

Unexpected Fulfillment (2:13-23)¹

One night, not long after I began following Jesus, I **got a text** at around 11:00pm. It was from a friend I hadn't talked to in several months, and all the text said was, "can you do coffee first thing tomorrow? Need to ask you a question." **How many of you also hate cryptic meet-up texts like that?** Yeah, I almost just responded, "well we might as well just go get coffee *right now*, because I sure as heck am not going to get much sleep after a text like that." But I just said "sure."

We settled on a time and place, and I showed up, anxious to hear what this question was and just how *unprepared* I was to answer it. We got our coffee, sat down, and he said, "okay here's my **question**: where *is* God?" Pretty thrown off by the question, I just started giving him a few of the typical answers: God is in heaven, but also he's present with us via the Holy Spirit, etc. But pretty quickly he cut me off and explained what he meant.

As we drank coffee that morning, he **caught me up on his life** over the past few months. Turns out, his mom had been *killed* suddenly in a freak accident; sort of a robbery gone-wrong type of situation. Shortly after *that*, he had found out that some stuff got restructured with his grad school program and they had lost most of the funding for his position. And shortly after *that*, just a few days before we got together for coffee, he found out that his dad had been diagnosed with Stage IV brain cancer. Just an absolutely *brutal* sequence of events.

So when he asked me that morning, "where is God?", the question wasn't so much *geographical* as it was *philosophical*. He didn't want to know about God's *location*; **he wanted me to explain how God could let so many horrible things happen, in such rapid succession, to him and his family.** And I'll be honest: that morning at coffee, I **didn't have many good answers** for him. I didn't know what to say. And really, even if I would've had the *perfect* answers for him, I don't know how much it would've truly helped him in that moment. Because he was *hurting*. He was grieving. He was angry.

But I **bring it up because** I think it's a question nearly all of us wonder about sometimes. And I'm sure as followers of Jesus, a lot of us have had people *ask* us that question and want *us* to answer it. *And* I think the **passage** we're going to cover this morning, among other things, actually speaks *to* that question. And even if it doesn't speak to it in a way immediately resolves *all* of our questions or grief or anger—I do think it at least helps us think well *about* it. *Where is God when the worst of the worst happens? Where is God*

¹ For much of the framing and explanation of this passage, I am indebted to Tim Mackie in his teaching, "God With Us," available [here](#).

when it seems like the train has run off the tracks? Where is God when we witness horrific kinds of evil right before our eyes? Where is God in those types of moments? I think that's at least one thing Matthew wants to help us with this morning.

So if you have a bible, turn with me to Matthew, chapter 2. If you're new, we've been working through the story of the first Christmas as told by Matthew in the first and second chapters of his gospel. And so far, we've covered all the familiar elements of the Christmas story: Mary becoming miraculously pregnant, Joseph taking Mary as his wife, and them traveling to Bethlehem where baby Jesus is born. And last week, we even talked a bit about the Magi—these mysterious Persian astrologers who show up where Mary and Joseph are staying, to bring gifts like gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus.

And my guess is that most of us, whether we grew up around church or not, are somewhat familiar with most of those details from the story. Because even if we've never read them in the Bible, we've likely seen them in the nativity scenes we drive by this time of year, or watched them in some type of ill-conceived Christmas pageant we were forced to attend. But one way or another, all of those details from the story are somewhat familiar to us. They might even feel somewhat sentimental, warm and cozy to us this time of year.

But today we are going to close out with a part of the story that probably isn't very familiar to most people. And it certainly isn't warm and cozy. I've found that this part of the story tends to get left out of most Christmas pageants and nativity scenes. And somewhat understandably, since there's a lot of fear, violence and bloodshed in this part of the story. **Today, the Christmas story turns horrific, dark, and deadly.** The holy family flees into the desert, in the middle of the night, after being warned in a dream that someone is coming to kill their child. Then, a power-hungry king decides to massacre an entire segment of a city's population. And then, to cap things off, Mary and Joseph have to start their lives over completely in a podunk town called Nazareth.

So by all appearances, especially for those living the story as it happened, this is where things go horrifically wrong. And that is saying something, because there have been some unideal experiences for Mary and Joseph in the story already. But in this part of the story, it likely feels to them like the train has come completely off the tracks. They're witnessing the worst of the worst happening, and I'd be willing to bet that, if they're human, they are asking questions like "where is God in all of this?"

And in how Matthew tells the story, I actually think he is attempting an answer to that very question. Because at each horrific moment in the story, he is going to offer his readers an insight into God's activity in it all. He tells the story as it happens, but he also

intersperses what God is doing *in* and *about* all that happens. And in doing so, he gives us a sort of “peak behind the curtain,” so to speak, into where God *is* in moments like this. And I think if we have ears to hear it, this passage shows us some pretty profound things about the nature of God, and about his presence even when things in life feel like they are out of control.

But, just as a fair warning: Matthew is **gonna make us work** for it a little. We’re going to have to take a deep dive into Old Testament prophecy and how it works, in order to understand the points that he makes. **So I hope you brought your bible nerd goggles this morning. Don’t know if you own a pair of those. If not, I’ll do my best to “loan” you mine for the morning. But if you’re willing to do the work to get there, I think there’s some really tangible payoff coming at the end.** Are you game for that? *Not gonna lie, I was kinda hoping for that answer.*

So with your **bible nerd goggles handy**, let’s dive in and see what we can learn from this passage. Matthew 2, verse 13:

*[13] When **they** had gone (meaning the Magi—once they left), **an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said (as in, right now), “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”***

Not exactly the dream you want to wake up from, especially when you’re Joseph, and your dreams have proven incredibly accurate as of late. So **Joseph responds accordingly**, v. 14:

*[14] So he **got up** (as in, that very moment), **took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, [15] where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”***

So **this journey** from Bethlehem to Egypt would’ve been about three *hundred* miles. Traveling by foot and/or animal, that means it would’ve taken them about a *month* to complete. So no small feat for Mary and Joseph and at this point, *toddler* Jesus to pull off. Not at all. I can only imagine making that trek with the idea looming in your mind that an evil dictator wants your child dead.

But *here* in the story is where Matthew gives us our **first “peak** behind the curtain.” Matthew says that this part of the Christmas story “fulfilled” Old Testament prophecy. Specifically, he references a prophecy found in Hosea 11, v. 1 (“Out of Egypt, I called my

son.”) Now, upon hearing that, you might be inclined to think: “okay, that means Hosea *predicts* that this would *happen* to Jesus, and then Matthew 2 confirms the prediction.” But if you flip over to Hosea 11 with *that* expectation, you will be very confused. Because in Hosea, God isn’t using the phrase “my son” to refer to Jesus at all. In fact, *there*, the word *son* doesn’t refer to *any* singular human being. *There*, “my son” is actually used as a *metaphor* for talking about the entire *nation* of Israel.

So here’s where I’ll ask you to **put on the bible nerd goggles**. It’s probably helpful to know that when the New Testament **talks about it fulfilling** Old Testament prophecy, it doesn’t *always* mean the Old Testament *predicts* something happening, and then it *happens*. Sometimes that’s the case, but not *always*. **Sometimes, it simply means that something about the story in the New Testament echoes or resembles a moment from the Old Testament.** So it’s not so much a *prediction*, as it is a *repetition* of an *idea*. Or, as theologians tend to call it, a **recapitulation**. And yes I did have to practice saying that word ten times to be able to say it to you this morning. You’re welcome.

So **think with me about this example** from *Matthew chapter 2*. In the story, Jesus and his family have to flee *to* (and then *from*) Egypt, because of *Herod*: a power-hungry king with evil intentions towards them. In the *next* part of the story, we find out that he kills *all* the baby boys in a particular region because he is threatened by *challenges* they may pose to his throne. So question for you. **Can you think of another story in the bible, where God’s people have to flee from Egypt, because a power-hungry dictator is pursuing them with evil intentions? Maybe even a story where that dictator is willing to kill an entire population of baby boys because he thinks they pose a threat to his throne? What other story does that sound like?**

Nailed it: the story of **the Exodus**.² If you’re *unfamiliar* with the story, *early* in the bible’s storyline, the Israelites find themselves enslaved *in* Egypt under Pharaoh. And at one point, Pharaoh is nervous that the Israelites are becoming too numerous, so he gives instructions to kill every baby boy born to the Israelites, in order to control their population.³ And *eventually* in the story, God leads his people *out* of Egypt, out from under the cruel reign of Pharaoh, but Pharaoh follows hot on their heels, pursuing them with evil intentions in mind. Or, as *Hosea 11:1* summarizes it, “out of Egypt I called my son (Israel).” So **Matthew here is pointing out the striking similarities between Jesus’ story, and the story of the Exodus.**

Now, here’s **what else is interesting** about this connection. In the story of the *Exodus*, God saved a baby named Moses *from* Pharaoh’s genocide. And he *did* that in order for

² You can read the story in its entirety in the book of Exodus, chapters 1-15.

³ Exodus 1:8-16, see specifically v. 15-16.

that baby to grow up and eventually *return* to rescue *all* of God's people. Does *that part of the Exodus story sound familiar to you?* You bet it does. Jesus is in the process of being rescued from Herod's genocide. And we were told two weeks ago that Jesus will eventually "save his people from their sins." So **Matthew is pointing out to his audience that they've heard this story before.** They've seen this pattern of events before. One commentator I read put it this way: "*Matthew sees striking parallels in the patterns of God's activities in history, in ways he cannot attribute to coincidence.*"⁴ This story has direct parallels to *that* one.

Now, Matthew **isn't doing** any of **this just because he finds it interesting.** This isn't him just saying "isn't it kind of *neat* how *this* story is kind of like *that*?" His intentions are far more *pastoral* than that. **Here's what he's trying to get his audience to see: there have always been evil kings with evil intentions. In Moses' day, Jesus' day, and even in ours. And those kings have always felt threatened by God and God's people. But just like the kings back then were ultimately unsuccessful, so will the ones now. Just like Moses delivered God's people, so will Jesus. God will still accomplish his purposes, and nothing will stand in his way.** Does that make sense?

Okay, (goggles off) let's **keep moving** through the passage. Continuing in v. 16:

*[16] When Herod realized that he had been **outwitted** by the **Magi** (because remember: they returned back home without reporting back to him about where the child was), he was **furious**, and he gave orders to **kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.***

So at this point in the story, **Herod does the unthinkable.** He gives orders for every male child two and under in Bethlehem to be executed. Based on the timing, two years old was the *oldest* that Jesus would've been, and Herod at least *thinks* Jesus is still in Bethlehem. So Herod does what he sees as the only way to *ensure* that the threat to his throne is eliminated: he has an entire demographic brutally murdered.

Based on population and average birth rates at the time, that likely means that somewhere between 20-50 male children in Bethlehem and the surrounding area were killed. Bethlehem wasn't a large city. But still, can you imagine, in a town that size, how *devastating* this must've been. Likely, everybody in that town knew *someone* who had been impacted by all of this; someone who had just experienced one of the worst kinds

⁴ Blomberg, Craig, *Matthew*, p. 22.

of loss imaginable. And for absolutely no reason. Just heartache and devastation everywhere you look.

And **that devastation** is what **prompts** Matthew to reference *another* Old Testament prophecy. So get your goggles on, look with me at v. 17-18:

[17] Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: [18] “A voice is heard in **Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”⁵**

Okay. *This* prophecy is from **another key moment** in Israel’s history, called the *Exile*. *This* time, God’s people are suffering under **yet another cruel king**. *This* time it’s *Nebuchadnezzar*, who rules over an absolutely brutal nation called *Babylon*. And the part of the story that Matthew references is when many Israelite men and *children* are being carried off into Babylonian slavery for God knows how long. It all happens at a place called *Ramah*.

So the **prophet Jeremiah** reflects on this scene, where Israelite women watch their sons being hauled off. And in *doing* so, he envisions the Jewish *matriarch Rachel* weeping over these children being taken away. *Matthew* then *recycles* that imagery to describe the agony of women in *Bethlehem* whose children have been taken away by Herod. And **the imagery is likely meant to be representative of God himself: God is actually weeping alongside the Israelites who have lost their children to an evil king.**

But there’s **even more to it**. What Matthew quoted was from Jeremiah 31:15. I want to show you **the very next verse**, v. 16:

This is what the Lord says: “Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded,” declares the Lord. “They (meaning “your children, who are being carried off into exile”) will return from the land of the enemy.

In other words, *exile* is **not a permanent destination**: they will see their children again. And once again, Matthew isn’t just pointing out a *connection*. He’s making a statement, an *assertion* about something. **He’s saying “just like how *that* was devastating, but also didn’t mean evil had won...the same thing is true here. *This, too*, is devastating. God weeps over what is happening here. But it also doesn’t mean that the story is over.” In**

⁵ You can read the prophecy in context in Jeremiah chapter 31.

the new kingdom Jesus has come to deliver, evil kings may devastate—but they never have the final word. As the poet Malcolm Guite so profoundly put it:

~~Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower
—Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,
—And death squads spread their curse across the world.
But every Herod dies, and comes alone
—To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.⁶~~

Which leads us to the **third and final movement** in the story. Let's look there, and then we'll talk about what this all means for us. Pick it back up with me in v. 19:

[19] After **Herod died**, an angel of the Lord appeared in a **dream** to Joseph in **Egypt** [20] and said, "**Get up**, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are **dead**." [21] So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

So at this point in the story, **if you're Mary or Joseph**, you're thinking "finally." *No more life on the run. We can return to where we're from. Where our family is, where our people are, where our familiarity is—finally, this nightmare that was three years of our life has come to an end.* Plus, if they're still thinking that this child of theirs is the long-awaited king of Israel, returning to Jerusalem means he could grow up where *kings* grew up: in *Jerusalem*. That's where the king's palace is, that's where the culture making and shaping takes place...so let's return and have him grow up *there*. "Happily ever after" for Mary and Joseph and Jesus—right?

Only then **this happens**, v. 22:

[22] But when **he (Joseph)** heard that Archelaus was **reigning** in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was **afraid** to go there. We know from history that Archelaus was in many ways as bad as his *father* was. So **having been warned in a(nother) dream, he** they **withdrew to the district of Galilee, [23] and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.** So was fulfilled what was said through the **prophets, that he (Jesus) would be called a Nazarene.**

So they **don't go back** and settle in Jerusalem; instead, they settle in another town called *Nazareth*. *We're told elsewhere that they may have had connections there*, but no doubt

⁶ As seen [here](#).

another reason was because of how *obscure* Nazareth was. If you wanted to lay low from a murderous king, Nazareth was a good place to stay off the radar. Bethlehem, like we mentioned, wasn't a *big* city, but geographically, it was still very *close* to Jerusalem, where Archelaus was. *Nazareth*, on the other hand, was the boonies. Middle of nowhere. In *fact*, the name *Nazareth* literally means "stick town." Jesus is, *literally*, from the "sticks." Pun intended.

But think about **how odd this is** from a *big picture* standpoint: this means the *most significant person* in Israel's history grows up in a no-name town no one had ever heard of. So just as a *parallel*: in today's world, if you want to make something of yourself—if you want to become a mover and a shaker in the world—you move to New York City. Or L.A. Or D.C. Right? That's where the important stuff happens. You usually *don't*, on the other hand, move to *Clinton, TN*. You don't move to *Townsend*. That's not how the world works. Important *people* move to important *places* to make something of themselves. But *Jesus* and his family go to *Nazareth*. *Sticktown*. There's actually a story in the gospel of John when someone meets Jesus, finds out people think he's the Messiah, and responds with "Can anything *good* come from *Nazareth*?"⁷ **The most important person in the history of the world, comes from one of the most *insignificant* places.**

Which is **actually what prompts Matthew** to write about Jesus, "he would be called a Nazarene." Now *this* reference to prophecy could be a bit *confusing*. Because you actually **won't find those words** ("he would be called a Nazarene") *anywhere* in the Old Testament. So what "prophecy" is Matthew talking about *here*, exactly? Okay—before I answer that, I do need to know: are you all ready for bible nerd level 1000? You still have your *goggles*, right? I mean you've come this far, you might as well just go all in.

Okay, one of the **more well-known prophetic images** about the Messiah was that he would be like a "branch" that grew out of the *roots* of a tree.⁸ *The idea was that the nation of Israel had been pretty much leveled*. To where metaphorically, all that was *left* of God's people were the roots of a tree. *But*, Isaiah tells us, a *branch* would grow out of those roots—a sprout of *hope after devastation*—and that *branch* would be the Messiah. The word *branch* in Hebrew is the word *netser*. It's the same as the word for "stick," and it's where the town *Nazareth* got its name. *Netser-eth*. Matthew is saying that Jesus *is* the "branch" that the Prophets spoke of. And just to *prove* it all, he's gonna grow up in a *town* with the same name: *Nazareth*.

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⁷ John 1:46

⁸ See mainly Isaiah 11:1,10.

Okay...**how are we doing** with all of this? Are you lost yet? Does your *head hurt* yet? So when I was putting together this teaching, I both *knew* that was going to be a lot to digest, and also didn't know of literally any other way to teach this passage and understand it. So while some of that may have been dense and confusing, I honestly think it would've been *more* confusing to just *pretend* we all already understood what Matthew was talking about. **Plus, then your bible nerd goggles would've gotten all rusty.**

But with all of that unpacked, let's **take a step back**, and just look at this passage as a *whole*. As we mentioned earlier, what Matthew is doing in this passage is twofold. First, he's just *describing* the events that transpired for Jesus' family: he's describing how they came to live in Egypt, and then ultimately *settled* in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. But at the same time, Matthew also gives us all these peaks behind the curtain as he tells the story. He's helping us spot and identify God's *activity* amidst all of these unideal and horrific events that took place.

And as we've seen, although he goes about it in a roundabout way, Matthew **has a distinct purpose** in what he's doing. **He wants his audience to *understand* something about God's *whereabouts* in these moments when the worst of the worst *happens*. And to get his point across, Matthew points his audience to *other* times in history where it likely *looked* like the worst was happening...but there was more *to* it than that. From God's perspective, yes—*horrible* things were happening. But at the same time, **none of those things were able to *thwart* God's purposes for his people**. In fact, not even close.**

Now, you might ask in response to all that: then **why didn't Matthew just say *that*?** Like, why take us on this crazy detour through Old Testament prophecy to make such a relatively simple, straightforward point? **But think about it: in moments in *your* life when you most feel like things are going off the rails, is what you need *most* for someone to come along and tell you, 'hey, just FYI: God is strong and powerful'? Is *that* what you needed? Or is what you need *most* for someone to *prove* to you that God is strong and powerful? To me, the latter is a little more helpful. So that's what Matthew is doing here: he's not just *telling* his audience that God is strong and powerful; he's *showing* them that he is. And that he *has been*, over and over and over again.**

So, **some** people would **sum up** these ideas with a short phrase like **"God is in control."** And I'm fine with that terminology, but I think an even more *biblical* way of putting it is that God is *sovereign*. The point that the bible makes is not necessarily that God *causes* evil or is in *control of* evil. **In fact, the book of James says plainly that God can't be**

tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone with evil.⁹ Rather, the bible teaches that God is sovereign over evil. Such that even when human beings commit *atrocious* evils against one another, *none* of that is able to *prevent* God from accomplishing his purposes, and working for the good of *his* people. Here's the way **Romans 8:28** puts it:

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.

So do you **hear the theology** at work there? Paul's conviction is that in *all things*—meaning even in the *trenches* of evil committed against us—even *then*, God is able to *work for* our good. Evil in the world *happens*; and God remains completely *opposed* to all of it. He remains completely *committed* to doing *away* with *all* of it for good one day in the future. And yet in the meantime, it is possible for God to *accomplish* good *despite*—and in the *midst* of—human evil.

Now, let me pause right there and acknowledge that **I do realize the difficulty** of what I'm saying. I'm well aware of the implications of that, and I'm well aware of how *confusing* and *off-putting* it could feel to many of us in the room. *I know many of you in this room. I know some of the tragic and horrific things you've been through. And I know that in response to what I just said, you might think, "really? You're trying to say that God intended for those things to happen?"* And to that I would say, "no. I'm not saying that." In fact, what I'm saying is that *ultimately*, God didn't intend for *anything* evil to *ever* happen to *anyone*. That was *his* original design for the world. *Evil* is what we—human beings—introduced into the story. That was *our* contribution to the whole thing.

Rather, what I am saying is that what others intended for evil, God can use for good. What I'm saying is that the God we read about in the Scriptures is strong enough, powerful enough, and good enough to take absolutely any amount of evil done against you and against me, and is able to accomplish good despite it. And what Matthew is saying is that if you take an honest look at the Scriptures, beginning to end, what you're going to see is that nothing—absolutely nothing—is able to stop him from accomplishing that. Nothing can stand in his way. Not evil kings, not evil people, not evil intentions—none of that is a match for God of the bible.

Now, just to be abundantly clear, when we witness evil in the world or in our lives, **we should grieve it**. It *should* make us upset. We *should* be bothered by it and even *angered* by it. The bible never tells us *not* to respond that way. **But it also gives us something we need** in the *midst* of such evil. It gives us an awareness that **evil will not—in fact, it**

⁹ James 1:13

cannot–be the end of the story. It shows us that **no amount of human evil can thwart God’s purposes for his people.** It shows us that right smack dab in the middle of evil, God is able to bring about *good*. For God’s people, **evil kings and evil intentions don’t stand a chance of victory in the shadow of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.** If a deliverance came out of genocide, it can come from anywhere. If hope could return from Babylon, it can return from anywhere. And if good can come out of Nazareth, it can come from anywhere.

So we come **full-circle back to the question** my friend asked me over coffee that morning: *where is God? Where is he when the worst of the worst happens? Where is he when it feels like the train is coming off the tracks? Where is he when we witness horrific evils before our very eyes? Where is God in those moments?* According to the Scriptures, here’s our answer: **he is right in the middle of it all *with us*, working to put an end to every *bit* of it. Accomplishing his purposes and bringing about good for those who know and love him. And nothing—not the most horrendous evil, not the most unideal of circumstances, not evil kings or evil intentions, *nothing*—will ever be able to stop him from doing that.**

And **in the meantime**, we have *this promise* from the apostle Paul:

*For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*¹⁰

This is **the reality that has opened up** for each of us, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus: **the joy of knowing that no amount of evil is a match for the purposes of God.** So as we go to the tables as a church family this morning, we remember that. We *commemorate* that. We recognize that even when it seemed like the worst had happened *to Jesus*—as he hung on the cross beaten and bloodied—even *then*, he was working for the good of those who know and love him. So as we take of the bread and the cup, we remember: *that was for us*. I can’t think of a more incredible thing to celebrate together this morning.

Let’s pray.

¹⁰ Romans 8:38-39.