

**The Great Escape**  
Psalm 148; Matthew 2:13-23

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor  
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Our text for today is an appalling story, so appalling that some claim that it cannot be historical. No one, they say, including ruthless Herod the Great, could have carried out the slaughter of the innocents. They say that this story is a *theologoumenon*, a theological construction designed to make a statement. In this case, it is a statement about Jesus who is portrayed as the people of Israel fleeing to and then coming out of Egypt, a fulfillment of prophecy.

While I accept that is possible, I also believe that it could be a historically accurate story. Human nature can be deeply depraved. History is full of appalling stories where deeply depraved people have committed atrocious crimes. Actually, we don't have to go far into history to find them, do we? Turn on CNN just about any day, and we can find news of an atrocious crime. Does it happen? As appalling as it is, as much as we want to believe that it could not have happened, it could have, and it does.

King Herod, an insecure and paranoid man, heard the rumors: a new king had been born, a rival to his throne. Wise men from the East even came to pay homage to the newborn king. Matthew says that Herod "was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." So, Herod tried to trick the "wise men." "Go and find this new king," Herod told them. "Give him your gifts and do whatever it is you need to do. But then let me know where he is so I can go and worship him too."

Of course, Herod had no intention of worshipping a rival king. Whoever this new king was, he was a threat to King Herod. There was room but for one king, and that would be Herod. Thankfully the wise men were wiser than Herod had anticipated. They found the new king all right. They gave him their gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But Matthew says that they didn't tell Herod. They returned to their country another way.

Herod was enraged! He was so angry that he ordered one of the most awful events recorded in scripture: the slaughter of all the male children in Bethlehem and the surrounding area age two and under. "The slaughter of the

innocents,” it is called today. Remember, Bethlehem at that time was very small. In all likelihood, we’re not talking about a large number of children. Some suggest about a dozen. But a dozen children is a dozen children. We wonder what kind of evil man could carry out such a heinous act. Who could be so cold-hearted? A few years later, this same king ordered the execution of three his own sons, fearing they might usurp his throne. A group of youth once tore down an idol he placed over the Temple gates. Herod had the youth burned alive. That’s the kind of man who could do it.

Matthew says that Joseph was warned of Herod’s plan. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream telling him to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt and to remain there until the death of evil King Herod. Then Matthew quoted the prophet Hosea with these words: "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

That quote from Hosea was important for Matthew. Matthew went to great length to depict Jesus as the New Moses, the New Deliverer. That is why the early church placed Matthew’s gospel first in the New Testament. It wasn’t written first. But Matthew is a good bridge from the covenant with Abraham to the covenant through Jesus. Matthew was trying to show that, just as God was at work in Moses, so God was at work in Jesus.

Look at the parallel Matthew presents between Moses and Jesus. The Egyptian Pharaoh ordered the slaughter of male children when Moses was a baby too. His mother hid him in a basket among the reeds on the bank of the Nile River. He was found by the Pharaoh’s daughter and reared in Egypt, as an Egyptian, rather than as a Jew in Israel. Just as God protected the infant Moses and then called him out of Egypt to be the deliverer of the people, so God protected the infant Jesus and called him out of Egypt to be the New Deliverer.

Matthew was building a case. He was trying to communicate to his people that the birth and life of Jesus were of such magnitude that they could not be ignored. He wasn’t just another bouncing baby boy. God was at work in the life of Jesus. And they were being called to reckon. What was Matthew’s proof? The great escape. That was proof that God was raising up a New Moses, a New Deliverer. God was at work again, and the question laid at their feet was this: “What will you do now with this man named Jesus of Nazareth?”

And, of course, that question has never gone away. We hear it echoing through the ages. At Pentecost, that is what Peter asked the people. What will

you do now with this man named Jesus of Nazareth? It is the question Paul and Silas began to ask around the world. In Jerusalem and Antioch, in Ephesus and Troas, throughout Macedonia, they asked, “What will you do with this man named Jesus of Nazareth?” It is the question of the early church, meeting in homes, enduring great persecution, but deeply loyal to that man from Nazareth. It is the question that fueled the renewal of the church during the Protestant Reformation, and then renewed the Catholic Church during the Counter Reformation. It is the question that called into being a radical, freedom-loving little group called the Baptists. It is the question that called your pastor to faith when he was fifteen years old. David Freeman, what will you do now with this man named Jesus of Nazareth? My life has not been the same since.

Today that question is laid at our feet again. It is a highly personal question. No one can answer it for you. In the depths of your heart and soul, you must wrestle, struggle, and finally decide. What will you do with this man named Jesus of Nazareth?

C. S. Lewis, the famous Christian apologist, did not answer this question until he was an adult. He was an intellectual, a scholar, teaching at Magalene College in Oxford, England. He and some friends formed an informal discussion group called The Inklings. They met on Tuesdays at the famous “Bird and Baby” pub in downtown Oxford. There they discussed politics, books they were writing, culture, and religion. J. R. R. Tolkein was a member of The Inklings. Tolkein was a devout Christian. Lewis was impressed to discover a highly respected intellectual who was also a Christian. Lewis, like all of us, came to a point where he had to decide for himself what he believed about Jesus of Nazareth. This is what he says in his book *Mere Christianity*. (p. 56)

*A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would be a lunatic—on the level of the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.*

Lewis is right. A man who claimed to be the Son of God would have to be either the Son of God or a nut, a madman. Like Tolkein, like Lewis, we must decide too. This very personal question is laid at our feet today. What will you do now with this man named Jesus of Nazareth?

Let me make one other observation. Not only is this question highly personal; it is also corporate. What will *we* do with this man named Jesus of Nazareth? This question strikes at the foundation of who we are as a community of faith. While we may share some similarities to a civic club—they do good deeds, and we do good deeds—we are not a civic club. We may share some similarities with a university. They teach and we do too. But we are not a university. We may look somewhat like a non-profit social agency, but we're not. We are people who find our identity in the life and teachings of Jesus. We are the Body of Christ, and as such the teachings of Jesus are at the heart of all we do. In the preamble of our vision statement, we have declared for everyone to know that this congregation exists under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The One who stands at the center of our corporate life is not a pastor or another member of our staff. It is not a deacon. It is Jesus Christ, the One who made the great escape to Egypt and then came out of Egypt as God's deliverer. This year, today, let us reaffirm our identity as the Body of Christ, existing under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. No, he was not just another bouncing baby boy. God was and is at work in him. I lay at your feet now, personally and corporately, this question, "What will you do now with this man named Jesus of Nazareth?"

#### Closing Prayer

Loving Christ, guide us personally and corporately to a rich and meaningful faith. Work within our hearts and throughout our church to make us truly a Jesus people. For those who are struggling to answer that question, gently pull them unto yourself. In the name of Christ, I pray. Amen.