

The Making of HIStory: God Uses the Foolish

DECEMBER 18, 2022

PREPARATION

▶ STUDY

Spend the week studying Matthew 2:1-23 and Psalm 73. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools to enhance your preparation.

▶ PRAY

Pray for our pastors and this week's message, the upcoming group time, your group members and their openness to God's Word.

▶ LANDING POINT

God still reigns over all His creation, which gives me hope, faith, and the right perspective when my world feels upside down.

GROUP DISCUSSION

▶ **CONFIDENTIALITY** | What's said in the group stays in the group.

▶ **NO CROSS-TALK** | Be considerate of others as they share. Refrain from side conversations and texting during group time.

▶ **NO FIXING** | We are not in the group to fix each other. Jesus does that part.

▶ **SHARING** | Be sensitive to the amount of time you share. Don't talk too much or too little. Every person brings something valuable to the group.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

WHEN UP IS DOWN AND DOWN IS UP

What are we to do when it seems like things are upside down in our world? When up is down and wrong is right? When wicked rulers aren't punished for their evil actions and continue to oppress their people? When cheaters and swindlers rake in profits that only benefit them and cause others to suffer? When brazen sin is condoned and celebrated while God is cursed and ridiculed?

Some might say it's never been worse than it is today. The truth is, it's nearly always been bad. Ever since the Fall, things have not worked the way they are supposed to. There's been a short circuit in the system and humanity has been living with the consequences of a world gone wrong ever since.

Our world gone wrong is the setting for God's extraordinary salvation story, and the birth of Jesus took place in a context not so different from our own. Jesus came into a world that was broken by sin and filled with broken and wicked people. What's amazing about God is that He can and does use the foolish and wicked of this world to tell His story.

This week we're going to look at King Herod and how God sovereignly rules over His creation, even the evil and foolish men and women who oppose Him. In this we can find hope, faith, and the right perspective when our world feels upside-down.

***Q:** Where have you recently seen evidence that God is in control over His creation and your life? What does that tell you about God?*

DEEPER DIVE

A FEARFUL AND JEALOUS KING

Like any good story, the story of Jesus's birth isn't without a villain who opposes the hero of the story. Herod, the king of Judea at the time of Jesus's birth, had been ruling for 33 years prior to Jesus's arrival; so we know that he had amassed a lot of power. Like most powerful people, Herod wasn't going to give up power to another very easily.

Herod had heard rumors that another king had been born and it filled him with a mix of fear and jealousy. He was afraid because another king meant his throne was under threat. He was jealous because there were only so many pieces of the power pie and he wasn't one to share with others.

Let's take a look at the story of Jesus's birth and the way God used Herod for His purposes, despite the king's evil desires and actions.

Q: *Have a volunteer read Matthew 2:1-23. Who are the major characters in this story? How would you describe their roles in the story? Be specific.*

Q: *In what ways could Herod have acted differently? What would have been the right way to respond to the news that God's promised Messiah had been born?*

Q: *What are right and wrong ways to react when we feel threatened by someone or something?*

REFLECTION AND NEXT STEPS

A GOOD AND SOVEREIGN KING

In Psalm 73 the psalmist reflects on the evil he sees in the world and in his own heart. He sees wicked people prosper and wonders, "Why?" But the psalmist gets the right perspective toward the end of the psalm when he understands God's sovereignty in writing His story and the dreadful end of the enemies who oppose Him.

Verses 23-28 are especially helpful for us because they help us know how to live in an upside-down world. In such a world, this is what we need to remember:

- God is with us and guides us.
- God fulfills our deepest desires.
- God is our strength and portion.

God is our good and sovereign king and He reigns over His creation, and He is telling a story that you have a part in. Which part will you play? Will God use you, despite your refusal to submit to and honor Him, or will God use you as a willing participant in His extraordinary salvation story? The choice is yours.

Q: *Have a volunteer read Psalm 73. How would you summarize this psalm in a few short sentences?*

Q: Where in your world do you feel like things are upside-down? How does God's Word give you hope, faith, and the right perspective?

Q: Think of someone who needs to hear the good news that God still reigns over His creation, even in terrible circumstances. Will you share this good news with them this week?

Q: How can the group be praying for you this week?

COMMENTARY

Background on Herod

"Herod was born in the 70s bc. His family was Idumean. Herod and his father, Antipater, were both loyal to Rome. Antipater was an adviser to Hyrcanus II. The family's loyalty and connections with Rome allowed Herod to receive a governorship in Galilee at age 25. He set out improving relations with the Jews, spreading Hellenism very slowly. He also established a military composed of foreign soldiers, centralized his bureaucracy, and began building projects throughout the region. After his father's assassination, Herod fled the land in 40 bc. He returned to Rome, and was officially crowned king of Judaea. Returning in 39 bc, Herod eventually regained control of the land from the Parthians (ca. 37 bc). He ruled for the next 33 years.

Herod's most prominent role in the New Testament is his appearance in Matthew's nativity account (Matt 2). This account reflects Herod's influence and jealousy. His attempt to discover the rival "King of the Jews" resulted in the murder of innocent children in the Bethlehem region.

Many of Herod's building projects serve as backdrops for events of the New Testament. Bethlehem—the birthplace of Jesus—is located near the Herodium. The magnificence of Herod's temple is clearly displayed in the Gospels. At one point, Jesus' disciples commented about the architecture of Herod's temple: "As He was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, 'Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings.' And Jesus said to him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down' " (Mark 13:1–2, NASB). The temple played a significant part in the life and ministry of Christ:

Christ came to this temple in Jerusalem three times a year, every year, from the time he was 12 years old until He died.

- During His ministry, Jesus preached in this temple (John 7–10).

- Jesus celebrated Jewish feasts there.
- Jesus predicted the temple's destruction (Luke 19:43–44; 21:6).

Herod's building projects also provide the backdrop for Acts—particularly the city of Caesarea, which was visited by Peter, Paul, and was the home of Philip (Acts 8; 23:33; 21:8). Paul was brought to trial in the city of Caesarea, which Herod had built and whose port he had engineered.

After Herod's death, his son Antipas served as tetrarch over Galilee (Mark 14:1; Luke 3:1). He is the Herod most referred to in the Gospels; he reigned during Jesus' years of ministry. Antipas probably inherited some of his father's shrewd ways, since Jesus referred to him as a "fox" (Luke 13:32). Herod Antipas is also mentioned at the trial of Jesus (Luke 23:6–12). Herod's son Philip is also mentioned as the tetrarch of the northern region of the kingdom (Luke 3:1)."

Not the Rightful King

"It is no surprise that **King Herod ... was disturbed** when the Magi came to **Jerusalem** looking for the One who had been "born King" (v. 2). Herod was not the rightful king from the line of David. In fact he was not even a descendant of Jacob, but was descended from Esau and thus was an Edomite. (He reigned over Palestine from 37 b.c. to 4 b.c. See the chart on the Herods at Luke 1:5.) This fact caused most of the Jews to hate him and never truly to accept him as king, even though he did much for the country. If someone had been rightfully born king, then Herod's job was in jeopardy. He therefore **called** the Jewish scholars **together** and inquired **where the Christ was to be born** (Matt. 2:4). Interestingly Herod connected the One "born king of the Jews" (v. 2) with "the Christ," the Messiah. Obviously Israel had a messianic hope and believed that the Messiah would be born."

Overview of Psalm 73

"This psalm eloquently expresses total abandonment to the God of the universe. It reflects on the seemingly carefree life of the wicked who prosper (vv. 3–12), echoing sentiments expressed in Ps 49. Concern for the downtrodden in the previous psalm (72:4) contrasts with the grim present reality—the pride of the wicked (v. 6). Ps 73 picks up on Solomon's prayer in 72:7 that the righteous would flourish and prosper (as 1:3 also asserts), but Ps 73 turns that prayer around, asserting that the wicked seem to prosper without any consequences (contrary to what 1:4 asserts). But Ps 73 ends by expressing profound truth about the meaning of life, which is revealed only in God's presence (vv. 15–28, especially vv. 17, 28) and only in one's total abandonment to him (vv. 25–26). This is one of the so-called wisdom psalms (see introduction to Ps. 34), which reflect on many of life's deepest issues."

ENDNOTES:

1. Melton B. Winstead, "Herod the Great," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).
2. Louis A. Barbieri Jr., "Matthew," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 21–22.