

Prayer

Praise You Lord Jesus Christ, for the incredible journey of faith upon which You have led Your people the Church, over two thousand years. May we who bear the Good News of Salvation in this generation confess our debt to those who have gone before, and prove worthy of our call to preach the Word to all people both in season and out of season: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Pastors

Pray today for any pastors you know who also preach in church on Sundays. They bear an onerous responsibility to speak prophetically to the people for whom they care.

On-going prayers

- *Praise God for the joys of family life and the bonds of love*
- *Pray for all who suffer bullying or stress in the workplace*
- *Pray for Zimbabwe*

Meditation

When I feel like letting go, Lord Jesus, hold me close;
and when I want to run away, then stay with me, dear Lord.

When I know that I am lost, Lord Jesus, rescue me;
and when I lose direction, then be my compass, dear Lord.

When I see there's trouble ahead, Lord Jesus, clear my mind;
and when I feel the threat of fear, then soothe my soul, dear Lord.

When I hear the call to action, Lord Jesus, make me ready;
and when I stumble on the way, then lift my spirit, dear Lord

When I sense the time is right, Lord Jesus, lead me onwards;
and when I open my lips to speak, then fill my mouth dear Lord.

When I'm sure I'm on the right track, Lord Jesus, keep me whole;
and when I grasp the call of God, then fill my life, dear Lord.

Bible Study - Matthew 2:19-23

¹⁹ *When Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,* ²⁰ *'Move on, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to kill the child are dead.'*

²¹ *So Joseph took the child and his mother, and travelled to the land of Israel.*

²² *But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. After being warned in a dream, he returned to the district of Galilee.* ²³ *When he arrived, he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what was spoken through the prophets would be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazarene.'*

Review

Today's passage describes the circumstances in which Joseph led his young family back to Israel and out of Egypt. It could only happen when it was safe to return and any talk of a young Messiah would not create trouble, and an angel came to Joseph to inform Joseph that it was safe to return because of the death of the tyrant Herod the Great. The rest of the text tells us something of the decision making that went in to Joseph's action in taking Jesus to Nazareth, and although the story seems very straightforward, there are some intriguing aspects to the whole event, which we will touch on shortly!

When King Herod the Great died in what we now know to be around 4 BC, it was clear that the Romans would not give his sons the power and influence that the old despot had acquired, and Israel was divided up. Herod's son Archelaus inherited authority over the kingdoms of Judea and Samaria; Archelaus' half brother Antipas took over the northern regions around Galilee, and another son Philip ruled in the North East, 'beyond the Jordan'. It was soon became apparent that Archelaus was even more unstable than his father, committing even more brutal and senseless atrocities than his father in order to try and secure his position. However, this simply hastened the day when the Roman Emperor Augustus relieved him of his duties (around 8AD), placing a Roman procurator in charge at Jerusalem and thus setting up the power structure with which we are familiar for the rest of Matthew's Gospel. Clearly, after Herod died, it was unwise of Joseph to settle in Judea because of Archelaus' rule, and this was probably the reason for the angel's second warning (2:22).

One small fact which often goes unnoticed is that what the angel said (2:20) is almost the same as the Lord's instruction to Moses to return to Egypt to begin his ministry of the deliverance of the people of Israel (see Exodus 4:19,20, which contains almost the same words!). It is possible that Matthew wanted us to see a connection between Moses, the first redeemer of Israel, and Jesus, the Redeemer of the World!

The last verse in this text appears to be a quote from 'the prophets', but Matthew says simply 'He will be called a Nazarene'; however, there is no place in the prophets where such a quote exists, so what is going on here? It is a little complicated to explain in full, but briefly, just as the scribes used several Old Testament texts to answer Herod's request to find out where the Messiah would be born, so Matthew uses several Old Testament texts loosely relating to prophets. Firstly, he used Isaiah 11:1 which prophesies that 'a shoot will come from the stump of Jesse ...' but the word for 'shoot' is 'nezere' in Hebrew! We do not see this play on words, but people of Matthew's day would have done. Secondly, the stories of the childhood of two great national heroes and prophets of Israel referred to their calling to be a 'Nazirite'. These were ancient vows concerning what we might consider as a monastic lifestyle. The two great figures are Samson (see Judges 13:7; 'for the boy shall be a 'Nazirite') and Samuel (see 1 Sam 1:22; 'I will offer him as a 'Nazirite' for all time). All of these Old Testament references contribute to what Matthew says here about Jesus. It is strange to us, but this word-play is the most likely reason for a text we cannot otherwise explain.

Through all this intrigue, Joseph is the man! At the end of Matthew chapter 2, we now say goodbye to the first 'character' in Matthew's Gospel (apart from the infant Jesus) who has a significant role. In days gone by, when babies died all too easily from a variety of causes, the protection of a father in a male dominated society was all important. Joseph was a 'just' man, who acted with unquestioning faithfulness to God and obedience to the angel. You could say he was the model 'man' of the holy family, alongside the model 'woman', who was Mary in Luke's account of the story of Jesus' birth.

Out of all the characters in this story, it is the faithful Joseph who emerges with his head held high, and yet, we never hear of him again. Would that all of us were content to demonstrate our faith by doing our God-given task, and leaving the rest to Him. Joseph

leaves the story with honour, but the child he so properly protected as an earthly father was about to burst onto the scene of Galilean first century life.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you think it matters that 'He will be called a Nazarene' cannot be found in so many words, in scripture?
2. What is your opinion of Joseph? If you are in a group, share your thoughts about his character, and what he might have been like.
3. Do angels only appear at special times to announce God's will? How may we know an angel has spoken to us in a dream?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This brief story about Joseph's wise management of the family in its early years is important, and it is good to find such 'role models' within scripture. The passage shows me that even the smallest passage of scripture will sometimes yield unexpected benefits when we study them closely.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Part of the background of this story is the story of how Israel was governed in Jesus' day. How much do you know about how you are governed? Find out more!*
- *If possible, find a child in your own family or the family of the church, and ask them what they think it must have been like for Jesus to move home when he was about four years old.*

Final Prayer

When our time comes to stand up and do Your will, may we not be found wanting. Give us courage, Lord God, when we hear Your voice, to act; and when we sense Your call, to follow. This we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN