

Jesus' Exodus

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] If you wish to follow the passage that I'm preaching on, it's on page 784 in the pew Bibles in front of you, Matthew 2, 13 to 23.

When I was about 10, my favourite television programme was Batman and Robin. And I used to love the predicaments that Batman and Robin would end up in. They were the heroes, they were the ones who'd come to rescue others and save the world and Gotham City from evil and bad and the Joker and the Riddler and so on.

But invariably they ended up in peril, under threat of death, in dire consequences. And one wondered how on earth they were going to be rescued from their predicament.

I enjoyed a programme like Batman and Robin more than some others because it was always good fun when the hero got into strife. And was in danger. And though Matthew chapter 2 is of course much more serious than Batman and Robin's rather trivial exercises.

Nonetheless, there is a sort of parallel. In that Jesus, the saviour of the world, the one who's come to rescue the world, is in dire straits. In peril.

[1 : 18] His life under threat. The hero is the toddler, Jesus. Up to two years old perhaps. Rather than the Joker or the Riddler, it's bad King Herod.

The meanest guy in the whole town as we saw last week. The one who killed his own sons, his own wife. Many of the leaders of the nation of Israel.

Because he was so paranoid and neurotic about any threat that might arise to his own rule. So Herod killed anyone who represented any sort of threat.

And so when we read about him killing the baby boys in Bethlehem, though horrified we must surely be. Nonetheless, it fits entirely his character as known from other sources in history.

Jesus' life is in real danger. It's not a bluff. It's not a make-believe situation like Batman and Robin. This is real and serious danger for Jesus Christ.

[2 : 18] In some ways, it's a bit of a pity about the other boys in Bethlehem. We wonder why God couldn't have warned their parents as well. Yes, they were massacred in Herod's Holocaust.

Something of the horror of that I hope we saw on the video, which I think portrayed it well. This is not some gentle and nice story. But it's an awful Holocaust and massacre of the boys.

But then again, not all that many. Bethlehem was not a big place, not a significant place. And scholars suggest that maybe it was a dozen boys who would have been the target of Herod's slaughter.

Maybe 20 at the most. In little Bethlehem of 2,000 years ago. One of the things the incident tells us is that from the cradle to the cross, Jesus' life was one of danger, affliction, peril, trouble, persecution.

His was not an easy life. From the beginning to the end, he faced opposition that sought to bring about his death. That should actually be an encouragement to us in an ironic sort of way.

[3 : 30] An encouragement because when we pray to Jesus in our own affliction or toil or distress, he knows what it's like. He didn't have an easy life.

It wasn't an easy rescue mission. He didn't just walk in and pick up the stranded and take them home. Just like the rescue this week in the Southern Ocean, there was danger for those who are the rescuers as well as those being saved.

So when we are in trouble or sorrow or affliction, or even if our lives are in danger or under threat, when we pray to Jesus, we pray to somebody who knows what it's like.

That should be an encouragement. He not only sympathizes and empathizes with us, he understands what it's like. Because his own life, of course, in the end was taken unjustly and unfairly.

So that ought to be an encouragement to pray in our own affliction. He knows what it's like. So pray. He understands what it's like.

[4 : 35] So pray. But of course, this story is also an account of divine protection. At every step of the way, God protects his son.

Three times there are dreams, two of them with angels, to Joseph. Each time, warning, guiding, directing, so that the toddler Jesus, his mother, and Joseph will be protected and spared.

Sometimes when we read the Bible and see all these dreams and angels, we wonder why they don't occur today. So often, perhaps.

And yet, though that's possible, God speaking to us in dreams and via angels, it's not probably usual. The occurrences of angels and dreams in the Bible are not even that common there.

And they're gathered around highly significant events in history. And many of them occur at the birth of Jesus and in his early years. So maybe we shouldn't get too troubled about dreams and angels.

[5 : 46] They seem to occur at very significant times. God more commonly speaks to us through the Bible, through the words recorded for our benefit. Though, of course, it is still possible for him to convey words to us through dreams or angels.

The first dream and angel occur in verse 13. Now, after the Magi had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, Get up, take the child and his mother, notice the order, child first, then mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.

Egypt wasn't far, really, 75 miles perhaps from Bethlehem. And Jews for hundreds of years had often gone to Egypt for some sort of safety.

When the Babylonians 600 years before had conquered Jerusalem, many Jews fled to Egypt for safety. They settled there. They set up communities there.

One community had its own temple, probably wrongly, but it did. And indeed, archaeologists have found remains of it in the correspondence of those Jews to other Jews in Jerusalem of about 500 BC.

[7 : 05] We know that not long before Jesus' life, there were a million Jews living in Alexandria, the great city of Egypt. It was a very Jewish city. Many of the Jewish philosophers had lived there.

It was there at Alexandria that the Old Testament was translated for the first time from Hebrew into Greek. Egypt was a place of refuge for Jews in the time of Jesus, and many of them would have traveled there and come to and fro in trade or visiting people.

Joseph obeys the command, and he and Mary and the toddler go to Egypt by night, maybe suggesting urgency, maybe suggesting danger and peril.

Of course, maybe it was just cooler to travel at night. Meanwhile, in verse 16, Herod gets about his dastardly deeds, and he orders the killing of all the baby boys up to two years old in Bethlehem, and it surrounds.

Herod takes no chances. It doesn't necessarily mean that Jesus would be two years old, though he may well be on the way to that, but Herod takes no chances. He makes sure that every boy who could have been Jesus would be killed in that area, not only in Bethlehem, but also in its surrounds.

[8 : 25] We can imagine the paranoid Herod. He wouldn't want to overlook anybody. He wouldn't want to overlook anybody because they looked to be just a touch old. He would have set an upper limit that was beyond probably what Jesus would have been because he didn't want to run the risk of leaving untouched the one-born king of the Jews.

Herod eventually died, and an angel again and a dream again to Joseph in Egypt, this time in verse 19, said, Get up, take the child and his mother, and this time rather than go to Egypt, go from Egypt to the land of Israel, for those who are seeking the child's life are dead.

Herod, as I mentioned last week, died in 4 BC. Jesus was obviously born before then, maybe 5, 6, or 7, perhaps even some say 8 BC.

We shouldn't worry too much about the years of the calendar, as I said last week. Some monk in the 6th century AD got it wrong by a few years. There's almost perhaps a mockery here of Herod. Herod died. The one who sought to kill the Messiah is dead, but the Messiah lives. The triumph of those who are opposed to God, even in the depths of their evil, is in the end short-lived.

[9 : 50] God triumphs, and those who seek to thwart his plans and to kill his anointed themselves die, and God lives.

Reminds me of Psalm 2. Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and his anointed, saying, Let us burst their bonds asunder and cast their cords from us.

That's Herod, if anyone. But the psalm goes on. He who sits in the heavens laughs. The Lord has them in derision.

And there's something of that in this passage as well. Herod, the megalomaniac, the paranoid, the despot, the tyrant, dies, and God laughs in his heaven.

For those who seek to thwart God come to naught. Their evil is a folly, and God triumphs. And again, Joseph obeys the command of the dream and returns to Israel.

[11:01] He comes back from Egypt. Some scholars doubt that Jesus ever went to Egypt. Fairly sceptical people. And yet, interestingly, in a Jewish writing, a non-Christian writing, from the hundred or two hundred years after Jesus, in the Talmud, it says that Jesus learnt his miracles in Egypt.

Although we might doubt that, because it comes from an unbelieving source, nonetheless, it's interesting that it reflects the knowledge that Jesus himself had spent time in Egypt.

When Herod died, his territory was divided in three amongst three of his surviving sons. He had many sons and many were killed. But three survived. Philip, a good son, a wise man, it seems, a quiet man.

He was given the area called Trachonitis, which is modern-day Syria, the Golan Heights, to the north and to the northeast of the land of Israel. There, Jesus often went for refuge.

When it said he crossed the Jordan, he ended up in Philip's, when he crossed the Sea of Galilee, he often ended up in Philip's territory. It was safer. It was in Philip's territory, at a place that Philip built, Caesarea Philippi.

[12:13] Peter declared that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. One of Herod's other sons was Antipas, and he was given the area of Galilee. Galilee included places like Nazareth and Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida, part of the western side of the Sea of Galilee, the area where Jesus spent most of his growing up years and adult life.

He was a weak man, fairly unpleasant, not as bad as his father. It was he who was involved with the beheading of John the Baptist. It was he who was involved at Jesus' crucifixion.

And it was he who was Pilate's enemy, though he became his friend. And the third son was Archelaus, more like his father than any of the others. A very unpleasant man indeed.

He was given the area of Judea, round Jerusalem and so on, in the south of the land of Israel. Samaria in the middle, the west bank, or much of what's the west bank today. Samaria, of course, the Samaritans were the half-Jews, in a sense, opposed or hated by the Jews because of their mixed racial descent.

He was also given the area of Edom, enemies of Israel for so long in the Old Testament history, to the south in the desert and around the south of the Dead Sea. That was Archelaus' territory.

[13:36] He wanted to be king like his father, but the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus refused it. He withheld the title. He called him an ethnarch, something of great honour.

But Archelaus wanted to be king. When he ascended to his rule, one of the things he did was to slaughter 3,000 of the leading citizens. Not a very good way to start.

Made him very unpopular. The Jews, of course, complained. They sent a delegation to Rome to Caesar Augustus. And when later on in 6 AD, Archelaus himself went to Rome in order to claim the title of king, he found the obverse happened.

Augustus withdrew his rule entirely from him, took him out of office, sacked him, and put his own people in place, the Roman procurators. Bit like the current government of Victoria and local government, I suppose.

And that's why when Jesus was eventually crucified, it was a Roman who was in charge, Pontius Pilate. He was the Roman procurator, not the first, one of many.

[14:44] And he was the one there when Jesus was crucified. Archelaus, you see, was an evil man like his father, hated and despised. No wonder then that Joseph is afraid to return to Judea, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, when he hears that Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great, is king.

So we read in verse 22, but when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to go there. And so for the third time in this passage, there was a dream, no angel this time.

And after the warning from the dream, Joseph went away to the district of Galilee, where Antipas was the ruler. Not all that pleasant, but weak, relatively safe by comparison to Archelaus. And there in Galilee, Joseph and Mary settled in Nazareth from where they'd originally come, maybe a couple of years before. But it seems that while they're in Bethlehem, they'd settled there, maybe got some work there, then they'd gone to Egypt and now angels, it's God who's in charge. It's God who's protecting. It's God who's guiding. All of it is the initiative of God. God each time it's He who reveals the warnings through the angels and the dreams.

[16:03] And it's God who's sovereign also in the death of Herod. For those who oppose God come to naught. God is in charge. But the sovereignty of God is also seen in another important way.

Three times in this passage, what happens, we're told, fulfills something in the Old Testament fulfillment. It's God who's directing events. It's God who's mapped out His purposes for the world hundreds of years before and now bringing them to their climax and fulfillment.

It's also reminding us that God is a faithful God and that what He promised even hundreds of years before, He is fulfilling in His own time and in His own way.

So verse 15 said about coming out of Egypt, this was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet. And then in verse 17, speaking about the slaughter of the boys of Bethlehem, then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah.

And then in verse 23, talking about settling in Nazareth of Galilee so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled. Three times the emphasis is very clear.

[17:17] God is fulfilling what the Old Testament promised. And if you've been here the last two weeks and on Christmas morning you'll have seen the same thing. The birth of Jesus called Emmanuel fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah as we saw on Christmas Day.

And then last week the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem to fulfill the promise of Micah the prophet at the beginning of Matthew chapter 2. If we were to ask what Melbourne's defining moment was we may well say something like the Olympic Games.

It was that that put Melbourne on the map and defined it as a place. If we were to ask it of Australia we might say something like Anzac Day in 1915 or Federation or winning the America's Cup or something else that defines the nation and puts it in place.

Well for Israel there was no doubt that the defining event of its history was the exodus of about 1400 BC when Israel the nation had grown strong in Egypt but then in later years in Egypt had become oppressed enslaved by a despotic Pharaoh and then through various miracles led by Pharaoh out of Egypt through 40 years in the wilderness then under Moses successor Joshua into the promised land.

That was the defining event for Israel's history. In many ways it was rich in the promise of blessing in the land. All the promises of God had their gateway through the exodus.

[18:47] It was through that event through the Red Sea the wilderness to the promised land that all the promises of God seemed to have their fulfillment and yet in reality as Israel settled in the land it forfeited the lot through its disobedience its idolatry its misbehavior and immorality Israel forfeited all the promises of God.

The prophet Hosea understood that about 700 years after the settlement in the land about 750 BC Hosea recognized that God had brought Israel out of Egypt but that Israel had spurned God and despite God's enduring compassion and love Israel kept spurning God.

The exodus in effect Hosea was saying was in vain. It came to nothing and Hosea chapter 11 which begins with out of Egypt have I called my son goes on to say in effect that they will return to Egypt. Why? Because of their idolatry misbehavior and sin. That exodus was in vain Hosea the prophet is saying and so Hosea looks forward in effect to another exodus a time when Israel will really come out of Egypt and be restored to God and live perfectly with God.

Matthew knows Hosea the prophet he knows the context of the prophet and so when he quotes just a little bit of a prophet he has in mind the whole lot just like today we can sometimes quote half of a proverb or something but in our mind we know the rest so all we need to say is he who hesitates we know the rest by quoting a little bit it implies it all and that's how often the New Testament uses the Old Testament it quotes just a bit but because its writer and its readers understood the Old Testament by quoting a bit it implies it all so when Matthew Matthew says and quotes Hosea 11 verse 1 out of Israel out of Egypt have I called my son he's not just saying something trivial that Jesus has come out of Egypt that's obvious he's actually saying something far more profound that

just as Hosea said the original exodus was in vain and look forward to a real exodus when God's promises would be really fulfilled

[21 : 13] Matthew's saying here this is it Jesus is the one the real exodus not from slavery to Pharaoh but rather an exodus from slavery to sin the real exodus occurs through Jesus Christ and indeed the passage of Matthew chapter 2 both last week's and this week's resonates with echoes of the exodus Pharaoh remember tried to kill all the babies of Israel so that they wouldn't be a strong nation Herod tried to kill the baby boys of Bethlehem Pharaoh wanted to kill Moses himself Herod wanted to kill Jesus like Israel Jesus was in Egypt like Israel he left Egypt like Israel he spent 40 days in the wilderness compared to Israel's 40 years we'll see that in a fortnight's time like Israel going through the Jordan Jesus was baptized in the Jordan we'll see that next week as God brought Israel out of Egypt so did he bring Jesus out of Egypt as the warning came to Joseph or the promise came that those who sought to kill the child's life were dead it's almost an exact quote of a reassurance to Moses that he could return to Egypt because those who sought to kill Moses had also died time and time again the passage that tells of Jesus' birth the Magi and the threat of Herod resonates with echoes of the Exodus to show us that Jesus Christ is the real Exodus the one who brings from slavery to sin into freedom and all the realization of God's promises of blessing and land and bounty and prosperity and above all relationship with God as the children of God

Jesus you see is the true Israel the real Israel the real child of God all the hopes of the Exodus find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ well if the Exodus is Israel's high point the exile is its low point after living in the land for perhaps 800 years Israel had squandered its inheritance from God and lived in disobedience to him and in the end the Babylonians came they destroyed Jerusalem they burned down the temple and they carted off the leaders of the nation and killed many of the others it was a great catastrophe the nation mourned and lamented indeed the prophet Jeremiah wrote lamentations as a lament at the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC Jeremiah came from a little place north of Jerusalem called Ramah five miles north about the same distance north as Bethlehem is south of Jerusalem he bemoaned the destruction of Jerusalem and from Ramah the exiles would pass by on their way from Jerusalem to Babylon heading north along the road and then eventually through to Mesopotamia he would have seen from his home the Babylonians leading the exiles in chains the women mourning the loss of their children or husbands or parents that's why we read the first reading this morning from Jeremiah 31 the women mourning the women like Rachel mourning the loss of their children but again you see

Matthew understands his Old Testament the quote of the women of Ramah mourning the death of the children is not the end of the chapter in Jeremiah 31 remember how it went on as was read for us in the first reading by Judy it goes on to anticipate the return of God's people so after the weeping God says keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears for these that you're weeping for they shall come back from the land of the enemy there is hope for your future so don't weep because the wailing and the weeping is preliminary only to the joy and salvation that God will bring the exile won't be the end of the story the weeping is not the final word but rather in the future Jeremiah prophesied the return and restoration of God's people and now you see Matthew picks up on that and he's saying that in Jesus Christ is the return and restoration of God's people it didn't happen when they came back from Babylon and rebuilt the temple and settled in the land the restoration of God's people was still unfulfilled then for the remainder of the Old Testament times but Matthew is saying as he's already said in chapter 1 as two weeks ago as we saw the exile ends with Jesus Christ all the promises of restoration to God to his promises to the land to blessing to bounty and prosperity all of them find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ

Matthew you see knows his Old Testament and he knows that all the history of the Old Testament from the high point of the Exodus to the low point of the exile finds its culmination in Jesus Christ that's where it's heading for that's where it's looking for so he quotes bits of the Old Testament that are not actually predictions of Jesus they're just references to the history of Israel and he's saying that it is all directed to the toddler Jesus Christ what a legacy then is pinned on the shoulders of this little boy all the hopes all the promises of God find their culmination their amen their yes their fulfillment in him well they're the first two statements of fulfillment the third is more puzzling it's a good test if you're playing Bible trivia where does the quote at the end of Matthew 2 come from Jesus made his home in a town called Nazareth so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled he will be called a Nazarene you can search the Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi in Hebrew

Aramaic English or Greek and you won't find that quote so did Matthew get it wrong Nazareth isn't even mentioned in the Old Testament in all the lists of towns that Israel conquered or settled or built there's no Nazareth it's not there that's how insignificant it is today it's a thriving bustling Arab city it's quite large quite prosperous in a way a significant tourist spot with lots of industry but it wasn't then a tiny backwater little village so what's Matthew getting at in this quote why does he say that Jesus being settled in Nazareth with Joseph and Mary fulfills what the prophets say in the Old Testament theories abound many of them seem rather obscure some say that the word Nazareth is like the word branch and that Jesus is the branch of David others that it's like the law that would allow the brother-in-law to marry the wife or it was about special people set aside for God who would make vows not to cut their hair and so on all of that's a bit speculative

[28 : 39] Nazareth was the pits it was an unlikely place for the Son of God to live small despised people spoke of Nazareth like the English speak of the north or of Wales if you're a public servant in England the last place you want to go is the Swansea traffic control centre it's out of the way oh you know it's the last thing you'd want to do sort of like going to Canberra or Tasmania or even the western suburbs of Melbourne see it's Thomastown not Turak bit of a surprise for the Son of God but he's gone somewhere despised somewhere low somewhere unexpected somewhere common somewhere that's almost perhaps even idiomatic for a lowly despised place and maybe that's what's there maybe it was indeed an idiom so to say that he became a Nazarene is really in effect to say he became despised rejected out of the way an unlikely sort of hero's place you see Jesus didn't need to dwell in palaces he didn't want patronage of the wealthy the rich and the powerful but rather was despised unlikely for the one who had all the hopes of the Old

Testament pinned on him maybe that's what Matthew's getting at really is to say that it's fulfilling many prophets indeed who anticipated that the Messiah would not be the glorious king necessarily but rather one lowly humble and despised for he was despised and rejected a man of sorrows acquainted with grief as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not he was oppressed and he was afflicted by oppression and judgment he was taken away but of course that passage in Isaiah 52 and 53 also says behold my servant shall prosper he shall be exalted and lifted up and shall be very high and kings shall shut their mouths because of him it's an extraordinary toddler one on whom all the hopes of the Old

Testament find their fulfillment and yet one who is despised and rejected like that was it fair for those boys of Bethlehem to be killed was it fair that God didn't give their parents a warning and so in the church calendar on December the 28th we commemorate the slaughter of the innocents but then again you see it wasn't fair for God's own son to die on the cross either the perfectly innocent one God didn't escape the harsh penalty of death for his son but in his own time he died a horrible death on a cross perfectly innocent but died for us the God whose own son dies for us is hardly cruel for us reminds us that God doesn't save us from this world and from its evil from its terror or from its tyranny but he saves us in the midst of it and gives us an unshakable hope so that the weeping and wailing of this life will one day give way to the salvation and joy of the life to come reign to the who done who you