

Joseph's Story

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Hi everyone. I am so glad to be able to share with you today. My name is Joseph and I just wanted to tell you about a time when my plans got turned totally on their head because God's plans were very different to anything I ever imagined. Have you ever had one of those holidays which just didn't go to plan? All your dreams and aspirations for that time just vanished and you had to take it one hour at a time because you just had no control over the circumstances anymore? I am sure you would all be able to think of a story like that from your past. Well allow me to tell you mine.

We had dreamed of a great family gathering. The previous year we had announced our engagement and many of you know how exciting life gets from that point forward and how many plans have to be made and we certainly had our checklist back then too!

Mary's mother was so excited. She couldn't wait to tell all her friends. Sure, I was only a carpenter. But that didn't matter. She knew I really loved Mary and that I would provide a good home for her. Mary's dad, the true business man, began the wedding plans for the next year immediately. His prayers had been answered. He knew that I was a God-fearing decent man and I would bring up his grandchildren in the ways of the Lord.

But all that changed – in an instant - when our plans were totally obliterated and we lost control of our lives for a little while. I had all kinds of dreams of what I would be doing that year and how wonderful it would all be and how excited everyone around us would be. But in what seemed like a blink of an eye, we found ourselves trudging towards Bethlehem, tired, dusty, sore, and, in my case, at least, just a little bit anxious – as Mary was due to give birth at any moment!

We had waited in Nazareth as long as we dared - hoping Mary would give birth there. But the baby waited longer ... and the government decree wouldn't wait for anyone or anything. Once again the Roman government had forced its hand upon our lives. How we longed to be free: Free to be our own people. Free to be God's people. We longed for that day when God's Messiah would shatter the yoke of bondage and set us free.

Is it possible that the Messiah was about to be born? Is it true that the child my Mary is carrying is truly our Saviour? Are the Romans pushing us to Bethlehem so that God's Son would be born in King David's town?

Now and then Mary and I would talk about these things. But we had so many more questions than answers. All I *really* knew for certain was that I loved Mary and that somehow, God was in control of this bizarre plot which had overtaken our lives and would leave us and our whole world, changed forever. I adored Mary for her simple faith. While I was anxiously wondering what God was doing - Mary was quietly pondering all these things in her heart and never once did she complain about this turn of events which had overtaken her heart, her mind, her soul and certainly her body too!

The previous nine months had certainly not been easy! I was shocked into numbness when Mary told me she was pregnant! I seemed riveted to the spot as my mind raced round and round in maddening circles. How could you do this to me Mary?! Don't you know I love you? Who is the father? I'll kill him! What will my friends say? They knew I was supposed to be getting married. How can you look so calm and peaceful? Even innocent? This is terrible! She dared to say that this was God's will!?!

I had learned a very long time ago not to make rash decisions. I couldn't cope with this news. Quietly I told Mary that I needed time to be alone. What should I do? It certainly wasn't right to go ahead with the wedding - with Mary pregnant with someone else's child.

But I loved her so. How could she do this to me? All our dreams - shattered. All our plans - gone. What would God want me to do? That was the hard question. It should have been simple actually. The law said I could have Mary stoned to death and restore my reputation in the town. Not my Mary - never! How could she say that this was God's will? Could it be? Could God *actually be* - the Father of this child? No way. My poor Mary was simply out of her mind. Something has happened to her. She has really lost the plot.

Well finally I had decided: the proper thing to do was to break off the engagement. There simply was no other choice. And I would pay for Mary to leave until after the baby was born. That would spare her of some of her embarrassment. Where should she go? I decided her cousin Elizabeth would welcome her.

Elizabeth and Zechariah. Now that's a story in itself. They had been wanting a baby for as long as I had known them. Finally, when they had accepted the fact that they were too old and God was not going to give them a child, Elizabeth fell pregnant. And Zechariah - well, that was strange - something happened when it was his turn to serve as priest in the temple. When he came out, he couldn't speak. Everyone believed he had seen a vision. This type of thing hadn't happened in years - actually several hundred years. Is it possible, I wondered, is God finally breaking His silence?

The decision had not been an easy one. After days of turmoil in my mind, I had decided. Now I could sleep. I would tell Mary in the morning. I knew she would accept my decision. That night - the strangest and most amazing thing happened. I don't know how to say it. I won't blame you if you do not believe me. I sometimes find it hard to believe myself. But in some strange way it seems more real than talking to you today. An angel spoke to me! I still shake when I think of it. To a priest? That would be understandable. But I am just a poor struggling carpenter; a 'commoner.' Yet I tell you, God spoke to me and I will never forget His words:

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

I could hardly wait until morning to tell Mary. Now I knew too that the baby growing in her was God's voice to His people. Now we could walk through this miraculous time together. Our emotions at that time are really hard to describe: Fear, awe, wonder, joy, bewilderment, humility. But now we had each other. We planned a quick, simple wedding. We would still have to tell our parents. And so began our very difficult journey.

Let me tell you - living in the centre of God's will is NOT easy at times. Strangely peaceful - yes - but certainly not easy. Our parents were devastated. My parents couldn't believe I was still going to marry Mary when she was pregnant I think Mary's dad wanted to kill me. Her parents were furious at us. They couldn't decide whether they wanted me to marry their daughter or to disappear from their lives altogether. It was obvious, to them, that I had violated their daughter and their trust. But time marched on. We did get married. Mary did visit her cousin Elizabeth for a couple of months.

But I never realized how cruel people could be - friends, neighbours, even church people! I lost a lot of my customers. Even when someone did come into my shop to pick up a new table or a mended chair, conversation was very short and very uncomfortable.

When we went to the synagogue, to worship God, everyone made room for us. People glared at Mary's growing belly and then glared at me. But I think what hurt us the most was the children. The children were no longer allowed near us. We were 'sinners' now. I was forced to give up my class of boys and no longer allowed to read the Torah.

And yet, somehow, Mary and I were happy. We knew something that others simply could not accept or refused to hear. God was working in our lives. He was using us. We were learning that nothing, nothing, matters more than that. Business, family, friends - all these are less important than being part of God's plan and purpose. But God's will is often hard to fathom.

Why would God want Mary to travel to Bethlehem? Could he not have made Caesar's decree a little later so that she did not have to travel, wondering if she would give birth at the side of the path? Wouldn't the travel put the baby's health in danger? Wouldn't it have been better to have Mary's mother help her with the delivery?

No, this holiday certainly did not go according to my plans. Ostracized from friends, misunderstood at church, now separated by miles from our family - we were alone among strangers as Mary gave birth to God's Son. But that night we learned something very special. We learned that to be alone with God is far greater than anything else in all the world. At the first sound of the baby's cry that night, Mary's pain and our whole ordeal getting there was forgotten.

Together we praised God as we felt His actual presence in that tiny stable. Silently we watched as God sent His chosen people to witness the birth of His Son and worship their Messiah for the first time. Shepherds, of all people! I smiled inwardly. These people were not even allowed in the synagogue - unclean they said. Yet here they are kneeling as the first visitors to see God's only Son! Later came some wise men - astrologers - scientists - Noble men from another country. Again I smiled. They are not even Jews! - yet they were brought by God to worship our baby - a King they said He was.

A truly amazing event which made absolutely no sense in my mind – none of these seemed right – none of this matched my expectations and understanding of God – and yet all of it felt absolutely perfect – like it had been planned to the finest detail centuries ago – and not by me! My plans had vanished in the face of God's amazing plan and at that moment I didn't care. I was where God needed me to be.

I want to encourage all of you here today to place *your* lives at the centre of God's will and don't be surprised if He interrupts your journey and really stretches your view of Him. You may have grown up thinking certain things about God and how He relates to His people. Through various good and bad experiences of Church and God's people, you may have decided God is not that interested in you personally and you certainly don't expect Him to cut in on your plans and involve you in something of supreme importance and eternal significance!

But friends, take it from me, that is exactly what God is likely to do – and I can assure you that He is very interested in you and He desires to work for you, in you and through you to achieve His purposes in the world.

As I discovered that year, when all my plans got turned on their head, God so often will use the simple things, the weak things, even the despised things and people of this world to do His best work. He so often shames the wise, the noble, the self-sufficient, as He interrupts the lives of common, ordinary, humble people like me and invites *us* to be part of *His* Kingdom, *His* will, *His* plans and *His* amazing life and ministry here and beyond.

I know you all call this time 'Christmas' now because of what happened to Mary and me back then ... and that's ok, I guess ... but I want to say one really important thing before I leave you now: what God did to me and to Mary in time and space and a specific location a long, long way from here – He desires to do again and again and again and you are part of His plan. What happened to us physically in that stable, God desires to do spiritually in every one of us.

We got to see our Lord and Saviour born in the flesh and that was pretty amazing ... but what is even more amazing to see is when He is born in spirit in people's lives today and every day. If you have not witnessed that miracle personally – if the Spirit of God has not birthed the reality of our Lord and Saviour in your life – then I couldn't think of a better day for that to happen than today.

Thank you for listening to my story – which is actually your story ... if you let God have His way with you. May you know God's peace and God's presence at this special time and always.