

History knows them as the “Holy Forty”. They were 40 soldiers in the famed Twelfth Legion of Rome’s imperial army, around 320 A.D. One day the captain informed his troops that Emperor Licinius had sent down an edict commanding all soldiers to offer a sacrifice to his pagan god, but 40 of the soldiers, who were followers of Christ, refused. They said, “You can have our armor and even our bodies, but our hearts belong to Jesus Christ.”

The emperor decided to make an example of these soldiers, so they were stripped naked and scourged, and in the middle of a very cruel winter, they were taken out onto the icy surface of a pond and forced to remain there until they froze to death. “Renounce your God and you will be spared from death,” he told them, but no one came forward. So, he left them there on the icy pond to contemplate his offer.

Throughout the night the 40 men stayed together; however, one finally gave in and crawled to safety, recanting his confession of faith in order to survive. The officer in charge that night had been so moved by the scene that during his watch he’d come to Jesus, and when the one man came from of the pond, the guard broke rank, stripped off his clothes, confessed his faith in Jesus Christ, and he walked onto the icy pond to join the remaining 39. The furious emperor demanded that he renounce Jesus, but he refused. When it was all over, the Roman soldiers carried 40 men away who had frozen to death.

Since the time of Jesus, it has been estimated that some 70 million people have been martyred because of their Christian faith, and about 60% of those people were martyred just in the 20th century alone. The Lord’s coming to this earth some 2000 years ago did not take away evil – in fact if you think about it, His coming was sandwiched between it – the evil of Herod near His birth to the evil of the cross at His death, and the evil still continues against those who identify with Jesus.

Speaking of evil, if you remember from last week, we spent a little time looking at *Herod*. He was the King of Judea, but he was not a Jew, and he did not care for the Jewish people. He was a puppet king of Rome, and over the course of his life, Herod was a man driven by paranoia, jealousy, and cruelty. He murdered some 8000 Jews during his reign. He murdered his favorite wife *Mariamne*, and he had conflicts with his sons, putting them into prison and executing two of them. Then as he faced his own death, he rounded up 100 Jewish leaders from Jerusalem and ordered that they should all be slaughtered at the moment of his death so that there would be mourning rather than rejoicing. Five days before Herod died, well into his seventies, he executed another son who had threatened his rule. So, Herod was an evil man who did not think twice about killing anyone for any reason.

Now, if you recall the story, the magi – these astrologers from the east followed a supernatural star into Israel looking for the King of the Jews, and understandably they go to capital city of Jerusalem – to the palace and they ask “*Where is He? Where is the one born the King of the Jews?*”

Well, when Herod hears of this, he becomes very agitated – there’s a rival in his kingdom, and he summons the Jewish religious leaders to tell him about this King – the Messiah. The religious leaders quote Scripture and tell Herod that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, just down the road only five miles away. So, Herod knows *where* the Messiah is, but he does not know *when* the Messiah was born and so he secretly calls in the magi to get that answer.

We are not told what the magi disclose to Herod, but by Herod’s actions – actions we will look at this morning – it would seem that the Messiah had been born a year, maybe two years earlier, and after getting his answer from the magi, Herod then tells them to go search for the Child in Bethlehem, and when they find Him, to come back to the palace and let him know so he can worship the King as well.

The magi leave the palace, the supernatural star reappears, and it leads them right to the house of Joseph and Mary and the Child called “*Jesus*” who is the King at birth. The magi worship Him, and they honor Him with treasures, and then being warned by God not to return to Herod, the magi quietly depart and head home another way, and it would seem that as soon as they left – maybe within hours, that night God gives another warning.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Matthew 2** and we will pick up where we left off beginning with **verse 13**, where Matthew tells us:

¹³ Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.” ¹⁴ So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. ¹⁵ He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called My Son.”

After the magi departed, maybe that very night, an **angel** appears to Joseph in a **dream** – and remember this isn’t the first time Joseph has experienced an angel in a dream – it may be the same angel, and the angel tells Joseph to take the Child and Mary and **flee**, and don’t come back until you hear from me.

Imagine that. Joseph and Mary had just had this great visit by the magi and their entourage, they packed away the expensive gifts, they went to bed for the night, and Joseph has this dream – not Mary, but Joseph, where an angel tells him take his family and flee. Joseph wakes everybody up – there’s no time to explain and there’s no time to plan – instead they quickly gather their stuff, to include the gifts they had just received which will be more than enough to support them, and they head south into Egypt until the coast is clear.

So, that’s what happens – Joseph and Mary don’t know where they are going in Egypt – they’ve probably never been there, but they trust and obey God anyway, and they stay there until Herod dies. We are not told how long that was – it could have been a few months, maybe a few years, but whatever the time frame, it was to **fulfill** a promise of God spoken by the prophet **Hosea**. In **Hosea 11:1**, we are told this,

When Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.

If you read that verse in **Hosea**, you probably wouldn’t connect the dots with Jesus because this was about the children of Israel. In this verse, God remembered His love for His people when He brought them out of Egypt, but now Matthew tells us that what happened to God’s people back then and there during the Exodus was merely a picture of something much later – something much greater concerning God’s own Son.

Now, before we continue on, there is something that we can take from this, and here it is: *God leads those who have chosen to follow Him*. Like this crazy situation with Joseph and Mary, sometimes life is confusing and chaotic, sometimes we don’t know where we are being led, but this we do know – we know Who is leading us, and that’s more than enough.

So, in the cover of darkness, Joseph takes his family and flees to Egypt, and as I said earlier, the magi do not return to the palace as Herod had commanded, and it does not take long for him to realize they aren’t coming, and beginning with **verse 16**, Matthew tells us what happens next.

¹⁶ Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. ¹⁷ Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:

**¹⁸“A voice was heard in Ramah,
Weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children;
And she refused to be comforted,
Because they were no more.”**

Now, I want to say something about this before I explain it. This is the only reference found anywhere regarding this slaughter. It's not written anywhere else in the Bible except by Matthew, and there is no mention of it by any of the ancient historians. It would seem that for most people, this was considered "*business as usual*" for Herod and wasn't even worth mentioning, but God wanted it mentioned and He inspired Matthew to do so.

So, we are told that Herod goes into a violent rage because the magi did not return to give their report to him – he thought he was being mocked, and so he gives the orders to slaughter all the boys **two years old and under** in the vicinity of Bethlehem, perhaps as many as 30 boys, in an attempt to kill this rival King.

I picture soldiers knocking on doors – knocking down doors, rummaging through homes and businesses, looking for any evidence of a child, and once a boy was found, the sword comes out and the boy is killed. I suspect that many of the parents tried to run away with their children, some likely fought back, and I imagine that many of the parents lost their lives in the process, but we are not told any of that.

Then Matthew quotes something from the prophet **Jeremiah** which says,

**“A voice was heard in Ramah,
Weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children;
And she refused to be comforted,
Because they were no more.”**

You may not know this, but the very first mention of Bethlehem in the Bible, way back in **Genesis 35**, occurred when **Rachel** died giving birth to her son Benjamin. That's where she died and was buried. Then some 600 years before Christ, **Jeremiah** gives us this symbolic image of Rachel – a mother of the ancestors of Israel, in **Ramah**, near Bethlehem, in great distress over the loss of her children who were either killed or ripped from their arms and taken away into slavery, like Daniel, during the Babylonian invasion.

Now here in Matthew's reference, Rachel once again symbolically represents these mothers who were in agony over their children – not because of the Babylonians, but this time because of Herod, refusing to be comforted because their children **were no more**, but little did they know, if any measure of comfort could be offered, their children were not *no more* – they were in the presence of God – much more alive than they would ever be in this world, and if these mothers were to continue reading the words of **Jeremiah**, they would read that God had not abandoned them, but one day, He would turn their sorrow into joy.

Ironically, Jesus – the Child who had escaped, would one day give His own life so that these moms – moms who might come to believe, would eventually see their children again.

Dr. W. A. Criswell, said that on a flight he found himself seated beside a well-known theology professor. He desperately wanted to start a conversation and they did get to talk. The man told Dr. Criswell about how he had recently lost his little boy through death, and this was his story:

He said his boy had come home from school with a fever and we thought it was just one of those childhood things, but it turned out to be a very aggressive form of meningitis. The doctor said we cannot save your little boy. He's going to die.

And so, this professor, loving his son as he did, sat by his bedside. It was the middle of the day and the little boy whose strength was going from him and whose vision and brain was getting clouded said, "Daddy, it's getting dark, isn't it?" The professor said to his son, "Yes son it is getting dark, very dark." Of course, it was very dark for him. He said, "Daddy, I guess it's time for me to go to sleep, isn't it?"

He said, "Yes, son, it's time for you to go to sleep."

The professor said the little fellow had a way of fixing his pillow just so, and putting his head on his hands when he slept, and he fixed his pillow like that and laid his head on his hands and said, "Good night, Daddy. I will see you in the morning." He then closed his eyes in death and stepped over into heaven.

Dr. Criswell said the professor didn't say anymore after that. He just looked out the window of that airplane for a long time. Then he turned back and he looked at Dr. Criswell with tears coming down his cheeks and he said, "Dr. Criswell, I can hardly wait till the morning."

In many ways, that's what God was saying through the prophet **Jeremiah**, "*I know it's dark, I know there's evil and suffering, but trust Me, morning is coming.*"

Now, before we continue on, I suspect some of you might have a question – a question that goes something like this: **Why didn't God just take out this evil man named Herod so he was no longer a threat to anyone?** I mean, he was close to death anyway and that would seem to fix a lot of the problems. Joseph and Mary wouldn't need to run for their lives into Egypt and these young innocent boys wouldn't have been killed.

First, let me make it clear that I do not want to say something that God has not said, and secondly, I have to be careful with my opinions – for if you remember, that's exactly what got *Job's* friends into trouble with God – their opinions, so I need to be really careful here.

I will admit that sometimes it's hard to understand why God does what He does or why He doesn't intercede in the way I think He should – and I know I am not alone. Since I have already mentioned **Job** – he struggled with this very issue after losing everything and everyone but his wife, and when Job – a righteous man, asked God *why* – and after a chat with God, Job quickly learns he doesn't know as much as he thought about anything. Job learns that God's ways are too far beyond his comprehension, God's plans are very complex, and more importantly, God is in charge and in control. So then, this prompts a much bigger question for us: **Can God be trusted? Can God be trusted when, like Job, things don't go your way and you can't understand why?**

Now, this brings me to another question – a similar question. **Can God be trusted when evil seems to flourish and go unpunished?** We know we live in a fallen sinful world and there are evil people in this world, who like Herod, do terrible things and cause a lot of pain and suffering. For *those* people – not us of course, but for *those* people, we want to see instantaneous justice by God – *God just take them out*, **but what would it look like if God applied that kind of justice for everyone?** In other words, when you commit a sin, you get what you deserve right there on the spot according to God's standards. Well, if you think about it, if God did that for everyone when they committed sin, this world would become *hell*. **So, do you really want a God who exercises instantaneous justice?** I don't, even if that means God is patient with those I might consider to be "*evil*" like Herod.

Now, maybe we can tackle this from another angle because we are really smart like that. What if, without any grace or mercy or forgiveness, God just got rid of all the

people who committed sinful acts such as murder, and rape, and child molestation. He just got rid of the *Herod's* in this world. That might work, but given God's righteous character and His view of sin, why would He stop there? Why not include arson, and robbery, domestic violence, and crimes against the vulnerable? That seems reasonable, but why would a righteous God stop there? How about adding lying and cheating and stealing? Do you see where this is going? If a righteous God took out all the sinful people across the board, there would be no one left.

So, where does that leave us? Can God be trusted? Can we trust a righteous God when there is evil in the world and things don't always seem right?

Okay, let's move on before I go too far down this rabbit trail and completely lose my way. Beginning with **verse 19**, Matthew tells us what happens after Herod eventually dies.

¹⁹ But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, ²⁰ "Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead." ²¹ So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into 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. Then after being warned by God in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, ²³ and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

To me, this passage seems fairly straight forward. Herod dies and the angel appears to Joseph again and tells him to return his family back to Israel. When reading this, it seems that Joseph intended to return to Bethlehem, but he's troubled when he hears about **Archelaus**. Archelaus was 19 years old when he took the throne from his father Herod; however, the Romans divided up the region of Judea and Archelaus only reigned over a portion of it. Archelaus was evil and inept – in fact, so evil and so inept that the Romans couldn't tolerate him, and after 10 years, he was summoned to Rome, stripped of his authority, banished to another country, and later replaced with a man named *Pontius Pilate*.

So, instead of returning to Bethlehem, Joseph is directed by God to take his family further north into the region of **Galilee**, to a city called **Nazareth** – a place he is familiar with, and it's with that connection that Jesus would later be called "*Jesus of Nazareth*."

Now, I don't know about you, but for me, this passage felt like a roller coaster ride. There was a lot of movement – a lot of ups and downs, and twists and turns, but I hope if you got anything from this, you learned that God can be trusted even when you don't understand, even when evil seems to prevail, even when you suffer.

God knows what is best and His timing is right. Maybe later, you'll come to understand *why* – you'll get your answers, but in the meantime, God asks that you trust and obey Him.

Source Material:

Stuart K. Weber, Matthew, vol. 1, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).
The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament – Walvoord & Zuck
Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible Exposition Commentary. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
Charles R. Swindoll, Matthew 1–15, vol. 1A, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2020).
The Christmas Massacre 2017 – Steven J. Cole
Matthew 2, CCPhillyResources – Joe Focht
Frank Stagg, "Matthew," in Matthew–Mark, ed. Clifton J. Allen, Broadman Bible Commentary (Broadman Press, 1969).
John F. MacArthur Jr., The MacArthur Bible Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005)
Enduring Word – David Guzik