

This place looks so different from my Synagogue in Nazareth, but it feels so familiar. I heard people reading from the Bible and people praying as I made my way inside. It is sure nice to have a warm, welcoming place on a cold, wet night like tonight. Thanks for letting me inside.

My name is Joseph. I spent most of my life in a little village in Galilee called Nazareth and went to the Synagogue every Sabbath unless I was sick. Our Rabbis used to read to us from the Torah and the Prophets. After reading from the Scriptures, they would try to help us understand what it meant, try to apply it to our lives and urge us to believe it or be faithful to it. I tried to do the right things, but didn't always succeed.

I listened to the prophecies about the coming Messiah for as long as I could remember and prayed that He would come soon. We were taught to celebrate His arrival. But to tell you the truth, it was a little hard to believe that God was going to send the Messiah soon. Oh, we certainly needed him. Our tiny little nation was under Roman rule. Caesar Augustus allowed an evil man known as Herod the Great to run rough shod over our land. As far as I was concerned, Herod wasn't great. He was crazy.

On top of that, it had been 400 years since the last time God sent a true prophet to speak to our people. There had been some false prophets and pretend Messiahs, but no true spokesman from God in 400 years. Had God forgotten about us and His promises?

Those thoughts were only in the back of my mind since I was busy building a new house on our family property. Mary and I were going to get married as soon as it was finished. We were both looking forward to our wedding day and starting our family. It was the right thing to do.

Then something crazy and totally unexpected happened. Mary told me this unbelievable story about a visit from the Angel Gabriel telling her that she had been chosen by God to be the mother of the Messiah. Right! How did she come up with that story? Then she said that she was expecting a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. What was I supposed to do? I had a few options, none of which made much sense. I didn't want to hurt Mary by giving her a public divorce and subjecting her to public disgrace. I couldn't marry her if she was carrying another man's baby. That wouldn't be the right thing to do. So I went to the synagogue to pray. It was there that I remembered the promises about the Messiah from the Prophet Isaiah. He said, "*The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*" (Isaiah 7:14)

That same night an angel of the Lord appeared to me in a dream and told me that the right thing for me to do was to take Mary and confirmed everything that Mary had said. The promise that God gave through the Prophet Isaiah was coming true. God was still with us. He had not

forgotten about us. And he was coming to Mary and to me in a very special way. So I brought Mary home as my wife. The celebration was a little more subdued than most. But that was ok. It gave me some more time to think and pray.

Sometime after our wedding, a Roman official showed up in Nazareth telling us about a new census. We had heard rumors about this census. I guess they were true. According to our Jewish custom, we were to return to our ancestral home. Since I am a descendant of King David, that meant that I had to return to Bethlehem. So I had another decision to make. Should I go by myself or take Mary with me? The trip would be hard on her, but staying in Nazareth may have been harder. So I went back to the Synagogue to pray. This time I remembered the words of the Prophet Micah who wrote that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. (Micah 5:2)

Since this looked like how God was going to keep His promise, we set out for Bethlehem. An 80 mile journey on foot with an expectant mother trying to ride on a donkey was a slow journey at best. We hoped to stay with some of my relatives in Bethlehem. Like most people who could afford one in our time, they had a guest room that was sometimes called “an inn.” But when we got there, the room was already taken. Bethlehem was overcrowded with people who had come in for the census. Mary could tell that it was time for the baby to be born. So the women welcomed Mary into the house and helped her with the delivery of the baby. Then we move out to the warmth and quiet of the stable, so Mary and the baby Jesus could rest. Since I’m a carpenter, I thought I would have made his first bed for him. But that didn’t happen. Mary bundled him up and I placed him in a manger so that they both could get some sleep.

Later that night some shepherds showed up at the stable. They said an angel had told them about Mary’s son. Then a whole choir of angels began singing and praising God. Then I knew for sure that Jesus was no ordinary baby. God had kept His promise. My wife, the virgin Mary, had given birth to God’s Son. God was with us. God had sent His Son into our world to save us. We celebrated with the shepherds. They tried to celebrate in the streets of Bethlehem, but I’m not sure if anyone paid any attention to them. Most of the people in Bethlehem were used to the wild stories that shepherds were known to tell.

Not long after that I found a place for my new family to stay. Even though I didn’t build it, Mary made that small house our first home. When Jesus was 40 days old, we went to Jerusalem to fulfill the requirements of the Jewish law. We had to offer a sacrifice for Mary and a sacrifice to “redeem” our first born son. How ironic to offer a sacrifice to God for His Son. While we were in the temple, an old man by the name of Simeon came up to us. He knew that Jesus was the Promised Messiah and said, ***“I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people.”*** (Luke 2:30-31 NLT). Then it hit me. God not only loves the Children of Israel. He loves all people. God sent His Son into the world to save all people.

Mary and I returned to our home and Bethlehem. I found enough work to support our family while Mary took care of the baby. Sometime after the baby Jesus became a toddler, we got another unexpected visit. This time the visitors were very wise men from a distant land. They had followed a star that appeared in the Eastern sky that led them to our house. They bowed down before Jesus and gave him gifts fit for a king: gold, frankincense and myrrh. After they left, I had a dream. God told me to get up in the middle of the night. Herod the Great was going to send his soldiers to kill Jesus. So we got up right away and began the journey to Egypt. I knew that God was for us, on our side, protecting us and Jesus. He warned us to keep us safe. He gave us the gifts to support us along the way and when we first arrived in Egypt. And he provided us with a large Jewish community where we could hide.

We went to the Synagogue on the Sabbath even in Egypt. There we heard the words of God's prophets telling us what Jesus would do. Jeremiah wrote that He would establish a new covenant between God and people. This covenant would not be based on trying to keep the law, but on God's forgiveness. Isaiah wrote that God would forgive people because the Messiah would pay the price for sin.

The baby that I almost didn't allow into my life, changed my life completely. Jesus made the words that I heard every Sabbath in the Synagogue become a reality for me. I know for sure that God loves us, that God is with us and that God is for us. I hope and pray that you know and believe that too. But isn't that why you are here, to celebrate the gift of Jesus. Thanks for listening to me. Good night!