

Christmas Child - Search and Destroy

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- [0 : 0 0] Please be seated and I'll pray for us. Lord God, give us open hearts to listen to your word and to be submissive to your Son, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.
- Well, it's not a very nice thing to say at Christmas, but it's being said more and more. Well, they say it, religion divides. They say, were it not for religion, we'd have no terrorism in the world.
- They say, religion is the problem behind most wars of history. They say to my face, I will not follow Jesus Christ.
- I will not even seriously listen to him because I don't like religion for what it's done wrong in the world. Has anyone ever said that to you? Have you ever read that or have you ever been tempted to think that?
- On the surface of it, the reading we've just had from Matthew 2, it's kind of a little-known violent event after Jesus' birth.
- [1 : 0 6] On the surface, it appears to be a classic illustration of the divisive nature of religion. You've got a kind of very religious Roman leader, Herod, using advice from uncaring Jewish leaders and with the help of some religious sages, sets out on a kind of partial genocide in Bethlehem in the name of crushing a future religious leader.
- It's not good, is it? They say religion divides. And it's a very bold and serious claim that we are hearing more and more from kind of increasingly kind of noisy secularists and agnostics and so forth.
- And I think it's a claim that we ought to address. If we want our Christmas to have any moral integrity, we must address it.
- I hope that Matthew's account, his historical account of the Christmas story will shed some light on this claim. It begins actually quite funnily with, I don't know how they got this title, with the wise men acting in a way which I think is foolish.
- It begins in this way in chapter 2. In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem asking, where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?
- [2 : 3 8] For we have observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage. Literally these men are magi.
- They're from the east. It doesn't say that they're kings. It doesn't say that there's three, though they give three types of gifts. And they very foolishly, I think, walk into the capital of Israel, into Jerusalem, openly, publicly saying, where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?
- Do you see the problem with that? Do you see the problem? Matthew told us what the problem was because he says it's in the time of King Herod. King Herod is the great kind of king of the Jews in power.
- He's the one who's built the Jewish temple. He's the one who nearly 40 years earlier, under the influence of Mark Antony in the Roman Senate, was given the title King of the Jews.

Everyone knows this. And so you don't walk into his territory, his city, and say, where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? That will get ugly.

[3 : 54] Imagine turning up last year to, say, a posh hotel in the city, maybe the Hyatt, at a Liberal Party post-election function, wearing a Kevin 07 t-shirt and a bottle of champagne.

That would get ugly. When you have people in power, you don't speak against them. It's treason. It's dangerous. In King Herod's Jerusalem, speaking about a new king of the Jews is extremely foolish and dangerous.

I don't know how these magi could be so naive. And when King Herod heard this, verse 3, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.

Like all insecure men, he is frightened when he has competition. And all Jerusalem is frightened for a different reason, I think.

They're scared at what Herod is going to do. I mean, what will he do with these wise men who are saying there's another king of the Jews? They know how paranoid Herod is.

[5 : 00] What we have in Matthew's account accords exactly with other historical evidence we have about King Herod, Herod the Great. Other records say that he was a cruel, vicious, and extremely paranoid, if not insane, ruler.

And so Herod gets scheming. He calls on some Jewish scribes and priests. He says, what do you know about this? What do you know about the Messiah? Where would his landing spot be?

And they quote to him from the prophet Micah. They say, it says, And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler.

And you can see Herod, a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel. My people Israel, they're my people. I'm the king of Israel. He's having aneurysms of jealousy and rage at this point, but still wanting more information.

He calls on the Magi and says, well, what do you know? You've been, you know, watching star charts and stuff like that. And he gives the Magi this command.

[6 : 12] And just listen to the deceit in these words. Go and search diligently for the child. And when you have found him, bring me word, so that I may also go and pay him homage.

Everyone in Herod's court knows that is a big fat lie. Everyone in Jerusalem would have known that Herod pays homage to no one.

It's unfortunate that the Magi did not see this. And it had terrible consequences. And so then what happens is Matthew gives us two Christmas scenes.

One of the scenes is of the Magi going to Bethlehem, into the stable, discovering baby Jesus. And that's the Christmas scene we know and love. They give gifts, they kneel down, they pay homage, they're overwhelmed with joy.

It's a great scene. But the next scene Matthew gives is less known. And it's more like an action movie. God warns the wise men in a dream to not help Herod, but to just disappear and go a secret way home, to sneak home.

[7 : 25] And then Joseph and Mary are given a dream, and they are warned to immediately escape into Egypt, because Herod wants to destroy the child. And so we have two scenes, one of worship and one of pursuit.

Though the stable was very kind of humble and sort of romantic in a way, maybe we have romanticised it, now Matthew tells us the Messianic family are on the run.

The baby Jesus and his parents are refugees in Egypt for a time. God is guiding them and protecting them until the death of Herod, which is imminent.

He's in his 70s. He's extremely sick. A friend of mine went to Egypt on a sort of a mission trip, and he brought back photos, and I was sort of expecting kind of Arabic-looking people in the photos, but there were photos of all these sort of African Sudanese people.

And I said, well, what are all these Africans doing in Egypt? And he sort of said, well, Egypt's a juncture for refugees from all over the world to get to other places. It's a good place to go to get somewhere else.

[8 : 35] But the reason God chose Egypt for Jesus was not logistical. It was actually theological. It was so that Jesus could, even as an infant, retrace the steps that Israel have taken.

Israel in the Old Testament were slaves in Egypt, and now they were brought out of Egypt into the Promised Land. And in a sense, Israel were called the Son of God.

And Hosea says, out of Egypt I've called my son. And so now what we have is actually, in an even more literal way, the true Son of God coming out of Egypt.

in a sense that he's going to walk the path that Israel walked, but he will be faithful. He will not be unfaithful. He will love God with all his heart, and he will step up where Israel has failed.

And so all this chaos, all this pursuit and persecution, we have the providential fulfilment of the grand plan of God the Father.

[9 : 42] And then it just gets worse after that. Verse 16, when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, I'm not really sure it was the wise men who did it, I think God did it, God told the wise men where to go, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children, probably the boys, in and around Bethlehem, who were two years old and under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

This is very tragic, isn't it? The order would not have taken long to carry out. Bethlehem's about eight kilometres from Jerusalem. You get a sense that he just missed Jesus.

We don't know how many boys were killed. There are, a couple of centuries later, there were some church traditions that say it was some huge figure, like in the thousands, which is completely unrealistic.

I looked on Wikipedia, that great source, and I think it was right, that said realistically, in a small town like Bethlehem, it may have been 30 to 50 infant boys under the age of two.

But friends, that's still pretty ugly, isn't it? That's still wrong. That's still quite painful and horrific. It's stunning to think that the Christmas event, the birth of God's son, would be the catalyst for such a massacre.

[11 : 00] I mean, surely this puts a dampener on the so-called Christmas spirit. How can we commemorate his birth knowing that historically this happened?

Well, friends, let me encourage, let me challenge you to not be as naive as the Magi. Be wise about the kind of person we're dealing with, with Herod the Great.

The historical records tell us that Herod the Great had a long, long history of cruelty and of bloodshed. Him and his father rose to power through the death of many of the Hasmonean Jewish dynasty that ruled in Judea before them.

Later on in life, it's said that he killed his favourite wife because he thought that she was plotting against him. It wasn't true, but she was killed.

And later on at different stages, two of his very own sons were tortured and killed out of his paranoia without evidence. One of them very close to his own deathbed.

[12 : 15] Even the historian Josephus, who politically is of the same group as Herod, he's a Roman sympathiser as well. Josephus says that Herod was incurably bitter and angry, especially toward the end of his life, short-tempered, paranoid.

He says that Herod died a slow and painful death, that he had all sorts of physical and mental illnesses that everyone else thought was the punishment of God, that he would die such a slow and painful death.

On his deathbed, he said to his sister this, and just hear the wickedness here. He said, I shall die in a little time, so great are my pains.

But what principally troubles me is this, says Herod, that I shall die without being lamented and without such mourning as men usually expect at a king's death.

He knew he was hated, and even on his deathbed, he was selfish. He was worried about his own reputation and glory, that how he would be mourned, what wouldn't be good enough for him.

[13 : 26] Friends, Herod is not an example of how religion divides people. He's not an example of that. To blame religion for that would be a very shallow analysis.

It wouldn't be looking into the heart of the matter. To blame God for a man like this fails to consider the historical facts, the biblical evidence, and also the experience of our own selfish human hearts.

The root cause of the massacre is Herod's own lust for power. It is his self-glorifying, self-preserving, self-honouring lust for control.

Herod hates God's son because he wants to be God. He wants all the power. And friends, we too, if we are honest, we are in rebellion against God.

We too have, in our own little expression of it, our lust for power. We too have a desire to gain control over others, to gain riches at the expense of others, to glorify self and not God.

[14 : 44] Sometimes, it is true, in history, religion has been exploited as an instrument in the name of this self-exaltation, self-worship.

But the problem is us. The problem is us. That's what Jesus taught. And so it is an imbecilic analysis to blame God for the violence caused by human evil.

The solution of the world's problems, therefore, will never be solved just with education or better communication. The solution will certainly not be the bombardment we're getting of secular moralising every day.

The solution will not be found in the democratisation of every government. The solution must come from outside us, if we are the problem. The solution must come from God and his son.

And Matthew's great message is that God himself has a rescue plan, carefully planned out in the Old Testament, achieved in his son.

[15 : 52] We see it being enacted in the birth of his son. This plan of God even encompasses the weeping of the mothers of Bethlehem.

Matthew ties us to the fulfilment of a prophecy from Jeremiah, a prophecy from a time of exile that Rachel, the sort of a mother figure over Israel, over the tribes of Israel, would be weeping at the time of exile over what is happening to God's people.

And so Matthew ties it in and says, all the punishment that Israel has gone through in exile now stops with the coming of the Messiah. The exile punishment ends here because if you keep reading Matthew or even if you keep reading Jeremiah from where Matthew quotes, there's a promise that the Messiah will come and we see that the Messiah does escape and he lives and he will grow up and he will reign and he will establish the new covenant written on our hearts by God's spirit.

Friends, God is not the problem. We are the problem. God provides the solution in his son. So where do you stand? Are you tempted to believe the shallow lie that the problems of this world can be blamed on God and not on fallen humanity?

I think to blame God is to make Herod's error. Herod's error is by saying the world will be right when I am in charge.

[17 : 30] and not anyone else, especially not God. To believe the myth that God is at fault is to perpetuate the problem. The real solution is to get off our little thrones, our pseudo-thrones and bend the knee and pay homage to the Son of God.

And on this Son of God, on this Christmas child, God has placed all rule, all authority, all power, all government, all lordship.

The prophet Isaiah said, his authority shall grow continually. Or he himself said, after he had risen from the dead, when they worshipped him, he said, all authority on heaven and earth has been given to me.

King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign. Do you see how that's good news for a world mucking it up, trying to rule ourselves?

Do not, friends, do not pursue independence. Do not pursue self-rule apart from the Son of God. You will end up a Herod.

[18 : 43] You will end up a Herod. You may not have the power or the resources to be as bad as he was, but selfish living and ignoring God leaves a trail of destruction.

The one who has the power, the Lord Jesus, he is the judge and he will not tolerate our treason forever. There is a day coming where there will be a cost to pay for rebelling against God's Son.

And the good news of the Gospel is Jesus Christ was actually sent to pay that price for us. He was sent to die to pay that cost of our treason, to wear our punishment so that we could be forgiven.

Jesus Christ is the only hope for a world in treason against its maker. And friends, what a great authority Jesus is.

He's a Lord who has walked in our steps. He's laid down his life for us. He's no insecure, paranoid, selfish dictator.

[19 : 57] He is our great Lord who has walked before us. And so tonight, in this very room, God has providentially brought each one of you here.

He's brought you here tonight to hear of this rescue plan through his son. Will you pay true homage to the son? Or will you simply pay lip service homage and continue to live in the treason, in the illusion of your own self-rule, of your own self-glory?

Will you submit your life to his authority? Will you trust him and receive his pardon? Let's ask him for that now and I invite you to pray this prayer quietly with me in your heart.

Lord Jesus, we do worship you and we thank you for coming into our world to do the greatest thing ever, to live as one of us and to die for us, to bear our punishment for our rebellion against you.

We're sorry, Lord Jesus, that you had to do this but we do thank and praise you and we ask that you would forgive us and we receive your gift of salvation tonight. So Lord Jesus, I pray that you would impress on the hearts of all of us this conviction and this trust in you that if any are not sure of their forgiveness that as they pray now you would help them to put all their hope in Jesus and hand over the rule of their life to him.

[21 : 34] And so Lord Jesus, we thank you and we thank you, Heavenly Father for sending him. Amen.