

The King of Kings Pursued by an Earthly King
 Matthew 2:13-23

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So what happened next? If someone asked you to summarize the Christmas story you could probably get most of the major parts. There were angels, announcements, a census, a virgin birth, a manger, shepherds and wise men. Those are the most famous parts of the Christmas story from the Bible. We see them pictured in Advent Calendars, Christmas displays and Christmas cards. But could you answer the question what actually happened to Joseph, Mary and Jesus after the wise men left?

It would be possible for the story to jump ahead about 30 years with no problem. The wise men worship the Christ child. The next thing we know, we've fast forwarded to John the Baptist announcing the coming of the Promised One. But Matthew wrote to a specific people that asked or faced questions about Jesus. One was where did Jesus get the power to perform all these signs? Few disputed that Jesus actually did do the miracles. But how did He do them and by what power. The 1st century rabbis believed that nine tenths of the magic in the world came from Egypt. Apparently Jesus had spent time in Egypt. So did he learn the magic arts from the Egyptian magicians? It was also well known that Jesus came from Nazareth. But the Messiah had to come from Bethlehem. So why didn't Jesus grow up in Bethlehem? Through the next paragraphs in Matthew's gospel, Matthew will answer these questions. But he will do much more. He will use this opportunity to demonstrate the arrival of something the Jews anticipated for centuries.

So as we travel through this passage, I want you to see 3 profound truths about Jesus that Matthew unveils for us. In each of them, we will see how God works on behalf of His people and continues to work this way in our lives today. We will then discover what arrived that the people longed after for centuries. And finally we will consider how we can live today in that which arrived with the coming of Jesus.

Matthew 2:13-23 ESV

13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 14 And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: 18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 20 saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." 21 And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. 23 And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

The passage begins with the departure of the wisemen. Joseph and Mary experienced some great material blessing through the wisemen's visit. Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh would fetch a good price should they need it. But they were about to experience a drastic desperate change in their circumstances. The angel that has directed Joseph arrives again in dream. He instructs Joseph to get up immediately, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. Why? Herod was going to search for the child to destroy him.

We met Herod last Sunday. Remember how he had the wise men in for a secret dinner to determine the exact time the star rose? So Herod has determined the approximate age of the child. He sent the wise men off to find the child and then return to him its location so he could worship the child too. But he wants to kill the child. So Herod calculates the time it takes for the wise men to travel to Bethlehem, find the child and then return to Jerusalem. You could get from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and back and in the same day on foot or on camel. So perhaps Herod allows for them to go to Bethlehem one day and expects their return the next. Or he may have waited one more day at most. But he soon figures out they are not coming back. So at most, 2 days after the wisemen visit Joseph and Mary, Herod will organize a search for the child.

Joseph wakes up from his dream. During the night they flee. There are no street lights – no lit up directional signs to Egypt. It's just darkness and traveling by the stars with a young child. Matthew informs us that they arrive in Egypt and remain there until the death of Herod. Egypt was a natural place of refuge for Israelites in trouble. Herod had no jurisdiction there. Other Israelites fled there when they were in political trouble in the Old Testament.

But if you've know the Old Testament Story and have read Exodus, you know that Egypt had a huge place in Israel's history. Joseph, one of the 12 sons went to Egypt as a slave. He ultimately rose to second in command under Pharaoh. Eventually his father, 11 brothers and their families came to Egypt to escape famine. They settled there and became a numerous people. That's where the Exodus story begins with a new Pharaoh enslaving the people. God raises up a deliverer called Moses who leads them out of Egypt and out from the terrible slavery they suffered.

The prophets at times referred to Israel as God's Son. One example of this happens in Hosea 11:1 which states "When Israel was a child, I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son." God preserved His people through the oppression of the slave drivers. He brought them out of Egypt in the salvation event of the Old Testament. Now Matthew applies this text to Jesus.

2:15. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son." God first called Israel his son out of Egypt. But now He would call Jesus, His only begotten Son out of Egypt. Here we find the first deep truth Matthew declares about Jesus in this passage. **Jesus is the forerunner of the new exodus and time of salvation.** One commentator states "Israel's exodus from Egypt was already seen by the Old Testament prophets to prefigure the ultimate Messianic salvation. Matthew's quotation here reinforces his presentation of the childhood history of Jesus as the dawning of the Messianic age." Another writes "Jesus has cut a new way through the wilderness to the land of promise."

God redeemed or delivered Israel from slavery through their coming out of Egypt. God would continue to redeem mankind from the slavery to sin through this Jesus who would come out of Egypt. God continues to do this same work in individual lives today. I hope some of you were able to read the article in the Gazette about the St Albert Salvation Army pastor Peter Kim. It's entitled "from punk to pastor." Peter grew up in Toronto and got involved in gangs and drugs. He eventually ended up on the street as a seller and user of drugs.

Peter still has a scar on his face as a constant reminder of those misspent days. Some of his friends at the time got into even more trouble than he did. Some of the people he knew were killed on the streets.

When he hit rock bottom, all he could do was look up literally.

"There came a point where I was hungry and homeless, had nothing in my pocket and no food in my stomach. I was lying on a park bench at the age of 17. I looked up at the stars of the night ... they must have all been out there that night. I thought, 'There must be a God who could create all of this universe'. How insignificant and how small I was compared to the universe and compared to God." He calls the moment his "revelation." It was just before Christmas almost 25 years ago.

"At that moment, I asked God to save me from the living hell that I was in. Then I said the next words. But didn't realize what they meant. I said, 'I'd follow you for the rest of my life.' At that point, something changed within me, a

light shone in my heart and I went back home. I went back to school and I went back to church. At that point, God took a hold of my life and things started to change. There came a point where a pastor asked me not to just give my heart to Jesus but to give my mind, body and heart so that I would start living for him.”

He gave his heart and his life to Jesus, he said. He enrolled in classes at the University of Toronto and even started teaching Sunday school. You’d think such a story would have a simple ending. We already know that Kim today is a man of God, a good person, kind and giving, and a pastor within his church.

But his life turned back the other way again. Sometimes people’s former lives resurface and take a new hold. He got back into trouble with the law. “I did backslide for a bit. I turned away from the church. I got caught up again with the wrong side of life and got into trouble,” he admitted.

At one point, he ended up getting the Salvation Army’s help to satisfy some community service obligations. It seemed that being on that side of the church’s programs showed him the way to the path he is still on now. “It’s ironic but I ended up becoming a Salvation Army officer. Now I have the opportunity to give back to the community and do what the Salvation Army did for me for others.” (St. Albert Gazette, Dec. 20/14, Punk to Pastor, Scott Hayes)

God continues to do slavery saving work today in our lives. We were all born into slavery in our Egypt – our own sins. Yet if you’re a Christian here today, Jesus has set you free from the slave mastery of sin. Romans 6:22-23 speaks to this – “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Matthew continues the story. Joseph, Mary and Jesus escape to Egypt. But Herod has was one more scene to play out. In verse 16, Herod the deceiver discovers he’s been tricked by the wisemen. So he flies into a rage perhaps just as the citizens of Jerusalem feared. He sends soldiers to kill all male children in Bethlehem and the surrounding region who are two years old and under. Soldiers arrive in Bethlehem and begin searching every house. They slaughter every young boy they find. They likely give no explanation to the parents.

We have no historical record of such a slaughter. But there are some good reasons why. Most scholars estimate that this atrocity involved about 20-30 young boys taking into account the population of Bethlehem and its surrounding region at that time. Now this was a terrible and devastating tragedy for the families affected. Think about

the ripple effect of the death of a young child through a family if something like that would happen. But compared to Herod's other victims, young boys of impoverished families would barely register a blip on the news radar.

The Jewish historian Josephus gives us a lot of detail about Herod's life. When Herod's young brother-in-law became too popular, he had a "drowning accident" in what archaeology shows was a rather shallow pool. Later, Herod had falsely suspected officials clubbed to death. Wrongly suspecting two of his sons of plotting against him, he had them strangled. Five days before his own death Herod, he had a more treacherous, Absalom-like son executed.

In a fit of jealous rage (which he later regretted) he had his favorite wife strangled. She turned out to be innocent of the crime of which he had accused her. He had religious men who had tampered with his golden eagle burned alive. He reportedly ordered that nobles from throughout the land be executed when he died to ensure mourning on that day. It is possible that he also engaged in persecutions outside the scope of Josephus's sources, as in the repression of the wilderness Essenes. In an era of many, highly placed political murders and massacres, the execution of perhaps twenty children in a small town would warrant little attention.

But Matthew gives great attention to this event and sees another fulfillment of prophecy. Verses 17-18. "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." Now what does that have to do with Herod's slaughter of baby boys in Bethlehem? Where is Ramah? Who is Rachel and how does this fulfill prophecy in some way?

Well Matthew quotes from the prophet Jeremiah who lived during the last days of the southern kingdom of Israel. that kingdom was conquered in 586 BC by the Babylonians. To keep conquered peoples subdued, the Babylonians would force thousands of their citizens into exile. But they first had to go throughout the occupied country and capture all these citizens. They looked for the wisest, wealthiest and strongest Israelites to work as slave labor in Babylon. This meant most of the young people would be taken away.

The soldiers took these young people to one small town north of Jerusalem named Ramah. Jeremiah 40:1 tells us this – "The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord after Nebuzardan the captain of the guard had let him go from Ramah, when he took him bound in chains along with all the captives." So Jeremiah was released just before he was deported to Babylon. But many were not so fortunate. The Babylonians would form them into long lines of prisoners and march them to Babylon. Imagine if you were a parent or grandparent of one of these young people. Young people,

teenagers to young adults, imagine you are put in chains to be deported. Many mothers especially followed their children to Ramah to give them some food and maybe console them. Maybe some parents tried to bribe the officials to let their child go.

But most failed. And can you imagine what that was like as a parent to watch your teenage and young adult son or daughter march away into captivity never to be seen again. It was like watching them die. There was much weeping in Ramah during this time.

But who is Rachel and what does she have to do with this? Rachel was one of Jacob's wives back in Genesis. Her sons Joseph and Benjamin became part of the 12 tribes of Israel. So Rachel represented the mothers of Israel. Rachel died way before the exile. But where she was buried and where she was travelling are critical to Matthew's use of prophecy. She was buried in a town near Ramah while she was on her way to Bethlehem. So she was buried near where there was much weeping for the children. She was on her way towards Bethlehem where they would now be much weeping for the young boys who were slain.

Yet the prophecy in Jeremiah goes beyond Rachel's weeping. It promises hope for the future. Eventually some of the exiles would return when the Persians conquered the Babylonians. Despite a foreign oppressor's attempt to wipe out God's people, He preserved them. Despite Herod's attempt to wipe out the hope of God's people in Jesus, God protects Him.

So here is the second deep truth that Matthew declares about Jesus - **Jesus travels as a refugee and survives a foreigners attempt to wipe him out.** This would resonate deeply with Israelites for this was their story. Joseph and his brothers travel down to Egypt as refugees. Then Pharaoh trying to wipe out the Israelites through slavery. The Israelites leave Egypt as refugees from slavery. They conquer the Promised Land. But then the Babylonians try to wipe them out through war and exile. Jesus flees as refugee from Bethlehem. Herod tries to wipe him out. Jesus identifies with the suffering and exile of his people just as he has identified with their exodus. Throughout history, the foreigners have tried to wipe out God's people. Yet God He has preserved them. God's power is greater than the sorrow bringing forces against His people. This reality continues for God's people today. We are called foreigners and exiles in this world. We are called to recognize that we won't be home until we see Jesus face to face. Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:11 – Brothers, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul.

We are foreigners and refugees in this world, like God's people in the past. But God continues to watch over us and protect us.

Matthew moves to one more episode for explanation. It begins with Herod's death in Matthew 2:19. He died at the age of 69 in his palace in Jericho in March of 4 BC. Remember he commanded that many influential Jews be executed when he died to ensure that there would be mourning in Israel on that day. But the order was countermanded by his sister Salome.

Josephus tells us after remaking his will at least seven times, Herod had finally settled on dividing the kingdom between three of his remaining sons, Archelaus, Herod Antipas, and Herod Philip. Archelaus, was 19 years old and ruled over Judea, Samaria, and Idumea (cf. 2:22). He reigned from 4 B.C. to A.D. 6 and quickly displayed the same kind of cruelty that had marked his father's reign. He overreacted to an uprising in the temple at Passover after his father's death. He sent in troops and cavalry, who killed about three thousand pilgrims. Because of his cruelty, Augustus Caesar feared a revolution from the people, so he deposed Archelaus and banished him to Gaul in A.D. 6. The rule over Judea was thereafter passed to Roman rulers called prefects, one of whom was Pontius Pilate.

But in 4 BC, Archelaus still ruled. So Joseph fears staying there and is warned in a dream to move on. So he takes Mary and returns to the district of Galilee to their town of Nazareth. And Matthew concludes by declaring "He went to a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene. Now there is no Old Testament prophecy that declares the Messiah shall be a Nazarene. So this must be quoting a general theme in the prophets. Matthew quotes the prophet in Hosea and Jeremiah but the prophets in this last prophecy. But what did "the prophets" predict?

One theory suggests that Matthew refers to Isaiah and the branch or shoot that grows up out of the stump of a broken down tree. In fact, the Hebrew word for branch that Isaiah uses in 11:1 is actually *nezer* which could be a root form of Nazareth. It's also possible that the original inhabitants of Nazareth named the village to connect it to the hope of the coming "neser" or Messiah. But we must also consider how other people viewed Nazareth and the Galilee at the time of Christ. Nazareth was located far from Jerusalem showing little or no influence of Greek and Roman culture. It had no political significance or wealth. It was one of those towns that had maybe one traffic light. If you were from Nazareth, people wrote you off as an out of touch back country person.

We see this view reflected in comments included in the Gospels. In John 1, the future disciple Nathaniel is sitting under a tree. Philip, a friend of Peter's, comes along and tells Nathaniel that they have found the one wrote about by Moses, the law and the prophets. But then Philip says "He is Jesus of Nazareth." Nathaniel responds "can anything good come out of Nazareth? Or when Nicodemus wondered if Jesus was a prophet, the chief priests scornfully respond "are you from Galilee too? Look into it and you will see no prophet comes from Galilee."

So we have these two sides to the label Nazarene. On the one hand, it is a label of honor pointing to the fulfillment of the messianic hope. On the other, it is a term scorned and despised. Both of these reflect the expectation of the prophets. The Messiah would bring hope. But He would also be despised and rejected. The obscurity of Nazareth could fulfill the Old Testament expectations of a humble and rejected Messiah.

So this brings us to the third deep truth Matthew gives us about Jesus. (2:19-23) **Jesus is the branch of hope from the stump of the country town Nazareth.** The early believers experienced the same thing. With the term Christian it described Christ's people and was a great honor before God. But it was used as a term of contempt by many throughout the empire who opposed Christ and His followers.

For many in the world today, wearing the name Christian is both of a badge of honor and contempt. In some countries, buildings are burned just because they are known to be "Christian" houses of worship.

Mark and Lara graduated from Bible College. They married and joined an international mission organization. They trained for several years to become Bible translators and finally fulfilled their dreams by participating in translation work in a primarily Muslim country. One morning the world woke up news that an international church in the city where they lived had been terrorized by two men. They talked in during the services and tossed several hand grenades at the worshippers. The news was sketchy at first, but it was known that five people had been killed, two of them Americans. At least forty others had been wounded, perhaps as many as ten of them Americans. Later Mark's name was read over the news as one of the wounded.

The newspapers interviewed Mark a day or so after the incident. Lara and their two children were safe. When asked if they were going to leave, he said that they have plans to leave if necessary, but they'd like to stay. In a gripping part of the interview, he acknowledged that he had been attacked *because he was a Christian*. But then he said that he would

like to stay, *because he is a Christian*: “I’m a Christian”. Christian – a reason to serve some & means of hope & help for others.

Nazarene – a title of honor and scorn at the same time. Christian – a badge of honor and scorn at the same time. Are we willing to wear it regardless of what the name brings to us? The commentator who tells Mark and Lara’s story writes “Torture and persecution for being a Christian seem far from a possibility in most of our everyday worlds. Yet persecution may become much more familiar to each of us than we expect. The increasing secularization of Western culture does not bode well for us. Christians are discouraged from denouncing practices condemned in Scripture, whether it is obscenity, pornography, or homosexuality. Many of the normal practices of faith once enjoyed—such as public prayers or even displays of a manger scene at Christmas—have been stripped away. The agenda of much public policy seems more like freedom from religion.

Jesus grew up honored before God and His people while despised by the many who rejected Him. We are called to follow in His footsteps. “He is an example of humility and Servanthood that will challenge our own self-serving desires for comfort, fame, fortune and glory. Our walk with Jesus will involve some kind of suffering for his name – whether that be some scorn at school or work or something even greater as our lives go forward. Paul writes to Timothy “all who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Tim 3:12).

So we have seen these three deep truths about Jesus. Jesus is the forerunner of the new exodus and time of salvation. Jesus travels as a refugee and survives a foreigners attempt to wipe him out. Jesus is the branch of hope from the stump of the country town Nazareth. What do all these point to that had arrived that people longed after for centuries; the ultimate salvation of God’s people. **In Jesus, the anticipated ultimate salvation of God’s people has begun.** They looked for someone who would deliver them from oppression of slavery though they didn’t know their greatest oppressor was sin itself. They longed for someone who would not be overpowered by a foreign enemy. Jesus escaped from Herod and eventually rose up supreme over all kings. They looked for someone to fulfill the promised messianic expectations of a branch of hope yet despised by the world. Jesus fulfilled these in coming as a Nazarene.

The anticipated ultimate salvation of God’s people has begun in Jesus. We have not yet arrived at the ultimate salvation where we will see Jesus face to face. But we live in a time where this salvation has begun and moves ever

closer to that day. So how can we respond to all God has done in Christ? In the Old Testament they offered thank offerings. Our lives can be thank offerings to God of grateful obedience in 3 ways.

We participate in this salvation life **by leaving behind sin**. God continues to do His rescuing and protecting work in our lives. We were all rescued out of our own Egypt – our slavery to sin. So continue to leave behind sin. Don't keep going back to your Egypt. Going back to Egypt became a symbol of returning to slavery. Instead of going back, we must go forward by the power of the spirit to a new life of ever increasing obedience and holiness.

We also participate in this salvation life **by accepting our status as refugees and exiles**. We are foreigners and refugees in this world. But God continues to watch over us and protect us. So accept your refugee status. Our property is ultimately not our property. Our lifespan is temporary and we need to invest it in that which matters for the kingdom. This life must not be held onto so tightly that we give up our loyalty to the Lord.

We participate in this life inaugurated by Jesus **by proclaiming and bearing with the label Christian**. We are Christians – this term of honor and scorn. Some people have stopped calling themselves Christians because the term is so loaded with scorn and negativity. Yet will we abandon the name to protect our own reputations?

God continues to bring His people out of slavery and their Egypt to life under a new master. God continues to protect His people as they travel through life as sojourners and exiles. Jesus continues walk with us as we bear the shame of His name. Let us continue to walk with Him and embrace all He has purchased for us. If you don't have this salvation, will you receive it?