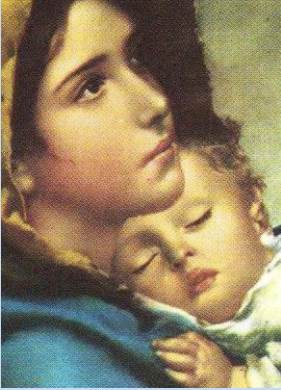


Out of Egypt



The boy was growing fast. Almost able to support himself now, he sat on a rug surrounded by a sea of wood-shavings. Mary had left him with Joseph while she made the long walk to the market. From the remote dwelling which was their temporary home she barely had time to complete the return journey before nightfall. Joseph was more than willing to have the baby with him at home. Home! Who knew for how long it would be their home! Perhaps long enough for the child to use this lean-to shelter at the side of the house as his own workshop. Joseph was not so much pessimistic as fearful of what returning to Galilee could entail.

The baby pulled at a curled wood-shaving and watched it recoil. He gurgled happily. Joseph watched him while at the same time turning a winnowing fork in hands to test its balance. He smiled, amused by Jesus' play. There was more laughter in their little family now *God is with us. It will all be well.* Mary assured him with the words a hundred times each day. She was right, of course. They had found shelter and were safe. Joseph often gave thanks to God for the way it had worked out so well for them. Fear of discovery and painful memories dulled a little as days passed into months. Sleepless nights grew less regular as did the times when Mary held her child close and wept for those other Bethlehem children.

Why? Joseph cried, *Why?* A man of faith, he still felt he could not match Mary's faith in God.

I don't know, she would reply. *There is pain in my heart, bursting for justice. But I trust that if all that had to happen to let God's plan go forward, then there WILL be justice and all the pain will somehow be used to bless many others.* Joseph held Mary and the child close - as close as his thoughts.

Stories of the infant bloodbath in Bethlehem had reached them via travellers on the road - so many innocent little children! It had been typical of the king. Angry at betrayal and fearful of intrigue, only blood could assuage his wrath. They said crucifixions satisfied his cruel nature. Joseph dreaded the call to make a cross. Carpenters were often pressed into that service. He had talked about it with Mary and told how making a cross would somehow involve him in the cruelty.

You would not be able to refuse, she said, her voice low and eyes averted as she combed her flowing black hair. Joseph noticed her tremble and said no more.

Things had indeed worked out well for them. Amazingly well! After their hasty departure from Bethlehem and the long, tiring journey on the King's highway they had journeyed west to reach the fertile farming regions east of the Nile. They had no idea where they would find shelter but they knew there was a community of Jews and other refugees in that area. They had hoped they could join them, but that had not been necessary. Before they reached their destination they passed a farm cart stuck in soft ground, with a broken wheel and listing precariously. Joseph could see there was no way the cart would move. He had some tools in their baggage and offered the farmer his assistance. With the help of the farmer's men who were able to raise the cart, Joseph removed the wheel and repaired it well enough for them to proceed with caution.

I can repair it properly if you like, he had offered *That's my trade*. The farmer had been only too pleased to accept the offer and as payment gave them shelter for the night. The farmstead was fairly rundown and so one repair job led to another until Joseph was offered a derelict house nearby against which he erected a lean-to for a workshop. In return Joseph worked for the man for a small wage and as his reputation had spread, business had flourished. Now there was work to fill every hour and an income sufficient for their needs. Mary had tidied and cleaned the dwelling enough to make it a home, but she sternly resisted Joseph's desire to renovate the property. *We are not here for long*, she insisted. Joseph wondered. He was thinking of another Joseph who had arrived unwillingly in this great land.

He had given a lot of thought to his name-sake since he had arrived in Egypt. It seemed to him that he was re-living that old story. Joseph, son of Jacob had been his boyhood hero ever since his father Jacob - yes his father was Jacob too - had told him the stories of their faith. That Joseph had come down to Egypt and the journey was not by choice for him either. He had been sold as a slave by his jealous brothers. However, he too had fallen on good times and found himself in a position of work and trust. It had not been easy though. He had been imprisoned unjustly for crimes he had not committed but, as Mary reminded him, even that had been part of God's purposes. Joseph in Egypt had risen to fame in the royal court, had saved Israel from famine and set in motion the events which would lead to the Exodus; to the giving of the Mosaic Law; the return to the promised land ... and the Messiah !

Joseph put down the winnowing fork. The baby had rolled over into the shavings, and was trying to pull his legs up under him.

Not long before you start crawling. Joseph spoke softly. Jesus reached out for a curl of wood, fell forward and started to cry. Joseph was with him immediately. He could not help himself being so protective. The child was special. Sometimes, when he held him in his arms he felt a fearful responsibility, imagining again the cries of the Bethlehem mothers. Yet the events in their lives were forming a pattern of God's leading.

Joseph still struggled to understand what had happened to them. There was no doubt in his mind that this child was God's. They would still laugh at that in Nazareth, but he knew. He knew Mary would never betray his trust. It was incredible though - this child! - his wife's child! - the child of God! destined to be the Saviour of Israel!

It seemed to Joseph that being here by the Nile was like the old story coming alive again. He had never dreamed of seeing the land of Egypt or living among fertile fields irrigated from the river Nile. This was where his namesake had brought God's people. From here Moses had led them out again - to the Promised Land. How long before they would be free to go home? Some day Jesus would return - as the Saviour - the Christ! Would he, Joseph, live to see it? He felt fear tighten its grip. These were bigger issues than his mind could get round. Mary's child - the Messiah - Mary seemed to be more able to accept things - the amazing promises - even the angel's warning that she would know sorrow as well as joy, but it was too much for Joseph.

He stood by the door, the sleepy child now in his arms. The day was cooling. The sun, low in the sky, bloodied green fields yellowing to harvest. This land was lush. These were the years of plenty like the other Joseph had known. Fields stretched to the horizon. Beyond them the river where Joseph could just make out the hazed tips of pyramids - gateway to the city. He lay the sleeping child on his rug again. He must finish the winnowing fork. There were many more of them to make before harvest. He eased the tines into their sockets and began the final shaping and smoothing. It did not need much concentration. His mind wandered again.

Joseph of Canaan and Egypt had always been his hero. Far more than sharing his name, he had so much wanted to be like him. He had learned that Joseph was a gracious character, forgiving and kind, and with a strong faith. He became a great leader and administrator but remained a faithful son and brother, friend and encourager. Yes, he had been a difficult and precocious brother, but no-one starts perfect. *We're like a piece of wood, Joseph had often said to Mary. We have to be cut and chiselled and shaped before we can be any real use."*

Joseph was a lot older than Mary but that was of little consequence when it came to sharing thoughts and dreams. Their families had been close friends for as long as he remembered. Mary was just a child when Joseph was first attracted to her. It was more of a spiritual attraction he realised now. There was something - he could not put it into words - something of God's Spirit in them both which drew them together. It had seemed so natural when he asked for Mary to be his wife, just as though it had been ordained. Joseph was happy to acknowledge that Mary understood so much more of the way of God's Spirit. She had told him so many times now, how the angel who visited her had said her child would be conceived by the Holy Spirit. It was beyond the thought patterns of a practical man, but Mary

accepted it. Her whole life was so full of love and goodness, of quiet peace • and patience, - although she could speak out quite vehemently about the injustices of their society and the hypocrisies of religion. She had been strength for both of them - on the journey to Bethlehem - seeking accommodation when they arrived - accepting the stable room - putting up in rented rooms afterwards - and then the awful nights and days running away from Herod's men and the butchery inflicted on innocent people. Over and over again, whatever happened Mary would calmly say - *We are the Lord's servants. We must trust him.*

Joseph, gazing through the open doorway again, spoke to himself. *Come • on. You'll never get this fork finished.* It was just then that it came to him Why hadn't it occurred to him before! The scriptures said that when the Pharaoh in Egypt had decided to make Joseph the Governor of the whole land, he had said, *We will never find a better man than Joseph, a man who has God's spirit in him.* It seemed like a light glowing in his whole being. *I want that too. I want to be a man with God's spirit in me. I have to teach the child and show him God's ways.* The warmth of the inner glow assured him. The spirit of God who was in the first Joseph was in him too.

Joseph i Joseph! Mary's raised voice, startled him Sensing alarm, he moved swiftly across the workspace sweeping the child into his arms. Mary ran towards him, holding her skirts, her face flushed.

What is it?

The king is dead! she panted *The king is dead!* She dropped her basket and threw her arms round Joseph and the baby. *Joseph! We can go home!* Her excitement flushed through him, but a shadow followed as a cloud spoiling the sunshine..

But what about the sons? Joseph had been through the possibilities so often. The king's son Archelaus could be an even greater tyrant than his • father.

It's all right, Mary assured him. *They told me in the market. Archelaus is to rule Judaea. Antipas has Galilee. We can go home - home to Nazareth!*

They stood holding each other close with the child between them. Joseph felt he was in a dream. He had not allowed himself to think of Nazareth during the past months. Now the pictures flashed before him - the busy streets, the whitened houses, the hills, the friends, the peace. He saw Mary and himself and Jesus together in the town. Jesus would grow up in Nazareth. They would take him out of Egypt and he would be like Joshua of old - leading his people into the promises of God. As the little family held each other close, Joseph was overwhelmed with gratitude. God would never fail his promises.