

Hurry and Wait: the Long Road to the Cradle

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[0 : 00] All right, what I'd like to do with you now, it's going to take me a minute to set up. So let me just do a little brief introduction. My name is Rick, but I'd like to turn our Bibles to the book of Matthew.

Matthew chapter 2 is where we're going to begin to read God's word together. And I'm going to invite you either in body or spirit to stand with me as God's people stood. Not yet. Hold on one second.

Let me just set up. Because this is one of the primary places where we encounter God together as the body of Christ. And it is good to be here with you all this morning.

It's nothing like, it's hard to get away from our small church and to preach elsewhere. And so having this opportunity, even though it shakes things up, we all kind of need this in our lives, is to do something different.

So I'm excited to be here with you. It's a privilege to be here. My family couldn't make it. They're like, we're not getting up that early, Dad. And which I can appreciate. Let me just set this up.

[1 : 03] Got a little different setup than I'm accustomed to. So I think we're good. Can you see it on your end? We're good?

We don't need it. Yeah, okay. I just wanted to make sure. I didn't know if I was messing something up. If I do, I apologize, by the way. But if you could please stand with me, as God's people stood at the foot of a mountain, so too we stand, just to recognize that this is one of the primary places where we do encounter God together and his target area of God's grace, his church, his body. And I'd like to start in verse 1 of chapter 2 of Matthew and then read all the way until we get to verse 12 together this morning. After Jesus was born in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east, just a heads up, would be unexpected visitors in this story, just like there's unexpected people showing up in his genealogy.

So, too, we have unexpected visitors here. From the east came to Jerusalem and they asked, where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

And when King Herod heard this, he was disturbed and all of Jerusalem with him. And when he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

[2 : 25] In Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, for this is what the prophet has written. But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. And then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, go and search carefully for the child.

As soon as you find him, report to me so that I, too, may go and worship him. And after they had heard the king, they went on their way. And the star that they had seen when it rose went out ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

And when they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary. And they bowed down and they worshipped him. And then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. These are the human, yet nonetheless, the inspired words of God.

[3 : 31] Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, much of the Christian life, if you think about it, and that I also include our reflecting on God, in particular, his goodness.

What he's up to, what he's done in the past, what he's up to now in terms of pouring out his spirit. What he's going to do in terms of the new heavens and the new earth, all of that. When we take a step back and we reflect on God's goodness, or when we make space. Because a lot of the Christian life is less frenetic. It's less frantic. It's actually less shoving more stuff in. It's more taking a step back and allowing God to move in and using C.S. Lewis language here. Allowing God to move in and to rearrange the furniture, ultimately, of our lives. A lot of that takes time, if we're honest. It takes a long time. Am I connected? It's not connected. It isn't.

[4 : 45] My apologies. I just plugged it in. Nothing yet.

And it should be a blank slide there. Okay. And all of God's people say. All right. This is going to throw me off, so I apologize. A lot of the Christian life takes a lot of time.

But some of what God does happens really, really quickly. It happens really, really rapidly and decisively and immediate. And so some of the work that God does in our lives and the world happens fast.

And that tension shows up throughout the scriptures. And probably one of the more iconic places that that shows up in the scriptures is none other than the story of the Exodus. When God rescues his people out of the Egyptians and out of the hands of oppression.

And preparing for Israel or preparing Israel for their liberation day. Preparing them for, ultimately, their freedom. God tells them, don't add yeast to the bread.

[5 : 50] You're not going to have time for that. And the reason is he knows that he's about to rescue them in a manner of an evening. He knows that he's going to rescue them in a manner of a night.

And so there's not going to be any time for that. And if you know how important bread was, I hear that the food pyramid has been flipped. But in the ancient world, bread was where primarily everybody got their nutrients.

We're a little comfortable in the sense of, like, we can choose our different options. But for a lot of the ancient world, almost everybody got most of their sustenance and their nutrition from bread.

And so you can imagine the angst here. You're not going to have any time to be sitting around because God's at hand. God's deliverance is at hand. And so where is it going to be time to sit around and wait for your bread, you know, ultimately to rise?

And this gets encapsulated in that passage of Exodus with the dough, Exodus 12:39. With the dough, the Israelites had brought from Egypt. They baked the loaves of unleavened bread.

[6 : 48] And the dough was without yeast because they had been driven out of Egypt. And they did not have time, right, to prepare food for themselves in this way. To this day, those seemingly inconsequential words have been enshrined in the celebration and the use and the tradition of matzah.

And some of you are aware of what matzah bread is. Jews around the world, globally, religiously, or religious Jews, they will still use matzah in their Passover celebrations.

There are even Christian Jews that will use that in their communion services to tie that full story.

And it's not just that. Protestants, we use flatbread, actually, next week we will when we celebrate communion together in our church.

We still kind of harken back to the Passover, to the rescue in this way. So every year, the purpose of all of this kind of foodie theology is to remember the moment when God acted quickly.

To remember when God acted decisively. But also to teach the next generation that this is the way that God can move. No matter what metaphorical Egypt you might find yourself in, that God can act quick, urgent, immediate in this way.

[8 : 01] And it's with that sense of urgency that Israel was to prepare. It was with that sense of immediacy that they had to be ready to leave their oppression.

But that's also true in our own lives. In the Christian story, that's also true in terms of the salvation that we've been given. Now, similarly, there's another place where this speed and this immediacy comes in.

Similarly, in the book of Numbers, if you're familiar, they're in the desert, and they almost immediately forget what God had just done. And there's testing, and they rebel against what God tells them, and they forget.

And so there's this call to respond to God, to return back to him, and to obey. And Psalm 95 will actually pick that up in that theme. And somebody, is it Steve?

Steve, right? Okay. Read from this this morning as well. But today, if you would just hear his voice. And the emphasis is today, now. If you would just return to this God.

[8 : 59] Hear his voice when he calls. Don't harden your heart as you did in Meribah. Don't harden your heart as you did in the wilderness. And this same kind of immediacy and urgency you find in the New Testament, even for followers of Jesus.

The book of Hebrews will use the same kind of language. For those who follow and love this God who has first loved us, they are also called to respond to God's voice. In fact, in Hebrews 3, it will use this same passage from Psalm 95 in a manner of one chapter.

In fact, just a few subsequent verses. Today, if you hear his voice. Emphasis, not later. Now.

Today. Don't harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion during the time of the testing in the wilderness.

Today, if you hear his voice. Again, don't harden your hearts. And what's the emphasis here? Now. There's no time to wait. We're called to respond to this God. So those who love this God who has first loved us.

Those who desire to follow this God who has moved in. Actually, it's so for us that he became one of us. Will respond to the voice that he calls by name, each of us.

[10 : 05] With a sense of urgency. Right? With a sense of immediacy. I bring that all up because most of the Christian life isn't like that. Most of the Christian life is not that urgent.

And most of the Christian life isn't that immediate. And it's not just that. It's not that. If you go all the way back to Israel's story.

Just bear with me for a minute. And right after the Passover, where do we find Israel? We find them in the desert. We find them heading to Mount Sinai.

Which isn't the quickest way, in fact. And so I want you to focus on three different lines here in this slide. There's three different colors. If you're colorblind, I apologize. First of all. Because this is going to be a little difficult.

I don't know if you guys can make that out. There's the red line. And there's a black line that heads towards two different versions of Sinai. There's disagreement on where that. The red one is the more recent understanding of where Sinai could be.

[11 : 06] So there's different variations of where they travel. The green one is the shortest route to the promised land. In fact, to put it in perspective, it's about the distance I traveled to get here this morning.

It's give or take. It's about 75 miles to get to where God ultimately wanted to bring them. He could have brought them that way. And we find out that if he had, they might have lacked the faith and the trust.

Because they would have run into the Philistines. And they were also the Sea Peoples. They had a certain kind of military might. And they might freak out and turn around. And they would maybe even want to go back to slavery, as you see that theme in the Old Testament.

He could have taken the shortest route. And he doesn't. He brings them the long way. He instead takes them the long way.

And the contrast between Exodus 12 and Exodus 13 is not just striking. I think it's incredibly instructive. Israel leaves Egypt how fast?

[12 : 03] Quick. Now. Immediate. In a manner of an evening. Where God would ultimately bring them. In terms of the promised land. That would take forever.

Right? If you really think about it. 400 years of bondage. 400 years of oppression. 400 years of slavery. Eradicated in an instant. But the road that he was about to bring them. In terms of where he ultimately wanted to bring them.

That took a lifetime. In fact, that 75 miles took about 40 years. Of them wandering around in the desert. This image of the way in which God tends to work with his people.

And in our lives. That lesson is beautifully told in an ancient Talmudic story. If you know the Talmud. There's a lot of different rabbinic stories in there. And this rabbi is trying to get to the city. We don't know what city.

But maybe it's Jerusalem. And he's trying to get to the city. And he comes to this juncture. These two different roads. And there's a boy standing there. And he says, which route should I take? I'm

trying to get there quick.

[13:02] And he says, well this road, the boy said, is short. But it's long. But this road here. This road is long. But it's short. And the rabbi is like, I'm going to take the short road. So he gets on the short road.

And he starts to find himself in olive groves. In orchards. In gardens. There are farmers trying to prevent him from getting to where he needs to go. He can never gain access to this city.

So he gets so frustrated. He turns around. He goes back to that juncture. And he says to that boy, my son, why did you tell me that that road was short? And the boy responds immediately by telling him, didn't I also tell you it was long?

And that story cleverly teaches that looks can be deceiving. This actually happened to my wife and I. We were traveling back from San Francisco. We were serving a church in the San Francisco Bay Area for about a summer.

It was great. And on our way back, we tended to, we've gone back and forth across the country a bunch of times. We had two little kids in the back seats. One in the oven. Our youngest, my wife, was carrying about seven months pregnant.

[14:05] And we were going to whip through, I guess, the national parks, if you can do such a thing. And we were going to visit some friends in North Dakota on our way. So we were on the second day, and we had to get to Billings.

But we were in the, we drove through the, we didn't stop anywhere. We just drove through and looked around the Grand Tetons, and we get to Yellowstone. So we're on the southwest corner of Yellowstone.

We have to get to Billings. And it's already late afternoons. We have these hangry kids in the back, and they're getting a little restless. And we're trying to get to the northeast corner. And we see these various routes that you can take, because we had a map.

Now, some of you don't know what a map is. A map's a book, and it's got paper in it. And it has, and they're big. And I'm sure it was like a hand-me-down, so like you're missing states like Oklahoma and Iowa, places that you don't want to go anyhow.

But, so you're, we have this map with pages, and you can write on it. Some states are missing. And in one of the routes, because you're like measuring, okay, this route's going to add about two to two and a half hours, and it goes around.

[15:08] But then we find a route that cuts diagonally through Yellowstone. And we're like, great. Except we're flatlanders. Well, yes, I am. My wife's from Honduras.

And so she, but I've, I mean, living in the Midwest can affect you. And so, like, we're not taking topography into consideration, which you should. So we're cutting, and we're, we're driving, and we find ourselves here.

Some of you are very familiar with that area. We find ourselves in Beartooth Pass at about, the elevation was like 10,900 feet. And it's dark. Or at least it's getting dark.

I didn't tell you that we were pulling this trailer, this little camper. We had a little tiny Volkswagen, and we're driving with this little pop-up camper, which we bought in Modesto, only to put bikes on. We didn't even camp.

To this day, I get mocked, but we never camped in it once. We just used it to, like, carry stuff. And so I don't know what it was. It could have been that I was used to a light car, and I never really had to think about it.

[16:07] Because I had had a manual before. This was an automatic. And I left it in drive. So I never put the load on, on the transmission, the power train. I put it on the brakes and the rotors.

And that's a no-no, I guess. Because when I started to put my foot on the brake, I put it to the floor, and we're gaining speed. And I'm pretty sure that's not how cars work.

You put foot on brake, and you stop. So I'm pushing my brake pedal in. We're not slowing down. We're actually speeding up. And we're hurling towards the edge of a cliff. I've only had a couple times in my life where I say, this is how I go.

I've had a few moments like that. This is one of those. What made it so worse is that there was others in there, and this is how we go. So I pull my emergency brake. And fortunately, we stop just before we hurl over a cliff.

My wife, thankfully, doesn't give birth. And we sit there. Because it was one of those moments where it is grateful, truly. And spoiler alert, we live. I'm here. But we stopped, and we took the

slowest way down.

[17:13] I mean, we just went like two miles an hour, and it took forever to get to Billings. I don't know what hour we got there. But it was late. And we learned that the short way was not only the most treacherous way.

This is actually a little picture. I don't know if you can make that out. Maybe not. You can see it better on that one. But the little Volkswagen. My son's hanging out the window wishing for other parents who know what they're doing. And this is a drawing that they did.

So this is clearly, clearly wasn't emotionally traumatic enough where they like drew us flying off a cliff. So I guess it was still, but there was clearly tension in the car enough for them to draw.

But we learned that the short way was not only the treacherous way, the dangerous way. In fact, we almost died. And we can all be tempted by the immediate.

Especially in our culture, we can be tempted by the immediacy of things. But sometimes the long way is not only, indeed, the faster way. It's actually, in our case, that day was the safest way.

[18:17] And the rabbi learned this the hard way, that the long way is often the short way. And this is true in our Christian life. But these dynamics, they're in tension with one another in terms of the Christian faith. Because there are times where God moves quick and swift and decisive, even in our own lives.

But then there's also this slowness to the Christian life. And we see this, like, even if you watch, like, a five-star chef or a Michelin chef or, you know, an artisan baker. And you just watch the years of dedication to reach certain culinary levels and skills.

And not only that, so much of their time, they spend so many long hours just sourcing the freshest, the most flavorful ingredients. But then the baking part or the cooking part happens very quickly because of chemical reactions.

But if you're not paying attention to both speeds, if you will, the long and the short, the whole thing can be for naught. The whole thing just doesn't work. And it's why most of us don't reach those kind of culinary levels.

And it's why people like me end up just depending on allrecipes.com and things like this. But Israel would have to wrestle for years as God brought them to the place that he ultimately, the goal that he wanted to bring them in terms of the land.

[19:25] But that long way, and here's my big point, that long way happened in an evening. That long way which God wanted to bring them up happened in an instant.

Or we could say in the Christian faith, when Christ was born unto you. When he was born in that manger. When he walked amongst us. Ultimately dying and rising.

Now why does this matter? Because when God speaks and he calls each of us by name, and he does. When God moves in amongst us, when he calls us. We are, we should be those eager to respond to him with a kind of, in a sense of immediacy.

And a desire to respond to his voice when he does call us. But it's also true that it can take years to become the kinds of persons who desire to obey.

And I want to focus on that word desire. Not out of, well this is what I kind of grew up with. This is kind of what I say every Sunday. But it can take years to become the kinds of people who desire.

[20:29] Out of a deep sense of gratitude and thanksgiving for what Christ has accomplished. To want to follow and to do his will. It can take years just learning how to submit to him.

And I know that's a four letter word in our culture. Submission because of our individualist culture. We don't submit to anyone but ourselves. And ultimately our goals and dreams and aspirations. But it can take years of submitting to him in the smallest of details in our lives.

It can take years of just belonging to a community as rich as this one. And what you guys have together. It can take years of belonging together. And I know even that has sadly in the Christian faith slowly being thrown out as if it's not necessary.

And I highly recommend people to go back to their New Testament. And look at the ways in which Christ has formed this community around himself. To which he is the head. It can take years of performing just the smallest seemingly inconsequential acts in our lives.

And I always think about that when you think of certain saints. And I think of that in terms of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. What were all the little things that nobody noticed in terms of obedience that led him in a predominantly Christian culture to finally be courageous enough?

[21 : 43] Like what were all the things that nobody noticed? What were all the little ways in which he was obedient in this way? It can take years to becoming the kinds of people who don't just speak the things that we speak this morning.

Or sing the songs that we sing. But actually become those who embody those things that we say we believe. I'm going to give you the weirdest of stories. So I grew up in Michigan. Which then means that I'm a University of Michigan fan.

So I grew up. And I'm sorry if sports are nothing to you. That's fine. I'm pretty simple. There's only one team I follow. It's the University of Michigan. Though I heard another team play last night. And I'm sorry. I watched it. There was a Michigan player that did pretty well for the Bears.

But Colston Loveland. But so. And sports are a lot like Christianity. You don't get to choose who you get to cheer for. And if you did, you would choose a different team.

But so University of Michigan fan. We had a football coach recently in the news for all the wrong reasons. He was given the position for two years after a pretty well-known coach.

[22 : 44] And when I say he said all the right things. You know. It's team over me. The team, the team, the team. Nobody's greater than the team. That actually wasn't his line. That was a previous coach. He said process over the prize.

It's about the details. He would even show up to press conferences with blue collar jacket. To evoke that idea that he was. You know. That this is what we're doing. We're focusing on the details.

Except he was living completely opposite of that.

It got so bad that not only was he cheating on his wife. He has three daughters. It got self-destructive. Where he almost harmed himself when he lost his job. And even harmed others.

So he was stating all of the things.

He was talking about all of the things that makes up a coach. He just wasn't the embodiment. He hadn't become those things. And I don't think God's grace is zero-sum game. I think God can meet him where he is at in the ashes.

It doesn't mean there's not consequences. But God can meet him in the ashes. Even that he's formed around him. But when God moves in. And he does. And when he's born amongst us.

[23 : 45] And he was. That's one thing. But being ready to receive him. That's a holy other. Being ready to follow. That's a holy other. Being ready to obey him by his grace.

That's a wholly different other thing. It requires a kind of arduous, painstaking discipleship. A consistent daily dying to ourselves. And rising in him. Years of slowly and intently and patiently being formed by this God's grace.

Learning how to accept criticism with a sense of humility. Learning how to repent. Rethinking our lives from the bottom up through God's lens and through his grace.

Listening attentively. Speaking truthfully. Cultivating humility. And ultimately the character of Christ.

And that's not even to mention loving our neighbors. Praying for those who persecute us.

Loving those who have been deemed or we've deemed our enemies. All of that can take a lifetime. And you'll note that all those things I just mentioned. They all include other people.

[24 : 47] We cannot become those who are formed by Christ without the body. We learn these things in the proximity of others.

And one of the reasons that is is because being formed by God's grace is not the same thing our culture calls finding ourselves or discovering ourselves. It's not that ourselves don't matter. It's just that we find our true selves when we lose ourselves in him.

And we continue to be formed by him. It's more like God finding us and then placing us amidst his community and then shaping and forming us accordingly. And all that's not to mention exercising caution and doubting God's goodness.

Or resisting disbelief in terms of the ways in which God reveals himself. Or receiving his Holy Spirit's guidance. Or even those prompts that we tend to ignore. And let me just share something quickly personally.

I was just with someone. A widow. So literally her husband just died. And I'm getting it. She has two phones. His phone and her phone. And he's getting all of these texts from all these people.

[25 : 48] Saying I meant to reach out years ago and I never did and I'm sorry. I meant to reconnect. Those things that we think are just my subconscious. Learning to have an antenna for the ways in which Christ and his spirit guides us and prompts us to do things.

And we're like I'll get to it in another day. Even learning that takes a lifetime. Respecting the long standing convictions of his church. Which go some of which all the way back to the apostles. I'm talking here the creeds and confessions. And persevering in that ongoing work of dying. Similar to a five star chef. Yeah similar to a coach who doesn't just say the thing but embodies what it means.

Similar to the visiting magi in this scene. God's call was how quick on their lives. It shows up out of nowhere. Similar to the Abraham story. It shows up immediate.

And it's unmistakable. They see the star and they rise. They're like who are these guys? They rise and they head immediately to follow that star until it rests over none other than Mary and child Christ our savior.

[26 : 51] But like their journey. The work of becoming the kinds of persons who are going to kneel and worship that child. The work and the diligence and the patience with ourselves and with God as we become the very kinds of people who give our allegiance to that child rather than to Herod.

That my friends it takes a lifetime. And just like the first people who came to worship him discovered. Recognizing his arrival. Recognizing that star in the sky.

That's just the beginning of the journey. Would you please pray with me? Our Father, Son, and Holy Spirit God.

You are the one who breaks chains in an instant. In an evening. One who leads us patiently through wilderness and through growth.

God, you speak. And Israel just walked out. The sea opens. The word becomes flesh and dwells amongst us. And God, if we're honest, we like that.

[28 : 02] We like the quick freedom. We like the being declared righteous part. But we often resist the slow transformation part. The deliverance without discipleship.

We like faith and trust without following. Christ without community. Arrival and resurrection without long obedience and dying. And yet you are wise.

You're wise in your grace. You're wise in your mercy. You know that what is freed in an instant, in a flash, still needs to be shaped and formed according to your will over years.

So God, we ask that you would lead us. Lead us the long way. Not because you're absent. But because you are indeed careful with us. And when God, we ask that you would give us patience.

Patience with you. But also patience with ourselves. Teach us to walk at your pace, not our own. To receive correction without bitterness. To learn obedience in all of the unremarkable ways.

[29 : 04] And God, we ask that you would save us from the lie that we can become whole on our own or in isolation from your body. Plant us amongst your people. Again, shape us through shared meals. Shape us through shared prayer.

Shape us through shared repentance. Shared grief. Shared burdens. Shared faith and shared hope. God, we thank you that our salvation doesn't depend on the speed of our growth.

But on the finished work of your son born among us, given and raised for us. That you've already done the decisive thing. So now, God, we ask that you would do the patient thing amongst us.

Make us ready. Make us ready for when you speak. Make us ready for when you call us to be obedient, when everybody else isn't. Make us ready to do maybe even perhaps a courageous thing.

Faithful as you form us. Until at last, that long road ends and we enter fully into the freedom of your presence. Where you've always been leading us all along. And we pray this in the name of the one who's come quickly.

[30 : 08] And the one who walks with us slowly and all of God's people say. Amen. This morning we have...