**A New Rescue, A New Covenant, A New King**
**Matthew 2:13-23**

Now at first glance this passage may seem to have little relevance to you. After all, what's it about? The travel arrangements of a first century couple, and their young son? Another atrocity committed by a power hungry ruler? I mean, whatever is going on in your life, does what was going on in theirs have anything to say to you?

Well, three times Matthew says that what happened fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophets. And that means that something deeper is going on here than a young family moving house. Something is happening in the life of Jesus, that is rooted in God's dealings with his people for centuries past; that God's purposes are now being fulfilled in Christ. Which means that you also get caught up in this.

Three points: A New Rescue, A New Covenant, and a King Like No Other.

**A New Rescue**

Look at v13: 'Now when they had departed…'. And Matthew is talking about the Magi, the wise men, who had travelled hundreds of miles across the desert to worship the one born king of the Jews. But that bright moment of worship had passed and they've headed back home, and now Joseph and Mary and the infant Jesus, are alone, and darkness closes in. As an angel warns Joseph, v13, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee."

Now did you notice how the angel says that? 'The child and his mother'. Four times he mentions them, and every time he puts Jesus first, in the place of prominence. It's never 'Mary and her child', it's always 'the child and his mother'. Now I know that in our day it can seem like the kids rule the house, and they have their parents wrapped around their little fingers, but it wasn't always like that, and it especially wasn't like that in Jesus' day. So when Matthew puts the child first, he's saying something, isn't he? And that is that the spotlight of the gospel, of what God is doing breaking into our world, does not fall on Mary, or on Joseph, or on you and me. It falls on Jesus. He's the hero of the story. He's the centre of attention.

And repeatedly God intervenes to protect him. Verse 13, as the angel tells Joseph: 'Flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Now if you think it's a bit fanciful Joseph trudging off down to Egypt, you'd be wrong. Egypt had always been the place the Jewish people turned to for sanctuary. And at this time there were a million or more Jews living in Alexandria and surrounding regions alone. Egypt was stable, and well governed by the Romans. But most importantly it was outside of Herod's jurisdiction. So this is the obvious and safe place for Joseph to go.

And yet Matthew sees something going on here that is deeper and more profound than Jesus being in a safe place. Look how he puts it: v15, '[they] remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."' Now when the prophet Hosea said that, in Hosea chapter 11, he was remembering how God had rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and brought them out from under the destructive power of Pharaoh, and up and out into freedom. And Hosea was saying that in God doing that, through the Exodus, he was demonstrating Israel's special relationship with him, that the people of Israel were God's children, his son.

But what was true of Israel, Matthew says, was even more true for Christ. That just as through the Exodus God had delivered Israel from the power of Pharaoh, and

declared Israel to be his son, so in sending Jesus into Egypt and bringing him up again to save him from the power of Herod, he was declaring Christ to be his true son: 'Out of Egypt I called *my son'*. The ultimate Son, the one true Israelite.

And yet, Matthew's saying something more even than that. You see, the context of Hosea 11 that Matthew quotes here, is God's undying love for his rebellious people: that though they don't deserve it, God rescued them in the Exodus, and he goes on rescuing them. But now Jesus has come, Matthew says, and he is going to bring about an even greater rescue.

You see, when you read the Psalms or the prophets, whenever the writer wants to conjure up an image of God's rescuing power, where does he turn? Almost invariably, he turns to the Exodus, *the* paradigm of God's power to save his people. And as the people of Israel sank further and further into sin and idolatry, and reaped the results of that in their lives, the prophets began to speak of God bringing about another exodus; that a time would come when he would once and for all deliver them, not from the power of Pharaoh this time, but from the power of sin. That he would bring them into the real, eternal Promised Land. As Isaiah wrote, 'Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord… Was it not you who dried up the sea [in the Exodus], the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over? And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away' (Is 51:9-11).

And Matthew is saying that in Jesus, that long awaited deliverance has begun, a new rescue is beginning.

Because we all need rescuing don't we? Now you might hear that and think – 'er, no I don't.' But the growth of the therapy culture, the breakdown in social cohesion, the polarisation of politics tells us that all is not well on planet earth, not even in the self-congratulatory West. And if we say, 'yeh, but that's other people, I'm above all that', we are in the realm of pride that sees ourselves as better than others. So whether we acknowledge it or not, we all need rescuing. The question is, who or what will rescue you?

Can religion do it? You see, religion tells you that you have to rescue yourself. It commands a level of obedience, a level of holiness. It says that you have to live up to this certain standard, and if you do, you'll save yourself, but you've got to do it. But it has no power to help you do it.

But the gospel says something very different. It tells you that Jesus has come and lived the life that you and I have proved ourselves incapable of living. And that through his perfect life, and his death in our place, he is bringing about a new rescue. That in him God is delivering those held in the slavery of sin, who can't free themselves, people like us, so that we can become his children. Out of Egypt I called my son.

Well, if the first fulfilled prophecy tells of a new rescue, the second tells us about a new covenant.

**A New Covenant**

Now when Herod realises the Magi have left without giving him the info he wanted, Matthew tells us, v16, that Herod 'became furious.' The man was livid. Here is a guy

consumed by his need for power, and he won't allow anything or anyone to rob him of that. And so he issues this appalling order that every male child, in the region of Bethlehem, 2 years old or younger, should be killed.

Now the fact that Bethlehem was small, and that this would likely have involved no more than about 20 boys, does absolutely nothing to mitigate the horror of what Herod does, does it? But let's be honest. This is our world isn't it? It's not a world of sweet scenes on Christmas cards. It's the world were babies and children are killed so people can stay in power and in control of their lives. But it's also the world into which Christ has come, the mess of our lives.

And in Herod's actions we see the downward spiral that sin can take us on. The spiral of sin Jesus has come to deliver us from. You see, Herod lusts for power. And maybe that began with the desire to have influence and respect, or to achieve something in life, but however it began, power becomes the thing Herod lives for. But that need to hold on to power becomes fear of anything that threatens that power. And here, specifically, it becomes fear of Jesus – an infant not 2 years old. But as Herod allows that fear to fester in his heart, it becomes anger, he's furious that the Magi bypassed him and thwarted his plan. And then that anger boils over and consumes the lives of little boys who posed him zero risk.

Now, you and I are unlikely to plumb Herod's depth, and yet we still face the dangerous downward spiral, don't we? I mean, consider what happens when you get angry. What lies at the root of that? Isn't it, often that I think I deserve better than this? That this other person isn't treating me as I deserve to be treated, as I want to be treated. Or that things are not turning out the way *I* want. And when we turn over the stone of our anger, we find pride and self-centredness lurking underneath. But then, when we don't get what we want from someone, or from life, resentment grows, and we become angry. And at first, and how long depends on your self-control, it's all internal. The seething lies hidden. But then at some point you can't keep it in any more and it spills out in harsh, critical words to others. And words are like swords aren't they? And they cut and they slash the lives of those we are angry at, just as Herod's swords killed these boys.

So what begins as me thinking I deserve better, ends with damaged lives and broken relationships.

Now, if you know that kind of downward spiral, what can be done to break that dark descent? Well, look what Matthew says next. Verse 17, 'Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

And Matthew is quoting there from Jeremiah chapter 31. But if you read those verses in their context, at first glance they have absolutely nothing to do with young boys being slaughtered in Bethlehem, or with Herod's anger, so even less to do with the kind of stuff you and I struggle with daily. The context is of the people of Israel being taken into exile in Babylon. And Ramah was a town where the Babylonian invaders held the Jewish captives before transporting them eastwards. Plus it was where Rachel, Jacob the patriarch's wife, was buried. And in that passage, Jeremiah uses Rachel as a picture of all the mothers of Israel, as she weeps from her grave, as her people are carried off into exile.

So why is Matthew saying that what happened in Bethlehem, with families being robbed of their sons, but Christ being made safe, a fulfilment of what Jeremiah wrote there?

Well, on one level, Jeremiah says that Rachel, representing all Israel's mothers, refused to be comforted. And there are no words that can defend the slaughter of babies and children, are there? Whether that is in the womb or by Herod's sword.

And yet, Matthew is saying something more as well. You see the wider context of what Jeremiah wrote here was that whilst Israel faced the loss of her children, carried off into exile, God will bring about a great return from exile. And Jeremiah 31 ends with God promising that whilst the people experience sorrow and death now, the time will come when he'll make a new covenant with them. And he'll forgive all their iniquities and remember their sins no more. And rather than the covenant being written on slabs of stone, as with Moses and the first covenant, this time it would be written on his people's hearts. That out of all this trauma, God was going to do something that would result in people's hearts being transformed. That out of darkness he would bring light, that out of death he would bring hope.

And Jeremiah 31 talks of a great company returning from exile with dancing and singing, and the blind and the lame and young pregnant mums will be among them. And a great crowd will come to God in Zion, and they'll come from the farthest parts of the earth. And there'll be joy in place of mourning, and gladness in place of sorrow. That even though Rachel weeps now, one day all this suffering and heartache and sin will be over. Winter will pass and summer will come.

And Matthew is saying that great turnaround has begun. And it's begun in Jesus. The light has come and Herod and his like can never put it out. And it's in Jesus that we can find hope in place of death. It's in Jesus that we can find forgiveness for our sin and the power that can change our hearts and reverse the downward spiral. That in him, this new covenant, written on transformed hearts, begins.

But how will that be?

**A King Like No Other**

Look at v19. Matthew says, 'But when Herod died...' It's the ultimate statistic, isn't it? One out of one dies. And no amount of seeking power or destroying others' lives can stop it. It doesn't matter what your salary is, it doesn't matter how big your pension pot, it doesn't matter how high you rise; even the rich, and powerful, and influential, and famous die. The people who seem to ride the wave of fame and popularity now, will die. We all will. And if we strut the stage of life, thinking that this is it, that we are invincible, that life is about me and getting what I want from it, we are no more wise than Herod was, are we? But reminding ourselves that one day we too will stand before God's judgment seat, gives us the reality check we need to live life rightly.

And with Herod gone, an angel tells Joseph to take Jesus and his mother back to Israel. And so he heads for Galilee, and for Nazareth. And as a result Matthew says something perplexing. Verse 23, 'And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.'

And it's perplexing because none of the prophets say anything about the Messiah coming from Nazareth. Bethlehem yes, but Nazareth no. In fact, Nazareth doesn't even get mentioned in the Old Testament. So what's Matthew talking about?

Well, notice he doesn't say 'so that what was spoken by *the* prophet' – singular – but 'by the prophets' plural. So he's not talking about one specific prophet saying the Messiah would come from Nazareth, he's talking about a theme in the prophets as a whole that the Messiah would be called a Nazarene.

Ok, but is there such a theme? And, on the surface, the answer is no – the prophets don't talk about the Messiah being a Nazarene. So to answer that some scholars think that Matthew is using a play on words here, because the word Nazarene is similar to the word for branch. And in Isaiah chapter 11, Isaiah talks of the Messiah being a branch from the roots of the house of David. But that's not exactly convincing. Or some argue that it's a play on the similarity between Nazarene and a Nazarite: a person who's taken a vow to dedicate their life to God, and grows their hair long, and drinks no alcohol, a man like Samson. But there was never any link between Nazareth and the Nazarite vow, and there's nothing in the prophets about the Messiah being a Nazarite, and Jesus certainly wasn't one. So there goes that idea!

So what does Matthew mean? Well, I spent my teenage years growing up near a town in England called Bognor. Except Bognor wasn't the kind of place you wanted to admit to coming from. So we used to say we came from Chichester, which is altogether posher. And Nazareth had just that kind of reputation.

You see, it wasn't just that this town wasn't mentioned in the Old Testament, it wasn't mentioned in the Talmud, or the writings of Josephus the historian either, it was a non-place. So if you looked for Nazareth on a map, you wouldn't find it – because it wasn't worth finding. Plus, the place was despised. It was located in Galilee – Galilee of *the gentiles*. But even amongst Galileans it was looked down on. Nathanael, who became one of Jesus' disciples, when he heard that Jesus came from Nazareth, scoffed, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' (John 1:46). And when the crowds learned that that's where Jesus came from they were equally incredulous: 'Is the Christ to come from Galilee?' (John 7:41). O, please!

But imagine if Jesus was known as Jesus the Bethlehemite, that would have been something, wouldn't it. That would have carried echoes of royalty and kingship – Jesus from the City and Line of David. But 'Jesus the Nazarene', that was said with contempt. And when the early Christians were called a 'sect of the Nazarenes' (Acts 24:5) it was meant to hurt.

So Matthew is not saying that one particular prophet said the Messiah would live in Nazareth, but that the prophets as a whole said he would be despised.

When I was at university there was a group of people who got nicknamed the Beautiful People. They were good looking, rich, had been privately educated and were intelligent. And if we're honest some of us wish we were like them. Or if not like them, we can at least admit that we can be swayed or influenced by someone who's got charisma or who's rich, or who's pretty or good looking, out of all proportion to the influence they should have. It's our celebrity culture. But the Lord isn't interested in celebrity, he's interested in character.

And Jesus wasn't a member of the Beautiful People. The prophet Isaiah says of him, 'He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men… and we esteemed him not.' (Is 53:2-3).

And yet this man who was despised and looked down on by the elite was the King of Kings. Yet he laid all that glory aside and became of no reputation. And he came and endured the scorn and the shame and the disgrace, not just of Nazareth, but the greatest shame of all, the shame of the cross. The shame of the cursed.

You see, whilst here we see the Lord protecting Jesus, the time came when that protection was removed. And a day came when, in the words of Isaiah, it was the will of the Lord to crush him. For now, the dark powers fail in their attempt to kill him, but the day came when the Lord allowed them to succeed; when Mary joined with the weeping mothers of Bethlehem, when God's own beloved son, the only truly innocent one, was slaughtered.

Now, why would this King take this lowest of all places?

Because he was despised by men that you might be loved by God. He took all the rejection, all the wrath of God that you deserve for your sin, upon himself, so that in turning to him in repentance, you might know the forgiveness of God.

And God our heavenly Father removed his protection from Jesus at the cross, so that you might be protected forever, under the shadow of his wing. He gave up his safety that you might know eternal safety.

And when you know that you have been loved by this King, a King like no other, when you don't deserve it, you will find a love for others who don't deserve it, for those who wrong you, who you are tempted to get angry at. When you know that he has paid your debt, amounting to hundreds of thousands of Swiss francs in Jesus' parable, you won't need to get angry and grab the throat of the person who wrongs you, and demand the few cents they owe you. Instead, when you see Jesus as he really is, when you see how he has treated you, it kills the anger and the self-centredness lurking in your heart.

But it will also give you the courage to serve like him. When you see and know how this king humbled himself for you, it will deeply humble you, and instead of insisting on your own way, and you being served, you'll give of yourself and do good to others out of love for him and love for them, where previously you just demanded.

And finally, when you know that this king was despised and rejected that you might be lifted up, you won't worry about your self-image or how others see you, because you'll be rock-solid secure in how he sees you. And that will give you the strength to do the right thing when it might cost you the scorn of others. You'll take the shame, because Christ, the King of Glory, was shamed for you.