

ACCORDING TO PLAN
MATTHEW 2:13-23

One of the major themes of Scripture—a theme that is found in every single book of the Bible—is that God is absolutely sovereign. That means, in its most basic sense, that God is in control. He has the power and authority not merely to do anything He chooses, but to *determine* what happens. It means that He *will* have His way, and no scheme of man, no political or military power, no catastrophic circumstance can thwart His plans and purposes.

The Bible is the story about how God's sovereign plans and purposes unfold. But as we read the Bible we often come to places where God's sovereignty seems to be challenged—where it appears, from our perspective, that He will *not* have His way, but that circumstances or events or political forces will actually subvert God's plans and purposes.

For example, God told Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore. The problem was, his wife Sarah was unable to have children, and they just kept getting older and older until not only was her barrenness an obstacle, but they were both well past child bearing age—Abraham was one hundred, Sarah was ninety. But God overcame the impossible, and enabled her to conceive in her old age. Because He had determined that Abraham's offspring would be a significant part of His story. And nothing can keep His story from coming to pass.

God also promised Abraham that He would give Him and His offspring the land of Palestine. But just two generations later there was a severe famine in the land, and Abraham's offspring moved to Egypt in order to survive. They stayed there 400 years, and became the slaves of Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

But God raised up a man named Moses to deliver them, and lead them out of Egypt into the Promised Land. He did it by overcoming every obstacle and defying the laws of nature, so that by the time the people of Israel entered the Promised Land they were no longer a bedraggled, beleaguered collection of former slaves, but a powerful nation that struck fear into the hearts of all other nations.

That's because God had determined that the land of Palestine inhabited by Abraham's offspring would be a significant part of his story. And nothing can keep His story from coming to pass.

As God's story progressively unfolds in the Scriptures, little by little His plans and purposes come into sharper focus, enabling us to discover that the story is building to a crescendo. It's not about Abraham; it's not about Abraham's son or his biological offspring. It's about God's own Son, Jesus Christ. It's about what God does *through* His Son, something that He determined to do long before He even created the world (Eph. 3:11).

We're at the beginning of our study in the Gospel of Matthew. In the first chapter we saw how Jesus fits into God's plan that unfolded in the Old Testament, particularly how He was legally and biologically related to the people with whom God made promises—Abraham and David. We saw how He was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. But we also discovered how He was unique in that He did not have a biological father, but was born of a virgin. That means that while He is human, He is also God.

I want to read the first twelve verses of chapter 2, though I will not be preaching on these verses this morning, because I did so just a few months ago on Christmas. (If you would like to hear that message you can go to our website and find it there).

Verse 1-12. *Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:*

*⁶ “ ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ”*

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Verses 13-15. *¹³ Now when they had 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.” ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”*

Herod was the legally installed ruler of Judea and a convert to Judaism. He had been taught enough of the Scriptures to know that God had promised to send a Deliverer from the lineage of King David, who would establish the kingdom of God on earth and, presumably, rule in Jerusalem, the city of God.

When the Magi asked the question, “Where is the One who has been born king of the Jews,” Herod knew exactly what they were talking about. But instead of being excited that the long awaited Messiah had come, he was threatened, and Matthew says he was greatly disturbed. That word means to be beside oneself with worry.

Of a newborn! Of a baby that hadn’t yet spoken a word, let alone issued a decree. And so disturbed was Herod that he assembled the chief priests and teachers of the law to inquire about where the Christ was to be born. Then he devised a plot to destroy the baby.

But remember, this is God’s story. And no scheme of man can ever thwart the plans and purposes of God. God is absolutely sovereign. And so while Herod schemed, God intervened. He sent an angel to instruct Joseph to take his wife and son and flee to Egypt until further notice. And Joseph got up and left for Egypt in the middle of the night.

Egypt was approximately four hundred miles from Bethlehem. It’s likely, though we don’t know for sure, that Joseph settled in Alexandria, an Egyptian city on the Mediterranean coast that was populated by one million Jews at this time. It certainly would have been a logical place to hide and blend.

However, there is something bigger going on here than God telling Joseph to take his family to Egypt because it was a safe place to hide. They would have been safe in Lebanon, or Syria, or a number of other places outside of Herod's jurisdiction. The reason God sent them specifically to Egypt is because it was part of His story that He had already determined. Matthew refers to the flight to Egypt and the later return from Egypt as a "fulfillment" of prophecy, and he quotes Hosea 11:1 which says, "*Out of Egypt I called my son.*"

I need to tell you that if you were reading the book of Hosea and came across this verse, you would have difficulty making the connection between what Hosea said and how Matthew interprets it. Hosea is clearly making a reference to when Israel was delivered from Egypt in the days of Moses. How, then, can Jesus' coming out of Egypt be a fulfillment of prophecy?

Please listen carefully, because Matthew is going to be referencing several Old Testament passages in his Gospel and asserting that they are fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus. Yet, just as in this verse, it is going to be difficult for us to see the connection to Jesus in many of them.

So here is what we need to know: Matthew is using the word "fulfill" to explain how Jesus' life and ministry correspond analogically or typologically to certain aspects of Israel's history (Wilkins, 111). Let me explain:

In the context of his prophecy, Hosea recounts how God had faithfully brought Israel out of Egypt. Matthew's point of comparison is the solidarity between the nation of Israel as God's son being rescued and delivered by God, and Jesus as the One who is God's ultimate Son, who is rescued and delivered by God (Wilkins, 111). In other words, God's son in the Old Testament days, Israel, is a type or is analogous to God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

As Matthew looks back to the story of God bringing Israel out of Egypt under his divine protection, he points out how Jesus corresponds to Israel's history. The life of Jesus is the historical completion of the process of redemption! No threat from any public official, whether Pharaoh or Herod, can thwart God's plans and purposes. (Wilkins, 112).

And so, for Matthew, God telling Joseph to take the baby Jesus and his mother to Egypt is not mere coincidence. It's purposeful. As one scholar said, "Just as God brought the nation of Israel out of Egypt to inaugurate His original covenant with them, so again God is bringing the Messiah, who fulfills the hopes of Israel, out of Egypt as He is about to inaugurate His new covenant" (Blomberg, 67).

Let's move on to **verses 16-18**. ¹⁶ *Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.* ¹⁷ *Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:*

¹⁸ *"A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."*

When I was touring Israel for the first time 30 years ago, I asked our thirty-something Jewish tour guide who he thought was the greatest king of Israel. I expected him to say David or Solomon. Much to my surprise he said, "Herod." I must have looked incredulous, because he said, "My generation is tired of war and conflict. David was a great warrior, but we've had enough of that in our history. Herod, on the other hand, was a great politician.

He got along with Rome, he did a lot to enhance the infrastructure of Jerusalem, and he was a wonderful diplomat.”

Herod might have been a decent politician, but he was a brutal, ruthless monarch. The historian Josephus describes him as paranoid and power-hungry. We see that in this incident in which he slaughtered at least a dozen innocent children whom he perceived to be a threat to his throne. But in recording this, Matthew wants his readers to know that not only did this horrific event *not* take God by surprise, it was a fulfillment of prophecy, and it is part of the ultimate story of redemption.

The passage that Matthew quotes is from Jeremiah (31:15), which was originally about the sorrowing mothers in Israel whose children were captured by the Babylonians and carried off into exile. Once again, Matthew is using this Old Testament event as a type or an analogy of what happened in Bethlehem with the slaughter of the children. As Herod attempts to eliminate the newborn king of the Jews, the events of Jesus’ earthly life correspond typologically to an earlier attempt by a foreign power to wipe out God’s chosen people (Wilkins, 113).

But no scheme of man can ever thwart the plans and purposes of God. God is absolutely sovereign. And so while Herod tried to eliminate the threat to his kingdom, God was ensuring the safety of His Son who would be enthroned as the King of heaven.

Meanwhile, Josephus tells us that shortly after ordering the murder of infant boys in Bethlehem, Herod became deathly ill with a painful terminal disease. Josephus believed that God was punishing Herod for his wickedness (Antiquities, 168-171).

Look at **verses 19-23**. ¹⁹ *But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,* ²⁰ *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.”* ²¹ *And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.* ²² *But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea 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.* ²³ *And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.*

From historical records we can speculate that Joseph and Mary and Jesus probably stayed in Egypt no more than a year. When Herod died, the angel once again appeared to Joseph in a dream telling him to return to Israel. But he is warned in another dream not to go to Bethlehem, where Herod’s son has been placed in charge, but to settle in Galilee. They, naturally, settled in their hometown, the village of Nazareth.

Nazareth was located in the hills in lower Galilee at an elevation of 1,300 feet, midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea. It had no importance politically, militarily, or religiously in Jesus’s day, and it had a population of about 500.

Jesus spent nearly thirty years in Nazareth, and was known as Jesus the Nazarene. Remember, people did not have last names in the ancient world, so they were identified in other ways. Since Jesus was a common name, one person named Jesus was distinguished from another Jesus by expressions such as, “Jesus the carpenter’s son” or “Jesus from Nazareth.” “Nazarene” is derived from Nazareth to indicate a person from that town (Wilkins, 115-116).

But, again, it is not coincidence that Jesus grew up in Nazareth. It is part of God’s story and it is another fulfillment of prophecy, according to Matthew. But you need to know

that although Matthew tells us that by calling Jesus a Nazarene it “fulfilled what was said through the prophets,” there is not any direct Old Testament prophecy with this wording.

So what is Matthew doing here? Is he misleading his readers to think that there is a specific prophecy in the Old Testament that says, “The Messiah will be called a Nazarene?”

Listen carefully. The Hebrew word Nazareth means “Branch.” Branch is a significant word in Old Testament prophecy and it had a very clear and definite messianic overtones. One of many allusions to Branch in the Old Testament comes from the prophet Isaiah, who said, “*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit*” (11:1). Remember, Jesse was the father of King David. Even though by Isaiah’s time David’s kingly lineage had been severely compromised and had fallen on hard times, this statement is predicting a day when God will cause a shoot or a branch to emerge from the seemingly dead stump of Jesse, David’s father. That “Branch” was understood by Jews to be the promised Messiah.

The village of “Branch” or Nazareth in Galilee was originally settled by people from the line of David. They gave the settlement that name because they were hoping and praying that the prophesied Branch would come in their lifetime and they would be the direct beneficiaries of His life and ministry.

And so Matthew is doing a wordplay. He is telling us that by settling in the village named “Branch” (Nazareth), Jesus was fulfilling prophecy.

So, what can we learn from all this? This story in Matthew highlights the absolute sovereignty of God. God has a story and that story will unfold according to His plan. He *will* have His way, and no scheme of man can ever thwart His plans and purposes.

It was true in the events of the Old Testament leading up to the advent of Jesus, and it was true throughout the life and ministry of Jesus. As you know, the story of Jesus is going to take some surprising twists, especially when He is rejected by His own people, and becomes the “victim” of a conspiracy in which the religious leaders accuse Him of blasphemy and insurrection, put Him on trial in a kangaroo court, and crucify Him.

But no scheme of man can thwart God’s plans and purposes. The fact is, this rejection and murder were prophesied in Isaiah 53, five hundred years before Jesus was born. Jesus Himself predicted it, declaring that His life’s purpose was to die, and that no one could take His life from Him—He was laying down His life voluntarily (John). It was part of God’s plan. And God used what appeared to be a tragic circumstance to bring salvation to mankind. He guaranteed it when He raised Jesus from the dead three days after His death.

No scheme of man can ever thwart God’s plans and purposes. It may appear to us at times that people or powers or circumstances threaten to undo or subvert God’s plans and purposes. It may appear to us that some of His plans and purposes take unnecessary detours, or that God is reacting to unexpected schemes and obstacles that threaten to hijack His story. But that’s not true. God’s story has and will unfold according to plan, exactly the way He has determined it to come to pass.

Everything is purposeful. And what that means in our day is that no matter how bleak things appear to be, no matter who is sitting on a throne in whatever nation, no matter who is in charge of a nuclear arsenal that can obliterate the cities of its enemies, no matter who is making laws that create moral havoc, God is ultimately sovereign. He’s in charge, and His story will unfold according to plan. And don’t forget, the climax of the story is yet to come.

Jesus is coming again, and every eye will see Him and every person will stand before Him. And He will reign in righteousness forever and ever. Amen.

According to Plan

Matthew 2:13-23

Main Idea: No scheme of man can thwart the plans and purposes of God.

The Family's Escape to Egypt (13-15)

An angel warns Joseph in a dream

The family flees to Egypt until Herod's death

The fulfillment of Hosea's prophecy

The Massacre of Bethlehem's Boys (16-18)

Herod's rage

Herod's hideous decree

The fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy

The Family's Return to Nazareth (19-23)

Herod's death

The angel's directives to Joseph

The fulfillment of prophecy?

God's Sovereignty and God's Story