

HARD KNOCKS: When Relief Does Not Come

A Study of Matthew 2:13-23

Characteristic of Completeness: Patience

Big Idea: To calm your heart, trace His hand.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 37:7; Psalm 56:8; 77:1-20; 130:5; Isaiah 49:15; 53:4;

Jeremiah 31:15, 31-34; Hosea 11:1; Matthew 6:8; Luke 12:6; Hebrews 4:15; 2 Corinthians 4:7-17

Introduction:

- A. The question I'd like to address this morning is this: What do you do when Jesus comes into your life, but things get worse? That is, what do you do when you experience the extraordinary presence and direction of the Lord in a fresh way, and so you expect a little relief, but relief does not come? What do you do when you hit the Jesus jackpot, but then it hits the fan?
1. Maybe you're married. And it becomes very clear to you that God wants you to follow Him more closely and to participate more fully in the life of the church community. But when you do, your spouse doesn't like it, and things at home actually get worse.
 2. Maybe you're a student. You just started a new school year, and you sense God calling you to start fresh in your relationship with Him. So you try to clean up a few bad habits that you know aren't doing you any good. But some of your friends don't like the new you. And you find yourself on the outside looking in.
 3. Maybe God has impressed upon you the need to spend some time with Him to listen for His voice, to ask Him to show you how He wants you to apply His Word. So you do. And at first it's great. But then, things get worse. There's the unexpected bill. The unexpected report from the biopsy. The unexpected conflict in a relationship. All at once.
 4. Maybe you feel prompted by God to try to mend a broken relationship, to lovingly, constructively confront with the goal of biblical reconciliation. But when you do, the other person does not receive it well and things get worse.
 5. I remember when I felt that God wanted me to change careers from businessman to pastor. I remember the initial exhilaration of His call, His presence, His direction, and going back to school to study the Bible. Near the end of my seminary education I had no money, no home, no job, and no prospects. But I did have a prostate infection and two kids in school, one of whom was recovering from a brain surgery.

Sometimes, when Jesus comes into your life, things get worse. What do you do?

- B. The biblical text we're studying today is Matthew 2:13-23. In the text, we have a helpful case study. When Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the Good News Incarnate comes into the lives of Joseph and Mary, things get worse.

We can only imagine what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph at first. To hear directly from God. To be a party to the miraculous virgin birth. To be chosen by God to be the earthly parents and guardians of the Son of God. To be the bearers of God's gracious promises fulfilled. To have shepherds and then magi traveling from afar to worship their newborn king. Wow! Talk about Jesus coming into your life in an extraordinary way!

I imagine it would have been quite normal to expect God to pave the way for them from then on. To make it easier. To give them certain privileges. To make things comfortable and secure. To make life better. After all, isn't that what earthly fathers with deep pockets do for their sons?

But things did not get better. They got worse.

1. In Matthew 2:13-15, we learn that Joseph and Mary must run for their lives. They become homeless refugees. Beginning in ► Verse 13, it says:

^{NAU} Matthew 2:13 Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." 14 So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. 15 He remained there until the death of Herod. . . .

We learned last week that Herod the king was not a nice guy. He had no qualms about killing anybody who posed any kind of threat, including his wife, some of his children, and now a newborn king.

2. That's bad. But things get even worse. You may recall that Herod sends some magi to Bethlehem to find the baby Jesus and to return to him to tell him the whereabouts of the child. The magi do find Jesus, but they are warned by God not to return to Herod. Verse ► 16 reports:

^{NAU} Matthew 2:16 Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years

old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi.

Bethlehem was very small and the infants killed may have numbered only one or two dozen.¹ It was a tragedy nonetheless.

3. Eventually, there appears to be a breakthrough. Verses ► 19 through 21 tell us:

^{NAU} Matthew 2:19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, 20 “Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child’s life are dead.” 21 So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

Was this when things would finally settle down? Was this when life would finally get easier? Nope. Verse ► 22 tells us:

^{NAU} Matthew 2:22 But when he [Joseph] heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Then after being warned *by God* in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee

You see, Archelaus was a chip off the old block: a malignant tyrant. So Joseph and Mary still run.

- C. Sometimes, ► when Jesus comes into your life, things get worse. What do you do? Thankfully, Matthew is careful to include in the story of our text some things that help us to put hardship into perspective and to be patient. In fact, ► Patience is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week.

In our text, I find ► five things that help us. They constitute the five-point outline of my sermon. The first four things are things to know about God in the midst of hardship when our patience is sorely tested. The fifth thing is something to do.

- I. Here’s ► the first thing to know: God knows. God knows all about the hardship of His people. He’s attentive to every detail of our suffering. He doesn’t miss a thing.
- A. Our text repeatedly demonstrates it.

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew, The New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 68; D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1985), 94.

1. In Verse 13 we see that God knows what's going on. He even knows the malevolent intentions of Herod's heart. And God directs Joseph, according to His perfect knowledge of the situation. Verse ► 13 says,

^{NAU} Matthew 2:13 Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him."

2. We see God's knowledge of the situation again in Verses ► 19-20, where it says,

^{NAU} Matthew 2:19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, 20 "Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead."

3. Again in ► Verse 22 there is a divine warning because God knows:

^{NAU} Matthew 2:22 . . . Then after being warned *by God* in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee

God knows.

- B. Other Scriptures corroborate the fact that He knows. He knows all about your hardship.

1. Psalm ► 56:8 says to God:

^{NAU} Psalm 56:8 You have taken account of my wanderings; Put my tears in Your bottle. Are *they* not in Your book?

2. In ► Matthew 6:8, Jesus says:

^{NAU} Matthew 6:8 ". . . your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."

- II. God knows. That's the first thing to know. Now here's ► the second: God cares. God cares about what happens to us. He is compassionate. We are close to His heart.

- A. Our text confirms it.

1. In the passages I just cited, God uses His knowledge to direct and protect because He cares. He considers His children to be of great value.

2. And there is further evidence. In Verse 15, Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1. We'll consider the prophetic significance of this in a moment. For now, I just want to go back and look at the verse Matthew brings to the mind. In ► Hosea 11:1, God says:

^{NAU} Hosea 11:1 When Israel *was* a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son.

Matthew's allusion to Hosea 11:1 is ► a reminder of God's love for His people.² God cares.

B. Other Scriptures corroborate it.

1. In ► Luke 12:6-7, Jesus says:

^{NAU} Luke 12:6 "Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? *Yet* not one of them is forgotten before God. 7 Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows."

2. In ► Isaiah 49:15, God says:

^{NAU} Isaiah 49:15 "Can a woman forget her nursing child And have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. 16 Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms *of My hands*; Your walls are continually before Me."

God cares.

III. God knows and God cares. Now here's ► the third thing: God enters. God not only knows and cares; He also chooses to enter into our suffering. He enters to identify with, to participate in, and to share our suffering.

A. Our text confirms it.

1. Think about it. Before our Savior could even walk or talk, He became a homeless refugee with a price on His head.³ He could have arranged things differently. He could have side-stepped our pain. No. He enters.
2. In Verse 23, Matthew says that, after running, Jesus's family ended up in a town called Nazareth. Matthew ► says,

² Blomberg, 67; Turner, 51.

³ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One*, (London and Louisville, KY: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, 2004), 14.

^{NAU} Matthew 2:23 . . . *This was* to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

This is puzzling for at least two reasons. First off, what does this fulfillment have to contribute to the story? And secondly, where is the fulfillment? Nowhere does the Old Testament say the Messiah will be called a Nazarene. Nowhere. It’s not there. So where is Matthew getting this?

Well, to be called a Nazarene was to be despised. We see an example of this in ► John 1:46, where a guy named Nathanael, upon hearing that Jesus came from Nazareth says,

^{NAU} John 1:46 . . . “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” . . .

Rhetorical question. The thought was that, of course, nothing good comes from Nazareth. The Nazarenes are despicable lowlifes. Nazareth represents everything that’s wrong with people. And that’s exactly where Jesus enters.

Various prophets in the Old Testament foretell how the Messiah would be despised (Psalm 22:6-8, 13; 69:8, 20-21; Isaiah 11:1; 49:7; 53:2-3, 8; Daniel 9:26). Notice Matthew uses the plural term: ► “prophets.” Matthew isn’t quoting any one of the prophets verbatim; he’s simply using the Nazarene figure of speech to confirm what they foretold: Jesus was despised; He suffered just as the Hebrew Scriptures said the Messiah would.⁴ The Lord enters our suffering.

B. Other Scriptures corroborate it.

1. For example, Isaiah ► 53:4 says of the Messiah:

^{NAU} Isaiah 53:4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted.

2. Hebrews ► 4:15 says of Jesus:

^{NAU} Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, *yet* without sin.

God enters our fallen human condition.

⁴ Blomberg, 70; Carson, 97; David L. Turner, *The Gospel of Matthew, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 55.

- IV. God knows. God cares. God enters. And there's a ► fourth thing to know: God redeems. God redeems evil to fulfill His purposes. Rescue is on the way. Jesus is bringing deliverance even when things look hopeless. He is always at work to bring good from bad.

Let me show you. Three times in our text Matthew alludes to some fulfillment of prophecy. Each time is a reminder of how God works to redeem difficult, hurtful situations according to His sovereign plan.

The word “fulfill” has a broader significance than just the precise prediction of future events.⁵ It can include parallels and metaphors and types and analogies and correspondence of events that Old Testament writers did not necessarily see in the future, but New Testament writers see in retrospect. “Matthew sees striking parallels in the patterns of God’s activities in history in ways he cannot attribute to coincidence.”⁶

- A. For example, the first prophecy to which Matthew alludes is in ► Verse 15. He connects it with the return of Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus from Egypt to Israel. Matthew says,

^{NAU} Matthew 2:15 . . . *This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON.”*

This is a quotation of Hosea 11:1.⁷ And at first, this is perplexing because in its original context Hosea 11:1 refers clearly and directly to Israel’s exodus from slavery in Egypt which occurred many hundreds of years before Jesus was ever born.⁸ So in what sense was Jesus’ coming out of Egypt a fulfillment?

Here’s the connection I think Matthew has in mind. The greatest saving event of the Old Testament—the liberation of God’s people from bondage in Egypt—was a foreshadowing of the greatest saving event of the New Testament—the liberation of God’s people from bondage to sin through the work of Jesus Christ.⁹ Thus, in coming out of Egypt, Jesus the Messiah fulfilled the imagery begun in the Old Testament. The redemption from Egypt serves as a type of the redemption the Messiah brings.¹⁰

The parallels are striking. You may recall that, on the brink of the Exodus, the people of Israel were to sacrifice a lamb and put its shed blood over their doorways in order to be saved from death. The people were saved by the blood of the lamb. This was a foreshadowing of the ultimate salvation to come through Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. Today, *we* are saved by the blood of the Lamb.

⁵ Carson, 92.

⁶ Blomberg, 67.

⁷ Carson, 91.

⁸ Carson, 91; Turner, 53;

⁹ Blomberg, 67; Turner, 53-54.

¹⁰ W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Matthew, The International Critical Commentary*, vol. I, eds. J.A. Emerton, C.E.B. Cranfield, G.N. Stanton, (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, Ltd, 1988), 263.

In the midst of seemingly hopeless bondage, God redeems.

- B. The ► second prophecy to which Matthew alludes is in Verses 17-18. He connects it to Herod's slaughter of innocent infants in Bethlehem. In the aftermath of the infanticide, Matthew says,

^{NAU} Matthew 2:17 Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: 18 "A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH, WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING, RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; AND SHE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE."

This is a reference to Jeremiah 31:15. And at first, this is perplexing because, in its original context, Jeremiah 31:15 is a direct reference to the deportation of God's people to Babylonian exile and the attendant mourning that occurred hundreds of years before Christ was ever born.¹¹ So in what sense was the Herodian infanticide a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31?

Here's the connection I think Matthew has in mind. In the day of the deportation of God's people to exile in Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah spoke of an abiding hope in the midst of suffering. The context of Jeremiah 31:15 is one of hope in the midst of darkness. In fact, just a few verses later, in Jeremiah 31:31-34, a new covenant is introduced involving the forgiveness of sins. God ► says,

^{NAU} Jeremiah 31:34 ". . . I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

I think Matthew's point in our text is that Jesus is the fulfillment of this new covenant.¹² In the midst of the darkness of infant death in Bethlehem, the Christ child emerges as the Hope of forgiveness for the world.

When Jesus leads His followers in the Lord's Supper, He points directly to Himself as the Forgiver, the fulfillment of the new covenant. He ► says,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 11:25 . . . "This cup is the new covenant in My blood . . ."

In the midst darkness, God redeems.

- C. The ► third prophecy to which Matthew alludes is in Verse 23. I've already touched on it. It's where Matthew says,

^{NAU} Matthew 2:23 . . . *This was* to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

¹¹ Blomberg, 68; Carson, 94; Turner, 54.

¹² Carson, 95; Turner, 54.

1. I've already alluded to what I believe is Matthew's primary point in this verse: Jesus the Messiah suffered.
2. But many scholars believe there's more to it. You see, the original Greek word Matthew uses for ► "Nazarene" is a homonym for the Hebrew word, "branch." They sound alike. Remember Matthew's original audience was primarily Jewish. They were bilingual Jews who knew Hebrew and would be hearing Matthew's gospel read to them in Greek. As the words "Nazarene" and "Nazareth" were pronounced in Greek, the Hebrew-speaking Jews would be thinking, "Hey, that sounds just like 'branch' in Hebrew."

You say, "So what?" Well the metaphor of the branch was a big deal to Jews. This may be a literary device¹³ Matthew uses to point to the well-known "branch" of Isaiah 11, which was and is generally considered a Messianic prophecy by Jews.¹⁴ Isaiah ► 11:1-2 says,

^{NAU} Isaiah 11:1 Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit. 2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him . . .

The branch signifies a king of David's line—a branch from David, the son of Jesse. As such, Matthew may be pointing out that Jesus is the king of David who will resume the broken royal lineage and establish His everlasting kingdom.¹⁵ There is a new beginning in the royal house of David.¹⁶

Once again there is hope in the midst of brokenness. God redeems.

So, what do you do when Jesus comes into your life, but things get worse? For starters, there are these four big things to know. God knows. God cares. God enters. And God redeems.

- V. But there is a ► fifth thing. It's something we are called to do. You're going to love this. Here it is: ► We wait.
 - A. Waiting is certainly a theme in our text. Remember, Matthew points back to two prophecies relating to the Exodus and the Exile, respectively. Any Jew with a sense of history would recognize in these events the theme of waiting.
 1. Take the Exodus. Before the original Exodus recorded in the Old Testament, the Jews waited for 400 years in Egyptian bondage. After the Exodus, Israel had to wait some more, enduring 40 years of wandering before taking the

¹³ It's called a paronomasia. It's a play on words or a pun.

¹⁴ Carson, 97; Turner, 55.

¹⁵ Blomberg, 70.

¹⁶ Wright, 15.

Promised Land. And Jews would know that, even after the Exodus, things did not always seem better (e.g. Exodus 14:12; 16:3).

2. Then there's the Exile. In the Exile, Israel had to wait 70 years before being liberated. And even after their liberation, things were not all that wonderful. In fact, at the time of Matthew's writing, many Jews probably felt like they were still in a kind of exile, under the thumb of the Roman Empire.

God seems to be in the habit of making His people wait.

B. Other Scriptures bid us to wait for the day when our liberation will be complete.

1. Psalm ► 37:7 says:

^{NAU} Psalm 37:7 Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him

2. Psalm ► 130:5 says:

^{NAU} Psalm 130:5 I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait, And in His word do I hope.

C. But waiting is not an entirely passive activity. There's something we can do as a big part of waiting.

We can trace God's hand. That is, we can actively remember what God has done in the past for His people and for us individually. To calm ourselves in the midst of hardship today, we can intentionally recount what God did yesterday. To patiently endure, we can deliberately recall the way God has worked in history and give thanks. And so, the big idea of my message is ► this: To calm your heart, trace His hand.

1. In our text, Matthew models the tracing of God's hand for us. He's writing to a Jewish audience for whom life is not easy. Jesus has come and some things have gotten worse. Some Jewish families are fractured, with some members believing in Jesus and others rejecting Him. And Matthew is recounting the story of Joseph and Mary to whom Jesus came and things got worse.

Throughout the text, over and over again, Matthew traces God's hand in history. "This was to fulfill." "This was to fulfill."

To calm your heart, trace His hand.

2. Psalm 77 provides a beautiful model of how this can work. It begins with a poignant heart cry in the midst of suffering:

▶ ^{NAU} Psalm 77:2 In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord; In the night my hand was stretched out without weariness; My soul refused to be comforted. ▶ 3 *When* I remember God, then I am disturbed; *When* I sigh, then my spirit grows faint. ▶ 4 You have held my eyelids *open*; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. . . . ▶ 7 Will the Lord reject forever? And will He never be favorable again? ▶ 8 Has His lovingkindness ceased forever? Has *His* promise come to an end forever? ▶ 9 Has God forgotten to be gracious, Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion?

Have you ever felt that way? Maybe you feel that way now. The Lord has come into your life and somewhere along the line things have gotten worse. What do you do?

It's as if the psalmist remembers our big idea in the middle of his heart cry: To calm your heart, trace His hand. And so, he traces God's hand. Beginning in Verse 11, he says,

▶ ^{NAU} Psalm 77:11 I shall remember the deeds of the LORD; Surely I will remember Your wonders of old. ▶ 12 I will meditate on all Your work And muse on Your deeds. ▶ 13 Your way, O God, is holy; What god is great like our God? ▶ 14 You are the God who works wonders; You have made known Your strength among the peoples. ▶ 15 You have by Your power redeemed Your people . . .

To calm your heart, trace His hand.

D. How ▶ could you trace God's hand this week?

You may say, "Well, I don't need to. I'm not really in a bad way right now." Good for you. I don't mean to be a killjoy, but stuff is going to happen. I'm not being prophetic; I'm just being realistic.

Tracing God's hand is just as valuable in preparing for hardship before it comes as it is for coping in the middle of it. Everyone can benefit from tracing God's hand.

Let me give you some applicational ideas to prime your pump.

1. Maybe instead of starting a new "My Photos" album, you could start a new "His Hand" album. Instead of five-by-seven glossies, you could gradually put in three-by-five cards with a date and a brief, specific explanation of how God provided for you and your family. Then you could periodically sit down and go through the "His Hand" album, giving thanks.

2. Here's another idea. Recently, we threw a party for the first anniversary of sobriety for one of the members of our Life Group. We wrote little notes of encouragement, reflecting on the year. We didn't think of it this way at the time, but it was really a "His Hand" party. We were tracing His hand and celebrating.
 3. Maybe this week, you could spend some time alone for the sole purpose of thinking back, tracing God's hand in your life and giving thanks. Maybe you could even jot down the things that come to mind and share them with your Life Group so you can trace His hand together.
 4. Maybe you could think of as many times in history as you can when God saved His people, even when they didn't deserve it. Matthew alludes to the Exodus, so maybe you could start there. Begin reading in Exodus 12 and count up how many times and in how many ways God saves His people in spite of the fact that they are thankless and grumbling. And then you could give thanks that God has been similarly gracious to you.
 5. Maybe you find yourself stuck waiting in the midst of a lousy job or a lousy disease or a languishing relationship. Maybe you could sit down, think hard, and list all the ways you can think of that God has been at work, redeeming your situation, bringing some good from it. And give thanks to the God who knows, the God who cares, the God who enters, the God who redeems.
- E. Last week, we moved back into our newly renovated offices. How refreshing and encouraging the new offices are! I unpacked and hung a framed picture Cathy gave me as a gift. She gave it to me near the end of my seminary education, just a matter of months before we would find ourselves with no money, no home, no job, and no prospects. On the back of the picture, she wrote something prophetic: "Never forget God's faithfulness to us." It was her way of saying: Trace His hand. To calm your heart, trace His hand.