

Monday, December 11. Read 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 practically from the moment he first met her (cf. Genesis 29:5-12, 17-18). 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 for Jacob and Rachel) 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, December 12. Read Ruth 1:1, 16-19, 22; 4:11-17. The story of Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth centered in Bethlehem. 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? Pastor David Jackman wrote that what Boaz did was “a reflection of the covenant-love (hesed) of Yahweh for His people, and at the same time a very practical illustration of how the quality could be worked out in interpersonal human relationships.” 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, December 13. Read 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, December 14. Read Matthew 1:16, 18-19. The gospel of Matthew did not duplicate the gospel of Luke, but rather complemented it. While Luke told the story of Jesus' birth through the eyes of Mary, Matthew told 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, it seems from the slender evidence the gospels give us that Bethlehem was Joseph's home town (cf. Luke 2:1-4). If so, that suggests that their families arranged the marriage, as was common in their time and place. We don't see or hear from Joseph in the Gospels. He appears to be a man who does 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? Give this a try this week: 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, December 15. Read 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, both Matthew and Mark recorded that when Jesus went to Nazareth, many of the people rejected him. In Matthew's version, they called him "the carpenter's son." According to Mark, they identified Jesus himself as a carpenter—it seems logical that he would have learned his father's trade. A United Bible Societies handbook for Bible translators noted, "The noun 'carpenter' may refer to one who builds with wood or stone. Wood is somewhat rare in Palestine, and houses are most frequently constructed with stone." Joseph and Jesus may have been stone masons, or may have been "subcontractors," making wood items like doors for stone houses. 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. (Again, the gospels simply do not mention that.) 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?