

**“Curiouser and Curiouser”**  
**Matthew 2:13-23**  
**October 22, 2017**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Matthew has introduced Jesus as the Savior and as Immanuel, which means God with us (chapter 1), and then as the object of worship by far-off Gentiles, the Magi (chapter 2). Now he is ready to introduce us to the kind of Messiah Jesus would be. This is where things get a little curious, or, as expressed in the title of the sermon, “curiouser and curiouser,” to quote from Alice in Wonderland. Lewis Carroll writes that Alice spoke these words because “she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English.”

What is so surprising about Matthew’s portrayal of the Messiah is that he is weak and despised. We get a clue about his weakness in the way Jesus is referred to repeatedly in this chapter. While in chapter 1 he is referred to by use of strong names such as Immanuel and Jesus, which means Jehovah saves, in chapter 2 he is referred to by a name that communicates weakness. Nine times he is called “the child.” Everything about Jesus in this text communicates weakness. He is also despised in that he comes from the town of Nazareth. This is not the first time Matthew has surprised us in his Gospel. We saw it first in his inclusion of four Gentile women in the genealogy of Jesus, and then in the fact that Gentile idolaters were the first to worship Jesus. Both of these show the grace of God, and we are going to see the same in his surprising depiction of Jesus as weak and despised.

**I. A Weak and Despised Messiah**

One night not long after the Magi left, Joseph had a dream in which an angel of the Lord appeared to him with an alarming message. **“Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him”** (v. 13). Israel was not looking for a Messiah who would flee at the first threat of danger, but one who would fight to defeat Israel’s enemies. They wanted a Messiah of power, not of weakness. We understand that impulse too. In Jesus, God has come to right all wrongs in the world. So we would expect him to begin with a display of power against this great wrong encountered early in his life. If we were writing this story, we would write it differently. Jesus, of course, was just a baby, or perhaps a toddler, at this time. But he was God’s anointed. Our preferred story would not have Joseph take Jesus and flee, but stay and be protected by God’s supernatural power. Perhaps something like a force field

could be erected around him, and every time Herod would send a soldier to take Jesus he would be repelled.

What actually happened is that Joseph took Jesus and Mary and fled right then and there, seemingly in a panic. Matthew tells us that they fled by night, probably the same night as the dream when the angel warned him. And so Jesus and his family became refugees in Egypt. Let's think for a while what it would be like to be a refugee in a foreign land. I'm sure they had to travel light, leaving behind most of their belongings. Joseph had been in Bethlehem long enough by this time to have secured work, which was providing for the needs of his family. That too would be left behind. The journey, as is the case with almost all journeys of refugees, would have been fraught with dangers and uncertainties. Where would they find the essentials of food, water, and lodging? What would they find when they arrived at their destination? They were leaving an extended network of family and friends for life with unknown strangers. Though Egypt had a large Jewish population at this time, it was still a foreign land. And all this happened to young parents with a small child in tow.

Following their escape to Egypt, Herod discovers that he has been betrayed by the wise men. They were supposed to return and tell him where he could find Jesus. Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they instead departed for home through a different route. Herod becomes furious and orders the execution of all the male children under two years of age, not only in Bethlehem, but in the surrounding region as well.

At first glance, Herod's murder of these babies seems to be just one more atrocity in a world not unfamiliar with such things. Cruel dictators have long been unjustly slaughtering innocent people when it suits their purposes and advances their causes. It is not an isolated event, but part of a larger story that has been going on since the beginning. Right after Adam and Eve sinned, God pronounced a curse upon the serpent. He said, **"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel"** (Gen. 3:15). Herod is the offspring of the devil and Jesus the ultimate offspring of the woman, and we see here the realization of this curse. Revelation 12 speaks similarly.

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.<sup>2</sup> She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.<sup>3</sup> And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems.<sup>4</sup> His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.<sup>5</sup> She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne,<sup>6</sup> and the woman fled into the

wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days. (Rev. 12:1-6 ESV)

This is a battle that endures through the entire Bible. A dragon crouches and seeks to devour the seed of the woman before that seed can crush his head. So the dragon, Satan, stirred up Cain to kill Abel. He worked in Pharaoh's heart to murder the male babies of Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, he brought nations against Israel in an attempt to destroy them. Now he does so against Jesus, using Herod as his instrument. But the dragon misses and Jesus escapes. Revelation 12 goes on to say that the dragon, filled with fury, takes out his wrath upon the offspring of the woman, that is, the Church.

After Herod died, an angel appears again to Joseph in a dream and tells him that it is now safe to return to his native land. He heads back to Israel and is warned by an angel once more, this time telling him not to return to Bethlehem. When Herod died, his kingdom was divided among Herod's three sons. Archelaus was one of those sons, and he was assigned the region of Judea, in which both Jerusalem and Bethlehem were located. He was a violent man who would have put at risk the life of Jesus. So Joseph goes instead to Nazareth. Matthew says that this was in fulfillment of what the prophets had said, even though there is no specific statement in any of the Old Testament prophets that says, **"He shall be called a Nazarene."** I believe Matthew is referring to passages that say that the Messiah will be despised, most clearly Isaiah 53. Nazareth was a despised place. Do you remember what Nathaniel said when he heard that Jesus was from Nazareth? **"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"** (John 1:46). It would have been far preferable for Jesus to grow up in Bethlehem, the home of the great King David and the recognized city of Israel's kings.

So Matthew's early depiction of Jesus is of a Messiah who was both weak and despised. We will talk about the theological reasons behind that in our next point, but I want to make one application before we move to that. As followers of Christ, we are called to accept weakness for the simple reason that weakness is an expression of trust in God. We are not required to seek weakness. But if we trust in God we will accept it and even boast in it, as Paul taught us. He boasted in weakness **"so that the power of Christ may rest upon me"** (2 cor. 12:9). The alternative to accepting weakness is to seek power. Did you notice, though, that the one in our passage who is seeking power is the tyrant, Herod? The inevitable result of seeking power is the emotion recorded of him in verse 16. Herod **"became furious."** Someone was telling me this week of a book on anger by David Powlison called *Good and Angry*. The second chapter of the book is titled "Do you have an anger problem?" The entire chapter consists of but one word—"Yes"—and then moves on to chapter 3. We deal with anger as we begin to trust God, and trusting God often boils down to accepting the weakness he allows into our lives. What is that weakness for

you? Is it something about your body? Your finances? Your job? Your marriage or relationships? For all of us, that weakness involves honesty about our sin.

We can see in Jesus the wisdom of God in the weaknesses he visited upon Jesus. While this Herod would not succeed in his efforts to kill Jesus, 33 years later another Herod would. Jesus would die, but in the weakness of that death salvation would come to the world. The sin-bearer was bearing sin that sinners like us might be forgiven and freed.

## **II. A Gracious and Patient Messiah**

Why did Jesus come first in weakness rather than in power? Why didn't he take the brokenness of this world in his hand and rid the world of tyrants like Herod? One of the reasons many give for not believing in Jesus is the problem of evil. They reason that if Jesus can stop evil but doesn't, then he must not be good. But if he wants to stop evil but can't, then he must not be God. So, according to this reasoning, Jesus is either not God or not good. In either case, He is not worthy of our worship.

But there is another possibility. Perhaps Jesus is dealing with evil in a way that is gracious and loving. Let me explain. The slaughter of the innocent babies of Bethlehem is a perfect test case for this because it is precisely the kind of evil people say God should stop. Could God have done so? Of course, and quite easily for him. But there is something very important that must be remembered. God's justice is perfect, and one of the implications of that is that it must be consistent. If God judges Herod for the sin of the selfish and unjust use of his power, then he must treat all the guilty in the same way. And if he judges this sin, he must judge all sins. Most of us want God to judge sin, but it is always the other person's sin we want him to judge, not our own. We want God to draw a line and say, "I will judge evil on the more serious side of the line, but overlook it on the other side." And we always want the line to be drawn just beyond where we would place ourselves so that we are safe on the good side of that line. What it comes down to is this: if God dealt with evil as we want him to, he would be forced by the demands of his own justice to judge all of humanity. We are the source of evil in this world. Even the effects of it we see in nature are caused ultimately by the rebellion of the human race.

So what has God done instead? He has in fact come into the world to set all things right, and that will involve ridding the world of all evil for the simple reason that human evil is the cause of all the world's ills. At his second coming he will judge evil and evildoers completely and speak those awful words to all evildoers, "Depart from me, for I do not know you." Had he done so at his first coming, no one would have been spared. So at his first coming, he comes in weakness and humility as the sin-bearer. He comes to redeem and rescue. Even the most wicked sinner, sinners like Herod, are given space to repent and

accept his gracious offer of forgiveness. The God of all glory is willing to be weak and despised for your sake. Instead of being a reason not to believe in God, the continued presence of evil in our world is actually cause to fall before him in gratitude for his grace and patience to us.

There is one more thing that is important to see in this passage. Did you notice that on three different occasions Matthew mentions that these events in the life of Jesus fulfill Scripture? He goes to Egypt so he can return from there and so fulfill a Scripture that says, **“Out of Egypt I called my son”** (v. 15). The weeping of the mothers in Bethlehem fulfills the Scriptures, as does Jesus’ home in Nazareth. On the other hand, the text speaks three times of Herod’s death. Here’s the lesson: evil will pass, but God’s word will remain forever. God’s word declares that Jesus is the Savior and the Lord, and it must be fulfilled. He will save his people and he will reign over the whole earth in righteousness and justice. It will happen because he will bring it about, and there is no force in heaven or on the earth that can stop it.

I find in the presence of evil a compelling reason to renounce atheism. In a world that is riddled with evil, why should there be any good? Evil has a tendency to grow and spread until it overcomes everything else. But it has not been able to do so. Why not? Because there is a God in heaven who will not allow it to do so. Consider the miracle of the existence of the Church. Though the Church is largely without earthly power, and though many are her enemies who want to destroy her, she continues to grow and flourish. At the same time, the Herods of the world come and go. What could explain that other than God’s rule and direction of all events on the earth?

## **CONCLUSION:**

Let me conclude with an application. God confronts the evil of this world during this era with grace and patience, and we are called to do the same. Are there people in your life who hurt you because of their sin? There are times when it is appropriate to protect yourself from harm they might bring to you. But in the majority of cases, our need is to follow Jesus and respond with grace and patience. Remember the epitaph on Ruth Bell Graham’s tombstone: “End of construction. Thank you for your patience.” We thank God for his patience with us and we show some of that same patience to others.

One final word is needed. Don’t mistake the patience of God during this era with the cancellation of judgment. The word of God must be fulfilled, and it says, **“It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment”** (Heb. 9:27). Jesus has come to take judgment in our place that we might escape it. All who accept weakness by trusting in him will rejoice on Judgment Day because our sin has been judged already in Jesus.