

4. A real Swear Word - Christ the real swear word to the world's people

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[0 : 00] So Matthew chapter 2 then at verse 19. But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.

And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judah in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth. But what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled.

He shall be called a Nazarene. One of the sad things about our nation today is that the name of Jesus Christ is uttered I'm sure more often is a swear word than is anything else.

I heard a year or so ago of a little boy who at school was, well, was at school, but had attended a service that had been put on by some Christian people who had come into the school.

[1 : 18] And they were telling the story of the birth of Jesus and how the angel told Joseph that the child should be named Jesus. And he put up his hand and he said to the person telling the story, why did the angel want the baby to be called a swear word?

And the truth is that the only time he'd ever heard the name of Jesus Christ was as a swear word. And yet, you know, the strange thing is that's the way it's been right since the very beginning. That's what this last few verses of Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 2, are telling us. In answer to this question, what kind of king is it who was born king that the wise men and the others came to see? That's a question we've been thinking about through our Christmas services this year. And the prophets foretold in verse 23 here of Matthew, Chapter 2, that he would be called a Nazarene. And that is a term of scorn and of shame. I'll explain that just in a little while. And yet, and this is what really matters, this name of scorn is the name of salvation.

[2 : 32] He who was and is scorned by the world is the bringer of salvation, is the bringer of light to the world. So in between our carols this morning, I just want to flag up three things that Matthew wants us to see in these verses that explain Jesus' birth, according to what was spoken by the prophets.

First of all, he wants us to see in Jesus' birth, the dawning light in Galilee. That's what verses 19 to 22 speak of, if you look at them there.

They tell of the return to Israel of the Holy Family after their escape into Egypt. And Matthew flags up for us this little geography lesson. I'm sure you noticed all the place names.

He tells us very carefully that they went to a place called Galilee and to a town called Nazareth. And he tells us that because he is telling us that this is the dawning of the light of life in Galilee of the Gentiles, just as God had promised.

Now remember, we've been saying, as we've looked at Matthew's gospel, that Matthew's very concerned to show that the story that he's telling is not a new story. It's the continuation of a very, very old story, the story of God's promise of salvation from the very beginning of time.

[3 : 50] Jesus, he reminds us in the very, very first chapter, the very first verse of the gospel, chapter 1, verse 1. Jesus, he says, is the promised son of David, the son of Abraham.

That is, Jesus fulfills God's promise, not just for Israel to restore her under the rule of a new and a greater David, the Messiah, the Christ who would reign forever, but also that he fulfills God's promise to the whole wide world, the promise to Abraham that through his seed, all the nations of this world would be blessed.

This story that I'm telling you, says Matthew, is part of that old, old, age-old story. And in Jesus, the whole of this story of God's salvation has come to its climax.

It's come to its fulfillment. That's why he keeps saying all the way through the story, thus it was fulfilled, thus it was fulfilled. He, Jesus, is the son of David and the son of Abraham.

He is Israel's king and he is also the savior of all the nations of the world. And Matthew, although Matthew is very concerned that we notice the Jewish origin of Jesus and that God's salvation comes only through him, he's also equally determined to show us that now at last the time has come when God's promise is being fulfilled for all the world through this Jesus, through this birth.

[5 : 24] And just as the prophets spoke again and again, all the peoples, they said, all the peoples would rejoice alongside the descendants of Abraham.

So now that's been fulfilled. And that's why Matthew records this visit of the wise men, the Gentiles who come from far away to worship Jesus.

Again, he's making the point. Jesus has come to touch the whole world. And that's why Matthew also focuses on Galilee here and tells us that Jesus drew up there.

Now, why is Galilee important? Turn over the page to chapter 4 of Matthew's gospel and look at verse 12, where Matthew teaches us about Jesus beginning his public ministry.

Once again, you notice he makes very explicit this mention of Galilee. Galilee of the Gentiles. Look at verse 12 of chapter 4. Now, when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee.

[6 : 25] And leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.

The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

And for those dwelling in the region of the shadow of death, for them a light has dawned. Quoting Isaiah chapter 9 there. See, what he's saying is that the light of salvation is dawning in Galilee, not just for Jews, but for all the world.

As we'll see in a minute, Galilee and Nazareth might very well have been despised by Jews because it was Gentile territory. But notice, it's called here the way of the sea.

It was actually one of the world's very major trade routes. People from all over the world crossed at that very point. They came from west to east and north to south.

[7 : 30] To the west was the Mediterranean Sea and ships that would take you to Rome and to Africa and so on. It was a north-south route going south down to Egypt and so on, north up to Damascus.

And it was here, at the hub of the travel of all of the ancient world, that Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all nations, was born and grew up.

And he grew up among literally people of every tribe and language and nation as they passed through his own homeland. And in his birth, Matthew's telling us by making that point about Galilee, in his birth, all these people from all parts of the world, north and south and east and west, all of these people who are walking in darkness have seen a great light.

The dawning of light in Galilee for the world's salvation. Look again, would you, at verse 23 of Matthew chapter 2.

And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled. He shall be called a Nazarene.

[8 : 48] Amen. Amen. Not only the light dawning over Galilee, but the drawing darkness over the Galilean.

There's another side to this, you see, because the light dawning in Galilee is accompanied, even in the days of the Lord's infancy, by the gathering darkness of the shadows of death over this child, who would be known as a Galilean, as a Nazarene.

Matthew's telling us that there is a wonderful light of salvation, but also there is a terrible darkness about the Christmas story.

And even here, at his birth, these clouds are gathering. Now this word, Matthew says, is a fulfillment of prophecy. It's not a direct quote.

He's not pointing to one particular prophet's utterance. You'll notice that he says, what was spoken by the prophets, plural. All the other times he quotes, it's in the singular. He's referring to a specific thing.

[9 : 52] But what he's saying here is that this was the message of all the prophets, as they spoke of the coming of the Lord's King, the Christ. They all point to the fact that the Savior, the Messiah, the Christ, though he is the great King, though he is the Lord of all, that he will be on this earth despised, that he will be one who is rejected.

And that's what this means. And Nazarene was a term of contempt and scorn to the Jews of Jesus' day. Nazareth was a little small town. It was a place with nothing going for it.

It was a place that just was scorned. It wasn't taken seriously. I guess it's like you Glaswegians talk about that wee dump across in the east. What's it called? Edinburgh. That's right. Can any good thing come out of Edinburgh?

Somebody once said to me, well, yes, the train to Glasgow Coon Street. But that's what they said about Nazareth. Do you remember John chapter 1, Nathaniel? Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?

That's what he said. In John chapter 7, when the Pharisees, do you remember a question in Nicodemus? And Nicodemus is saying to them, he thinks Jesus is a great one.

[11 : 05] Nicodemus, you fool, he said, no prophet arises from Galilee. To be called Jesus of Nazareth, it was a very, very different thing to being known as Jesus of Bethlehem, Jesus of the house of David.

That was his true identity. But he was known always through his ministry as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, nothing. Jesus, nobody from nowhere.

That's what it means. He was despised. He was rejected of men. And that's what all the prophets had said. Isaiah chapter 49.

He would be deeply despised, abhorred by the nation. Isaiah 53 verse 2. Like a root out of dry ground, despised and rejected by men.

A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And so he was. All through Matthew's gospel, if you read the story, it tells of the rejection and the scorn being heaped upon this one who was the Son of God.

[12 : 11] Matthew chapter 12. They said it's by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that he casts out demons. He's a devil. Chapter 27.

They're shouting out, crucify him. He's worse than Barabbas, that murderer, that terrorist. He's worse than the likes of Osama bin Laden.

Even after his death. They just referred to him as that imposter from Nazareth. Jesus' name has always been a real swear word.

And that's what Jesus was. All his life. Despised, rejected, humiliated. A Nazarene. Scum from a scummy time. And here, Matthew's telling us, even at his birth, the shadow of suffering and death is drawing in upon him.

The drawing darkness upon Jesus, the Nazarene. Some of you might know that lovely painting by Rembrandt. Rembrandt was so marvelous in his use of light, wasn't he?

[13 : 20] Terry's nodding. He knows. He's got a lovely painting called The Adoration of the Shepherds. And if you know it, there's gathering around the crib and the light is emanating from the Christ child.

But in the shadows, in the background, there are beams holding up the roof of the stable shed in which the child is laid. And when you look carefully, you see that they're shaped in the shape of a cross.

There's a great darkness about our salvation as well as a great light. Because in order that those dwelling in darkness and the shadow of death might see the light of life, he who dwelt with the Father in inaccessible light, he trod the valley of suffering and death himself.

He became a Nazarene. Nothing more than a swear word. Of course, that means that those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ will find that they too become swear words in the eyes of the world. If you read the Acts of the Apostles, that's what the early Christians were called. That Nazarene sect. Time of abuse and contempt. There's no different today, is it? Real Christians are always called that.

[14 : 41] Fundamentalists. Extremists. We shouldn't be surprised, should we? What did Jesus say? If they called the master of the house Beelzebub, the devil, how much more will they malign those of his household?

Jesus was always the Nazarene. He was always just a swear word. And Matthew says, Behold the drawing darkness over the Galilean, even from the time of his birth, when he first came into this world.

What that hymn is telling us is that this Jesus will not forever be called by a name of scorn. No, a day is coming when the one who was scorned by the world will be seen by the world as he truly is, as the Prince of Heaven in power and in glory.

And in his risen life will be eternal life for all who belong to him. And the newness of life for this whole creation.

It's often pointed out by the scholars that there's another association with the name Nazarene in the Old Testament, because the Hebrew word for a small branch or a twig is the word netzer.

[15:56] And that's probably how Nazareth got its name. It was an insignificant twig of a town, as it were. But in Isaiah chapter 11, we read something very interesting.

You'll know the words, I'm sure. From the stump of Jesse, a shoot will come. From his root, a branch, a netzer, a small twig.

It shall bear fruit, and the Spirit of the Lord shall be upon him. In other words, what the prophet there is saying is that when the house of Israel is at its absolute lowest point, when it's downtrodden and all but dead, when it's nothing more than an insignificant twig of a thing left, and it looks as though all God's promise for the world is going to come to nothing, from this despise nothing, God, in fact, will usher in his great day of the Lord.

And the new life of heaven and earth will come to the world through something that seems so insignificant as to be trodden underfoot like a twig. Listen to how those verses in Isaiah chapter 11 go on.

In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples, of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

[17:26] He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the banished house of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. And you will say in that day, give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted, sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously.

Let this be made known in all the earth. Shout and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

And Matthew is saying to us, by quoting these words, and so it will be for the whole world, through this one who has been born king, despised and rejected, seen by the world as nothing but insignificant and weak, a Nazarene.

And yet through his work, through his death for sins, and through his mighty resurrection in power, so he will raise a signal for all the peoples of this world.

And this name, which was once despised, shall be the name revered in power and in glory by every creature in this universe. And because of that, and what he came to do, says Matthew, the light of life has dawned from Galilee to the whole world.

[18:56] You remember, don't you, at the very end of Matthew's gospel, after his resurrection, you remember what Jesus says to his disciples? Go to Galilee, and there you will see me.

And from there, when he appeared to them, in Galilee of the Gentiles, Jesus commanded the disciples to go into all the world, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name, not anymore in the name of a despised and rejected and weak nobody, but in the name triumphant in glory and mighty to save, of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Friends, that is the Savior that we welcome this Christmas Day. Not a baby, rejected by the world, put into a cattle trough, because there was no room for him, even in his own place.

Not a despised and a forsaken Savior, who was hung on a cross, facing the vitriol of the world. No. He was once this.

As the Creed says, for us men and our salvation, he became that, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. But he is no longer a man of sorrows.

[20:18] Earth shall not see him rejected again. Triumphant in glory, the Lord comes to reign. Because life, eternal life, has dawned from Galilee to the world.

light and life to all he brings. Risen with healing in his wings. And as the carol says, our eyes at last shall see him through his own redeeming love.

For that child, so dear and gentle, is our Lord in heaven above. And he leads his children on to the place where he has gone. We'll see him not in that poor lowly stable with the oxen standing by. We shall see him, but in heaven, set at God's right hand on high. When like stars, his children crowned, all in white shall wait around.

And that, friends, is the glorious message of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the fulfillment that began in a stable in Bethlehem, but at the new month that is still to come when Christ returns in power and glory and every eye will see him.

[21 : 41] So may we greet him this Christmas as the Savior and the Lord who comes again. And as we close, let's pray together.

Lord, we thank you that you came from such a height and plumbed such depths to win us and our salvation that we also might go to the place where you have gone through trusting in Christ our Savior.

So, Lord, this Christmas morning we ask that you would indeed visit us afresh today that true faith may be born in our hearts and that we might go on our way rejoicing at all we have seen and heard just as it has been told us by the prophets.

So help us, we pray, bow the knee to our Lord Jesus Christ both now and always. Amen.