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“The Depravity of Herod”

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Matthew 2:16-18

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.”

Thank you very much for coming to hear the message for today. Before we begin our next lesson, let us reiterate our reason for attending Church.

We attend Church to obtain the mind of Christ, meaning, to have the Bible illuminated in our minds so that we can clearly understand the principles that Jesus taught and base our daily personal decisions on those principles.

We come to Church because we want to be obedient to the Bible, which is the doctrine of Jesus Christ, in an informed, insightful and intelligent manner.

I am aware that we are all familiar with the Christmas story, but we take this time, every year, to review the circumstances in which the most pivotal person in the history of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, came to us. In our last lesson, we chronicled the faith of Joseph, who agreed to marry Jesus’ earthly mother Mary although Mary was pregnant and he was not the father. To marry Mary was not the first solution to Mary’s pregnancy that Joseph had in mind.

Matthew 1:19 records:

19 Then Joseph, [Mary’s] husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make [Mary] a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.

To “put a woman away” is a Jewish euphemism for divorcing a woman to whom one is married or ending one’s betrothal with a woman to whom one is engaged. Continuing, **Matthew 1:20-25** says:

20 But while [Joseph] thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

21 And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.”

The angel assured Joseph that although Mary was pregnant, she had not been unfaithful to him. Matthew, the writer of this Gospel, then quotes the prophecy of Isaiah that applies to the situation, in **Matthew 1:22-23**:

22 So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying:

23 “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us.”

God created the circumstances of Mary’s pregnancy and then revealed that which He had done to Joseph. Joseph was faced with the choice of believing God or believing that which he could see with his own eyes. Joseph chose to trust in God, as **Matthew 1:24** says:

24 Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took [Mary] to him [as] his wife,

Joseph chose trusting obedience to God. Before the birth of the child, once again God intervened in human affairs to fulfill prophecy. Micah prophesied, in **Micah 5:2**:

2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting.”

The word everlasting in the prophecy points to the coming of God to the earth, as no created being can be “from everlasting”. This prophesied God-Man with whom Mary is pregnant is to be born in Bethlehem, but Joseph and Mary live eighty miles away in Nazareth. God used the power of the Roman state to cause Joseph to travel to Bethlehem at exactly the time for which the prophecy of Micah called. **Luke 2:1-5** records:

1 And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

2 This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.

3 So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,

5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

There is probably no conversation that Joseph could have had with Mary to convince her to leave her familiar surroundings and go to Bethlehem, but God used the authority of the Roman Emperor to make Mary move. **Proverbs 21:1** records:

1 The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.

So Mary gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem as was prophesied, and she and Joseph decided to take up residence there. After almost two years, the circumstance to which our text refers began. **Matthew 2:1-2** records:

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

2 saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

Judah had been an autonomous Jewish state shortly before installation of Herod upon the throne. The entire Palestinian area had previously been under the control of the Greeks, but, early in the first century BC, the Greeks found themselves being conquered by the Roman Empire, and the Jews took the opportunity to obtain their political freedom from Greece while Greece was occupied with the encroachment of Rome. Unfortunately for the Jews, the Romans decided to take over Palestine while they were taking over the rest of the Greece, and so, after a short period of independence, the Jews found that they had actually exchanged one set of masters for another.

Herod, a half Jewish politician that helped facilitate the conquest of the Palestine for the Romans, was given supervision of Judah by them.

Herod was greatly disturbed by the “one born the King of the Jews” of which the wise men told him. Herod was not the King of the province of Judea because of his Jewish lineage, as he was not even a full blooded Jew, but was installed as King by the Roman emperor. Herod inferred from the words of the wise men that a legitimate King had been born to recreate the kingdom ruled by David in the Old Testament, and who would depose Herod and his lineage as illegitimate. Herod, having received his position by betrayal, was defensive about his position.

But Herod was crafty as well as defensive, and decided to use the visit of the wise men to snuff out this new competition. Herod, as half Jewish and the ruler of a Jewish state, was generally but not specifically familiar with the words of the prophets, and so Herod called the priests and scribes to give him and his visitors more specific information. When the scribes quoted **Micah 5:2**,

Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem with instructions to bring him back the information about the child that they ascertained. **Matthew 2:9-11** records:

9 When [the wise men] heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

11 And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The wise men had obtained the information that Herod sought, but God intervened to save the child King from the tyrant king. **Matthew 2:12** records:

12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, [the wise men] departed for their own country another way.

As well as warning the wise men to not return to Herod, God warned Joseph that Jesus was in danger from the reach of Herod. Now, God chose Joseph to be the earthly father of Jesus because of Joseph’s faith, but also because of Joseph’s wisdom. Secular definitions of intelligence include the skills of logical reasoning, problem solving, critical thinking, and adaptation. God’s Word does not reference intelligence, but wisdom. It says, in **Proverbs 12:15**

15 The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, But he who heeds counsel is wise.

My father said the same thing differently. Dad said, “The first sign of human intelligence is the ability to follow simple instructions. Joseph had this ability, which is why he married Mary after receiving the instructions from the angel. God, knowing Joseph’s wisdom, continued to give Joseph information with which to make wise decisions. **Matthew 2:13-15** records:

13 Now when [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.”

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.”

The wise Joseph obeyed God. He did not argue about having recently moved from Nazareth to Bethlehem. He did not complain about having just established a successful new

location for his carpentry business or having just built a new home for his young family. He did not even ask, as did Zacharias in our last lesson, for a sign that the information given to him by the angel was correct.

Joseph heard the word of God, and obeyed. This is an example of both wisdom and intelligence.

The difference between people who act intelligently and people that do not is not the ability to think critically, reason logically, solve problems or adapt, but it is that to act intelligently requires the ability to follow instructions, and people that act intelligently will do so, while people that act unintelligently will not. There have been thousands of years of recorded history, pages written in law books, and sixty-six books in the Bible that will describe proper actions act to us.

So we have plenty of precedence from which to develop wisdom. But the opposite of wisdom is not stupidity, it is willfulness.

A little kid sits in the kitchen as Mommy cooks dinner, and he sees the glowing eye on the stove. "What is that?" his little mind thinks, and one day, as Mommy is holding him as she stirs the soup, he decides to touch the pretty glowing circle to see what it feels like.

"No. It's hot", says Mommy firmly. "Don't touch that or you'll get burned."

This is an intelligence test.

Whenever curiosity has a conflict with instruction, the meeting is a test of intelligence. Now, let us think about this intelligently.

Mommy loves us. She sacrificed her body to bring us into the world, and sacrifices her time to take care of us, to bathe us, to clothe us, to prepare us meals, to play with us. We know that Mommy is a benevolent force in our lives, and we love her. On the other hand, the stove is interesting. It glows, is has an interesting color, and Mommy is standing right in front of it. We can reach it if we try, so why shouldn't we try? Aren't we growing up to have new experiences every day?

There is only one reason that we should not try. Mommy said no, because it's hot. We may not be sure what hot means, but we are sure what no means. And Mommy said no. Mommy is taking care of us, not the other way around, and, if we were intelligent, we would count on Mommy's experience in the world to instruct us as to what we can do and what we can not do. God is like Mommy. His word should be instructions to us.

A few years later that same child goes to school. He talks to the other kids on the playground, and one of them has an interesting toy. "Where did you get that?" you ask.

"My mommy got it from the store", says the kid.

The toy has bells, lights and whistles, and it operates with a little remote. When the kid puts the toy on the ground and presses the remote, the toy goes around in circles. The kid can drive the toy just like Dad drives the car.

When the child comes home, he goes to see Mommy. "Mommy", he said, "this boy had a toy with a remote that he could drive around the playground. I want one. Can I have it?"

"Maybe for Christmas", Mommy says, "but not now."

This is an intelligence test.

Whenever our desire has a conflict with instruction, the meeting is a test of intelligence. Now, let us think about this intelligently.

Mommy loves us. She sacrificed her body to bring us into the world, and sacrifices her time to take care of us, to bathe us, to clothe us, to prepare us meals, to play with us. We know that Mommy is a benevolent force in our lives, and we love her. Mommy tells us that we cannot have the toy until Christmas. On the other hand, the other kid has the toy now, and doesn't have to wait for Christmas, whenever that is. Well, to get the toy, we can either get Mommy to take us to the store and we can get the toy for ourselves, or we can take the toy from the other boy. After all, shouldn't we have the things that we want?

There is only one reason that we should not. Mommy said not now. We are not sure when, but we are sure what not now means. And Mommy said not now. Mommy is taking care of us, not the other way around, and, if we were intelligent, we would count on Mommy's experience in the world to instruct us as to what we can do and what we can not do. God is like Mommy. His word should be instructions to us.

I hope that even the youngest of us have developed some understanding of intelligence and wisdom from these examples. Intelligence is not the ability to think critically, reason logically, solve problems or adapt. Intelligence is the ability to follow simple instructions. Most criminals are above average in the cognitive skills of thinking critically, reasoning logically, solving problems and adapting, but are below average in their ability to follow instructions.

I read in the news in the last week about Bernie Madoff, who used his investment firm to swindle high net worth individuals and banks around the world out of \$50 billion dollars. He was able to do this because had proven himself trustworthy as the chairman of the Nasdaq stock exchange, before he started his crooked firm. He had done such a good job enforcing the rules of investing on others and had proven himself so knowledgeable and reliable that the people whose money he stole could not believe that he would intentionally be dishonest. Nevertheless, with all of his credentials from his jobs throughout his career, and his knowledge of the rules of investing through his time as the chairman of the Nasdaq, Bernie stole money from people that trusted him and his reputation in a manner that he knew was illegal. Bernie did not lose the money through a bad investment; Bernie stole the money deliberately. He confessed the theft to his sons, who told the FBI. When they came to arrest him, he said that he knew that that which he was doing was illegal, that eventually he would be caught and sent to prison, but he did it anyway.

What is the first criterion for an intelligent decision?

It has to be within the rules.

The most important thing that we can learn in life is the discipline to follow simple instructions. The problem that we have is that acting intelligently delays gratification, meaning that to be intelligent, we have to plan for the long term rather than gratifying short term desires.

1 Timothy 6:17 tells us:

17 Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.

Listen to the last thought in this verse. The living God is rich, and He gives us all things to enjoy. Not some things, but all things to enjoy. How can this be true? I don't have everything. Do you?

Let us apply wisdom to this statement. First of all, the Scripture does not say that God gives us all things, but that He gives us all things to enjoy. Remember the problem of the stove? If Mommy let you touch the pretty, glowing eye, you would not have enjoyed it. Of course, as a

child, you didn't know that. You know what things that you want, but you may not understand the consequences of obtaining them. **James 4:2-3** tells us:

2 You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.

3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Our misunderstanding of life through the seeking of pleasure is our problem. As the secular songwriter and the eye of the stove will tell you, everything that is good to you is not good for you. But our problem is our limited focus on pleasure and the possibility that we may choose not to plan past it.

My problem is that I want what I want when I want it, without regard for the future. That is why Bernie Madoff is going to prison. He knew he was going to eventually get caught when he first started stealing, that that which he was doing was wrong and that his actions were leading him to prison, but Bernie chose to take the trip because of the beautiful scenery on the way.

When God tells us that we ought not have something, it is usually because there are consequences involved in obtaining that which we want that they we not enjoy. Suppose Mommy spent the grocery money and bought you the toy. Could you eat the toy for dinner, or would you just have to go hungry? Parents are charged with supporting their children, and have resources to budget in the most intelligent manner possible. Children can ask for that which they want, but they need to understand that their desires are not the most important criterion that their parents may have to consider in making the decision. Their needs are more important than their desires.

So, we all need the discipline of intelligence. We all need to understand obedience, the word "no" and the word "later". No, you can't have that which you want, but if you obey your parents, if you obey God, you may be able to receive it later if it is good for you. You may never receive it, because although you think that you would enjoy it, there may be negative consequences if you obtain it of which you are not aware and from which God is protecting you.

Joseph had a new business in Bethlehem, a new house, and a new baby. He was busy creating a life for his family; he and his wife had friends, were developing a support system, and were doing well. He had a healthy child and a good environment, and was looking forward to growing and developing in Bethlehem. But the angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream and told him, "Leave Bethlehem immediately and go to Egypt, out of the reach of King Herod, who is going to try to kill your son."

Joseph acted intelligently, and left his home, his business, and all that he had in Bethlehem, in accordance with the angel's instruction. He did not wait until the morning when he could sell his business interests, but, as the Scripture tells us, he left that night.

Joseph moved when God said move, because of his intelligent ability to follow instructions. As the episode continues, our text, **Matthew 2:16**, tells us:

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.

Herod knew that there was a male child in Bethlehem that was born to be King of the

Jews. He knew of the prophecy and called the Jewish priests of God to find out the exact nature of the prophecy. Now, let us think about this for a moment.

Prophecy comes from God, who says, in **Deuteronomy 18:18-19**:

18 I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.

19 And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.

The words of the prophet of God are sure to come to pass. It is true that when God prophecies disaster, the disaster is a function of our bad behavior, and that God may relent of his prophecy if we repent of our sins. But, other than that, the prophets are men called by God to tell us the plans of God for our lives. There was no sin involved in the prophecy of the coming King, so there was no repentance which Herod could perform that would cause God to repent of His prophecy.

But Herod did not want the prophecy to come to pass. Herod wanted to remain King of the Jews for the rest of his life, and his history indicated that he had no compunction about killing to achieve his objective. When Herod became suspicious that his first wife was cheating on him, he had her put on trial for adultery. Herod suborned perjury from his wife's mother by threatening her with execution, used the perjury to have his wife convicted and then had her executed. Herod remarried, and then became suspicious of his two sons by the wife that he had executed, had them convicted of treason and executed. Since Herod had no hesitation about killing his own wives and children, you can see that Herod had no hesitation about wiping out all the young male children of one the towns under his jurisdiction.

Some people will do anything possible to get that which they want, whether their action is ethical, moral or correct. The problem with acting in this manner is that it ignores the commands and power of God. When the soldiers under Herod's command reached Bethlehem to carry out Herod's command, Jesus, the child that Herod sought to kill, was already out of the city, on His way to Egypt. And the same Herod that sought to murder Jesus Christ, within two years, suffered from intestinal ulcers and developed worms that ate him from the inside out, exiting his body through his private parts. Josephus, the Jewish historian, recorded that Herod died a horrible, painful death, even as the Lord Jesus Christ, whom he sought to murder was growing and preparing to complete the plan of God by giving Himself for the world.

Jesus Christ was born and preserved by God and a wise father to remedy our sinfulness; the condition in which men would destroy one another and kill one another's children just to preserve a position of authority; the condition in which one would steal \$50 billion dollars just to keep up the appearance of being a great investor. Men without a wise, godly perspective take the short-sighted view that they should do whatever is necessary so that they can have that which they want in the short term, and choose to ignore the long term consequences of their actions. But God instructs us to be wise and to prepare, not for earthly glory, but for the eternal kingdom.

1 Timothy 6:17-19 says:

17 Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.

18 Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share,

19 storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

It is tempting to follow the direction of secular society during this blessed season. The secular symbol commemorating the birth of the Savior is not the babe in the manger, but a fat man in a red suit that comes down the chimney bringing toys. But material possessions are not the totality of that which God gives us to enjoy, and often, our material possessions and our secular positions can be used by the devil as traps to keep us away from that which is really important.

As we celebrate the season, let us remember that which **John 3:16** tells us:

16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Jesus Christ, according to Micah 5:2, was from old, from everlasting. He did not come into the world that we might have riches; in fact, the example that He gave us was that He made Himself of no reputation. He was not born in the King's palace, but in the most humble circumstances to a working class family, His trade was that of a carpenter, and He worked with His hands, He had no academic or leadership particular credentials and He held no particular official position. Outside of the fact that He could heal the sick and raise the dead, Jesus came to us as an ordinary fellow. But Jesus made his mark on the world by doing two things: following the commandments of God to perfection and giving Himself, including His very life, for the benefit of others. Those two things are the keys to Christianity and doing them is the way to please God. We have the example of Herod, who lived for himself, and the example of Jesus Christ, who lived for others. Let us use our intelligence, emulate the example of Jesus Christ and celebrate the season by giving ourselves to the work of making the world a place in which the Gospel can be believed because of our actions. Let us follow the wisdom of God and give ourselves to others as Jesus gave Himself to us.

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