

A Promise Kept

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Preacher: Alistair Chalmers

[0 : 00] I invite you to keep that passage of Matthew open in front of you, Matthew chapter 2. Now this morning, as you probably guessed from the reading that Sabina brought to us, this is part of the Christmas story that we all wish wasn't there, isn't it?

This is the bit that we all wish we could overlook and never, ever hear of. It grates against the sanitized Christmas story that we've all grown to love.

Images of a cute little baby Jesus who doesn't cry and who sleeps away in a manger. Images of cattle chewing hay contently in the back of a big spacious cattle shed, making no noise so little baby Jesus doesn't wake up.

And images of happy, content, smiling Mary and Joseph staring down at the newborn baby Jesus. That's the Christmas story we like, isn't it?

But that's not really what happened. Maybe we do see a little bit of that in the first half of Matthew chapter 2, as the Magi come and they worship Jesus.

[1 : 12] They bring their gifts from a distant land in the east. They follow the star from their homeland. And it's rested over the place where Jesus is.

And they adore him. They bestow honor on him as they worship. But then in verse 13, we see a terrible twist of events.

Things start to change for the worse. And it appears that this king is on the lookout for Jesus and wants him dead. The verses that we come to this morning are tragic.

A tragic part of the story. But it is a very important part of the birth narrative of Jesus. And we cannot skip over it for comfort's sake.

This passage is important because it tells us that God is a promise-keeping God. And it explains to us that Jesus is the fulfillment of those promises.

[2 : 16] Right at the very beginning of the Bible, a problem is raised and it's called sin. It's when mankind decided to reject God and reject his way.

And since then, every single person has naturally wanted to walk their own way and say, No, God, we don't want you. To live in separation and alienation from God.

But, God promised that he would send someone to deal with the effect of sin. Someone who would take the rap for all the wrongdoings and someone who would deal with our sin.

And make it possible for us to be back in that right relationship with God. Isn't that amazing? And we've already seen in this short Christmas series that the person who does this is Jesus Christ.

But at this stage in the story, in Matthew chapter 2, verse 13 to 23, the tension is rising. The situation is becoming more and more heated and dramatic.

[3 : 26] And it all seems that it's lost, doesn't it? We're going to walk through this passage and draw out some of the important parts. And we're going to see how it teaches us that God is a promise keeping God.

And how nothing, absolutely nothing, can thwart his promise for salvation to those who call on his name. So, in verse 13, reality hits as an angel warns Joseph in a dream to get up and go to Egypt.

Now, the angel is speaking with a real sense of urgency and you get that from the passage, don't you? He isn't saying, Joseph, set your alarm for 7 a.m. Wake up, have your coffee and your cornflakes and then pack your things slowly and go for a wee family trip to Egypt.

Now, the angel, it seems as if he's shouting at Joseph, get up, leave now. And Joseph does just that in verse 14.

He didn't know the full story. Joseph didn't know when he'd be back. He didn't know what was awaiting him on the road to or even in Egypt. And yet, he knew the words and will of the Lord.

[4 : 40] He acted in faith, knowing that God is a promise keeping God. Imagine if we had a sliver of that obedience.

The Bible is clear on many issues, yet often we walk away in disobedience because it's just more comfortable. Now, this is not the main point of the passage, but I think we should all take a leaf from Joseph's book.

So the angel tells them to go to Egypt and for two reasons. One, it's the logical place with a big Jewish community there and it's outside the reach of King Herod.

But two, as Matthew explains in verse 15, it is to fulfill something that took place in the Old Testament, known as the Exodus. The time when God miraculously saved his people, Israel, and called them out of slavery in Egypt, into the plan that he had for them.

The same will happen for Jesus, Matthew says. Hostility and hatred made his family flee for their lives into Egypt. But this is all working according to God's grand plan of salvation.

[5 : 56] And Matthew is telling us that this happened so that we could see something special in the person of Jesus. The one through whom salvation will come.

The son being called out of Egypt. Matthew is highlighting to us the fact that God made a promise. And that he will follow through with that promise because he is a promise keeping God.

Looking at this situation from the outside, you could be thinking how on earth is any of this God's plan? How has this got anything to do with God saving the world?

Everything seems lost. In verse 16, there's a furious king on the lookout for Jesus. A king so adamant that his throne is threatened by this little baby boy that he does a horrible thing.

In the midst of mindless rage, this king orders that every baby boy under the age of two is killed in Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

[7 : 04] We don't often hear that bit of the nativity story, do we? Why? Well, because it's an absolutely horrific event.

Nobody wants to remember the story of a mad king killing innocent children. It's outrageous. But another reason we don't hear about this is because it seems weak.

It seems as if all is lost, that God's plan has failed. It looks as if this promised Messiah won't even make it to his third birthday.

And you can feel the pain, can't you? As the path of destruction makes its way through this little town of Bethlehem. And weeping is the only sound that can be heard.

In verse 18, there is weeping and mourning as mothers mourn and refuse to be comforted. Because their children are no more. So much pain.

[8 : 08] So much devastation. So much destruction. This is just a snapshot of the mourning caused by Herod's hatred.

But why? Because Jesus was born into a world that hated him. Born into a world that wanted nothing to do with him. And at this point, all seems lost.

It seems as if God's grand plan of salvation set out before the beginning of time has crumbled. Before it even got off the starting line.

It seems weak and insignificant because this promised one has had to run away. But the reality is, friends, that these events, as horrible and outrageous as they are, cannot thwart God's plan.

The amazing thing to notice about this is that Jesus is the very answer to Herod's sinful nature. Herod is trying to kill Jesus, but Jesus is the only person who makes it possible for people to be forgiven.

[9 : 19] For people to be saved from sin and judgment. All this time, God is actively protecting his son. God is keeping his promise.

And God is still victorious. No human effort can ever stop that. God is a faithful, promise-keeping God. Now we don't know what happened to Jesus in Egypt.

We don't know the kind of situation that he spent his first years on earth in. But one thing we do know is that God was working, preserving and protecting his son.

His plan of salvation. So that a broken humanity can be restored into a right relationship with God. And we see that happen because God comes through on his promise. In verse 19, look with me. An angel appears to Joseph again and tells him to return to Israel.

[10 : 20] So God promised in verse 13 that he would tell Joseph when he could return. And in verse 19, that is exactly what happens. God fulfills his promise. God bless. The angel says that Herod, the one who was adamantly trying to kill Jesus, has died.

It's safe to go home. But they don't go back to Bethlehem. In verse 21, Joseph hears that Herod's son is ruling in his father's place and he is afraid.

And trust me, he has every single right to be afraid. Looking at the historical records of Herod and Achilles, the apple did not fall far from the tree.

These were two very evil men who did unspeakable things to preserve their power. So God warns them again in a dream to go to the land of Galilee, to the town of Nazareth.

A small, unassuming town with no military, political or religious significance. He's calling them to go live in the middle of nowhere.

[11:29] Similar to the village that my parents live in, Poiana, Romania. It's off the beaten track. You need to be going there for a reason. It's not a through road.

There's no real reason to be there unless you live there. That's Galilee. Insignificant. But it's safe. It's where Jesus can be brought up and raised in safety.

Again, we see God's protection, can't we? And Matthew tells us in verse 23 that this little town wasn't picked at random.

But God sent them there again to fulfill a promise because God is a promise-keeping God. The promise being fulfilled is that Jesus would be a Nazarene.

Now Matthew's probably thinking of Isaiah chapter 11 verse 1 here. And you can go look at that later on this afternoon. And I think Matthew's saying that Jesus is to be the branch that will bear good fruit.

[12:32] I think he's doing a wordplay on the Hebrew word for branch, which is similar to the word Nazarene. But the point that Matthew is bringing to our attention in this very important part of the birth narrative of Jesus is that God is a promise-keeping God.

That God is faithful and that nothing, absolutely nothing, will thwart his plan of salvation. That God is faithful.

Friends, at times it seems that God's plan is weak. That everything is about to crumble around us. And we're sitting there wondering, why on earth is any of this happening to me?

The truth is that in those bleak moments, in those moments where it seems that God has been defeated, God is always reigning sovereignly and always comes through victorious.

Even in that moment when Jesus was whisked away to Egypt for his own safety as a child. That moment seemed bleak and tragic and weak.

[13:43] But does that moment of bleakness and tragedy remind you of another time where everything else seemed to be stacked against Jesus?

A time that everything seemed to suggest God's plan had failed. Jesus is lying in a crib, then escaping to Egypt as Roman soldiers do, the unspeakable in Bethlehem.

And you can picture King Herod, can't you, standing in the background waiting eagerly for the news to hear of the death of a baby boy. Sounds similar to the events just a few chapters later in the book of Matthew.

As Jesus stands before another Roman ruler. Again with his life in the balance, but this time he's an adult. He stands accused of crimes that he did not commit.

The accusers, the accusations that have been brought against him are by the very people he was sent to save.

[14:53] The Jews. But they didn't welcome him as King and Messiah. They didn't welcome him as the promised one from the Old Testament who would come and save the sins of the world.

Instead, what did they do? They cried out, crucify him. The mob becoming more and more agitated, standing around Jesus and they shout in unison, crucify him.

They're crying for the death of the one who can bring them forgiveness. It seems that God's plan is being tested again. But this time there's no Egypt moment.

There is no place to run. No way for him to get away. The only thing that stands before him is a big wooden cross.

No escaping. And just a few hours later, beaten and mocked, tired from carrying the cross, Jesus hangs there, nailed to a tree.

[16:01] Passes by mocking him. Telling him to come down and save himself if he really is the King of the Jews. Naked. Alone. Beaten and torn.

Again, it seems that all is lost. Every person present would be thinking, how on earth can this be God's promise? How can this be the sent one from God?

But in that final cry, which ends his life, it is finished. That is the cry that changed the world forever. The moment the onlookers thought was the biggest defeat. The moment the disciples cowered for fear. The moment all seemed lost.

That was the moment of greatest victory that this world has ever seen. Jesus' birth into hostility and hatred has been leading up to this point.

[17 : 07] To this very moment. Because as Jesus said, it is finished. The punishment for sin was paid. As Jesus breathed his last and bowed his head, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

The divide that stood between man and God is obliterated. And God's salvation plan for the world was taking place.

And it is continuing to take place today. There is nothing in this world that can stop God's salvation plan. No angry king. No angry mob.

No wooden cross. Because three days later, Jesus rose triumphantly from the grave, defeating death and paying the punishment for sins. That is the message of Christmas.

That is the life that we celebrate at this time of the year. That is the salvation plan that Matthew presents to us. And he asks you, will you listen? Will you listen?

[18 : 22] Maybe you're here and you're not a Christian. I want you to know that this is the length that God went to so that you can be made into a right relationship with him.

This is the extent of God's love that he took on flesh and went to die on a cross so that you could be free, that you could have life, and that you could be one of his children.

The world has no problem with cute little baby Jesus in a manger. But they do have a problem with King and Lord Jesus who calls us to repent, believe, and follow him.

But that is what we see in the Bible. We see the birth of Jesus and his whole life being surrounded in a whirlwind of hostility and hatred so that you and me can be brought back to God again.

This episode in the birth narrative of Jesus is not what we would expect. It's not the story we like to hear, but friends, it is the story that we need most.

[19 : 36] This part of the birth narrative of Jesus shows us that the whole of the Old Testament has been leading to this point, that all the promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And it tells us that God is a promise-keeping God who worked to protect and preserve his son and who planned the whole thing from crib to cross so that we can be forgiven.

As we anticipate the events over the next few days, with the busyness of friends and family gathering together, as children wait in anticipation for that moment when all the wrapping paper sits on the living room floor, or maybe as we look at Christmas with pain and heartache, let's remember that Christmas is about Jesus.

Remember that hatred and hostility he was born into and remember the tragic events of his birth.

And let's remember how all of this, from crib to cross, shows us that God is a promise-keeping God and that he has promised salvation to all those who call on his name.

And that was made possible through Jesus. Friends, as we draw to a close, this is the reason for the season. This is the saviour that we need, the saviour that has already been freely given.

The question remains, will you trust in this wonderful God? In the amazing sacrifice of our saviour Jesus? And will you listen to his call to repent and believe in him this Christmas time?

[21 : 24] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can celebrate Christmas, that we can celebrate the birth of Jesus.

But Lord, forgive us for the times when we only think about cute little baby Jesus and we don't think about his true identity as God in the flesh.

when we don't think about the reason that he came so that sinners like us can be made right with you. Father, that is a wonderful, wonderful gift.

Help us ponder that in the coming days and help us know that in our hearts. And Lord, help us live as good and true worshippers of you.

We ask all of this for your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.