, even to the view of those around Him, remarkable for His wisdom (Luke ii., 40), and in countries like Palestine, where development is so rapid, twelve would be equivalent to a still greater age among us. So it was not a case of Our Lord being "lost," as we commonly understand the word. The Evangelist puts the matter quite intelligibly when he says simply that Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem without letting His parents know. It was Christ's own action. Mary and Joseph saw Him among the party when they were setting out for Jerusalem; they knew that He, like any grown boy, was quite able to take care of Himself, so they naturally felt no anxiety when they did not see Him in the course of the first stage of the journey, until He failed to rejoin them at night. Then they became alarmed, enquired fruitlessly among their friends, hurried back to the city, searched all next day without success, and finally found Him on the third day among the doctors in the temple. It had been a sore trial for Joseph; besides his own grief and anxiety, he had to witness the anguish of the Holy Mother. She, too, was conscious of St. Joseph's grief. "Your father and I have sought You sorrowing." Then came the Boy's answer, a single flash in all these years lighting up His divine character and mission. But Mary and Joseph could not fully understand what He meant. The future, with all it contained, was still hidden. But the Mother "kept all these things in her heart." She must have talked over this incident with St. Joseph, too, for she was able to tell the Evangelist that he, like her, did not understand. "They understood not the word that He spoke unto them."

The third fact which we learn from the Gospels about this period of St. Joseph's life is that he exercised the rights and duties of a father in regard to Jesus Christ. Jesus was known afterwards and commonly referred to as the Son of Joseph. From Mary's spontaneous use of the word when she came upon her Son in the Temple, we see that "father" was the name Joseph ordinarily went by in the home at Nazareth. And Jesus, we are told, was subject to him. Joseph instructed Him in the precepts of the Mosaic law; he taught Him to read the inspired books of the Old Testament; as the Boy grew up and became strong, he taught Him his own trade. We can trace throughout the remainder of the Gospels how much more Jesus learned under Joseph's roof. Where but at home in Nazareth did He first watch a hen gathering her chickens under her wings? Where did He get His knowledge of the patching of old garments? Where did He learn by experience that a good father will not offer his hungry son a stone when he asks for bread? Where did He first see a woman mix leaven with her measures of meal? Where did He find out that the lamp is not put under the bushel measure, or under the bed, but on the stand? We must not forget that Christ spent nearly all His life in Joseph's house, and that His thought and speech, as revealed to us in the Gospels, reflect the experiences of all those years.

Exactly how long St. Joseph lived after the last mention of him in the Gospels, when Our Lord was twelve years old, is unknown. It is the common opinion that he died some time before the beginning of Our Lord's public life, and for this opinion there is good foundation. In several places later in the Gospels, where we should reasonably expect some reference to St. Joseph, we find none. Then, when Jesus visited His own town of Nazareth, the people said: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" and then follows a reference to His brothers and sisters (that is, His cousins), who were living among them; but not a word of Joseph. And so on other occasions. We find, too, during Our Lord's public life, that Mary had given up her home at Nazareth. This would hardly have been had St. Joseph still lived. And, finally, on the cross, Jesus left His Mother to the care of St. John. The death of one so loving and devoted must have been a cause of deep grief to Jesus and Mary. But of this the Gospel tells us not a word. After his life of service, the "man called Joseph," the "just man," passes away without a single sentence to chronicle the event. Let it be enough for us to know that he died, as we all hope to die, attended by Jesus and Mary.

##### 5.—THE "JUST MAN"

Considering the high office St. Joseph was chosen to fill, we should suppose that God prepared his soul in a fitting manner and bestowed on him those graces and spiritual endowments which would render him worthy of the intimate

association he enjoyed with Jesus and Mary. If the lips of Isaias were purified with a burning coal before he prophesied of the Redeemer to come, if the Precursor was cleansed from sin in his mother's womb, if Mary was preserved stainless from the first moment of her existence, surely the foster-father was a man made worthy of his trust! When we reflect, too, that union with Jesus and Mary is the road to, as well as the goal of, sanctity, we can imagine how the soul of Joseph grew in grace and holiness, living as he did in constant daily intercourse with God made Man and the Virgin Mother. But though we might thus infer from the very nature of St. Joseph's position the height of his virtue and sanctity, let us, however, keeping to the path we have followed so far, see what the Gospels themselves reveal to us on this matter.

The only direct testimony we have in the Gospel about St. Joseph's virtue is given in a parenthesis: "Joseph her husband, being a just man. . . ." It may seem at first sight a very small meed of praise this, but when we consider them attentively these few words are full of meaning. A just man is one who serves God and keeps His law. The first utterance of Our Lord when He left Nazareth to begin His public life shows us that His whole desire was "to fulfil all justice." Let us note that there is a great difference between a man who performs just actions and a just man; just as there is a great difference between a person who does charitable things and a charitable person, a person who does humble actions and a humble person. St. Matthew explains why St. Joseph, at a time when his heart was torn with anguish, was bent solely on doing God's will—he was a just man. His actions naturally were right because they came from a heart and will devoted to God's service. The tree was good, therefore the fruits were also good. The passing nature of the reference only emphasises St. Joseph's virtue. It is as if it needed no insisting on. A hint is sufficient. And it is in keeping with all we know of St. Joseph's life that his great sanctity should be thus presented and veiled by a passing phrase. Volumes have been written about St. Joseph's virtues, but it is no disparagement of them to say that St. Matthew's two words are worth them all.

Better, too, than any commentary on St. Joseph's life is the simple narrative of the inspired writers. No more useful biography of any saint is left us than that which the Gospel gives so briefly of St. Joseph. We see there a sanctity which all can appreciate, a humdrum life such as any man may have to live, accompanied by sorrow, hardship, disappointment, and monotonous toil. We get a picture of a silent man who carried out God's will through obedience, amid trials, by faith, in obscurity, in humble service. The outstanding feature of St. Joseph's life as presented to us in the Gospels is service. We are told nothing about his private life, no personal details about his birth, upbringing, or death. Wherever he appears in the Gospel story it is as the servant of Jesus and Mary. Most of his life could be summed up in a few words, "He served Jesus and Mary faithfully." That was his occupation in life. Joined with this is his obedience to God's will, whether that will was intimated to him directly from heaven or through the law of Israel and those who held authority over him. We have only to recall the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the hasty flight to Egypt, and his faithful compliance with the precepts of the Mosaic law.

His chosen position as husband of Mary and foster-father of the Redeemer of the world did not exempt St. Joseph from sorrow and suffering. The very first incident related of him in the Gospel shows him tortured by a terrible perplexity, which must almost have torn his heart in two; and the last scene in which he appears shows him wandering about Jerusalem in bitter sorrow. St. Joseph's trials were just the trials that everyone in his own measure has to suffer, anguish of mind and physical hardship; and they came in the same way as all our trials come, from the inconsiderateness or malice of others, as when he had to break up his home and travel so inopportunistically to Bethlehem, and when he fled with fear in his heart from the ferocity of Herod; or from the ordinary hazards of life, as when he found himself shelterless as the winter evening fell one day at Bethlehem, the one day of all his life he would have given anything for a comfortable lodging; or from God's direct intervention, as when the words of Simeon's prophecy fell on his ears, and left him with a burden of anxiety for Jesus and Mary which he carried till his death.

He had to live a life of faith. He often did not understand God's workings. He had to follow the path of God's will in darkness. When he was most faithful he seemed deserted by Providence. Think of the situation when he arrived with Mary at Bethlehem. Here were two beings indescribably dear to God, the Mother of the Word made Flesh and His foster-father. It was in obedience to God's will they had left their home. The supreme event in the history of the human race was close at hand. Yet God to all appearances had forgotten them; so far from there being any special preparations made for them,

even God's ordinary providence seemed to have failed them. In many respects this is the most striking scene in the Gospels; it certainly carries an important lesson for us. Sickness, sorrow, death, trials of various kinds may come into our lives and wreck our happiness, while God seems indifferent and deaf to our prayers. He gave Mary and Joseph no sign of His love and care that time at Bethlehem; and yet, was He indifferent? Could He be indifferent? Nor was this the only occasion on which St. Joseph's faith was tried. He had been told by the angel that this Child that was to be born would be the Saviour of His people. Yet less than two years later he was told to get up by night and fly, in order to save this same Child's life. What did it all mean? Joseph did not understand. He saw none of the miracles of later days; he heard none of Our Lord's teaching; he only wondered at the words of Simeon, as he wondered twelve years later again in the temple when he found Jesus among the doctors. Even after those twelve years of intimacy he did not understand the answer Christ gave on that occasion. Without warning, and of course without fault on the part of Mary and Joseph, Jesus—unnecessarily, we might be inclined to say—plunged His parents into such aching grief as only His loss could cause. It often happens that those who are trying to serve God best are abandoned apparently by Him, and left to plod along alone, with no companion but the signposts by the way. Well, Mary and Joseph experienced the same. Why should we complain? Joseph did God's will, he carried out the work that lay to his hand, but he did not always understand God's plans. Is it right that we expect always to understand them?

If we study it thoughtfully, St. Joseph's life has valuable lessons for us all. He was one of God's greatest servants, and yet his life was woven of the same warp and wool as ours. The Gospels give us that life in its sober reality, not overlaid with any of the conventionalities of pious biographies. We may learn from it that neither money nor position nor talents nor special opportunities are needed to serve God with the greatest perfection. We may learn to avoid the delusion that we could be saints if we were somewhere else, or had some other employment, but not in Egypt, or in a workshop, or amid worries and trials, or leading a busy life. We may learn that high sanctity does not consist in pious sentiments or even in lofty meditations, but in faithfully doing God's will, day in, day out, in the sphere in which He has placed us. This is the safe, practical, solid spirituality we find in St. Joseph's life. May that life be an inspiration, help, and encouragement to us, and, aided by St. Joseph's intercession, may we follow the same path as courageously and as faithfully as we can.

### **PRAYERS TO ST. JOSEPH**

#### **Efficacious Prayer to St. Joseph**

O Glorious St. Joseph! faithful follower of Jesus Christ, to thee do we raise our hearts and hands, to implore thy powerful intercession in obtaining from the benign Heart of Jesus all the helps and graces necessary for our spiritual and temporal welfare, particularly the grace of a happy death and the special favour we now implore (*mention it*).

(Then say the following Versicle and Response seven times in honour of the seven joys and sorrows of St. Joseph.)

V. O Glorious St. Joseph! through the love thou bearest to Jesus Christ and for the glory of His Name.

R. Hear our prayers and obtain our petitions.

#### **LITANY OF ST. JOSEPH**

Approved by Pope Pius X., March 18, 1909.

Lord, have mercy on us.

*Christ, have mercy on us.*

Lord, have mercy on us.

Christ, hear us.

*Christ, graciously hear us.*

God the Father of Heaven, *have mercy on us.*

God the Son, Redeemer of the World, *have mercy on us.*

God the Holy Ghost, *have mercy on us.*

Holy Trinity, one God, *have mercy on us.*

Holy Mary, *Pray for us*

Saint Joseph, *Pray for us*

Illustrious Son of David, etc.

Splendour of Patriarchs,

Spouse of the Mother of God,

Chaste Guardian of the Virgin,

Foster-Father of the Son of God,

Watchful Defender of Christ,

Head of the Holy Family,

Joseph most just,

Joseph most pure,

Joseph most prudent,

Joseph most courageous,

Joseph most obedient,

Joseph most faithful,

Mirror of patience,

Lover of poverty,

Model of all who labour,

Glory of family life, *Pray for us.*

Guardian of virgins, etc.

Mainstay of families,

Solace of the afflicted,

Hope of the sick,

Patron of the dying,

Terror of demons,

Protector of Holy Church,

Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world, *Spare us, O Lord.*

Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world, *Graciously hear us, O Lord.*

Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world, *Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

V. He hath made him master of His house.

R. And ruler of all His possessions.

Let Us Pray

O God, Who in Thine ineffable providence didst vouchsafe to choose Blessed Joseph to be the spouse of Thy most holy Mother, grant, we beseech Thee, that we may be worthy to have him for our intercessor in heaven, whom on earth we venerate as our Protector, Who livest and reignest world without end. Amen.

*300 days' Indulgence once a day, applicable to the souls in Purgatory.*

(Decree of Pius X., March 18, 1909.)