

The Worst of the Worst

From the Series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe"

Presented on Sunday, February 9, 2020

By Phil Brainerd

Introduction

"Mirror, Mirror, on the wall: Who's the fairest of them all?" That's a well-known line from the classic fairy tale, "Snow White". In the fairy tale, we meet an evil queen. This queen has no shortage of bad qualities. Among them, she's self-absorbed and vain. Every day, she looks into a magic mirror and asks it to tell her who is the most beautiful woman in her land. Every day, the mirror answers, "You, my queen".



Evil Queen with magic mirror from "Snow White"

Another evil quality of the queen is her desire to steal power from others. She's the second wife of an otherwise good king. The first queen died after having one child, a girl named "Snow White". Snow White is the legitimate heir to the throne. But, the evil queen quietly longs for a way to take the throne for herself.

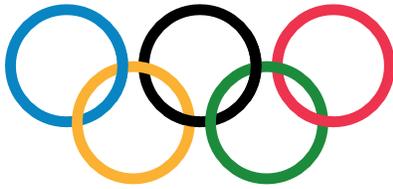
Snow White starts out as a pretty child and grows more beautiful every day. One day, the little girl Snow White blossoms into a young woman. On that day, she becomes more beautiful than the evil queen.

That same day, when the queen asks who is the fairest, the mirror tells her that there is now one more beautiful. It's one thing for the evil queen to have her vanity attacked. But more, the one who is more beautiful is also the legitimate heir to the throne. From that day on, the queen tries to destroy the child.

Sometimes, fairy tales become popular because they pick up on themes that common in human existence. We as humans can be very preoccupied with the business of finding out who is the best of some quality. Maybe it's beauty, as we saw with Snow White? In that case, we have beauty contests to determine who is the most beautiful in our locality. Then we have state competitions. Then we have national competitions. Before we know it, we have contests like the "Miss America" pageant. If that's not good enough, we can move on to Miss Universe.



Miss America Winner 2020 - Nia Franklin



Or, maybe we want to see who's the strongest, or the fastest? For that we have events like the Olympics. We even have a competition for the best person at any given time. If you've made a major contribution to humanity, you may win the Nobel Peace Prize. ***We have lots of ways to determine the best of the best.***

Now, on the other side of the coin, sometimes history presents us with bad people, sometimes even evil people. We don't have an official competition for those people. We don't have a "worst of the worst", but sometimes we're compelled to discuss them.

Sometime, as we look through the history of humanity, we meet people like Adolf Hitler, or Joseph Stalin.

These men were responsible for the deaths of millions of people. Adolf Hitler is credited with the deaths of 7 million people in the Nazi concentration camps of World War Two. Conservative estimates say that Joseph Stalin was responsible



for the murders of 20 million during his reign over the Soviet Union. These numbers don't count the losses on the battle fields in wars started by these men. When we try to describe these men, words sometimes fail us. Should we merely call them evil? Or, do we need something stronger, like monstrous? History sadly provides us with many names of people considered to be evil. Time would fail us if we merely read the list.

Because they're evil, maybe we should try to forget them. Perhaps we should try to erase their memories. Or, perhaps there is something for us to learn? ***That seems to be the thinking of a man named Matthew.***

We're in our series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells us about the King of the universe. Today, our message is entitled, "The Worst of the Worst". We're going to be looking at a man who, I would suggest, ranks among the worst human beings of history. The man's name was "Herod". We met him last week.

As we consider this man and his life, we'll ask some questions:

- What did Herod do to be ranked with people like Hitler and Stalin?
- Why did Matthew include this man in his book?

Before we can answer those questions, we need to do a little review. We started studying the book of Matthew together a few sessions ago. Recall that one of the reasons Matthew wrote his book was to reach his Jewish friends. Matthew's Jewish friends were looking for the

Messiah, the great king. *So, Matthew wants to demonstrate that Jesus is qualified to be this great king.*

Matthew starts his book with a genealogy. He does this to let people know that Jesus is qualified to be the great king because of his ancestry. Jesus is a descendant of both Abraham and King David. Because Jesus is descended from David, he is qualified to sit on David's throne. Next, Matthew told us that an angel spoke to Joseph to announce the royal birth. So, Jesus is qualified because God sent supernatural messengers to testify to his authority.

In our last session, we learned that God sent a supernatural star to signal the Magi, leaders from a foreign land, that a great king had been born. So, we see more supernatural power supporting the contention that Jesus is qualified to be king. Also, foreign leaders who are qualified to recognize a king lend their authority when they pay homage to Jesus.

And, all along the way, Matthew demonstrated that Jesus fulfills prophecies made centuries before. No other world leader was predicted the way that Jesus was. No other religious leader was predicted the way that Jesus was. So, Jesus is qualified to be the king because he fulfilled ancient prophecies. We'll see more of that as we move on in the book of Matthew.

So, now that we're caught-up, let's dig into today's story.

13 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." (Matthew 2:13-15)

Again, last week, we read about the Magi. They're given an amazing star that guides them to Israel. Once there, they visit the political King, Herod. The Magi were important foreign dignitaries, so they are welcomed into the King's court. However, *they're shocked to find that Herod and all the people of Jerusalem are totally clueless about what's happening.* In fact, not only are they clueless, Herod and all Jerusalem are troubled at the news.

Although he's troubled, Herod calls local religious leaders and asks them where the "King of the Jews" was to be born. They report that the prophecies point to Bethlehem. Herod tells the Magi to go and search for the child, and to report back.

So, the Magi head off. The star re-appears and leads them to Jesus. When they see Jesus, they essentially say, "Yes, this is a great king". They give him expensive gifts; the kind that one group of royalty would give to another.

Here's an important twist in the story: After they're done, they don't go back to Herod. They have been told in a dream to go home another way.

So, they've just left. Mary and Joseph have just said "Thank you" and waved good-bye. It's been a tiring day, so they get into bed.

Joseph just about lays down his head, when an angel appears. The angel says, "Get up". This is no time for sleep. The angel says, "...take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt". Some translations say, "Flee". In other words, "get out, fast!" Why does Joseph need to grab his family and run? *Because Herod wants to kill Jesus.*

Remember, Matthew is going to great pains to demonstrate that Jesus was qualified to be King of Israel. A legitimate king of Israel had to be a descendant of David. *Herod was not qualified.* He wasn't a son of David. He wasn't even Jewish - He was from Edom, a neighboring nation. Now, you don't have to be Jewish to serve God. There are lots of places in God's kingdom for people who aren't descended from David. You just can't be King of Israel. ***So, Herod was an illegitimate king.*** He was illegitimate in this and many other ways.

Remember, as we look at this story, we're asking some questions. One of those questions is, "Why did Matthew include Herod in his book"? There are likely lots of reasons. I'd like to focus on two of those possible reasons.

First, because this is a true story. It happened. Because God's word is true, it's always appropriate to include a true story. But there are many true stories that aren't included in the Bible. The apostle John said that all the books in the world couldn't contain the whole story of Jesus. So, the followers of Jesus had to be selective about what they included when they wrote the Gospel accounts. They had to choose what they felt were the most important stories.

For the second reason, I'm going to speculate a bit. Matthew has demonstrated in several ways that Jesus is qualified to be the king of Israel. Matthew will demonstrate in the rest of his book that Jesus is king of much more. This is an excellent opportunity to compare the legitimate king of the universe and his followers to an illegitimate king and his followers. Using this story, and other things that we know about Herod from history, let's do that. Let's compare the King of the Universe, Jesus, to the illegitimate king of Israel, Herod.

I. The illegitimate king was concerned only about power and wealth.

As we learned last week, Herod sat on the throne of Israel because the Romans placed him there. On the throne, he enjoyed power, and lots of wealth. Power and wealth are not always bad things, but in Herod's case they caused lots of problems. Power and wealth caused Herod to believe that everything he needed was here on earth. Last week, we said that he had no desire to "look up to the skies" for guidance. He wasn't concerned about God. He had no desire to learn about the God of Israel.

That's a shame, because he lived in Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish faith. He was surrounded by teachers of the Scripture. And not only teachers; the best teachers. But Herod only

consulted those teachers when he perceived a threat. And when he received answers from those teachers, he didn't use his newly acquired knowledge to seek or obey God. He used what he learned to do something terrible.

Herod's lust for power and wealth corrupted his mind. A symptom of this corruption is the fact that Herod lost all sense of value for human life. One of the qualities of God is his love for Human life. Human life may be the reason this planet was created. We talked about that a lot during our series, "Life Answers In Genesis". A legitimate King would seek God. Once he discovered God, he would learn about God's love for the human race.

Herod is told that someone has been born who is said to be the legitimate king of Israel. Someone stands in the way of his power and wealth. **Herod decides to kill the child.** We'll learn that this isn't the only time Herod will place his power and wealth over human life. We'll also learn that Herod surrounded himself with people to do his bidding for him. It seems that illegitimate kings often have followers who participate in their evil.

Let's compare this to the legitimate king and his followers.

II. The legitimate king is concerned with the things of God.

Let's read on in Matthew:

14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 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." (Matthew 2:14-15)

Let's look at the legitimate king, Jesus: 1. Whereas the illegitimate king, Herod, is surrounded by wealth and power, Jesus is born into a poor family. 2. Herod is surrounded by a wealth of Scriptural information and supernatural displays of power but disobeys. Follower of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, hear God's will and obey immediately. 3. Herod solves problems by killing. The life of Jesus will be characterized by healing and saving lives.

Later in his book, Matthew will share the following quote from Jesus:

...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:26-28)

You might ask, "Why did Jesus have to run when he was attacked? If he was so powerful, couldn't he have sent lightning bolts to kill his attackers?" Of course, he could have. But he didn't. Understand that Jesus was a great king, not just of Israel, but of the Universe. If he was threatened, he could have called armies of angels to wipe out the soldiers who would come to

take his life. He could have sent an angel to kill Herod. But you see, even those lives, the lives of his attackers, were precious to Jesus. This is not the only time he will spare those who come for his life.

There something more in the passage we just read. Look at the last sentence: “And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: Out of Egypt I called my son.” (Matthew 2:15)

This sentence has been criticized over the years by people who don't like to think of the Bible as God's word for us. Here's why. Mathew has told us that Jesus fulfilled prophecies about the Messiah. To oversimplify prophecy, let's say that there are two types.

The first is type of prophecy is literal prophecy.

That means God announces what he's going to do. What he says comes true physically, exactly as stated. It may come true right away. It may come true over a relatively short term like days or weeks. The most amazing of the prophecies come true centuries after they're pronounced. A good example is one we saw recently. God announced the birthplace of the Messiah, Bethlehem. This was announced through the prophet Micah in 740 B.C. Centuries later, that's exactly where the Messiah was born. To have a prophecy fulfilled exactly and literally the way it was pronounced over centuries is an awesome display of God's power and faithfulness.

A second type or prophecy is symbolic.

Here, Matthew quotes a prophet named Hosea. We don't have time to go there, it's found in Hosea 11. In this passage, Hosea isn't talking directly about the Messiah. He's talking about Israel, and about the fact that Israel sometimes failed as a nation over the years. Hosea points out the fact that Israel spent time in Egypt. God called them out so that they could come to the promised land. However, Israel often sinned against God. Nevertheless, God was still faithful to them. That's Hosea's point in telling the story.

By quoting this, Matthew is saying that Jesus will be partly like Israel. He'll also have to spend time in Egypt, a foreign, unfamiliar land. In the same way that God brought Israel back to their home, God will bring Jesus back. However, whereas Israel often failed, Jesus will succeed.

This is a powerful thought that I'll expand in a moment. Before doing that, let me say that this can be a real stumbling block if you don't look deeply into the Scriptures. Imagine that you're trying to tell someone about Jesus. The person you're talking to says, “I can't see how you can believe all this. Why look: Here's a case where Matthew misquotes the old testament. This can't be God's word if Matthew misquotes things, right?” Well, ***Matthew isn't misquoting.*** Matthew is showing a depth of understanding that surpasses a lot of modern-day amateur Bible scholars.

We have a powerful image here. Let's include that image in our comparison of the illegitimate king, Herod, with the legitimate king, Jesus. The illegitimate king, Herod, has nothing in common with the people of faith. The legitimate king, Jesus, works hard so that he has much in common.

Herod wasn't from Israel and didn't try to support the people of Israel. He supported Rome. He was surrounded by teachers of the Scripture. He could have scheduled time to learn more about Israel. But he didn't. He learned only what he needed to get by.

Here, Matthew says, "Hey Israel, Jesus has something in common with you." Israel had an 'Egypt' moment. Jesus has one, too. So, Jesus can understand.

And that's just the start. Jesus is born into a poor setting. So, he can understand the poor. He can understand people who struggle. Jesus was often misunderstood. So, he can understand when we're misunderstood. Jesus suffered. So, he can understand when we suffer.

In quoting this passage, Matthew begins a theme that will carry all throughout the New Testament. Here's how the writer of the book of Hebrews says it:

15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. 16 Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:15-16)

The legitimate king, Jesus has much in common with us. He understands our pain. So, he can help us when we stumble. ***He can lift us up, because he understands.***

Let's read on.

16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he 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. (Matthew 2:16)

Another question we're asking in our study is: What did Herod do to be ranked with people like Hitler and Stalin?

Let's work our way through the information we have. We consider a person to be evil if they're willing to kill one human being for selfish gain. There's a jump in what we consider to be depravity if a person is willing to hurt a child.

Bethlehem at the time of Christ wasn't a big place. Historians have tried to calculate the number of children that Herod killed. They put the number in the dozens. What kind of a man

would murder children, much less dozens? This alone would make Herod a monster, but this wasn't the end of Herod's killing spree.

Notice Herod assumed that the Magi had "outwitted" him. The word used here has a deeper connotation that would include the idea of being mocked. There's a deep irony here. Herod had lied to the Magi. He told them to find the child and then return so that he could join in the worship service. However, he always planned on killing the child. This, according to historians, was common for Herod. He loved espionage and lies. ***So, he assumed that everyone was like him.*** Since he lied and schemed, the Magi must have done that, too in Herod's mind. Not only had the Magi lied to Herod, they must have done it to mock him.

This is the pattern of tyrants. They become paranoid and suspicious of everyone around them. They eventually start killing anyone who gives them even small reason to be concerned.

We don't know how many people Herod killed in his lifetime, but it included members of his own family, including three of his sons and his wife. Historians say that he actually loved his wife, but she was a potential threat. So, he had her executed along with anyone else included in his paranoid delusions.

We wouldn't say that Herod killed millions, as Hitler and Stalin did. But, maybe that was just a question of Herod's power? If he had held power over millions, perhaps millions would have died? Fortunately for the world, Herod's power was limited to one small nation.

Let's read more:

17 Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:
18 "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." (Matthew 2:17-18)

This is another prophecy that falls into the symbolic category. Matthew quotes the prophet Jeremiah here (Jeremiah 31). Jeremiah lived at the time the people of Israel were deported to Babylon. This picture is Rachael, the wife of Jacob. Jacob was later known as Israel. Rachael is thought to be buried in the region of Bethlehem. She's pictured watching the deportation of Israel from her grave. She see it and weeps.

In context, Jeremiah is actually giving an image of hope. Rachael doesn't need to grieve, because someday her children will return home. That was a literal prophecy at the time. However, this wasn't originally a direct prophecy of the Messiah. Matthew quotes it here because this time there is also terrible suffering. This time, Rachael once again watches from her grave and sees people feeling intense grief and mourning. And again, she weeps.

Only this time, there is no hope for the lost. Unlike the children of Israel who would one day come back from Babylon, the children who die at the hand of Herod will never return. Here's what I think Matthew is trying to say: *When an illegitimate king tries to remove the legitimate king from his throne innocent people get caught in the crossfire.*

Many years later, in the year 70 A.D. the people of Israel attempted a revolt against Rome. When they did, Rome responded with the full force of their armies. Some historians say that a million Jews were either killed or taken away to slavery, never to return.

Let's read the end of the story:

19 After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt
20 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." 21 So he got up, took
the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard
that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid
to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of
Galilee, 23 and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what
was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene. (Matthew
2:19-23)

We've said several time in our series that Matthew wants his friends to see God's power and his faithfulness. We see that here. The child Jesus is born. The child is soon in danger when an illegitimate king tries to prevent the legitimate king from taking the throne. God displays one amazing supernatural act after another. The child escapes to safety. Those who want the child dead eventually die themselves. Jesus comes back, eventually returning to the original home of Joseph and Mary in Nazareth. All along the way, he fulfills prophecies, real and symbolic. In the end of this chapter, we are reminded that God is in control. No one can thwart God's plans.

It's an amazing story. More stories like it will follow as we study Matthew together.

But, is this the end of the story? Should we content ourselves with saying that Herod was a very bad man? Should we close our Bibles, and go home? I'm afraid that Jesus, the King of the Universe, doesn't let us go so quickly.

Early on, we asked the question, "Why did Matthew include Herod in his book?"

Perhaps he did it to help people in a historical sense. The philosopher George Santayana is quoted as saying, "Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it." Maybe we learn about Herod so we can prevent others like him? Santayana's words sound well advised by themselves, but sadly there are many in the modern world who don't think it's true. History has a very tragic way of repeating, whether we study it or not.

At the end of World War One, historians gave that great conflict the name, “The war to end all wars”. Millions died on the battle fields of Europe. Many said it must not be allowed to happen again. Steps were taken by everyone from scholars to politicians to prevent something so devastating from reoccurring. Then, there was World War Two.

Based on my understanding of human nature and history, I don’t think Matthew included Herod in his story because he thinks we can find a way to prevent more people like him. I think the reason Herod is included in the story can be briefly stated in some words that Matthew will later quote Jesus as saying:

3 “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye. (Matthew 7:3-5)

I’ve suggested that Herod belongs among that ranks of Hitler and Stalin. Historians may not put him there. Herod, they might say, didn’t kill millions. As I said, maybe it’s because Herod’s kingdom was smaller than those other men?

Let me suggest that every human being represents one kingdom. Each of us is a kingdom of sorts. At current count, there are over 7 billion people on our planet. Do you know what that means? *To me, it means there are over 7 billion kingdoms.*

You see, it’s not really about who is the worst of the worst. It’s not about whether Hitler is worse than Stalin or whether Herod we better or worse than either of them. It’s not about people way out there or who lived long ago. It’s about us. ***It’s about the decisions that we make.***

Can I ask you a question? Who sits on the throne of your kingdom?

The rightful king is your Creator, the king of the Universe, Jesus Christ. That’s why Matthew is writing his book.

If you sit on the throne, what are your goals? Sometimes wealth and power hold greater control over our lives than we imagine. That’s so even if the amounts of wealth and power seem small to onlookers. Perhaps it’s other things? At any rate, sometimes it can be very surprising what we’re willing to do when someone stands in the way of our goals.

Are you a sort of illegitimate king? Compare this with the legitimate king. He came to serve. He values others more than himself. He came to give his life a ransom for many.

Who sits on the throne of your kingdom?

If it's Jesus, be ready to see him someday in his kingdom, where your kingdom will be combined with the lives of millions of others into one great kingdom of heaven. A kingdom led by someone who values you deeply, and who understands when you hurt, and when you fail.

If Jesus is not the King of your kingdom, please talk with us. Write us. Or, come visit. You can find more info on our web site: www.TrinityTeaneck.org.

Herod was an illegitimate king. He did not go down well in history. And, I think things went much worse when he entered eternity.

Is Jesus your king? Is Jesus the Lord of your life? All it takes for Jesus to be the king of your life is to invite him in.

There is no better time than now to decide.