

The Incarnation Part 11 - 'The Last Two Prophecies'

by Charles Alexander

The second chapter of Matthew reveals the fulfillment of prophetic scriptures in the life of Christ, including His birth, identity, and early life, and demonstrates the significance of these prophecies in understanding God's purposes and provision.

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1, Isaiah 60:21, Matthew 2:5, John 3:20, John 15:1, Ephesians 2:3

Topics: "Incarnation Of Christ", "Biblical Prophecy"

Description

Charles Alexander delves into the second chapter of Matthew, exploring the prophetic scriptures that foretold the birth and identity of Jesus Christ. He highlights the reactions of King Herod's court to the news of Christ's birth, emphasizing the wickedness of men's hearts and their resistance to the light of truth. Alexander connects the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem to prophecies in Jeremiah and Psalms, revealing the symbolic significance of Rachel weeping for her children and the eventual redemption of those slain. He concludes by unraveling the enigmatic prophecy of Christ being called a Nazarene, symbolizing His humble beginnings and ultimate glory as the Branch of Jesse.

Transcript

We turn again to the second chapter of Matthew, and retrace the most absorbing and instructive quotations which Matthew gives us, as touching the birth, the identity and the early life of our Lord Jesus Christ upon earth. We have observed, on a former occasion, that there are three very significant prophetic scriptures in this chapter connected with the visit of the wise men to Bethlehem, and to the subsequent events which took place.

There are actually four prophetic scriptures in the chapter; however the fourth was not quoted by Matthew, but by the officers of King Herod's court. Matthew's three quotations were his own by divine inspiration. The fourth actually appears earlier in the chapter and was spoken by the officers of King Herod in response to his inquiry about where Christ was to be born. They said (Matthew 2:5-6), 'In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written by the prophet (Micah 5:2), 'And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel'. Now that quotation concerning the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ instantly ascertained, not only the fact of His birth, but also His identity as the Christ. The court in Judea was appraised of the facts by the visit of the wise men; otherwise they would not have known, and neither would it have been publicly

known that such an event had taken place. It was revealed only to a few shepherds who were watching over their flocks by night in the fields near Bethlehem, until these distinguished men came from the east, with what must have been a most imposing train. They were clearly men of wealth and dignity, as their gifts indicated, and the court of Herod was duly appraised by their presence, and by their enquiries concerning a most significant event. Far from filling the court of Herod with praise and joy, the news filled them with apprehension, from which we may gauge the wickedness of men's hearts, and their unreadiness to receive the revelation of God, even when plain prophecies are quoted. So, far from sending them into an ecstasy of worship, it plunges them into the depths of resentment, if not of despair.

You may wonder why men fight against their own hopes and aspirations, why they are so unreasonable, so irrational, as to fight against light, and prefer darkness. But Christ has given us the reason; He says that men prefer darkness to light, because their deeds are evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd (John ch.3, v.20). Thus their wickedness is revealed, and their evil hearts dispose them to hide from light and truth. In such a condition, they will persist till the last judgment. They will not need to hear the sentence, "Depart from me ye cursed," but will themselves be hastening away into the darkness, because still they fear and hate the light. Will that be the appalling fate of any of us here? God grant that it may not be so; but the solemn warning is there.

In the whole history of men, even in their best and most favoured conditions, as they were in Palestine and Judea at that time, the only spot on the face of the earth where the true light was shining, where the Word of God was being read and, by some faithful men at least believed and expounded, was in the synagogue and temple. Zacharias, father of John the Baptist, was a priest of the Holy Temple of Jerusalem, and he waited for the hope of Israel. He was a prophet himself and received the gift of prophecy. Where there was one, there must have been others; there must have been many hidden ones in Israel. But, for the most part, people were given up to the evil and the blindness of their own sinful hearts, and because of this they did not recognise the Saviour when He came, nor when the scriptures were quoted, nor when the word of God was expounded to them, nor when the evidence of signs and wonders was presented to them; still their hearts remained the same. Only the miracle of divine mercy and grace can change the heart, revealing the truth concerning ourselves: the darkness of our hearts, and the appalling nature of our own condition without Christ. It is only when this light shines in its all-revealing and all-gracious power to redeem, to revive, to restore, that a complete change is wrought within, and we come to the light. Then we desire the light and we long for deliverance, even the forgiveness of our sins. So when they heard that the birth had taken place, and that it was verified and sanctified by the prophecy of Micah, they believed the prophecy; but they did not believe the event, which in itself was prophetic.

We have already dealt with the first of Matthew's three quotations: Out of Egypt have I called my son. Now we proceed to the second: the destruction of the babes of Bethlehem, an appalling massacre, perpetrated at the command of Herod the king in order to obliterate, in one awful act, the life of the babe who had been born of David's line. Unknown to Herod the child was already in Egypt, or well on the way, and it was some time before it was discovered that the wise men had not returned.

Matthew's second quotation (ch.2:17-18) refers to the prophecy in Jeremiah: Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, 'In Ramah was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not'. You will find that this New Testament quotation is almost in the same order of words as in the Old Testament. If there is any difference in the quotation, it is only because of the translation from the Hebrew into the Greek language, and from Greek into English, but the meaning is the same.

Jeremiah says (ch.31:15), Thus saith the Lord; 'A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel (a alternative spelling for Rachel) weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not'. Jeremiah's prophecy continues in verses 16 and 17, but it was not quoted by Matthew: Thus saith the Lord; 'Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears; for thy work shall be rewarded,' saith the Lord; 'and they shall come again from the land of the enemy.

And there is hope in thine end,' saith the Lord, 'that thy children shall come again to their own border'. Now prophecy is enigmatic; it seems so clear as far as it goes, but as soon as you begin to examine it, you will find that Rachel was not there anyway to weep for her children, and in the second place you will find that they were not Rachel's children at all, but Leah's. Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rachel; Leah was the first wife and Rachel, her younger sister who was intended to be the first wife, was the second because Leah was substituted by her father.

We are familiar with the story from Genesis: Rachel had no children, but Leah had several, who were born in this order: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; and out of Judah came David's line, and the inhabitants of Bethlehem. Rachel, later on, had two children, Joseph and Benjamin, but the babes of Bethlehem were not Rachel's descendants; they were descendants of Leah, and were of the tribe of Judah. Why then does it say, "Rachel weeping for her children"? It is because of whom Rachel prophetically represents; she represents not only the children of Leah, but all twelve tribes of Israel.

Prophetically, Rachel is Israel, and so her two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, come into the picture. We read in Psalm 80: 1-2: Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that ledest Joseph like a flock; thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth. Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh stir up thy strength, and come and save us. Now these names are significant; Benjamin is, of course, Joseph's younger brother; Ephraim and Manasseh are the two sons of Joseph, and they were permitted to form a tribe each, so Joseph was represented in Israel by two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh, and with Joseph is incorporated his younger brother Benjamin.

Joseph and Benjamin were children of Rachel, not of Leah, and hence it is that Psalm 80, which has to do with God's purposes for Israel, is a psalm which is written around the drama of the life of Rachel's two sons. Special distinction was accorded to Joseph in his father Jacob's last blessing upon his death bed. This special distinction was accorded to Joseph, the one who was separate from his brethren, the other ten sons of Jacob, and was despised and rejected by them. We know that this was a type of Christ, who was despised and rejected by his brethren of Israel, and yet comes again to power in the land of Egypt, which is typical of all the gentile, heathen races of the world, where Christ has His seat and where the great triumphs of His gospel have been recorded.

Not in Israel but in Egypt, and what Egypt represents of the great heathen nations of the world, in heathen darkness from the foundation of the world, at any rate since the days of the flood. But now their day has come; "Out of Egypt have I called my son." And so Christ has to go down into Egypt as a babe, there to be nourished, and there to be identified; just as Joseph went down into Egypt. Joseph's body was brought out of Egypt many years after his death, his bones being collected in the Egyptian sarcophagus in which they lay and carried faithfully by the children of Israel, particularly by his descendants in his own tribe. They were interred, in due time, in the promised land as a symbol that he must come up out of Egypt, he who went down into Egypt because of the unbelief of his brethren.

Now you see how enigmatic is prophecy, and sometimes it is very difficult until you are acquainted with the whole of the history, to understand what is going on. So we return with this information to the eightieth psalm, and we find that, although Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh, that is the tribes of Joseph and Benjamin, the children of Rachel, are in view, they represent the whole of Israel, as we shall see. Now there is another identification of Rachel weeping for her children; when Benjamin was born Rachel died. It is written in the account that when they came to a place called Ramah, Rachel had hard labour. As her life was passing away, the midwife said to her, Thou shalt have this son also, and with her dying breath Rachel called him Benoni (the son of my sorrows); however, after she had passed away, Jacob called him Benjamin (the son of my right hand). Why did Jacob alter the name? Because he was a prophet. Here we have it in the 80th Psalm, and verse fifteen: And the vineyard which thy right hand hath planted, and the branch that thou madest strong for thyself. Benjamin, as we have already seen, means "the son of my right hand," and here in this verse it is the right hand of God. Verse seventeen says, Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand (that is Benjamin), upon the son of man (Jesus Christ) whom thou madest strong for thyself. Clearly in this verse, the son of the right hand (Benjamin) is none other than Christ, the son of man.

Now Israel did not know this as they sang this 80th Psalm continually in their services. In the chanting of the Levitical priests in the temple, and in the chanting of the people later on in the synagogue, they were familiar with Psalm 80, but they did not perceive that Benjamin is another name for Christ, the son of my right hand. Whose right hand? The right hand of God; He is the power of God, the son of man, the son of my right hand. Psalm 80 describes how the vine which came out of Egypt, namely the tribes of Israel, planted in the promised land, flourishing for so many centuries, is at last destroyed. Psalm 80:12-17: Why hast thou then broken down her hedges, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her? The boar out of the wood doth waste it, and the wild beast of the field doth devour it. Return, we beseech thee, O God of hosts: look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine; and the vineyard which thy right hand hath planted, and the branch that thou madest strong for thyself. It is burned with fire, it is cut down: they perish at the rebuke of thy countenance. Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself. And now you see the gospel beginning to appear; Israel falls by the wayside, the earthly vine has perished, but the true vine takes its place. Christ quotes from this and other passages in the Old Testament, when he says, in John 15:1-2: I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. The true vine is Christ in the gospel; the true kingdom is Christ's kingdom. Israel perishes, passes away, but mysteriously Rachel's children live again in the gospel, as we have read in Jeremiah: Thus saith the Lord; 'Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears; for thy work shall be rewarded', saith the Lord; 'and they shall come again from the land of the enemy'. They are the mystic, spiritual children of Rachel, for she died and was buried in Bethlehem where Christ was born. Though He was not of her line of descent, never-the-less the mother of Israel, representing Israel in herself, lies buried there until this day, at the spot where Christ was born, where David was born. It became known as the city of David, and because Christ was born there, the children of that part, who prophetically were Rachel's children, were murdered by the enemy. But they shall come again, those innocent babes, called again from the grave.

Again the enigmatic prophecy, as we are brought from death unto life by the power of the Redeemer, we who were once slain by the hand of the cruel enemy, who lay in the graves of sin and death. Ephesians 2:3-5: We were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ (by

grace ye are saved). He who went into the grave from the cross, to conquer the grave, comes forth again and has His youth, even as the morning dew, and brings again His people from the ends of the earth.

Now you see why Matthew was inspired to quote in connection with the slaying of the innocents: the lamentation and great mourning; Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted. She passed away from this life in tears, sorrow and sadness, because she would not live to see Benjamin, would not live to hold him in loving arms, to nurse him and see him grow up to manhood. But be of good cheer Rachel; thou art in Heaven, thou art Israel, thou art a mother in Israel and thou hast thy reward already, and the unspeakable reward in the glory which is yet to be when all thy children shall be gathered together again, and you shall see not only Benjamin and Joseph, but those whom they represented, who have been brought again from the land of the enemy, quickened to immortal, eternal life by the grace of Him who was born within sight and sound of thine own sepulchre, and died to redeem thy children and bring them again to everlasting life.

So our passage in the second chapter of Matthew concludes with that other prophecy: And He came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, 'He shall be called a Nazarene'. One brief word concerning Christ being called a Nazarene: nowhere in the prophets will you find the words, He shall be called a Nazarene. Matthew is quoting the effects of what all the prophets have spoken, for he does not say 'that which was spoken by the prophet', but 'by the prophets'.

That is, the burden of all prophecy is that Christ should be called a Nazarene. Why should He be called a Nazarene? What does it mean, "He shall be called a Nazarene"? Is He called a Nazarene merely because He lived in Nazareth? Or was Nazareth called Nazareth because Christ was going to live there, and received its name on that account, centuries beforehand? The latter is true; Nazareth takes its name from Christ, not Christ from Nazareth, because the name Nazareth is "nazar" which in the Hebrew means "a branch".

Remember that in Psalm 80 the word occurs in verse 15: "And the vineyard which thy right hand hath planted, and the branch that thou madest strong for thyself." Now the word in Psalm 80 is not the same word which we have in Nazareth (nazar); it is another word which means precisely the same. It means a bough or a branch, an off shoot from the stem of Jesse, a descendant of David. But it means more than that; it means something which begins in an insignificant and humble way, obscure, unnoticed, unrecognised, and, wonderfully, we have this selfsame word in the prophecy of Isaiah (11:1-2): And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots; and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

Isaiah goes on to predict the nature and wonder of His kingdom and reign, and the matchlessness of His righteous judgment. All creation, mankind included, would co-exist in perfect accord and harmony. Isaiah continues (12:9-10): The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious. This is the very essence of the gospel !

In that first verse of the prophecy we read, A Branch shall grow out of his roots. That word branch is "nazar", from which the name "Nazareth" is taken. It occurs again in Isaiah 60:21 : Thy people also shall be all righteous: they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified. Christ, then, is the "Branch", the "Nazar", and His people, therefore, are branches

because they are in Him. Jesus said, "I am the vine; ye are the branches."

In effect, it is as if Jesus is saying, "I am the parent stem; I am the great bough, like Joseph's bough which grows over the wall; so great is the strength and might of Joseph's tree. I am Joseph who was separate from his brethren. I am this great bough which began so humbly and meekly. I am the Branch which grows out of the root of Jesse, and ye, my people, are also the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified." And so, enigmatically, He shall be called a Nazarene.

He was called a Nazarene firstly because He was associated with Nazareth, but that is only the surface meaning. More importantly, it is because He is the Branch of prophecy, the insignificant shoot which comes out of the main stem of Jesse, the royal line of David, unnoticed, unhonoured and undignified in His appearing. But from so small a beginning, He who was despised and rejected of men, separated from His brethren, becomes the Branch which flourishes to the glory of God, and wherein is to be found the only means of perfect peace and eternal salvation.

Now you see that the second chapter of Matthew is no ordinary chapter, and that Matthew was no ordinary historian; that the inspired Matthew knew what he was saying. He did not enter into a full explanation of what it all meant and how it related to other scriptures which were divinely inspired. Rather, he wisely provided the means whereby succeeding generations could look beyond the surface meaning, and, by searching and enquiring, arrive at a full understanding of God's purposes and provision. When we have made the discovery, the wonder of it dawns upon us and we say, "How great is our God! How glorious is our Redeemer!" We can rest in Him with confidence, He who is the "Branch" from heaven which can never be destroyed, and through which we can become subjects of an everlasting Kingdom.

Amen.

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