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The Fearful

Faith. There are various types of faith outlined in the Scriptures. There is what is known as *temporal faith*. This is the faith exercised in most miracles of healings in Scripture (John 11:26). It is *temporal faith* when the thing or event is past for which faith is required. After these events pass there is no longer any need for the faith. There is also what is known as *historical faith*. The demons accept the reality of God, but they do not live according to Him. And thus, while they know that God alone deserves all glory and honor, they nevertheless rebel against this truth. Thus we term their faith, *historical faith*. This type of faith is illustrated in James:

James 2:19, "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble."

There is what is termed *saving faith*. *Saving faith* is the faith that relies upon the work of Christ as the only basis upon which one can stand before God and plead not guilty to violating God's law. This faith is illustrated in Acts:

Acts 16:31, "And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."

And there is what is known as a *practical faith*. *Practical faith* is faith that lives day by day in light of the Unseen. This faith takes God at His Word and lives accordingly. It is that faith that is illustrated in Hebrews 11.

Hebrews 11:6, 13, "But without faith *it is* impossible to please *him*: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him . . . These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of *them*, and embraced *them*, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth."

The rest of Hebrews 11 details men and women who lived day-to-day in light of their unseen God. These are the ones who "died in faith, without receiving the promises, but" it was through faith they saw the promises and welcomed them from a distance.

Of the four types of faith mentioned in Scripture, it is the last that is perhaps the most difficult because there are so many things that can mess it up- one of which is fear. Fear crippled Peter on the waves (Matthew 14:30). Fear scattered all of Christ's disciples (Matthew 26:31). Fear caused one of the disciples to run naked throughout Jerusalem (Mark 14:51-52). Fear moved Peter to deceit (Luke 22:54-57). Fear led the Apostle Paul down the path of violence and persecution (Acts 18:9). Thus, it is no surprise to discover that it was on account of fear that many in the first century entirely missed that first Christmas!

I want us to look at this group of individuals who missed the birth of Christ: the fearful.

The Fearful Reject Christ

Matthew 2:1-8, "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard *these things*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, 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. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found *him*, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also."

These verses detail the activities of a man who, far from being ignorant or negligent of Christ's birth, was well informed! Read again with me Matthew 2:7-8:

Matthew 2:7-8, “Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found *him*, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.”

Herod pretended he wanted to worship Jesus Christ, but this was just a show. Notice also verse 13 and 16:

Matthew 2:13, 16, “And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. . . . Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men.”

For reasons yet unseen, Herod felt threatened by the Christ child. And thus rather than truly seeking to worship Him – as was the Magi's intent – Herod sought His death! Herod missed the birth of Christ – like so many in our day. But why? Why did he reject Christ?

Wise Men

Matthew 2:1-3, “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard *these things*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.”

Unlike the Christmas tradition, these wise men were not kings nor were there three of them. Rather the term *wise men* denotes not so much of a nationality, but an occupation. For example the term is used in Herodotus (Godley 1920, 1, 101, 132) of a tribe of the Medes who had a **priestly function** in the Persian Empire. Daniel applies the word to a class of Babylonian wise men or **astrologers** who interpreted dreams and messages of the gods (Daniel 1:20; 2:27; 5:15). In Acts the term is used of any who practice **magic arts** (Acts 8:9, 13:6,8). And thus, the wise men in this text represent a group of individuals, probably from Arabia or Babylon, who participated in the arts of sorcery and foreseeing. In fact, it is from their name that our words for *magic* and *magician* are derived.¹ As such, the magi in our text would have been viewed as Gentile, pagan priests who practiced sorcery and witch-craft.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they asked the question: “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” (Matthew 2:3). This was a rather provocative statement to make in first century

¹ That is why various translations use the term *magi*.

Jerusalem. From the perspective of first century Judaism this would have assumed that everyone in Judea and Jerusalem would have known about this monumental birth. So that is why they asked this of everyone they saw on the street.²

Jewish theology at the time of Christ expected a Messiah who in fact would be the King of the Jews. And thus, for the magi to pose such a question would have raised many eye-brows! That is why we read that Herod and Jerusalem were troubled. They were in a state of panic! This denotes a deep emotional disturbance and thus refers to terror. Why this panic in Jerusalem?

Matthew 2:4-6, “And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, 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.”

Troubled By Truth

Because the Jews knew the Old Testament and the many prophecies of the coming Messiah, how could they have missed it? Surely these pagan priests are wrong? Could it really be that the Christ is born? Why haven't the Pharisees and Sadducees spoken about this? Has the Messiah truly come? Has he been born?

Now this explains why the Jews would be “troubled” by the Magi's inquiry. But why was Herod troubled? What was Herod's reason for being panicked? Why did he seek the life of Christ? Why did he – and so many like him today—miss that first Christmas? To answer this, you need to know a little about Herod.

There are five different Herods mentioned in the Scripture: Herod the Great (Matthew 2:1-8; Luke 1:5), Herod the Ethnarch (Matthew 2:22), Herod the Tetrarch (Mark 6:14-28; Luke 3:19; 23:7; 13:31), Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1; 10:1-11:18), and Agrippa (the son of Herod Agrippa) (Acts 25:13-26:32). The Herod of this text is Herod the Great!

Herod the Great's Background

Herod the Great came to power in 37 BC, and died in 4 BC. His ancestry was that of Esau – thus in the New Testament he is known as an Idumean (the Old Testament Edomite). Because his father had helped out Rome, the Herodian family was given the right to rule Judea. And yet, this was at the expense of Jewish order, since the Jews in Palestine recognized the Hasmonaeans as the only family qualified to rule Israel. In fact, Herod would spend his whole life seeking to become that which the Jews would never allow to be: King of the Jews.

Herod was known for his public works projects. He built theaters, race tracks, and other structures to provide entertainment for the people. He revived Samaria and built the beautiful

² From the construction of the word saying, the nuance is that the magi asked this of everyone they saw. It is a present participle in the Greek form.

port city of Caesarea in honor of his benefactor Caesar Augustus. He embellished the cities of Beirut, Damascus, Tyre, Sidon, and Rhodes. He built the remarkable and almost impregnable fortress of Masada. And in 19 BC he began the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem which, when finished, far surpassed Solomon's temple in magnitude and expense.

Through the turmoil that existed in Rome throughout his regency, Herod always managed to befriend the “winner” — Caesar, Antony, and Octavian. Hendriksen wrote this about Herod’s political savvy:

Both Antipater and his son Herod were characterized by slyness. They would court the favor of whoever happened to be on top in Rome. As soon as the government changed hands they would immediately change their allegiance and shower their compliments and presents upon the man whom 'until yesterday' they had opposed. (Hendriksen 1982, 158)

During times of economic hardship, Herod was known to give back some of the tax money that had been collected. And during the famine of 25 BC he melted down various gold objects in the palace to buy food for the poor.

And yet, he was also known for his character – or lack thereof. Herod was the consummate politician. He was a man pleaser. He bowed to whoever had the power. As such, though he professed the Jewish religion, he built many pagan temples to gain the approval of the masses. He also was extremely paranoid. As mentioned earlier, before Herod's reign the Hasmonaeans were the ruling family in Judea. Recall that the Hasmonaeans were the sons of the Maccabeans who in the middle of the second century BC revolted against Greece, and thus established a semi-sovereign Israeli state. As such, the Hasmonaeans were quite popular with the Jewish people. However, because he felt threatened by the Hasmonaeon family, he set out to exterminate them one-by-one. This eventually led to Herod executing his own wife, Mariamne, on account of her Hasmonaeon blood! And yet, the blood letting didn't stop here. Whenever Herod felt threatened, the result was always death for the one thought to be dangerous.

His paranoia led him to have his mother-in-law and his wife's uncle murdered. He drowned his brother-in-law- after which he provided a magnificent funeral where he pretended to weep. He executed two of his sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, in 7 BC. Five days before his death in 4 BC, he executed Antipater — another of his sons. And before his death, he arrested and imprisoned some of the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem (over 100 in all) to be executed upon his death so that there would be mourning in Jerusalem when he died!

Fearing Christ

Now from this it is no surprise to read that when he received news from the magi of this “King of the Jews” (a title that Rome had conferred to him in 37 BC³ and which he proudly flaunted until his death) Herod slaughtered every Judean child two years old and younger in hopes of killing the Christ. WHY? Because Herod FEARED CHRIST!

³ When the Parthians invaded Syria and Palestine they set the Hasmonaeon Antigonus on the throne of Judea (40-37 BC) the Roman Senate, advised by Antony and Octavian, gave Herod the title “King of the Jews.” (Douglas 1962)

At the time of Christ's birth, Herod was probably 69 years old.⁴ Thus, the birth of a king at this age posed little threat to Herod's dominion. Yet, Herod had just spent the last thirty-six years killing, assassinating, and fighting any and all who posed the slightest threat to his dominion. Thus, the declaration of the wise men would have struck a raw nerve in Herod—was this another attempt at dethroning him? F. F. Bruce put it this way:

Any rumour of a rival king of the Jews was bound to rouse his worst fears. This suspicion latterly grew to insane proportions, and in consequence Herod has been remembered more for his murderous outbursts than for his administrative ability. (Douglas, et al. 1963, 479, 481)

Hendriksen wrote this:

[Herod's] cruelty was being constantly nourished by his over-weening egoism and by his morbid distrust of anyone who, as Herod saw it, might aspire to replace him on the throne... He loved *power* more than anything else. Therefore, the least suspicion that someone had arisen who might wish to deprive him of his throne often drew from him the immediate reaction, 'He must die!' (Hendriksen 1982, 162)

And so, Herod missed one of the greatest events in his day—the birth of Christ. Why? Because he FEARED Christ! Christ threatened him. The birth of Christ jeopardized Herod's reign, well-being, power, autonomy, and independence. And thus, this man — and so many like him — missed the first Christmas! Brothers and sisters, how many this day will miss the Christ of Christmas? How many will miss Christ because of their fear of Christ?

You say: I am a follower of Jesus! What is there to fear? How could I miss Christ's birth?

Listen, redemptive history is strewn with example after example of God's children missing God on account of their fear.

In Numbers 12-14, God's people failed to enter the Promised Land on account of their fear. In 1 Samuel 17, God's people under Saul failed to conquer the Philistines on account of their fear. In 1 Samuel 18, Saul forfeited whatever remaining blessings that might have been his as king on account of his fear of David. In Isaiah 7, Ahaz, God's chosen king to care for God's people, lost his kingdom on account of his fear of the northern armies. In 2 Timothy 1, we read of Timothy forgoing his responsibilities as a servant of God on account of his fear.

Is it possible that God's very own people can miss Christ and His birth on account of their fear? INDEED!

But in what way do we — God's very own people — fear?

Is it our fear of eternal judgment? Or is it the loss of our soul? Or do we fear the wrath of God?

For some who do not understand the gospel, these may be typical of their fear — but for the

⁴ Herod was born 74 BC.

Christian, I doubt it! Rather, our fear when it comes to Christ is altogether more subtle. We fear what God may require.

We fear what Christ may do. We fear what will happen if we truly entrust our lives to Him. We fear what will happen to our families, our children, our jobs, our future if we place those in Christ's hands. We fear for our dignity, rights, and sense of security.

And that is why, perhaps, of all church celebrations, Christmas is the most loved and cherished. A baby in a manger is manageable. And thus, we take time off from work to observe His birth. We cancel important events and we may even seek to mystically participate in the purity and innocence of this event. But to allow this baby — this KING of the Jews — to interfere with our career, position, power, ambition, plans, and lifestyle our souls squirm. Dr. John MacArthur put it this way:

Herod's fear was that someone else would take his throne. Lots of people are like him. They won't allow anything to interfere with their career, their position, their power, their ambition, their plans, or their lifestyle. They are not about to let someone else be king of their lives. (MacArthur 1990, 71)

So how do we combat fear in our walks with Christ?

Combating Fear

Combating fear in our lives begins as we recognize three things that are found in John 16.

John 16:33, “**These things I have spoken unto you**, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

Just what are “these things?”

While this phrase references much, it certainly includes trial and tribulation (John 16:18-22). Accordingly let us recognize that trial and tribulation occurs on this earth not because we love Christ, but because this is a fallen world.

So many fear the prospect of service in the Kingdom of God on account of what might happen to them. Listen! You and I are going to endure hardship and trial in this life — not on account of Christ (though that may happen), but simply because this world is fallen.

Secondly, we must recognize that God is in control.

John 16:33, “These things I have spoken unto you, **that in me ye might have peace**. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

Though we live in a treacherous world, only in Christ is there peace. Christ Himself said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18).

Accordingly, let us recognize that though this world is hostile, nevertheless God is in control of all things! When one accepts this truth, all fear will vanish!

Thirdly, we must recognize that God is good.

John 16:33, “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; **I have overcome the world.**”

Truly, all that occurs in our lives is as God has ordained. Yet listen, who is it that has overcome this world? Christ- our good God!

Accordingly, let us love Him and trust Him to work His will in our lives for good! Don't ever forget: Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

Now having recognized these three truths, let us entrust ourselves to God — and all fear will disappear!

1 Peter 4:19, “Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.”

Pilgrim's Progress

John Bunyan recognized this when in his *Pilgrim's Progress* he described the following scene: Christian is climbing the Hill of Difficulty. When he finally arrived at the top, he met two panicked men, Mistrust and Timorous. When Christian saw their state, he asked, “Sirs, what's the matter? you run the wrong way.” Listen to Bunyan's commentary:

Timorous answered, that they were going to the city of Zion, and had got up that difficult place: but, said he, the farther we go, the more danger we meet with; wherefore we turned, and are going back again. (Bunyan 1957, 42)

Oh, family of God! We are so much like Timorous. The blessings and graces of Christ lay in front of us. And yet on account of our fear and timidity we turn our back on God and His graces. Like Peter after the resurrection, our fear drives us back to our former way of living (John 21).

Brothers and sisters let me remind you of truth. That baby born in a manger 2000 years ago was born KING OF THE JEWS! The celebration of Christmas therefore is the celebration of the Reign and Rule of Christ! Thus to reject this reign and rule is to deny Christ no matter how much and often we may profess Him! To bow our knees as the magi and worship this babe is to do so with the unconditional promise of following Him and submitting to His rule. We must live our entire life according to His plan. We must unreservedly dedicate our whole lives to Him!

And yet, let us also realize that as threatening as it may be to follow Christ and entrust all that we are and have to Him that this is our call as believers. We must realize that there is no greater King in all the world. We must recognize that He loves us, cares for us, protects us, and preserves us. Christ desires to work in us performing both His and our good. Indeed! Christ is a

King who demands the lives of all who would follow Him. Yet He also is such a King who will not suffer us to be bereft of any good thing. Rather He desires that whatever we might lose on account of His kingdom, He richly supplies with Christ! (Matthew 19:29)

Jim Elliot wrote these words: “He is no fool who gives us what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Let us this day cast out all fear, and thus truly celebrate the advent of our Savior!

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