

Lesson 4: There Is Hope In Your Future

Matthew 2:13-23

Memory Verse: "...‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’" (Matt. 4:4).

Text: 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." 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 But 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."

Monday

The text that we come to this week is Matthew 2:13-23, and the title for our study is "There is Hope In Your Future." This is a quote from Jeremiah chapter 31, a chapter which Matthew quotes specifically in this passage.

About 320 A.D. the Roman Governor of Sebaste, Armenia, heard a startling rumor, that some soldiers in Rome's famous Thundering Legion were Christians. He gathered the legion together and demanded to know if it was true, and 40 soldiers came forward and admitted to following Christ. The governor was shocked and responded by threatening them saying, "I command you to make an offering to the Roman gods. If you will not, you will be stripped of your military status." The forty soldiers knew that they must not sacrifice to the Roman gods, because to do so would be to worship a false God and deny the Lordship of Jesus.

A man named Camdidus stepped forward and spoke for them. He said simply, "Nothing is dearer or of greater honor to us than Christ our God." The governor then tried other tactics to get them to deny their faith. He first resorted to bribes and other attempts to persuade them. Camdidus replied, "You offer us money that remains behind and glory that fades away. You

seek to make us friends of the Emperor, but alienate us from the true King. We desire one gift, the crown of righteousness. We are anxious for one glory, the glory of the heavenly kingdom. We love honors, those of heaven.” It was a beautiful speech, given by the Spirit in a moment of extreme duress.

This reply led to anger and threats of torture from the Governor. To these threats Camdidus spoke for the forty, “You threaten fearful torments and call our godliness a crime, but you will not find us fainthearted or attached to this life or easily stricken with terror. For the love of God, we are prepared to endure any kind of torture.”

The governor was enraged, and he now had determined that these Christians would die a slow and painful death. They were stripped naked of all their clothes and herded into the middle of a frozen lake. He then set soldiers around the perimeter of the lake to keep them from escaping. The terms of the torture were simple. He told them, “You may come ashore and warm yourselves when you are ready to deny your faith in Jesus Christ,” To increase their torment he had bonfires lit around the edges of the lake and had baths of hot water placed within their sight as the legionaries began slowly freezing to death.

The forty soldiers encouraged each other as though they were going into battle. They said, “How many of our companions in arms fell on the battle front, showing themselves loyal to an earthly king? Is it possible for us to fail to sacrifice our lives in faithfulness to the true King? Let us not turn aside, O warriors, let us not turn our backs in flight from the devil.” They stood on the lake the rest of the day and into a frigid night, bearing their pain and rejoicing in the hope of soon being with the Lord. The Soldiers took up a chant, “We are Jesus’ forty soldiers; we’ll be faithful to the end.”

Eventually a fog rolled in. The soldiers could no longer be seen from the shore and their voices began to lose strength. Some collapsed and fell unconscious in their final sleep. Finally, one of the soldiers cracked. He came off the ice and climbed into a warm bath on the shore. After he left, a few voices could still be heard coming off the ice. Their chant had changed, “We are Jesus’ thirty-nine soldiers; we’ll be faithful to the end.”

Then something incredible happened. One of the centurions on the shore, when he saw that a man had deserted his companions, let out a choked cry; and with a sudden conversion, he threw off his clothes and ran out onto the ice crying out, “I am a Christian! I am a Christian!” He took the place of the man who left, and his voice could be heard booming from the center of the ice and strengthening those that remained alive, “We are Jesus’ forty soldiers; we’ll be faithful to the end.”

The story of Thundering Legion spread like a wildfire throughout the Roman empire and many more, inspired by their courage and willingness to die for the Lord, were converted to faith in Christ.

One of the wonders of history and of life in this world is how God is at work through even the most difficult and tragic circumstances to bring about good, to bring about His plan, His kingdom, a glorious future and a blessed hope that will not fail. It can be seen in the mystery of martyrdom, how the blood of martyrs can be the seed of the church, the seed that brings lost souls into the kingdom. It can be seen on the pages of Scripture, how the pain of being born blind or the scourge of leprosy can be used to reveal the glory, the grace, the forgiveness and the works of God; or, how the sickness of a Paul and the anguish of trials in this life can be used to work Godly character, humility, love towards others and precious dependence and faith in God alone. It can be seen in the cross, how God took the greatest evil of all history and turned it into the greatest blessing, the greatest good, the greatest display of love, and the greatest hope for all of His children.

In our text for this week we see several facts related to God's working in history and the circumstances of our lives in this world. Facts that if we embrace will be a great blessing, encouragement and benefit to us in the dark and difficult times of life. The first fact is this:

1. God knows the secret plans of the heart (v. 13). Verse 13 says, "Now when they (meaning the wise men) 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 hearts and intents of all men are known to God. There is nothing in your heart or in your thought life that is hidden from Him. Your thoughts may as well be shouted from the roof tops or printed in bold on the front page of every newspaper as far as God is concerned.

There is often this idea of secrecy associated with sin. From the cover of darkness to setting up separate internet accounts, those who are engaged in sinful acts will often go to great lengths to keep these things secret so that others won't find out what they have done, or what they have been planning, just as Herod attempted to deceive the wise men. Psalm 10, in talking about the thoughts of the sinful says, "He has said in his heart, 'God has forgotten; He hides His face; He will never see.'" But the Psalmist goes on to say, "But You have seen...to repay it by Your hand" (v. 14). In fact, not only does God know all the secrets of men's hearts, the Scripture tells us plainly that He will one day openly reveal those secrets so that others will see them as well. In Matthew 6, it talks about how God, who sees your deeds in secret, will reward them openly. The Lord Jesus announces in Mark 4:22, "For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light." The Old Testament even gives the title to God, "He who reveals secrets" (Dan. 2:29).

All of us will be called to account for our secret thoughts, words and actions. And those things that were done and kept in secret will be openly revealed and displayed, even as the secret wicked thoughts of Herod have been displayed for the world to see for centuries on the pages of Scripture. Now beloved, if that isn't a deterrent, I don't know what is. Not that we should be more concerned about the opinion of others than about God's, who already knows, but it is

certainly worth considering. Before you are about to engage in a supposedly secret sin, know that it will one day be publicly exposed.

So what does you do, if you have done things that are secret and shameful in the past? What does God desire in that case? He desires repentance and confession, brokenness and a godly sorrow that rejects the evil of the past. That's all. Then He will forgive you and cover your secret sins with the blood, the payment, of the Lord Jesus Christ. You see there are two ways that secret sins will be viewed, when they are revealed by the Lord. Either they will be a great revelation of guilt and shame for those who reject the Lord and seek to stand in their own self-righteousness, or they will be seen as a marvel of God's grace and mercy, a trophy testifying to the glory of God in His abundant love, patience and forgiveness. I know which way I want my secret sins to be seen. What about you?

Since God knows the secret plans of the heart and because one day He will bring all to justice and expose the true motivation of all who have ever lived, we can have hope for the future. If the secret counsels of your heart were printed on the front page of the local paper, would people have cause to praise God, or are you living in such a way that you would be ashamed? If so, what should you do about it now? Be specific _____

Tuesday

We saw yesterday the first fact from this text related to God's working in history which will encouraged us in the dark and difficult times of life: God knows the secret plans of the heart. The second fact is this:

2. God is committed to His word and purpose (vv. 13-23). Herod sought to short circuit the plan of God when he murdered Bethlehem's boys, but He may as well have tried to beat back the ocean tide with a whip. God didn't do anything spectacular, though He could have. He simply spoke to the right person in a dream and maneuvered around the wicked purpose of Herod, even using that purpose to fulfill His word. And all through this passage we see the truth that God is unerringly moving things toward His will, His purpose, His desire and His goal.

Beloved, this is a wonderful truth, because it is also God's purpose to save all those that trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Though Satan and all the demons of hell, though all the wicked men of the world, men like Herod and Usama Ben Laden, would desire to take your life, and see you destroyed, defeated and crushed in this world and damned to hell in the next, though they would rage against you and your Lord, this is nothing to God. Why? because God will fulfill His purpose for you. What is God's purpose for you? Turn to Jeremiah 29:11, and take a moment to read it.

What does God say here? _____

Is this promise for you also (note 2: Cor. 1:20)? _____ If so, do you ever have cause to despair? Why not? _____

This is a promise spoken to the remnant of Israel. Those who believed in Him. It is also a promise to those of you here and now who have believed in Him and trusted Him, “for I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Though the circumstances of this life and this world rage against you, Beloved, the thoughts of God are to give you peace, a future and a hope. Truly He has done it already, and He will bring it to a glorious completion. Write that verse down, memorize and remember it, Jeremiah 29:11.

Now consider Matthew 2:13-23 again. How do we see God’s commitment to His word in this text? List some ways: _____

What aspects of God’s word have special significance to you today? _____

Does God’s commitment to His word bring comfort to your heart? Why or why not? _____

Wednesday

We’ve seen two facts already this week about God’s working in history and circumstances. Here is a third that is crucial to our endurance and perseverance for Him in this world:

3. The wicked rage against God in vain (vv. 16-18). The Herod in our text, known as “the Great,” is the first of several Herods mentioned in the New Testament. Julius Caesar had appointed his father to be procurator, or governor of Judea under the Roman occupation. His father then managed to have his son Herod appointed prefect of Galilee. In that office Herod was successful in stopping Jewish guerilla bands who continued to fight against Rome. This Herod went to Rome in 40 B.C. and because of his success, was declared by the emperor, Augustus,

with the concurrence of the Roman senate, to be the “king of the Jews.”

Herod was a clever and capable warrior, orator, and diplomat. In times of economic hardship he showed tremendous administrative ability, which Rome greatly appreciated. Herod also was a great builder, constructing theaters, race tracks, the fortress of Masada and many other buildings, the crown of which was the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. These achievements earned him the title, “the Great.”

However, Herod was also cruel and merciless. He was incredibly jealous, suspicious, and afraid for his position and power. Fearing any potential threat to his rule, he had his brother-in-law, the appointed high priest drowned, after which he provided a magnificent funeral where he pretended to weep. He then had his wife killed, and then her mother and two of his own sons. Five days before his death, he had a third son executed out of fear over his own position. These atrocities led Caesar Augustus to utter his famous pun, “I would rather be Herod’s pig (Greek: hys) than his son (huios).” But Herod’s paranoia was endured by Rome, because of his administrative ability and incredible knack for keeping peace.

Mass executions were also common under Herod, and in his paranoia he was not very discriminating about who his enemies actually were and who were just innocent bystanders. One of the greatest examples of Herod’s bloodthirstiness and insane cruelty was in having the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem arrested and imprisoned shortly before his death. Because he knew that no one would mourn his own death, Herod gave orders for these prisoners to be executed the moment he died simply to guarantee that there would be some true weeping and mourning in Jerusalem. Fortunately, the Roman soldiers ignored his command on that occasion and set everybody free immediately after his death. Jerusalem was filled with rejoicing.

That barbaric command, however, was exceeded in cruelty only by his slaughter of “all the male children in Bethlehem and its surrounding areas, from two years old and under” in hopes of killing any threat to his throne from the One the magi said had been “born King of the Jews.”

Herod in his actions embodies the message of Psalm 2 where God says, “Why do the nations rage and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, ‘Let us break their bonds in pieces and cast away their cords from us. He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision....’”

Herod’s efforts to destroy the Messiah were all in vain, and they served only to bring even greater and more terrible condemnation upon himself. The first century Jewish historian Josephus gives us an account of Herod the Great’s death in his writings. Josephus says, 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.”. Well, that’s what God thought about Herod, and the wicked king left that torment only to wake up in an eternal hell. So we see that all of his plotting and murderous efforts to grasp at and keep power and position in this life were

completely in vain.

Who are the wicked who rage against God today? _____

How does the vanity of their rage impact you personally? _____

How does this impact the cause of missions, and how does it affect your personal involvement?

Thursday

A fourth fact even more marvelous than what we saw yesterday, is that God actually takes the evil intentions of the wicked and turns them to fulfill His word and accomplish His purposes. And while the wicked do what they do with evil motivation, God turns it and uses it with good and glorious motivation. The fact we come to today from our text is this:

4. God works good through the suffering caused by evil men (vv. 16-18). Verses 16-18 say, “Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived [or a better translation might be “mocked through disobedience”] 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. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, ‘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.’”

The prophecy that was fulfilled is from Jeremiah 31:15. Ramah was a town about five miles north of Jerusalem. Bethlehem and its surrounding districts were just south of Jerusalem, and so the wailing of the mothers spread throughout the region and was heard all the way in Ramah.

Rachel, the wife of Jacob, was the mother of two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, and she was the idealized mother of the Jewish nation, emblematic of all Jewish mothers. Not only that, she was buried in Bethlehem. The prophecy of Rachel weeping for her children is a prophecy to the weeping mothers of Bethlehem, who wept bitterly over the massacre of their little boys because of Herod’s attempt to kill the Messiah.

You say, “How could God possibly work good through such a senseless and horrible tragedy?” Well, we see good coming through this in at least three ways. First, these little baby boys

became martyrs for the kingdom of God. Their death apparently satisfied the bloodthirsty desires of Herod and others that may have sought to destroy the Lord as a child and provided cover for Him and His family. Second, God brings good through the tragedy by assuring us that this is not the end of the story for these little ones. In Jeremiah 31, the very next verse after the one quoted here, God says, “refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded says the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy” (meaning the Lord and His family who were forced into exile in Egypt). Verse 17, “There is hope in your future, says the Lord, that your children shall come back to their own border.”

After their deaths, these little boys immediately entered into the presence of God in heaven and took their place among that mighty company. And as they shed their blood on behalf of God’s kingdom, the Lord Jesus would one day shed His own blood to pay for their redemption. Because of this sacrifice they will receive their reward, and one day they will come back with the Lord Jesus when He returns. They will return in glory with Him to their own border in great triumph and joy. “There is hope in your future.”

A third way that God brings good from this tragedy is by using it as a sign and a fulfillment of His word just as Matthew uses it here to demonstrate the identity of Jesus as the Messiah. In this they were also martyrs, in that their lives served as a testimony and a witness to the truth. So there are three very specific ways that we see God bringing good through the suffering caused by Herod in this text.

Why does God allow suffering? There is always a good purpose in His heart. (Remember the Thundering Legion?) We may not always know the purpose, but we can know by faith that God’s intentions toward us are good, and that He will work it all out for good for those that love Him (Rom. 8:28). Like these mothers, Rachel also lost her son Joseph, sold into slavery as a boy because of the jealousy and hatred of his brothers, never to be seen by his mother again in this life. And what was the testimony of Joseph’s life story given in Genesis 50:20, “But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”

What are some of the good purposes that God works through suffering? _____

Have you ever seen God work good through the suffering caused by evil men? Give an example from the Bible: _____

Now give an example from your own experience: _____

How should this impact your faith? _____

Friday

We come today to a final fact from our text for our encouragement about God’s interaction with history. It is this:

5. God identifies with the weak and lowly (vv. 19-23). Verses 19-23 continue the story, “Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 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.’ Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. 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.”

Possibly Joseph had expected Herod Antipas to reign over the entire kingdom, but Herod the Great made a late change in his will, dividing his kingdom into three parts. Archelaus, known for his ruthlessness, was given Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. Caesar Augustus agreed to this arrangement and promised the title “king” to Archelaus, if it was earned. But Archelaus proved to be a hopelessly incompetent ruler and was banished by Rome in A.D. 6 for misgovernment. Rome then decided to rule the south of Israel through a Roman procurator, but by that time Joseph had settled the family in Galilee, where Herod Antipas governed. When Joseph heard that Archelaus was ruling in Judea, he was justly afraid. Shortly after he took his position, Archelaus executed three thousand Jewish Passover pilgrims as an act of retribution for a political incident during his father’s life. God warned Joseph to live in northern Israel in the region of Galilee.

Finally verse 23 says, “And he came and dwelt in the city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene.’” Now what is the significance of that? Is it because He took a Nazarite vow? No, He never took one and didn’t live by one. Unlike the other prophecies in this chapter, which refer back to specific Old Testament passages about the Messiah, these words, “He shall be called a Nazarene,” never occur specifically within the Old Testament, and yet Matthew says that it is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and that the “prophets,” plural, predicted it. What is he getting at here?

Well, Nazareth was a town about 55 miles north of Jerusalem in Galilee. The town was in an elevated basin about one and half miles across, and was inhabited largely by poor, crude, and unrefined people. The term Nazarene had long been a term of derision, used to describe a person

that was rough, rude, backwater and uncultured. We see this attitude in Nathaniel, who was from Cana, a few miles to the south of Nazareth. He asked Philip, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth” (John 1:46). The question was especially significant coming from Nathaniel, who by Jesus’ own words was “an Israelite, indeed, in whom is no guile!” Nathaniel, therefore, was not given to bad mouthing his neighbors. He was genuinely shocked that the one “of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote” could actually come from such a disreputable place as Nazareth.

The early church father Jerome wrote that in synagogue prayers Christians were often cursed as “Nazarenes” with a petition that they be “blotted out of the Book of Life.” It was a curse and an insult to call someone a “Nazarene,” kind of like calling someone a “Pollock,” or a “dumb redneck”. Where I grew up in Missouri, if you really wanted to refer to someone as crude and stupid you would say, “Where are you from, the boot heel?” Only calling someone a “Nazarene” in first century Israel was more serious. When we say things like that we are joking (hopefully). These people weren’t joking, though. They meant it. The fact that Jesus grew up in Nazareth gave Him the title, “Jesus the Nazarene,” and that title would be used as a title of reproach, a title of scorn, something that people could belittle and hold in contempt.

There are many prophecies in the Old Testament which predict that the Messiah would be scorned, held in contempt, rejected and despised (e.g. Pss. 22:6-8, 13; 69:8, 20-21; Is. 49:7; 53:2-3, 8; Dan. 9:26). For instance Ps. 69:20 says, “Reproach has broken my heart, and I am full of heaviness...” Is. 49:7, “Thus says the Lord, The Redeemer of Israel, their Holy One, to Him whom man despised, to Him whom the nation abhors, to the Servant of rulers: ‘Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the Lord who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel; and He has chosen You.’” Is. 53:2-3, “For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised and we did not esteem Him.”

Do you see what Matthew is doing in this passage? He is writing to Jews and he is presenting evidence that Jesus is the Messiah. Here he is ticking off prophecies of the Messiah that were fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and the final prophecy He uses in this text to prove the identity of Jesus is that He was reproached and rejected, not just by Herod, but by His very own people.

Why did God do it this way? At least three reasons: 1) He did it to shame us in our own wicked prejudice; 2) He did it to give a stumbling block, frustrating man’s wisdom, pride and false human ideas of glory; and finally, 3) He did it that He might identify with the weak and the lowly. To those who rejected Him, Jesus was a “stinking Nazarene,” but to Matthew this demonstrates that Jesus is in fact Immanuel, the Lord fulfilling prophecy. For those of us who recognize our own weakness, our own sinfulness and lack of worthiness, this truth fills us with love and just admiration for the King of glory. It tells us that there is hope for our own souls because Jesus willingly identifies with the weak and lowly.

Do you see the glory and wonder of Jesus being called a Nazarene? Do you see the shame that name brings to false human categories of worth and prestige? Do you see the Lord's readiness to identify with the weak and the lowly? Do you fit in that category?

“But on this *one* will I look: On *him who is* poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word” (Is. 66:2b).