

GET UP, TAKE THE CHILD AND ESCAPE TO EGYPT

Matthew 2:13-23

Key Verse: 2:13

“When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘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.’”

In this passage the child Jesus’ life is threatened by the evil King Herod. With God’s guidance, he escapes to Egypt under the protective care of Joseph. After the death of Herod, he comes back to Israel to live in Nazareth. Matthew proclaims that each event in this passage fulfills prophecy. This is not easy to understand. Martin Luther wrote a message on this passage. He described the evilness of Herod in detail and explained the identity of Christ. Then at the end, he says, “Now the other question and textual problem concerning the three prophetic texts cited by Matthew still remain. I entrust this question to the scholars” (Complete works, vol 7, page 264). Let’s study this passage with a humble heart, asking God’s help. Let’s consider the three events one by one, in context. As a conclusion, let’s consider two themes that run through these events. May God grant his Holy Spirit to help us in this study.

First, “escape to Egypt” (13-15).

Verse 13a begins. “When they had gone....” “They” refers to the Magi, who had just left the child Jesus after a joyful and meaningful worship service. After worshipping him, the Magi simply went away without expecting anything. They did not burden Mary to cook for them; they did not burden Joseph to prepare their lodging and to look after their camels. They simply worshiped and left. They were like sacrificial UBF coworkers who travel long distances to participate in the work of God; they worship wholeheartedly and go back quietly. What a mysterious event the Magi’s beautiful worship was! It was orchestrated by God for his own glory and good purpose.

Look at verse 13. “When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘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.’” Joseph and Mary must have laid down for sound sleep. But God did not sleep. God watched over the child Jesus. One of the hardest things for new parents is to get up in the middle of the night to care for their baby. But to God, this was no problem, for God does not sleep. Psalm 121:4 says, “...indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” As he watched, God saw an impending threat against his Son. Herod was planning to search for the child Jesus to kill him. Perhaps no one else knew what Herod planned, but God knew. Hebrews 4:13 says, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

In this scene, there is a great contrast between heaven and earth. In heaven, the eyes of God were fastened upon the child Jesus. God surveyed the people and events around Jesus with the utmost scrutiny. A myriad of angels were ready to answer God’s summons and speed toward earth at any moment to serve the child Jesus. Jesus enjoyed this spiritual privilege throughout his lifetime. At the time of his arrest, Jesus could have called on twelve legions of angels (Mt 26:53). However, to earthly eyes, the child Jesus looked vulnerable, like a tender shoot. He seemed to be an ordinary child in a poor family. He seemed to have no chance against the mighty power of Herod and his secret police. The work of God may appear to be vulnerable and weak. But the invisible and almighty God exerts the power of heaven to protect his work.

To human eyes, fourteen new pioneering chapters in the USA and Canada may look vulnerable. Yet the power of heaven protects and establishes them. Missionary Philip Won has begun a Sunday worship service at the University of Washington in Seattle. The last two Sundays, he delivered his Genesis message before four empty chairs with Bibles and backpacks on them to represent UW students. Although this looks small, God is with him to bless and establish UW ministry. This weekend, Nick and Katy Saethre from Chicago went to Seattle to visit relatives. They will attend the UBF Sunday worship service as prayer servants and musicians. They will bring their aunt and uncle. Missionary Philip will preach to four living people. God accepts our faith. God answers prayer. God is with all new pioneering families. Let’s pray for them with faith that God will establish and protect them.

When God intervened to protect the child Jesus, he did not use a vast earthly army. God used one faithful coworker, Joseph. God spoke to Joseph through an angel in his dream. This reminds us that God spoke to Old Testament Joseph through dreams. Throughout the Bible, God spoke to various people through dreams. However, this

happened mostly in the Old Testament. The word “dream” or its variants appear 90 times in the NIV Bible; 83 times in the Old Testament and seven times in the New Testament. Among the seven in the New Testament, six are in Matthew’s gospel—God spoke to Joseph in a dream four times, to the Magi once, and perhaps to Pilate’s wife once. The other NT reference to dreams is a quotation of the prophet Joel in Acts 2:17. We can conclude that God’s revelation in a dream was a special gift to Joseph. Since then, God has spoken to us through his Son and given us the New Testament. Hebrews 1:1-2a says, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son....” Of course, today people may have God-given dreams. But they are not authoritative. The written word of God in the Bible is the final authority for faith and practice. In this passage, Joseph’s dream was the word of God to him.

Though God used only one earthly man to protect the child Jesus, God demanded from this one man absolute obedience and wholehearted cooperation. God woke Joseph in the middle of the night. Moreover, God skipped the formality, “Joseph son of David,” and began with, “Get up.” Then God gave Joseph a difficult task. It required transporting a baby and a nursing mother in the middle of the night from their home country to a foreign land. They would need transportation and lodging. They would need Egyptian visas and a means of financial support in a foreign land. God did not tell Joseph in detail how to carry it out. God only told him to take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt.

The angel called this an escape. The threat was imminent and real. The power of darkness wanted to pounce upon the child Jesus and kill him. In that situation, God told Joseph to escape to Egypt. God’s people must know how to escape from the devil’s trap. How can we do so? In the first place, we must listen to the voice of God through his word. God is always watching and he is ever ready to warn us. To hear his warning we must be diligent in Bible study. We must have a right attitude toward the word of God. We must have an awesome respect for the word of God and be ready to obey it unconditionally. Joseph heard the voice of God through the angel in the middle of the night. He got up, took the child and his mother and left immediately. In contrast, Lot’s sons-in-law heard the warning of God as if it was a joke. They laughed and forgot about it. A short time later, they perished in burning sulfur (Gen 19:14b).

In the second place, we must be free to escape. In Bible history, not everyone who had been warned was free to escape. For example, there is Lot’s wife. The angels told her to flee from Sodom and not look back. This seems simple enough. But as she fled, she remembered the jewels in her chest, her designer clothes, name-brand furniture, new plasma TV, BMW, and so on. Unconsciously, she looked back, longing for her earthly treasures. She became a pillar of salt. Those who are bound by the pursuit of material things, cultural convenience, and the constant need for entertainment have no strength to escape from the devil’s trap. During the recent hurricane in New Orleans, many did not want to evacuate to save their lives. Some were too attached to earthly possessions. God’s people must escape when they have to escape. God’s people must overcome materialism, pleasure-seeking, and easygoing mentality. God’s people must put their hope in the kingdom of God, looking forward to eternal life with Christ and eternal reward.

One shepherd was a spoiled youngest son. By God’s grace he married a sweet and pure woman of God. Still, he wanted to enjoy a fancy life. He drove an expensive SUV, causing his wife to work at Dunkin Donuts. Through God’s servants’ counseling, he realized that it was not right. After a tearful struggle in prayer, he overcame himself and sold his SUV. Now he drives an ordinary car and has freedom in his heart.

There is a beautiful and charming second generation missionary. She had only one problem: emotional attachment to an unbelieving boy. After much struggle, she realized she had to choose Jesus or the boy. She chose Jesus. Then God blessed her to establish a new house church with a man of God. Now she is happy all the time. We can be free to escape when we hold God’s word of promise in our hearts. Matthew 6:33 says, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

As we escape to Egypt, we must “take the child and his mother” with us. We must help God’s precious children to escape with us. We can do this when we struggle hard to obey the word of God, and share the word of God with others. At the Founders Day meeting on Friday, Shepherd Walter Nett shared his testimony. As a new Christian, he heard Dr. Samuel Lee share John 10:11 that a good shepherd is not a hired hand who abandons the sheep; rather, a good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. At the time, Dr. Lee was struggling to sacrifice for American students, though a most beloved one had just left the ministry. As Dr. Lee struggled with this verse, it pricked

Shepherd Walter's conscience, exposing his hidden dream of obtaining great human recognition. He repented and decided to live as a true shepherd for German people. Since that time, God has raised him as a servant of God's word and shepherd of God's children in Germany.

How did Joseph respond to God's word? Look at verses 14-15. "So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 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.'" Joseph obeyed the word of God immediately and absolutely. Then God protected the child Jesus. The child Jesus lived and Herod died. God also fulfilled a deeper purpose through this. According to Matthew's quote of Hosea 11:1, God sent Jesus to Egypt to call him out of Egypt. To summarize briefly, God made a new beginning through Jesus. In the past, God called the nation Israel his "son," and led them out of Egypt to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. They had failed. But God did not fail. God was starting over again with Jesus. In Jesus, the promises and prophecies of God would be fulfilled. We pray for North America to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Practically we struggle to escape the corruption of the world, bringing one or two people with us. God weaves these struggles into his great redemptive plan. God will raise a kingdom of priests and a holy nation without fail.

Second, Herod's evil act also fulfills prophecy (16-18).

Look at verse 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." As we studied last time, Herod coaxed the Magi to do his bidding through clever deception. Herod was a master politician and a first class liar. But Herod could not deceive God. God revealed the truth to the Magi and helped them escape Herod's scheme. Then Herod flew into a rage. He ordered the slaughter of all baby boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under. Herod was a liar and murderer, the exact incarnation of the devil (Jn 8:44). Herod was an antichrist. His brutal cruelty caused the murder of so many innocent children. Families and communities were devastated. Mothers, fathers and siblings wailed without remedy. No one could comfort them.

However, Matthew says that this fulfilled prophecy. Look at verses 17-18. "Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: '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.'" God's world salvation plan is costly to carry out. It requires sacrifice and bloodshed, even the martyrdom of children. We should not avoid costly spiritual struggles. Nor should we fall into humanism when the cost of carrying out gospel work is great. We must remember that painful tragedy as well as glorious triumph, tremendous suffering as well as overflowing joy, are all used by God to carry out his world salvation work. And we must remember that God paid the highest price by sacrificing his one and only Son on the cross as a ransom sacrifice for our sins.

Third, "He will be called a Nazarene" (19-23).

Leaders like Herod make the world seem like hell. Those who suffer under their reign can lose all hope. We sometimes wonder if Bin Laden will ever be stopped. But evil rulers pass away sooner or later. Then they go to eternal condemnation. On the other hand, God's work marches forward without interruption. Look at verses 19-20. "After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 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.'" Now it was time for Joseph to take the child Jesus and his mother and return to Israel. However, the death of Herod was not the end of evil in Israel. Look at verses 22-23. "But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: 'He will be called a Nazarene.'"

Matthew's point is that Jesus grew up in Nazareth according to God's plan. Actually, there is no single Old Testament reference that foretells this. It seems that Matthew portrays Jesus as fulfilling prophecy in general. In other words, being called a Nazarene is in line with the character of the Messiah as generally foretold by the prophets. This is probably why Matthew uses the plural form "prophets" in this verse.

Nazareth was not a place that evoked great expectations. It was a nondescript land of ordinary people. In fact, in John's gospel, when Philip introduced Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanel responded, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Jesus did not grow up in the capital city, attending the best schools and enjoying a privileged life. Jesus lived as ordinary people do. Jesus went to a public high school and probably had to work part-time jobs to help his family make ends meet. Jesus knew what it was like to get his hands dirty and to work hard for a living. Jesus experienced life just like ordinary people. It was to be with us to understand us and to relate to us. We only thank Jesus for his divine humbleness that he became a Nazarene in order to be with us. One Northwestern University graduate decided to devote her life to American campus mission and joined the UBF staff. In the course of time, she was sent from Northwestern to UIC as a shepherdess for students there. At first, she felt somewhat humiliated. In the course of time, she accepted Jesus who humbled himself for her and for all sinners by coming into this world as one of us. Now she has become a humble shepherdess at UIC. Many young people look at her like chicks look at their mother hen. When we accept humble Jesus, we can grow in his humbleness. Then all human barriers disappear and the love of God grows among people.

Fourth, God's sovereignty and Joseph's obedience.

When we consider this passage as a whole, two themes emerge: God's sovereign rule of his redemptive history, and Joseph's obedience to the word of God. Matthew sees each of the events in this passage as fulfilling Scripture, so he uses the word "fulfill" three times. Jesus is the fulfillment of what the Old Testament prophets foretold. Jesus is the Messiah whom God promised from the beginning. God rules over men and history to fulfill his redemptive purpose without fail. Though the nature of the spiritual conflict is intense, God accomplishes his will and purpose without fail.

Three times God spoke to Joseph in a dream. Each time, Joseph responded to God's word with faith and absolute obedience. Then God used him to protect the child Jesus and care for his mother Mary. Moreover, God used him to fulfill purposes that Joseph was not even aware of. We can be useful to God when we obey him with absolute faith. When God uses us, he does far greater things than we are aware of at the time.

May God help each of us to have absolute faith that Almighty God is ruling history to carry out his salvation purpose. The spiritual battle is intense and costly. But in the end, God will save his people from their sins. We can be useful to God when we obey him like Joseph did. May God use us to raise up a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.