

INTRODUCTION

We're in the third message of the new series from Matthew that I'm calling, "Parables and Miracles: Experience the Timeless Principles and the Transforming Power of Jesus." Today we're going to study "The Miracle of the Escape to Egypt." Our working definition of a miracle is an interruption of the laws of nature that can only be explained by the power of God.

Some people are too skeptical to believe in miracles, so they reject the miraculous parts of the Bible. For instance, Thomas Jefferson believed in the goodness of Jesus, but he didn't believe there was anything miraculous about His life. Jefferson created his personal version of the four gospels by literally cutting entire passages out of his Bible and pasting them into a new booklet he entitled, "The Life and Morals of Jesus." It was a thin 25-page booklet, because when you remove the miracles from the life of Jesus, there's not much left. Personally, I think it's a dangerous thing to cut out parts of God's Word—instead, God's Word is like a two-edged sword that cuts on us.

When I'm asked if I believe in miracles my answer is that I not only believe in them, I **DEPEND** on them. I like C.S. Lewis' definition of a miracle. He wrote: "Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see." The entire universe is a miracle of God's creative and sustaining power. The miracles recorded in the Bible are gentle reminders from God that He is God—and we're not!

In the last message, we studied the mysterious Magi from Persia who searched and found the King of Jews. Herod the Great told them to stop on their way back by and tell him where the child was so that he could also "worship" Him. But Herod was lying—he was only interested in eliminating any threat to his throne.

Matthew 2:12-23. "And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.' So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.' When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.' After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.' So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judah in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Have been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: 'He will be called a Nazarene.'"

The story of the first months of Jesus' earthly life reads like an adventure novel. Joseph and Mary had to sneak out of Bethlehem by night. The villain, Herod, wanted to kill the Christ child, so he sent his soldiers into Bethlehem to kill all the boy babies under the age of two. We're not sure how long Joseph, Mary, and Jesus had to stay in Egypt. But when it was safe again, God told Joseph in a dream it was safe to return. It's possible Jesus was a toddler by the time they relocated to Nazareth. In this message, I want to study four different aspects of this miracle and give you a personal teaching point for each component. First, let's notice:

(1) THE INSANE JEALOUSY OF HEROD

Herod's murderous jealousy provides us the perfect example of this truth: From the beginning, the devil has opposed God's plan. The Christmas season is the only time when we generally talk about the Magi's visit. You hardly ever hear this part of the story where Herod kills the little boys in Bethlehem. That unpleasant detail would tend to spoil your Christmas spirit. I've never seen it portrayed in a Christmas pageant, put to music in a song, or seen it on a Christmas card. However, it was important enough for God to include in His Holy Bible, so we can't ignore it.

A person is known not only by his friends, but also by his enemies. The fact that the life of Jesus was endangered from the time He was a little boy reveals there was more going on than just the birth of a baby boy. There were invisible forces at work in spiritual warfare.

Herod the Great was a great builder with a great ego. He was insanely jealous—or jealously insane—take your pick. He was so paranoid he murdered all his rivals. He murdered his brother-in-law, and then he murdered the beautiful Mariamne who was his wife—along with both her young sons. He later murdered another son who was heir to the throne. He spent millions of today's dollars building the magnificent hanging palace at Masada, and only spent two nights there. Historians can verify that Herod hacked his way to the top by slaughtering over 7,000 of the best people in his realm. His reputation was so bad that Caesar Augustus said of Herod, "It would be safer to be Herod's swine than Herod's son!"

Based upon the information given to him by the Magi, Herod ordered all the boy babies two years old and younger in the vicinity of Bethlehem to be killed. This has often been called "the slaughter of the innocents." Bethlehem was only a tiny village and scholars estimate there might have been 20 children killed—but that's still 20 too many.

Without realizing it, Herod's crime was a fulfillment of scripture where Jeremiah prophesies that Rachel is weeping for her children. Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. She died giving birth to Benjamin and was buried there in Bethlehem. From the beginning of time, the devil has been actively opposing God's plan. The good news has always had enemies. In the book of Revelation, we learn the identity of this adversary. The Bible says, "And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray." (Revelation 12:7-9)

As wicked as Herod was, I believe it was Satan who drove him to try to kill the Messiah child. In the early part of Revelation 12, John sees a woman giving birth to a man-child. (The woman is a representation of Israel). Then John wrote, "The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter." (Revelation 12:4-5) But then it says God snatched the child away from the dragon. Sound familiar?

Is there something about killing boy babies that reminds you of another time? In Exodus chapter 1, Pharaoh decreed all the Israelite male babies were to be killed the moment they were born. This was simply an earlier attempt by Satan to abort God's plan to bring a Redeemer into the world. Thanks to the disobedience of the Hebrew mid-wives, Puah and Shiprah, the Hebrew baby boys were not killed and one of them was named Moses.

In America we are witnessing a growing opposition to the truth that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven. Those of us who believe this and preach this are given the worst title possible: Intolerant. It hasn't come to the shedding of blood yet, but just know that there always have been and always will be evil forces at work to fight against the gospel of Jesus Christ.

(2) DREAMS FROM GOD

Through the years I've been asked by many people if God still uses dreams to communicate to us. Here's the truth: Before the Bible, God often communicated through dreams and visions. In the first two chapters of Matthew there are five references to God communicating through a dream. First, an angel spoke to Joseph in a dream to take Mary as his wife. Second, God warned the magi in a dream not to go back to see Herod. The next three dreams guided Joseph to leave Bethlehem, and then leave Egypt, then to avoid Judea and head to Galilee.

Medical studies reveal all of us dream, and that we dream every night, even if we can't recall our dreams. Dreams can be funny, and many people have recurring dreams. I still dream sometimes that I'm in high school and desperately trying to find the right classroom! Then when I get there, there's a test I haven't studied for! Is that some message from God?

The Old Testament is full of people having dreams that were messages from God. Jacob had a dream of a stairway into heaven. God even sent dreams to Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel had a dream about four beasts rising out of the sea. But it's interesting to note after these five occasions of dreams in Matthew 1 and 2, do you know how many times the New Testament records God speaking through a dream? Zero. Nada. Zip. Peter and Paul and others continued to have visions, but not dreams.

For centuries before Jesus' birth, God communicated to people in a variety of ways, including the inspired Words of the prophets, angels, and even dreams. Up through the birth of Jesus, God was still using dreams. But the next time we read anything about Jesus is Luke's account when He's twelve years old and He is already talking about His Father's business. Why would God need to use dreams when Emmanuel, God with us, is here talking Himself? And since He left us His words, and we have the completed Bible we have a much more reliable source of truth than dreams.

It's important for you to know this because if you turn on the television or listen to some teachers they continue to claim God has spoken to them through dreams. You might recall that in 1977 Oral Roberts said he had a dream of a 600-foot tall Jesus telling him to build the City of Faith hospital. This massive skyscraper was built in Tulsa, but was only operated for a few years and had to be sold. Today a few floors of it are used by the Oklahoma Orthopedic Hospital. Was this dream legitimate? I'm not qualified to say. I only know that in the Old Testament time, when God occasionally used dreams, He warned people about so-called prophets who claim they received a word from God in a dream. God says, "I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, 'I had a dream! I had a dream!' ... Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain? Is not my word like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:25-29) God says relying on dreams is like eating straw while relying on His Word is like eating grain. You decide which is more nutritious—straw or grain.

So many people today are clamoring to hear a word from the Lord—open your Bible! There are plenty of clear directions and warnings in this Book if you take the time to read it. There are warnings in here about the dangers of everything from sexual immortality to drunkenness, from gossip to greed. God doesn't need a dream to tell you that which He has already clearly communicated!

The prophet Joel predicted that in the last days that God will "Pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions." (Joel 2:28) But if you think that's something in the future, don't forget Peter quoted that verse on the Day of Pentecost as being fulfilled 2,000 years ago. If those were the last days then, then these must be the LAST of the last days!

Here's my bottom line on dreams. Is every dream a message from God? I'll give you a definite "No." Does God still speak through dreams? I'll give you a definite "Maybe." Although there aren't any more dream experiences after Matthew 1-2, I'm not going to limit God. He is God and He can do whatever He pleases, thank you very much. Finally, is there a better way to find God's message to me? I'll give you a definite "Yes." Read His Word! Trust His Spirit!

(3) THE DETOUR TO EGYPT

Joseph and Mary traveled from Galilee to Bethlehem, but instead of returning to Galilee immediately, God sent them on a detour. Here's the teaching point: With God, the shortest distance between two points is usually NOT a straight line! For centuries, artists have depicted this scene, and it's usually called, "The flight into Egypt," because Joseph and Mary had to take Jesus and flee to Egypt. Some of the Renaissance artists depicted this experience with a lot of beauty and color, like the Italian artist, Vittore Carpaccio. However, his interpretation is far too romanticized compared to what it probably looked like. There were no lakes and trees; they had to escape across a barren desert at night. Gustave Doré's depiction is probably more realistic.

A children's Sunday School class was drawing pictures of the Christmas story, and the pastor had visited the class to admire them. Most of them showed pictures of the stable, shepherds and wise men. But one little boy had drawn a jet airplane with three figures going up the steps to board the plane and one figure in the cockpit. The pastor couldn't figure it out, so the little boy said, "That's the flight into Egypt." The Pastor said, "Okay, but who is that guy flying the jet?" The little boy said, "Oh, that's Pontius the Pilot!"

One of the first theorems I learned in 9th grade geometry was that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. We sometimes envision God's plan for our lives as a straight line, but God isn't bound by either time nor space, so don't be surprised if your journey takes longer than you expected and you find yourself somewhere you never thought you'd be! Young Joseph, who had a coat of many colors, had a dream that his older brothers would one day bow before him. However, he never expected that journey to take him into a pit, into prison, and into prominence in Egypt. That was God's detour.

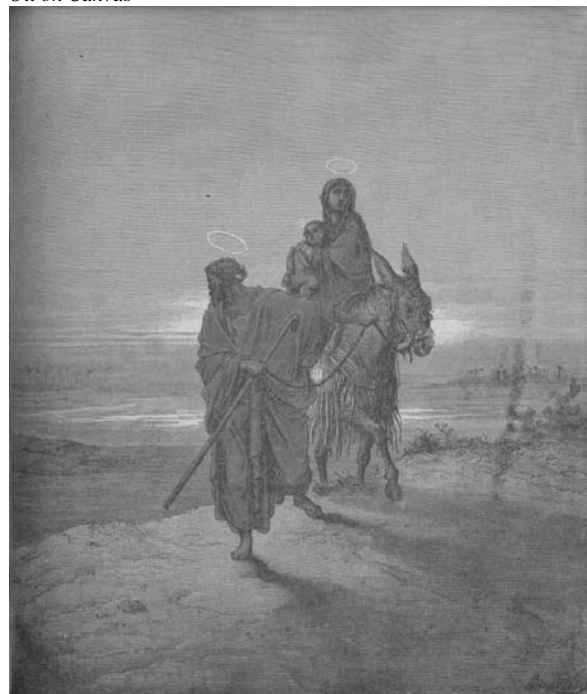
You may find yourself in Egypt today when you thought you should have already arrived in Galilee and you wonder what's going on. You may be on one of God's detours. Don't try to figure out WHY. In fact, we don't have the brain power to figure out God's ways. The Bible says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)

There are a couple of quick lessons we can learn for your detour to Egypt. First, when God speaks, be ready to OBEY Him quickly. The key to this successful escape was that Joseph obeyed God without questioning or trying to analyze the message. Hesitation or reluctance on Joseph's part could have been catastrophic. If God speaks to you in His Word, don't try to analyze it, as Nike says, just do it.

Next, we learn the value of waiting. We don't know how long the Holy Family was in Egypt, but it must have been difficult to be refugees in a foreign land. If God has you on a personal detour



The Flight Into Egypt
Vittore Carpaccio
1500
Oil on Canvas



The Flight Into Egypt
Gustave Doré
1870
Woodcut Engraving

to Egypt, it may be difficult to wait because there may be circumstances beyond your control. If you are an impatient person, you don't like to wait. You don't like to be put on hold when you're on the phone. You'd rather drive a mile out of your way to keep moving rather than wait for a traffic jam to clear. But there is great value on waiting on God's time. The Bible says, "The Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!" (Isaiah 30:18)

(4) DIVINE DELIVERANCE

The final aspect of this miracle is how God delivered Joseph, Mary, and Jesus from danger and led them home. Here's the teaching point: When you follow God's plan, He protects you until He completes His plan.

I recall one harrowing late-night flight in Russia a few years ago. The Aeroflot equipment wasn't the best, and it was raining and foggy outside, I knew the visibility and ceiling were close to minimums, and we were encountering turbulence as we made the approach. I felt the clunk of the landing gear being extended but there was nothing to see outside my window except rain and fog. Apparently the pilot couldn't see the runway either, because he executed a go-around to attempt another approach. In broken English he announced he would try one more approach before diverting to an alternate airport. One of our mission team members, a white-knuckled flyer, was sitting next to me. She looked at me and said, "Pastor, aren't you afraid?" I can remember saying, "Not really. I don't think I'm going to die tonight, because God isn't finished with me yet." That might have sounded arrogant, but I really believed it. That seemed to help the nervous flyer, and in a few moments we landed and the passengers erupted into applause.

There are many promises of God's protection. We read: The Lord says, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned...since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you." (Isaiah 43:1-2, 4)

Notice God didn't say that He would keep us OUT of the rivers and the fire. He just promised to be with us when we pass through difficult times. When a child of God faces danger, it's a no-lose situation because He will either carry us through or He will carry us home!

As I think about this escape, I can't help but admire Joseph. He demonstrates the characteristics of a good father by taking steps to protect Jesus and Mary. I suspect when Joseph was sneaking Jesus and Mary out of Bethlehem, taking care of them in Egypt, and then sneaking back into Galilee, he might have thought, "Jesus is lucky to have me. I'm protecting Him and His mother." But what he didn't know was that he wasn't really protecting Jesus as much as Jesus was protecting him! And the same Jesus who promised never to leave us or forsake us is available to deliver us today. Dads like to protect our families, but we might forget who our real Protector is.

CONCLUSION

As I finish, I want us to go back and think about those little boys who were killed by Herod.

What are we to think of them? God delivered Jesus, Joseph, and Mary—why didn't He protect the other children? I don't know why God chooses to protect some and not others. As we learned earlier, God's ways and thoughts are not our ways and thoughts. However, I do believe these little boys will occupy a special place in heaven. Stephen is often called the first Christian martyr, but these little boys were actually the first Christian martyrs. They were the first to shed their blood for the One who would later shed His blood for them. I believe God the Father welcomed them into heaven and gave them the special prominence only reserved for His martyrs.

Some people still ask, "Why didn't God protect my child?" Or "Why didn't God deliver my husband from danger?" It's like some people suggesting the survival of all 155 people on Flight 1549 was a "miracle on the Hudson." These same people may be asking where God was when Continental Connection flight 3407 flight crashed this week outside Buffalo, New York, killing all 40 passengers. God is the same place He's always been.

However, I do know that the kind of faith God honors doesn't depend on a miracle of being delivered from danger. One day 2,500 years ago, three Hebrew men were outstanding in their field. They were literally standing out because King Nebuchadnezzar had constructed a golden statue and ordered everyone to bow down before it. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down before anyone or anything except God. Nebuchadnezzar arrested them and threatened to burn them alive if they continued to refuse to bow down. Notice their faith. They said, "Our God is able to deliver us from the fire, but if not, we're still not going to worship your idol, we're going to trust our God." Did you catch that? Some people have an "if" faith. If God delivers me, I'll serve Him. But the kind of faith God honors is a "but if not" faith. It says, "My God IS able to deliver me, but even if He doesn't, I'm still going to praise Him!" Which kind of faith do you have?

OUTLINE

"Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see." C.S. Lewis

(1) THE INSANE JEALOUSY OF HEROD: From the beginning, the devil has opposed God's plan

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Revelation 12:7-9

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes