

The Opposite of What You Prayed

When Mary found out she was pregnant with Jesus she prayed, *“He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.”* Luke 1:51-53

Just a year or two later Mary found herself living in what seemed to be the exact opposite of her prayer. King Herod was furious with the quiet rumblings that a Messiah had been born in Bethlehem. He ordered the systematic slaughter of every infant and toddler boy two years old and younger. Mary, Joseph, and toddler Jesus only escaped because of an angel’s intervention in the middle of the night. They woke up, grabbed what they could carry, and fled to Egypt. (Matthew 2:13-19)

No food. *The hungry were not filled with good things.*

No time to say goodbye to friends or family. *It was not the proud who were scattered, it was Mary, Joseph, and Jesus who were scattered. They became refugees in a foreign land, a foreigner culture, with no family, no resources, and no knowledge of when they could ever return.*

The lowly were not lifted up. *Toddlers lives in Bethlehem were ended. Their parents wailed in rage and grief at a king whose power they could not defy.*

Herod was not cast down from his throne. *He retained his power until his death. His son Archelaus then took the throne and remained a threat.*

Sometimes our prayers go that far off the rails. It literally feels like we are living the exact opposite of what we prayed. How could thing have gotten so far off course? How did this happen? We pray with faith. We live with courage, and everything falls apart. We escape by the skin of our teeth. We find ourselves trying to survive and wondering how it ever came to this. In the darkness we enter a land we do not know. Tomorrow becomes uncertain. We don’t know who we can trust. We don’t know where to turn. We wish we could just go back. There’s no way to make sense of any of it.

3-5 minutes: The picture depicts Mary and Joseph as refugees fleeing in the night. Jesus is barely visible in Mary’s arms. A stranger holds a light as they flee King Herod, holding close to the walls. Find yourself in this picture. Have you ever lived through the opposite of what you prayed? Does it ever felt like everything has gone completely off the rails? What did you lose? Focus on the stranger holding the light. As you think back, can you notice any interventions, any guiding lights, any anomalies that helped you survive? Is there any possibility that in some way your prayers might still be fulfilled? Where is God when the opposite of our prayers happens?

Open Reflections: Share about your experience of listening to God through this picture.

“Flight into Egypt.” By Henry Ossawa Tanner. 1923. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Margeurite and Frank A Cosgrove Jr. Fund, 2001.