

## THE LIGHT STILL SHINES

### *SERIES: THE BIRTH OF CHRIST*

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In this series we're studying the story of Jesus' birth in the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew's narrative ancient promises and hopes are fulfilled. The heavens speak of a Ruler for Israel. King-makers arrive with remarkable gifts. And finally, as we will read in the text before us, the undeserving die, foreshadowing the cross looming in the future.

There is a hard, violent side to the Christmas story. In order to tell the story honestly, in our last study on the birth of Christ we are going to read of the execution of innocent, undeserving children at the hand of a cruel tyrant. It has often been observed that the violence at the beginning of Jesus' life anticipated the violence at the end. Those who hated him hoped to kill him in his infancy. Their hope was realized later. We can't tell the Christmas story fully without telling the conclusion. Jesus' enemies did finally kill him—but not as a victim. Death was at the time and place of his choosing.

There is a related scene in the Revelation of John, who sees stages of history in cosmic, vivid pictures. "Another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born." (Revelation 12:3-4.)

It is part of the story that our Lord was sent into this world from his Father with a death sentence. The Son was born to fight the greatest battle, to conquer sin and death. He gave himself, stood in our place, so that death wouldn't succeed in destroying us.

We're going to consider a story of vulnerability and a story of cruelty in Matthew 2. I hope this text will sober us. It's good to be sobered a bit at Christmas, to go beyond shallow merriment and to look in hope at things that are important, to fix our eyes on what lasts forever.

Let's first consider the flight of Joseph, Mary, and the Baby to Egypt, a dangerous journey taken to escape from a tyrant. The second story is that of Herod's violent actions after the Magi fail to return to him.

#### **A command to escape**

The story of the flight to Egypt is told in Matthew 2:12-15:

**And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, [the Magi] returned to their country by another route.**

**When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "and take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."**

**So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where**

**he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”**

This young husband and wife have traveled to Bethlehem under extreme, difficult circumstances, late in her pregnancy. They are very poor. They are given no place for the Child to be born (Luke 2:1-7). They have already suffered a good deal of hardship. Now, some weeks after the Child is born, they are told again of another trip they must take, running for their lives from Bethlehem and its environs to Egypt. They embark in the middle of the night on an arduous and dangerous journey. We're not told of anyone who was there to support them—no caring circle of family or friends. There's no description of a welcome for them in Egypt. Remember, too, these are first-time parents, with the normal worries and uncertainties.

Let me point out two helpful aspects of the angel's direction to Joseph. First, he predicts events before they happen. Herod doesn't yet know that the Magi have taken off without checking in with him, that he has been outwitted. He will be furious and act to kill every baby boy in Bethlehem, but that brutality hasn't begun yet. The God who cares for us doesn't have to wait until something bad happens and then scurry around trying to deal with it. He acts with knowledge of the future, and he can be trusted. We observe, too, that prophecy is fulfilled in the flight to Egypt. It's clear that this development with Herod is not something that catches the Lord by surprise.

Our lives are like this journey to Egypt. We know the promise of God that he will complete what he has begun in us, that we are part of some plan that is bigger than ourselves. We know that he has promised to make us like his Son. But very often the next stage of the journey doesn't look that way at all, does it? It looks dangerous and chaotic. We're clearer about the tyrants who issue threats than we are about the Lord who promises protection. The Christian life has hardships, regrettable failures, confusing stretches of wilderness, circumstances that have no explanation. But in all of that, God is redeeming and remaking things. He has a good end in mind.

The tyrant doesn't win. He means to destroy the life of this Child. He wants to inflict tragedy without hope. But he is not permitted to do so. Sometimes in our lives there are tyrants, threats, awful words spoken against us. Sometimes the tyrant is something like cancer. It may be loneliness or financial chaos or personal weakness. Tyrants threaten destruction from which no good can come. But they don't win. This family is protected, and Jesus does not die as a victim. He fulfills his mission. And God will fulfill the plans he has for us, complete the work he has begun in us.

Let's now examine Herod's place in these events.

### **An opportunity to repent**

Notice that we are told in the text what Herod thinks and feels, given access to his emotions. We know the plans he makes and the actions that he takes. Matthew has drawn Herod in some detail in this text—for good reason.

Matthew 2:1-3 sets the scene:

**After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”**

**When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.**

Herod's story continues in verses 16-23:

**When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:**

**“A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.”**

**After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.”**

**So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.”**

Herod was known among his contemporaries as Herod the Great. He is called King Herod here, and he reigned in Palestine, but he was not a Jew, and he was not independently a king. Herod was brilliant and politically astute. He won the favor of the priests and other leaders among the Jews, mostly by buying them off, particularly with his rebuilding of their temple.

In Herod's lifetime Rome underwent revolutions and battles for sovereignty. Herod ingratiated himself with each successive leader, so that he continued in power for an extraordinary length of time. He erected not only the Jerusalem temple but other magnificent structures including public arenas and aqueducts, great public-works projects that are still in evidence today. But he was also ruthless. One commentator uses these three adjectives to describe Herod: capable, crafty, and cruel. He killed every rival. He fought off insurrection, assassination, revolution. He died of old age, which was almost unheard of in that time and place. Among his rivals were his own wives and children, whom he killed without compunction at various points in his career. There was a saying about Herod in his own day: “It is better to be Herod's hog than to be his son!”

The world system in every age rewards competitors like Herod. People with Herod's ability and drive are called great today as surely as he was called great in his day. People who can override their conscience, who are smart and aggressive, who refuse to lose, who will pay any price, who respect no boundaries, end up on the top of the pile.

But consider the point in history at which we find ourselves in Matthew 2. Jesus was probably born in 5 or 6 B.C. We know Herod died in the spring of 4 B.C. When the events of this story took place, he was an old man near seventy. He died of an illness, and the illness had lingered for some time before he died.

Herod must have suspected he was nearing the end of his life when he was visited by these remarkable travelers from the east, visitors with a disturbing question: “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

If the stars were indicating that there had been an important birth, then God had to be involved. The phrase “born king of the Jews” was also frightening. Herod had been given the title “king” by Rome. There was no possibility of anyone being born a king—except that David had been made king by God, and David was to have a son someday who would be born king of the Jews—the Son of David, the Messiah who was going to change everything. If the Magi had come and said, “Where is the rival king of the Jews?” that would have been hard enough to hear. But to hear that this One was the King from the day of his birth meant that the ancient promise was being fulfilled. And Herod knew that.

I believe that Herod was being given an opportunity to repent. The Magi didn’t need to approach Herod. We read later that the star, in some peculiar way, actually came to rest over the very house where the Child was. If they had just kept following the star, they would have eventually found their way to him. But they entered Jerusalem, and they spoke to Herod. That gave Herod and the spiritually bankrupt scribes and priests in Jerusalem an opportunity. They could repent, cry to God for mercy.

Remember Charles Dickens’ great story *A Christmas Carol* (1). It’s the story of a flint-hearted old man, Ebenezer Scrooge, whose deceased partner Jacob Marley pays him a visit, dragging a very large chain. When Scrooge asks about it, Marley replies:

“I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to *you*?...Or would you know...the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and as long as this seven Christmas Eves ago. You have labored on it since. It is a ponderous chain!”

These Magi arrive in Herod’s palace a little bit like Jacob Marley’s ghost. Herod was near the end of a wicked life, and their question represented a final opportunity to let God strike off the chain he had forged.

Two interesting statements are made in this text. The first one is in verse 3: “When Herod heard this *hewasdisturbed...*” (Italics added). The word “disturbed” in the Greek describes the way water is roiled by some kind of stirring motion. He was shaken, frightened, challenged by what he heard. And he was presented an opportunity in being shaken. Then in verse 16 it says, “When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and *hegave orders tokill* all the boys in Bethlehem...” (Italics added). He made a choice to be the way he had always been, to kill rivals, to promote himself and only himself, to destroy, to deceive.

Jacob Marley talked about the chain that he would drag for eternity. And in verse 19, we’re told that Herod died, just a few months after he ordered the execution of the children. He entered eternity with the blood of these children on his hands.

Jesus told a parable of a rich man who had so much, he planned to build bigger barns to hold it all. But God spoke to him: “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” Jesus adds, “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:16-21.)

The facts of death and of our accountability for the way we live are here at the beginning of the Christmas story. It’s the story of One who came to do battle with the forces of death. This little Baby

would fight for us and would absorb for us what we deserved. The battle began from almost the first moment of his life. And it's a battle that he would win for us. He would break the power of tyrants. "Born that men no more may die," the carol says (2). What a great promise of the birth of Christ! We will miss what is deepest about this season if we don't look from the manger to the cross, and from the cross to the empty tomb and the shout of victory.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5, NRSV.) The darkness *cannot* overcome it.

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(1) Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 1843.

(2) Charles Wesley, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*.

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