

Waiting for Deliverance

King of Heaven: The (Un)expected King

Matthew 2:13-23

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Good morning, First Free. It's a joy to be with you this morning as we celebrate Jesus the Christ. As many of you know, Christmas is coming up soon. The calendar says it's only five days away. Yet for me, and I suspect for many of us, this has felt like one of the least celebratory Christmas seasons in recent memory. This year has been hard. As we struggle with the difficulties of a pandemic—ill health, economic and job loss, disconnection, inability to visit with loved ones, and our own sinfulness—hope has been in short supply. During these times, it can be tempting to feel like, in the words of C.S. Lewis, we are condemned to live in a world where it is always winter and never Christmas.¹ It feels like we've been waiting, and waiting, and waiting for hope.

These past ten months have been difficult, especially the waiting, yet I think the difficulty of this year, in a unique way, can help us better appreciate God's people's difficult situation as they waited for the coming of the Christ, and so better understand the joyful good news of Christmas.

Our passage today is composed of three narrative sections, which together present a story of difficulty, violence, and oppression, of exodus and exile. Matthew pairs each of these narrative sections with a statement of prophetic fulfillment emphasizing Jesus' messianic identity and the hope he brings to God's people. As we walk through Matthew 2:13-23 this morning, we will see one main point, a great reason for hope: through Jesus Christ, God delivers his people.

So, three narrative sections paired with three fulfillment statements, each of which points to hope in Christ.

THROUGH CHRIST, GOD DELIVERS HIS PEOPLE.

Matthew 2:13-15²

¹³Now 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." ¹⁴And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵and 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."

In the first narrative section Matthew continues our story from last week, where God guided the Magi, the Gentile wise men from the East, to Judah in search of a child born king of the Jews. The Magi, assuming this king would be born in the capital city, visited Herod, the tyrannical ruler of Judea, a client-king of Rome. Herod, always paranoid about possible threats to his rule, sought to determine from the Jewish religious officials where the promised Messiah-king was to be born, and they rightly concluded based on the prophet Micah that he was to be born in Bethlehem, the ancestral hometown of David. Herod then asked the Magi when the child was born, before sending them to find the child, on the false grounds that Herod desired to worship this new king.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

Herod's instructions masked ill intent. As we see in the angel's message of verse 13, Herod had no intention of worshiping Jesus. He intended to destroy him. God warns the Magi in a dream not to return to Herod, verse 12, and also warns Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt, verse 13, where the holy family are to stay until God tells them to return. Joseph, demonstrating the same obedience we saw in chapter 1, immediately takes Mary and the child and flees by cover of night to Egypt, outside of Herod's reach, staying there until Herod's death.

I've already made the claim that this passage is about hope. But at first read, we might ask ourselves what is hopeful about the passage. It's certainly dramatic. It's certainly vivid. But for many of us, I suspect this passage, and the soon-to-come massacre seem to emphasize the bleak reality of hostility to the Messiah. Where is the hope here?

I believe we begin to see this hope most clearly in verse 15, where Matthew makes clear that the flight and return to Egypt ought to be a source of immense hope for God's people. We see this in the second half of verse 15, where Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1 saying, "This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'"

What exactly does Matthew mean here and why is it a source of hope for us? In order to make sense of this citation, we need to understand Hosea 11:1 in its original context. Whenever we read New Testament citations of Old Testament passages, it's best to read the original passage in order to understand what's being said.

At first, Matthew's citation of Hosea 11:1 seems quite confusing. Unlike the quotation of Micah earlier in Matthew 2, which spoke of a future king who would come to God's people, this quotation doesn't, at first glance, seem to be a forward-looking promise. Instead, it is a backwards-looking recollection of God's love demonstrated in the past when he delivered Israel from slavery in the Exodus. Furthermore, in the original context of Hosea 11, the son of Hosea 11:1 seems to refer to the whole people of Israel, rather than to any one particular individual.

Now in order to understand what this fulfillment means and why it matters, we need to understand Israel's history. Israel had grown out of the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, beloved by God, who, when warned in dreams, fled to Egypt to avoid famine, where they lived for four hundred years. While there, they grew in population, but groaned under the rule of the Pharaohs, who enslaved and oppressed them, eventually resorting to the coordinated killings of their young boys in an attempt to control their population. They had very little reason to hope. Yet God in his mercy delivered them from oppression in Egypt, making them his own special covenant people, his son. In God's words through the prophet Hosea that are quoted here in Matthew, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."

Yet there was a problem. Despite this deliverance, and despite her commitments to obediently love and serve God alone, Israel betrayed God through idolatry and sin. Hosea 11:2 continues with the sad words, "The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols." God repeatedly warned Israel that these betrayals would lead to judgment and banishment from the land he had given them, yet they continued in their sin, and so were sent into exile, subjected to oppressive foreign kings. This sin shattered Israel's relationship with God, and although they eventually returned to the land, things were not what God's people had hoped for. They continued to suffer under the yoke of oppression, as they had in the exodus.

Yet despite this, a glimmer of hope remained. God promised through Hosea and other prophets that despite his people's sins, he would show mercy to them; that he would, in the words of Hosea, heal their apostasy and cause them to flourish like a beautiful flower, a spreading tree. And so God's people waited for him to deliver them from their sin and its consequences, their seemingly perpetual exile.

It was into this waiting that Jesus, the promised Christ, came into the world to bring God's people deliverance. Matthew here, by quoting Hosea 11, introduces a theme that runs throughout his gospel. In the events of the flight to Egypt and return, Matthew sees Jesus as God's Son, the true Israel, who reenacts Israel's history, but in a way that brings God's people deliverance from sin and its consequences rather than judgment. Just as Israel fled to Egypt in response to a dream, so Jesus, the true Israel, and his family flee to Egypt in response to a dream. Just as God delivered Israel out of exile in Egypt, so God delivers Jesus out of exile in Egypt. Yet Jesus, the true Israel, brings hope to God's people by succeeding where they failed.

Though Israel proved herself faithless in the wilderness after deliverance from Egypt—complaining and testing God—Jesus, proves himself faithful in the wilderness, as we will see in the temptation narrative of Matthew 4. Though Israel failed to keep the law they had committed to, Jesus fulfills the law, as we will see in Matthew 5. Though Israel's sin eventually led to exile, bringing shame to God's name in the sight of the nations, Jesus delivers God's people from exile, bringing glory to God's name in the sight of the nations. Jesus, Matthew makes clear here, is the faithful Israel, who rather than pursuing false idols and Baals, serves the true God alone, and by his righteousness makes God's people righteous. Matthew sees the seeds of this hope in the events of Jesus's flight to and return from Egypt.

THROUGH CHRIST, GOD RESTORES HIS PEOPLE.

Matthew's emphasis on hope in Christ continues with his second narrative and fulfillment section, which highlights again the blessed hope that through Christ, God delivers his people, but this time the focus is on coming restoration.

Matthew 2:16

¹⁶Then 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.

Herod, paranoid about any threat to his rule, orders the massacre of all boys two years and under in Bethlehem.

Perhaps we see reason for hope in God's rescuing of Jesus from Herod's clutches in 13-15, but how is this grisly scene a reason to hope? Imagine if these were your own sons, or brothers, or nephews. What great cause for grief!

The sense of grief is only heightened as we read verses 17-18.

Matthew 2:17-18

¹⁷Then 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.”*

Here Jeremiah refers to one of the most devastating events in Israel’s history, the exile. Ramah was a town north of Jerusalem on the main highway leading to Assyria and Babylon (the two nations which brought Israel and Judah into exile) and would have been the place where mothers said final goodbyes to their children who were torn away from them, likely never to be seen again.³ It was a place of separation and loss, brought to pass by Israel’s own sin. Matthew sees in the slaughter of Bethlehem’s infants a replaying of the most tragic event in God’s people’s history. We see in these events not only Herod’s opposition to the true king, but the latest in the pattern of oppression God’s people suffered throughout their history.

Yet there is something more we are meant to see here than the violence of evil and desolate grief. In fact, I would contend that Matthew’s primary goal in this section is, in fact, to instill hope in God’s people. Now how can I possibly suggest this, especially since the quotation from Jeremiah seems to focus on grieving rather than hope?

The surrounding context of Jeremiah 31, is, in fact, almost uniformly hopeful, and the context makes clear that this moment of desolation and seemingly inconsolable grief will not last forever, despite the seeming permanence of despair. Immediately prior to the quoted verse, God promises that despite his people’s exile, one day he will restore them, turning their mourning into joy.

We see this displayed immediately after the quoted verses as well in God’s response to Ramah’s weeping in Jeremiah 31:16-17: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country.’”

In the face of Israel’s desolation at the exile, God promises their suffering will not last forever, and though their grief seems insurmountable, he will restore them. In fact, the main message of Jeremiah 31 is one of future restoration for God’s people, a future restoration that includes freedom from the evil rule of kings like Herod and a restoration of God’s people in God’s place under God’s righteous rule. It is a restoration that addresses God’s people’s situation. Yet it is also much more than that, it is a promise of a solution to the original reason for this exile in the first place—Israel’s sin.

A few verses later in Jeremiah 31:31-34 God promises he will make a new covenant with Israel, saying, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me,

³ D. A. Carson, “Matthew” in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary
R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament

from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Matthew here points God’s people to the hope of a new covenant brought about through the work of Jesus the Christ. Jesus refers to this covenant at the Last Supper, where he speaks of the new covenant through his blood. Through his blood shed on the cross Jesus made it possible for the iniquity of God’s people to be forgiven. His blood paid the penalty so that our sin might be remembered no more. Through Christ, we are delivered from the deserved punishment of our sin.

Yet not only that; through this new covenant in Christ, God works a transformation in his people’s hearts. Though Israel had rebelled against God and his first covenant repeatedly, through Christ’s work in the new covenant, God’s law would be written on his people’s hearts in a way it had never been before, and with these new hearts, the relationship between God and his people would be restored. He would be their God, and they would be his people. It is this promise of hoped-for restoration that Matthew points to through the slaughter of the Bethlehem boys. Even in the face of Herod’s oppression of God’s people, even in the face of his attempt to murder the messianic hope of Israel, God’s promise of his people’s restoration could not be thwarted. Restoration would come.

So, even in the face of forced flight and wholesale murder, Matthew makes clear that we have great reason to hope. Through Christ, God delivers his people. Through Christ, God restores his people. Now in verses 19-23 we see in our last narrative a reason to hope: through Christ, God saves his people.

THROUGH CHRIST, GOD SAVES HIS PEOPLE.

Matthew 2:13-23

¹⁹But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” ²¹And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²²But 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. ²³And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

Matthew tells us in verse 19 that when Herod died, an angel appeared to Joseph again in a dream in Egypt, telling him to return with the child and his mother to Israel. Again Joseph responds with prompt obedience. But a problem arises. Though Herod the Great has died, Joseph hears that Herod’s son, Archelaus, is now reigning over Judea in place of Herod.

We know from the historian Josephus that after Herod’s death his territory was parceled out to three of his sons.⁴ The territory of Judea, which included Jerusalem and Bethlehem, was given to Archelaus, who rapidly developed a reputation for violence, cracking down on religious protests in Jerusalem that had begun under his father, killing three thousand Jews and canceling the Passover that year. These actions likely explain Joseph’s fear of returning to Judea. Instead, we’re told he was warned in a dream to settle in his hometown of Nazareth, a small town of little reputation in the region of Galilee, which had been given to Archelaus’s comparatively less violent brother, Herod Antipas, who would later execute John the Baptist and judge Jesus during Holy Week.

⁴ Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, Book II, chapter 2

As with the previous narrative sections, Matthew presents the importance of these events in verse 23. We're told that the family's settling in Nazareth happened so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled—that he would be called a Nazarene. This is a notoriously difficult fulfillment reference to interpret, because we have no clear Old Testament references to Nazareth. Scholars have proposed a number of possible referents, usually based on puns between the Greek word Nazarene and various Hebrew words.

However, following New Testament scholar D.A. Carson, I think this is better understood as an indirect allusion to multiple Old Testament prophecies which spoke of a Messiah who would be rejected by many.⁵

Why do I say that?

First, unlike his other citations, Matthew here refers to prophets plural, rather than a singular prophet. He also uses a Greek word not present in the other quotations which can signal an indirect allusion rather than direct quote.

Now, if Matthew is making an allusion to multiple prophecies, why should we think these are prophetic references to him being an undesirable, frequently rejected Messiah?

Because Nazareth's reputation, or lack thereof, suggests such a thing. We know from archaeological evidence, and the lack of any non-Christian literary references to Nazareth, that it was a small village of little importance, maybe five hundred people tops, located in the backwaters of Galilee near a major Gentile city. It was not a prestigious place, and certainly not the town from which the Messiah was expected to emerge. In fact, we see hostility to the idea the Messiah would come from Nazareth elsewhere in other biblical accounts. For example, in John 1:46, Nathanael responds derisively to messianic claims about Jesus with, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" We see a similar dynamic in Acts 24:5 where the high priest Ananias's representatives charge Paul with being "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes."

Matthew in his infancy accounts has taken great pains to show that Jesus is, in fact, the legitimate messianic king in David's line, born in Bethlehem. Jesus is the true king who would deliver his people and restore them. Jesus is the one in which Israel's long-expected hope of deliverance will be fulfilled.

Yet Matthew's gospel also makes clear that Jesus confounded expectations and was frequently rejected. This idea of the Messiah as the unexpected one who would be of humble origins and rejected by his own people is present in many Old Testament prophecies, and is frequently connected with the Messiah's saving work.

For example, in Isaiah 11:1, we're told of a coming Messiah, a tiny shoot rising out of Jesse's stump, who endowed with God's Spirit, would judge the world with wisdom as the promised Davidic king. In the Messianic Psalm 22, which Jesus quotes from the cross in reference to himself as he's being mocked, David says, "I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people" (v. 6). Perhaps most clearly, we see the promise in Isaiah 52 and 53 of God's suffering servant who would be despised and rejected, but who would bear God's people's griefs and sorrows, being pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. Through his sacrifice this undesirable,

⁵ Carson

despised and rejected king would bring salvation to God's people by suffering the punishment they deserved for their sins in their place.

This is a very different type of king than the Herods and the Caesars of the world, and was, in fact, a very different type of king than many in Israel were hoping for. While many looked for a king who would immediately overthrow their foreign oppressors through violent revolution, triumphing in a glorious victory, Jesus, in his first coming, brought deliverance and salvation to his people through his obedience and shed blood. Let us not be those who reject Christ because he doesn't fit our expectations or our paradigms. Let us instead joyfully believe, submit to, and worship him. Let us, even in times of seemingly perpetual winter, celebrate the tremendous deliverance he brought us in his first coming, even as we long for the day when he returns to fully consummate our restoration.

Though we wait, we wait in great hope, anticipating the day when all evil, including the evil of the Herods of the world will be judged. When there will no longer be any trace of sin in us, and all opposition to Christ will be ended. When we will flourish in God's presence as his people under his rule, rejoicing with him forever. Then it will be always spring, and never winter. Ours will be a perpetual joy, forever and ever. Let us look back at the first coming with celebration this year, even as we look forward to our coming hope.