



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 2:13–23

Gospel of Matthew

“From Bethlehem to Egypt to Nazareth”

TRANSCRIPT

We are in expounding in our series of studies the Gospel of Matthew, and we are turning now to the last half of the second chapter in which we have the last of the infancy account. And so will you turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 2 and verse 13? And I want to read through the end of the chapter for our study that shall follow in a few moments. Matthew chapter 2 verse 13 through verse 23:

“Now when they were departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word, for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. Then he arose and took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt; and was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, OUT OF EGYPT HAVE I CALLED MY SON. Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceedingly angry and sent forth and slew all the male children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the borders, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that

which was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, IN RAMAH WAS THERE
A VOICE HEARD, LAMENTATION AND WEEPING AND MOURNING,
RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN, AND WOULD NOT BE
COMFORTED BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT. But when Herod was dead, behold,
an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, ‘Arise and
take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are
dead that sought the young child’s life.’ And he arose and took the young child
and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that
Archelaus (or Archaeleaus) did reign in Judaea in the place of his father Herod,
he was afraid to go there; and notwithstanding being warned of God in a dream,
he withdrew into the parts of Galilee, and came and dwelt in a city called
Nazareth; that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, he shall
be called a Nazarene.”

May God bless this reading from his Word.

A leading evangelical scholar has said, with reference to Matthew, the apologetic aim with
reference to Matthew can be summed up in a sentence: Jesus is the Messiah, and in him, Jewish
prophecy is fulfilled. This section is in harmony with this claim. Its three short narratives are: the
flight into Egypt, in verse 13, 14 and 15; the massacre of the children in the next verses, 16, 17, and
18; and then finally the section concludes with the account of our Lord’s final settlement in Nazareth
in Galilee.

As we were reading the Scripture, perhaps you noticed that each of these sections concludes
with a claim that in that particular narrative, a text from the Old Testament is fulfilled. For example,
in the fifteenth verse we read: “And was there until the death of Herod that it might be fulfilled.”
And then in verse 17 we read, “Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet.”
And finally, at the conclusion of the section, we read, “That it might be fulfilled, as it was spoken by

the prophets, he shall be called a Nazarene.” So that at the conclusion of these three brief sections, the evangelist introduces a text from the Old Testament in support of that particular section of the narrative.

And then in addition to this, we have read, “And when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph,” and again in verse 19, “And when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, so the impression is given by these claims that Scriptures are fulfilled in each aspect of the narrative, and by special attention being directed to the angel of the Lord, that what we have here is an account that is constructed with great care and with a definite purpose. He is the Messiah, and prophecy speaks of him.

That does seem to be the aim of the evangelist as he unfolds the accounts of the birth and early life of our Lord Jesus Christ. But there is also another level of truth here that I want to stress this morning as we look at the section that is before us. And that other level of truth is the providence of God in prophecy and in history. If there is one thing that Matthew seems to be saying to us, it is on this level that God is no omniscient spectator, but he is the supreme mover at all of the events of redemption. And even in the incidental events of the Messiah, one can see that Scripture itself is fulfilled.

For example, he interferes to prevent the Magi from returning to Herod, that we have read in the 12th verse. Then we read that he interferes to prompt Joseph to flee to Egypt in the 15th verse. And then we read that he interfered to direct the return from Egypt, and interfered again to ensure that our Lord would go on to Galilee. So the impression that we gain, then, is that it is God who is moving through all of this history, and that he is directing all things because he is the one who works all things according to the counsel of his own will.

In the book of the Proverbs, in the Old Testament, we have read, “A man’s heart deviseth his way, but the Lord directed his steps.” And that is what we see here. The Lord is directing the steps of Joseph and the family as all the preparations are being carried out for the Lord Jesus to carry out the ministry that God has determined for him.

And it is very comforting to know that in the history of redemption, everything proceeds according to God's eternal plan. And if everything proceeds according to God's eternal plan, then we can be sure that salvation and all that we have through the Lord Jesus, rests upon a very firm foundation. God's hand is seen in it all.

One of our most prominent, contemporary systematic theologians has said that providence may be defined as that continuous exercise of the divine energy, whereby the Creator preserves all his creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end.

Now that definition indicates that there are three things that are prominent in God's providence. First of all, there is the element of preservation. He preserves all things and all his creatures. And second, concurrence or cooperation; he works or is operative in everything that comes to pass in the world. He is not surprised by anything, not surprised by any of the events that take place, and not surprised by any of the thoughts of your heart. And finally, government; he directs all things to their appointed end.

I'm sure that if Matthew were here, and we were to call him to witness, and were to ask him in the account that you have written, did you understand that in each of these activities of our Lord, the hand of God was present and controlling what was happening? He would probably say to me, “It would take a numbskull to fail to see that in the things that I have written.” For I have tried to show that in every event in our Lord's life is an event that takes place under the control of a providential God who does preserve all things, and is operative in all things, and who does direct all things to this appointed end.

John Wesley used to like to say, “I read the newspaper to see how God is governing the world.” And I think it would do us good to read it in the same spirit, for we are not reading things that are surprising to God. He does not take the *Dallas Morning News* and, at his breakfast table, after reading the headlines decide that certain activities are appropriate for this particular time. But he is

well aware of everything that is taking place, and is actually moving it all to one great common goal when all things are gathered together in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The account that we are to look at is the last section of what has been called the infancy narrative, or narratives of the birth of the Lord Jesus. And in the first of them, we read of the sojourn into Egypt. The angel's appearance is soon after the departure of the Magi, evidently, and we read in verse thirteen that the angel appeared unto Joseph and said to Joseph, “Joseph, I want you to arise, I want you to take the young child and his mother, I want you to flee into Egypt and be there until I bring thee word.”

Isn't it startling that we have just had the wise men adoring and worshiping the king, and now, suddenly, the king who is worshiped and adored by the wise men, now the king is fleeing into Egypt. He is a king. And Matthew would have us to remember that. But he is also a rejected king. And right here, in the beginning of the life of our Lord Jesus, there is, in a sense, stressed for us the fact that while he is the royal king of prophecy, it is necessary for him to live as a rejected king because of the nature of the human race.

He flees into Egypt. One of the reasons that he fled into Egypt, no doubt, is because Egypt was near. But there probably was another reason. Many Jews lived in Egypt, and undoubtedly, as he went down to Egypt, he would find many family friends, and he could be cared for there. But it seems that Matthew stresses most of all not so much the fact that Egypt is near, or that many Jews were there or even that relatives might be found there, but that the fulfillment of the Word is paramount in his thought. And it is necessary for him to go to Egypt in order that he might be called out of Egypt, just as the great, typical experience of Israel in the Old Testament involved a call through Moses out of the land of Egypt.

Now Joseph obeys immediately. It's very beautiful, I think, to see the response of Joseph to the direction of the Lord in this section. We read that he arose and he took the young child and his mother by night. So evidently, he did not even wait for the daytime to come. His departure was immediate. There was no delay. There was no hesitation. There was no reluctance. And a beautiful

illustration of the proper response to divine guidance is seen in Joseph, this just and holy man under law.

Then Matthew says, all of this has taken place that that which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, “Out of Egypt have I called my son.” Incidentally, we have in this verse—and this is something I hadn’t intended to say anything about, but think I should, nevertheless—it’s evident that in the way in which Matthew constructs this fulfillment statement that he has a high regard for Holy Scripture. Well, you notice how he puts it: “And was there until the death of Herod that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet.”

Now I think, perhaps, if we were not thinking doctrinally, we might simply say that that spoken by the prophet might be fulfilled. There would be nothing wrong in that. Why, of course he could say that spoken by Hosea the prophet might be fulfilled. But do you notice that he thinks of Holy Scripture as that spoken by the Lord? In other words, he regards Scripture as coming to us from the Lord through a human instrumentality.

It is evident, then, that if we are to look at the Word of God, if we are to judge from this construction of his sentence, we may think of the Word of God and should think of the Word of God as the Word of God which has come to us through a man. We should not think of the Bible pre-eminently as a product of God and man, though that of course is true. But we should be careful to emphasize the fact that pre-eminently the Word of God, or the Bible, is the Word of God that comes through the instrumentality of a human being. It is God’s Word.

In other words, it is a product of God, a divine product. Now being a divine product, that suggests in itself its infallibility. And even though it comes to us through the instrumentality of a man, it is God’s Word. We can easily see there is justification for an analogy between the person of Christ and the Word of God, for the person of our Lord Jesus may be described in this way: the Lord Jesus is a divine person who possesses also a human nature. At a point in time he also took an additional nature, a human nature, but he is a divine person, and therefore God. He existed before he took his human nature.

Now the Word of God is, by analogy, a divine product, and we may expect it, therefore, to be infallible and inerrant though it comes to us through the instrumentality of a human being. So the way in which Matthew has constructed this sentence is very revealing, it seems to me, of the doctrine of Scripture to which he held. That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord, immediate agency, through the prophet, intermediate agency, saying, out of Egypt I have called my son.

To understand these passages, it is important to think of the Old Testament context of them. “Out of Egypt I have called my son” is a reference to Hosea chapter 11 and verse 1. And in that passage, Hosea has spoken of God’s initial calling out of Egypt; he has referred to the Exodus. Now in the New Testament, in Matthew’s use of it, we have something that has troubled the interpreters. They have looked at this and they have wondered how in the world could our Lord Jesus be said to fulfill a text of Scripture which says, out of Egypt have I called my son, which so obviously in the context of Hosea has to do with Israel and not with our Lord.

Well now, of course, we must say right at the beginning that Hosea does refer to a historical fact; he refers to Israel being called out of Egypt, and so therefore he cannot refer to Jesus Christ directly by that statement. The only way in which we may find the Lord Jesus in that statement is typically. And it seems to me that is the idea back of this.

Augustine wrote, many years ago, that in the Old Testament the New Testament lies concealed. And that in the New, the Old lies revealed. And so what we have here in this New Testament is a revelation of the fullness of meaning that existed in the Old Testament. And the essential thing that we must remember when we think about the types of the Word of God is the Word, correspondence—the events, the persons, the institutions of the Old Testament, by divine intention, by the exercise of his divine providence—are intended to correspond to the events of the New Testament revelations.

In other words, we find in the Old Testament events that are designed to correspond to the events of the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus. For example, the Passover account and the Passover service; that particular institution is designed to correspond to certain aspects of the

ministry of the Lord Jesus, for he is the true lamb of God. It's not surprising, then, that the Apostle Paul should write about Jesus Christ our Passover who has been sacrificed for us. So the Apostle saw in the rite of the Passover, in the Old Testament, a clear adumbration of the Lord Jesus himself. So the term that is important for us is, correspondence—the events, the institutions, the Tabernacle, the services (such as the services of the Levitical cultus), and individuals such as Joseph and Moses and others who look forward to Christ—correspond to things that are found in the New Testament

Well in what way do we have a correspondence between Israel and the Lord Jesus? Well, Israel is called in the Old Testament, “God's son.” In fact, Israel is called his first-born. And furthermore, Israel is called the servant of the Lord. Now if there is one person who is God's unique Son, and who is the servant of the Lord, it is the Lord Jesus. And so what we have, then, is a recapitulating in our Lord Jesus' experiences of the experience of Israel which pointed forward to him.

So that when they went down to Egypt and were called out of Egypt, their experiences corresponded to that which would happen in the Messianic experiences of the Lord Jesus. He is the seed, he is the representative Israelite through whom God does everything for them. But if the Lord Jesus had not been the seed of Abraham, he would never have done for them what he had done for them. And just as it was necessary for Israel to come out of Egypt and to the land in order that God might fulfill the promises that God gave Israel, so it is necessary for the Lord Jesus to come out of Egypt and into the land to accomplish his redemptive work and to fulfill all of the promises which were related to him. Just as Israel's promises could not come to fruition if he had remained in Egypt, so the great promises of redemption could not come to fruition if the Lord Jesus had remained in Egypt. I think I understand what Matthew means when he says that he was there until the death of Herod that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet saying, typically, out of Egypt have I called my Son.

The enemies of the Lord Jesus have given us a different interpretation of our Lord Jesus Christ's visit to Egypt. They have said that he went into Egypt to learn the magic and sorcery by

which he was able to perform his miracles. So he went down there to learn his craft that Jean Dixon and Maurice Woodruff know so well. In fact, the Jewish Talmud says ten measures of sorcery descended into the world: Egypt received nine, the rest of the world one. So Egypt was, according to Jewish lore, at least, the home of magic and sorcery.

Selsius, the pagan philosopher and foe of Christianity, claimed that Jesus was brought up as an illegitimate child. And further, he sold for hire in Egypt and there he came to knowledge of his powers by which he later proclaimed himself God. That of course is simply the slander of a twisted mind. There was a certain Rabbi, Rabbi Eleazar ben-Hurcanus, who said that Jesus had the necessary magical formulae tattooed on his body so that he would not forget them. These are examples of explanations that the enemies of the Lord Jesus have been forced to make in order to explain the ministry of the Son of God.

Now after the description of the sojourn into Egypt, we turn to the second of the narratives here, that concerning the slaughter of the infants. William Gurnel, one of the Puritans, has said the devil is a great student of divinity. And he is right. The devil is a great student of divinity. And furthermore, all of his servants are great students of divinity.

We pointed out last time how Herod was far more interested in where the Messiah was to be born than the high priests and scribes. They knew exactly where he was born, but they had no desire whatsoever to determine whether he had been born or not after the reports came to them. But Herod, who is the heathen king, and who is one of the servants of Satan, he is very much interested in these facts of the birth of the Messiah. And so just as the devil is a great student of divinity, so are his servants.

One of the other Puritans has said that Satan has had three titles given to him in Scripture. First, the title of dragon, to note his malice. And then the title of serpent to note his subtlety. And then lion, to note his strength. Well, he's acting as a dragon here through his servant Herod. So we read in verse 16, “Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceedingly

angry and sent forth and slew all of the children that were in Bethlehem in all its borders from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.

Inflamed because he had been tricked; his own trick having been boomeranged—you would think, of course, that Herod would have been mad at himself. He should have said, why did I try that stupid trick? Because what has happened is that now they have gone and I don't have any idea where they've gone. So the folly of the king is manifested by this. What a contrast between the king *de jure*, the Lord Jesus, who is the king by the law of God, and this king *de facto* who is king at the present moment, who goes down to his loathsome death, which everybody longed for but he himself. He stands as a symbol of the futility of all opposition to the Lord Jesus Christ. If anyone ever desires an illustration of what it means to be opposed to the Lord Jesus, Herod is a beautiful illustration of it, because he stands a living symbol of the fact that we cannot oppose the work of God.

Now I know that we are inclined to think that in 1975, this could not apply to the United States of America. It applies to those who lived at the time of our Lord Jesus Christ's birth and life. But let me assure you, my good Gentile friends in the audience, that the truths that are found here are truths that apply to you, and they illustrate for every one of us the futility of opposing the work of God through Jesus Christ.

How futile it is for you, the businessman, to think that you can, by your activities thwart the purpose of God. How futile it is for you to think that you will somehow survive by never coming to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus. That means any kind of submission to the purpose and plan for God in your life.

How futile it is to think that there is any other way of salvation than through the Lord Jesus. How futile it is think that you can be saved through your good works when God himself has said in Holy Scripture, for by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God lest any man should boast.

How futile it is to think you can be saved by being religious, by attending a lovely church, by hearing lovely messages that exalt the Lord Jesus—by attending a church such as Believers Chapel.

How futile it is to oppose the plain teaching of Holy Scripture, which so clearly and definitely says that we are saved only through the grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now we have here an incident that, I must confess, is a very difficult incident to understand. There's no question but that it is within the will of God. He is controlling all of these events, but what shall we say about the slaughter of the infants two years old and under? That's a strange fate for infants.

Now of course, we must temper this by saying that we must not think of hundreds and thousands of infants. The chances are that there probably no more than 15 to 25 involved. But after all, the slaughter of one infant creates a problem if we are to trace it in any way to the plan and purpose of God. And there is no question that the hand of God is on all of these events, and so we cannot in any way escape the fact that this takes place in any way within the will of God. That is, unless we want to fall into Arminianism and into that which is contrary to the teaching of Holy Scripture. God does have his decretive will, by which he determines all things which come to pass. Holy Scripture says he works all things according to the counsel of his own will. So how do we explain these events of Holy Scripture in which the suffering of innocents is set forth, and set forth in connection with the ministry of the Lord Jesus?

“In their brief lives, these infants have won immortal fame,” Alexander McLaren has said. “They died for the Christ whom they never knew. These lambs were slain for the sake of the Lamb, who lived while they died, that by his death they might live forever. These little flowers of martyrdom,” McLaren continues, “roses by the whirlwind shorn, head the long procession of martyrs, if not in intent, yet in fact, and we may be sure are now amongst the palm-bearing crowd, being the first fruits to garden the Lamb.”

“O happy little ones,” says Augustine, “but just born, not yet tempted, not yet struggling, already crowned.” I'm not so sure that it was such a curse to be slaughtered in connection with the preservation of the Lord Jesus. And I have a hunch that when we get to heaven, we shall discover

that those infants are quite satisfied with the event that transpired in their lives which brought them into the presence of God for all eternity.

McLaren continues these beautiful comments by adding, “Even in his infancy, Christ came not to bring peace but a sword, and the shadow of suffering already attended the brightness of his rising.”

Now Matthew, as is his custom here, says that Scripture is fulfilled in this. And he turns back to a very strange text, at first glance, in the Old Testament in which in the 31st chapter of the book of Jeremiah we read, “In Ramah was there a voice heard, lamentation and weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and would not be comforted because they are not.”

Now in the context of that passage, Jeremiah refers to the exiles who are being taken into the Babylonian captivity, and they are being gathered in Ramah, which is near the place where Rachel is buried. Rachel was a kind of *mater dolorosa* for Israel, just as we think of the Virgin Mary as the *mater dolorosa* of the church of Jesus Christ. The sad mother.

Rachel was deeply held in the affection of Israel. She had had a very tragic end. She had died in the birth of Benjamin. And she came to be thought of as a kind of mother of Israel. And so Jeremiah, in chapter 31 of his book, as he thinks of the captives who are being gathered at Ramah ready to be sent into the Babylonian captivity, speaks of Rachel weeping for her children, for her grave was nearby, and thinking of her as a living person who looks out at what is happening to her people, in beautiful poetic imagery, Jeremiah thinks of Rachel weeping over what has happened to the chosen people.

Now Matthew, of course, looking at what has happened here, thinks, also, since this is the same general locality, thinks in the same kind of poetic imagery. So, he draws an analogy from the passage in the Old Testament and says Rachel is weeping for her children, these little infants who have been slaughtered by this Satanic king, King Herod.

Incidentally, in that passage in Jeremiah 31, right after the description of the fact that Rachel is weeping because Israel is going into captivity, we are told by the promises of God that they shall

soon be delivered, or ultimately delivered and delivered as a disciplined and chastised nation. And it's not beyond the possibility that Matthew also thinks of this, too. That while there is weeping now, as a result of this weeping, we may look forward to the deliverance which shall be accomplished when this little infant who was spared, the Lord Jesus, comes back into the land and ultimately grows to maturity and performs his beautiful work of dying upon the cross at Calvary, thus making it possible for a true exodus of spiritual life to take place.

And incidentally, in that 31st chapter of the book of Jeremiah, reference is made to the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus, in the 22nd verse of Jeremiah chapter 31, in which we read, “A woman shall encompass a man.” And finally, and I think most climactically, Jeremiah 31 is the chapter in which we have the unfolding of perhaps the most important covenant of all of Scripture for the forgiveness of sins: the New Covenant. So right in the context of that passage is a collection of truths that bear upon the ministry of the Lord Jesus, who is the deliverer, who has been born of a virgin, and who when he sheds his precious blood will consummate the New Covenant, for many, for the remission of sins.

So what we have, then, is a beautiful poetic imagery by analogy, that Matthew [and] the prophet have given us.

And finally, in the last few verses of chapter 2, we read of our Lord's settlement at Nazareth. Herod, we know from history, died of foul and fatal diseases in 4 B.C. at the age of 70. Josephus says, “He was a man of great barbarity toward all men equally, and a slave to all his passion.”

Kind of reminds me of the man who died, and they were having his funeral in his church. The coffin was up front, and the preacher, when the time came for eulogy in the ceremony, said that there was very little that he would like to say about the man, but perhaps there was someone in the audience who would like to say something about him. He was wicked man and known for his wickedness all over the community, and evidently the preacher had enough of the truth in him to decide that he was not going to give any eulogy whatsoever.

And so, he waited, and there was a very embarrassing silence, the family was there. No one got up to say anything until finally one man got up and very hesitantly went on to say, “Well I would like to put in a word for John. I would like to say that he was not always as mean as he sometimes was.” [Laughter] I must confess that when I read this statement of Josephus I thought of that. He was a man of great barbarity toward all men equally, and a slave to all his passion.

Now it’s interesting that in the description of the words in verse 20 that the angel of the Lord gives to Joseph, he states, “Arise and take the young child and his mother into the land of Israel, for they are dead who sought the young child’s life.” That reminds me of the words that were spoken to Moses: “All the men are dead which sought thy life.” That was an encouragement to Moses. And here, they are dead that sought the young child’s life. What an encouragement to Joseph that must have been. And again, it sums up in one sentence the failure of the first attempt to do anything about the Lord Jesus. And it’s like an epitaph on a tombstone for a man still living, which he can read, a kind of prophecy of all the succeeding efforts to crush Christ and thwart his work. They are dead which sought the young king’s life.

The dreaded infant’s hand is mightier than all the male fists or fingers that hold a pen. Jesus Christ lives, and he grows to maturity. Herod literally—for this is literally true of this man; I cannot describe the diseases from which he died—Herod literally rotted and died. They are dead that sought the young child’s life. And you can be sure, and we can each one be sure, that ultimately all who seek to thwart the purpose of God and the life of Jesus Christ shall die, and die the second death.

Archaeus was another Herod. He began his ministry as king by massacring 3,000 people. Joseph was fearful of going into to Judaea, and the angel of the Lord, desiring him to go back to the parts of Galilee warned him in a dream to go on to Nazareth and there the Lord Jesus went and settled down. And Scripture says that he shall be called a Nazarene.

That passage, incidentally, is not found in the Old Testament. I wish I had time to have a little fun with you. I think I would say, would you find that passage in the Word of God? Perhaps the great majority of you would know immediately it was not found in the Old Testament: “He shall be

called a Nazarene.” You could search the Old Testament through, you will not find it. The students of Holy Scripture in academic circles have troubled and puzzled over it for a long time. About six or seven different interpretations have been given of it.

It is a passage not found specifically in the Old Testament. It probably—and this is my own feeling—it probably refers to the general tenor of the Old Testament. In other words, what Matthew is simply saying is that when he settled in Nazareth, and after all, you’ll remember that Nathaniel said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nazareth was regarded as a kind of despised and lonely type of village, and it was totally unexpected that someone should come out of Nazareth who should have the qualities and capacities that Jesus, the son of Mary, had.

So evidently, when he says he shall be called a Nazarene, he is referring to the lowly and despised character of the citizens of Nazareth. And he refers then to the general tenor of the Old Testament which testifies that Lord Jesus would be a despised and lowly person.

Now we do read in several of the passages of the Old Testament words like this. And of course, you would recall to mind particularly Isaiah chapter 53 in verses 2 through 4 in which the prophet writes, “For he shall grow up before him like a tender plant, like a root out of dry ground. He hath no form no comeliness, and when we saw him there was no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and we hid”—the remnant of the future says—“We hid (as it were) our faces from him. He was despised and we esteemed him not.” So, “he shall be called a Nazarene” was an expressive way of stating that the Lord Jesus was to be despised of men and lowly in his influence.

Now I think that this is confirmed by the fact that Matthew does not say that this statement is made a prophet. Will you notice the plural in verse 23? And he shall come, and he came and dwelt in the city called Nazareth that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the *prophets*—so he does not say this was found in any particular place. He’s saying this is what the prophets say about the Messiah. When he comes, he will be a despised and lowly person.

Zechariah adds testimony to this. Psalm 22 adds testimony to it. And when our Lord came into the city on the day of his triumphal entry into the city, sitting upon a colt—a colt, the foal of an ass—he was appearing as a despised and lowly person though king of all.

It must have been a terrible thing for the Lord Jesus to come into our society and live. I don't think you can understand what our society is like by being one of it. It seems to me if we are to truly understand what we are like as a society, you must be from outside this society. And that's very difficult for us to understand.

The man who led me to the Lord was Dr. Donald Gray Barnhouse, and in one of his books, he tells of an experience he had when he was pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He said one night, late at night, a man called him on the phone and said Dr. Barnhouse, could you take the next train to Trenton? There's a terrible tragedy. I'll meet you at the station platform.

He said I immediately went down, got on the train, and about an hour later I was in Trenton. And the man met me and said, “Something terrible has happened. Last night, about 10 o'clock, my wife lost her mind. It was just a violent, insane flare-up. We got a doctor in, he immediately called another doctor, and they signed the papers and got her committed to an insane asylum. They took her off late last night, and I've just been over and gotten a private room for her. She's a little quieter this morning.”

Dr. Barnhouse said he went with her to the insane asylum, and he walked into that private room and saw this woman's haggard and worn face. She looked up at Dr. Barnhouse's face and said, “Oh, Dr. Barhouse, you will never know. I had a headache and all of a sudden I felt a great pressure in my head, and the next thing I knew I had come back to consciousness, and I was in a room with fifteen other raving maniacs of women. Some of them were naked. Some of them were on the floor eating their food with their mouths like beasts. The stench was horrible, and there I was in this pit with all of them.

“Oh Dr. Barnhouse, what can I ever do? How can I ever think that it might not happen again?” Dr. Barnhouse went on to say that it was not more than a month before they were able to get the papers cleared and get her removed from the private room, and she never had to go back. But then he goes on to say there’s a beautiful illustration in this. For the step from her beautiful home in Princeton, New Jersey to the madhouse was not as great a step as Jesus Christ took when he was born into this world to live among us. You see, when the Lord Jesus came, it was like coming into an insane asylum. For that’s really what we are. We are deranged, irrational, as a result of our natural rejection of the Lord Jesus, and rejection of the truth of God.

Oswell once said to Johnson, “Do you think that man is naturally good?” And Samuel Johnson replied, “Not any more than a wolf.”

He was a Nazarene, despised and lowly, and Oh what it cost him to come and live among these maniacs that we are.

Well let me conclude. Incidentally, when the superscription was written above our Lord’s cross, This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews, that superscription was a kind of expression of the lowliness of the Lord Jesus. It was a kind of statement just as plainly as could be made of the fact that he was the despised Nazarene.

Let me, as I close, mention one or two things. As you see, there was a heavy emphasis in this passage on the divine initiative in the story of the infancy. It is the angel of the Lord that is controlling the events. God is interfering. He interferes in Joseph’s life constantly because he is carrying forward his work of redemption to its climax in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then, of course, there is a beautiful lesson of sovereign providence. One of the Puritans have said, “One mighty is more than all mighties,” and you certainly see that here. One almighty person is far greater than all these other mighties like Herod and Pilate and all the rest. And we have one Almighty who is concerned with the ministry of the Lord Jesus, and beautifully, we may say, he is concerned with the ministry of the Lord Jesus, in and through us.

And finally, Joseph illustrates for us so beautifully, that he who waits for divine guidance, not moving before the cloud, is never disappointed—nor is he ever left undirected. I will guide them with My eye, is the Word of God, and if you’re a Christian, and you desire to know the certainty of divine guidance, you can be sure that if you patiently wait, God will guide you, for that is his work, and he guarantees it.

The difficulty that we often have is that when he indicates his will, we either stay where we are. And if Israel stayed where they were after the cloud moved, they moved into darkness. Or, we tend to not wait, and move out before God speaks, in which case we also move into darkness. He has promised to guide us, and he will guide us. He will not leave us undirected, as we patiently wait for him.

If you’re here this morning, and you have never believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, Oh the futility of rejection of the gospel that concerns him. The Lord Jesus, who came from the glory of heaven, was found in the manger in Bethlehem. No newcomer to the human scene, the eternal Son of God, who grew to maturity, carried out his Messianic ministry, and finally climaxed it in the shedding of the blood of the New Covenant for remission and forgiveness of sins, crying out, “It is finished!”

If you’re here this morning, the way of salvation is plain and clear. It is through him, who died for sinners. If by the Holy Spirit, you have come to realize that you are a sinner, this salvation is for you. And as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus, we offer it to you upon the simple term of trust in him who has died for sinners.

Wouldn’t it be a terrible thing to come into an auditorium like this, hear about the futility of fighting the will of God, hear about the good news of the way of escape through the Lord Jesus, and then to leave and not have him. May God speak to your heart. Only the Holy Spirit saves sinners. May God, the Holy Spirit, illumine your heart to see your condition: a raving maniac, utterly maladjusted, irrational. May God bring you into beautiful adjustment through the saving work of Jesus Christ. Let’s stand for the benediction.

“From Bethlehem to Egypt to Nazareth” by S. Lewis Johnson
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[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the ministry of the Word of God, and we thank Thee for the direct way in which thou has pointed out the futility of opposing the will of our great sovereign God. We thank Thee for the interferences into our lives which Thou hast accomplished.

And now, O God, we pray that Thou wilt interfere in the lives with any without Christ here. Illumine them. Bring them to see their true condition. And by their marvelous grace, through their effectual working of the Holy Spirit, make the unwilling, willing. And may Christ be received as Savior and Lord.

And now may grace and mercy and peace go with the saints.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.