

S e r m o n s o n
Matthew

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Matthew 2:13-23

With Study Questions

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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."¹⁴ When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt,¹⁵ and 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."¹⁶ Then 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.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!"*

¹⁹ Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,²⁰ saying, "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."²¹ Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

²² But 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.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" (Matthew 2:13-23).

The Story

The story contained in the second chapter of Matthew goes something like this: wise men from the east come to worship the baby Jesus. Herod, an Edomite, who had been made king over the Jews by the Romans was not particularly excited about this event, nor were the people of Jerusalem. Herod begins to make inquiry of the wise men and his own priests and scribes regarding the time and place of the Christ's birth in order to destroy Him.

The wise men find the newly born King, worship Him and give Him gifts. Herod's true motives are revealed to them in a dream so they depart for their own country another way. Joseph is also warned in a dream to take Jesus to Egypt. Herod, in a fit of rage (something common for him), engages in the stomach-turning massacre of every male child, two years and under, in Bethlehem and all its districts.

Eventually Herod dies and Joseph, in another dream, is told to bring the baby back to Israel. But the new king, Herod's son, is still a danger, so Joseph is warned that he should go to Nazareth.

Three Observations

I will seek to make three observations regarding the story before us—1) How are we to understand all the drama of this event—especially the tragic slaughter of the infants? 2) What does this story tell us about the King and His kingdom? 3) What is Matthew's main point in including this in His gospel?

I. An Orchestrated Drama

The wise men are questioned, and lied to, by Herod, but the angel warns them and they depart another way. Herod seeks to kill the baby but Joseph is warned to flee to Egypt. Herod commits the unthinkable atrocity of killing all the male babies in Bethlehem and its districts but fails to accomplish his treacherous task of destroying the baby Jesus. Joseph is then told that Herod is dead and goes back to Israel but things are still not safe. As one theologian put it:

At Thy birth there was no room for Thee in the inn; and now all Judea is too hot for Thee.¹

One gets the impression that these are not random occurrences. The very weeping of the mothers is prophesied! Does anyone think that it was possible that the Gospel According to Matthew could have ended in chapter two? Is it possible that Herod could have succeeded in killing Jesus? When a playwright composes a two-hour play, is it possible that it might end in the middle of Act One? Why all the drama? The drama is heightened when we read of this event from a celestial perspective in the apocalyptic language of the Revelation.

**And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads.
⁴His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth.
And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. ⁵ She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron (Revelation 12:3-5).**

Let us admit one thing—it is dramatic. History is a drama. At times inspiring, tragic, nerve-racking, horrifying, funny, you name it. No worldview can accept the proposition that history is not an unfolding drama. But is there rhyme and reason to these events? Is there a theme? Is there an author and does He have a set script and purpose for history? These questions are particularly meaningful in light of the appalling story before us. Let us not ignore the unimaginable pain of these households who lost their babies. Let's pursue this.

Atheism's Answer

The atheist must believe that there is no purpose or meaning to history. That Herod had his henchmen invade private households with their daggers drawn is simply the end result of matter in motion—molecules falling through space. He could no more be held accountable for his actions than rain can be held accountable for falling to the ground. Not only is there no purpose for this atrocity—in an atheistic worldview *one cannot even define it as atrocious*. And of course for the atheist there is no purpose.

Theistic Options

But what of the theists (those who believe in God)? How do those who believe in a loving, all-powerful, all-good God handle a story like this? What are our options? Perhaps God didn't know what Herod was going to do. Perhaps God knew but lacked the power to stop Herod. Perhaps God knew what Herod was going to do, had the power to stop him, but (in an effort to respect human freedom) chose not to exercise that power. Perhaps God exercised His full power in ordaining this very event. Any

¹ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Mt 2:13). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

answer given will be some form of what is above. What is most biblical? I will argue that the most biblical answer will also be the most comforting answer.

Open Theism

The open theist says God doesn't know the future with absolute certainty. This is so patently unbiblical that it hardly bears an explanation among Christians. That fact that Rachel weeping is a fulfillment of prophecy indicates that God was fully aware of this event.

The Powerless God

That God lacked the power to stop Herod is also absurd. Would anyone truly argue that the God who spoke the universe into being lacks the ability to put the kibosh on the evil plans of a seventy-year-old Edomite king? Will it not be the testimony of Jesus in this very gospel that He need merely pray to receive the help of twelve legions of angels (Matthew 26:53)?

The Negligent God

The most popular view is that God had the power but simply (in His desire to keep the will of man free) chose to merely allow this event to take place. Therefore, it is asserted, man's freedom is maintained, while at the same time God is exonerated from perpetrating this awful deed.

Upon further examination this position certainly does not exonerate (clear from blame) God (as if God is in need of exoneration) for in God's economy there are sins of omission. Later in this gospel Jesus will make it clear that if you have the ability to help and fail to exercise that ability, you are guilty—we are to feed the hungry and clothe the naked (Matthew 25:42). To walk by them is to be guilty of negligence. Hear the Proverbs:

Deliver those who are drawn toward death, and hold back those stumbling to the slaughter. ¹² If you say, "Surely we did not know this," does not He who weighs the hearts consider it? He who keeps your soul, does He not know it? And will He not render to each man according to his deeds (Proverbs 24:11, 12)?

You could say that God is not subject to His own law. But then, of course, there is no need to exonerate Him from anything. But if God's law (and I believe this is the case) is an extension of His of nature, then positing that God merely *allows* evil to take place does not solve the problem. God could have stopped Herod. To suggest that the answer to the difficulty merely lies in the fact that He chose not to makes God guilty of the sin of negligence.

The Sovereign God

What is the biblical answer? The biblical answer is something we see over and over throughout the Scriptures. It is seen in Genesis 50:20; it is seen in Isaiah 10; it is seen in the entire book of Habakkuk; it is seen in Acts 4:27, 28. In fact one can barely read a chapter in the Bible without seeing the answer to the question—men mean it for evil, but God means it for good. The treachery of Joseph's brother was meant for evil by them but for good by God (to save many people). The king of Assyria was God's instrument in judgment. He meant it for evil; God meant it for good. The cross of Christ was the most evil deed ever performed by human hands; God meant it for good.

There is an architect, there is a design, and there is a purpose. The architect is God. The design is His decree (His plans) and providence (the working out of His plans)

which encompasses every event in history, both good and evil. And the purpose, first and foremost, is His own glory. And yet the Scriptures teach that this does not remove one whit of human responsibility before God.

Men hate this answer. How sad that Christians have come to hate this answer. They prefer to dispose of God's sovereignty rather than trust that He is almighty. In great humility Matthew Henry explained, "God's judgments are a great deep." Oh that today's pop theologians would be granted that humility before the judgments of God! How often we hear the objection the Apostle assumed would flow from our obstinate lips,

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"²⁰ But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?"²¹ Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor (Romans 9:19-21)?

Must God answer us, as with Job, out of the whirlwind? Would we not, like Job, lay our hands over our mouths?

**Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out
(Romans 11:33)!**

Comfort in God's Sovereignty

But is there comfort in this doctrine? What of the heartbroken parents of these small children slain by Herod's thugs? The atheist offers no comfort. The God of ignorance or weakness certainly offers no solace. The negligent God offers only the comfort of knowing that He wasn't the perpetrator and that perhaps he'll make the best of a bad situation. But the biblical answer assures the bruised reed and the smoldering wick of an eternal consolation. How soothing for the soul to know that in eternity we will see that a holy and wise God had a glorious reason for human sorrows. A possible scenario was proposed by one theologian:

And if these babes of yours be now in glory, through the dear might of that blessed Babe, will they not deem it their honor that the tyrant's rage was exhausted upon themselves instead of their infant Lord?²

And what of our sorrows? Are we to think that this is unique to the events surrounding Christ's birth? Would it not be reasonable to assume and will not this very gospel testify (Matthew 10:30—our hairs being numbered) that this divine orchestration extends to the minutia? Is it not glorious for Christians to know that their toils have a just, holy, and eternal purpose and significance? Now we move onto our second point.

II. A Triumphant Kingdom

How early we see the unquenchable success of the King and His kingdom. Herod, with all the power of Rome at his disposal could not dispose of a baby. Though unrestrained by any sense of human decency Herod, in his pursuit, was a bitter failure. It has been said of him.

No, Herod, thou art not mocked of the wise men, but of a Higher than they. He that sitteth in the heavens doth laugh at thee; the Lord hath thee in derision. He disappointeth the devices of the crafty, so that their

² Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Mt 2:18-19). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

hands cannot perform their enterprise. He taketh the wise in their own craftiness, and the counsel of the froward [obstinate] is carried headlong (Ps 2:4; Job 5:12, 13).³

In the chapters to come Jesus will state without equivocation that His kingdom will become a deluge drowning the unrighteousness on the earth. This flood will not be the waters of Noah but the word of His mouth—the gospel. This will be seen in the parables and also in His words to Peter.

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

Herod rapidly becomes an afterthought! The Scriptures merely explain, “Now when Herod was dead...” It is the nature of the Kingdom of God to transcend all opposition. It is like the moon; no matter how many, or how long, or how loud the coyotes howl, it continues in its orbit.

And since the Kingdom of God cannot be extracted from its citizens, this same glorious conquest belongs to all its members—all who have called upon the name of the Lord. It is no wonder that the Apostle Paul endows Christians with the designation,

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Romans 8:37).

He was called Herod the great. He and his kingdom have become ash. His moment of power and glory has now been replaced by an eternity of justice and torment. Men are to take to heart the nature of their true kingdom and the Name of their true King. To whom do you bow?

III. Matthew’s Point

Finally, what is Matthew’s point in conveying this story in his gospel? What are we to learn? The gospels are the good news; the good new that Christ has come to save that which was lost (Matthew 18:11). In Matthew it is emphatic that Christ is the promised King who will bless the world by the advancement of His kingdom. We’ve already seen this brought forth in the His royal genealogy and by what the angels conveyed to Joseph regarding Jesus’ mission to save His people (Matthew 1).

In chapter two of Matthew we are made aware of who Jesus is. Matthew makes numerous allusions to Him as the promised Christ by virtue of fulfilled prophecy—born in Bethlehem, called out of Egypt, His birth accompanied by the tragic death of children, He would be called a Nazarene.

We also continue to learn of the humility of the King. He is not received by the world with gladness and fanfare but with sedition and contempt. His kingdom would not begin via the cataclysmic overthrow of human institutions. Its genesis would be relatively obscure, but as we shall see, it will grow.

Again, the main point of chapter two (if not the entire gospel) is that Christ is the promised deliverer. He has come (as God had promised) to save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; and let them say among the nations, “The Lord reigns” (1 Chronicles 16:31).

³ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Mt 2:16). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Questions for Study

1. How does an atheist account for the goodness, evilness, or meaningfulness of events in history (pages 2, 3)?
2. What are the different options theists (people who believe in God) to explain evil (pages 3, 4)?
3. Does God know the future with absolute certainty (page 4)?
4. Does God have the power to stop evil (page 4)?
5. Does the assertion that God merely allows evil exonerate Him from the evil that occurs (page 4)?
6. Explain the purpose of evil in light of what the Bible teaches regarding God's sovereignty (page 4).
7. Why do you suppose men hate this answer (page 4)?
8. How is this view of God's sovereignty comforting to the Christian (pages 4, 5)?
9. What do the events of chapter two reveal regarding Christ and His kingdom (page 5)?
10. In the grand scheme of the gospel, why do you suppose Matthew includes this story (page 6)?