

**“THE GREAT ESCAPE”**  
*Matthew 2:13-23*

We’re just going to have a quick look this morning at one of the parts of the Christmas story which doesn’t get aired quite as often as the other bits. Usually we stop at the end of 2:12 with the departure of the wise men and this rather gory section gets left out – perhaps understandably, because it’s rather scary.

But Matthew has obviously included this story in his gospel for a purpose. As we have said many times before, these gospel writers wrote what they did because they were trying to convey something very specific – they wanted to make a point.

This story then, is set out in three sections, each ending with a quotation from the Old Testament, because one of the things Matthew was trying to do was show that this was all part of the plan that God had been working on since the beginning of time. In v15, there is a quotation from an unnamed prophet – whom we know to be Hosea. In v17, he actually names Jeremiah. (Jeremiah is a favourite of Matthew’s.) In v23, there is a quotation from “*the prophets*”, which you won’t actually find in that form anywhere in the Old Testament but which is thought to be Matthew’s way of distilling something that was clearly hinted at in the words of the people who were preaching before him. Through it all, though, is this clear conviction that God is exercising his sovereign power – so let’s look at it a bit more closely.

**1. PROPHECY**

Matthew had a very strong sense that God’s word was worth taking seriously. He and the people amongst whom he lived knew the Hebrew Scriptures – our Old Testament – very well. Some of them made it their life’s work to study the Scriptures – the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law (or Scribes), for example. Others would pick it up through their regular attendance at the synagogue. But most people would have it there in their daily and weekly rituals – the Sabbath, graces at meal times and stories handed down by their fathers and grandfathers. The word of God was a part, an integral part, of their daily lives. It was a bit like the way the Lord’s Prayer and other parts of the church’s liturgy, Bible stories and the Ten Commandments seeped into the consciousness of the nation when they were a more prominent part of school assemblies.

And there is a little Latin phrase which is used to describe the process that this leads to – *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. It basically means that what you pray often enough you get to believe. Matthew and his contemporaries believed these words of God, these prophecies. And they believed that when God spoke – in creation, in prophecy, in command, in comfort, or whatever – that it worked. What God said would

come to pass: there was no doubt about that. So what Matthew is doing here is saying that God has spoken and now it is all coming true – we knew it would some day, and this is obviously the day. It has been shown in the great and dramatic signs of Jesus’ birth, and also in the little details as well. “Can you see how it’s all fitting together? This must indeed be the Messiah!” God’s sovereign purposes are being worked out through the fulfilment of prophecy. It is confirmation of his might and power and wisdom.

## **2. PROTECTION**

God has shown his sovereign power not only in bringing about these prophecies and demonstrating their fulfilment, but also in ensuring that his Messiah is protected.

There wouldn’t have been much point in God setting up all this amazing plan of salvation only for his Only Begotten Son to have been wiped out within a few months of his birth. That would really mean going back to the cosmic drawing board! If we look through that genealogical table there in chapter one, we can trace the way in which God has sovereignty and wonderfully ensured that things come together as they are supposed to. Look at some of the names in that list and remember what adventures they had, and how God rescued them, protected them, ensured their succession.

And now he has to do it again. Through a dream he speaks to Joseph and tells him to get out quickly and down into Egypt. At this time Egypt would have been a very good bet for Joseph and his little family. The border was only about 75 miles away; it was still under Roman rule, but not under Herod’s jurisdiction; and there was a community of about half a million Jews there at this time. God told Joseph quite explicitly to stay there until he was told to return, so that there was no possibility of any further difficulty. And when he did return, the place to which he went was not Bethlehem, but back to the family home in Galilee (again as the result of a dream). God had watched over them and was continuing to ensure that his will would be accomplished.

## **3. PREPARATION**

And that’s where this third, rather enigmatic, little quotation comes in. As we’ve said, there is no mention in the Old Testament of the Messiah turning up in Nazareth. What seems to be the case is that Nazareth at this time was a very small village, humble and obscure, tucked away in the hinterland of Galilee, a region which was, itself, looked down on. You get some idea of its status from Nathaniel’s

exclamation in *John 1:46* – “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there.” It’s a bit like expecting anything good to come from Halifax or Basingstoke today!

So, scholars argue that Matthew has taken all those prophecies about the Messiah being despised, obscure, rejected, humble and so on and put them together in this phrase about him being a Nazarene – which is a kind of shorthand for all these other things. Anyone reading it would have known what Matthew was on about. And God was preparing his Son for the mission he had – once again ensuring that his will was being carried out. He was in this little obscure village, the obscure son of an obscure carpenter. This was the kind of preparation for the Messiah that was actually predicted by the prophets but which was overlooked by many of the keenest students of the Scriptures. God was still very much in control.

Now, I find all this wonderfully encouraging. We are the people of a God who takes care of all the details. God intervenes in his sovereign power and might to ensure that everything goes as he wants it to. He has told us in his Word what his plans are – not in every detail, of course, but enough to let us know that he wants the best for us. He continues to protect his people, those whom he has called to be his own and to whom he has given all kinds of tasks for the continuing of his Kingdom. God is not going to let you go: his sovereign intervention is assured so that his will can be done. It might be a bit difficult for us to grasp initially – after all, Joseph must have wondered why he had to go off to Egypt soon after the boy was born – but he knows what’s going on and will ensure it happens. And all the time he is preparing us for the next bit of his plan.

This may be a rather curious episode in the life of Jesus. It may be a story that is a bit obscure and often skimmed over. But this is a part of the Christmas story, like all the others, that is wonderful testimony to God’s tremendous purposes and his infinite love. Let’s renew our trust and faith in that wonderful God as we prepare to move into a new year. He has prepared this year for us already. He will protect us through it. And he will always keep the promises he’s made to us. That should give us confidence to trust him for another twelve months at least.