

The First Christmas Letter

Joseph, son of Jacob, of the tribe of Judah, and the house and line of David; Mary, my beloved wife; and our son, Jesus, so recently born to us in Bethlehem of Judea. To our beloved family and friends who are in Nazareth of Galilee.

May our almighty and gracious Lord, the God of Israel, send forth his blessings upon you all, even as he has so richly – and so *unexpectedly* – blessed us. We do not exaggerate when we say that it is our most ardent desire to return to you and resume the fellowship we have long treasured. It is our hope that the Lord will provide a way soon. But until then, know that you are constantly in our prayers as we remember your loyal friendship and unflinching kindness.

We were aware, of course, that there were a number of rumors and scandalous stories circulating about us even before we left Nazareth. We can only suppose that these have grown more elaborate and filled with conjecture since that time. That's why we thought it best to write now, so that you at least, our relatives and close friends, might know the truth of the remarkable things that have happened to us. They are strange and wonderful things that are the Lord's doing. It would be wrong for us to keep them to ourselves.

But where shall we even to begin to tell of the things we have seen and heard? Though it seems much longer ago to me now, it was only one year ago that Mary and I were betrothed to be married, as you yourselves know since many of you stood as witnesses for us. How happy we were then, as we looked forward to starting our lives together. I know that we both would have been quite content to lead quiet lives raising our family with you as our neighbors. That was our dream. Little did we know then that the Lord had other designs for us.

My simple plans began to unravel just two months later when Mary surprised me with her sudden decision to travel to Judea. She said that was necessary for her to be with her cousin, Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah the priest. I wasn't happy with it, not wishing to be parted from her; but she insisted that she must go. When I asked why, she said that Elizabeth would need help because she was expecting a child. This I knew to be highly unlikely. We had received no such news from Judea, and everyone knew that Elizabeth and Zechariah had been married more than thirty years, and never in that time had there been even the hint that Elizabeth might be with child. I told Mary she was being silly. I refused to give her permission to go. Ah, but my Mary can be rather headstrong, as you know. She said, "Joseph, my love, we are not married yet. And when we are, I will happily submit to your authority. But if I am to become your wife, you must learn to trust me – trust me with things far more difficult to accept than this. I cannot tell you now how I know that Elizabeth needs me; only that she does and that I must go to her."

So, Mary went, and I sulked; but in less than four weeks I held a letter from Zechariah himself thanking me for sending her and telling me how fortunate I was to be marrying such a godly, beautiful, and industrious young woman. He also wrote that he was expecting the birth of his son in about two months. I was stunned. How could Mary have known? And how could this old priest be so sure that this child would be a son? Was it just a father's pride? Somehow, he sounded more certain than that.

Mary returned after another ten weeks. We were thrilled to see each other again. We'd missed each other terribly. She had stayed a little more than a week after the child was born in

order to help them settle into their new routine. Everything changes when there's a baby in the house. Yes, it's a boy. They named him John, which means the Lord is gracious. I thought it an unusual choice since no one else is named John in that whole clan. Mary just smiled and said there was no other name they could have chosen. When she saw my puzzled expression, she said, "That's the name the angel gave to Zechariah." "What angel?" I asked. "What are you talking about?"

Mary then proceeded to tell me the most fantastic story I had ever heard, about how an angel appeared to Zechariah as he was praying in the Temple. The angel told him that he and Elizabeth would soon have a son, whom they were to call John. He is to be the one whom the prophets have foretold will go before the Messiah to prepare his way. "And you believed that story?" I asked her incredulously. "Mary, they're old. They're brains are addled. They're overcome with joy on account of their baby. You can't take what they say seriously.

"Of course, I believe", she said, "Because the same angel appeared to me. That's how I knew to go to them." I was taken back. "You? *You* saw an angel? And he *spoke* to you?" I feared she was losing her mind. I tried reasoning with her; tried to show her that such things are simply not possible." "You don't believe in the Lord's angels?" she accused. "Well, yes, sure I do", I said, "but they don't talk to people like ...". "Like *me*?" she asked. I couldn't respond. "Then how do you explain it, Joseph? How could I have known that Elizabeth was expecting? How did I know to go to her?" She had me. I couldn't explain it. I grudgingly agreed that as far-fetched as it seemed it was at least a plausible explanation.

"Good", she said, "Because there's more. And Joseph, as I told you before, you must trust me – now more than ever. The angel said that I too am to have a son." At this I smiled. "Yes, my dear; I hope the Lord gives us many sons." "No, Joseph", she said. "I am with child *now*. I'm already three months along. It will soon become evident to everyone. The angel said ...". I cut her off. I was even more certain that she was losing her mind. "Mary, you can't be pregnant. It's not possible. You've never been with a man, have you? No, of course not. And you are betrothed to me. So, look, I want you to forget all this talk of angels and babies. You're just worked up about our upcoming wedding. You're excited for Elizabeth. That's it. It's got you all out of sorts. You need to calm down." I saw her to her parent's home. She tried to say more; but I wouldn't listen to her. I thought she only needed a good long rest.

I confess that then for the next several weeks I avoided her. I threw myself into my work during the days, and evenings I spent on what I still hoped would be our happy home. It was late one such evening that Mary's father stopped by. He was obviously uncomfortable. "Joseph, you must come with me", he said. "Mary needs to speak with you." So, I went. And as I did, I prayed that the woman I loved had returned to her senses and forgotten all the foolishness she had spoken of.

Her father showed me into a room where Mary was seated on a chair. She looked as if she'd been crying. He left us alone and closed the door—which hardly seemed appropriate. Up until this point, someone in the family had always been with us. We'd never been together privately. It was awkward. I tried to be cheerful, not knowing exactly what to expect. "Mary", I said, "you look radiant. I'm sorry I've not stopped by of late; but I've been very busy getting our home ready. Seeing you now, though, tells me that it was a mistake to deprive myself of your beauty." She said nothing at first. She seemed to be struggling to compose herself. Then, suddenly, she stood, spread her arms to reveal her swollen belly, and said, "Joseph, do you still think I'm beautiful?"

What can I say? Never before had I felt such pain tearing through my heart. I felt cheated and betrayed. I was in fury and agony at the same time. Mary kept talking about how she'd tried to explain ... more talk of angels and babies and the Lord's promised Messiah; but I couldn't hear any of it. How could she do this to me? —to us? It was so heartless. And how could she concoct such a far-fetched story to cover her infidelity? Did she really expect me to believe such nonsense? It was insult upon the injury. I stormed out of there, just about knocking her father over when he tried to stop me. "It's off!" I shouted at him. "Forget it. I don't know what game you two are up to, but I won't be a played for a fool by you or your faithless daughter."

It was hours later that I calmed down enough to think clearly. I thought of all the possible scenarios. It was most tempting to denounce Mary publicly, in which case she'd be shunned – treated exactly as if she were dead. I thought she deserved some of the pain and humiliation she'd given me. But the more I pondered it, I knew I couldn't do that. The reason she'd wounded me so deeply was because I had truly loved her. I suppose that to some degree I still did. I resolved to divorce her privately. She'd have to leave town in disgrace, of course; but perhaps someone like Zechariah would take her in. She'd get by all right. And one day, I hoped, my own heart would heal.

It must have been close to daybreak when I finally fell into a restless sleep. Some time later, I can't say how long, I found myself in a strange, trance-like state. I wasn't sure if I was awake or asleep; but I could see and hear everything clearly. All at once my room was filled with blinding, bright light. I saw an angel of the Lord standing at the foot of my bed. I was unable to move or even to speak; I was so frozen with fright. He lifted a hand in a peaceful gesture and said to me, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. She has not been unfaithful to you. The child that is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, the Lord saves, for he will save his people from their sins. And so, will be fulfilled the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son. And they will call him *Immanuel*, which is *God with us*.'"

Then, just as suddenly, he vanished. I was in my bed and now fully awake. It was long past sunrise. I sat up wondering if what I'd seen were real or only a dream. I couldn't be sure; but I knew how to find out. I rushed over to Mary's home and insisted upon seeing her immediately. I waited in the room where we'd met the night before until she came in. She eyed me guardedly and asked, "What, Joseph?" I said, "Mary, he came to me too – the angel." With an ironic little smile, she said, "Oh, Joseph, don't be silly, angels don't talk to people like ...". "That's enough", I interrupted, "Mary, what name? What name did the angel tell you to call your son?" She said, "I was told to call him Jesus, for ...". I finished her sentence, "for he will save his people from their sin." I took her into my arms, "Mary, I'm so sorry. Can you forgive me for doubting you?" "Of course, I forgive you, Joseph. I have trouble believing it myself – but then I'm reminded of this miracle every day", she said gently patting her extended abdomen. Then we talked—or rather, she talked and this time I listened – really listened while she told me of the wonderful things the angel told about the child—*our* child that she was bearing.

As you know, we moved up our wedding feast several months. And yes, we saw the disapproving looks and heard the whispered exchanges, vicious laughter at our expense muffled by hands that quite purposely only half did the job. They were saying that I was either a fornicator or a fool, and that Mary was ... well, there's no reason for me to write such slander. The Lord has charged us both with an immense responsibility. If part of that is having to endure the insults of the ignorant, so be it.

We put ourselves fully into the task of preparing our home so that it would be a suitable place for the birth of our special child – or at least as suitable as we could make it with our limited means. Once again, however, the Lord had other plans. The last thing we expected was the imperial census that forced us to come here to Bethlehem. It was a hard journey for Mary, she being so far along; but the Lord was with us all the way. There was a moment of panic for me when we arrived. Mary had begun her labor, and the small town being so full of travelers needing to register, I could find no place for us to stay. It was very late, the inn was full, and every home was filled with visitors. Knowing that the yards where the sheep were kept would be empty this time of year because the shepherds would have their flocks in the fields, I found a small shelter for livestock that was unoccupied. I apologized to Mary for not being able to do better; but she said somehow it seemed fitting that he who would sit on David's throne should start as David did – among the sheep. So that's where it happened: in a stable on the hay, our son – the child of promise – was born.

A few hours later a most remarkable thing happened. We heard a commotion in the dark. It was a group of very rough looking characters approaching with lanterns and torches. I thought maybe they were brigands and robbers – or perhaps the city guard called out by the owner of the stable to accuse us of trespassing and drive us off. They turned out to be shepherds. They were asking excitedly, "Is he here? Are you the ones?" "What do you want with us?" I asked, trying to as best I could to shield Mary and our son. "Who is it you're looking for?" They said, "We've come to see the Savior – the One who is called Christ the Lord." I was amazed. "Who told you to look for him here?" I asked. "Oh, wait: don't tell me: you saw an angel, didn't you?" "No" their leader replied, "Not just one angel. Well, there was only one at first; but then the whole sky was filled with them. Thousands upon thousands of the heavenly hosts in brightest glory, singing praise to the Lord God most high. Never have we seen such a glorious sight – that is, until *this* moment. Is *that* the child the angels spoke of, the One for whom all Israel waits?" They had come to pay homage to our son, Jesus.

And they have been a great help to us ever since. They found us a more permanent place to stay. They've brought us food and furniture. They have even found a place where I can work in my trade and so support our little family. When I asked them why they were being so helpful, they replied, "This child has been given to you; but he has come to deliver us all." So, for the time being at least, we will be remaining here. We cannot be sure where the Lord will lead us; but we've learned not to make long term plans. We want to be ready to do whatever the Lord shall direct.

In the meantime, we are concentrating on performing well the task the Lord has given us. Mary is a good and thoughtful mother, and I hope to serve adequately as a father. I must admit that it's more than a little intimidating to know that this child so small and helpless is also my Lord. I often find myself just gazing at him in his crib or in his mother's arms, wondering what he's thinking – wondering *if* he's thinking; and wondering too if I will be equal to the task before me. Mary, who spends much time thinking about all these things that have happened, assures me that everything will be all right. For my own part, I find myself praying much more than I used to.

As I stated before, we hope to return to you soon; but if we are delayed, expect to receive another letter from us about this same time next year, and every year thereafter until our return to Nazareth. We want to keep you informed about this child who has given us so much joy because, as the shepherds say, he's come to save and to bring joy to us all. The Lord bless and keep you. And may he be with you even as he is with us in Jesus his Son.

Soli Deo Gloria!