



The King's Ransom

Matthew 20:28

Text

Matthew 2:13-23

Topic

King Herod orders the murder
of all the boys two years old and under in Bethlehem

Title

"Sudden Tyrant Death Syndrome"

Introduction

"Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

In 1866 explorer and medical missionary David Livingstone headed out to Africa on foot. He was looking for the source of the Nile River. He gathered together a group of local natives to guide him.

Unfortunately for Livingstone, his guides decided they weren't as committed as he was, and so one-by-one they abandoned him.

Some of them raided his supplies before they left. When the native guides returned to camp and the others asked what had happened to Livingstone, they shrugged and said that he had died.

In the meantime, Livingstone was stumbling through the jungle on his own, mapping out rivers and marshes and fending off every disease the jungle could throw at him. In March of 1869, alone in the jungle with no supplies, he was forced to rely on passing slave traders to escort him to the village of Bambara.

He was caught there by the rainy season and, to earn his keep, he was reportedly forced to eat in a roped off area in the rain for the entertainment of the natives.

Henry Stanley went looking for him. When he finally found Livingstone, crippled with dysentery and malaria, he is reported to have greeted him with the now-famous phrase, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

Livingstone was in hostile territory when, to his detriment, he was abandoned by his guides.

I suggest to you that we, as Christians, are in hostile territory. One verse is sufficient to prove it.

1John 5:19 (ESV) We know that we are from God, **and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.**

Sounds hostile... treacherous... dangerous. *Good thing we have a guide!*

He's the Holy Spirit and is called our "Guide" in John 16:13. Our normal understanding of what that means is captured in this stanza from the hymn, *Holy Spirit, Faithful Guide*,

*Holy Spirit, faithful Guide, ever near the Christian's side;
Gently lead us by the hand, pilgrims in a desert land.
Weary souls fore'er rejoice, while they hear that sweetest voice,
Whispering softly, "Wanderer, come, follow Me, I'll guide thee
home."*

Livingstone's guides abandoned him to his peril. Our Guide will never abandon us. **But we might abandon Him** - to our great peril. We abandon Him when we choose to ignore the leading of the Holy Spirit.

We would do well to understand the threat level we face while on the earth and be totally committed to finding and following the leading of God.

Our text, infamous for the brutality of the murder of the young boys in Bethlehem, is a study of God's leading Joseph through hostile territory. God led; Joseph followed to the saving of the life of Jesus. We can see in God's leading of Joseph something of His leading us.

To that end I will organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Since The Whole World Lies In The Power Of The Evil One, It Is Imperative You Remain Submitted To The Lord's Leading You Through It, and #2 Since The Whole World Lies In The Power Of The Evil One, It Is Imperative You Remain Sensitive To The Lord's Leading You Through It.

#1 Since The Whole World Lies In The Power Of The Evil One, It Is Imperative You Remain Submitted To The Lord's Leading You Through It

(v13-18)

You can't help but see God leading individuals through hostile territory in this text.

- First God led the magi to Jesus in a thousand mile journey fraught with danger - not the least of which was the animosity of King Herod.
- Next God leads the magi away from Herod along an alternate route home.
- Then God will lead Joseph again and again to protect Jesus from death at Herod's hands.

God doesn't lead us with a "star" like He did the magi. He doesn't usually lead us by dreams - although He still can if He chooses.

He definitely can lead us by His indwelling Holy Spirit, always according to His Word - if we will let Him.

Mat 2:13 Now when they 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."

The magi may have arrived in Bethlehem the same day they spoke to King Herod. It was only six miles away and they were anxious to see the King of the Jews.

If so, they probably received the dream to depart for home another way *that same night*, and left either in the night or first thing in the morning.

Joseph would have gotten his dream that same night.

Herod was close and mindful of the Messiah being in Bethlehem. He wasn't about to let too much time pass. Time was of the essence for all the godly players in this drama to escape.

The very first lesson in God's leading, then, is to get on it right away. Don't delay. Do what He tells you; don't do what He tells you to not do (if that makes sense!).

Now by "leading" I'm not talking about mysterious signs or impressions. I'm talking mostly about things we already know that are in God's Word, and especially when the Holy Spirit really highlights them in our spirit as we are listening to the Word being taught or reading it for ourselves.

Beyond that, God can still lead you in a dream, or by a vision, or by a supernatural word of wisdom or a word of knowledge. He's got a lot in His leading-arsenal.

The point is to act upon it immediately. We are in hostile territory fighting spiritual battles that have massive consequences in our lives and in the lives of others.

Mat 2:14 When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt,

Mat 2:15 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 prophecy is from Hosea 11:1. In its original context it is about Israel as God's "son" being led out of Egypt by Moses as their deliverer. Matthew sees in it a prophetic fulfillment in Jesus being led out of Egypt to lead His people as their Deliverer.

There is an interesting parallel between two Josephs:

- Jacob and Rachel's son Joseph was used by God to keep His son, the nation of Israel, safe in Egypt until their deliverer was born who would deliver them from their shackles.
- Joseph was used by God to keep the Son of God, Jesus, safe in Egypt until He was ready to deliver His people from their sins.
- Both Moses and Jesus were in danger of being murdered as infants.

There are several fulfillments of prophecy in this section. It caused one commentator to say, "the path of Jesus was paved with prophecy."

Joseph implicitly obeyed God each step of the way. Here he gets up immediately, and undoubtedly while it was still night, he heads out to Egypt.

Travel was difficult and dangerous and infinitely more so at night. If they took the regular caravan route south from Bethlehem to Hebron (modern Road 60), then sharply northwest to Gaza, they would have followed the coastal highway down to Pelusium, the gateway to Egypt. Traveling an average of twenty miles a day, they would have reached Egypt in about ten days.

I can't even imagine how crazy hard this must have been; and all the more because you were fleeing for your life and being told to do it by an angel in your dreams.

Had Joseph delayed even a short time, Jesus could have been murdered.

I know what you're thinking; no, He couldn't have been murdered. God would have protected Him.

Well, **this** was the way God was protecting His Son, our Savior - through the obedience of His servant, Joseph. We eliminate the human element in God's providence to our detriment, thinking our slacking off is no big deal, that God will see to it His will gets done.

At the very least it eliminates us from serving God. At worst it can put ourselves and others in harm's way.

A word about Herod's death: He died during Passover season in 4BC. Before his death he ordered innocent Jews be arrested to be killed when he died in order to insure there would be mourning in the land. They were instead released and there was a double celebration.

Josephus, the oft-mentioned first century Jewish historian, described his death as coming from, "ulcerated entrails, putrefied and maggot-filled organs, constant convulsions, foul breath, and neither physician nor warm bath led to recovery."

Mat 2:16 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.

Mat 2:17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:

Mat 2:18 "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."

Rachel was the favorite wife of Jacob, father of the twelve tribes of Israel. She bore Joseph and Benjamin, dying in child birth. Her sad death came to represent the sorrow of all Jewish mothers during times of tragedy.

This prophecy comes from Jeremiah 31:15, in which Rachel, who had been entombed near Bethlehem some thirteen centuries before the Babylonian captivity, represents the mother's weeping for their children as they were led away to Babylon in 586BC.

In the slaughter of the male infants at the time of Christ's birth, Rachel represents the mom's of Bethlehem mourning the violent loss of her sons.

I want to point out a fact about these murders without sounding callous. Bethlehem was an exceedingly small town. Professor William F. Albright, one-time dean of American archaeology in the Holy Land, estimates that the population of Bethlehem at the time of Jesus birth to be about 300 people.

The total number of male children murdered in that small population could be as few as five or six.

I only say that because critics love to point out that there is no independent secular record of this event.

Why would there be? In February of this year *Unicef* reported that every day 19,000 children die worldwide from preventable causes. Did you read about any of them?

The total number of abortions in the U.S. between 1973 and 2011 was reported as 54.5 million. That breaks down like this:

- Abortions per year: 1.2 million.
- Abortions per day: 3,288.
- Abortions per hour: 137.
- 9 abortions every 4 minutes.
- 1 abortion every 26 seconds.

Herod ordered this terrible slaughter. Terrible slaughters are still happening. The world lies in the power of the evil one.

He's been defeated, at the Cross, by this Child Who escaped and Who grew to die on the Cross to defeat him. But a serious warfare still rages on and there are real casualties - every day.

The question asked shouldn't be, "What is God doing about it?," but rather, "What am I doing about it?"

One answer to that more important practical question is to be like Joseph and be submitted to God's leading.

#2 Since The Whole World Lies In The Power Of The Evil One, It Is Imperative You Remain Sensitive To The Lord's Leading You Through It

(v19-23)

As the story continues we see Joseph being led by The Lord twice more. I'm calling it a sensitivity - an attitude that The Lord wants to continue to guide, lead, and direct.

It's all too possible, especially in America, to settle in to a particular lifestyle. We make our plans - five year plans, ten year plans, retirement plans, post-retirement plans. There's nothing wrong with that as long as we remain sensitive to The Lord leading us in ways that might be different from our plans.

Even a casual survey of the Bible will reveal that God called upon ordinary people to do things that were not according to their plan. He called upon them to take radical, even risky, steps of faith.

Matthew, the writer of this Gospel, had a lucrative business as a tax collector - also called a Publican. Publicans were men who bought tax franchises from the Roman emperor and then extorted money from the people of Israel. It was a lucrative career.

When Jesus called him, he instantly and without hesitation left his tax franchise to follow The Lord.

God probably won't call you to quit your job tomorrow. ***But He might!*** He is certainly going to lead you to do things that are radical and somewhat risky. It's His *modus operandi*. It's how God operates.

If He isn't occasionally leading you that way, then it's most likely you have become insensitive to His leading and have settled in to your own plans for your life.

Mat 2:19 Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

Mat 2:20 saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead."

I wonder if Joseph looked forward to going to sleep or if it wasn't just a little scary, not knowing if an angel of The Lord was going to appear to him?

They may not have been in Egypt very long; perhaps around six months. There was a strong Jewish presence in Egypt. Still it would have been quite a hardship to have left everything that they couldn't carry behind.

Waiting is never fun. It's where we go off the rails sometimes because we grow impatient with The Lord.

Mat 2:21 Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

Mat 2:22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee.

After Herod's death his territory and authority over it was split among four sons he hadn't managed to kill. Archelaus was a chip off the old block and could definitely still have thugs looking for toddlers to murder.

Joseph was first told only to return to Israel. He probably took it to mean he could return home, to Bethlehem. Instead, by a combination of God's leading and his own wisdom, "he turned aside into the region of Galilee."

Joseph must have been starting to understand that things were never going to be quite the way they once were. Or the way he may have thought they'd be.

I don't want to engage in silly, idle speculation, but Joseph must have had some thoughts about what it would be like to have the true Son of David and King of Israel as his foster child to raise. I'm pretty sure that things were not unfolding any of the ways he could have imagined.

The imminent threat of Jesus' death had put Joseph into an action mode. We might think that, if there were a more imminent threat against us, we, too, would be more sensitive to action.

The threat to us is constant and terrible. The devil is the god of this world, the prince of the power of the air, a lying, thieving murderer who is going about seeking whom he may devour. He rules over principalities and powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world. They are fallen angels whom we call demons.

If you are a believer, you are in the devil's sights. He is always lying to you; he is planning to rob you; he wants to murder you.

A sensitivity like Joseph's is an absolute necessity.

Mat 2:23 And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

Scholars puzzle over this because there is no place in the writings of the Old Testament prophets that has this exact wording.

The prophet Isaiah calls the Messiah the "Branch" (11:1). The word for "Branch" is *Netzer* and is the root of the name of the city of Nazareth. Perhaps this is the prophecy Matthew had in mind.

He may be referring to an oral tradition among the prophets - a genuine prophecy that was never recorded in any of the books of the Old Testament. We know, for example, that Jude quoted parts of the Book of Enoch as a genuine prophecy, even though the book itself is not considered part of the inspired Scripture.

I can say this. It was no one's goal in life to settle in Nazareth of Galilee.

Some historians say that Galilee was the birthplace of the Zealot group known as *Sicarii*. The word means *dagger-men*. They would get close to their victims - either Romans or Jews who sympathized with Rome - then viciously stab them and disappear in the crowd. It was no place to raise kids!

Nazareth was relatively poor and over-populated. There was a scarcity of natural resources, such as water and fertile soil. Apparently there was even an expression common at the time, "can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

The best thing that ever happened to mankind came out of Nazareth.

Only someone with a real sensitivity to God's leading would end up in Nazareth.

Has there ever been a Nazareth moment in your life? One in which you sensed God's leading but it seemed so contrary to wisdom or your own plans? To go someplace, or to remain someplace, that seems undesirable or that isn't in your life-plan?

I'm not suggesting God will always send you to a Nazareth. But if He *never* has, or if you think He never would, then you might not be sensitive.

Or you might have sensed it but not have submitted to it.

It's important we are both sensitive and submitted to God's leading, and not just for our own personal growth. Lives hang in the balance.

God's general and special providence notwithstanding, Joseph sensed and submitted and his obedience saved the Savior.

Others were still killed; that's because "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." There's a battle going on and there will be until the Second Coming of Jesus. We can argue about why; or we can act with compassion.

Don't be a casualty by following your own plans. Be a combatant.