

The Beginning of the End of all the Stories

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 October 2023

Preacher: Joe Hall

- [0 : 00] The new Planet Earth series began last week, Planet Earth 3. If you didn't already know, I love stuff like that.
- If you thought you would never get to see a sea angel eat a sea butterfly, now you can. It's brilliant. But if you watch enough BBC nature series, you start to notice a pattern.
- For all the richness and the diversity of life in sea, sky, and land, it turns out that David Attenborough only has one story to tell.
- There's an animal. We're told where it is and what it does, but it has a problem. It has to hunt for food, or it has to fight, or it has to reproduce, or some combination of those things.
- Then we see them do it. There are winners and there are losers. But there's a bigger problem. Human beings or climate change. Next scene.
- [1 : 08] There's an animal, but there's a problem. They try and fix it. Winners and losers, but there's a bigger problem. Next scene. New animal. Problem. Conflict.
- Solution. Bigger problem. See, watch enough planet Earths, or lives, or blue planets, and you begin to pick up the thread behind the incredible diversity of life on Earth in all its beauty and wonder.
- There's only one story the producers want to tell. One plot they want to draw you into. Now, the question we need to ask with any story that we're told is, is it a true story?
- Is that the plot that drives history? Is that it? Or is there a different story? A different plot? Well, today, Matthew wants to tell us a different story.
- Here is the true story. The real plot that is driving life and history in our world, he says. It is repeated, unfolded through time, played back again and again in the life of a chosen people.
- [2 : 19] Because it turns out that God, too, only has one story to tell. And it is a rescue story. It's a story God has told over and over again in the life of his people.
- It's a drama that's been staged again and again throughout the Old Testament. And now that rescue story is repeated one last time, but this time with a twist.
- Because this is the showdown. The ultimate retelling of the rescue story. This is the beginning at the end of all the stories.
- Just have a look down with me at verse 5. Where would the Messiah be born, says the king? This is what the prophet has written, comes the reply.
- Verse 15. The newborn king goes down to Egypt. So was fulfilled what the Lord has said through the prophet. Verse 17.
- [3 : 24] The king takes his anger out on all the other children. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled. Verse 23. The newborn king comes home again.
- So was fulfilled what was said through the prophet. See, with every fulfillment, what's Matthew doing? He's picking up the thread from different points in the past.

And he's saying, this is where it was all going all along. This is the rescue stories that all the other rescue stories were crying out for. This is the climax and the conclusion of the greatest story ever told.

And the hero of the story is the newborn king, Jesus Christ. And whoever we are this morning, whether we know it or not, we are all part of his story.

If we take nothing else away from this morning other than that, I've done my job. There's a lot going on in this chapter.

[4 : 32] We can't deal with all of it. So instead of going through it bit by bit, we're just going to zoom into it bit by bit as a whole. Last week, you could think of it as standing right up close with a magnifying glass.

This week, we're taking a step back and we've got our zoom lens. And we're going to start in the widest angle and zoom in and in and in and get a closer look at this rescue.

So starting with the widest angle, we see the story retold in the life of Jesus. Now, what's the story? King Herod heard from some important visitors from the east that a new king had been born.

And the king and everyone else is disturbed by this news. Why? It's a rival claim to the throne. And it's interesting, isn't it, the reaction to that news, because the sitting king knows exactly who it is who has come onto the scene.

Verse 4, this is none other than the Messiah, the promised king from God. So he gets the priest to tell him where he's been born. Oh, little town of Bethlehem, they say, just as the prophet said.

[5 : 49] So the king sends the visitors off to find the promised king and report back. And the visitors do find the promised king, but they are warned in a dream not to tell Herod.

The visitors exit the stage. So far, so Christmas, right? But what next? An angel comes to Joseph and tells him to take Mary and Jesus out of the country because King Herod is coming on a search and destroy mission.

So Joseph does it. He obeys word for word. Wake up. Wake up. We have to go. Where are we going? Egypt. Egypt? Get the baby.

The baby? What? We have been warned to run. Quick. We have to go right now. So he took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt.

When the king discovers his plan has been foiled, he is furious. And then the mask falls off. And he is not interested in worshiping this king, is he?

[6 : 57] We see this man for who he truly is as he orders that every two-year-old boy or younger in or near Bethlehem is put to death.

We don't see that horror. But over the town, we hear the inconsolable weeping of the mothers of God's children over those sacrificed to this one man's fear and hatred of God's promised king.

Only when that man is dead does an angel tell Joseph to take Jesus and Mary back to the land of Israel. So again, that is what he does word for word.

He got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. When he hears that Herod's son is on the throne, he fears taking him back and has another dream, takes him to the very outskirts of the land, so that Jesus would grow up to be known as Jesus Nazareth, Jesus the Nazarene.

Now, that's the story. Some of that's familiar. Some of it's not. There's loads that we could unpack. But what Matthew wants us to see about that story, above all, is that everything that happened was not an unhappy coincidence.

- [8 : 21] Nor was it because an evil king messed up the plan. Rather, it was to fulfill what the prophets had written. All is God had planned and purposed and promised.
- Notice that it is God directing this drama. He warns the wise men in the dream. He sends an angel to Joseph. He wrote the script long ago in his word, the scriptures.
- If this is the story God is telling, well, why would he write such a nightmare of a story for his son to be born into?
- Why would his son be the hero of a story such as this? Well, so that the story he has been telling since the beginning of the world would be retold through the life of his son for the last and greatest time.
- What story is that? It's the story where God's son suffers and is sent away because of a king's sin, but is ultimately rescued and returns.
- [9 : 37] Now, where have we heard a story like that before? If you're not sure, that's okay.
- It's said we're struggling with the Old Testament. Matthew's a really good way into it, and it is. Here's the story God tells again and again. He says,
- Are we beginning to see the thread that Matthew is pulling in this chapter? Going back through the Old Testament, those are the three great big episodes, the exile, the kingdom, and the exodus.
- And they are the three very points in history that these prophecies pick up. A son called out of Egypt, verse 15. Well, that's the story of the exodus.
- A ruler born in Bethlehem, verse 6. That's the story of the kingdom. God's family being destroyed, verse 18. That's the story of the exile. But hang on, you say.
- [11 : 40] How can all these stories be fulfilled in this one retelling? Well, close up, we can't see it. But take a step back.
- Zoom right out. Can we see that God has been telling the same story all along? The same family. The same problem.
- The same conflict. The same rescue. It's a bit like asking, Which episode of Star Wars was it where there's an evil superpower, but an unlikely hero discovers a hidden force and goes to fight the bad guys?
- All of them, right? That's the story they all tell. Now, okay, there are differences. That's not all that happens. But if we can't see they follow the same basic plot, we've missed the point.
- So what Matthew wants us to see here is that this episode contains all the episodes that have gone before it. In verse 13, the mask slips, and we see that Herod is the Saul to Jesus David, hunting his life so that the true king has to flee the country.
- [12 : 55] In verse 16, the mask slips again, and we see Herod is the Pharaoh to Jesus Moses, killing all the baby boys so that only one future hope is left.
- In verse 18, the mask slips again, and we see that Herod is all of Israel's wicked kings to Jesus' Israel, bringing suffering on the chosen one through his sin.
- So now, this is the beginning of the end of that age-old conflict, says Matthew, between the power of sin and God's true king.
- This is what is written, said Jesus. This is his summary of the whole Old Testament, listen, that the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.
- That's the story God's been telling, he says, a suffering Savior's victory over sin and rescue from death. So, when Matthew says Jesus is fulfilling what was written, we're not supposed to think he kind of clicked on a link in his scroll in a verse that took him straight to this bit in the life of Jesus.

[14 : 21] Jesus, rather, those verses are gateways into the great big story that God has been telling for all of time. Like when the words Star Wars roll up your screen in great big yellow letters, you don't say, what is a Star War?

Do the stars fight each other? How does that work with the laws of astrophysics? No, you're sucked immediately, aren't you, into the Star Wars universe, the Force, Jedi's, Death Stars.

So with these verses, when Matthew quotes from the Old Testament, we're not meant to ask, well, how does that work? And did the prophets really see that?

These quotes are here to draw us back into the age-old drama of God's rescue in the story of his people. So now, says Matthew, settle in, because God is retelling the story one final, ultimate time in the life of his one true Son and King, Jesus Christ.

Everything that came before him was only the trailer, he says, for the epic showdown which is about to begin between the power of sin and God's true king.

[15 : 46] Now, the Old Testament is still big, and it's okay to find it difficult, and we do. It's confusing. It's dark. But it helps us to know, doesn't it, that the whole thing is there for one reason.

The whole Old Testament is there, says Matthew, says Jesus, as a teaser and a trailer for the coming of Jesus Christ. So, brothers and sisters, when we learn to look for that rescue story, we will learn to love our Old Testament.

Look. Look for the pattern. Look for the promise of the rescue that Jesus brings. Now, what rescue is that?

Okay, we're standing back. Let's zoom in a little bit further and see the promise renewed. Because perhaps you're wondering, you know, if these Old Testament prophecies are just here to tap into the bigger story, aren't there any number of verses that Matthew could have chosen to do that?

Right? Why are these verses especially? Well, they all have something in common. They all come from the prophets. And in their original context, each one is giving God's people hope and a promise of his rescue from exile.

[17 : 14] So, in verse 6, Matthew is quoting Micah chapter 5. 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.

So, the back story in Micah is that God has threatened to send his people away into exile for their repeated and unrepentant sin.

Their enemies would come and take them captive. But here in chapter 5, God promises a rescue through the coming of a king from Bethlehem.

He would rule in the strength and majesty of the Lord and lead God's people rightly. He would defend them against their enemies, and his greatness would stretch to the ends of the earth.

So, through this promised king from Bethlehem, their exile would be over, and his people would instead be rescued from their sin and restored to a right relationship with God.

[18 : 16] What about verse 15? So, he was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, Out of Egypt I called my son. Well, that comes from Hosea chapter 11.

And there the Lord is saying, He loved his people like an only child. He lifted them out of danger. He taught them to walk. But they had grown up into rebellious teenagers who wanted nothing to do with him anymore.

So, he threatens to send them away into exile for their repeated and unrepentant sin. But then he says, How can I give you up?

How can I hand you over? My heart is changed within me. All my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger. And he goes on to promise a day when he would call for them again, and they would come running to him again as they did when they were little.

And so, their exile would be over. He would rescue them from their sin and bring them back to himself. Then, what about verse 18? That's from Jeremiah 31.

[19 : 29] The story will be familiar. A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping in great mourning. But in Jeremiah, this is the one hopeless verse in a chapter that is bursting full of hope.

Rachel, the mother of Israel, is pictured crying because her children were away in exile at this point for their repeated and unrepentant sin.

But the very next verse says, This is what the Lord says. Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, declares the Lord.

They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your descendants, declares the Lord. Don't cry, he says, because soon the exile will be over.

Your people's sins will be finished. And I will restore you to myself. So what's the thread that Matthew's picked up running through the prophets?

[20 : 31] It is a great promise of rescue. In each of these quotes, God is in the middle of saying, Your exile will soon be over because I will rescue you from your sins and bring you back home to me.

In my age-old conflict between the power of sin in you and in your world, me and my king will win and get you back.

See, in telling this story one final ultimate time through Jesus, God is not just replaying the tape and watching repeats over and over.

He's fulfilling his age-old promise to his people to rescue them from their sins and restore them to himself. And so Jesus is not just reliving the story.

He is the climax, the answer, the fulfillment, the conclusion of the story. He's not just another character. He is the hero that we have been waiting for.

[21 : 33] And every time we read, so was fulfilled, so was fulfilled, so was fulfilled, we are reminded that Jesus is living up to his name.

Why was he called Jesus? You will call his name Jesus, said the angel, because he will save his people from their sins.

Friends, the story of God's people is a dark one. And let me suggest, if we don't struggle with parts of the Bible, then we haven't really grappled with it.

What happened that week in Bethlehem is unspeakable, isn't it? The darkness of the power of sin over that little town. If you had lived there, if you had had a baby boy, a baby brother, you would never recover, would you?

We're reminded in our news feed, even the last few weeks, the last few days, that unthinkable sin is not just in the pages of Scripture, is it? It is not all in the past.

[22 : 49] And we know, if we are honest with ourselves about what goes on in our own hearts at times, that we would be terrified for anyone to know. We all come to church, don't we, with perhaps not unthinkable, but certainly unspeakable sins.

Do we realize how desperately we need for these promises to be true? Do we realize how desperately we need God and his King to win against the power of our sin?

Sin is not taking two biscuits instead of one. It is our stubborn defiance and rebellion against God and his Word.

He tells us what is good, and we do the opposite. And the results speak for themselves. What a mess we've made of our world. What a mess we've made of our families.

What a mess we've made of our lives. And so, praise God that what he promised through the prophets has been fulfilled. Praise God that every time his people sinned in repeated and unrepentant ways, he renewed his promise to them to rescue them.

[24 : 06] Praise God that he gave his Word and that he kept it in sending his Son into history. Friends, this is the true rescue story.

And Matthew insists that we put two and two together and see that God's rescue, long promised, is now here because the hero of the story, the yes and amen to God's promises, the Lord Jesus Christ has come.

And so, there is hope for you and me. There is hope for our world because of the newborn King that the power of sin could not destroy.

Whatever is eating away at our hearts this morning, and whatever is going on out there in the world, we have a reason to leave here with hope because in Jesus, God's promise of rescue is renewed for a world and a people under the shadow of sin.

And zooming in one last time, we see gloriously that the rescue has begun. See, as hopeful as those promises are of a rescue from sin, the horror of this chapter reminds us that that rescue back then was still a hope for God's people, not yet a reality.

[25 : 29] There's still a wicked king on the throne. There's still inconsolable weeping over the suffering caused by his sin. The point that Matthew's making is that God's people are back in Jerusalem, but they're not yet back from exile.

They are back home in the land, but they're not yet back home with God. They are still living under the power of sin. They still want to take the life of God's true king. They're still chasing the rightful heir of the throne out of his kingdom.

So how can God save them if they destroy the one he sent to rescue them? Matthew wants us to know that that is exactly how he will rescue them.

Because I wonder if you noticed how Jesus keeps these promises of rescue. By becoming a public enemy. As his life is being hunted.

As he flees the country. See, it's as he's rejected that God's promises are fulfilled. Because it is through his exile that God's people would be brought home.

[26 : 42] As the newborn king is carried in Joseph and Mary's arms out of his home and away from his country, we get the smallest glimpse of what it will mean for him to save his people from their sins.

They will push him away. They will find ways to kill him. They will nail him to a cross. They would send him to die outside of the city with the words hung over his head that announced his birth to the world.

The king of the Jews. How can God save them if they destroy the very one he sent to save them? Well, in God's rescue plan, that is exactly how he will do it.

Matthew makes clear at the very start of his gospel that it will be through Jesus' suffering, rejection and death at the hands of sinners that he will save them from their sins.

Brothers and sisters, if he had not suffered the hatred of the world and the agony of the cross, we would still be living in that same kingdom of darkness under that same sin.

[27 : 49] we would still see him as a threat to be fought against or an inconvenience to be ignored. We could not love him.

We might have worshipped still something that we call God, but our hearts would still be a million miles away from the God who rescues. We might have been sitting in church, but we would still be lost.

Let us never, ever forget that unless he had gone into exile for us, we could not have come home to God. Unless he had been rejected by humanity in God, we could not have come back into God's presence to belong to his family.

Unless he had died at the hands of sinners, we sinners could not live. And so, friends, if your faith and hope are not resting in Jesus today, understand that that is where you still are, lost, living in a kingdom of darkness, rebelling against your creator.

Perhaps it's a very polite and a very put-together rebellion, but it's a rebellion nonetheless. To say to God's king, you are not my king, however nicely we say it, is still treason against the king of kings and the lord of lords.

[29 : 13] Whether we've been in church for a short or a long time, we know our Bible is back to back, or this is the first time that we've opened it. If our trust is not in King Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins and our right standing with God, then we are no closer to God than Herod.

But it was written that the Messiah must suffer. And so he did. From the cradle to the grave to save us from our sins.

So would you put your trust in his rescue? He left his home so that you could come home to God. Come to him today.

Lay down your weapons. Be forgiven of your sins. Come into his kingdom. Worship him as your king. His rescue was begun in the cradle, but it was completed at the cross for all who would trust in him.

Whoever we are, wherever we're from, whatever we have done, he did it to save us from our sins and bring us home to God again. So let's come and worship him as we pray together.

[30 : 31] Let's pray. Once a babe in Bethlehem, now the Lord of history.

Our Lord and our God, we worship you and we thank you for what you suffered in your life, in your death, so that we could come near, that we might be forgiven.

Our Father, we thank you that you have spoken and promised through the ages of a rescue from sin and a becoming king. Lord, your people long for him and we thank you that we know him by name.

Our Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, how we rejoice in him if we know him and trust him. Lord, we love him and we pray, Lord, that we would see that he is the Lord of history, the center, the hero of the story, that we would put all our trust and hope in him.

Lord, for the brokenness of our world, for the darkness of our hearts. Lord, for the sin that still clings so closely. And Father, for those who as yet do not know him personally, how we pray, our Father, that you would shine light into their hearts, that you would reveal Christ to them and that they would find forgiveness in him and come into his kingdom.

[32 : 00] For this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.