

A Despised Life

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you very much, Alice and Al. Good morning, everyone. Really good to have you with us, whether you're in the building or watching at home. You may not immediately see the connection between the two passages we've just read.

Hopefully that will become reasonably clear as we go along this morning. We're finishing our series this morning that we've been following for the last four weeks, which has been called The Christmas We Should Have Seen Coming, looking at some of the prophecies from the Old Testament and how they were fulfilled in the life of Jesus.

And this morning, our topic is A Despised Life. That might not sound very jolly and Christmassy. Indeed, it isn't. This isn't going to be a particularly jolly sermon. But it's really important that we recognise that the Lord Jesus came into a world that was hostile to him, that was hostile to what he stood for, that was prejudiced against him, and that he was despised as a result.

And we're going to be thinking about that this morning. I think one of the things that very easily missed as we go through the Christmas story is this last section we've read this morning.

And in particular, the fact that we all know, I'm sure, but maybe don't think about very much, that Jesus' hometown where his family were, where he lived for almost all his life, was Nazareth, a small town in Galilee, probably no more than about 500 people living there.

[1 : 3 2] And throughout his life, Jesus was known as Jesus of Nazareth. Now, in some ways, that was just an easy way of identifying him. They didn't have surnames like we do in those days.

And so Jesus of Nazareth was a fairly straightforward way of identifying Jesus from a large number of other people who would have been called Jesus. It was a relatively common name in that time.

But Matthew, as he looks at it, sees quite a lot more in it than that. And what I want to do fairly simply, and hopefully quite quickly this morning, is just three things.

We're going to start by walking through the passage in Matthew and completing, if you like, the Christmas story, trying to understand what is happening and what Matthew is saying to us.

I'm then going to have a little bit of a digression, and I'm going to talk a bit about prejudice. And that is as a preliminary, it's important in itself, but also as a preliminary as we think about the prejudice the Lord Jesus suffered as he led a despised life.

[2 : 4 0] And we'll finish as we're talking about that in the passage in Isaiah that Alice read to us. So first of all, let's get up to speed with what's happening in the Christmas story.

So remember, Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea. The wise men came, and last week we were thinking how they were warned that Herod was out to kill the newborn king.

And so Mary and Joseph fled with Jesus to Egypt before Herod slaughtered all the babies that had been born recently around Bethlehem.

And they stayed there probably for a reasonable length of time, perhaps a couple of years even. And then they heard that Herod had died, and they thought they could go back to Bethlehem.

They seemed to have made their home there in Bethlehem, despite having originally come from Nazareth. Now Herod, who is referred to in the Christmas story, the Herod we were hearing about last week, is commonly called Herod the Great.

[3 : 47] There are a number of Herods in the New Testament. This Herod is commonly called Herod the Great. That may sound a rather strange description of someone who was very cruel and who was paranoid about others wanting to take over his kingdom.

But actually Herod, alongside his cruelty, was a competent ruler. Among other things, he built a temple in Jerusalem, a really grand temple that he built for the Jews there, although he also built a temple to Caesar Augustus, so it wasn't that he had any strong convictions about the God of the Jews, but probably saw it as that kind of political thing.

But he was a competent king, albeit a very cruel one. It was expected that when Herod died, that his son, another Herod, Herod called Herod Antipas, would take over his throne and would be the ruler of all of what we now call Israel, and probably a bit beyond that as well.

But at the last minute, Herod the Great decided he wanted to split his kingdom up. He had three remaining sons. He had already killed three because he thought they were plotting against him.

He had three remaining sons, and he divided the kingdom among them. So the area of Galilee, and one or two other bits and pieces, went to his son Herod Antipas.

[5 : 09] And Herod Antipas is the Herod we read about in the life of the Lord Jesus, and in connection with John the Baptist later in the Gospels. There was another son called Philip, who got a bit of territory we don't need to bother ourselves with.

And then the third son was called Archelaus. And he got, I suppose, the prime territory, the area around Jerusalem, the area that would have been called Judea. Now the best way to describe Archelaus is that he had the cruelty of Herod, but didn't have his competence.

He was a very cruel man, but he was a very bad king as well. And he only lasted a few years. There were complaints to Rome. He got removed, and they put governors in place.

And again, if we think forward in the story of the Lord Jesus, by the time he had his ministry and his trial, of course, Pontius Pilate was the governor. But what we need to know about Archelaus was he was as cruel as his father, and it would have been as dangerous for Mary and Joseph and the young Jesus to go back to Bethlehem as it was when Herod was still alive.

So we have the two dreams in the passage. The one telling them that Herod has died and that he had to go back. And then the second one saying, don't go to Bethlehem. Go and make your home in Nazareth.

[6 : 30] In some ways, that's all quite straightforward. But then Matthew sees some deep significance in the fact that Jesus grew up in Nazareth. It wasn't just somewhere where he happened to grow up.

Nothing in the story and the life of the Lord Jesus was just something that happened to come about. And so Matthew says, at the end of the passage that we read, that as he came back to me, they went to a town called Nazareth.

So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets that he would be called a Nazarene. As I said, our series has been called the Christmas we should have seen coming.

I think this bit of Christmas would be very difficult to see coming. You can read through the whole of the Old Testament. You won't see the town of Nazareth mentioned.

You won't see the word Nazarene mentioned. There's a word called Nazarite, but that is something quite different. And so you look at this passage, this verse, and you think, well, how can he say that the prophets had forecast, had prophesied that Jesus would be a Nazarene?

[7 : 40] And there are a number of explanations. In some ways, you could say none of them is entirely straightforward. Certainly not one that's clearly right or clearly wrong. But there are two explanations, which I think most of the scholars look at these things think are possible.

One is that the word Nazarene has the same root meaning as a word that's used in the Old Testament for a branch. And the significance of that is in the book of Isaiah.

We were looking at Isaiah earlier in the year in our Sunday evening services. And Isaiah chapter 11 and verse 1 says, And that will be very clearly understood by the Jews and should be understood by us as being a messianic prophecy.

Looking forward to the one who would be great David's greater son and would restore the kingdom of David. And as I said, the root word for branch used here is essentially the same as the word for Nazarene used in Matthew chapter 2.

So that is one possible explanation. The other explanation is to do with the town of Nazareth itself. Nazareth, I've said, was a small and relatively insignificant place.

[9 : 05] But for such a place, it actually had quite a bad reputation. And as you go through the Gospels and you find references to Nazareth and Nazarene, it is clear that people of Nazareth weren't well thought of.

In John's Gospel, in some of the discussions about Jesus that the religious leaders had, one of the things they said was, well, he comes from Galilee.

No prophet has ever come from Galilee. In other words, someone from Galilee could never be the Messiah. And Nazareth was in Galilee.

But even within Galilee, it was looked down on. In John chapter 1, one of the first disciples of the Lord Jesus, Philip, goes and speaks to his friend, Nathanael, and says, we've found the Messiah.

He's Jesus from Nazareth. And Nathanael says, Nazareth? Can any good thing come from Nazareth? So the thought then, that people would suggest, is the fact that Jesus came from Nazareth meant that people were naturally prejudiced against him.

[10 : 22] Nazareth was seen as a place that nothing could come from, so how could the Messiah, God's chosen one, possibly come from a place like Nazareth?

A backwater in a part of Israel was quite a long way from the capital in Jerusalem, and a town that itself was looked down on, even by those who lived in neighbouring parts of the country.

He was called a Nazarene, and as a result, he was despised. And that, I think, is the thought that Graham had as he put together this series. And the two probably come together in the passage we read in Isaiah, because it talks about the Lord Jesus being despised.

It also talks about the fact he grew up like a tender shoot and like a root out of dry ground. And that, I think, is the connection between the two passages we've read.

Now, as I say in a few minutes, I want to talk through the passage in Isaiah and to learn some things from it about the prejudice that the Lord Jesus suffered. But it's been on my mind this week, and I thought it was worth highlighting the general thought about prejudice and the danger that we have, that we are prejudicial towards others.

[11 : 42] And bear with me, I think this is quite important, even though it's not directly from the passage. You'll see it's significant as we come to think about Jesus in a few minutes.

I want to make two statements, and you can think about whether you agree with them. The first statement is that if we're not very careful, each of us is likely to be guilty of prejudicial thoughts and actions.

If you're in the business role, or probably in the world of government as well these days, you will get training on something that is called unconscious bias, which is the thought that although you may not deliberately look down on particular groups or treat them differently, in practice it's very easy that we do.

And so we need to be careful. There's no place for prejudice in the church. We need to be careful that we're not guilty of prejudice, and we need to be actively making sure that's not happening.

And the second thing, and I suppose the reason for that, is that I believe we most easily identify with people who are like us.

[12 : 53] And the corollary of that could be that people who are unlike us, people who are different, we sometimes tend to look down on and not treat as well. Let me give you just a very trivial example.

One of the contestants in the recent series of Strictly Come Dancing was Dan Walker. Dan Walker, broadcaster, breakfast television, sports news, also known as a Christian, and particularly for not working on Sundays.

And I was hoping that Dan Walker would do well in the competition, even though he wasn't, by a long way, the best dancer. You might ask, well, why is that?

Is it perhaps, because I look at Dan Walker, and I see a white, heterosexual, male, evangelical Christian like me? And because he's someone who is in some ways similar to me, it's easy for me to identify with him and to hope that he does well.

Now, you may or may not think there's any harm in that. Where the harm comes is if we go beyond that and say, yes, I identify easily with some people because they're like me, but there are some people who are unlike me, and I don't want anything to do with them, or I want to treat them differently, or I look down on them and despise them.

[14 : 12] And that is where the danger of prejudice comes in. Whether it's because of their race, their religion, their physical and mental health, or whatever else, as soon as we start looking down on others because they're different from us, then we're guilty of prejudice, and that should have no place in the church.

Everyone who comes through the doors of our church should be treated with the same respect and dignity as everyone else. They are people who are made in the image of our creator.

They are those for whom the Lord Jesus died and who, if they trust in him, can be our Christian brothers and sisters. And if we want to know an example of how we shouldn't be prejudiced, then we just have to look at the Lord Jesus, perhaps most clearly in John chapter 4.

John chapter 4, Jesus comes across a Samaritan woman who is, let's say, probably has dubious morals. And he is an upright Jewish man.

And most upright Jewish men would have run a mile rather than associate with a woman like that. And yet Jesus takes the time to speak with her, to help her, to show her who he is, and she becomes a great evangelist for those in her town.

[15 : 34] No prejudice, treating everyone with dignity and respect. And that is how we should be as a church. And we need to be careful that people who are different from us, we don't treat in a lesser way from people who are like us.

Now with that digression, I think it's quite important, but let's think about how that applies in Jesus. And we're going now to the passage in Isaiah, Isaiah chapter 53.

And Isaiah chapter 53, I think it is saying, Jesus came into this world, he was different from those, particularly the religious leaders in the day, and they looked down on him, they were prejudiced against him, they despised him.

Not just because he came from Nazareth, although that was part of it, but because in many ways, he had different values and different attitudes from them.

So three simple things, and then we're finished. Three things I think we can learn from this passage. And the first of these is that Jesus showed different attributes from others round about him, particularly the religious leaders.

[16 : 50] That comes across, I think, with this picture that Isaiah gives us of the root coming out of the dry ground. In other words, he's saying, this is something that is unlikely to happen, something where you've got arid land, you wouldn't expect anything to grow, and you get what looks like a very tender shoot coming up, something that's different, something that demonstrates life.

When Jesus came to this earth, by and large, there was little or no life in the religious establishment. Yes, they knew the Old Testament. They could quote huge sections of it.

They would try to be obedient to it in the real minutiae of things and make their own rules up to go along with it. But there was no real love of God. There was no real concern for others.

And Jesus came, and he was different. He was different because as he spoke, he spoke with vitality, he spoke with life, and he didn't just look back and refer to lots of ancient authorities and say, this is what's said here, this is what's said there.

He says, here is what I say. And he spoke with the authority that comes from God. He also claimed very clearly to have a relationship of a father, a son to a father with God, and to be speaking himself the words of God.

[18 : 21] He was different in the way he was and the way he lived and in what he said from the religious leaders of his day. And rather than listen to him and accept what he said and believe the word of God, as many of the common people did, the religious leaders looked down on him, they despised him, and they wanted rid of him because he was different from them.

And definitely what we would look back and say was a good way, definitely what they would say was a bad way because he exposed their hypocrisy and because of that would turn the common people against the religious establishment.

He grew up like a tender shoot, like a root out of dry ground. Second thing I want to say about the way in which the Lord Jesus led a despised life was that he saw different attitudes towards him.

He showed different attributes. He saw different attitudes. Now when we say Jesus led a despised life, you can find lots of instances in the New Testament where that's not obvious, where actually people looked at Jesus and they recognised something in him that was really good, that was worth following and worth believing in.

So when he preached the Sermon on the Mount, you've got this group of people listening in rapt attention as he says these words which have changed history in many ways.

[20 : 00] I saw a description that says they're the basis of Western morality, perhaps right. And the people listened and they marvelled at what he said because they said he speaks with authority.

He's not like the teachers of the law who just refer to other people and don't have any authority of their own. And because of that, the people, common people in Galilee flocked to him and they loved listening to him.

When the Lord Jesus fed the 5,000, when he did that marvellous miracle of taking a small amount of bread and of fish and of feeding the multitude, the people were so impressed and so enthralled with him that they wanted to make him their king.

They didn't despise him. They loved him and all that he was and all that he stood for. Now, John 6, they very quickly changed their attitude but at that point, they loved him.

By and large, the common people, the ones who weren't religious leaders, had a lot of time for Jesus and were those whom he was able to help and to bring into God's kingdom.

[21 : 13] And he did, as we said, without prejudice. It didn't matter who they were. If they were willing to listen to him and to believe his word, he would receive them. But then you have the other attitude, the attitude of the religious establishment.

And they very much saw Jesus as a threat, as someone they didn't want to have among them. And they despised him. They looked down on him.

They wanted to have nothing to do with him. And so the prophecy in Isaiah, verse 3 of chapter 53, we have it in front of him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain.

That certainly was true. Jesus, during his lifetime, was despised by those who should have known better, who should have known and be able to interpret the word of God.

Ultimately, he was completely rejected. And he went alone to suffer on the cross. So he saw different attitudes.

[22 : 22] And then finally, Jesus, he showed different attributes. He saw different attitudes. And then the final thing, he suffered different attacks.

And there's a progression, I think, isn't there, as you go through Isaiah 53. Verse 2, and people are looking at him and saying, well, he's not much, is he? Just like the tender shoot, like the root of the dry ground, nothing particularly attractive about him, nothing in his appearance that makes him special.

And perhaps that was originally how the religious leaders would have thought of him. He's a prophet from Galilee. He's not going to come to very much. Let's just ignore him and maybe he'll go away.

He's no one special. Then in verse 3, you get the progression. He's not just being looked down on and thought to be nothing. He is actively despised, and rejected.

He is held, says the writer Isaiah, in low esteem. So at this point, you have the religious establishment attacking Jesus. And you can see, as you go through the Gospels, how time and again, the religious leaders would come and they would say, how can you do this?

[23 : 41] Or how can you say that if you are who you say you are? How can you heal on the Sabbath day when that is against our interpretation of God's law? They came to him with trick questions and tried to catch him out and to demonstrate that he wasn't who he said he was.

And they failed miserably. But they attacked him and they tried to turn the people against him. And then, that didn't work.

Didn't achieve it. So then, they took him and they tried him and they nailed him to a cross. And that's in verses 4 to 6 in Isaiah 53.

Religious leaders thought in some way they were doing God's will and this was God's punishment for the Lord Jesus. And they were willing to hand him over to the Romans to allow him to be tried, to allow him to suffer the most horrible of deaths as he was crucified on the cross.

And they thought then, this is the person who we despise, we've got rid of him now. But the glorious truth that Isaiah brings to us is that it wasn't them who were nailing Jesus to a tree, although physically it was.

[24 : 59] It was the Romans leading him to a tree. Rather, he was there so he could take the punishment of God against sin. And yes, he led a despised life.

Ultimately, he was completely rejected by those who should have known better handed over to the Romans. And yet, that life was lived, a life of perfection, a life of pleasing God so that he could die on the cross and there he could take the punishment that should be ours.

And that is the ultimate message of Christmas, is the ultimate message of Christian faith. That Jesus came into the world, he lived a life where he was looked down on by many, he was ultimately rejected and handed over to be killed.

But he was doing God's will and he was taking the sins of the world on himself. As we look at Christmas and as we come in a few months to look at Easter, the two are very intrinsically linked.

Christmas is the first step on the road that would ultimately lead the Lord Jesus to the cross. And we need to recognise that this baby who came to Bethlehem is lovely to rejoice in Christmas, to share presents, to have time with family and to think about the birth of the Lord Jesus.

[26 : 24] But ultimately it was so he could die on the cross and take the penalty for our sins. And so our message this morning, quite simply, do you recognise recognise who Jesus is?

Do you recognise him as the son of God who came into the world and who died for your sins? Or do you see him as someone who's not worth bothering about?

Someone even that you would look down on? And I hope we'll be able to see the error of that, that we all should recognise Jesus as God's son and put our trust in him.

There's a great hymn, we sang it at the earlier service this morning, which I think summarises a lot of what we've been saying. Man of sorrows, what a name, for the son of God who came, ruined sinners to reclaim.

Hallelujah, what a saviour, bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood.

[27 : 32] Hallelujah, what a saviour. May that be our experience this morning, that we see him as the one who came to save us from our sins and we put our trust in him.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word to us this morning. We thank you for this final bit of the Christmas story and for the way it points forward to the life of the Lord Jesus.

That as he was rejected in many ways at his birth, as he had to, our parents had to flee to save his life. So he came back and he lived in a town which was held in no regard and he lived a life where he was rejected and despised by many.

But we thank you that he came to bear our sins. We thank you he died and rose again and today he is in his rightful place at your right hand. Help us this Christmas we come to the end of the Christmas period to be able to look beyond the trappings and the rather sentimental view sometimes we have of the Christmas story and help us to understand it was the beginning of a glorious life and it was the beginning of a life that would ultimately lead to the cross and the Lord Jesus taking our sins on himself.

We thank you for your presence with us. We commit ourselves to you now in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.