

Text: Mt 2.19-23

We are thinking about Joseph this Christmas, and the role he played in the Christmas story. Our messages so far:

1. **Descent into Obscurity** – we traced the general decline of David’s line from its peak at David/Solomon to Joseph, living in obscure Nazareth.
 - Why is Joseph in Nazareth?
 - Was he (and his family) trying to be anonymous in the Roman empire?
 - However we answer those questions, clearly Joseph lives in obscurity, quite a comedown from David the king.
2. **Do Not be Afraid** – the young man Joseph becomes betrothed to Mary, his whole life is ahead of him, he is looking forward to building his own home ... and then he discovers that Mary is pregnant. God intervenes and calls Joseph to Get Up by lowering himself still further and taking Mary as his wife.
3. **Flee to Egypt** – the young family just received the wealthy wise men into their home, and God sent his angel with a warning ... Get Up, Joseph, men are seeking to destroy the child, go again into obscurity, this time in Egypt.

Today we conclude our series with:

Go to Israel

The little family lost itself somewhere in Egypt, out of Joseph’s reach. Somehow they sustained themselves – maybe from the gift of the wise men, maybe from the labour of Joseph’s two hands.

How long in Egypt? We don’t know. Not too long – probably at least six months, maybe a year or two. In any case, Herod the Great dies, and the angel of the Lord comes with another message. *Go to Israel*

Perhaps now Joseph’s life can settle down. Perhaps now he can start making progress, building a home, building a family, making something of himself.

Today we will see Joseph directed again into obscurity, subjecting any ambitions of his own to the will of God and his role in God’s story of redemption.

Read Mt 2.19-23

Proposition: The gospel advances when men put themselves last and put God first.

I. Go to Israel: the primary danger is over

A. The removal of the threat

1. A reminder of the threat Herod embodied

a. A double-minded man, like Nero

1) Great ability

“The personality of Herod was impressive, and he was possessed of great physical strength. His intellectual powers were far beyond the ordinary; his will was indomitable; he was possessed of great tact, when he saw fit to employ it; in the great crises of his life he was never at a loss what to do; and no one has ever accused Herod the Great of cowardice. There were in him two distinct individualities, as was the case with Nero. Two powers struggled in him for the mastery, and the lower one at last gained complete control.”¹

2) Great jealousy and vindictiveness

a) Married ten different women (some concurrently)

b) Fathered fifteen children

c) Suspected family members (sometimes rightly) of plotting against him

i) Executed his inlaws

ii) Executed his favorite wife

iii) Executed the sons of his favorite wife

All of this with the approval of Rome: “The trials and executions of his own conspiring sons were conducted with the acquiescence of the Rom power, for Herod was shrewd enough not to make a move without it.”²

¹ Henry E. Dosker, “Herod,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr et al. (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 1381.

² Dosker, 1381.

b. A breath of relief when he passed

1) Died in 4 BC of a very painful disease

“for a fire glowed in him slowly, which did not so much appear to the touch outwardly as it augmented his pains inwardly... His entrails were also exulcerated, and the chief violence of his pain lay on his colon; an aqueous and transparent liquor also settled itself about his feet, and a like matter afflicted him at the bottom of his belly.”³

2) Issued two commands to happen immediately after his death

a) Execute eldest son Antipater

b) Execute a large group of Jewish elders he previously arrested: to ensure the nation would be in mourning at his passing

2. A relief for those who fled from his lands: Joseph and Mary, and, of course, Jesus

B. The Lord's command, and Joseph's response

1. The command is grammatically exactly the same as the one to flee

a. “Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt” (13)

b. “Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel” (20)

2. The command follows this construction: participle, imperative, imperative

a. Get up: participle (imperative sense borrowed from main verb)

b. Take the Child (imperative)

c. Go into Israel (imperative)

³ Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Auburn and Buffalo, NY: John E. Beardsley, 1895), 462.

3. Joseph's exacting response

“Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel”

- a. The participle “got up” exactly the same in form as the participle in the command “get up!”
- b. Here, the participle states a fact, just as the following verbs
- c. The point: Joseph did *exactly* as the Lord directed

(don't miss this evidence of his character)

II. Go to Galilee: present danger remains

A. The apparent plan of Joseph: return to Bethlehem

1. After the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary stayed on in Bethlehem
2. Joseph must have taken up his trade there: they were living in a house when the wise men came
3. Bethlehem represented something of a new start for them
 - a. Away from the wagging tongues of Nazareth
 - b. Back in the ancestral homeland of David

B. The news about Archelaus reigning troubled him

1. Archelaus was one of Herod's sons, a wicked and cruel man (and poor administrator)
 - a. Named an “ethnarch” (“ruler of a nation”) as head of “Judaea, Idumaea, and Samaria (approximately half of Herod the Great's former kingdom)”⁴
 - b. At the beginning of his reign, ordered a massacre of his own, killing over 3,000 Jews
 - c. Lasted 10 yrs in power, 4 BC to AD 6, then banished to Gaul

⁴ Frank E. Dicken, “Archelaus, Son of Herod,” in *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

2. Remember: Bethlehem a small town, but just a few miles from Jerusalem

C. The Lord “warns him” in a dream (22) so Joseph withdraws to Galilee

1. Matthew doesn’t give a verbatim command here, as in previous instances
2. Nevertheless, the consequence seems to be a “change of plans”
3. We don’t know if the Lord specifically said, “Go to Nazareth,” but that is what “left for the regions of Galilee” ultimately meant

III. Go to Nazareth: the prophets are your guide

A. Going to Nazareth brings the family full circle

1. They are back where the Lord began giving them revelation
2. They are back where the virgin conception occurred — and where it was “found out”
3. They are back where they were known

Mt 13.54-56 He came to His hometown and *began* teaching them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, “Where *did* this man *get* this wisdom and *these* miraculous powers? ⁵⁵ “Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶ “And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then *did* this man *get* all these things?”

4. They are back to the place of obscurity

As I am thinking through this, I think Joseph hoped to avoid going back to Nazareth — but ultimately, God directed him and he obeyed.

B. Going to Nazareth brought agreement with the prophets

1. According to our text (23)

This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

2. The problem with the text: no prophet of the OT says these words, or anything close

a. Solutions

1) First part: not a strict quotation

- a) Uses “prophets” plural (unlike other citations)
- b) Uses a unique word, not “saying,” but “that,” making this an indirect rather than direct quotation

This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets that He would be called a Nazarene

In other words, Matthew didn't intend a direct quotation

2) Second part: the meaning of the indirect quotation

- a) A common view: a play on words with Heb. *nešer* “branch” as in Isaiah 11.1

Isa 11.1 ¶ Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.

This is a possibility, but perhaps not strongest option

- b) The more likely view: part of our Lord's humiliation (and Joseph's)

i) Galilee held in low esteem in Judaea

Jn 7.42 “Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the descendants of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?”

Jn 7.52 They answered him, “You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee.”

ii) Even other Galileans despised Nazareth

Jn 1.46 Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

iii) The prophets often spoke of the Messiah as despised

Ps 22.6-8 But I am a worm and not a man, A reproach of men and despised by the people.
 7 All who see me sneer at me; They separate with the lip, they wag the head, *saying*,⁸
 "Commit *yourself* to the LORD; let Him deliver him; Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him."

Ps 69.8 I have become estranged from my brothers And an alien to my mother's sons.

Isa 49.7 Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel *and* its Holy One, To the despised One, To the One abhorred by the nation, To the Servant of rulers, "Kings will see and arise, Princes will also bow down, Because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You."

Isa 53.2 For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, And like a root out of parched ground; He has no *stately* form or majesty That we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.

Dan 9.26 "Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end *will come* with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined.

- iv) The Lord came to Nazareth to grow up, the place of Joseph and Mary's past
- (1) The place of their (supposed) shame
 - (2) The place they seem to have wanted to avoid
 - (3) The place of humiliation

This view "proposed at least as long ago as the days of Jerome (fourth century), is that 'Nazarene' was a slang or idiomatic term for an individual from a very remote or obscure place (much like our contemporary words *hick* or *backwoodsman*)." ⁵

Conclusion:

Proposition: The gospel advances when men put themselves last and put God first.

This reminds me of the words of John the Baptist:

Jn 3.30 "He must increase, but I must decrease."

When we follow Christ, we are following one the world despises.

We share that viewpoint. The world looks at us as (at least) a bit kooky.

If we speak up for the Lord, their attitude grows even more negative.

Are you willing to put yourself last for the Lord's sake?

⁵ Blomberg, 70.