

“Hearing and Doing”

Matthew 2:13-23

Matt. 2:13-23 is not a popular passage to deal with. What Pastor wants to speak on Herod's killing children? But when we read the passage, we discover that the main character is not Herod, but it's Joseph. Joseph is the hero here. Every time he hears from God he does what God says. He receives three dream/revelations from God through an angel and he does what God says. Just as the Magi's narrative focused on worship, the Joseph narrative focuses on obedience. And if we want to be very specific, the obedience of a parent to God so their child is in the best place for God's plan to work in their life. Now this passage sounds more appealing doesn't it? Like God has something for all of us to learn about hearing and doing what He says especially in the context of helping our children be in the best place for God to work in their life.

All of Ch.2 is one long narrative about Jesus' coming into the world to be the prophesied Messiah. While the Wise men want to worship and honour this new born king, the knowledge of the Messiah's birth spreads a shudder through Herod's palace; the self-proclaimed king who has become a raving madman due to years of paranoia, murder and mental illness. The Wisemen hear God speak to them through a dream and do what God says; avoid Herod and take a different route home. But even though they are no longer part of the narrative, Herod still is. And he's not happy when he hears that the Magi ignored his request.

God, who knows all these things, already has a plan. Joseph – a righteous man who initially was going to spare Mary public disgrace and divorce her quietly when he found out she was with child – who obeyed God's message to marry Mary, now obeys again to another angel message from God;

Get up,” he said, “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.”¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt,¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod

Joseph – who never speaks a word in the Bible – hears what God says and then does what God says. He was a hearer and a doer, as Jesus would later share that we all need to be in Matt. 7:24. As a follower of God and also as a parent, Joseph models for all of us our need to ...

Trust God's Word to Direct our Life and our Family **(2:13-15)**

God has wired us men to naturally protect our families. We get a little worked up when someone speaks ill towards or about our wife or children or they experience a threat of some kind. Joseph understands that he and Mary are responsible to care for the Messiah, the Saviour of the world – no pressure!! They may not know how Jesus will impact the world for God's glory and our good, they only know He will. And that's any Christian parents' prayer for their child; to impact our world for God's glory and good. That's why Joseph obeyed God's Word

For the physical and spiritual protection of his family (vv.13-15)

Up until this point a physical threat to Jesus was not something Joseph and Mary were aware of. Yes, there was the ominous words of Simeon when they went to the temple to offer Mary's purification sacrifice after giving birth to a boy. He said,

Luke 2:34 "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed—³⁵ and a sword will pierce even your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

But after the birth of Jesus, they seemed to settle into a life in Bethlehem. Anywhere from 3 months to a 1 ½ years had gone by. New life, new routines; life was good. And if Jesus is to be the King one day it would only make sense to live close to Jerusalem.

But then the angel speaks to Joseph in a dream – something that had happened before – and says he must take the Child (notice Jesus is always mentioned first) and His mother and “flee” [means run from danger, we get ‘refugee’ from this word] to Egypt. Why Egypt? Usually in the Bible Egypt is not the best place to go. But after their defeat at the hands of the Babylonians in 609 BC, Egypt had lost much of their power in the world. When Alexander the Great conquered the world in the mid 4th century BC, he had the Egyptians build him a city to be called Alexandria. Alexander was quite friendly to the Jews and Alexandria became a place for Jews to live. By the mid 1st century AD, records indicate there were close to 1 million Jews living in Alexandria at that time. That's 900+ km away from Bethlehem. They may not have gone that far. Even if they travelled just inside the eastern border of Egypt was still 200 km from Bethlehem, a minimum 3 week journey on foot. No doubt the gifts from the Magi were used to finance their travels.

Yet Joseph accepted God's Word and obeyed it because he knew God wanted to protect his family physically and spiritually. He even left at night, a dangerous time for a journey. And to protect our families physically and spiritually we must,

Anticipate inconveniences and sacrifices (v.14)

Joseph and Mary had already had their fair share of inconveniences and sacrifices. Their marriage plans were disrupted by God. In spite of their integrity no doubt they were shunned by their families and community of Nazareth. Then came the census and the travel to Bethlehem late in Mary's pregnancy. Then the less than ideal circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus. The shepherds visit. Later the wise men.

Just when it seemed things were becoming routine and their life having a rhythm to it, God interrupts it again with a message to flee – now! But all this was to spare their son harm and to ensure God's plan for how He will impact His world for God. Isn't that what God calls all of us to do as Christian parents? Sometimes we have to make sacrifices and go through many inconveniences to help our children be who God wants them to be. Making decisions that result in their being more influenced by Godly people than ungodly, to incur their temporary disappointment because we have to limit their entertainment choices. To graciously steer them away from negative influences and praying they will make wise decisions. To sometimes say 'no' for them because you see danger that they don't see. Even when pressured from their peers or other people who claim to have their best interests in mind yet do not.

And in all of this, even when we don't understand why or they don't know why,

Understand God has a purpose (v.15)

The purpose of Matthew's gospel is to point out that Jesus was the rightful King of Israel. In Ch. 1 he outlines Joseph's family line, proving Jesus was legally in the line of David. But Matthew also carefully explains Joseph had no physical union with Mary prior to Jesus' birth – a virgin conception as Scripture points out. Then conferred by the wise men's visit and the star as fulfilling Num. 24:17, and then affirmed by the religious leaders (and Herod) that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem as Jesus was. Now there will be three more references to prophetic fulfillment affirming that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Here Matt. points out by quoting Hosea 11:1 that Jesus, God's Son would come out of Egypt.

Remember, when a NT writer quotes a passage, he is referring to the context of the passage where it's found. Hosea was not a positive book. Hosea was told by God to marry Gomer and stay committed to her even though she would be continually unfaithful to him. God did this to show Israel that they had been constantly unfaithful to Him in spite of His continual faithfulness to Him. Hosea begins 11:1 quoting God,

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. ² But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. ³ It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. ⁴ I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.

Here God compares Israel with Jesus – the son He called out of Egypt – saying of both of them that He loved them from the beginning. Israel came out of Egypt experiencing the miracles and provision of God yet worshipped other gods. As a result God would punish Israel with exile (11:5-7) but then He says 'His heart is changed and His compassion aroused' (v.8), that He will not come in wrath (v.9) but that they will follow Him and He will settle them in their lands (vv.10-11), ultimately pointing to what Jesus will do for them.

This is what is called typological prophecy where Jesus is a type of Israel. Both coming out of Egypt as a result of God's miraculous hands but Jesus, unlike Israel will, lead His people through the wilderness and into the place of God's blessing should they follow Him.

At the time Joseph and Mary did not know why God was sending them to Egypt (other than for safety) but He also had a greater purpose. They may have only been in Egypt for one to 6 months, but not long. For God would take Herod's life shortly after this terrible incident in Bethlehem. But ultimately God sent them away to spare them from Herod's rage.

¹⁶ *When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, 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. 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."*

The greatest sadness surrounding the coming of Jesus to the world was the loss of these innocent lives. We live in a sin-filled world with many Herod types who use their political, commercial, religious and even family power to hurt others. It is a reminder to us all that

None of Us Are Immune to Suffering **(2:16-19a)**

While Bethlehem and region may have been small and the deaths few (scholars guess anywhere from a dozen to 50), some of these children and their families would have been known to Joseph and Mary. There are no words of comfort that would minister to these families – as sometimes there are none for us to offer people who have experienced difficult loss. So how can we as believers find any consolation?

God sees the evil in the world (v.16, 13)

God knew this was going to happen as we see in v.13. So He sent His Son away. Why didn't He send them all away? Herod would have only searched for them and killed more. So enraged was Herod that had he thought this through, that since the Wisemen 'outwitted him' then maybe they helped Joseph and Mary escape or someone helped them escape. It never crossed his deranged mind that Joseph and Mary and Jesus were not there. Making a safe return possible.

These babies were the first martyrs to suffer for Jesus. And many more have happened since and still happen today. Boko Haram, an Islamic terrorist group in Nigeria has been killing Christians for a decade, even killing 11 more on Boxing Day, sending a message that they are now part of ISIS.

But God knows our pain (vv.17-18)

Matthew uses the quote from Jer. 31:5 actually to encourage God's people to know there is hope. Jeremiah had a difficult ministry. Not only did he prophesy about the Israelites' exile to Babylon and the destruction of the temple, he was an eyewitness to it. And yet, in the middle of the book God has four chapters of hope; Jer. 30-33. Ch. 30 ends with God's promise that He will deal with their enemies one day,

²⁰ Their children will be as in days of old, and their community will be established before me; I will punish all who oppress them. ²¹ Their leader will be one of their own; their ruler will arise from among them. I will bring him near and he will come close to me— for who is he who will devote himself to be close to me?' declares the LORD. ²² "So you will be my people, and I will be your God." ²³ See, the storm of the LORD will burst out in wrath, a driving wind swirling down on the heads of the wicked. ²⁴ The fierce anger of the LORD will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart. In days to come you will understand this.

The leader of course will be the Messiah. Ch. 31 is mostly positive reaffirmation of these promises except the verse Matthew quotes. To understand why we have to see how Ch. 31 begins;

"At that time," declares the LORD, "I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people." ² This is what the LORD says: "The people who survive the sword will find favor in the wilderness; I will come to give rest to Israel." ³ The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. ⁴ I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt. Again you will take up your timbrels and go out to dance with the joyful. ⁵ Again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; the farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit. ⁶ There will be a day when watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephraim, 'Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God.'"

Not all Israelites survived the exile. Many died. But a remnant returned and that assures the promises of God are still intact. Rachel, was the mother to Joseph and Benjamin; Joseph representing the 10 tribes to the north and Benjamin the two to the south. Ramah (5 miles north of Jerusalem) was the place where Babylon gathered the exiles and took them to Babylon. Jeremiah was initially tied up there (Jer. 40:1) and Rachel was buried outside of Bethlehem (Gen. 35:19). So yes, God sees our pain but His promises still hold out and again we must

Understand God has a purpose (v.19a)

God appears to have punished Herod with this last act of cruelty by sending a series of diseases on him that resulted in a painful death within less than year after the Bethlehem incident. God uses Herod's rage to deal with him once for all. God had an overall plan that was still unclear to Joseph and Mary but becomes clear to us with hindsight. Because Matthew's focus through all this is that Jesus fulfills all these prophecies. His birth in Bethlehem, about His coming out of Egypt, about the weeping of Israel's children but the prophecies also say a light will come out of the north Zebulun and Naphtali according to Isaiah 9.

Again, Joseph hears what God says and does what God says; he returns to the south in Judea. Joseph and Mary are from Nazareth. Joseph appears to have no desire to go back. So God arranges for Herod's equally cruel son Archelaus to take over forcing Joseph and Mary to move again. It's not always easy to trust God but we must always,

Believe God's Plan is Better than Ours **(2:19b-23)**

Joseph and Mary are told Herod is dead and that it is safe to return to Israel. That was easy to do. It's always easy to follow God's plan

When it makes sense (vv.19b-21)

Sometimes God's plan seems clear. He closes a door so that another opens and you follow it. His Word is clear and helps us make good decisions. Don't hate people, pray for your enemies, do good to those we have opportunity to do good to. Love your spouse. Don't exasperate your kids. A lot of God's commands and at times His leading makes perfect sense. Joseph and Mary initially return when it makes sense since Herod is dead, but then they find out his cruel son is now in charge. So God gives Joseph another dream message – which he clearly obeys – and to go north to Galilee. And he goes

Even when it doesn't make sense (vv.22-23a)

Why wouldn't it make sense to go to Galilee? First, Jesus is supposed to be king one day, so shouldn't He stay near Jerusalem? Second, Galilee is home and when they left home it was somewhat of a relief because we know they were ridiculed because of Mary's getting pregnant before they were married. Probably why they stayed in Bethlehem after Jesus' birth. But Joseph obeys God again and is learning from his obedience to

Understand God has a purpose (v.23b)

And that is that Jesus will be known as a Nazarene. Matthew doesn't quote any specific prophet here because there isn't a clear verse that declares this. Is. 9:2 says that a light will come from Galilee, from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali; the land of Nazareth. Isaiah also prophesied in 11:1 that

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

² *The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—*

³ *and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.*

A clear Messianic prophecy, Jesse being David's father. And the word for Branch in Hebrew is 'Nazar'; Nazareth meaning 'Branch town'. Jesus was known as 'Jesus of Nazareth' or the Nazarene (not to be confused with Nazarite, one who takes a holy vow of separation). Followers of Jesus were known as Nazarenes, a term of derision because Nazareth was a totally non-descript place. As Nathaniel pointed out in John 1:46 when told the Messiah was there and from Nazareth, he sarcastically remarked, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'

So God orchestrates all of these fulfilled prophecies by speaking to Joseph through dream revelation. And Joseph unquestioningly obeys so that his family is physically protected which ensures God's plans and purposes happen for his child.

I think as parents that's the best thing we can do for our children. That we obey God's Word and point them in the direction they should go in; even though it may mean making unpopular decisions at times to help them avoid pain or being involved in things or relationships that would hinder their walk with God. Not that we can make that happen for them but we can lay a foundation for them where we trust God's Word in order to direct our family and our own life. We have to anticipate that we will suffer; that we will experience many inconveniences, that life does not go smoothly for us. So prepare for it. And ultimately trusting God's plan is better than ours.

And Lord-willing we and our families will see the benefits of hearing and doing what God says.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net