

Study Guide
Series: Christmas Through Joseph's Eyes
"A Carpenter Named Joseph"

Monday - Genesis 35:16-20, 48:7. The "little town of Bethlehem," where Jesus was born, was a fairly small city about six miles from Jerusalem. The place had roots that ran deep in Israel's history. The Bible story first mentioned Bethlehem when Jacob's favorite wife Rachel died in childbirth. His grief at losing her was so great he mentioned it again as he neared the end of his own life. Jacob buried Rachel near Bethlehem, and put up a monument to her that lasted for several hundred years. Jacob seemed to have loved Rachel from the moment he first met her. We can imagine the sadness and loss he felt as, traveling along a desolate road, it became clear that giving birth to her second son Benjamin was going to cost Rachel her life. How has grief touched your life? In what ways, tangible or intangible, do you seek to preserve your memories of loved ones you have lost? Rachel lost her life giving birth to Benjamin, and Jacob lost the woman he loved the most. Centuries later, the infant Jesus (who would heal the world's brokenness, and open the doors of eternal life) traveled to his birth, probably over that same road. In what ways have you seen God bring hope and life even out of painful, heartbreaking circumstances?

Tuesday - Ruth 1:1, 16-19, 22; 4:11-17. The story of Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth centered in Bethlehem. Today's reading just samples it. It was a story of loyalty, devotion and commitment, with far-reaching effects. Ruth became the great-grandmother of the great King David. The story of Ruth told how God used Boaz, a prosperous farmer, to help Ruth, a Moabite immigrant, and her mother-in-law Naomi, by letting her glean in his fields (cf. Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22). From his generosity came their marriage. From that came a line that led to King David, and, centuries later, to Jesus. When have you seen an outwardly small act of sharing (in resources, time, or talent) launch positive results that went far beyond what the giver might have expected? What Boaz did was a reflection of the covenant-love of Yahweh for His people. In what ways have you learned to appreciate God's steadfast love for you? How has God's love shaped the ways you act towards other people?

Wednesday - Judges 6:11-16, Amos 1:1-2, 7:14-15. Gideon, the farmer, or the shepherd, Amos, are only two examples of many we find in Scripture showing that, long before Jesus' earthly father Joseph, God often called hard, conscientious but ordinary workers. The point is that God seeks people with receptive hearts, whatever their earthly status. Gideon's story was striking. God's messenger greeted him as "mighty warrior." Gideon, not feeling like a mighty warrior, asked, "How can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I'm the youngest in my household." And "The LORD replied, "Because I'm with you, you'll defeat the Midianites." When have you seen God's power accomplish something through you or someone you know that you couldn't have done on your own? Like many prophets, Amos attracted some serious opposition. But he saw his message not as a cause he had invented, but as a deadly serious God-given commission, whatever the cost. So he kept preaching, even when those in authority ordered him not to. When have you had to stick with a purpose you believed was right, even if you faced opposition or ridicule?

Thursday - Matthew 1:16, 18-19. While Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth through the eyes of Mary, Matthew tells the story from the standpoint of Joseph, who was engaged to Mary when the

story began. Although Mary lived in the tiny village of Nazareth, Bethlehem was Joseph's home town. That suggests that their families arranged the marriage, as was common in their time and place. It would be nice if we could read an eloquent speech Joseph made about being Jesus' earthly father. But, unlike Mary, Joseph doesn't speak, a single word in the Gospels. He is the patron saint of those who serve and do the right thing without seeking any credit. How easy or hard do you find it to be content when the spotlight falls on someone else more than on you? Jesus taught his disciples, "Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness to be seen by others, instead, do your acts of righteousness in secret, so your Father will see and will reward you." Try this spiritual exercise: do something good, in a way that no other human being will know about. Give yourself a chance to serve without any hope of recognition—except from God.

Friday - Matthew 13:53-57, Mark 6:1-6. In keeping with Joseph's relative obscurity, the gospel writers never specifically said what he did for a living. They never directly called him a carpenter. However, when Jesus went to Nazareth, in Matthew, they called him "the carpenter's son." According to Mark, they identified Jesus himself as a carpenter, so it seems logical that he would have learned his father's trade. The Greek word for 'carpenter' may refer to one who builds with wood or stone, but wood is somewhat rare in Palestine, and so houses were mostly constructed with stone. Joseph and Jesus may have been stone masons, or they may have been "subcontractors," making wood items like doors. People's response suggests they did not see such workers as wise or impressive. Are you open to learning from anyone who has valuable insight to offer, or do you discount those who don't have the "right" outward credentials? The texts mention Jesus' mother and siblings, but not his father. Most scholars believe Joseph died sometime before Jesus' public ministry began. So, Joseph apparently had a 12 to 30-year window to help protect and shape Jesus growth. What opportunities do you have to serve, bless or shape people and events? Are you ever tempted to think those opportunities will last forever?