

# Heroes

**Mary and Joseph**

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I want to talk about heroes; specifically, Biblical heroes—rather unlikely Biblical heroes. There seems to be an innate need for people to have heroes, someone to look up to, someone to emulate. I can recall some of my early heroes. Growing up (I was born just before World War II) many of the heroes I first became aware of were military leaders who were around at that time. Douglas MacArthur and Dwight Eisenhower were the strong leader-generals of the war. Those in other countries and other parts of the world might have other names which come to mind when thinking of heroes.

As I got a little older, there were several baseball players that made my list. I remember Stan Musial, a great baseball player for the St. Louis Cardinals. Also, there was Robin Roberts, who was a pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies. He could thread a needle with his pitching. Sometime later there was a fellow named Warren Spahn, who played for the Milwaukee Braves. He was a fine pitcher in his own right. In any case, we have these heroes and we look to them and we think, "Wow, they are something!" They are really people we would want to emulate. And, as young boys we really wanted to do what they did. We envisioned ourselves performing at the same peak level that they did.

Now, I will venture to give my own definition of the word "hero." This is my own idea and if I were to define "hero," this is roughly the way I would state it. I would say a hero, man or woman, is one who stands out above the norm by reason of their achievements.

For example, many of the military heroes that you may think of—Seven back to Civil War times—were men of such ability that others would just follow at all costs. The Confederate surrender at Appomattox is a case in point. There were men, barely dressed and even without shoes, who when it came time to surrender, looked to Robert E. Lee, or "Bobby Lee" as he was known to some, as if to say, "Well, should we quit now?" And it was not until he gave the nod that they laid down their arms. And even today Robert E. Lee is looked upon as a hero, a man whom we can admire. Evidently Robert E. Lee was a man of tremendous character, if one had ever read anything about him at all.

Heroes—people that you can emulate. Some women heroes who come to mind are, among others, Abigail Adams, married to John Adams. She was a truly fine woman who had a great influence on her husband, who in turn had profound influence on the events, which were happening at the founding of our nation.

Also Marie Curie, a renowned scientist. She won two Nobel Prizes (the first person to do so—1903 and 1911) for her research in radioactive elements. These are people of great accomplishment to whom we can look and try to emulate.

I have selected certain individuals from the Biblical annals to examine. There is no shortage of

Biblical heroes. When one considers "Biblical heroes," who comes to mind? Is it David, or Jonathan? Or is it Elijah, or Samson? Samson carried the gates of Gaza on his shoulders for approximately forty miles (Judges 16: 1-3) as a real insult to the enemy, the Philistines! These are people with panache, bravado! They did these tremendous, memorable deeds, often times laying their lives on the line. Ruth, and Esther, too, laid their lives on the line so that God's purpose would be accomplished.

The people I have chosen, two in number (one man and one woman), are not in this category. You would not find them listed in the book of Judges. They did not carry city gates long distances. They did not slay Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. They did not ride away in a fiery chariot like Elijah. Or call she-bears out of the woods. If you look in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, you will not find them listed among the great servants of faith. And yet the impact these two people had on the world, on our society, is unimaginable. To this very day, their influence is still felt and goes far beyond the impact of such people as Samson and Jephthah and the like—put together! I categorize these as two of the greatest heroes who ever lived!

The people that I am talking about are named Mary and Joseph, the earthly parents of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Again, their influence on the world, in the position of parents of Jesus Christ, is simply unimaginable. Would that I was more skillful in describing what I feel was their tremendous impact on this world and society. So, I am asking you to place yourself, for a moment, in their position. Take yourself back to the day and age when Mary and Joseph were specifically called to such a tremendous task.

Let us consider them individually. We will begin with Mary. We often think on Mary and Joseph around the end of December, usually (unfortunately) because we hear their names associated with the worldly celebrations that go on at this time. Except for the Catholic community, Christendom seems to pay little attention to Mary.

She is not as bombastic an individual as those previously mentioned. She is very quiet. She plays a very large part in Catholic lore. She is virtually deified. In their liturgical cycle there are two months (May and October, if I recall correctly) dedicated to Mary.

There is a whole cult built around her and the worship of her. From an extensive article about Mary in the Catholic Encyclopedia we find that in many scriptures they see references to Mary. In the account of Moses and the burning bush, for example, they see a symbol of Mary's perpetual virginity.

The Bible yields comparatively few verses in reference to Mary. There are those that apply to the birth of Jesus. And then later on, she is mentioned in the account of the crucifixion—she is there at the foot of the cross. And there are a few other references which refer to "the mother of Jesus," the marriage feast at Cana, among other scant few verses.

Mary's introduction, scripturally, is found in the first chapter of the book of Luke. This is immediately following the account of Zacharias and Elizabeth and the conception of John the Baptist.

Luke 1:26-27 (NASB) Now in the sixth month, the angel, Gabriel, was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin

engaged to a man ?

Now the New American Standard Bible uses this word "engaged." I would rather, as the King James interprets, the word "betrothed." We will examine this more closely in a moment.

Luke 1:27-38 ?[She was betrothed] to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming in; he [the angel Gabriel] said to her, "Hail favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a Son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His Kingdom will have no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God. And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Now this is absolutely remarkable! Her response is just fantastic—or perhaps, the lack of response! Just imagine this. Let us presume this occurred in a private area of the home where the angel appeared to her. It does not say anything about how he went about doing this. Did he come and knock on the door, wearing a business suit of the day? Did he somehow just materialize in her room? It does not say. But what troubled her was not the appearance of the angel. It was as if she had just seen him yesterday! Here is Gabriel. It is like she knew who he was and from where he came. What troubled her was what he said, "Hail favored one; the Lord is with you." Now what is he talking about?!? The angel explains it. And we see the remarkable nature of her response, "Okay, that is the way it is, so be it unto me, as you have spoken."

Just place yourself in this kind of a situation. Imagine you are having a private moment, some quiet time, perhaps in prayer or meditation. You may hear a knock on your door, or someone comes in—an angel! First of all, you would probably faint dead away—I would! That would of course depend upon how he presents himself. When finally you would pick yourself up—or be placed upon your feet because you would have no strength within yourself—you might hear something to the effect of, "Hey, I am from God and I have an important job for you to do."

That is precisely what happened to Mary! It sounds a little humorous in the vernacular, but that is what happened. This, astoundingly enough, did not surprise her! This says something about

her character, it says something about her background, and it says something about her upbringing. She was prepared. She was not "any old virgin" that happened to come along. Or is it any "young" virgin? Tradition has her being approximately fifteen to nineteen years of age. Scripture does not definitively say.

But, she had something about her, in her consciousness, in her ability to think and understand. She had something in her background and her upbringing which had prepared her, probably for several generations prior, for this moment in time. All her parents and grandparents and great-grandparents were all righteous people, if we may describe them in that manner. They knew God's law; they kept the laws of God and they were careful to keep these things.

By the time Mary came along, all of this—the appearance of Gabriel, the annunciation, all of this was not a shocking surprise to her. She knew that God did give assignments to people—"I want you to do this job." And this was not at all surprising to her. She had really fine character which was deeply rooted and founded on the laws of God.

I am reminded of the stories of Abraham and Jacob. They were impressed with the idea of "the birthright." "You will be a nation and a company of nations," they were promised. "You will have this birthright, which is so important," they were told. And they looked at these promises, and they saw that they were important, even though Abraham and Jacob did not receive them. And it was not until thousands of years later that their descendants received the promised birthright blessings.

And Mary had that same strong character. She had the same spiritual vision to see that what this angel was telling her was vitally important. Even though she did not, at that time, fully understand everything that was happening.

Let us now turn our attention to Joseph. Joseph was "the forgotten man" if ever there was one. Joseph is not given a great deal of attention. Here again, it is generally around the Christmas season that he is brought out and stood in nativity scenes. Usually he is the guy standing in the back. In the front, of course, there is Mary and this oversized infant/child, supposedly a newborn. The magi, the shepherds, and even the lambs upstage poor Joseph—who is left standing in the back! Again, in the Catholic liturgy, March 19<sup>th</sup> is a day dedicated to Joseph. So, we see that he is really a forgotten sort of guy!

But there is a whole lot more to Joseph than meets the eye. Here again there is not a whole lot written in scripture, even less than Mary. Because by the time Jesus comes to the point of His baptism and entry into His public life—His ministry—Joseph is gone, presumably he died. It is thought that Joseph was considerably older than Mary. The first mention of Joseph is in the genealogy found in the first chapter of Matthew.

Matthew 1:15-16 ?and to Eliud was born Eleazar; to Eleazar,  
Matthan; and to Matthan, Jacob; and to Jacob was born Joseph the  
husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

What we have here is the actual genealogy of Joseph himself. The one in Luke is Mary's genealogy.

Luke 2:1 Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

A little word research reveals that this census deals, basically, with taxation. The Greek words denote that the citizens had to go to the town of their nativity for the purpose of entering into the public record the names of men, their property, and income.

Luke 2:2-7 This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the City of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him [or betrothed to him], and was with child. And it came about that while they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him and cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2:22 And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord?

Luke 2:24 ?and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES, OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS."

I bring this out just to make a reference to their economic status. It is popular belief that Mary and Joseph were pretty much dirt poor, that they did not have a place to live that was worth living in. Here is scriptural evidence that this is not so. This is not to say that they were wealthy, either. Joseph was an established carpenter—a contractor, if you will. If he were alive today, he would probably be driving a Chevy pick-up truck with a toolbox in the back and the extended cab. He was a contractor, he was established, he was an older man—older than Mary—and he could support her.

Let us now look at the betrothal, or engagement period. It may be somewhat difficult for us in today's society to understand because we generally decide who we are going to marry and then we have an engagement period, the meaning of which we usually take for granted. But back in those days, and for reasons of transmittal of property and estate, they had a "two-part" marriage. This is still extant in some parts of the world today.

I served in the Navy for one year in Vietnam back in 1966 and I had heard of the people there going through the same tradition, where a man and woman were married, legally betrothed. It meant they were legally consigned to each other, but the marriage was not consummated for another year. One reason for this was to prove there were no improprieties on the part of the bride. If she came into the union already pregnant, bearing a bastard child, that meant that the transmittal of the properties and the estate would be corrupted. Nobody wanted that. So this

does indicate that there was something in the way of an estate to be transmitted.

Secondly, he had to go to be taxed. How much tax do poor people pay? Not much. Today, everyone pays through the nose through sales tax, but as far as income taxes and the like, they do not pay very much. And up until modern times, the taxes were based upon property holdings, so if you did not own property, you did not pay much in the way of taxes. So this is some evidence to indicate that Joseph and Mary were not destitute.

As far as their not finding any place to stay at the inn—what scripture says is not that they could not afford the inn, but that there was no room for them at the inn. They were not planning to come there at that time—it was the Feast of Tabernacles and all of the rooms were taken.

What sort of character did Joseph have? Let us look in the book of Matthew.

Matthew 1:18-19 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her?

Here again—"a righteous man." The word means righteous in the modern sense that we would tend to think of someone who is righteous. This is someone who observes divine laws, someone who is approved of or acceptable to God. So again, as we stated with regard to Mary, his (Joseph's) forbears were righteous people. They led him in the right way.

Matthew 1:19-25 So Joseph, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins." Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US." And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife, and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name, Jesus.

Now, here again, notice the character. Notice the obedience. And notice the distinction. In the case of Zacharias, the angel appeared. In the case of Mary, the angel appeared. In the case of Joseph, he had a dream. Why was this? I am not certain. But, in any case, it was a dream. Joseph awoke from the dream and said, in effect, *'Okay, here we go!'* And, similarly, in other cases,

Matthew 2:13 Now when they [the magi] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise and take the Child and his mother, and flee to Egypt?"

Joseph said, "*Okay, let us go.*"

Matthew 2:19-20 But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt saying, "Arise and take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel?"

And Joseph says, "*Okay.*"

Let me at this point just refer to a section of scriptures in the book of Ephesians (chapters 5: 22-6: 4). Paul speaks here about the relationship between husbands and wives and children. In the accounts we are studying, Joseph is addressed as the head of the family. When God wanted to communicate something to this family, He communicated it to Joseph—the head of the family. In each case, Joseph led.

So, in spite of the modern trends for Mary and Joseph to become somewhat lost in the shuffle while all the others, the flamboyant, the boisterous, the colorful characters of the Bible get a great deal of notice, we could ask the question, "Why is it that way?" Why is there so little written about Mary and Joseph?

Perhaps it was because there were two very important personalities coming on to the world scene at that time—Jesus and John the Baptist. So Mary and Joseph became overshadowed. Or it may not have been part of the "job description" that God had for them when He came and said, "I want you to do this job." God did not want them to be in the limelight. He did not want them preaching, or slashing Philistines, or whatever.

He wanted them to take care of His Son, to nurture Him, which, to Mary, meant prenatally. She made sure to eat the right things and do the right things and to take care of herself so that the baby was taken care of. And it meant nurturing the child after He was born, raising Him. This was no easy job because this was no ordinary child.

I have had the distinct pleasure—and difficulty—of raising my own children. I taught them to drive, for example. But there is another reason why, perhaps, God had so little to say about Mary and Joseph in scripture. Notice that, unlike David and unlike Abraham and Sarah, there is nothing negative recorded about Mary and Joseph—not a word! Perhaps it was that God and Jesus Christ had so much love and respect for these two people—that they were such tender and gentle people—they were just not permitted to be exposed to such petty, useless, and worldly observations.

That is just my theory; take it for what it is worth. But it may well have been a mercy and gentleness on God's part to respect the privacy of Mary and Joseph, knowing full well the weight of the responsibility that was placed on their shoulders. This was a tremendous load to carry.

Here, again, because of my limited skill to describe these events—and our limited ability to

comprehend God's great plan, I am asking us to try and place ourselves in the shoes of these great people—Mary and Joseph. Imagine you are the mother, or the step-father of Jesus Christ!

Heroes! Were these two heroes? I dare say so! In addition to just carrying the heavy burden placed upon them to raise God's Son the way He had to be raised, they also had to bear what was probably the shame that went along with that. Everyone knew—everyone in Nazareth, everyone in Galilee knew, or they thought they knew—of the "illegitimacy" of Jesus' conception and birth! At that time it was a shame for an unmarried woman to become pregnant. Today, many women simply decide for themselves to have a child and just go and do it! There is no stigma attached to it!

There are some scriptural references, John 8: 41 for example, that indicate society of the day looked down their noses at Joseph and his family for having this child. This "Son" probably did not look like His other siblings. In my book, they were indeed heroes. They were two of mankind's greatest heroes. And if you want to emulate someone, doubtless one could find anyone better, aside from Jesus Christ of course, than Mary and Joseph.