

Hope Beyond Christmas

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, folks. Turn with me, please, to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 2. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 2. I didn't know there wasn't any Sunday school this morning, so I'm going to try and keep this fairly short, because I know they'll have a short attention span if there's nothing planned for them as well. But the message this morning is very important.

So thank you to Ian for playing and to the singers for leading us in worship. We suddenly realized how much we appreciate your ministry, because Christmas Day, the singing was pretty dire. We really struggled with some of the carols on Christmas Day, but we got there, and it wasn't so bad. But really, you do make a big difference leading us in song. I've been encouraged as well, just before we read God's Word together, by those, this time last year or round about this time last year, we looked at various reading plans for 2024. We looked to quite a few, and I've been so encouraged to hear of people who have said, this was the plan that I stuck with as I went through 2024, and I'm coming to the end, and it was great to see Karen in hospital, and as I approached her bed where she was seated at the side, she was reading her Bible, she was reading Revelation, and that's the reading plan that I'm on. You finish with Revelation, I usually start with Genesis, and can I commend that to you, if you do nothing else between now and the bells on the 31st, determined to have a reading plan for 2025.

It's good to pick into various verses of the Bible, maybe you read a devotional book, and they might concentrate on a verse, give you some warm thoughts, but read the Bible systematically.

You might not decide to read the whole Bible in a year, but read it through, read books of the Bible through John's Gospel, whatever book that is, so can I really impress upon you, and I know I'm preaching to the converted here, most of you will do this, but make sure come January the 1st you have a good reading plan. I do commend to you the five-day reading plan that takes you through the Bible in a year. If you miss a day, you don't have to flog yourself, you've got two days where you can catch up as well. So the five-day reading plan, you can download it from the 26th of December, you're allowed to download that free of charge. It's a great reading plan. It looks at the Bible chronologically as well.

Anyway, let's read Matthew chapter 2, continuing the Christmas story, and I thought I would finish with this today. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

[2 : 39] We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him. 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. 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. When Herod, 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. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. And coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary. They bowed down and worshipped him. 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. When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, out of Egypt I called my son. When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious and gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity, who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled? A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping in great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted because they are no more. After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel. For those who are trying to take the child's life are dead. So he got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judah in the place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to go and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets that he would. We'll end our reading there. Let's ask for the Lord's help now as we come to understand this together. Our loving Father, Lord, of another year, this would be the last Sunday of our year,

Lord, and it's been good to reflect perhaps on highs and perhaps difficulties during 2024. But one thing is for sure, we do not know what 2025 will hold for us. So Father, as we come to consider your word now, we pray, Lord, that our confidence in you will grow, and that our hope and our faith in you, Lord, will be established as we consider this passage together. So Father, be with us, we pray. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Christmas is over. I was intrigued by the way Gerald started our service, thinking about Christmas is finished and all the hustle and bustle of that, because that's very much what I want us to look at just now. I don't know about you, but I like December the 26th, when all the Christmas stuff's laid and all that's finished. You don't hear it.

December 27th, 28th, it's all gone, and then it'll all ramp up for the new year as well. Christmas is such a strange, it's a very surreal time when it's simply the most wonderful time of the year, and it's log fires and toasted marshmallows and so forth, and it's simply not like that, and it's everybody's geared to trying to forget the misery that's out there for a moment, and then come the 27th. When you're back at work and everything's back to normal, the old problems loom large. The old problems don't go away, and it's such a busy, such a surreal time. Another time, another thing that I notice around about Christmas is things like this. This, a newsletter, family newsletters, I must confess, they do my head in. Just, it's, whether it comes from the States, I don't know where they come from, but I remember when we were at Bible College, and we parted company with loads of folk, they'd send us their new newsletters, and they were always such cheery things. We've had a great year. We were swimming in the Seychelles, scuba diving. Yeah, Johnny here's got a first in Oxford, and so-and-so has discovered a cure for cancer, and so it goes on, and you read these things, and you think, what world do these people live in? They really don't live in my world. There's no signs of difficulties. This was a hard year. I was diagnosed with this. This was hard. It is, it's just so false and so sugary-coated, and so we get one or two of them, and I must confess, we get the first paragraph, and we go, all right, Ben, we just think, it's just so unreal. You're not being honest. You're not completely honest in the real world. Christmas is a very surreal, everything is great, and it's all wonderful, and it's big food things, and what have you, but Christmas is set in real-life situation. We would love to forget about all the stuff we still have to face in January the 1st, and the 2nd, and the 3rd, and into February, and into March, but the Christmas story reminds us that the Bible doesn't allow us to sugarcoat everything, and that's what we read in the story that's before us. After the birth of Jesus, things that were messy when Jesus was born, but they became even messier after he was born, and you read of this in this thing here. So I want to look at three things that might encourage us for 2025. The first thing is this, pressure. As we go into 2025, there will be pressure placed upon us. We don't know what form that will come. We live in a world of darkness. Darkness is normal in our world.

Difficulties are normal. Sometimes we think that they are not, but it's part of our world, and then the Christmas story, it's set in a real world, at real events. When he came, there was much singing. There was much rejoicing, and we make much of that, don't we, in the carols that we sing, but it was also a time of great worry and great distress, and that is what you read in the passage before us. Life was very messy, even when Jesus was born. My wee grandson was supposed to be born in Edinburgh, but whatever happened, they moved him to Livingston, and I thought, this is great, nice and quiet, and the birth went very well, and we were pleased, and it seemed quiet, and I go, this is a nice place to be born, although they're a bit miffed because it doesn't have Edinburgh stamped on his birth certificate. Livingston. Who comes from Livingston? Sorry, I know another folk come from Livingston here, but anyway, they wanted Edinburgh. They didn't want Livingston, so they're a wee bit miffed. Livingston, really? I'd rather it was Edinburgh, so anyway, that's where they are, but Jesus' birth was messy. Mum and dad, at a time when mum and baby need TLC, you see the baby's born in a stable or in a cave, and at this time there's a deranged king on the throne, and you see this when he's tricked, just what happens there. He gave orders, verse 16, to kill all the boys in Bethlehem. It's quite shocking. Here's an image of a painting of this. There are various paintings, if you go into Google, some of them are very graphic at this time, and you can imagine mums holding their baby at this time, and this is the Christmas story. This is part of the Christmas story that this was happening in a horrendous, horrendous time when Jesus was born. He gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem. Herod was famous for his cruelty, and anybody that he thought was going to take the throne, even his sons, he put to the sword, even one of his wives as well, and Caesar

[11 : 54] Augustus, who was known for his brutality as well, he said, I would rather be Herod's dog than his son. He was notorious for his cruelty, and one of the famous carols that's often sung at this time, where the lyrics are not pleasant, so it's not often sung, but it's often played. It's the Coventry Carol, and it's part of a play, it was at that time, called The Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors, and this play was to do with the massacre of these boys. It's a play that centers around this that happens here. Some of the words of that say, O sisters, too, how may we do, for to preserve this day, this poor youngling for whom we sing, bye-bye, lalay, lalay. And it goes on like this all the time, it's like a lullaby, but it's very sad. It's about the death of these babies, and this was the world into which Jesus is born. He was not the exception, he was the rule.

And Matthew, the Gospel of Matthew, is the only historical reference to that. You wouldn't find this in other historical books, so much so that historians say, did this really happen? And yet, we shouldn't be surprised, because Bethlehem is such a nothing town. It just isn't noticed. Whatever bad things happen, if it happened in London, if it happened in some major city, we would notice it.

But when things happen in a nothing place, no wonder it's not even mentioned in a lot of the historical accounts. They didn't merit such attention. It might be that you'll go into 2025 and think, does God really see me? Does he know what's happening in my life? I'm just John from wherever.

Other families seem to be more impressive, but nobody really notices me, and the Lord does. It was into this fragile and sad and broken world that Jesus came. A virgin will conceive and give birth to a son. They will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. One thing is sure in 2025, God is with us.

I mentioned that newsletter that's all sweetness and light. At the same time, I remember getting a newsletter from my college principal. I kept in touch with him, David Smith, when I left the college, and he wrote his newsletter. At the same time, I was getting all these other newsletters where folk were living the dream, apparently. His wife was suffering from a brain tumor. She was going through chemotherapy.

[14 : 39] She subsequently died. In his new letter, he talks about the love for each other that had grown deeper over the years. But he says this, and he ends his newsletter like this. However beautiful life may be, its fragility and brevity highlight the importance of knowing that the journey we are on is merely at its beginning, and that the love which creates the meaning for our existence transcends this stage, and will become yet more real in the life that lies beyond death.

These reflections seem rather gloomy to some, especially as we approach the celebration of Christmas. But while the story of Jesus' birth is indeed filled with song and laughter, it is also overshadowed by suffering and death. The entry of love incarnate into this broken world was celebrated by angels, but also accompanied by weeping and great mourning. He goes on to say the Christmas story is utterly removed from the sentimental escapism of a consumerized holiday, and tells us that love, or rather love with a capital L, entered a world of pain and distress with a mission of redemption and transformation.

That is, that's what Christmas is about. God who comes into a broken world, into a broken life, with the view of transformation and of redemption. And I thought that was very powerful when I read that.

He realized that the love he had to his wife was only at the beginning of the journey. It would grow deeper and deeper as time goes on. The Bible insists that we look at the total event of Christ's coming, not just the singing and rejoicing, but the weeping and the mourning. But recognize that behind us, there is a God who loves and cares for us. So, secondly, let's look at protected.

In the midst of all this, we see that God is still in control in all of these events. Look at verse 13, when the Magi had given their gifts, they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.

[16 : 56] Get up, he says, take the child and his mother, escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. So, he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. Here is the knowledge of God.

He knows what's going to happen. He knows the situation into which this baby has been born, his son has been born. He knows the type of person that Herod is. He knows how Herod will respond to the good news. He knows, verse 13, that Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. The Lord knows. He knows you're 20, 24, even if we do not know. He knows what lies around the corner, but he knows what's needed. And that's what this story screams out. It is. Look at the imperatives.

Get up, take the child and his mother. Escape to Egypt, to a specific place. Stay there until I tell you. Herod is no match for the Lord. He will protect the little one. And God is able to lead and to guide and to protect us as a church and also us as individuals. He knows what's needed at any time.

And it's a great comfort that when we go into Twitter, we don't know what's needed. We do not know what's around the corner, but the Lord knows. He said, Herod is going to do this, therefore do that. This is going to, you're going to face this, John, so you will need this in 2025. The Lord did not just send us a savior and it was all singing and rejoicing. And that is it. He's with us during the dark times. He sees the dark times coming. And you remember Jesus' great high priestly prayer in John 17. It's great to remind yourself of this and to remind us that this is what Jesus wants for us always. And this is what we have. I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world, Jesus says. They were yours. You gave them to me that we belong to Jesus. I gave them the words you gave me. They accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you. They believed that you sent me.

I pray for them, he says. It's a great thought, isn't it? The Lord prays for us. He ever lives to make intercession for us. When you can't pray for yourself, there is always somebody praying for you.

[19 : 35] And that's the Lord himself. I'm not praying for the world, but for those you've given me. They are yours. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world. 2025. And I am coming to you, Holy Father. Protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. I'm coming to you now. I say these things while I'm still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. Wow. I'm looking at you just now. I'm trying to picture the joy, the full measure of joy that might be there. But the Lord prayed that not only you would know joy, that not only his joy, but the full measure of his joy. I don't think the Lord knew depression. I just don't think he knew that. Difficult times. Pressure. He set his face towards Jerusalem. But his hope was always in the Lord, that we might have the full measure of joy. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by the truth. That's why I was encouraging us to read God's word every day. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent you.

There's so much in this. The Father has given you to Jesus. He prays for you. He prays for your protection from the evil one, that you will know full joy, that you will be sanctified as you are sent into the world in 2025. What need we more? At a brother John's funeral, I read to you too, Peter 1. Let me remind you of what I read. His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life. That's a great encouragement. You can live a godly life in 2024 because of his great power through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these, he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped, like they had escaped to Egypt, having escaped to corruption in the world caused by sinful desires. We are protected by the Lord. Doesn't mean we won't suffer various things from the evil one. Without that, we would be ravished by him in 2025. But the Lord is all.

Sees and he knows. Thirdly, Methistle finish. Predicted. God was in control, control of all the sorrow. He saw it coming long before it actually arrived. He mentions this. He mentions three times.

This happened because it was prophesied. It was understood that this would happen. He prophesied the sorrow. Verse 17. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled. A voice in Ramah weeping in great mourning. Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they are no more.

However, the Lord sees things coming before we see them coming. He could say of your life, he could say on March the 23rd, this happened because it's part of my plan. It's a way that I'm working in your life.

[23 : 00] I don't know about you, but that gives me great hope to know that my hands are in not just a loving God, but a sovereign God who works all things out according to the counsel of his own will. He saw the sorrow.

He also saw the solution in verse 15. When he flees from Egypt during the night and he leaves for Egypt, he stayed there until the death of Herod. So was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, out of Egypt I called my son. He sees the sorrow. He sees and knows the solution. And also the settling, as the passage we read ended. Once Herod had died, he was told to move and he eventually comes to the district of Galilee and he settles in Nazareth. And you know the rest is history. He will be called a Nazarene. Can anything good come from Nazareth? But like Bethlehem, it's a place that's kind of nondescript. Bethlehem, Nazareth, nothing to boast of. It may be you think, wow, does the Lord see me?

I just feel so insignificant. Does he really know? The Lord sees everything. He saw the sorrow. He saw the solution. He saw them settled in Nazareth. And then right the way through, not only through Jesus' birth in early days in Nazareth, being brought up in Nazareth, sees his life. And at the last S under this is he sees him seated, seated at the Father's right hand.

Paul says this, The Lord knows your life. He knows my life. He knows 2024. We know 2024. We can recall his goodness, his faithfulness. But we do not know 2025. I'm looking forward to 2025. I like even number years.

And I like ones at Phoenician 5. I don't know why. I just like 22, 24, 25. Won't really like 27 and 29. But 2025, I just like the sound of that. But just because the number's good doesn't mean that all will be easy for us. There will be pressure. But the Lord sees. The Lord knows. This morning, I woke up and I was reading a wee article by John Piper about times of darkness. And he was talking about darkness as normal. But in this article, he just happens to quote Psalm 40. And he says, I waited patiently for the Lord. He turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire. He set my feet upon a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth. A hymn of praise to our God. People who are in the mire and who are struggling need to know what it means to wait, to be patient, and to wait for the Lord. The Bible tells us this often, wait patiently for the Lord. There may be times when your patience will be tested in 2025. Lord, don't you see? Lord, don't you care? I'm in the mire. I'm sinking up to here. But as he saw this baby, as he saw this situation, the pressure that he was under, they were protected. He saw it coming. He preserved them. He can keep you in the palm of his hand. May the Lord, may we know something of this.

[27 : 26] May we step, I like this wee picture, 2025. Might be a step up. We might have to leap. We might have to apply effort as we enter into 2025. But the Lord is with us. Whatever difficulties might come, may we reaffirm that in our own hearts and in our own minds as we hear the bells on Tuesday night, is it Tuesday night into Wednesday morning. Our confidence is in him. The world knows nothing of this. But we know this. The Lord prayed for us. He sees us. He knows us. He's sovereign. He loves us and cares for us. We're going to stand and sing. It's a song that looks back over the year. Lord, for the years, your love has kept and guided, urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way. Let's stand and stand and we'll sing together. Lord, for the years, your love has kept and guided.

Lord, the future take us. Let's close in prayer. Our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for the past, Lord. We thank you for your sustaining power, for your love and for your grace and for your mercy.

And Lord, we do just pray, Lord, that you will lead us, Lord, into 2025. We do not know what awaits us, but you are the God who knows the future. You are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, even of our lives. Lord, you are well acquainted with us. And Father, I do just pray, Father, for those, Lord, for whom 2025 will be different from 2024, those who have lost loved ones, those who are perhaps even anxious as they enter into 2025. I pray that you will sustain and that you will keep them and that you will fill them, Lord, with the joy that Jesus prayed for, that they might know even joy and peace in believing, that settled joy, that inner joy that does not depend on circumstances, but is based on you, is based on a certain future. So, Father, we commend each other, Lord, into your hands. So, Father, we finish now with your word. Now, to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy, to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore. Amen. Amen. Thank you, folks.