THE ESCAPE TO EGYPT

Matthew 2:13–23

Key Verse: 2:15b

“And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’”

In chapter 1 Matthew tells us how Jesus was born in the line of Abraham and King David, showing God’s great faithfulness to keep his promises. God was sending Jesus to save us from our sins and be Immanuel—God with us. Chapter 2 tells us that Jesus was born to be our spiritual King, Shepherd, and the only one worthy of our worship. Through the birth of Jesus God was accomplishing something so great, so wonderful, it attracted people like the Magi from a far-away place. But as God’s great salvation work was being carried out, the powers of this dark world were immediately confronted. After his birth, Jesus was almost killed and had to flee for his life. By God’s leading, he ended up in Nazareth, a humble town in Galilee. Matthew tells us that in these highly unusual turns of events, Old Testament prophecies were being fulfilled. He shows us how crucial Joseph’s faith was in protecting the child Jesus. In this study we want to learn from Joseph. But most of all, we want to focus on who Jesus is, in two ways: God’s Son, and, a Nazarene. May God speak to us through his word today.

1. The Escape to Egypt (13–15)

Verse 13 begins, “When they had gone…” This refers to the Magi. They had just come to worship the child Jesus and present him with gifts fit for a king. It was such a glorious moment. But it was soon over. The child Jesus, his mother Mary and Joseph were so helpless and vulnerable compared with the power of Herod. But God himself was watching over them. Read verse 13. Through an angel in a dream God again revealed to Joseph what was about to happen. Dreams aren’t always a revelation of God’s will; often they’re just a mixture of our subconscious fears and concerns of the previous day. It’s much better to discover God’s true will by reading the Bible and seeking God in prayer. Most of the time it takes faith and patience to discover God’s will. But in this extreme situation God gave a special revelation to Joseph in a dream. The time was urgent. What did Joseph do? Read verse 14. It’s written in understatement. Leaving quietly during the cover of night would keep them from being noticed. But surely it wasn’t easy for Joseph, when he was sound asleep, to get up in the middle of the night, suddenly pack up everything, along with mother and child, and make a trip he was totally unprepared for. And the Egyptian border was 90 miles away. But Joseph had such respect for God’s revelation that he immediately acted on it and obeyed. Many people scoff at God’s revelation and dismiss it as if it were a joke. But when God’s reveals his truth and his will, it’s still so important to respect it and act on it without delay. In his action we see that Joseph has accepted his role as protector of the child and his mother. It wasn’t about him: it was about the child and his mother. Many men in history wanted their wives and children to serve *them*, to enhance *their* honor and reputation. But Joseph was ready to sacrifice himself to protect the child and his mother. God still needs men like Joseph who humbly obey and self-sacrifice for others.

According to Matthew, Joseph’s obedience has a much larger significance. Read verse 15b. Jesus’ escape to Egypt as a child is recorded only in Matthew’s Gospel. Throughout this Gospel Matthew repeats the word “fulfill” 16 times, and in other places he shows how prophecies came true. Matthew wants us to see that the entire Old Testament was being fulfilled in Jesus. Here, even the escape to Egypt fulfilled the prophecy of Hosea 11:1, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” Matthew sees the significance not in Jesus’ *going* to Egypt, but in his coming *out* of Egypt. Through the prophet Hosea God was not only describing Israel’s past but also predicting what he would do in the future. One day, God would call his own Son out of Egypt, and this prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus’ coming out of Egypt has a deep spiritual meaning. Just as God brought Israel out of Egypt, marking their birth as his covenant people, so God would bring Jesus out of Egypt to mark the beginning of his new covenant with all those who receive him (26:28).

We learn two important things here. Firstly, only God can deliver us from our slavery to sin, and he saves us through Jesus. When God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, the Bible says he was using “his mighty hand” and ten spectacular acts of judgment. But all that was just an imperfect shadow of what God would one day do through Jesus. Matthew is showing us that Jesus would be the new Moses, our true deliverer. Just as baby Moses was born under the threat of death, and many baby boys were killed when he was born, so baby Jesus was born under the threat of death, yet God was working to save his precious life in order to use him greatly in the future. God would call Jesus out of Egypt to be our Savior, the one who would save his people from their sins (1:21b). The Israelites were saved from their bondage of slavery in Egypt through the blood of the Passover lamb. But now we can be saved from our bondage of slavery to sin through the precious blood of Christ. Through the blood of Christ, we’re redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to us from our ancestors (1Pe1:18,19). Through the blood of Christ, we who were far away, living in sin, can be brought near, into the very presence of the holy God (Eph2:13). Through the blood of Christ, we can be set free from our guilty conscience and serve the living God (Heb9:14). God would call Jesus out of Egypt to be our Passover Lamb, our Redeemer, our Savior (1Co5:7; Gal3:13,14; 2Ti1:10). Jesus our Savior, called out of Egypt, is our blessed hope (Tit2:13). When we look at the world, at people, and especially at ourselves, sometimes it’s hard to see any hope. But when we look at Jesus, who was called out of Egypt to be our Savior, we always find hope.

Secondly, Hosea’s prophecy tells us that Jesus is God’s Son. Why is this important? If we see Jesus only as a man, then we can’t see what God was doing through him. In chapter 1 Matthew made it crystal clear that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary as the holy Son of God. He’s one of the three Persons of the Trinity. God the Son came in the flesh and became fully human so that he could be our Savior. Even after all the people of Jerusalem heard the news of his birth and his star, only the foreigners from a distant land, the Magi, actually went to Bethlehem to worship him. Herod was even trying to kill him. Though Jesus the Son was rejected by humans, he was chosen by God and precious to him (1Pe2:4). People today in spiritual blindness continue to reject Jesus the Son. Still, Jesus is God’s Son. What does it mean? Colossians 1:15 says, “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.” Hebrews 1:6 says, “And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’” God’s Son is our true object of worship. Later, we’ll see that the disciples needed to open their spiritual eyes to see who Jesus really was and worship him (Mt14:33). Likewise, Jesus who is God’s Son is the One we need to learn to worship.

1. The Massacre of the Innocents (16–18)

In this second part Matthew tells us the dark story of Herod. Read verse 16. Herod is such a contrast to the child Jesus, who was born to be our Shepherd (6). Herod’s behavior here may seem like that of an extreme character, an evil fiend in fictional cartoons or movies. But actually he shows us what we can become when we live for ourselves instead of for God. For Herod, his own power and glory were most important. Anything or anyone who slighted him became objects of his wrath, and he would stop at nothing to protect and advance his own power and glory, even if it meant ruining others’ lives. He forced his soldiers to go to Bethlehem, house to house, find little boys two years old or younger, rip them from their mothers’ arms and murder them. What a horrible military assignment! It came from Herod’s paranoia. He was so insecure about himself that he even felt threatened by little babies. In fact, the devil had gotten hold of Herod and was working through him to try to destroy the baby Jesus. It was such a painful tragedy. But even in this Matthew could see God at work.

Read verses 17,18. The pain of these mothers who saw their precious little boys being killed was real. It was as horrible as the Holocaust. It ripped all the joy of living out of these families. And yet God saw it all. God knew what these women were going through. God was withholding his protection and judgment at this time so that he could accomplish his greater purpose of bringing the Savior, the true Comfort of all people, into the world. People today who experience painful tragedy and loss can feel so helpless and meaningless. But when our hearts are broken and we’re speechless and have no answers, these verses tell us that God is still at work. It reminds us of Romans 8:28, which says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” We know this about God only by faith.

1. “He Will Be Called a Nazarene” (19–23)

The child Jesus was worshiped by the Magi. God protected him in Egypt through Joseph’s obedience and called him out of there as his Son. God was going to make him our Savior and deliverer, the most important person in history. But God was leading him to grow up in obscurity. Read verses 19,20. It’s the third time Joseph receives God’s direction through an angel. We may be wondering how long they’d been living in Egypt. Some scholars think it may have been about a year. Joseph and Mary were originally from Nazareth. They had to go to Bethlehem during a Roman census. After two years in Bethlehem they had to escape to Egypt. After a year in Egypt Joseph was finally feeling safe, being free from Herod’s reign of terror. Perhaps the family was just settling in to a good rhythm of life with new neighbors and friends. But now Joseph had to pull up the roots of his young family yet again. How did he respond? Read verse 21. Joseph was a man who knew how to obey God’s word ahead of his own feelings and calculations. Probably he was thinking of resettling in Bethlehem, the town of David, where the Messiah was to be from. But it was not to be. Read verses 22,23. God was leading the child Jesus to grow up in an obscure town in Galilee called Nazareth, which archaeologists say had only 500 people at the time. The New Testament tells us that Nazareth was a despised town (Jn1:46). Jesus the Son of God grew up in such a humble town, despised and rejected, to understand all those who are despised and rejected (Isa53:3).

In today’s passage we learned about the obedience of Joseph. In our culture people idolize those who are as rebellious as possible. But Joseph is a model of obedience. His acts of obedience may seem foolish, but God was using them preciously to accomplish his own will. We also learned that despite Herod’s evil plot, God was ruling the world, fulfilling prophecies and accomplishing his own plan. Finally, we learned about Jesus. Jesus is God’s Son. Yet he grew up in a most humble town, Nazareth. Most of all, God called Jesus his Son out of Egypt to be our Savior. May God help us to believe in him and worship him.