

Bible Studies for Enquirers and New Believers: A Series of Eight Studies

Study 1 – The Holy Family: A Christmas Meditation

taken from
Bible Studies for Enquirers and New Believers
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Reading: Matthew 1:18 -2:23

Memory Verse: Matthew 2:21-22

The excitement of the birth of the first-born is over. Joseph and Mary and the young child have left Bethlehem. They only went there because of the government regulations regarding population census. Like the Holy Family we have to settle down to ordinary life. The problems that faced Joseph and Mary are not so different from our own. They found victory and so may we through the grace of God.

False Accusation

Joseph and Mary had to contend with false accusations against their characters and moral life. Joseph, being a good and upright man, did not want to make a public example of Mary although his virgin bride was pregnant. In those days the interval between betrothal and marriage was generally a year, during which the bride lived with her friends. Her property was vested in her future husband. Unfaithfulness on her part was punished, like adultery, with death. Mary herself was puzzled by the angel's message but he said to her: "Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest. The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore, also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:30-35). Mary understood. Joseph's doubts about her purity were allayed by a dream (Matthew 1:20-21). Mary's relatives must have had doubts and questions but God vindicated her. As soon as Elizabeth set eyes on her cousin Mary, she was filled with the Holy Spirit and said: "Blessed art thou among women, blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should visit me?" (Luke 1:42-43). Through all the centuries in many lands God has vindicated Mary through his church as believers have declared their faith in the creed speaking of Jesus that "He was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary." People may speak evil of us but if our conscience is clear before God He will vindicate us. "For who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God who justifies" (Romans 8:33).

Poverty

Another problem that the Holy Family faced was poverty. They were undoubtedly poor. Money might have got them more than a stable for the birth of Mary's son (Luke 1). A little while later they took the child to the Temple for the rite of circumcision. They could not afford a lamb so they brought two young pigeons – an offering permitted by the law

for those too poor to bring a lamb. Joseph and Mary were from the house and lineage of King David, but they were poor relations. It was written of Mary's son by the Apostle Paul that "though he was rich yet for our sakes he became poor that we through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). We know that Jesus had at least four half-brothers and two half-sisters. Joseph was a working man – a carpenter. How did this family face poverty? The gold given by the wise men must have helped them in a particular difficulty when they were refugees but there were no gifts as far as we know for the succeeding years. By the sweat of their brows they worked and laboured in the carpenter's shop and in the home. The spiritual riches meant more to them than material wealth. Who could be richer than the Virgin Mary with her infant son? What we call the Magnificat is a song of spiritual treasure. Jesus has come at last to his people – not to a rich and famous family, but to a humble workman's cottage. What praise, what joy and what peace in that home! (Luke 1:46-55).

Critical Conditions

We are familiar with wars and rumours of wars, with revolutions and martial law. The Holy Family lived in even more uncertain times. The Romans ruled their land. Their own king was against them. He slaughtered the innocent families' children in one district in an effort to eliminate a possible infant rival. Like many many periods of history the Holy Family became refugees. They fled to Egypt to get away from the anger of King Herod. The prince of glory became a refugee in the world he had created. At the command of a foreign government Joseph and Mary had to make the long journey to Bethlehem for the census despite the fact that Mary was pregnant and about to be delivered of her first child. God was overruling in the affairs of men. The Roman census was God's instrument for the fulfilling of the Old Testament prophecy that the Christ should be born in Bethlehem of Judaea (Micah 5:2). Another prophet, also eight centuries before the event, had foretold: "Out of Egypt have I called my son" (Hosea 11:1). So the exile in Egypt, the period of being refugees, was also in the plan and purpose of God. Pontius Pilate was the Chief Martial Law Administrator of the troublesome province of Judaea. Herod was King of the Jews. History did not revolve around either of them but around a child who grew up in a carpenter's home. As his mother Mary said: "He (God) hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted those of low degree" (Luke 1:52). It is God the Lord who rules in the kingdom of men.

Suffering and Death

The Holy Family shared more in the suffering of mankind than any family that has ever existed. In this too they are our example and inspiration. In the Temple in Jerusalem the aged Simeon blessed the family giving a special message to Mary saying that many would fall and rise again in Israel because of her baby boy. He warned of opposition from political as well as religious leaders. A sword would, as it were, pierce through the mother's heart. How well Simeon prophesied of the sorrow and suffering to come. Mary experienced that great burden of watching her son die one of the worst of deaths. But perhaps she alone among her contemporaries understood before it occurred the deep meaning of his death. She kept these things in her heart and pondered over them. From the cradle to the grave Jesus was a man of sorrows. His mother understood this best. An imaginary conversation in a poem by Helen A. Jefferson expresses this idea:

Mary to Joseph

*You ask why these strangers came, why
they brought these gifts. They said they
were led by a star, and I believe this,
Joseph.*

*They were learned men. Skilled in reading
the stars. Could not Yahweh reveal
Himself to them through the book of the
heavens*

*as He revealed Himself to our
people through a book?*

*They said they were seeking a King
and had found Him,
prostrated
themselves, laid their
gifts*

at the feet of the Child.

*Yes, I know gold is a tribute for a king.
But what of the frankincense?
Is it not a symbol of Deity?
It is used in the incense sacred
to Yahweh.*

*It is poured on the meal
when the cereal offering is burned.
These men worshipped my Son. But
what of the myrrh?*

*You say it is used
in the holy anointing oil.*

*But, Joseph, it is also a
gift for the gravel*

*Is that why the Child woke
and wept*

when the myrrh was presented?

Must the Chosen One suffer?

*Is that what the great prophet meant? It
is written*

*the Servant shall justify many,
for He shall bear their iniquities.*

*Joseph, bring me my cloak,
I feel suddenly cold.*

The Holy Family battled through their problems of false accusation, poverty, critical conditions, and sorrow and death by God's help. So may we to the glory of God.