

The King Pursued

Matthew 2:13-23

Introduction

Someone has said; “Pray for your enemies, after all, you made them.” We can tell a lot about a person by both their friends and their enemies. King Jesus has enemies. Before the age of two an assassination attempt is made on His young life. Matthew will bring up the reoccurring theme of hostility toward the King. Repeated attempts will be made to destroy the King and yet the Lord God will repeatedly protect and care for the King. Joseph was warned about the plot against Jesus in a dream (v.12); and Matthew will describe Herod’s attempt to destroy the Child (vv.13-18). With the death of Herod the Great a new danger comes from Archelaus the son of Herod and ruler of Judea (vv.19-23). Herod’s fear of the truth and fight against the truth will end badly. Herod like all predators used deception and depravity to further his ends; but in the end his life-style spells certain defeat.

The Reason’s For The Journey (vv.13-15)

Matthew 2:13 (NKJV) 13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.”

The reason for the journey include to flee the wrath of Herod and to fulfill the words of Hosea (11:1).

The Lord warns Joseph in a dream. Remember that a warning is a caution concerning an action. God warns us of opposition. God also warns us to be obedient when faced with danger. The angel tells Joseph specifically to flee to Egypt. Our word fugitive comes from the word ‘flee’. Clearly the Lord could have preserved their life in Bethlehem. God could have teleported them to Egypt or anywhere else for that matter. He could have stationed angels to protect the Child. But an angel of the Lord speaks to Joseph (not Mary!). As a family they obey the Lord. Egypt’s border is about 75 miles south of Bethlehem. Egypt is beyond’s Judah’s border and Herod’s jurisdiction. Joseph may have used some of the gifts of the wise men to finance the journey. Most important, if God commands or warns you to do something; the Lord will make the provision to accomplish that task. When we are faced with opposition in our Christian walk; God will warn you. How does the Lord speak to us? God warns Joseph in a dream; the Lord did the same for Daniel and Joseph (son of Jacob) in Egypt. But the Lord is not limited to dreams. The Lord can speak by His Word (Psalm 19:9-11); or His Messenger (for example Paul the Apostle) Acts 20:31; “Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears”. Cornelius the Centurion was warned by an angel (Acts 10:22); “And they said, “Cornelius, the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you.” Sometimes the Lord Himself will warn (Hebrews 11:7); “By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.”

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God warns us and guides us. We may disregard the warning; or ignore the warning; or rationalize to ourselves it's just panic or fear or voices. Are you involved in something or with someone that dishonors God or displeases God? Has God warned you? Proverbs 29:1; "He who is often rebuked, and hardens his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy."

Few words are more unsettling than "for Herod will seek the young child to destroy Him".

But that's the world we live in. We live in a world of predators and perverts. Our children face dangers from unwelcome and criminal contact from those tasked with our care and protection. We can no longer post-pone the conversation concerning the sources of danger and possible abuse.

We sometimes must make an unwanted and unwelcome journey for safety's sake.

14When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt,

Joseph's response is prompt. He goes by night for added protection.

15and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

The Bible often speaks of Egypt a type of the world. God allowed the children of Israel to "escape" to Egypt during times of plague and famine. God had sent another Joseph (a dreamer of dreams) into Egypt to rescue his brethren (the sons of Jacob). Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1; Israel as a nation is a son, but Jesus Christ is God's greater Son.

Matthew sees in Jesus' return from Egypt a picture of Israel's calling from that same country centuries earlier. The Exodus, therefore, was a type of Jesus' return from Egypt with Joseph and Mary. As God had once brought the people of Israel out of Egypt to be His chosen nation, He now brought out His greater Son to be the Messiah (see John MacArthur). God brought His Son up out of Egypt for liberation from slavery and the oppression of sin.

The Retaliation During The Journey (vv.16-18)

16Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.

The easiest way to return East was through Jerusalem. The Magi never came back through town. Herod believed the Wise men had pulled the wool over his eyes. What Herod did not know was that God Himself had intervened to warn the Wise men. They were not simply trying to trick Herod but they were trying to obey God's warning.

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17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:

18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more."

Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience. He quotes Jeremiah 31:15. This prophecy like so many in the Old Testament—appeared to have an immediate fulfillment and a future fulfillment. Jeremiah prophesied prior to the Babylonian invasion. When Nebuchadnezzar did invade Jerusalem, and deported the people, Rama was deportation headquarters. In WWII, Hitler and the Nazi's used train-stations and railroad cars to deport millions of European Jews to the death camps located in Eastern Europe. Families were torn apart, there was weeping and wailing. Imagine the gut wrenching horror as terrified mothers and grief-stricken fathers watch as their children are ripped away from all they know; security, privacy, stability, all gone!

Every Jew in the first century would remember Rama as the exit station of deportation into Babylon. Some of you may remember that Rachel was Jacob's wife. It was in Bethlehem that she gave birth to Benjamin. Rachel died there. Jacob remembered Bethlehem as the place where my beloved wife Rachel died giving birth to my baby boy. It was a place of tears and grief and death.

Now Matthew, by the Holy Spirit, would remind us that Rama would once again become a place of horror, torture, murder and slaughter. Rachel would once again weep, but this time Rachel becomes a type of all Israeli mothers. Babies killed by the sword, babies smashed to pieces, babies ripped from their mothers arms or ripped from their wombs. I am sure that fathers and brothers also died that day, trying to prevent Herod's holocaust. Once again, Rachel is weeping for her children, once again the Jews are suffering outrageous persecutions. One man wants to maintain control of his kingdom, and if that means putting a few score Jews to the sword so be it. One Bible teacher writes; "No longer, "O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie"—but O little town of bedlam, how deep we hear thee cry." Soldiers marching in the streets replaced shepherds running through the streets, and piercing swords through their hearts, or decapitating them—while you are screaming and lamenting without help and without hope. Blood is flowing, babies are dying and parents are weeping. This is not a pretty picture. This is the hard part of the Christmas Story. "Where Jesus went, death followed" (Jon Courson p. 33).

Later in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says (Matt.10:35); "For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.' (36) And a man's foes will be those of his own household.' (37) "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. (v.38) "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me."

This is the part of the Christian invitation that is often left out. We are grateful for forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life. But sometimes there is pain and division and persecution.

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Sometimes friends and family will walk away from you. Sometimes pain and separation are part of the Christian journey. Your friends and family want to dishonor and displease the Lord. If you love and live for Jesus sometimes family and friends will turn their back on you.

When you are serious about Jesus our whole world changes. The old nature must die. Few people think about Bethlehem as a place of death; because it is the birthplace of life itself. Our Lord Jesus Christ. But in the death of our Savior lies hope for all!

The Return From The Journey (vv.19-23)

Matthew 2:19–23 (NKJV)

19Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

Herod died in 4 B.C. “When Herod was dead, the greatest immediate danger to Jesus was over. In his Antiquities Josephus reports that Herod “died of this, ulcerated entrails, putrified and maggot filled organs, constant convulsions, foul breath, and neither physicians nor warm baths led to recovery” (John MacArthur).

Again the angel of the Lord appears in a dream with divine instructions. God made certain that His plans were accomplished.

20saying, “Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child’s life are dead.”

The angel of the Lord tells Joseph to go to the land of Israel, but does not specifically tell him to go to Nazareth. I find this interesting. God uses divine and supernatural instructions, and then also allows the natural circumstances to bring about Joseph’s decision to return to Nazareth (Joseph and Mary’s home town; see Luke 2:4; Luke 1:26).

21Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

22But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee.

Herod the Great had 10 wives and several sons. Herod wrote several wills in his life. In his fourth will he named his son Antipater as the sole heir of the Empire. The young prince was anxious to ascend the throne so he attempted to poison his father. The plot failed when Pheroras, Herod’s brother drank the poison by mistake. Herod imprisoned Antipater and reported the assassination attempt to Augustus Caesar (circa 5 B.C.). When Herod the Great received permission from the Emperor, he executed his son. All this was happening when the Magi showed up asking where is he who is born the king of the Jews!

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Herod became ill and drew up his fifth will. Herod's two oldest sons; Archelaus and Phillip—were by passed for Antipas as ruler in Israel. Soon after Joseph, Mary and Jesus left Bethlehem, Herod the Great ordered the execution of the children in Bethlehem. But Herod's health declined dramatically! Then Herod drew up his sixth will, five days before his death. In it, he named Archelaus king, Antipas Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, and Phillip Tetrarch of Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, Batanea and Paneas. Herod the Great died in the Spring of 4 B.C.

The brothers contested the will, and appealed to Rome. When Archelaus became king, a riot broke out in Jerusalem during the Passover and Archelaus sent troops in and butchered 3,000 pilgrims. While Archelaus was in Rome another riot broke out this time during the feast of Pentecost. Archelaus treated both Jew and Samaritan with utter contempt (his mother ironically was a Samaritan). Because of his oppressive rule, Jews and Samaritans joined together and petitioned the Roman Emperor to have Archelaus removed. Archelaus was banished to Vienna in Lyon (modern Vienne).

Joseph knew this man was dangerous and decided to take his family to Nazareth. But God was using circumstances and common sense coupled with divine direction to accomplish God's plan and will. Wiersbe; "This whole episode is a good example of how God leads his children. Joseph knew that he and his family were no safer under the rule of Archelaus then they had been under Herod the Great. . .Certainly, Joseph and Mary prayed, waited and sought God's will. Common sense told them to be careful; faith told them to wait."

23 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."

Nazareth was not a driving force or vital center for politics, economy or religion. "The word 'Nazareth' literally means 'bean town or sprout town'. We would call it hick town" (Jon Courson p. 41). Isaiah 11:1 tells us that Messiah would come forth as a 'root from the stem of Jesse'. "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets" (plural). The interesting thing about this verse is that no single prophecy says he will be a Nazarene; the expression prophets must mean consensus among the prophets who used the term 'netzer' which means branch or shoot. Perhaps it is a reference to the lowest hanging branch—at first unimpressive—limited fruit—but will become the branch filled with fruit. Several prophets apply the title branch or twig to Jesus (Isa. 4:2; 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5; Zechariah 3:8).

Jesus grows up in Nazareth. His enemies suggested he was born there (John 7:50-52). If they had investigated the Temple records—where Jewish genealogies were kept they would see that they were wrong.

Two things establish the fact that Jesus is King and Lord. His resurrection from the dead and predictive prophecy. Four examples of predictive prophecy are given in chapters 1 and 2.

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1. Messiah would be born a virgin (Matt. 1:23).
2. Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:6).
3. Messiah would live in Egypt (Matt. 2:15).
4. Messiah's appearance would create sorrow and opposition (Matt. 2:18).

There are literally hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament that give overwhelming evidence to establish Jesus as the one and only Messiah. The Old Testament written over a period of 1000 years gives overwhelming evidence that Jesus is Lord. The solid base of credentials will continue to build in the chapters in Matthew's Gospel. Predictive prophecy proves that only the true God, whose knowledge is infinite and whose word is never broken, could orchestrate the family, birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Predictive prophecy assures us that all things are subject to God's sovereignty and divine will. The identity of Messiah will be absolutely known based on His credentials. "I declared the former things long ago and they went forth from my mouth, and I proclaimed them. Suddenly I acted, and they came to pass. Therefore I declared them to you long ago, before they took place I proclaimed them to you, lest you should say, 'my idol has done them, and my graven image and my molten image have commanded them'" (Isaiah 48: 3, 5).

Conclusion

Herod may have experienced some sense of relief that he had eliminated the threats to his rule. But Herod's are still at work. Goodness and innocence is threatened. People who want to retain rule in their own lives remain threatened by the Lord Jesus. Fearful of the truth and stifled by its presence some still resist the Lord Jesus.

Sadly we live in a broken world where perverts and predators are willing to exploit your children; harm your children; destroy your children. We must protect them. We must talk to them; and teach them; and empower them; to distinguish friend from foe.

We have to have the hard conversation about child abduction; sexual predators and internet safety. We have to know the warning signs; the physical signs and behavioral signs. We must know what to do if we suspect our children are at risk. We have to pick the time and the place. We have to have the conversation in a place where children can feel safe. Never ask a child about abuse in front of his or her suspected abuser.

It makes perfect sense that Joseph and Mary will later experience a kind of panic when the young Jesus wanders off on his own and left behind in Jerusalem during one of the Feast Day observances. Careful parents want to know where their children are—what they are doing and with whom. Teach your children how to use the phone and dial 911. Listen to your child when they tell you about someone they have met in your absence. Teach your child to run away and scream if someone is making him or her do something he or she does not want to do. Take photos of your children four times a year.

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Both apostates and apostles pursue Jesus. The one to discredit our Lord and the other to declare Jesus both Lord and King.

But for Herod and his philosophical descendants; Julian the Apostate; Voltaire; Nietche, Sam Harris; Bart Ehrhman etc; they might as well try to drain the oceans or blot out the sun; because the Babe of Bethlehem is now on His Father's throne as present Savior and future judge.

What are our options? Rebel now and remain ruined forever; or return and surrender now; and be saved and honored forever.