

SETTING THE STAGE

Matthew 2:13-23

Why did the Son of God take on human flesh and become a man? There are a lot of correct answers to that question, but First John 3:8 summarizes them all: **The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.** That answer goes back farther into creation history than even the fall of Adam, which came about as direct result of the devil's work.

The devil's works have not yet been destroyed; he continues to be active in our world. But as Martin Luther wrote in "A Mighty Fortress," the devil's doom is sure, because of work of Jesus Christ. As we know, Satan was utterly opposed to the Person and work of Jesus, but when exactly did that opposition begin?

In Isaiah 14 we are given a brief glimpse of Satan's history.

Isaiah 14:12 makes it clear that we are reading about the devil:

12 "How you are fallen from heaven, **O Day Star** [the Latin name "Lucifer"], **son of Dawn!** How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!
(Isaiah 14:12, ESV)

And then we read of Satan's sin before God. The devil, full of pride in himself, made five declarations:

- I will ascend to heaven.
- I will set my throne on high above the stars [angels] of God.
- I will sit on the mount of assembly.
- I will ascend above the height of the clouds.
- I will make myself like the Most High.

In each of these, and especially in the last one, he declared himself to be superior to Yahweh. Because of his sin and rebellion, he lost his place among the holy angels, and was cast down, along with one-third of the angels, whom he had

managed to seduce. He successfully tempted Adam, and all mankind died spiritually. But the Lord promised to send a Redeemer, a man who would rescue His people. For thousands of years Satan did all he could to destroy God's people and prevent the Redeemer from coming through them, but he could not prevent Jesus from being born.

TRANSITION: But now that Jesus had been born, there was a new opportunity, and for once it was very, very specific. All Satan had to do was bring about the death of this Child, and God's redemptive plan would vanish into the dust, His promises would prove to be untrue, the judgment of every last human being would be inevitable, and Satan would be crowned as King of kings and Lord of lords.

THE WISE MEN

Let's look at Matthew 2. When the chapter begins, wise men have come from the east to worship the recently born King of the Jews. They visited king Herod to find out where the Child was. Herod was both paranoid and violent, as I mentioned last week. He found out from the chief priests and the scribes that the Savior was to be born in Bethlehem, and then he had a private meeting with the wise men.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." [This, of course, was a lie; Herod wanted Jesus dead.] **9** After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. **11** And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. **12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod**, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:8-12, ESV)

Herod's attempt at finding Jesus through deception failed.

Psalm 33:10-11 says,

10 The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. **11** The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations. (Psalm 33:10–11, ESV)

This is precisely what we see with Herod. The Father just won't let him succeed. Instead, the will of God moves forward without a single hindrance.

TRANSITION: The Lord didn't just warn the wise men.

JOSEPH

13 Now when they [The wise men.] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream [There is a very small span of time between these two events, less than a day, and perhaps just a few hours] and said, “Rise [That is, wake up and get up], take the child and his mother, and flee [the word implies great urgency: Hurry up, go, go, go!] to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you [As sudden as this seemed, it was fully under God's control.], for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” [“About to” means that Herod was on the verge of ordering the soldiers to Jerusalem at that very moment.] **14** And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt **15** and remained there until the death of Herod [Which took place in 4 B.C.]. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” (Matthew 2:13–15, ESV)

For the first time Joseph is made aware that Jesus' life is in danger. He immediately obeyed God, waking up Mary, packing their things, and starting southwest toward the coast road that would take them to Egypt.

All of this came very suddenly for them, but it was not unexpected to the Father. Not only did the Father foresee this entire sequence of events, He had decreed and prophesied it. In Hosea 11:1 the Father says, **Out of Egypt I have called My Son.** Before Jesus could be called OUT OF Egypt, He had be taken INTO Egypt.

From Joseph and Mary's point of view and experience, it was all very sudden and unsettling. But the Lord's timing was absolutely perfect. What's more, the Father used Herod's threats as the means of fulfilling His Word. Remember, Satan's intention is to destroy the Son of God and His work, but the Father wouldn't permit it.

TRANSITION: This was beyond Herod's ability to cope with.

HEROD

HEROD EXPLODED WITH RAGE.

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. (Matthew 2:16, ESV)

It was not the wise men's intent to trick Herod. Matthew 2:9 says that they listened to Herod's request to bring back Jesus' location. They had no reason to distrust him, and it's possible that they agreed to this plan. Remember, they only left Israel by a different route because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. But Herod took it as trickery; he quickly decided that they were making a fool of him, mocking him, ridiculing him.

He responded predictably: he became murderously angry. If he could have killed the wise men he would have. Instead, he stopped looking specifically for Jesus, and issued a staggeringly brutal order to his soldiers: go to Bethlehem and kill every little boy under the age of two. How hard would it have to been to send someone to Bethlehem to ask, "So, which house did the wise men visit?" Instead, Herod orders the first century version of a carpet bombing. What an unimaginable shock for those families!

But it was also a fulfillment of prophecy, which means that it was not a shocking surprise to the Lord.

17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: **18** “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.” (Matthew 2:17–18, ESV)

This prophecy was spoken in Jeremiah 31:15. If you will take time later to read Jeremiah 31 – and I really hope you do – you will find that the chapter is largely positive and joyful. It speaks of God’s restoration of His people and the overwhelming joy they will experience. It describes the time when the Messiah comes and institutes the new covenant. But it also includes this sobering statement: the arrival of the Messiah will be attended by terrible, wrenching grief. The nation is not just promised a Savior; it is reminded why it needed a Savior in the first place.

Did the slaughter of the innocents have to take place? Yes, it did, just as surely as Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem; just as surely as Jesus had to be pierced for our transgressions; just as surely as Jesus had to be raised from the dead. God never, ever speaks a word and then lets it fall to the ground unfulfilled. The fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15 is a reminder that even the worst sorts of tragedies are fully within the control of our God, and that He permits them for His purposes and glory. If that seems troubling, just remember that it would be far more troubling if our God was not sovereign over all things, and could not prevent at least some things from taking place.

TRANSITION: For all of Herod’s pride and violence, he could not preserve his own life one second beyond the time granted to him by his Creator. He died in the spring of 4 B.C.

JOSEPH

THE FAMILY RETURNS TO ISRAEL.

19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, **20** saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” **21** And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. **22** But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. **23** And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene. (Matthew 2:19–23, ESV)

With the death of Herod and those Herod had charged with the killing of Jesus, the immediate danger was over. When Joseph learned that Archelaus was ruling, it gave him pause; the son was at least as bad, if not worse, than the father. In fact, Archelaus was removed just a few years later because of his brutality and instability. An angel confirmed Joseph’s concerns in a dream, and Joseph decided to head north to Galilee, back to his own town of Nazareth, where all of this had started.

And again we see that this was not accidental, but the fulfillment of prophecy. Now, it’s true that there is not specific prophecy that says that the Messiah would be called a Nazarene. Some have thought that it refers to the Nazirite vow described in the Old Testament, but that is a very different word in the original text. There are a couple of possibilities. Isaiah 11:1 calls Jesus a **branch** of David’s father, Jesse; the word branch in Hebrew is *netser*, which sounds very close to “Nazareth.” Or it’s possible that Jesus would be called a Nazarene because of the low reputation that village had. Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 both describe the Messiah as being scorned and despised. When Philip approaches Nathanael in John 1 and tell him that they have found the Messiah, “Jesus of Nazareth,” Nathanael responds, **Can anything good come out of Nazareth?**, expecting the answer to be “no.”

And again, it is a fulfillment of God's prophetic Word, confirming that Jesus Christ is the promised Son of God.

BRINGING IT HOME

Here are a few thoughts about what we should do with this passage.

First, we must not underestimate Satan's hatred for God and His creation. Satan has not yet been defeated; his activities continue in the book of Acts and the epistles. Revelation 19 describes Satan's final destination: the lake of fire, from which he will never escape or be pardoned. Until then, he remains a very real enemy. Christians have means of protection – the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Word of God, faith in Jesus, personal righteousness.

Second, we must remember that these events in Matthew 2 set the stage for the spiritual conflict to come. The devil never stopped trying to destroy Jesus and His Work. It's important to remember that there is not a single "nice" story in the Gospels, as in, "Oh, look what Jesus did; that was a nice thing to do." Jesus actively tore away at the foundations of Satan's domain of darkness. As we continue in Matthew we will see repeated conflict with various people and the devil himself.

Finally, nothing prevents God from achieving His purpose. The Lord does what He pleases. He protected Jesus from His conception on. Even the crucifixion took place within the careful, specific boundaries established by the Father. Jesus suffered, yes, according to the will of God, but suffered nothing not willed by the Father. There couldn't be a more imbalanced fight than between a squad of armed soldiers and a toddler, but Herod, and ultimately Satan, were powerless to harm the Son of God. Put yourself in the Lord's hands; trust that He is able to protect you, as well.