

The Escape to Egypt

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[0 : 00] Well, please do be seated. Let me add my welcome to the one Laura gave earlier on.! It's great to see you.

I hope you've had a great Christmas. It's good to be gathered together again today. And if you've got Matthew chapter 2 open, page 966, let me pray for us as we turn to God's word this morning.

Heavenly Father, we come before you for a fresh gift today of wisdom, of instruction, of challenge and rebuke from your word.

So please, would your Holy Spirit do his work among us, that we might be your people who live by your light. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, I wonder what you made of our gospel reading this morning. I suspect it wasn't the one you thought you would get, especially since the Christmas tree is still up.

[0 : 59] The lights are all around, and maybe you're still tucking in to the turkey at home. But here it is. After all the joy and hope, the light and glory of Christmas. Today we have a passage from Matthew 2 that plunges us back into the gloom, the darkness, and all the evil that Isaiah would tell us, would go at the arrival of the sun given to us.

Of course, some of the characters in the Christmas story are still here, aren't they? Their wise men are here, only they are making a quick exit. There's an angel in the story too. But the angel is bringing a dire warning, not a message of joy.

The infant Jesus is sent to stage, of course, but he's not being sought out to be worshipped any longer, but sought out to be murdered. It's quite a change, isn't it? But this is the world that Christ came to save.

This is the darkness into which Christ shines his light. So with Christmas done, this passage gives us a dose of realism. And along with it, a warning, an encouragement, and a challenge.

A warning, an encouragement, and a challenge. See, there is real evil in this passage, isn't there? As Herod seeks to destroy his rightful king. That will bring us a stark warning as we look to the year ahead.

[2 : 20] But alongside that evil, we see God's sovereign hand at work, fulfilling his purposes, protecting his son, making sure that the rescue plan is not derailed. And that is something that should encourage us as we move into 2026.

And then we get a glorious example to follow. That Joseph hears, God speak, and immediately obeys. And that's our final challenge today.

So a warning, an encouragement, and a challenge. But let's start with a few background things, just to set the scene for us. The events in verses 13 to 23 take place, obviously, little after Jesus was born.

We don't know exactly how long that was. You can read different Bible commentators and come up with completely different timelines. But it seems to me that Jesus was probably between six and maybe 24 months old, maybe a little older, by the time the wise men arrived.

And then it would have been another few weeks after the family fled for their lives, that Herod carried out his infanticide against the boys in Bethlehem and the villages around it.

[3 : 28] It's almost unimaginable, isn't it? How someone in a position of power and authority, particularly over God's people, could do something so wicked and evil.

But of course it isn't something we need to imagine, because similar things have been done within living memory. I've never been to one of the former Nazi concentration camps, but I've read that one of the most difficult things to see, that one of the things that drives most people to tears, are the sight of the clothes and shoes that belonged to the thousands of children who met their deaths there.

Although it may not be on the same kind of scale, reports of the attacks on Christian villages from Islamist gangs across various parts of North Africa show a similar kind of hatred, with children slaughtered alongside their parents.

Not that we have anything to be proud of in the UK. Earlier this year, Parliament voted to allow abortion up to birth for pretty much any reason at all. That wickedness might be hidden away in the clinics and hospitals, but it is still there.

But Herod's crimes were not hidden away. They were very public. In fact, he made sure they were public. That way people would fear him all the more.

[4 : 47] Apparently, not long before he killed the babies of Bethlehem, he executed all the top judges and legal experts in the land, so that when he committed this terrible crime, the people would have no one to go and complain to.

And whilst he was busy killing the children of others, he also made up his mind to kill one of his own sons, so there wasn't someone else to take his place as well.

Nice guy, Herod. Evil man. Because what Herod is worried about is being usurped. Earlier in the chapter, if you remember, we're told that he was disturbed when the news or the Magi turned up in Jerusalem seeking for the special baby born to be king.

Herod wasn't a Jew. He was an ethnic Edomite. So he wasn't interested in the Messiah. He only wanted to secure his own position. He wanted to make sure no one challenged his power, his wealth, and woe betide anyone who threatened that.

That's why he schemed to send the wise men off to find Jesus with those instructions, encouragements, to go and find the baby so I might come and worship him as well.

[5 : 57] But of course we can see through his lies, can't we? We can see what he was trying to do. His plan was a seek and destroy mission. And when he found out that he'd been double-crossed, he was no longer disturbed, but furious.

And no longer just furious, but murderous. It's like there's been a chain reaction of anger and hatred brewing inside of him until he orders this despicable crime.

There is real evil here, isn't there? But at the root of Herod's evil is something that we all battle with. It's the original sin of Adam and Eve of wanting independence from God so that we can rule instead of God.

That's the sin at the heart of the human condition. Fortunately, it doesn't always end up with infanticide. But this is where a desire for independence from God can lead to.

It leads to a desire not just to ignore Jesus or to move him out of the way, but to kill him dead. So he doesn't bother us anymore. That's where this sin in our hearts leads if it's not checked.

[7 : 04] So here is our stark warning from the life of Herod. Rejecting Christ's rule is never a minor thing. It's something of the most seriousness because rejection of Jesus' rule, even in some small area of our lives, is a rejection of his rightful kingship.

And rejecting Jesus as king, when he is our rightful king, is treason. And when we find ourselves fighting against our true king, we find ourselves too on that very slippery ground that Herod was on.

Because that desire for independence can soon become pride. Pride, when it's challenged, becomes resentment and anger. And anger against God rarely ends well.

Far too many people reach a point where they know God's will, but they refuse to obey him. And so they begin to slide down that slippery slope of disobedience, to resentment, to anger, to being set against God and all he stands for.

That's why Paul, in some of his letters, speaks in such strong terms. Colossians 2, Romans 8, telling Christian believers that we must seek to put to death whatever belongs to the earthly nature.

[8 : 15] That part in us that rebels against God has got to go. So as we head into the new year, let's check our hearts. Let's seek God to see whether he truly rules in our hearts or whether he's just a temporary advisor, a person that we turn to for one or two things, but not for everything else.

Does his word truly guide and direct us? Or do we really want to be in charge of how we live ourselves? Let's heed the warning that Herod gives us. There is only one room for one king.

Let's make sure Jesus is on the throne of our lives. Well, if Herod gives us a stark warning, the passage gives us plenty of encouragement to trust in God.

Because Herod's plans to kill Jesus not only come to nothing, but actually as we read this passage, we see that they seek, serve to fulfil God's ultimate purposes. You see, wonderfully, God is at charge in every step, isn't he?

He is sovereign over all things, so his plan of salvation is sure to succeed. We see that in a number of ways. Firstly, Herod's secret plan to kill Jesus turns out not to be very secret after all.

[9 : 32] He's making all these private plots and schemes, lying to the wise men, but the wise men get told anyway. And so they go home by another route. Joseph hasn't heard anything from Herod, but he hears he's told by an angel, so the family escape from Herod's clutches.

God knows what's going on. Nothing takes him by surprise. He hears every word his enemy speaks. He knows the thoughts of every rebellious mind, and so he ensures that Mary and Joseph take Jesus into Egypt, where he is safe from Herod's murderous hands.

God is in charge all the way through this. Isn't that an encouragement to us as we move into the new year? Secondly, verse 19, Herod dies.

There's something to encourage us. It's a fact of history that every evil dictator, every wicked leader, twisted abuser, a violent murderer who has sought to oppose God dies.

Everyone. Whether they're an Egyptian pharaoh, a Babylonian king, a Roman emperor, a communist ruler, a Nazi fuhrer, or anti-Christian leaders today of empires, nations, war bands, or terrorists, each and every one will die.

[10 : 49] And so each and every one will end up facing God's ultimate justice. Don't lose sight of that and everything else that goes on in this passage. Herod is trying his best to retain power, to kill Jesus, but he fails on both points because God is in charge and only his rule is eternal.

Everyone who stands against God will fall. Something else that should encourage us this year. Lastly, God fulfills prophecy through the evil actions of those who oppose him.

Now, the fact that God uses evil actions like Herod's for his own purposes doesn't justify or excuse them. Herod's acts are utterly heinous in the extreme.

But the evil here is Herod's, not God's. And yet, despite all his attempts to thwart God's plans, Herod only succeeds in helping them along, in fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament.

Now, the Old Testament prophecies referred here aren't the same kind of prophecy, it seems to me, as that we find in Micah, who tells us exactly where the Saviour will be born. What Matthew gives are patterns from the Old Testament that Jesus fills out, that he inhabits, to help us see that Jesus truly embodies all of God's people across the ages.

[12:13] So look down at verse 50. Just as ancient Israel went into Egypt for safety during a famine and then was rescued from Egypt at the time of Moses, so Jesus here is embodying that, isn't he?

He's fleeing to Egypt for safety and then God is going to bring him back out of Egypt and into the promised land. Jesus is embodying the pilgrimage of God's people.

Secondly, as there is weeping at the slaughter when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and the people were led out of the land to exile, that's what's being referred to in verse 18, so there is weeping here too as Herod slaughters the innocent children and as Jesus who embodies God's people heads out of Israel into a temporary exile.

If you go and read Jeremiah chapter 31 which is quoted here, you'll find actually it's a chapter largely of great hope and of course that's what we're finding in Matthew too, isn't it?

As the Saviour has come, in the midst of a darkness there is a bright light shining. The last quote Matthew gives in verse 23 is a little more enigmatic.

[13:26] No one is really sure where it comes from or really what Matthew is pointing to when he says that Jesus is called the Nazarene. You can chat with me over coffee if you like about some of the more obscure ideas.

I think to me the most convincing one is that Nazareth was considered a backward place. So calling someone a Nazarene was an insult like calling someone a country bumpkin.

Backwards, unqualified, of no reputation. Well there are a number of Old Testament prophecies which point to the Messiah being badly thought of when he came. Jesus certainly was that.

Think of Nathaniel asking if anything good could come out of Nazareth. Or the way the Jewish leaders took little note of Jesus because of his insignificant background. Or think of Isaiah's words that the suffering servant would be despised and rejected.

Whatever Matthew is pointing to, these three Old Testament passages highlight God's ongoing plans of salvation. even as Herod acts with such evil intent to stop them.

[14:33] But he can't stop them. God is powerful and sovereign that he is able to use evil for good. And that should give us great comfort and confidence as we enter next year.

Whatever laws get passed, whatever evil acts are committed, however hopeless the situation might seem, don't give up. God is so totally sovereign over his world that he is able to use the wickedness of evil people even when it involves terrible suffering to accomplish his good purposes.

And of course that's what we'll see in a few minutes time, isn't it, as we gather around the Lord's table. The most terrible act of all time as the innocent son of God was nailed to a Roman cross.

The most wicked thing this world has ever seen, God uses for the greatest good of all. A warning from the life of Herod not to resist Christ's rule.

An encouragement from the actions of Herod that God is still sovereign over his word, even world, even when evil people do evil deeds. And lastly, an example to follow.

[15:50] In the midst of all this darkness, death, suffering, and confusion, Joseph models for us a life of obedience. If you try and picture or write a biography of Joseph from the Gospels, it's difficult to find out very much about him.

We know he was in the family line of King David, Matthew chapter 1, verse 16. We're told that he was faithful to the law and yet kind and compassionate, Matthew 1, 19.

We know he was a carpenter, Matthew 13, 55. And whilst he didn't sleep with Mary until after Jesus was born, we're told that he later became the father of several other children, including four other sons, James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon.

But we also know that when God spoke to him, Joseph obeyed. Granted, those commands came through the rather dramatic means of angelic dreams.

once when he was considering divorcing Mary quietly, twice in this passage here. But nevertheless, when God spoke to Joseph, what does he do? He obeyed.

[16:58] Every time. In fact, the first time in Matthew chapter 2, Joseph obeys instantly. Let me read you those verses again, verses 13 and 14.

When the Magi had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.

So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt. Joseph hears God speak and gets up during the night to obey.

Can you imagine that conversation, can't you? Mary dear, wake up. Just had another dream? Yes, it was an angel again. We've got to flee to Egypt. I've actually been up for a while.

I've packed the bags, made some sandwiches. We're leaving in five minutes. Get yourself ready. No messing around. God spoke to Joseph and he obeyed, even if it meant a late night departure to a foreign land.

[17:59] The same is true in verses 20 and 21. An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream, telling him to take the child and his mother and go back to the land of Israel. What does Joseph do?

Verse 21. He got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. Instant obedience. God spoke to Joseph in a dream.

Joseph obeyed God's commands. Interestingly, they don't settle back in Bethlehem, do they? That might have been their first choice. After all, it was Joseph's family town.

But there is room on this occasion for Joseph to obey God fully while at the same time using his own wisdom. After Herod's death, the kingdom was split up into four parts.

And one of Herod's sons, Archelaus, who was almost as ruthless as his father, was still ruling in Judea, the area where Bethlehem was. So, sensing the threat, wanting to keep his family safe, Joseph took the family back to Nazareth in Galilee, where, of course, Mary and Joseph had travelled from to get to Bethlehem.

[19:12] The ruler there was another of Herod's sons called Philip, a more gentle man who liked a peaceful life. But again, through it all, Joseph gives us a wonderful example of God-fearing Christian obedience.

God spoke, he obeyed. At the time, it might have felt inconvenient and costly, but obedience to God is always the best, best path to take.

And we know that, don't we? We know that, really. So as this year draws to a close and we get ready for 2026, maybe it's a good time to pause and to think back over the last 12 months and see how well we did on this score.

Were there times when we heard God speak to us? Maybe not through angelic dreams and visions, but through his word, through a talk, through that sense in your spirit that God was asking you to obey him in some way.

As you think back to those times, how did you respond? Like Joseph? With immediate obedience or with doubt? Prevarication?

[20:19] No. I'm not doing that. And what about going forward? Are we willing to start the new year with a commitment to God that we are ready, like Joseph, to obey God whatever he asked us to do?

What a difference that would make to our witness if we did. We might need wisdom to know how to obey and with something life-changing, it's always best to share that sense of call with wise Christian friends.

It's always good to check what God is calling us to do. We feel he's calling us to do with his unchanging word in the scriptures. But if God speaks to us through his word, convicting us of our sin, calling us to change something in our lives or obey him in a new way, well, Joseph gives us the pattern of what to do.

He calls us to obey, to say yes to God. The obedient life is the blessed life after all. So what have we seen this morning?

We've had a warning from the life of Herod not to resist Christ's rule in our hearts. We've had an encouragement from the actions of Herod that despite Herod's evil, God is still sovereign over his world even when evil people do evil deeds.

[21:38] And in Joseph, we have a wonderful example of costly, faithful obedience to follow. Well, maybe the passage isn't quite so gloomy after all.

Looking back over the last 12 months, it's been wonderful and I'm sure you'd agree with me on this, to see God at work here among us at St Paul's. We've seen people come to faith, we've seen many others growing in their faith, we've seen the church growing in number and wonderfully we've seen more and more people being willing to obey God and serve him in the church in different ways.

And that's been despite a whole number of challenges in our own lives, within the parish, within the wider church, but I wonder what God will do amongst us in the next year.

Whatever that might be, if we want to see God continue to move among us as individuals and as a church family, well, we need to make sure that it is Christ that we're serving and not ourselves.

When difficult times come as they will, we need to be people full of confidence and hope in God's sovereign rule over his world and over his church. And as God works in us, we need to be ready to obey his call and to follow him wherever he leads.

[22:57] Let's make that decision for ourselves right now. And let's be a church that encourages one another to do that. Not just today, but throughout this coming year.

May God bless us and strengthen us for that. Amen.