

2. A real Son - Christ the true son of God, for his people

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[0 : 00] It's never been the story of Christmas alone, enchanting as it is, that makes people want to sing and rejoice. The multitude of these lovely carols that we're singing tonight, they were written by people who understood what the story means, what the birth of this child is really all about.

Our last reading is the very next words in Matthew's Gospel, where we see how ancient prophetic words of Scripture were fulfilled even in Jesus' earliest days.

And they help us to understand who Jesus really is and what it means that he was born king for us. Listen to what Matthew records.

And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the wise men departed to their own country by another way. Now when they departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, Rise, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt and remain there until I tell you.

For Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him. He rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod.

[1 : 16] This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. Out of Egypt I called my son.

Before we think for a little about what the birth of Jesus really does mean for the world, we're going to sing one of the simplest but perhaps the best loved carol of all. Son of God, oh how bright, love is smiling from thy face, strikes for us now the hour of grace, Savior, since thou art born.

We've been studying together the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel in our Christmas series this year where Matthew tells the story of one who is born king. And we're asking the question, what kind of king?

What kind of king is this Jesus and why does it matter anyway? You might be thinking that to yourself tonight. You think, well how lovely all these carols and readings and candlelight and so on. But really does it actually mean anything? Is there any real significance in all of this beyond just a lovely winter tradition? Well Matthew in his Gospel wants to answer that question with a very firm yes.

[2 : 34] Yes it does matter. It matters for you and it matters for every person who has ever lived. And he wants us to understand why. Jesus' birth, he says, can only be understood in the light of the scriptures.

In the light of the words of the prophets all down the ages who looked forward to this birth and spoke of this birth, the birth of a great king. A king who would himself be God's true son. Now if you read the first few chapters of Matthew's Gospel, and if you never have, there are copies at the door tonight. We'd love you to take one and do so. It'll only take you an hour or two. If you read Matthew's Gospel, you'll find that there's a phrase in these first two chapters that keeps cropping up.

Indeed it crops up all the way through the Gospel. It comes in verse 15 there, as you can see. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

That comes five times in the birth story of Jesus. Jesus' birth in every way is a fulfillment of the words of prophecy. We heard it again there in the last but one reading about the fulfillment of the prophecy that Christ would be born in Bethlehem.

[3 : 49] That he'd be born a king. That he'd be a ruler who would at last shepherd God's people forever. That's what we were looking at last Sunday night. But tonight I want us to see what Matthew's saying about Jesus when he says his birth fulfills what another prophet, the prophet Hosea, said some 800 years or so before the birth of Jesus.

When he says this, Out of Egypt I have called my son. And why does Matthew record this trip down to Egypt by the family of Jesus?

Well, he records it because he sees in it a great fulfillment of these words of the prophet, even this early in the life of Jesus. It's a fulfillment, according to Matthew, that tells us something vital about who Jesus is and what he came to do.

People, it's true, sometimes find this text a bit of a puzzle because it does sound a bit odd, doesn't it? Out of Egypt I called my son. That doesn't sound like a prophecy of the future.

It sounds like something in the past. And in fact, when you read the place where it comes in Hosea's prophecy, well, in fact, it is in the past. He's referring to something that happened to Israel, to God's chosen people.

[5 : 10] And Israel was often referred to as God's son. So it wasn't a prophecy of the future. What does all this mean? Well, what Matthew is saying is simply this.

He's saying that this story of Jesus isn't a novelty. It's not the beginning of the story. In fact, it's the very end. It's the climax of a story. It's the fulfillment of a story that began long, long ago with the calling of Israel as God's people, to be his special treasured people, to be, in fact, what he called his son.

But what Israel could never be, and what no human beings could ever be because of their sin and rebellion against God, what we could never be, Jesus, God's true son, would be.

He came at last to fulfill God's desire for a perfect human son and to fulfill God's promise for a perfect human savior.

And that's what Matthew is telling us here in quoting this prophet. This man, born king, he says, comes to be God's true son in our place. And therefore, he comes also to be God's true savior for our race.

[6 : 30] Let me just explain a little of those two things in turn. Jesus came to be God's true son in our place. That means that he himself is the fulfillment of God's Israel.

He fulfills completely God's desire for a perfect human son. He, at last, is the one who will keep all the commands of God.

He's the one who will shine a light to the whole world and display to the whole world the knowledge of the one true God in all his beauty and loveliness. Out of Egypt I have called my son.

Now look at the original words on the screen there that Matthew's quoting from the prophet Hosea. That comes in chapter 11, verse 1 of his prophecy, written, as I said, some 750 odd years before Jesus.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, said the Lord. And out of Egypt I called my son. Israel is God's precious son.

[7 : 35] Israel's story, you'll remember, began way, way back with the calling of Abraham. When God promised that through Abraham would be a great family through whom he would bless all the nations of the earth.

And God told Abraham in advance that his family would enter Egypt. And that they'd spent 400 years there being prepared and being multiplied. Ultimately, being oppressed.

But then he said, I will bring them out of Egypt. And of course he did, just as Hosea said. The exodus under Moses is the great event of the whole Old Testament story.

And what a great story it is. You've probably all seen this story in The Prince of Egypt, the Disney film. The exodus constituted Israel as God's holy people, as a treasured possession, he called them.

A people called to obey God's commands, to shine the light of God's goodness to the world all around. And Moses, you remember, relayed God's words to Pharaoh.

[8 : 39] And he said, Israel is my firstborn son. Let them go and serve me. Or else I will destroy your firstborn son.

You remember what happened. So right from the start, you see, Israel was precious. The treasured son of God, called to mirror God's holiness.

And the chosen servant of God, to shine God's glory and his goodness to the whole world. Out of Egypt, I called my son for this glorious purpose.

This is what God was saying. And the prophets too, all the other prophets, they speak of this great destiny for God's people. Israel, his son, his servant, to be a light to the Gentiles, to show God's great salvation to the whole world.

But was that? Was that how the story of Israel unfolded? Well, if you've read the Old Testament at all, you know the answer, don't you? No, it wasn't.

[9 : 41] Hosea's very next verse summarizes Israel's true history. The more they were called, says God, the more they went away.

They kept sacrificing to the Baals, the pagan gods, and burning offerings to idols. Israel's story was actually a story of a disastrous disobedient son.

Despite all God's love and tender care, I led them, he said, with the cords of kindness, with the bands of love. And yet my people, says the Lord, are bent on turning away from me.

So if you read on in Hosea the prophet, you'll find that he has to speak of God's necessary punishment on his people. I will return them, he says, to a new Egypt, into captivity in Assyria and Babylon.

And Hosea and many of the prophets tell of just how terrible, how awful that judgment was upon God's wayward and rebellious son. And yet, such is God's mercy that even a people who scorn him, who hate him, who fail him in every way, he promises that one day he will come and restore them again.

[11 : 04] They shall come trembling, he says, like birds from Egypt, and I will return them to their homes. But much, much more than just that, returning them to their own land.

The prophets speak of this great return of Israel as ushering in something far bigger, something far greater, something that affects the whole of this world. It will usher in the great reversal that God promised from the very beginning.

The reversal of the curse of sin and death that bedevils all mankind. In Hosea chapter 13, God puts it this way.

I shall ransom them, he says, from the power of Sheol. That's hell. I shall redeem them from death. O death, where are your plagues?

O Sheol, where is your sting? And that was God's promise. It will not fail despite the utter failure of God's people. Israel, his son.

[12 : 10] No, he says, Israel, my true son, will be again beautiful like the olive, fragrant like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow, says the Lord.

And friends, that is the promise that the whole of the Old Testament unfolds. From its very first glimmer, as we heard it in those early readings, in the garden. That the seed of the woman would at last conquer and crush the head of the serpent.

The seed of Abraham. Of Israel. Of David. And now, says Matthew, at last, born of the Virgin Mary by the Spirit of God.

At last, the true seed of Israel, the true Son of God is here. Not a failure to disappoint, but holy and righteous and wonderful to shine the glory of God to the whole world.

Out of Egypt I have called my son. My true son. Just as it was patterned in the history of Israel, the nation.

[13 : 14] Jacob fleeing to Egypt to escape famine. Called out of Egypt by God. Going through a baptism in the Red Sea. And the testing in the wilderness. And receiving God's law on Mount Sinai.

And being commanded to worship God alone. So also, Matthew unfolds exactly the same pattern in Jesus' life. Fleeing to Egypt for safety. Called out of Egypt.

Then if you read on in Matthew chapter 3. Baptized in the Jordan. Where heaven opens and God declares, This is my beloved son. He was tested in the wilderness.

Where he proved himself, unlike Israel, utterly faithful. And on the mountain, he doesn't receive the commands of God. He himself expounds the command of God definitively to the world in the Sermon on the Mount.

And he does worship only God. Utterly and faithfully and truly. See what Matthew is saying to us in his gospel.

[14 : 18] He is saying to us, This son of God does not disappoint. God's plan has not failed. The seed he promised has triumphed. And has fulfilled all God's promised purpose for the world.

For mankind. This man does shine forth the beauty and the goodness of God. He is a true son. He is a true image of God in man.

This man does shine forth the light of God's salvation to all the nations. That's how Hosea's words are fulfilled in Jesus.

Jesus, at last, is the true Israel of God. What he began with Abraham's call and his seed of promise and what he preserved through Israel, his people of promise, is now at last fulfilled in Jesus Christ, his perfect human son.

Well, you might say, That's all very well, but what's that got to do with me? Let me tell you.

[15 : 25] What it means is that Jesus Christ is God's true son in our place. Everything that God, our creator and ruler, demands of human beings and which no human being can ever be because of our sin, he is for us.

He fulfills God's desire for a perfect human image. The son who fills the earth with the father's glory. Not even the Israelites with all their privileged possession of the words of God.

Not even they could ever be what God called them to be. Because like all human beings, like us, they were sinful. At their hearts, they were rebels against God's rule.

Right from the very start, God taught them that constantly. He gave them his commands and his laws, but he taught them that they could never attain holiness and rightness with him by their own efforts alone, by their own merits.

That's why he gave them sacrifices constantly to remind them that only by God's mercy could they ever be saved. And he taught them also to long for and to look for the one who at last would come and win their salvation for them.

[16 : 41] The Messiah. The Christ. The true son of God. And just as David the king, great David, once slew Goliath and won the victory for all his people, so now Matthew is telling us great David's greatest son, Jesus Christ, has come to be his people's champion.

He's come to be and to do what you and I can never be and can never do. To be the pure and the lovely and the perfect human being God created us to be.

And to do the will of God in every aspect of his will. He came to do that, the apostle Paul says, so that by one man's obedience, many, many will be made righteous.

Will be made right with God forever. And what could matter more than that? Nothing could matter more than that, could it? Why?

Well, you know why. If you're an honest person, you know that you're not what you should be.

You're not even what you want to be yourself, are you? You don't even satisfy your own demands on yourself.

[17 : 57] Of course, there are some people who are very pleased with themselves and think they're perfect and faultless in every way. The rest of us see through that pretty quickly, don't we?

None of us, I think, want to emulate that kind of arrogance. But the fact is that most of us, when we're honest, we feel pretty disappointed in ourselves a lot of the time, don't we?

We wouldn't want all our thoughts and words and deeds to be broadcast publicly, would we? Would you? I wouldn't. We'd be desperately ashamed, wouldn't we?

And rightly so. That's our conscious telling, conscience inside telling us the truth. But friends, if that's how we feel about ourselves much of the time, how do you think God feels about us?

An honest and utterly transparent judge who knows everything, who knows just how far short of the mark I fall as a human being.

[18 : 59] And the measuring line for real humanity is the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you have any confidence that you'll have much of a showing beside him?

Don't need to answer that, do I? But that's why what Matthew is telling us and what the whole New Testament is telling us is so, so important. Because of Christmas, when God looks at his own people in judgment, at those who belong to Jesus, what he sees is not the disastrous failure of your life and mine.

What he sees is not a corrupted and a wicked rebel. What he sees instead is the perfection and the beauty of his own son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

All that is his becomes ours when we become his and belong to him. In Christ Jesus, says St. Paul, you are sons of God through faith.

You have put on Christ. His righteousness, his perfect God-likeness is credited to us when we trust him.

[20 : 14] For an honest person, for someone who knows their own heart and rightly feels ashamed, rightly feels sorrowful and guilty, friends, there is no greater joy than that truth.

Because in Jesus, God has a true son at last. He is the true son in our place and for us, so that we also might be a delight to God, our maker and our Lord, so that we might know his acceptance and

his love, not his judgment and his rebuke.

We have no guilt in life and no fear in death because, and only because, Jesus is God's true son in our place.

And that's why, secondly and much more briefly, Matthew's whole book tells us that Jesus alone can be God's true savior for our race.

He is the fulfillment of Israel's promised deliverer. He fulfills all God's promises for a perfect human savior who is to come. Out of Egypt I have called my son, says Matthew of Jesus.

[21 : 28] You can't read Matthew's account of Jesus' birth without seeing so many parallels to the story of the Exodus from Egypt. You have the birth of a baby amid persecution from a vicious king and a slaughter of baby boys all around.

And one special child is preserved and protected to be a leader and redeemer of God's people. He flees away from the wrath of a king, but he returns to fulfill his destiny and save his people.

There are so many echoes in the birth of Jesus, the one born king, of the story of Moses, the prince of Egypt. Why? Well, because the whole of the Old Testament story is one great prophecy.

It's a pattern looking for fulfillment in something far greater, in the climax of the whole story of God's redemption for his people. And Matthew's telling us that time has come, that Jesus at last is the true Moses, the greater prophet, the greater redeemer, come to lead his people out of the bondage to death itself.

Moses himself spoke of a greater one than he who was to come. He would be like me, he said, from your own brothers. And God said, to him you shall listen. And whoever doesn't listen to him, I shall require it of him.

[22 : 55] And Matthew's saying, this is he who is now here. See the pattern. He was foretold in the prophets and in the servants of old like Moses, but now here is the fulfillment.

And even great ones like Moses and Elijah are set aside on the mountain of transfiguration. They were there, but God said of Jesus, this is my beloved son with whom I'm pleased.

Listen to him. At last, the true prophet, the true redeemer, the deliverer of God's people is here. And Jesus, you see, is the leader of a far greater exodus.

Out of bondage, not just in Egypt, but out of the bondage to death itself. Not the tyranny of Pharaoh, but the curse of sin and its terrible wage, death.

Can there be an answer, a definitive answer to man's greatest enemy, to the terror of death itself? To the darkness that robs us of everything that's most precious in our human lives.

[24 : 07] The lives of our loved ones. And in the end, our own life. Can there be an answer? Yes, says Matthew in his gospel, because out of Egypt, God has called his son, the promised deliverer.

And just as Moses came down to Egypt and partook of his people's suffering in order to be their deliverer from the tyrant Pharaoh, who enslaved them in fear, So also Jesus, as the book of Hebrews tells us, He partook of our frail flesh, that through death, he might destroy the one who has the power of death.

That is the devil. And deliver those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

Friends, you know as well as I do, don't you, that the fear of death is a crippling fear.

It's a terrible bondage. That's why we hide from it all the time. That's why we don't like to think about it and talk about death. To think about our mortality, it's just so painful, isn't it?

All that we have, all that we are, is going to be robbed one day by the jaws of death. So we hide from it. We can't always hide from it, though, can we?

[25 : 32] In the face of a crisis, or of danger, or of a bereavement. Perhaps when we're just feeling despairing of our own life.

The fear of death haunts us. Do you see what Matthew is saying to us in these little verses about the birth of Jesus? He's saying the deliverer from all this, from the bondage of death itself, the deliverer has come.

As God's true son in your place, Jesus has offered for you what you could never offer. He's offered the obedience and holiness of a perfect life to God.

And as God's true savior of our race, he has paid what you can never pay. In his own death, in your place, on the cross, for your sin.

To deliver all, says the Bible, all who entrust themselves to him, to deliver you from death, and from bondage, to the fear of death.

[26 : 40] And that's the true wonder of the message of Christmas. Out of Egypt, says the Lord, I've called my son for your sake, for my sake, for all who will bow the knee to this kind of king, to God's true son, and our true and only savior.

And my prayer is that you will bow the knee to this king this Christmas. Let's pray. O come, all ye faithful, joyful, and triumphant.

Come ye to Bethlehem. Come and behold him, born the king of angels. O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

Gracious God, grant this to be the response of all of our hearts here tonight, this Christmas. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. O come, all ye faithful.