

A Suffering Son

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[0 : 0 0] Well, morning folks, it's lovely to see you. For those who don't know me, my name is Graham and I've got the incredible honour of being the pastor of the church here. Let me encourage you to grab a Bible if you have one with you, or perhaps you could grab one in front of you in the pew or scroll on your phone. And we're going to visit those verses in Matthew chapter 2 again, verses 13 to 18 that we heard earlier. We're going to be thinking about the Nazareth section of it next Sunday morning, so let me encourage you to come along to that.

But Matthew chapter 2, in at verse 13. And let me ask you just to raise your hand if you've received a Christmas card this year, just as we get going. Raise your hand if you've got a Christmas card this year. Okay, vast majority of us, excellent. I wonder if you can picture the last Christmas card that you opened. What was the image that was on the front? Have a think.

What was the image that was on the front? Maybe it was one of the classic Christmas seams. See if this rings any bells. Maybe it was the stockings over the roaring fire. That's a classic Christmas card image, that one. Maybe it was the Christmas day meal complete with all the trimmings.

Maybe it was a decorated gingerbread house with E numbers that were off the scale. Perhaps your parents, you'll love it when your kids come home with those ones. Perhaps it was Santa's sleigh, or maybe it was even the classic snowman. Or maybe it was the nativity scene complete with angels, shepherds, and wise men, as we've already seen, of an unspecified number.

What was the last image you saw on the front of your Christmas card? And let me ask you, I wonder how many of us saw a dragon on the front of our Christmas cards that we opened this year? Or how about a raging king? Or how about a group of crying and grieving mothers? Or how about some ruthless Roman soldiers? I suspect that none of us saw those things on the Christmas cards that we opened this year. We much prefer as a society the cute and the cuddly and the romantic. But what we're going to see today is that's exactly the kind of Christmas card that Matthew presents us with as we look at Matthew 2, right? The Christmas card that's unlikely to fly off the shelves at Clinton Cards, the Christmas card that no one's searching for on moonpig.com, and yet this is the Christmas card that Matthew presents us with in Matthew chapter 2.

[2 : 3 1] And while these might seem like kind of left field details to us, Matthew wants us to know that these are crucial details that we need to understand if we're to grasp something of the enormity of the Christmas stories the Bible tells it, and to grasp the significance and wrap our heads around the beating heart of the God of the Bible.

And so as we step into Matthew 2 today, picking up at verse 13, let me give you the view from below. Now Herod, as we've heard, is king in Jerusalem. Now there's an awful lot that we could say about Herod, but the headline is that this man is truly awful. Hardened with jealousy, rules with paranoia, prone to fits of anger. In fact, there's records from a first century historian called Josephus, that Herod had three of his sons killed because he got it in his head that they had ideas to steal his throne. And that when he himself was about to die, he even ordered that one member of each family in the local community be killed so that there really was a sense of mourning when he died.

This guy is absolutely brutal. And so two things happen in this scene. Firstly, God warns Joseph in a dream, verse 13, to take Mary and the boy Jesus and escape.

Now pay attention to what Matthew is trying to tell us. It's not just anywhere they've escaped to. It's not just a flee for your life. It's run for the hills kind of effort, is it? They've got to run to Egypt. So that tells us straight away that there's a divine purpose behind everything that's going on here. They've got to get up and they've got to go to Egypt. Now, likely at this time, there would have been a community of Jews who are living down in Alexandria. So that's probably where they head to find safety. But before we move on, just put yourself in Mary and Joseph's shoes for a moment.

They've recently settled in Bethlehem, if you do the chronology of it, recently kind of settled there. And they've not been given one month's notice by their landlords. It's not a, we'll sleep in it and see what happens in the morning kind of deal. They are told to get up and go. Now just picture it for a minute. Panic packing, fear stricken, questions all over the shop. What's going to happen? Where are we going? Who will we meet? What will happen to us when we get there? And this is a lot more close to the distressing scenes that we've seen on our news screens from around the world this year, as people all over our world are fleeing for their lives. And it's worth pausing and remembering and noting that this is the world that Jesus is born into. Not Disney world, not Cadbury world, not these kind of places that we come up with, kind of fantasy lands where we go for a bit of escapism. He's born into our world, the news at 10 world, the world complete with atrocities, tears, heartache. And history shows us world leaders who down the ages have thought nothing of abusing their power. You know, you'd semi-expect

[6 : 04] Jesus to almost live the first century equivalent of the American dream here, would you not? If Disney were writing this, the boy born in the manger who negotiated and overcame every barrier, he started his own global business, floated it on the stock exchange, sold it for a huge profit, is now living in a mansion. But actually Jesus' story is the opposite of Disney, isn't it? It's the opposite of the American dream. And the child who is born here, who begins to grow up, knows darkness in this scene. And as we'll see, he knows even greater darkness at the end of his life. His life is one of lowliness. If Jesus leaving heaven and coming to earth was him lowering himself, if him being born in a manger in Bethlehem to peasant parents was him lowering himself even further, well here he is knowing a hand-to-mouth existence with parents on the run, knowing life essentially as a refugee. And would you see then the lengths that

God the Father has gone to for a lost and a sinful and a going-to-hell broken world out of his great love for us? How vulnerable Jesus is willing to make himself in these moments. I love these words from Puritan John Owen, the greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to him is not to believe that he loves you. And here is the lengths that God was willing to go to.

So that's the first thing that happens. And the second thing is that Herod is waiting in Jerusalem for the return of the Magi. So these are the men that he's sent on a scouting mission to find the king of the Jews. And the Magi, verse 12, having been warned in a dream, decide not to boomerang their way back to Jerusalem. And so Herod realizes, verse 16, that he's been well and truly, watch the word there, it's outwitted. He's been played. He's been shown for a fool. And the phrases that we would use, the bear has well and truly been poked, the hornet's nest has well and truly been kicked, and Herod's fury is unleashed. And so what he does, I dig it, is he just does his mass when Jesus was born to the time when this is going on. And every baby boy under two is ordered to be killed.

Now Bethlehem ain't a big place. Historians estimate that that's something like 20 or so baby boys. But make absolutely no mistake that what goes on in the streets of Bethlehem is utterly horrific. And so this little section ends with Mary and Joseph and the toddler Jesus on the run to Egypt, and with the unimaginable grieving that's going on back in the streets of Bethlehem.

And so that's the Christmas card that Matthew presents us with in these verses in chapter 2. And so that's the view from below. Now what on earth are we supposed to do with that?

[9 : 21] Well, Matthew also wants us to see the view from above. Two things in particular. Firstly, that standing behind this is a bigger enemy with one goal in mind.

Do you know if you've ever had that experience of being behind the scenes at something? I remember as a teenager being at the Globe Theatre down in London, where I was standing, kind of making you stand downstairs, standing, just having the angle where I was able to see what was kind of going on backstage. And I could see the person pulling the rope. I could see the person directing the stage. I could see the characters coming on and off. And it was a great experience, just seeing behind the scenes of something. Well, I think that's what Matthew's doing here.

He's almost inviting us to come and see what's going on backstage in Bethlehem. Because what's playing out on the streets of Bethlehem is a bigger cosmic battle.

As the devil, the prince of darkness, makes his move, fully intent on snuffing out the light of the world. And he's doing it through King Herod. There was a French writer, I think I'll pronounce this right, Charles Baudelaire, who said, and later quoted by Kevin Spacey's character in *The Usual Suspects*, the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world that he didn't exist.

And Matthew says to us, don't be fooled. Don't be fooled. He said, right at the end of the Bible story, we get this book of Revelation. And it gives us the behind the views, the behind the scenes view in this scene.

[11 : 02] And this is what we read on the screen, just a little bit of it. This is what we read. Then another sign appeared in heaven, an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its head.

Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born.

She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And that's exactly what's going on in the streets of Bethlehem. As the devil makes his move, prince of darkness, trying to snuff out the light.

And yet we read this in that Revelation section as well. It says, and her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. In other words, God has got his hand on his king.

God is protecting his king. God is manoeuvring his king. And God's always one step ahead in this account. In all the chapters we've seen before in Matthew, God is always one step ahead.

[12 : 08] Have you noticed that? God is sending his angelic messengers to warn and instruct Joseph the Magi, warning them in dreams, giving them specifics of what is going to happen and where they need to go, guiding them, positioning them to the exact place that he wants them to be.

He's always one step ahead. And in actual fact, as we'll see in a moment, the devil's worst attack only plays into God's good purposes. As the king of light enters the world, fully intent on waging war against the darkness.

And yet, make no mistake, says Matthew, standing behind this is a bigger enemy with one goal in mind. But secondly, standing above this, there's a greater God with two promises to fulfill.

So that's the word Matthew uses twice here. And it's been the theme that we've been tracing over these last couple of weeks. The idea that Matthew sees in these events surrounding the birth of Jesus, God making good on his promises.

This is who this God is. And it's such a timely word for us, isn't it? As we enter another season as a society, as we think to ourselves, whose word can we trust? We hear conflicting opinions all the time about the vaccine.

[13 : 24] We hear conflicting opinions all the time about what might be happening in the places of power, what might not be happening. Whose word can we trust? And the God of the Bible would step out to us today in his word and say, you can trust my words.

And that's what's going on with this word fulfilled. That this is going down exactly as God said it would go down. We can trust every word that comes from the mouth of God. And I'm convinced that Matthew, as he uses this word fulfilled, intends for his Jewish readers to pick up in two divine *deja vu*.

Have you had a *deja vu* recently? You know, that weird thing that happens, it's something triggers in your mind. And you're left with that distinct feeling that I've seen something like this before.

Right? First *deja vu*, I think. And see if you can connect this. A king, this is what we read here, a king. The killing of innocent children.

God protects his leader. God raises that leader up to save his people from slavery. Remind you of anything? It's the Exodus. Except this time it's Herod, not Pharaoh.

[14 : 36] And it's Bethlehem, not Egypt. And it's Jesus, not Moses. And it's spiritual slavery, not physical slavery. This is what this child will grow up to be.

He will grow up to be the saviour. He will grow up to be the greater Moses, who will deliver his people from their greatest enemy. That's what he's come to do.

And the second *deja vu* comes at verse 18. And this one's a little bit trickier. But I think what's going on is it's a quote from the prophet Jeremiah. And if you consider that Rachel there is symbolically the mother of the 12 sons and therefore the 12 tribes of Israel.

She's almost the mother of the nation. What it's describing there in the context in Jeremiah is the pain that she is feeling of God's people being carried away from their homeland 586 by the Babylonians.

As God's enemies deal yet another deadly and painful blow to God's people. What's the *deja vu*? It's the exile. When God's people are carried away. And just a time of indescribable pain that's going on for God's people as their enemies deal another hammer blow to them.

[15 : 55] And you bring those two things together. Hosea 11 on the screen. Out of Egypt I called my son. And Jeremiah 31 and Rachel weeping uncontrollably for her children who are being carried off by their enemies.

It's almost as if Matthew's saying, do you see how Jesus is living Israel's story? They're not just any points in Israel's story.

The more I've thought about it this week, it's the lowest and it's the most painful points in Israel's story. It's almost as if Jesus is standing in the shoes here of everything Israel have gone through.

He's living their story. He's living their pain. And the thing about those two Old Testament properties in their context is that the pain that God's people experience in those moments are couched with words of affirmation about how God will act to deliver them.

About how he loves them. Words reaffirming his commitment to them. That he will make a way for their sin to be forgiven. He will make a way to deliver them.

[17 : 11] He will make a way to transform their hearts so that they're no longer hearts of stone. But he will give them a heart of flesh so that they know and they worship and obey him.

And that through Israel, God will carry out his promises to the world that he will bless the nations. That's what God says he's going to do on the other side of the pain that his people know in those moments.

And yet God also tells his people in those prophecies the context that they have failed time and time and time again to be the people that he's called them to be. And yet while they may be failures, he is faithful.

While they may get it wrong all the time, God will always be true to his promises. And here's what I want us to know. Even though we get it wrong time and time and time again, it's not about us being perfect for God.

It's about the God of the Bible being who he says he will be. Jesus will come and he will stand in their shoes. He will do everything that Israel was called to do.

[18 : 18] He will fully worship God. He will fully obey God. He will fully love God. And he will be the one that will bring in those blessings that God said he would bring to the world. Now let me just bring, I realize that's complex in a sense, but let me just bring one really simple big truth from it.

And here it is. That the God of the Bible, even in the darkest and the bleakest and the most painful of moments, offers real hope.

This God offers hope. So you look out on a world right now, and I do this today, look in the news and it's a hard watch. Look out on the world just now that seems so incredibly dark.

This God offers hope. Maybe your mental health is off the scale right now, and you cannot fathom how you're going to get through the fact that there might be another lockdown.

And you look at your life and you think, what is the point? This God offers hope. Maybe you struggle with the same sins all the time, that your life feels routine, it feels mundane, it feels worthless, and you think, what does God make of me?

[19 : 38] The God of the Bible offers hope. And boy, does our world need hope right now. You know, we live right, if you look at our new screen, Scotland, we live in the drug death capital of Europe.

This is where we live. Our country needs hope. Where are they going to find it? Where are we going to find it? It's not to be found in a place. It's not to be found in a feeling.

It's not to be found in a changing set of circumstances. It's not to be found in a set of results. It's not to be found in a job. It's not to be found in your performance. It's not to be found in the place where you live.

Where is it found? It's found in the person that's described to us here. It's found in the child who's a refugee on the run to Egypt. That is where hope is found.

And you say, how? Well, in Matthew 2, do you see how Herod is searching for the child Jesus in order to kill him? And Jesus flees.

[20 : 39] Well, 24 chapters later in this gospel, there's another hunt for Jesus. Except this time, the man Jesus would be found. And willingly hand himself over to be crucified.

A Jesus's life that starts in darkness. is going to end in even greater darkness. You know, as Jesus dies on the cross, as he gives himself over to be crucified in our place, what is it Matthew records is hanging over the land, coming over the land, is darkness.

what's going on? It's symbolic of Jesus taking the wrath of God. That just and measured anger of our creator against our sin, the creature.

And Jesus is taking that darkness on himself. And he experiences the darkness. He takes the darkness that his people deserve on himself.

And as Jesus rises, though, on the third day, the women run to the tomb at when? They run at dawn. As all of us is, Matthew's telling us, in the rising of Jesus, light has broken in.

[21 : 56] The one who's defeated death, the one who's paid the price for his people's sin, the one who is going to usher in the blessings which are going to come on his people, the dawning of light has happened in this king.

And Matthew's saying, you've got to hope in this Jesus. You know, let me just tell you what this reminded me of just as we close. It's reminded me of something.

I remember we've done it with our kids a couple of times. Of a magic candle. You ever seen one of these things? It's just, it's a lot of fun at the time, and then it gets annoying after a little while.

But this is the image, isn't it, that God has given us here through his word. You blow it out, and it comes back. You try to blow it out, it comes back. You think you've got it, it comes back.

You give it another shot, it comes back. And you realize after a while, it's just not going to go out. And John would write in his gospel, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

[23 : 04] In other words, the light that's going on in Bethlehem is never going to go out. And the darkness will try its best to snuff it out. Herod will try everything in his power.

It looks like he's won, but nothing will snuff out the darkness. At his crucifixion, it looks like the devil has won. They've got Jesus just where they want him. He's handing over his life.

He's making this easy. Great, we've got him. He dies on the cross. We've got him. We've killed him. No, you haven't. The devil tries his worst. The darkness makes his play, and this king of light will not be put out.

Friends, if you're looking for hope this morning in the darkest of places, you will find it in Jesus. And so Matthew has given us the weirdest Christmas card ever.

Ever. Ever you're going to receive. A dragon. A raging king. Ruthless Roman soldiers. Crying mothers. And it's not just a weird scene. It's a terribly dark scene.

[24 : 03] And yet it's almost as if in that scene, Matthew's just stuck on there a magic candle. And he says, There is the light of the world who will not be put out.

I'll just finish with this wonderful quote from Charles Wesley. Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace. Hail the Son of Righteousness. Light and life to all he brings.

Risen with healing in his wings. Mild he lays his glory by. Born that man no more may die. Born to raise the sons of earth.

Born to give them second birth. Hark the herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn king. Let's pray, shall we? The words of Isaiah 50.

Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God. Father, we just thank you so much for your love for a broken world.

[25 : 23] Your action that you took in sending your son Jesus. We thank you, Father, for who he is. Thank you for Matthew's nitty-gritty gospel account, which tells us about the birth and the life of Jesus and the real hope that is found in the one who called himself the light of the world.

And so, Father, I pray for those this morning who are struggling in many different ways. Oh, Father, would you bring knowledge of who Jesus is today? Father, perhaps those who are watching this or maybe who are here today and who don't know you, may today be the day of salvation, the day when people put their faith in Jesus Christ.

And we just thank you, Father, that we would not have come looking for you, but thank you that you are the God who came looking for us. And so, Father, we make our prayers to you today, knowing that you hear us, and we pray confidently in heaven's champions, worthy and in his precious name.

Amen. Amen.