

A Light Has Dawned – on a very deep darkness

Matthew 2:13–23

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The theme for this series of sermons in Matthew 1-7 is “A light has dawned”. That’s the good news. Unfortunately, the good news also reveals the bad news. The dawning light of God reveals the haunting darkness of mankind. Today’s scripture reading is a very difficult passage to listen to. If it were made into a movie it would be rated ‘R’ for all the wanton violence and murder. Yet it also teaches us a lot about God’s desire for us, what obedience to God often looks like, and who wins in the end.

There are three takeaways from this passage I’d like to focus on:

1. God speaks to us

It’s hard to fully grasp the wonder of this statement - that the eternal, Almighty God who created the cosmos would somehow be interested in speaking to me and you. But speak He does!

- i. God speaks to us primarily through His Word, the Bible. It’s the most accurate, trustworthy and comprehensive means we have of hearing the voice of God. This is to be our go-to means of listening to God every time.
- ii. We also have nature. God speaks to us through His creation, sometimes emphatically. We’re told that “the heavens declare the glory of God”. By observing and enjoying nature, by finding refreshment in nature, by sometimes being confronted by natural events, we can know and understand something of what God is like.
- iii. We have prophetic word. God has used His prophets throughout the ages to speak to His people. Even today, the Holy Spirit provides the gift of prophecy and speaks to His people through prophetic word. This is always consistent with the Word of God, often illuminating it to us.
- iv. A fourth area that God sometimes speaks to us - and pertinent to today’s reading - is through dreams. Three times in this passage alone, Joseph is spoken to by God (or an angel of God) in a dream. Dreams seem to be a less common way for God to speak to us today, but God still does use dreams to speak into people’s lives today.

In his book *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, Nabeel Qureshi is spoken to several times in dreams and, in a shock to many Christians, this is while he was still a practising Muslim. But it’s not surprising that God would use this means of communication to a people who have no access to the written Word or church teaching. But God so loved the whole world... As Christians, we should embrace the idea that God can and does speak to those who are not yet His own, calling them to a saving knowledge of Jesus. This is what God has always done - called out in love to a sinful and distant people - we should know this

because that's who we were. God called to Nabeel in dreams and, long story short, at great cost, Nabeel gave His life to Jesus and went on to influence many.

One of the DMI workers in Uganda, named Dennis, heard the voice of God several times in dreams. Dennis's life story is extraordinary. When he was 12 years old, he had the misfortune of dying. He was a healthy, strapping lad who contracted cerebral malaria, fell into a coma and died in hospital. Three days later, after they had lowered the coffin into the ground and begun to shovel the dirt in, the lid of the coffin moved, they pulled it back up and found that he was still alive (or had come back to life). That's the good news. The bad news is that his brain was so damaged, he had cerebral palsy, was deaf, unable to speak, paralysed down his right side and crippled. What sort of a resurrection story is that?! Why would God spare a life to be lived in that sort of misery? But God loved Dennis and had a purpose for his life. God spoke to him in dreams, first to tell him that he would walk again, which he did a few months later (he just jumped up and started walking); then to tell him that he would go to school (which was unthinkable at the time), which some months later by a timing and financial miracle, he did; then to tell him that he would study abroad in ministry, which some years later, he did. That young deaf, dumb, crippled man with cerebral palsy and a gnarled body is now the principal of 300 students in a Christian school for the disabled. His miserable life has been replaced with a life of joy. When I spoke to him (through an interpreter- he signs with one hand), he was full of laughter - and I don't mean polite laughter. I mean thigh-slapping, head-rolling, body rocking laughter, because God has spoken into his life and given him love.

In our reading, God spoke to Joseph and His words changed Joseph's life, they changed the life of his whole family, and they changed the course of history. God speaks to us. His words will change our lives, they will change the lives of our families, and they they will likely have impact on those far outside our immediate sphere of influence. God speaks to us. Our response is to listen and obey We're not called to read God's mind, we're told to listen to His voice! We hear his voice most clearly and reliably in the words of Scripture, but also at times through creation, prophetic word and even in dreams.

The second takeaway from today's passage is this uncomfortable truth:

2. Obeying God can lead us into wilderness

It's much easier and neater to think that obeying God would bring untold - and immediate - prosperity and peace. But this is simply not the case.

You're probably familiar with how the nativity story begins. The angel Gabriel visits Mary and says to her, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." This sounds really exciting in a Hollywood movie kind of way but in reality Mary was really disturbed by it. So the angel says again, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God."

What does favour with God look like? What does obedience to God lead to? What sort of treatment could - or should - Mary have expected as one who would give birth to the "Son of the Most High...whose reign would never end"? First class health care and accommodation, servants to cook and clean, and a lifetime supply of after dinner mints, perhaps?

How about long distance travel on a donkey while heavily pregnant, giving birth in an open field with farm animals because no-one will give you a room, death threats, mass murder, refugee status in a country where you don't know anyone, have no job and can't speak the language? I like to put these things in a modern setting because it helps me to grasp the reality of the situation. If the emperor of Japan scoured the country to find the fairest maiden, the best person to marry his son the Crown Prince and have the honour of giving birth to one who would ascend the throne and he chose - not without good reason - Remi, but Remi ended up travelling by bicycle in the rain while heavily pregnant and giving birth in a bunker behind the 9th hole at a public golf course out in Yamaguchi prefecture before having to flee to Vietnam because ultranationalists in Japan wanted to take her life, I'd want my money back - and I'd want answers.

I'm sure Mary wanted some answers. What does obedience to God lead to? What does favour with God look like?

For the Israelites, God's chosen people, it was 400 years of slavery. Then when they finally entered the Promised Land, it involved 13 major military conflicts.

For David, after he was anointed King, he had to flee from a jealous Saul, and lived in caves and wilderness areas for almost 15 years before he actually ascended the throne.

When Jesus Himself was baptised and we saw His miraculous anointing - The Father speaking, the Spirit descending and the Son rising up out of the water to begin His ministry, we don't see mass healings, exorcisms, water walking, storm-calming or resurrections; we're told something very strange. It says, "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." So the devil's doing the tempting but only under the Spirit's ultimate authority and leading. After His baptism, His great anointing, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness wrestling with the devil.

That's not the script I would have written.

When Jesus directed the disciples to get in a boat to go off on a mission trip, what could possibly go wrong? A near death experience, that's what! The storm is so severe that the seasoned fishermen feared for their lives. You know how that story ends but why did the disciples have to go through that - after faithfully obeying Jesus' directive?

We could look at Steven's martyrdom, Paul's many sufferings and hardships, Peter's early and grisly death. Is that what favour looks like? Is that what obedience to God leads to?

All these people, like Jesus, endured their hardships, their wilderness "for the joy set before them" because they trusted - they *knew* - that God was bigger than their circumstances. They were able to see past the suffering, whether it was temporary or longer term. They could see the big picture. They knew that God and His Kingdom were worth fighting for and worth suffering for.

Hebrews 11, often called the Faith Hall of Fame, records the truth of this vividly: *And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some*

faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. (32-39)

The heroes of the faith are not only those who experience victories in this world but those who know that God is worth trusting to the very end even when they haven't yet seen or received what was promised.

Obedying God can lead to a wilderness experience. Sadly, this seems to be the rule just as much if not more than the exception. Maybe you're going through your own wilderness time now. Maybe you've been living faithfully for God but all you can see right now is poor health, or no job; or maybe your struggling with loneliness, or a broken relationship; maybe it's doubt that's robbing you of any purpose or joy, or a temptation that never seems to leave you. And to make matters worse, it might seem that everyone else has got their act together - you're dying in the wilderness and everyone else seems to be partying in the Promised Land. It's not true. You're not the only one.

Don't give up. You're in good company. Moses, David, Jesus, Paul, Joseph and Mary, and many others today. You're in the good company of others who knew and trusted God. God is working even when we can't see it. God is faithful to His people even when we don't feel it. Don't give up. Keep trusting. Keep seeking.

Let me share with you one of my many wilderness testimonies.

In 2008 I began to pastor the Minoh International Church. There were 12 in the congregation at the time. I knew I was called to pastorship, so I threw myself into it. I was a tentmaker so I was teaching English most of the time, but spending hours and hours every week preparing the service, running small groups, pastoring the congregants (and being surprised that 12 people could have so many problems), and most of all, preparing sermons. I did this diligently for almost 3 years. What did I have to show for it after 3 years? Nothing, it seemed. The same twelve people, still dealing with their problems, and a long way from changing the world (let alone themselves). I found myself in a very barren wilderness. I was dry and tired and discouraged. From time to time I would ask God if this was really where he wanted me. Was this a good use of my time and resources? All that time, preparing services and sermons every week - for 12 people - nice people - but just 12. I began to despair.

Then one day out of the blue, I got an email from a returned member of our church, a gifted praise and worship leader. He was then in New Zealand and he wrote, "Andrew, I have a confession to make. Every week I lead the praise and worship in my church and the pastor asks me to share from the Word as a part of the praise and worship. Every week, I just give them the sermon that you post on line, word for word, and people are coming up after the service and slapping me on the back and saying, 'That was a great Word you shared, it really spoke to me'. I've got 400 people here praising me when it's really just your words I'm giving them. I feel so guilty. Can I have your permission to use your sermons each week?"

With my eyes of flesh, I thought I was preaching to 12 people each week. But in reality I was preaching to 412.

But God wasn't done with me. A few weeks after that, I got an email out of the blue from another returned member, a pastor from Africa. He wrote, "Andrew, I have a confession to make. Every week when I give the sermon to my congregation, I'm just giving them the sermon you post on line each week. People are getting so much from them and they are thanking me but I just feel so guilty. Can I have your permission to preach with your sermons to the 200 members of my congregation? Actually," he continued, "It's worse than that. You see, I've been sharing your sermons with my pastor friends all over Africa and we're all using your sermons. May we have your permission for this?"

With my eyes of flesh, I thought I was preaching to 12 people each week. But in reality I was preaching to 1,012. Within 3 years of receiving those letters, our church had grown to 60 or 70 and it continued to grow after that.

Hardship is often the fruit of lack of obedience. Think of Israel in the desert, the exile etc). But hardship can also be the fruit of obedience. Think of Mary and Joseph before, during and after the birth of their son, Jesus the Christ.

Obedying God can lead us into wilderness
Our response: to know and to trust God

The third takeaway from today's passage is a more glorious truth:

3. God's Sovereignty wins in the end

In today's passage where we read of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus fleeing Bethlehem to live as refugees in Egypt, we not only see a wilderness experience but we see the fulfilment of prophecy.

Matthew goes to lengths to show us this. In this short passage alone we're shown how Jesus fulfilled 3 OT prophecies. Each of them were given many hundreds of years before the birth of Christ.

The first is in verse 6:

*"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."* (From Micah 5:2,4)

This prophecy was given to Micah 700 years before the birth of Christ. It was an unlikely prophecy because Bethlehem was a small and largely irrelevant part of Israel. But God in His Sovereignty declared, as God so often does, that the weak would be strong, and by His hand the insignificant would become significant. Matthew doesn't repeat the whole prophecy from Micah which goes on to say that this ruler's origins would be "of old, from ancient times". Clearly Messianic, this prophecy tells us that the beginnings of this ruler would be much earlier than His human birth.

The second prophecy in this passage is in verse 15: *“Out of Egypt I called my son.”* This is from Hosea 11:1. Hosea prophesied 800 years before the birth of Christ. Just as God’s son Israel had been called out of Egypt, so His one true Son Jesus would be called out of Egypt. An extraordinary manipulation of geopolitics would be required to bring this about but that is no problem for God. The zeal of the Lord would accomplish these things.

The third prophecy is from Jeremiah 31 and foretells the weeping that would follow Herod’s mass murder of innocent children. Jeremiah prophesied this 600 years before the birth of Christ.

Each of these prophecies tell us not just that Jesus was the Messiah who was to come, but that God is Sovereign over all. *“From everlasting to everlasting you are God,”* the psalmist declares. (Psalm 90:2) This is immensely comforting for those of us who might at times struggle to see the hand of God in our daily lives. God is Sovereign, He is over all and, most importantly, He cares in a very deep and personal way about each of our lives. God isn’t just Sovereign over history. He’s Sovereign over our lives, right down, Jesus tells us, to knowing the number of hairs on our heads, and as Peter tells us, to wanting to hear and take from us each and every anxiety that we might be dealing with.

God is Sovereign over all. His Word is true. We can trust it with our lives. I’ve read the back of the book. I know Who wins. I’m sorry if you need a spoiler alert but - it’s God! God wins! He’s already planned and written it all out. And no matter what wilderness we might be going through at the moment, God shares His victory with us when we give our lives to Him by receiving His Son as Lord and Saviour.

God’s Sovereignty wins in the end.

There’s only one appropriate response to this: To worship God and to enjoy Him.

To conclude, let me quickly review.

1. God speaks to us.

Our response is to listen and obey.

2. Obeying God can lead us into wilderness

Our response is to know and to trust God

3. God’s Sovereignty wins in the end.

Our response is to worship God and to enjoy Him.

Pray.