

Beside Thy Manger Here I Stand

Paul Gerhardt (1607–1676); tr. William Martin Czamanske (1873–1964)

Beside Thy manger here I stand,
Dear Jesus, Lord and Savior,
A gift of love within my hand
To thank Thee for Thy favor.
O take my humble offering;
My heart, my soul, yea, everything
Is Thine to keep forever.

With joy I gaze upon Thy face;
Thy glory and Thy splendor
Are greater than my heart can praise,
And songs can fitly render.
O that my mind might truly be
As boundless as the deepest sea—
'Twould still be lost in wonder.

O grant me this abundant grace,
And let it be Thy pleasure
That I may be Thy dwelling place,
Dear Savior, sweetest treasure!
O let me be Thy manger bed,
Then shall I lift my lowly head
With joy beyond all measure.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Man in the Shadows

Kevin T. Bauder

During the Christmas season, two figures stand rightfully in the spotlight. One is Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem. The other is Mary His mother. A third figure generally remains somewhere in the shadows: he is known to have been present but hardly seems to matter. That man is Joseph.

Many Christians treat Joseph as a placeholder. Since they know that Jesus was conceived and born of a virgin, they assume that Joseph was present only as Mary's husband. They take it as incidental and almost accidental that he was in the story at all. After all, what did Joseph contribute? He was a husband to Mary. He provided a male parental figure for Jesus. Perhaps he trained Jesus in the trade of construction. The story, however, would be substantially the same had Joseph never lived. Another man—or no man at all—might have done as well.

The Gospels challenge these assumptions about Joseph. They provide reasons for saying that he played a unique role in the nativity of our Lord. Without Joseph, the mission of Jesus Christ could never have succeeded. He was a remarkable man for several reasons.

At the least, Joseph is important because of his character. Matthew calls him a just or righteous man (Luke 1:19). Only about ten individuals in the Bible get called just or righteous. This designation already places Joseph among the elite.

His righteousness, however, was not of the priggish sort. It clearly included an element of compassion or mercy. Joseph was unwilling to subject Mary to shame, even before he knew that her pregnancy was caused by the Holy Spirit. Instead, he settled on a private divorce to end their marriage.

Joseph was more than Mary's fiancé. He was legally her husband and she was legally his wife. Even though they had not yet consummated their marriage, and even though they were not yet living together, a divorce was necessary to dissolve their relationship. This was what Joseph planned to do, but he did not rush into it. Joseph must have been a temperate and deliberate man, because he was still pondering the situation when he dozed off and was confronted in a dream by an angel.



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The angel assured Joseph that Mary was faithful to him. Her pregnancy was miraculous, something that was wrought by the Holy Spirit. The angel told Joseph to complete the marriage with Mary and to bring her into his home. This was a significant act, one that would be widely understood to mean that Joseph acknowledged the child. When Joseph took the final steps to complete his marriage with Mary, he was extending public acceptance to Jesus as his own offspring.

The angel gave further instructions about the child. He told Joseph, “You shall call his name Jesus,” a name that means *savior* or *deliverer*. The point is that Joseph was told to do the naming. Of course, this does not exclude Mary from being involved in the naming, but a child’s father had naming rights that could override the mother’s wishes (see the example of Zacharias, Elisabeth, and John in Luke 1:59–63). By exercising this right, Joseph was underlining his acceptance of the child Jesus as his own.

This point is critical: even though Jesus was not the biological descendant of Joseph, he was more than a stranger who was fostered in Joseph’s home. He was even more than adopted. From a legal point of view, Jesus was the son of Joseph, with all the rights, honors, and privileges pertaining thereto. And being the son of Joseph did come with rights, honors, and privileges.

Joseph stood in the direct line of descent from King David through King Solomon. By right of primogeniture, under the terms of the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:12–16) Joseph held the title to the throne of David. He could not claim that title because of the curse placed on King Coniah (Jer 22:24, 30). By affirming Jesus as his legal son, however, Joseph passed the right of succession on to Jesus.

As the legal son of Joseph, Jesus headed the dynasty of Solomon. He held the title to occupy the throne of David. Because He was not Joseph’s biological son, however, He was not under the curse of Coniah. Since Mary was also a descendant of David through David’s son Nathan (Luke 3:23–31; 2 Sam 5:13–14), Jesus’ virgin birth fulfilled God’s promise that a descendant of David would rule Israel.

Was Joseph’s fatherhood of Jesus recognized? Luke indicates that Jesus was believed or thought to be the son of Joseph (Luke 3:23). Years later, he was still referred to as “the carpenter’s son” (Matt 13:55–57). He was called “the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know (John 6:42). Indeed, Mary, talking to Jesus, could refer to Joseph as “your father” (Luke 2:48). The suggestion that the circumstances of Jesus’ birth might have temporarily slipped from Mary’s mind is simply ludicrous. More than once, Luke’s gospel names both Mary and Joseph together as Jesus’ parents (Luke 2:27, 41).

Joseph fulfilled the role of human father to Jesus. When Herod’s paranoia threatened the child, the angel warned Joseph to move the family to Egypt. When the threat had passed, the angel again appeared to Joseph, permit-

ting him to take Mary and Jesus home to Nazareth. Then every year Joseph would take his family to Jerusalem for Passover (Luke 2:41). Since Jesus was increasing in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52), Joseph must have played a significant role in His spiritual upbringing.

The last glimpse we get of Joseph is when the twelve-year-old Jesus was disputing with the doctors in the temple. Probably Joseph was older than Mary, and he may have died shortly after that event. He was certainly gone before Jesus began His public ministry. The years during which Joseph parented Jesus were brief but crucial.

Much of Joseph’s life is hidden from us, but the little that we do know is vital. He was a just man, a good man, a devout man. His royal fathers can rightly be proud of him. He opened their dynasty to Mary’s son, the Savior. He gave the Savior a name, a title, a throne, and a home. Joseph is truly a hero of Christmas.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
