

“God’s Enemies Who Ultimately Fail”

Luke 2; Matt. 2

Thankfully you can't buy a Nativity set with Herod in it! But let's admit it – he is part of the narrative regarding Jesus' coming into the world. When Matthew wants to talk about the birth account of Jesus, this is what he includes. And I think that is healthier for everyone to know that the arrival of Jesus into the world was far from perfect. Too many people have unrealistic expectations of a 'perfect' Christmas scenario where every family member is there, all happy, with the perfect meal and the perfect traditions observed and great presents, etc. None of which are bad, but that's not what Christmas is all about (Charlie Brown & gang – we'll come back to that later). The first Christmas was imperfect, a bit messy and even involved danger. Not everyone was happy the Jesus came. And Herod wasn't the only villain in the coming of Christ, as we'll see.

The presence of evil and enemies of God have been tempting humans since Genesis 3. They're all around us today, they were around when Jesus came in the flesh. What can we learn from the ungodly people that were around at the coming of Jesus that will help us live by faith and confident trust in God today as the ungodly continue to seek to remove Jesus from our world?

We'll spend the majority of our time in Matthew 2 but first let's go back to Luke 2, the actual account of Jesus' birth. Luke 2 begins with an edict of an ungodly ruler who sought to control the people of his world so he could get money (taxes) from them. This was why Caesar Augustus issued the decree so he could count people in order to tax them. We read,

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to his own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

If Joseph and Mary were aware of the prophecy in Micah 5 that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, I'm sure they wondered how this was going to happen since they lived in Nazareth, 170 km away. That's a 2 hour drive by car but a minimum 3 day walk, probably 5 days depending on how far along Mary was in her pregnancy. So God solves the problem. How? By using a King's edict to collect taxes which become the manner that allows Joseph and Mary to get to Bethlehem. So one thing we learn from the presence of enemies surrounding Jesus' first coming is that it ...

Reminds us that God Can Redirect Godless Plans **(Luke 2:1-7)**

Now I'm going to go out on a limb and suggest that most of us most likely, when our government passes an unpopular law say to each other 'Wow. I wonder how God is going to redirect that law for His glorious plan?' Our initial reaction is to groan and complain but yet, should we not at least think that God has a purpose we can't see and that we should at least pray along those lines?

'Lord, this new law passed by our godless government is intended to suit their own purposes and is an attempt to discredit you or remove you from society. Please Lord redirect this for your purposes.'

That's a biblical prayer. Because we read in Prov. 21:1-2

The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.

² *All a man's ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart.*

In his own thinking, Augustus thought his plan was good (for himself) because it helped collect taxes. Yet God uses his plan to allow Joseph and Mary to leave their hometown of Nazareth (a place of strife and tension no doubt because Mary was pregnant out of wedlock) and legitimately find a reason to get to Bethlehem since Joseph was from the family of David, Bethlehem being David's hometown. Not that the surroundings of Jesus' birth were ideal – they were not – but God got them there and that was the main thing.

While the passing of laws of godless men and women in power that limit Jesus' followers from practicing their faith or that make life more difficult for its citizens in general are always unpleasant, let's try and pray to God when these things happen, that He would redirect these laws to accomplish His purposes. And, as well, let's continue to pray to God for all those in positions of power that affect how we live, that He may turn their hearts toward Him and become followers of Jesus and no longer His enemies.

Let's move to Matthew 2 where we see more of Jesus' enemies. It's very clear in Matt. 2 that the wise men come after the birth of Jesus. They arrive at a house and they see the child (not the Greek word for infant or new born). The wise men know that this child who is the rightful and future king of Israel "who has been born". That was the whole point of the star, signifying His birth. But this is news to the one who currently sits on Israel's throne, Herod.

This news "disturbs" Herod and all Jerusalem's citizens (v. 3). Herod the Great was not Jewish but an Edomite. His past political and military success led him to procure this title. But he was disturbed in other ways because he was extremely jealous of anyone who might be a potential threat to his rule. He had sons, wives and others killed whom he saw as a threat. And so Herod and even the religious leaders helps us understand why many hate Jesus. The presence of enemies surrounding Jesus' birth ...

Helps Us See These People are Threatened by Jesus **(2:1-23)**

The first thing Herod does when he hears about the birth of Israel's king is he checks with the religious leaders who know what the Bible says. Herod was aware of these prophecies otherwise why would he inquire about it? He specifically asked where is the Messiah to be born? And he asked the keepers of the Scriptures because he was aware that God's Word promised this would happen. If he doubted it he would not have sent the wise men to make a careful search for the child nor would he have asked them the exact time the star appeared (another prophecy from Num. 24:17. Herod was threatened by Jesus and so secretly attempts to use the wise men to find him and will make an attempt to get rid of Jesus. Why? Well he doesn't want to lose the throne. Here we see why most people find submitting to Jesus as Lord very threatening:

Many don't want to give up control of their life (vv.1-8)

Many people have heard the gospel. They even have understood Jesus died for their sins and that forgiveness is only available through receiving Him as Lord and Saviour. That's threatening because they realize it means giving Him control over their life. But that's a good thing not a bad thing. Jesus said in John 10:10,

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

John 8:12 I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 15:10 If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

True life – Jesus' life in us – comes to us through His Spirit when we receive Him by faith and allow Him control over our life. His life brings us a joy that has purpose and is unavailable to us if we don't accept Him. For many however, this seems threatening. While many do not want to give up control of their life, ironically they only have little control anyway. They have no control over disease or tragedy coming into their life and basically no control about when it will end. Life without Jesus now means life without Jesus forever.

But the religious leaders who know where these prophecies are, also make no attempt to put their trust in Jesus. They are indifferent as if 1) Scripture makes no difference in their life or 2) they already think they are kay with God because they have the right answers.

Being indifferent to the gospel of Jesus lumps people with the enemies of Jesus because neither of them are willing to let Jesus control their life. As we read the gospels we see how Jesus confronts the religious leaders with the truth and those who refuse to believe what Scripture says (even though they know what it says) become more angry at Jesus and in so doing show they are His enemies by wanting to get rid of Him – just as Herod did. Indifference and hatred are both enemies of the gospel and at some point

Will eventually hurt others in their hatred of Jesus (vv.16-18)

Once Herod realized he has been outwitted by the wise men - who were warned in a dream to go back home another way – he takes drastic measures to see to it that Jesus is removed by issuing an order to kill all boys in Bethlehem under the age of two. Matthew then quotes Jer. 31:17 concerning Rachel (representing Israel's mother) weeping in Ramah for her children. Ramah was the location point where the Babylonians corralled the Israelites and from there they went into exile. There was much suffering and many tears shed then. Similarly, many mothers in Israel wept for their sons who departed from life, not just exile.

People who are indifferent to Jesus or want nothing to do with Jesus will take their anger and hatred out on Jesus' followers. Those who may have been hurt by Christians or by those who claimed to be Christian often take their anger over anyone they come across who claims to identify with Jesus.

Christopher Hitchens was a well-known atheist who railed against God, Jesus and religion in general, who was a friend of Richard Dawkins. His most famous book is "God is Not Great". One Christian author commented on people like Hitchens and said, "If God and Jesus don't exist, why write about them? Why do modern scientists write books and denounce creation if they think creation never happened? The author

then stated that intelligent people only attack that which is a real threat to their thinking and way of living. In other words, if it wasn't true it wouldn't be a threat.

Meanwhile Jesus Himself goes into exile, as Joseph is warned in a dream about Herod. The gifts of the wise men no doubt were used by the family as a way of meeting their needs for the months, possibly couple of years until they ultimately returned to Nazareth. Joseph planned on returning to the Bethlehem area, possibly Jerusalem (v.21) only to discover Herod's son Archaleus was now in charge. So they return to Nazareth, a non-descript town that didn't even walls and was looked down upon. The perfect place for the Son of God to grow up in; despised, lowly, humbling place as Jesus would be despised, humiliated and looked down upon and eventually crucified. Joseph and Mary's attempt to return to Judea reminds us ...

Enemies of Jesus will exist until Jesus returns (vv.19-23)

Whether it's Haman or Antioches Epiphanes or Herod or Archaleus or Hitler or Hitchens, as long as sin exists so will enemies of Jesus exist. As long as The Enemy continues to manipulate the minds and hearts of those who don't know Christ there will be those who will continue to speak out against Christ. The Bible warns us however that that the enemy masquerades himself as an angel of light and his servants (people who reject God) masquerade themselves as servants of righteousness.

So we get laws passed that supposedly are to enlighten our minds and open our hearts to all lifestyles and choices because that's the loving think to do, even though they go against the truths of the Word of God. So with that cheery news how can the follower of Jesus be strengthened?

Let's remember that Jesus came and lived in a sinful world and suffered at the hands of His enemies. He didn't tell us to be careful and don't be afraid, He entered into our world so we can be

Reassured that God is With us in the Battle Against Evil

The news we are inundated with each day is intentionally negative because that's what grabs are attention. If there's a feel good story, it's always at the end to make you come back the next day and feeling the world isn't so bad. But they don't tell you the real truth; that all that negativity is a result of evil in the world and is a plot to remove God and Jesus from everyone's thinking. Yet here's the truth for you and me that we can cling to and point others to:

Heb. 2:14 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

Jesus became one of us to defeat Satan once for all. To be victorious over sin. His power has been broken. We need to remember that.

¹ John 4:4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

John 1:4 In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

We know longer need to fear the enemy since his power over us is broken. When we know the Lord His love casts out fear and insecurity. He is our hope and refuge.

Remember Linus in 'A Charlie Brown Christmas'? When Charlie Brown is discouraged by the inattention of his friends to rehearsing the Nativity and exasperatedly yells 'Doesn't anyone know what Christmas is all about?' Then Linus comes forward and starts to recite Luke 2:8-14,

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."*

Charles Schultz always tried to slip snippets of God, Jesus and the Bible in his cartoons. And in this one he did something very subtle that most people have never noticed. When Linus, who always needs to hang on to his security blanket comes to 'But the angel said to them 'Do not be afraid ...' he drops his blanket and reads the message of the gospel without it. When we understand who Jesus is we no longer need to fear the enemies of God. Because if God is for us who can be against us?

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us
at olivet@rideau.net