

Followers of the Way

The Journey to Bethlehem

Alice Jones, 07-12-25

Luke 2:1-7; Ruth 1:16-22; 1 Samuel 16:1-5, 10-13

Have you ever had to make a journey that you didn't really want to make, at a time that was incredibly inconvenient? Maybe it was to help a friend or a family member in difficulties, or in response to an urgent demand from your employer. Did you feel overwhelmed, weary, perhaps irritated? Did you call out to God to help you through it?

I think we can assume that Mary and Joseph felt like this when they first realised that they were going to have to make the journey to Bethlehem. Yet, with hindsight, we know that this journey was far from being just a random inconvenience. It was part of God's plan for how His Son would come into the world, and it was rich with meaning. Today we'll look in depth at this journey that Mary and Joseph made, what it meant for them and what it means for us, and we'll also consider two other significant journeys to Bethlehem, made in Old Testament times by Ruth and by Samuel.

To come back to Mary and Joseph... When they found out about the census that had been called by the Roman authorities and the requirement for them to travel to Bethlehem, they had only been married for a matter of months. Mary had spent the first three months of her pregnancy staying with her relative Elizabeth, whose own pregnancy was in its later stages – a valuable learning experience that God had arranged for Mary, and a time of mutual encouragement for both women. It must have been after Mary returned to Nazareth that Joseph, to whom she was engaged to be married, made the shattering discovery that Mary was pregnant. We are not told in Matthew chapter 1 how long Joseph agonised about this situation, resolving to quietly end the engagement, before an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and uttered the words that changed everything:

"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

(Matthew 1:20-21)

The implication of verse 24 is that Joseph obeyed the angel of the Lord immediately: *'When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.'* Mary must have experienced this decision on the part of Joseph as a remarkable demonstration of God's mercy towards her. From the moment that Gabriel had appeared to her and told her that, even though she was a virgin, she would conceive by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Son of God, Mary must have realised that

many people would not believe this and would instead accuse her of promiscuity. This could have put her life at risk. Deuteronomy chapter 22 verses 20-21 say this about any young woman who was found to have been promiscuous before marriage: *'she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done an outrageous thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge the evil from among you.'*

Mary had courageously and selflessly accepted what Gabriel told her, answering *"I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."* But as she processed this seismic experience afterwards, she must have wondered what hardship and social ostracism lay ahead of her as an unmarried mother. Joseph's courageous and selfless decision to trust the angel and marry Mary removed this problem instantly – a tiny foreshadowing of how Mary's unborn son would one day save every person who believes in him, through the supremely courageous and selfless action of giving his own life as a sacrifice for their sins.

Mary and Joseph trusted the message that each had received from God, and they must each have been amazed to have been chosen by Him for this unique task, which was both a huge honour and an immense responsibility. They knew that God had great plans for this child. Mary had been told that he would reign over Jacob's descendants forever, and Joseph had been told that he would save his people from their sins. All this implied that he would survive to adulthood, which must have been a great encouragement to Mary and Joseph when the news of the census arrived in Nazareth and they realised that they had no choice but to travel to Bethlehem, a journey of about 90 miles, late in Mary's pregnancy.

After their initial shock at having to make this risky journey, Mary and Joseph may have remembered the prophecy in Micah 5:2 that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem:

*"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times."*

Knowing that God had planned for them to make this journey would have been immensely reassuring, but no doubt it was still demanding and difficult. For ordinary people there were two options: to walk or to ride on a donkey. The familiar Christmas card scenario of Mary riding on a donkey with Joseph walking beside her seems most likely. Earlier this year, along with some family members, I visited a donkey sanctuary and saw more donkeys in one day than I'd ever seen before. I noticed two things about donkeys: firstly, they really do have a cross on their back; and secondly, their back looks incredibly uncomfortable to sit on. Unlike a horse which has a wide flat back, a donkey's back is narrow, with a prominent spine and a rough bristly coat. This journey must have been an ordeal for Mary in late pregnancy.

Unless Mary and Joseph were able to join a group of other travellers, they would have been vulnerable to attack, by wild animals such as wolves, or by bandits. In Jesus' parable

of the Good Samaritan, the man who was beaten and left half dead by robbers was on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, which went through a desert region only about ten miles to the east of the route that Mary and Joseph took. At this time, with a large proportion of the population travelling to their ancestral towns, there would have been a shortage of places to stay all along the route, which would have taken at least four days to travel, but probably most of a week. Throughout that journey, Mary and Joseph must have feared that they might have to spend the night in the open.

I believe God does sometimes confront us with our fears in order to help us overcome them. Sometimes this is in major ways like a health scare or unemployment, but sometimes it is in very small ways. The summer before last I was delivering evangelistic tracts through people's doors close to where I live, and there was one couple whose home I wasn't looking forward to delivering to. I'd had a few conversations with them over the years and had often felt uncomfortable, conscious of many differences of opinion between us and sensing that they weren't keen on me. Their house wasn't very accessible either, with a long winding path through their front garden and a steep flight of steps up to the front door. However, I felt convinced that God required me to deliver them a tract, and I thought that by doing this between noon and one o'clock, the chances of me encountering them would be small. But at the exact moment that I was standing at the top of their steps and reaching towards their letterbox, with a strange sense of inevitability, I saw the door slowly swing open, revealing the man looking surprised to see me on his doorstep. There was nothing for it but to cheerfully hand him the tract, saying that as a Christian I wanted to share the hope that Jesus offers us. He accepted the tract and we parted amiably. I am sure that God arranged this experience to show me that I had been worrying unnecessarily, and, in the process, He also showed me that He most definitely has a sense of humour!

The journey to Bethlehem not only confronted Mary and Joseph with things that they feared, but it also took them away from the support networks that they would have relied on if they had stayed in Nazareth – the friends, family members and local midwives who would have helped Mary with the birth of her baby, and the carpentry business that would have helped Joseph to provide for his young family. I believe that God's purpose in this was to draw them closer to Himself, so that they would understand that they could rely on Him to provide everything they needed. In the same way, God had brought the Israelites out of Egypt into the desert and fed them on bread from heaven and water from the rock; He had caused ravens to bring Elijah food when he was hiding in the Kerith Ravine east of the Jordan; and He had sustained the young David while he lived as a fugitive from Saul. Jesus himself, during his ministry, had no place to lay his head as he walked through the land proclaiming the kingdom of God. But God provided for Jesus and his disciples through the financial support of several women and also through miracles, both large (such as the feeding of the five thousand), and small (such as the coin found in the mouth of the fish that paid the taxes for both Jesus and Peter, in Matthew 17:27). Shortly after Jesus' resurrection, as he prepared his disciples for their forthcoming change in employment from part-time fishermen to full-time fishers of men, Jesus provided for them with the miraculous catch of fish described in John chapter 21.

As Mary and Joseph trekked along the road to Bethlehem, they couldn't have known that at that very moment a group of learned men from a foreign land to the east were making their way to Bethlehem too, guided by an unusual moving star. Still less could they have known that the gold, frankincense and myrrh which these magi would present to the infant Jesus when they arrived would be God's provision for the whole family when they had to flee into Egypt. Only later, with hindsight, would Mary and Joseph realise that God had everything planned, down to the minutest detail.

At the very end of their journey, a short distance from Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph would have passed Rachel's tomb beside the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. For Mary, exhausted at the end of her journey and about to give birth to her first child without the assistance that she would have relied on in Nazareth, the description of Rachel's death in childbirth in Genesis chapter 35 verses 16-20 must have had a troubling resonance:

Then they moved on from Bethel. While they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty. And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth, the midwife said to her, "Don't despair, for you have another son." As she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named her son Ben-Oni. But his father named him Benjamin.

So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb.

When Mary and Joseph finally reached Bethlehem, with Jesus's birth imminent, and found no place in the whole town where they could stay, they must have cried out to God, knowing that He was the only one who could help them in this dire situation. The Bible doesn't tell us who offered them a stable to stay in, or whether anyone other than Joseph helped to deliver the baby Jesus. But what we do know from Luke chapter 2 verses 22-24 is that, 41 days later, despite the rigours of their journey and the hazards of giving birth in a stable, Mary and her son were well enough to travel the six miles to the Temple in Jerusalem: *'When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord'*. Their relief and gratitude must have overflowed in joyful worship. They had personally experienced what David expressed in Psalm 23: *'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me... Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.'*

This is the kind of worship that pleases God. This is why He repeatedly told the Israelites to remember how He had rescued them from Egypt. We may not all have been rescued from a dire physical situation by God's intervention, but we have all been rescued from spiritual death by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Jesus himself said to his disciples at the Last Supper: *"Do this in remembrance of me."* We're very prone as human beings to take things for granted. In the time of Isaiah, the Israelites displeased God by honouring Him with their lips, while their hearts were far from Him. Their worship of Him was based on merely human rules they had been taught (Isaiah 29:13). To avoid falling into this error ourselves, we need to continually remind ourselves of what God has done for us personally, so that we really do worship Him in spirit and in truth.

On their journey to Bethlehem and during the time they spent there subsequently, Mary and Joseph must sometimes have thought about their ancestor David, whose home town this was, and they may also have remembered the story of Ruth the Moabitess, David's great-grandmother. The book of Ruth, probably written by Samuel, serves as a real-life illustration of how, as Paul would write centuries later, *'in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose'* (Romans 8:28). In the midst of the pain of this fallen world – famine, displacement, bereavement, poverty – we see in the book of Ruth how three people who loved God took His commands seriously and chose to show His love to those around them.

Naomi was so kind to her two foreign daughters-in-law that one of them, Ruth, came to know and trust Naomi's God as well as Naomi herself. Ruth's courageous decision to leave everything she had known in Moab and journey to Bethlehem with Naomi prefigured Zechariah's prophecy made centuries later, concerning the good news of Jesus being made known to the Gentiles: *'This is what the LORD Almighty says: "In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, "Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you."'"* (Zechariah 8:23). Likewise, Ruth's selfless love for Naomi exemplified the new commandment that Jesus would give to his disciples at the Last Supper: *"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

Boaz, a prosperous citizen of Bethlehem, was careful to live according to God's law, which in Deuteronomy 10:18 says of God, *'He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.'* As a result, Boaz gladly gave Ruth extra help when she gleaned in his fields, and later performed the duty of the kinsman redeemer by marrying her, in so doing foreshadowing Jesus's redemption of the whole human race. The story ends with Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz richly blessed and united as ancestors of David, the man after God's own heart, and ultimately of God's own Son Jesus, the Saviour of the world. As Proverbs 21:21 says, *'Whoever pursues righteousness and unfailing love will find life, righteousness, and honour.'*

Finally, let's turn to Samuel, whose significant journey to Bethlehem was made perhaps eighty years after Ruth's, by which time Jesse, the grandson of Ruth and Boaz, was a prominent man of the town with eight sons. Samuel made this journey to Bethlehem when he was old. He had served God since childhood. As Israel's judge he had worked diligently for many years putting God's law into practice, travelling between his home and the three locations that formed his judicial circuit. God had used Samuel to lead Israel to repentance for their idolatry, and in response to Samuel's prayers God had enabled Israel to defeat the Philistines so comprehensively that, as we read in 1 Samuel chapter 7 verse 13, *'the Philistines were subdued and they stopped invading Israel's territory. Throughout Samuel's lifetime, the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines.'*

But recently Samuel had suffered a series of disappointments. He had discovered that his two sons, who he had trained to succeed him as judges, were dishonest and had been taking bribes. Then the people of Israel, partly because they didn't want to be ruled by Samuel's dishonest sons, started to demand a king. Samuel knew this wasn't what God

wanted for Israel, though God generously accommodated the people's request and chose Saul for this purpose, bringing him to Samuel to be anointed king. But after a promising start, Saul started to disobey God's instructions, and he soon became what we might today call a narcissist. At Samuel's latest interaction with Saul described in 1 Samuel 15, the king had lied repeatedly when confronted about his disobedience to God, seemed to be concerned only about what other people thought of him, and was so emotionally volatile that he had grabbed Samuel's clothing and torn the fabric. We are told in 1 Samuel 15: 35 that Samuel stopped visiting Saul and mourned for him after this encounter. Samuel must also have feared for the future of Israel.

At this point, the call of God came to Samuel, and it was a challenging one – to travel to Bethlehem and anoint a new king to replace Saul. As with Mary and Joseph about a thousand years later, undertaking this journey put Samuel in personal danger. He feared that Saul would kill him if he found out. But like Mary and Joseph, Samuel courageously and selflessly obeyed God's call. God kept him safe throughout and led him to David, the youngest of Jesse's sons, and Samuel had the special privilege of anointing David king. This was Samuel's last recorded action before his death. Unless God revealed it to him, Samuel couldn't have known how significant David and his reign would be in God's purposes. But I believe God blessed Samuel with this experience to give him hope at the very end of his life, just as God brought Anna and Simeon to the Temple on the day that Mary and Joseph presented Jesus there. In His great love, God wanted them to have the experience of seeing His Son before they left this world.

Reflecting on Mary and Joseph and Ruth and Samuel – four people who at different times made the journey to Bethlehem and were given such important parts in God's story – I realised that the common thread linking them together was something very simple, but nevertheless something that we find hard to do. When the call from God came, each of them recognised it and obeyed it courageously and selflessly. Mary and Ruth were young when this happened. We don't know whether Joseph was a similar age to Mary, or whether he was middle-aged. Samuel was close to the end of his life.

God wants to give us all a place in the story He is creating, and whatever He has called us to do for Him in the past, each day brings the possibility of a new call from Him. We need to be alert to what God may be asking us to do and, when we recognise His call, to obey Him courageously and selflessly.