

The Exiled King

December 21, 2025

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Matthew 2:13-23

Session Outline

1. Into Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15)
2. Massacre of the Innocents (Matthew 2:16-18)
3. Return to Nazareth (Matthew 2:19-23)

Theological Theme

Even when we must unexpectedly pivot in our lives, God is in control—providing, guiding, and working things out for good.

Call to Action

If we call ourselves followers of Christ, we are to expect that we will experience opposition and persecution. Our HOPE is in Christ alone!



Leader Guide

The Exiled King

Introduction

Have you ever heard the story of how Post-it® Notes were invented?

A 3M scientist, Dr. Spencer Silver, was researching to try and discover a new, bigger, stronger, tougher adhesive, when he stumbled across a formula that peeled apart from surfaces easily. It wasn't what he was looking for (remember, they wanted tougher, stronger adhesives), but he was determined to find a use for it.

Meanwhile, another 3M scientist, Art Fry, needed a solution to mark pages in his church hymnal. The little scraps of paper he used would always fall out by Sunday! He needed a bookmark that would stick to the pages of the hymnal without damaging them.

The two put their heads together and, viola! Post-it® Notes were born.¹

It wasn't what they, or even 3M, originally expected or intended, but it worked. Sometimes our lives work this way too. And we can always trust that God is at the helm with a plan, even when our story takes an unexpected turn.

This week, we'll look at the story of Jesus's family fleeing to Egypt. This was surely not part of the family's plans (if you have ever moved with a two-year-old, you can relate), but God was at work, guiding and protecting them.

- ❓ When was a time something in your life didn't work out like you expected? What happened?
- ❓ Think back ten years. Does your life today look like you thought it would? How has God worked in ways you didn't expect?

Session Summary

This week, we'll explore God's abundant provision, and how He used dreams to guide and protect Jesus's family, warning Joseph to flee to Egypt in response to Herod's threat. Just as He did then, the Lord still guides us today. Like Joseph before us, we can trust that God will take care of us no matter the circumstance.

When Jesus's family fled to Egypt, Herod issued a horrific decree: All boys two years old and under in Bethlehem and the surrounding area were to be murdered. This horrific event reminds us of Pharaoh's command in Exodus 1 to kill the Hebrew baby boys, but in both cases, God's redemptive plans prevailed.

As Jesus's family returned from Egypt, God continued to guide and provide for them, leading them to settle safely in Galilee.

1. Into Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15)



What stands out to you about the warning Joseph received? How is this similar or different from other dreams we've seen in our study of Matthew so far?



How did Joseph display faith in God in this passage? Why might that have been challenging?

Last week, we read about the account of the Magi visiting the child Jesus. In those events, the paranoid Herod the Great was already seeking a way to identify and kill the child the Magi had identified as the king of the Jews. He directed the Magi to come and update him when they'd located Jesus, but they returned home by a different route, avoiding Herod. It was only a matter of time before Herod would have taken matters into his own hands.

We've seen dreams play a guiding role in Jesus's story multiple times so far. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling him Mary's pregnancy was of divine origin:

But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

—Matthew 1:20-21

The Magi were warned in a dream to avoid Herod on their way home:

“And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route.” —Matthew 2:12

In both cases, God used these dreams to guide and protect, and we see the same result in this passage. In danger from Herod the Great, Joseph was warned and instructed to take his family to Egypt. Note Joseph’s quick, obedient response. Joseph got up and fled with Jesus and Mary in the night. Remember the lavish gifts they received from the wise men? Many scholars believe that these gifts probably funded their flight to Egypt.

This isn’t the first time God’s people have taken refuge in Egypt. Back in Genesis, Jacob’s family moved there during the famine in Joseph’s time (Genesis 45:9-11). At this time, in Alexandria, Egypt, there was a Jewish colony numbering more than one million, so it’s possible they settled with their own people!²

Jesus’s family stayed in Egypt until Herod the Great died in 4 BC. Matthew identified this as fulfilling the prophecy “Out of Egypt I called my Son” (v. 15). This comes from Hosea:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.
—Hosea 11:1

This referenced the nation of Israel’s exodus from Egypt but also foreshadowed this event from Jesus’s life.³ Moses led the people out of slavery to the pharaoh of Egypt, and Jesus would lead His people out of slavery to sin.



Application: How do these events give encouragement for God’s sovereign plan in our own lives?

2. Massacre of the Innocents (Matthew 2:16-18)



How did Herod seek to subvert what God was doing according to his human power?



How does the prophecy quoted here remind us that God is in control, even in the darkest moments?

When Herod realized that the Magi had eluded him, he “flew into a rage,” and “gave orders to massacre all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under” (v. 16)—Jesus’s apparent age at that time. “Massacre” is an apt word to describe the devastation of this order.

Remember, Herod was known for being tyrannical and vengeful. In his lifetime, he murdered family members to secure his power (his own wife and mother-in-law, and three of his sons), Jewish high priests, more than half of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish governing body), and hundreds of court officers. Before he died, he also arranged for the death of notable men in Jerusalem (to take place after his death was announced). He was cruel and unapologetic. It isn't difficult to believe that this notoriously ruthless king would issue this devastating order.⁴

This event reminds us of a similar one in Exodus 1. Enslaved in the land of Egypt, the population of the Israelite people was so prosperous that the pharaoh of that day attempted to stifle them. The pharaoh issued this order:

“You must throw every son born to the Hebrews into the Nile, but let every daughter live.” —Exodus 1:22

Another connection pointing to Jesus as the new Moses is found in Deuteronomy:

“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. This is what you requested from the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, ‘Let us not continue to hear the voice of the LORD our God or see this great fire any longer, so that we will not die!’ Then the LORD said to me, ‘They have spoken well. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. I will hold accountable whoever does not listen to my words that he speaks in my name.’ —Deuteronomy 18:15-19

Jews in Jesus's day viewed Moses as the deliverer of God's people, but Jesus would deliver them in ways that Moses could not. In both horrific events, attempts to destroy God's people failed. God's plan cannot be derailed.

Matthew again connected this event to prophetic fulfillment, driving home the point that Jesus was the Messiah by sharing Scriptural evidence. Despite the horrendous actions of Herod, God remained in control and would fulfill His promise of redemption.



Application: When was a time something painful happened and you questioned why God allowed it? How did you see God work through that situation?

3. Return to Nazareth (Matthew 2:19-23)



God again spoke to Joseph in dreams. What are some ways you've learned to listen for and trust God's voice in your life?



God may speak in miraculous ways, but He has spoken clearly through His Word. Why is it vital that we spend time in His Word so we can learn His voice and receive His guidance?

Jesus the Nazarene

Matthew states that the decision was a fulfillment of an OT prophecy that Messiah would be called a Nazarene. No specific OT text explicitly prophesies this, and so Matthew was appealing to a prominent OT theme rather than a particular text. Specifically, he was probably alluding to the "Branch prophecies" since the Hebrew consonants *nzr* (which make up the word branch) are shared by the words "Nazareth" and "Nazarene." These prophecies (Is 4:2; 11:1; Jr 23:5; 33:15) told of a righteous descendant of David whose wise and just rule would be empowered by the Spirit and who would bring salvation to Judah. Matthew, thus, saw Jesus's hometown as a subtle clue to his identity as Messiah.

Herod the Great died in 4 BC, and was succeeded by his sons (Archelaus, Herod Antipas, and Herod Philip). Herod Antipas was in power at the time of Jesus's earthly ministry.⁵ Jesus, Mary, and Joseph probably stayed in Egypt for less than one year.⁶ When Jesus and His family returned to Israel, He was likely around the age of three.⁷

Once again, we see dreams play an important role in our story. Joseph was first warned in a dream to flee to Egypt, so it's fitting that he got the news he could return to Israel in a dream too. The Lord's warning in this dream is strikingly similar to the words spoken to Moses in Exodus 4: "Return to Egypt, for all the men who wanted to kill you are dead" (Exodus 4:19).

Archelaus (v. 22) was known to be similarly violent to Herod⁸, so Joseph was afraid to go to a region where he was ruling. Joseph's discernment and the Lord's warning led to the family settling in Galilee (the region ruled by Herod Antipas).

There is no specific Old Testament text that specifically says the Messiah would be called a Nazarene, so Matthew was probably referring to a prominent Old Testament theme rather than a specific passage. Matthew may also have been using word play here to allude to prophecy from Isaiah 11:1-2.⁹

And thus, the pieces were in place for Jesus's earthly ministry. Matthew recorded nothing else from Jesus's childhood, but picks up with the beginning of His earthly ministry in chapter 3.



Application: How has God guided decisions in your life? How have you found it better to trust Him than go your own way, even when the future is unclear?

Conclusion

This week, we looked at divine guidance and protection in Jesus's early life. Once again, dreams played a key role, with the Lord's warning of the danger Herod posed coming in the form of a dream. Joseph quickly and obediently took action based on the Lord's warning, fleeing to Egypt.

The Lord still gives us warnings like this today. It could be in the form of a dream or a feeling, but the Holy Spirit often guides our actions and steps, protecting us in ways we may never know the full extent of. We should strive to be immediately obedient, like Joseph was, trusting that God knows what He's doing and will take care of us, even if what He's asking us to do seems extreme.

When Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were safely away in Egypt, Herod, in a rage, issued a murderous decree for Bethlehem and the areas around it: All boys aged two and younger were to be massacred. This heartbreaking event reminds us of Exodus 1, when Pharaoh ordered the death of newborn Hebrew baby boys to suppress the growing Israelite population. Both attempts to destroy God's people failed. Jesus, the new Moses, survived and would deliver His people out of slavery to sin. Even in the face of violence and sorrow, God's redemptive plan moved forward.

-  What are some things we can do to better tune into God's direction in our own lives?
-  How can we encourage one another toward obedience to God's guidance daily?
-  How does living in obedience before God lead us to share Jesus with others?

Prayer of Response

Praise God for His faithful guidance and provision, even in the darkest and most uncertain moments. Thank Him for the way He fulfills His promises and works through every detail to carry out His redemptive plan, even when it feels questionable. Ask for His help as you listen for His voice to respond with trust and obedience like Joseph.

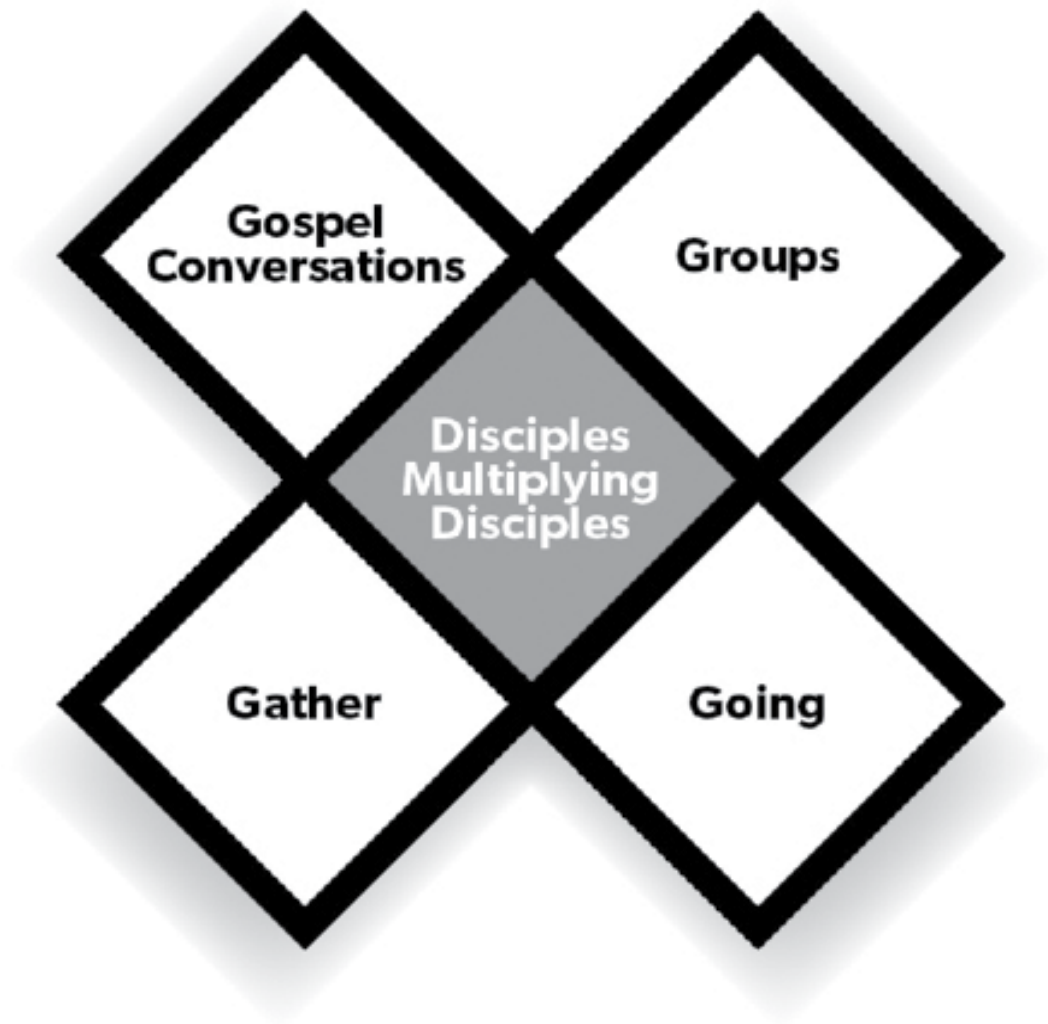
Memory Verse

He stayed there until Herod's death, so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled: Out of Egypt I called my Son. —Matthew 2:15

Additional Resources

- *Be Loyal* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Matthew for You* by Tim Chester
- *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* by David Platt

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Matthew

Purpose

Matthew probably wrote his Gospel in order to preserve written eyewitness testimony about the ministry of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel emphasizes certain theological truths. First, Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited King of God's people. Second, Jesus is the new Abraham, the founder of a new spiritual Israel consisting of all people who choose to follow him. This new Israel will consist of both Jews and Gentiles. Third, Jesus is the new Moses, the deliverer and instructor of God's people. Fourth, Jesus is the Immanuel, the virgin-born Son of God who fulfills the promises of the OT.

Author

The author did not identify himself in the text. However, the title that ascribes this Gospel to Matthew appears in the earliest manuscripts and is possibly original. Titles became necessary to distinguish one Gospel from another when the four Gospels began to circulate as a single collection. Many early church fathers (Papias, Irenaeus, Pantaenus, and Origen) acknowledged Matthew as the author. Papias also contended that Matthew first wrote in Hebrew, implying that this Gospel was later translated into Greek.

Setting

Determining the date of composition of Matthew's Gospel depends largely on the relationship of the Gospels to one another. Most scholars believe that Matthew utilized Mark's Gospel in writing his own gospel. If this is correct, Matthew's Gospel must postdate Mark's. However, the date of Mark's Gospel is also shrouded in mystery. Irenaeus (ca AD 180) seems to claim that Mark wrote his Gospel after Peter's death in the mid-60s. However, Clement of Alexandria, who wrote only twenty years after Irenaeus, claimed that Mark wrote his Gospel while Peter was still alive. Given the ambiguity of the historical evidence, a decision must be based on other factors.

Special Features

This Gospel was written from a strong Jewish perspective to show that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament.

Extended Commentary

Matthew 2:13-23

2:13–14 Again an angel visited Joseph in a dream warning him of Herod's intent. Herod was a cruel and paranoid ruler. See note at 2:3. So it is not surprising that he would commit treachery against children due to a perceived threat (v. 16). Joseph promptly obeyed when he was told to flee to Egypt. See note at 1:24–25.

2:15 That what was spoken had to be fulfilled indicates that the Bible is inspired by God and authoritative over history. In its original context, the calling of the son out of Egypt in Hs 11 is a reference to Israel's exodus from Egypt, not young Messiah's trip back home. Matthew understood this, but under the Spirit's direction he recognized Jesus as the new Moses who will lead a new and climactic exodus. Just as Moses delivered his people from slavery to Pharaoh, Jesus will deliver people from slavery to Satan. Thus Matthew rightly regarded Hs 11:1 and other portions of the OT as foreshadows of Jesus and events in his life.

2:16 Skeptics deny that Herod ever slaughtered the boys of Bethlehem since no extrabiblical source documents this horrific event. However, the murders are consistent with his documented dealings, such as his murdering his own family. The Jewish historian Josephus reported that Herod arranged for many Jewish nobles to be murdered upon his death in order to ensure that the land mourned his passing (Ant. 17.167–69). Herod's behavior is reminiscent of Pharaoh's around the time of Moses's birth (Ex 1:15–22). This and other striking similarities to Moses's birth narrative strengthen Matthew's presentation of Jesus as the new Moses whom God promised in Dt 18:15–19. Ancient Jews thought of Moses as a deliverer (Ac 7:25, 35). By highlighting parallels between Moses and Jesus, Matthew shows that Jesus was the promised deliverer who would save his people from their sins (see notes at Mt 1:7–16 and 2:20–21). Herod killed all boys two years old and under in and around Bethlehem because the star had appeared to the magi two years previously, presumably at the moment of Jesus's birth.

2:17–18 Once again Matthew introduces a quotation in a way that implies that the OT author (Jeremiah in this case) was used by God to proclaim his message. This was the unquestioned view among religious Jews from the day of the prophets down to Jesus's day. In v. 18 Matthew quotes Jr 31:15, which originally expressed the lament of mothers who grieved over sons who were sent into exile. Matthew's application here implies that Israel was again in exile, estranged from God, and in need of redemption. Since Jr 31 includes the weeping and then climaxes with the joyous promise that God would establish a new covenant with his people, one in which he would forgive their sins and write his law on their hearts, Matthew likely intends to call this to mind and apply it to the Bethlehem massacre and the coming of Jesus. Just as the weeping of mothers preceded the promise of the new covenant in Jr 31, so now the weeping of mothers preceded the establishment of the new covenant through Jesus (see note at 26:27–28).

2:19 Since Herod died in 4 BC and since Jesus was born roughly two years before Herod ordered the massacre of the Bethlehem boys, it seems that Jesus was born in 5 or 6 BC. It also seems likely that the shameless Bethlehem massacre was one of Herod's final acts.

2:20–21 The angel’s words are almost identical to the words the Lord spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Ex 4:19, LXX). This allusion to the Moses narrative again identifies Jesus as the new Moses (see notes at 2:15 and 2:16). Jesus, now perhaps three years old, returns from Egypt with his family.

2:22–23 Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, inherited his father’s violent traits. His rule over Judea signaled that the holy family should settle elsewhere, and so Joseph led his family to resettle in the obscure Galilean village of Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary had previously lived (Lk 1:26). Matthew states that the decision was a fulfillment of an OT prophecy that Messiah would be called a Nazarene. No specific OT text explicitly prophesies this, and so Matthew was appealing to a prominent OT theme rather than a particular text. Specifically, he was probably alluding to the “Branch prophecies” since the Hebrew consonants nżr (which make up the word branch) are shared by the words “Nazareth” and “Nazarene.” These prophecies (Is 4:2; 11:1; Jr 23:5; 33:15) told of a righteous descendant of David whose wise and just rule would be empowered by the Spirit and who would bring salvation to Judah. Matthew thus saw Jesus’s hometown as a subtle clue to his identity as Messiah.¹⁰

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