



FINDING HOPE: Prophecies Fulfilled

Finding Hope: Prophecies Fulfilled (Matthew 1-2)
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How to use this guide

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

Virgin Birth: *Hope for the Lonely*

Matthew 1:18-25

by Steve Jones

Hope is one of those words we see all over the place every Christmas season, along with Peace, Love, and Joy. When we think of hope, we often treat the word as if it is interchangeable with the word “wish.” We say things like “I hope so,” when what we mean is “I really wish something will happen.” There is a dimension to hope that is about having an optimistic state of mind and looking forward to or expecting positive outcomes with respect to future events. However, sometimes we mean more than just wish. Sometimes, hope has for us a hint of expectation or anticipation. But if hope is to be more than just wishful thinking, it needs to be grounded in something. That is why hope is most closely related to the idea of trust.

A central purpose of scripture is to encourage us to put our hope and trust in God and not in the things of this world, like wealth, or health, or power. One of the ways that God shows us that He is where we should be placing our trust is through fulfilling prophecies. Throughout scripture, God tells His people to expect certain things to happen. The reason He does this is so that when it happens, we can have a renewed awareness that God is in control. But prophecies are more than just improbable occurrences that God predicts. They are windows into the very heart of God. They show us that God is in control and working things out towards the end that He intends. They remind us about important truths we tend to forget.

This is the case with Christmas. The Gospel of Matthew mentions five prophecies that were fulfilled by the birth of Jesus. By looking closely at each one of them, we will see how Jesus fulfills the promises God made to Israel about when, where, and how the Messiah was going to be born. We will also see how each prophecy gives people unique reasons to hope in God.

The first prophecy that was fulfilled by the birth of Jesus was that He would be born of a virgin. Such an event would be miraculous enough on its own. But when it was prophesied ahead of time, the miraculous nature of the event is even more compounded.

We will look at the full story, see how the prophecy fits in, and look at how the prophecy is more than just an odd or unlikely event, it's a promise to us from God.

The Full Story (Matthew 1:18-25)

• An Unexpected Detour (v18-19): The story starts with a simple man in a small town getting ready for a wedding. But before the wedding, it was discovered that Mary was pregnant. So, Joseph is planning on divorcing Mary quietly so as not to cause her (or him) any embarrassment. It might sound weird that Joseph was planning on divorcing her. In fact, your Bible might say that he was going to "send her away." This was the colloquial term for divorce. In our day, we would consider an engagement semi-serious, but wouldn't think of someone breaking an engagement in the same way that we think of someone getting divorced. In the Ancient world, once a betrothal occurred, the two parties were basically legally bound together. The gap between engagement and marriage was simply the time necessary for the groom to get both the ceremony and the home set up.

• An Unexpected Dream (v20-23): Joseph has all these things on his mind when his plans take an unexpected detour. He decides what to do. He is going to quietly break things off with Mary. Then he goes to sleep and has an unexpected dream. An angel appears to him and tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, because she hasn't been unfaithful, she is participating in God's plan. The child she is carrying is going to be the fulfillment of prophecies. He is going to save people from their sins.

• An Unexpected Decision (v24-25): Joseph wakes up from the dream and does exactly the opposite of what he decided to do the night before. He does exactly what the angel instructed him to do. He takes her as his wife, and he keeps her a virgin until she gives birth.

The Fulfilled Prophecy (Matthew 1:22-23; Isaiah 7:14)

The prophecy that is being fulfilled is found in Isaiah 7:14, which says, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel."

When you go back and look at the context for Isaiah 7:14, a couple problems or questions emerge. First, the passage seems to refer specifically to an immediate historical situation in the reign of King Ahaz. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with the coming of a messiah in the distant future. Second, the word in the original Hebrew text used for "virgin" in the passage can also simply mean "maiden" or "young unmarried woman." So, what is going on?

Two things should be said in response. First, Isaiah calls the event a sign, which means a miraculous occurrence. So, trying to water down the meaning of the term "virgin" to make it simply mean "maiden" doesn't work. It's supposed to be a miracle. An unmarried young woman who becomes pregnant would hardly qualify as out of the ordinary. Second, we should say something briefly about the nature and purpose of prophetic signs. Prophetic signs in the Old Testament can be grouped into two categories: present persuaders and future confirmation. A present persuader is a sign used, as the name suggests, to convince a person in the moment. The plagues of Egypt were in this category. Their purpose was to persuade Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go. Future confirmation signs are more of what we think about when we hear the word "prophecy." We are being given information ahead of time about what will occur. The purpose is to reassure the hearer that God knows what is about to happen so that when it happens a person will have reasons to trust God more. An example of this is what God tells Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3:12, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain."

When read in its larger context this passage is clearly intended not as a present persuader to Ahaz, but as future confirmation of all that God will do. This specific passage is a part of a larger message contained in Isaiah 7:1–9:7. The whole passage tells the story of God's grand unfolding plan including the appearance of a promised deliverer called Immanuel. It says that God will send Immanuel (7:14) who will possess the land (8:8), thwart all opponents (8:10), and appear in Galilee of the Gentiles (9:1) as a great light to those in the land of the shadow of death (9:2). He is also the Child and Son called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" in 9:6, whose government and peace will never end as He reigns on David's throne forever (9:7).

So, this passage is clearly prophetic, messianic, and miraculous. Matthew tells us this was fulfilled in Jesus.

The Further Promise

There is more to this prophesy than God predicting an impossible event. Matthew and Isaiah both tell us that the point of this miracle was to show us that God is Immanuel, which translated means "God with Us."

At first glance, though, we have another problem. The verse directly preceding this in Matthew appears to conflict. Matthew 1:21 says, "She will give birth to a Son; and you shall name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." The angel says to name Him Jesus. Then Matthew says that this fulfills the prophecy about the baby being named Immanuel. So, which is it?

As far as our information goes, nobody ever called Jesus "Immanuel"; it was not the child's name in the same sense that "Jesus" was. Immanuel doesn't indicate His name but His role, bringing God's presence to man. This meaning is connected, though, to the meaning of His actual name, Jesus, which means "Yahweh saves." Sin separates man from God's presence. Salvation from sin results in "God with us."

It's important to realize that Jesus is proof that God does both jobs. We don't have to get free from sin before God will accept us back. God does all the work. He saves us from our sins. He promises to be with us always.

This is an important promise to remember especially at Christmas time. We like to point out that Christmas can be a lonely time for many people. The truth is that the holiday season simply makes us aware of the loneliness that we all experience at some point in our lives. This prophecy reminds us that Jesus is proof God cares for us and comes near. We can hope in God because He doesn't leave us to fend for ourselves or wander this world alone. Jesus is the living embodiment of what Hebrews 13:5 says, "He promises never to leave us or forsake us." In Matthew 28:20, in the last words of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus Himself tells His disciples, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the two types of prophetic signs? What are their different purposes?
2. What are some of the lies we are tempted to believe when we experience loneliness?
3. What does Immanuel mean? What hope or promise does this give us? Why is this important especially around the holiday period?
4. If Immanuel isn't His name, what does Immanuel refer to? What does the name Jesus mean? How does that connect with the meaning of Immanuel?

Born in Bethlehem: *Hope for the Lowly*

Matthew 2:1-8

by Steve Jones

I get tired of Christmas Songs. They are mindless and repetitive. The first time you hear them they sound cute or catchy, but after a couple repeats you realize that the words aren't really saying anything. Christmas Carols, on the other hand, I could listen to year-round and sometimes I wish we would. What is the difference between a Christmas Song and a Christmas Carol? A Christmas song is about all the pictures society paints about what Christmas is supposed to be: snow, presents, chimneys, stockings. Christmas Carols, on the other hand, are all about Jesus and give us opportunity to think deeply about what actually happened when God became Man. As opposed to the images of Christmas Songs, the truths of Christmas carols are worthy of meditating on throughout the year. In fact, I think our celebration of Christmas might be more meaningful if we didn't try to cram all our thinking about Christmas into this one crazy, hectic, month.

One of my favorite carols is "O Little Town of Bethlehem." It focuses on the contrast between the Creator and Lord of everything being born in a sleepy, little, insignificant town. The first verse ends with, "Yet in thy dark streets shineth / The everlasting Light / The hopes and fears of all the years / Are met in thee tonight."

We all long for significance. We want our lives to matter. We desire to make a difference. It's easy to look at the things that constitute success and start to think that we have to embrace the "way of the world" or risk being forgotten and overlooked. In fact, that is how many people feel not just during the holidays but throughout the year.

Christmas reminds us that God comes to us, to rescue us, to lead us, to restore us. It shows us that God's priorities are not the world's priorities, and that the people God chooses to use are not the people the world says are important.

That is the truth we are going to consider today as we look at the second prophecy Jesus fulfilled: the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. The prophecy is mentioned in the story of the wisemen coming to visit Jesus. It reminds us that what is overlooked by the world is valuable to God.

The Full Story (v1-8)

- Magi From the East (v1): After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, some visitors arrived who were looking for Him. They are described as Magi from the east and they seem to be astrologers because they are observing the stars. In addition, it is assumed that they are rich because of the gifts they brought. What is interesting is that nowhere does it say that they are “kings” or that there are three of them. The position is assumed from the wealth. The number is assumed from the three gifts that were given. People disagree about who the Magi were because by Jesus’s day the word ‘Magi’ could be used for any magician or even just a deceiver or swindler. But the likely meaning is that these were actual Magi, members of the priestly class of a religion from Persia called Zoroastrianism, which originally emerged in Persia during the time of the Jewish Exile in Babylon. Whatever the religion later turned into, it seems like it was strongly influenced by and borrowed heavily from Judaism. That was probably why these members of the priestly class knew about the Jewish expectation of the Messiah and were looking for Him as well.

- We saw His star in the East (v2): What exactly did they see? Sometimes we imagine a star leading them like a guide. But the truth is, we are not quite sure what exactly they saw. They saw some sort of astronomical phenomenon that signaled to them that a Jewish King had been born. But it evidently didn’t tell them much else beyond that. They didn’t know exactly where to go, so they headed to Israel and naturally went to the capital city, Jerusalem, to inquire about the royal birth at the palace.

- He was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him (v3): The response to the Magi was alarm. Why was Herod upset at their arrival? First, he evidently hadn’t had a son born to him recently. This meant that the Magi were looking for a potential rival to his power. Also, they said they were looking for “He who has been born King of the Jews.” You see, Herod hadn’t been born a king. He had been appointed king by the authority of Rome. He wasn’t even Jewish, but rather an Edomite. He was not the real king of the Jews and everyone knew it. But he held onto power because of his alliance with the Romans. Now the Magi come saying that a new king has been born. No wonder he was worried and Jerusalem with him. What turmoil would this new rival cause?

• He Asked Where the Messiah was to be born (v4-5): Herod assembles his own wise men. No doubt mad that they had missed this and wondering what was going on. He wants to know where the Messiah was to be born. These students of the Word tell him that Micah 5:2 prophesies birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem, a city about 7 miles south of Jerusalem.

The Fulfilled Prophecy (Matthew 2:6; Micah 5:2-4)

We will look at the rest of the Magi story next week when we look at the prophecy contained in that section. It is important to underscore, though, that not only did God foretell through the prophets that Jesus would be born of a virgin, He also told us where. Matthew 2:5-6 says, “⁵ They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.’”

This isn't a Christian interpretation of an Old Testament prophecy. Every Jew of Jesus's day read this passage as pointing to the Messiah. This prophecy is the most straightforward and obvious fulfilled prophecy in the Bible. The context of the passage in Micah is clearly referring to the coming of the Messiah and was regularly read that way by the Jews of Jesus' day.

Sometimes we skip over the actual prophecy because we know the meaning. But if we look closer at the prophecy, we will see that this passage predicts more than just the location of His birth. It shows us the kind of Messiah He is coming to be. God promises to send not just someone to exert power over the nation. He promises a shepherd, someone who will live out Psalm 23 for the people.

The Further Promise

Again, this prophecy is intended to do more than amaze us at the improbability of the event and the prediction. Bethlehem was chosen instead of Jerusalem to show us something important about God and us.

We live in a world that tells us that we are worthless unless we have power or wealth or both. That is why the wise men went to Jerusalem. The star told them that a king had been born, and they just assumed that the king would be born in a palace in the capital city. But God doesn't value the things that man values.

In 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, Paul writes, "²⁷ but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no man may boast before God."

Jesus Himself is "the stone which the builder rejected (Mark 12:10)." Jesus also promises His followers that the meek and lowly are blessed and will "inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5)."

So many times, we walk around in this world feeling insignificant, like we don't matter. Jesus was born to seemingly insignificant people in a seemingly insignificant town. This prophecy reminds us to hope that what the world calls insignificant is valuable to God.

This prophecy also reminds us that because we are valuable to God, He will lead us like a shepherd leads sheep. Because He is our shepherd, we can trust that He will lead us the way Psalm 23 says.

Discussion Questions:

1. Where did the Magi come from? What were they looking for? Where did they go first? Why?
2. Why was Herod troubled by the arrival of the Magi? How did Herod become King?
3. Jesus was born in Bethlehem not Jerusalem. What does this tell us about God's priorities?
4. What does it mean that Jesus is "the stone which the builders rejected?"
5. This prophesy promises that God's Messiah will lead us like a shepherd. Read Psalm 23. How does a shepherd lead?

Out of Egypt: *Hope for the Lost*

Matthew 2:7-15

by Steve Jones

Has someone ever given you directions that were either incomplete or confusing? You took one look at them and thought, "I don't understand. I know I am gonna get lost. Where am I supposed to be going?"

I remember one such time that happened to me. It was back before cell phones. I was in a friend's wedding. We were leaving the rehearsal and heading to the place where the rehearsal dinner was going to take place. We were taking two separate cars. I was supposed to follow him there. Before we left, he told me roughly where we were going in case we got separated. As we were driving, I noticed several of the landmarks and street signs that my friends had mentioned. I was feeling pretty comfortable with where we were going. That is, until he drove right past the place where I thought we were going. I was almost positive it was the right place. There were even people I recognized headed in preparing for a party. Why had we missed it? Where were we going now? What was going to happen? Should I get his attention? Surely, he knew. This was his hometown after all. While I was following him through a series of turns for what felt like an eternity but was probably only a few minutes, I noticed that we reemerged at the building we had passed but this time we were exactly where we needed to be to snag the two best parking spots. After we both got out of our cars, he said something to me that I always found meaningful. He said, "I knew you would be confused while it was happening, but once we got there, I knew you'd understand."

I sometimes think that is how God looks at us. He promises to lead. But we frequently get confused with how things are going, especially when we pass a place we thought we were headed. God is saying to us, "I know you are confused while it is happening, but once we get there, I know you will understand."

Today, we are going to look at a prophecy that was fulfilled in the life of Jesus that gives us reason to hope, especially when we feel lost, that God knows what He is doing and is working all things out. In the last lesson, we saw how God promised that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Today, we are going to look at a prophecy Matthew says Jesus fulfilled by “coming out of Egypt.” On the surface, it seems contradictory and impossible. I wonder if there were rival Messiah schools of thought: the Bethlehem School and the Egypt School. Or maybe people thought, how could the Jewish Messiah come from Egypt. Well, today we are going to see how God worked it all out. And perhaps along the way, gain confidence to trust God and have hope even when we feel lost and perplexed on the path that God has us walking right now.

The Full Story

- The Determination (v7-8): After Herod finds out where the Messiah was to be born, he goes back to the Magi and asks when they saw the star. He then sends them to Bethlehem to find the baby. He pretends that he wants to worship Him too. But if that were so, why on earth doesn't Herod go with them. The Magi have been journeying probably for two years. They have traveled several hundred miles in a land that was treacherous and among people who might be dangerous. Herod is seven miles from Bethlehem. Why doesn't He go? Probably because he wants to plan on what to do if they find a baby. Of all the people who heard about the Magi, no one seems to go with them. They knew where the Messiah was to be born. They knew what the Messiah was supposed to be. Now they had word that the Messiah was here, and no one could be bothered to take an afternoon walk to see if it was true. They don't take the opportunity, because they don't want it. They want to stay in power. They refuse to be led; they refused to bend the knee, so they don't go.

- The Discovery (v9-11): The Star went on before them. We aren't sure what they saw. There have been some interesting suggestions about what it could have been. One is that they might have seen planets moving in a way that was meaningful to them. Another suggestion is that perhaps they saw a comet. Whatever they saw, they recognized it as divine guidance and it filled them with tremendous joy. When they came to the house, they entered and worshipped. The reference to the house indicates that the Magi didn't arrive on Christmas night. The shepherds found Jesus in a stable. The Magi find Jesus in a house. It must have been an odd sight. Great and powerful men, no doubt with an entourage, come to a small house in a poor town. They enter and fall on the floor before a mother and her baby. This is more than kneeling. This was more than a sign of respect. This was the sign of submission before a king.

They also presented Him with three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These three gifts also represent how they viewed Jesus. Some even consider the gifts prophetic. Gold is a gift for a king. Frankincense is used in worshiping a deity. Myrrh is a spice used in burial. These three gifts symbolize the three roles that Christ revealed Himself to be: King, God, Sacrifice.

- The Detour (v12): After seeing Jesus, they had evidently planned on going back to Herod because the route back to their own country went north from Bethlehem back through Jerusalem. But they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. So, they went home by another route. We aren't told what route they went, or even what happened when they got there. But it is important to realize that God led them to Jesus by means of the star. But that wasn't the end. He kept leading them even as they headed home. This time He guided them by means of a dream instead of a star. Who knows how their lives changed based on what they experienced? What we do know is that they came following divine guidance, and they left under the same guidance.

- The Dream (v13-15): Once the Magi leave, Joseph has another dream, this time he is told by an angel to head to Egypt. There is urgency in the angel's command. Joseph gets up immediately and leaves with his family while it was still night. The choice of Egypt as a place of refuge was a natural one for first-century Jews. It was a traditional place for people from Israel to flee when times were hard. It was close, a little more than seventy-five miles away. Though it would take longer then than now, it wasn't far. It was also a Roman province, wealthier and better run than Herod's client kingdom. And, most importantly, outside Herod's jurisdiction. A large Jewish community had lived there for several centuries. According to the ancient Jewish writer Philo, by around A.D. 40 there were close to a million Jews living in Egypt. For Matthew it held extra meaning as the place where Israel's history as the people of God began.

The Fulfilled Prophecy (Matthew 2:15; Hosea 11:1)

This story of wisemen and dreams and Herod and a hasty flight to Egypt reaches its culmination in the statement in Matthew 2:15, "this happened so that what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled: "OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON."

The prophecy Matthew is referring to comes from Hosea 11:1, which says, "When Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son." There is only one problem. The passage in Hosea isn't looking forward to the future but rather looking back at the past. God is recounting, through the prophet Hosea, how He called and blessed and had been faithful to Israel despite Israel's continual rebellion and faithlessness.

So why does Matthew apply it to Jesus? It isn't really a prophesy per se, so how could it be "fulfilled?" In addition to making individual predictions, one important dimension of Old Testament prophesy is about revealing patterns that occur repeatedly in God's relationship with His people. It is about reminding people how God has dealt with His people in the past so that they know how they can expect God to deal with them in the future.

Matthew says Jesus fulfilled this prophesy because he believes that what God was doing in Israel was preparation for what He is going to do in Jesus. Just as God redeemed His people from Egypt long ago and inaugurated a covenant with them, He is now accomplishing a more glorious redemption through Jesus, who is the greater Son fulfilling the hopes of Israel and inaugurating a new covenant.

The Further Promise

So what lessons are we supposed to derive from this fulfilled prophesy?

It should strengthen our faith that Jesus is the one who fulfills God's plan. Later on, in Matthew 11:3, John's Disciples come to ask Jesus, "Are You the Coming One, or are we to look for someone else?" I think many are often caught like this, wavering between faith and doubt. Faith is less like an on-off switch and more like a muscle. Faith isn't something you either have or don't. It's something that grows stronger the more you use it. Prophecies like this strengthen our faith.

It should also remind us that God's nature never changes. We see how God has repeatedly acted in the past in a consistent way and how it all points to Jesus as the culmination of His plan. He longs to lead us out of exile and to give us life through His Son.

I think there is one more promise to be found in these verses too. One thing I keep coming back to is how God is able to make order appear out of chaos. The fulfillment of this prophecy offers hope to us when we feel lost. When life looks like it's confusing, off track, or impossible to make sense of, we can rest in the fact that God knows all the variables and is working everything out. The scribes were probably confused about how the Messiah could both be born in Bethlehem and come from Egypt. In hindsight it all made sense. So too for us, in retrospect we will say to God "oh, so that's how it works out." In the meantime, we have opportunity to hope that what looks like a wandering and broken road that we are being made to walk is actually the most direct route to the destination that God has for us.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever felt lost or confused by the path you were on?
2. Have you ever been amazed at how God worked something out that you didn't think was work-out-able?
3. What is the significance of the three gifts the Magi gave Jesus? What do they symbolize?
4. What is Hosea 11:1 about? How does it apply to Jesus?
5. What are the hopes and truths that can be drawn from this fulfillment?

In the Midst of Suffering: *Hope for the Afflicted*

Matthew 2:16-18

by Steve Jones

I remember sitting across the table from a good friend of mine who asked to meet me for coffee. After a few minutes of pleasantries, he finally nervously summoned up the courage to ask his question, or more accurately, to make a statement. "I think I am losing my faith." I asked him why he felt he was losing his faith, and he responded that he was trying to come to terms with how God could be good and there could be so much evil in the world. The first thing out of my mouth surprised him. I said, "You aren't losing your faith, you're gaining it."

Most people interpret the doubts they experience as temptations to stop believing in God. More likely, this is an opportunity to grow in our understanding of who God is. As Christians, we shouldn't be afraid of asking questions. Faith isn't blindly believing what we are told. Faith means living out what we believe to be true. And confirming what we believe is true is a very reasonable thing to do. Too many people have been turned away from Christianity because they were asking questions, good questions, and not only would no one answer them, maybe they were even told that asking the question itself was wrong. My friend thought he was drifting away from God when actually God was drawing him closer by provoking in him questions that were encouraging my friend to seek answers and to seek God.

But his specific question, wasn't just a good question. It is THE question. One of the most important ones. Inquire long enough of most people and you will find that the one thing they really don't understand is the problem of evil. They might use different language. Like, "Why do bad things happen to good people." But they still ask it. Ask people who have walked away from God or who are increasingly skeptical of His existence, and you find at the heart of their objection a claim that all the evil in the world is proof that God isn't real.

Look in the Bible, the oldest book in the Old Testament is the book of Job, a 40-chapter inquiry into the goodness of God in the midst of suffering. It's okay to ask the question. There are good answers.

In today's lesson, we are going to look at part of the Christmas story that many people overlook because they don't know what to do with it: Herod murdering the baby boys in Bethlehem, sometimes referred to as "The Slaughter of the Innocents." My hope is that by studying this difficult passage, we can realize that God doesn't overlook our pain and that we can learn to hope in the midst of it.

The Full Story (v16)

Herod had tried to deceive the Magi into betraying the location of the Messiah. In verse 8, he had pretended to be interested in coming to worship this new king as well. When the Magi didn't return to Jerusalem, Herod realized that his plan had been discovered and he in turn had been tricked by the Magi. In response to the deception and in a fit of rage, Herod does the unthinkable. He orders the murder of every male child under the age of two.

The last half of verse 16 tells us the reason that two years was selected: "according to the time which he had determined from the Magi." From this, we gather that the Magi saw the star about two years previous, and that Jesus was more of toddler than a newborn when all of this transpired.

Some critics and skeptics think that Herod's reaction is so extreme that it must have been made up to make the birth of Jesus sound more legendary. They point to how Herod hunting the babies sounds an awful lot like Pharaoh hunting down the babies during the birth of Moses. They also point to the fact that there is no evidence for the Bethlehem atrocity in any sources outside of Matthew's gospel. But the truth is that Herod's actions in the Gospel of Matthew accord well with what is recorded about him in outside sources. Herod ruled Judea with an iron fist. He had been placed on the throne by Rome with the explicit command of ensuring quiet by any means necessary. And he did just that. Even the Romans thought his methods were extreme. According to Josephus, an ancient Jewish Historian, Herod had three of his own sons killed. Herod was hated by everyone and he knew it. When he was near death, he left a final order that one member of every family in Judea should be executed when he died so that the whole nation would really be in mourning. Fortunately, that final order was never carried out.

So, though there is no extra-Biblical corroboration of Herod killing the babies in Bethlehem, it does fit with his personality as revealed in Jewish History. Sadly, one reason why it might not have been reported might be because it was on a relatively small scale for the kinds of atrocities Herod normally committed. Bethlehem was a small town, the number of baby boys under the age of two may not have numbered more than a dozen. How terrible does a person have to be that the cold-blooded murder of a dozen children is not seen as a big deal compared to the other stuff you did?

The Fulfilled Prophecy (Matthew 2:18; Jeremiah 31:15)

Matthew says that this happened as a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15 which says, "Thus says the Lord, A voice is heard in Ramah, Lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; She refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more."

Looking at Jeremiah, a couple questions stand out: Where is Ramah? Why is Rachel mentioned? Why is she weeping? And how does this connect to Bethlehem?

The context of Jeremiah is the people of Israel being carried off into exile in 586 BC. Ramah is the place where the Babylonians assembled their caravan of exiles to take into captivity. Rachel is pictured as weeping because she was viewed as the "mother" of Israel. It was connected with Bethlehem because this is where she was buried. According to Genesis 35:19, "Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)." So, the picture in Jeremiah is of Rachel weeping and mourning from her tomb in Bethlehem (6 mi. south of Jerusalem) and that wailing is heard in Ramah (5 mi. north of Jerusalem) by those who are being driven into exile.

But there is more to this passage. The next few verses are words of hope. Jeremiah 31:16-17 says, "¹⁶ This is what the LORD says: "Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; For your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD, "And they will return from the land of the enemy. ¹⁷ There is hope for your future," declares the LORD, "And your children will return to their own territory."

The Lord tells Rachel to have hope because this isn't the end of the story. The section concludes with the promise of the new covenant. Jeremiah 31:31 says, "Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." Sorrow does not have the last word. Rachel may try to refuse to be comforted, but God will comfort her anyway.

In focusing on this passage. Matthew isn't saying the passage in Jeremiah predicts a slaughter of babies. Matthew is showing us how the tears of the Bethlehem mothers mirror the tears of those going into Exile. In the midst of suffering, we have the promise of God that sorrow doesn't have the last word. The true Son of God is here. He is going into "exile" in Egypt. The new covenant is beginning and will culminate in the undoing of sin and death.

The Further Promise

This has to be one of the hardest prophecies to discuss. It raises a lot of uncomfortable questions like: Did God cause this to happen? If God could save Jesus, why couldn't He save the other babies too?

It's okay to ask these kinds of questions. No question should be off limits. If we are going to grow our faith in God, we must be clear about what our obstacles to faith are. Here are a couple things to keep in minds as you wrestle with this topic.

- **God Didn't Cause:** It's worth saying right from the start. God didn't kill the children in Bethlehem. Herod did. God gives each of us freedom. That freedom is the power to do real good and real evil. Herod chose real evil. Why didn't God stop Herod? I don't know. But part of the answer is that would be taking away freedom. Why didn't God warn the rest of the families in Bethlehem, too? First, we don't know if He did or not. He might have but they didn't understand. Second, again I don't know. It's okay not to know. Maybe Herod would have killed even more people. Maybe if Herod came into town and found no children under the age of two, he would have suspected a coverup and killed everyone in the town. But ultimately this is all speculation. The one thing we can say for sure is that God didn't cause this. Herod did. He used his God-given freedom to harm others.

- **God Cares:** Sometimes we think that when God could've stopped something but didn't, that He doesn't care. But that is not the case. He is deeply moved by the pain we all are going through. In the Jeremiah passage, God comforts the woman who refuses to be comforted. In the New testament, we have John 11:35, which says, "Jesus wept." The shortest verse in the Bible. But maybe one of the most profound. Jesus was moved to tears at the suffering and pain He saw while standing at the tomb of Lazarus, His friend whom He was about to raise from the dead. He knew what He was about to do. He knew that weeping was about to turn to amazement and joy. But He didn't mock them or chastise them for their grief. He wept with them. "Jesus wept" is proof that Jesus cares about us and the pain we are going through.

No matter how insignificant it may seem to others. No matter that one day He will undo all the sin and evil and pain in the world. Right now, in the midst of your grief, Jesus grieves too. In the midst of your tears, Jesus cries too. Jesus knows your pain, and it hurts Him too.

• God Conquers: It's important to realize that God doesn't promise us the absence of evil. He promises that He will defeat evil. Jesus told His disciples in John 16:33: "In the world you have tribulation but take courage; I have overcome the world." It is hard for us to comprehend, but God decided that the best of all possible worlds was not a world in which evil never existed, but a world in which evil existed but was conquered. And God is in the process of conquering it. The cross and the empty tomb were the start. But they are not the end. Revelation 21 says to us that one day God will remake everything into a new heaven and new earth. When He does so, Revelation 21:4-5 promises that "and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." ⁵ And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." We have the promise from God that every place where evil, sin, and death claim a victory, it will be overturned. He will restore everything and make it new again. He will wipe away every tear from every eye.

This prophecy might not give the whole answer to the problem of evil. But it does give us reason to hope in the midst of affliction that the evil of this world doesn't catch God off guard. Evil doesn't defeat God or derail His plan. He knew it would happen. He is undaunted by it. He gives grace in the midst of it. He is triumphing over it.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever felt like there were questions you wanted to ask but couldn't? What are they? What did you do with those questions?
2. Have you ever wrestled with the problem of evil?
3. How do we sometimes blame God for evil? How does it help to remember that Herod killed the children not God?
4. How does God comfort us in the midst of suffering? Have you ever felt the comfort of God?
5. God doesn't promise us the absence of evil. What does He promise us?

From Nazareth: *Hope for the Unloved*

Matthew 2:19-23

by Steve Jones

I went to graduate school in Philadelphia. Moving up there from Texas, where I went to undergraduate, was quite an experience. Through a series of connections, I discovered I had a friend who had an aunt who lived in Philly and went to a church that had a list of church members with rooms and garage apartments for rent. I made my way through the list calling and asking for information. One phone call was going extremely well. The room sounded like a perfect situation in a perfect location. As I chatted with the woman who was renting out the room, it appeared she thought I was going to be an ideal renter for her. But that was when things took an interesting turn. She asked if I wanted to come see the room and determine if it would suit my needs. I told her that I couldn't right now because I was currently living in Texas but would be relocating to Philly at the end of the month. She responded with a gruff, "the room is taken" and hung up. Bewildered but still needing a room, I continued calling down the list. Amazingly, none of the rest of the rooms on the list were for rent any more. One later call stands out in my mind. As I approached the bottom of the list, the person who picked up interrupted my brief introduction with a curt, "Are you the religious nut that has been calling people?" Dumbfounded and at a loss for words, I don't remember how I got off the phone. Evidently that first woman had called her friends and warned them about me. Everything positive about me was swallowed up by what appeared to her as a universal negative: I was from Texas. That label carried with it a list of things that the person assumed was true about it, and because of it, she wanted nothing to do with me.

The story has a happy ending. After a few more bizarre twists and turns, it all worked out. I found a perfect room, at a perfect place, at a perfect price. But that experience has always served as a reminder about how we all use labels to identify and exclude people. And how those labels are frequently things that the people can't control.

Have you ever felt like you were the wrong king of people? Like you were excluded or unwanted because of something about you that you couldn't control. Have you ever felt like things would be different for you if only you were born in a different place, looked different, or had access to different opportunities?

We have been looking at the prophecies fulfilled in the Christmas story. Today we are going to look at the last of these prophecies. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fulfill prophecy by settling in Nazareth. Matthew 2:23 says, "This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene." This is more than another impossible occurrence. It is a message of hope for the unloved and excluded.

The Full Story

- Joseph Returns (v19-21): Herod was the primary threat to Jesus. He feared all rivals. He had killed three of his sons and had tried to kill Jesus. Once he was dead, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus would be free to return. Herod did in fact die in 4BC. This is important for it means that Jesus was probably born between 6 and 4 BC. Perhaps you are wondering how Jesus could be born between 6 and 4 BC if BC means "Before Christ." Well, the BC/AD system of counting years was developed by a monk in the early Middle Ages named Dionysius Exiguus (which means Denis the Short). Unfortunately, Denis's calculations were off by a few years. So, we shouldn't be worried that Jesus was born between 6 and 4 BC. The main point is that Herod tried and failed to kill Jesus but did in fact die himself not long after. After Herod's death, an angel again appeared to Joseph in a dream and tells him to return to Egypt. Joseph woke up and immediately obeyed. This is the third time that Matthew tells us about a dream Joseph had and his immediately obedience when he woke up (Matthew 1:24. 2:14).

- Joseph Relocates (v22-23): On the way back to his homeland, Joseph learns that Herod's son, Archelaus, was ruling in Judea. When Herod died, the Roman empire divided Herod's kingdom into four parts. Two parts, which included Judea, Samaria, and Idumaea, were given to Archelaus. The other two parts were assigned to Herod Antipas and Herod Philip, also sons of Herod, who each got the title Tetrarch, which means ruler of a fourth part. Antipas ruled the region of Galilee and Perea. Philip was assigned Batanea, Trachonitis and Auranitis. Archelaus was as cruel as his father and a poor ruler. He was removed from rule in 6 AD and a Roman procurator was assigned to govern in his place. Warned again by a dream, Joseph settles in Galilee, specifically Nazareth.

The Fulfilled Prophecy

Settling in Nazareth fulfilled prophecy. Matthew 2:23 says, "This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

But where does that prophecy come from. This one is trickier to pin down. Notice, this verse probably looks different in your Bible than the other prophecies in Matthew so far. It's not written in all capital letters like all quotes from the Old Testament normally are. There is no footnote in your margin telling you the Old Testament reference. Matthew even uses the plural "prophets" instead of the singular "prophet" which he used for the previous four prophecies.

So, what is Matthew talking about? One thought is that he is referring to Isaiah 11:1, which says "then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit." The Hebrew word for "branch" is naser. That means the name Nazareth can be roughly translated as "Branch town." Some people evidently thought that this was a subtle reference to where the Messiah would be from.

There must be more, though. If this was all there was, Matthew would have quoted the Isaiah passage like he had done with the other prophecies. This suggests that Matthew had no specific OT quotation in mind; indeed, these words are found nowhere in the OT. It is more likely that people in Jesus's day were connecting two ideas common in Jewish thinking.

First, the Old Testament is full of references to the fact that the Messiah would be despised. Psalm 22:6 says, "But I am a worm and not a person, A disgrace of mankind and despised by the people." Isaiah 53:2-3 which says, "² For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, And like a root out of dry ground; He has no stately form or majesty That we would look at Him, Nor an appearance that we would take pleasure in Him. ³ He was despised and abandoned by men, A man of great pain and familiar with sickness; And like one from whom people hide their faces, He was despised, and we had no regard for Him."

Second, people in Judaea despised people from Nazareth. "Nazarene" was a slang or idiomatic term for an individual from a very remote or obscure place (much like our contemporary words hick or hillbilly). For example: In John 1:46, when Philip invites Nathaniel to come see Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel responds, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

Even other Galileans despised people from Nazareth. Later on, the followers of Jesus are called "Nazarenes" as a way of mocking and insulting them. (Acts 24:5).

If Joseph had returned to Bethlehem, Jesus would have been referred to as "Jesus of Bethlehem," which would carry with it Messianic overtones because of its association with David. "Jesus the Nazarene," on the other hand, is a term of contempt and scorn. Jesus went to Galilee so that what was written about Him in the prophets would be fulfilled: He would be despised, rejected, and looked down on by those He came to save.

The Further Promise

Once again, like the other prophecies, being from Nazareth is more than a prediction. It is a message of hope. We all go through times where we feel like an outcast or that we don't fit in, that we are the wrong kind of people. Jesus being a Nazarene offers hope to all of us when we feel unloved or overlooked by the world. He became one of the most despised and unloved people in His day so that He could demonstrate to us all that no one is unloved by Him, and remind us that God is in the business of using the people the world thinks are useless in order to accomplish His purposes.

One of the other prophecies the early Christians claimed Jesus fulfilled was Psalm 118:22, which says, "A stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." Jesus is the definition of someone the world didn't want, but who was exalted by God.

We can trust that when we feel like the world has overlooked us and excluded us, that we are seen by God and loved. Jesus says in Matthew 10:29-31, "²⁹ Are two sparrows not sold for a penny? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ But even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So do not fear; you are more valuable than a great number of sparrows."

We can trust that our lives are in God's hands not in the hands of those in the world who claim power over us. And we can trust the promises contained in 1 Peter 5:6-7, "⁶ Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you at the proper time, ⁷ having cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares about you."

God is strong, when you feel powerless. He is calling you to submit to Him and not to those in the world who promise success in exchange for submission. God is wise and is calling you to trust that He has a plan that is for His glory and your good. God loves you and wants you to cast all your worry upon Him and see if He doesn't sustain you in the meantime.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever been overlooked or excluded because of something about you that you couldn't control? How did that make you feel?
2. How many times does an angel appear to Joseph? What does he do immediately afterwards?
3. Where does the idea that the Messiah will be a Nazarene come from?
4. What further hope and promise does this prophecy give about who God is and why we can trust Him? What does Psalm 118:22 mean?
5. How do we normally respond when we feel overlooked or excluded by the world? What do verses like 1 Peter 5:6-7 show us to do?

