MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Why Do the Nations Rage?

Reverend Scott Johnson | November 8, 2026 | Matthew 2:13-23

Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament reading is Jeremiah 31, verses 15 and 16. And this is God's infallible and inerrant word. Let's hear the word of God.

"Thus says the Lord, a voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children because they are no more. Thus says the Lord, keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord. And they shall come back from the land of the enemy."

New Testament Reading

And now let's turn to the New Testament, to Matthew chapter two. This is our New Testament reading, as well as our sermon text. Matthew two, verses 13 through 23. Matthew two, 13 through 23.

"Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.' And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled

what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping in loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children. She refused to be comforted because they are no more.'

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, 'Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.' And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene."

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

The World's Hatred of Christ

In the incarnation, when the Son of God became man and came into our world, He traded the glory, the blessedness of heaven for the darkness and the misery of this world. And at the same time, when the Son of God came into our world, when He became man, He left the safety of heaven, the bliss of the love of His Father, and He came into a world that hated Him, a world that wanted to destroy Him. Jesus himself testified that the world hated him. And in our passage this morning, we see how that hatred of Christ, how that murderous hatred of Christ broke out against Jesus in the very first years of his life, at the very beginning of his life in this world.

So we've just started going back through Matthew, and last week, in the passage that we consider, the visit of the Magi to Jesus in Bethlehem, we saw how they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. They were overflowing with joy as they followed the natal star, which led them to the baby Jesus. They worshiped Him. They offered Him gifts. They honored Him. They rejoiced in the birth of Christ.

But that passage ended on an ominous note. The wise men were warned in a dream not to go back to their country, wherever that was. They were not to go back to that country the way that they came through Jerusalem and to see Herod there, but they were to go another way. And so we know then that Herod, he must have had some sinister purpose in mind in wanting to find out from the wise men exactly the identity, the location of this baby who was born, who was called the King of the Jews.

And our passage this morning shows us exactly what that purpose was, what that evil intent was on Herod's part. His plan was to murder Jesus. Of course, Herod failed in his attempt to destroy the Christ child. And the reason for that, the reason why Harold—Herod, not Harold—but the reason why Herod failed in his attempt to kill Jesus is the other story that Matthew tells us in this passage, and that is the story of God's protection, His deliverance, His watching over the baby Jesus. And so by the end of the passage, it's not Jesus who is dead, but it is Herod. He is lying in his grave, and Jesus and his family are living safely in Galilee.

And so we'll consider this passage from these two perspectives, the two stories that Matthew tells us: first, the story of Herod's fury against Christ, and secondly, of God's protection of Christ. And as we'll see, what Matthew tells us here has implications for the church and for us as Christians today.

Herod's Fury Against Christ

So first of all, Herod's fury against Christ. Our passage begins with something that is becoming quite familiar to Joseph at this point, although I'm not sure how anybody could become familiar with this, but an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph and begins, and he speaks to him and brings a message to him from the Lord. And the message is this, in verse 13. And so Herod, at some point, after he sent the wise men to Bethlehem and asked them to tell him where he was, at some point, Herod is waiting for the wise men to return. They don't come back, and so he's beginning to get impatient. He does not know where they are, and he realizes at some point that he has been tricked, that the wise men are not coming back to him. Herod never finds out the location of this baby whom he, of course, wants to destroy, the king of the Jews.

The word that Matthew uses in verse 16, a word that's translated as "tricked," is a word that means to deceive or to mock. And it's actually the same word that Matthew will use later in his gospel to describe the mocking, the mockery that Jesus endured when He hung upon the cross. And last Sunday, we saw a comparison between these two kings, King Herod on the one hand and King Jesus on the other hand, and here's another point of comparison between the two. Here, King Herod is tricked, he is mocked, he is deceived by the wise men. And when he is, he flies into a murderous rage. And of course, he proceeds to have innocent children murdered. But when King Jesus was mocked by those who hated him, as he hung upon the cross, he silently bore the insults. And of course he prayed for their forgiveness, and he was praying—or

he was suffering—there on the cross to pay for the very sins of those who mocked him and derided him.

And so Herod, back to our passage, he is filled with rage. He sends his goons to Bethlehem to murder every male child in that village and in the surrounding regions, every child who was two years old and younger. If Herod couldn't destroy the baby Jesus one way, he would destroy him another way. Biblical scholars estimate, based on the population of Bethlehem at that time and the surrounding area, that there were probably two dozen or so boys who would have been killed. And as you know, or as you may know, this act of depravity on the part of Herod has become known to us as the massacre of the innocents.

And Matthew tells us that when this massacre took place, it fulfilled that sad prophecy of the prophet Jeremiah that we read or that we heard. In Jeremiah, he says, "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping in loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children. She refused to be comforted because they are no more." And so in this prophecy, Rachel represents the mothers of Israel who are overwhelmed with grief and sorrow. They're weeping bitterly because according to the prophecy, their children would be carried off into Babylon in exile to be heard from no more. But Matthew, despite that fulfillment, Matthew sees a greater fulfillment of this prophecy in Jeremiah, and that is when the mothers of the slain baby boys in Bethlehem would wail in grief and cry over their innocent sons who had been murdered.

Cosmic Spiritual Warfare

Of course, in the history of man, a massacre, even one as horrific as this, is not unheard of. It's not that unusual. There have been many kinds of massacres and mass murder committed by various people throughout history. And so this kind of savage cruelty was not unique to Herod. However, there was something more at work here than just another despot killing whomever he thought necessary to protect his rule and power. Herod's rage was specifically directed against Christ. It was none other than the incarnate Son of God that Herod was determined to destroy. Now, of course, Herod, he did not know who Jesus was. He did not know that this was God in the flesh, the Messiah. Nevertheless, he was determined to kill him because he was being led by an evil spirit, Satan. Herod was doing his bidding.

And so, what Matthew is showing us here is the outward manifestation, what took place in human affairs, of a greater spiritual war taking place between the God of heaven and His angels, and Satan and his demonic forces. Ever since God put into motion on earth his eternal

purpose to save his people from sin and death, Satan has opposed that plan. Satan has sought to frustrate God's purposes. He has sought to overturn God's plan of redemption. The devil has always fought against God and his people to try, if possible—as if it were possible—to try to undo or to bring to nothing God's purposes of salvation.

Back in the book of Genesis, right after the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, God spoke to the serpent who deceived Eve and led Adam and Eve into sin. The serpent, of course, was Satan. And he told Satan, the serpent, that there would be enmity—that is, hatred and warfare—between him and the woman and between the serpent seed and the seed of the woman. And so much of the history of Israel, as we read on from Genesis, throughout the Old Testament, so much of the history of Israel is the unfolding of those words that the Lord spoke to the serpents. You could say that the story of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament is the story of God's preserving his people, the seed of the woman, from those who are the seed of the serpent—that is, God's protecting his people from those who throughout history have opposed and sought to destroy the people of Israel. And as God was preserving his people from the seed of the serpents throughout their history, he was also preserving and keeping alive the promise of the one seed of the woman who would finally come into the world, who would be raised up from among the people of Israel, who would undo the work of Satan, and of course, that is the Messiah, the Christ.

But that is the cosmic spiritual warfare between God and Satan, between heaven and earth, that is played out and manifested in the earthly affairs of men in the history of our world. When we looked at the book of Exodus, we saw the spiritual battle raging on earth when a Pharaoh, he called for his own massacre of the innocents. He commanded the death of all the baby boys who were born to the Israelites. And of course, Pharaoh had his own reasons for wanting to do this. But nevertheless, he was being used by the evil one to seek to destroy the people of Israel.

In Revelation chapter 12, we read of that spiritual warfare at the time of the birth of Christ. The apostle John, in one of his visions of heaven that God gave to him, he sees a woman in labor who is about to give birth to a male child, a child who will rule the nations with a rod of iron. Of course, the woman in labor is Israel. She's about to bring forth Christ into the world. But John then describes what he sees appear on the scene: a hideous beast, a great fiery red dragon with seven horns—or seven heads and 10 horns. And John says this in Revelation 12:4, "And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth to devour her child as soon as it was born." But of course, the dragon fails to devour the child because the child is taken up to

be with God and to his throne. But that's the spiritual version, that's what's taking place in the spiritual realm that's manifested in the events that Matthew describes for us here in Herod seeking to kill the baby Jesus.

And so Herod had his own reasons to kill Jesus, but it was Satan himself, again, working through his human servant to try to frustrate the purposes of God. God's purpose is to bring salvation to sinners through Jesus Christ. Now, praise the Lord that Herod failed, that Satan failed, and Jesus would go on not only to survive Herod, but he would ultimately go on to deal the ultimate death blow to death itself. Jesus would conquer for us death and Satan and hell forever and ever. He did that at the cross. Colossians tells us that at the cross, in the person of Jesus Christ, God himself disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them. And so the war has been won. The war has been won by Jesus Christ. He is the conqueror over Satan and sin and death.

The Ongoing Persecution of the Church

However, the battle rages on. The battle continues, even to this day. Satan still opposes Christ, he still opposes the people who belong to Christ, who worship him, and he fights with all of his hellish fury to silence the testimony of the church and even, if possible, to extinguish the life of the church on earth. And you see this spiritual warfare unfolding when you look back on the history of the church, particularly the history of the persecution of Christians. Just as Jesus Christ was persecuted right after his birth, so the church, right after her birth, began to experience persecution as well.

Luke tells us in the book of Acts that Stephen was martyred by the unbelieving Jews; they could not bear to hear his testimony of Jesus Christ, that he is the Messiah. And so he was the first Christian martyr. And of course, Stephen was just the first of many, many, many martyrs to follow. As you know, the murder of Stephen unleashed a great persecution in Jerusalem against the first Christians, a persecution that no one took part in with more zeal and determination than that of a young Pharisee named Saul. For he was the seed of the woman—Saul was the seed of the serpents, and he did his best to destroy the young church, but of course, Christ took Saul, the persecutor, and by his power and grace, he made him Saul, or Paul, the apostle. So Jesus is able, by his power, to overcome even the most hardened, most determined opponent of the church and of the truth of God.

Later, when the church grew, the Roman government began its persecution of the church. It began with the Emperor Nero. He found the Christians in Rome to be a very convenient scapegoat, to blame them for the fires that had destroyed the city. And so he subjected the Christians to all kinds of horrific torture. Just to give one example, Christians were tarred and set on fire to serve as torches at public events. Later in the Roman Empire, Christians were thrown to the lions in the arenas to the delight of thousands of cheering people. And ever since then, God's people, the church, has suffered persecution in various ways, sometimes at the hand of wicked rulers, sometimes at the hands of a corrupt church, sometimes at the hands of a totalitarian state, and sometimes at the hands of communist nations or Islamic peoples and armies.

And the persecution of Christians today is alive and well. It is still taking place. This warfare is still raging. We are so blessed to live in a place where we can freely profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are so blessed to live in a place where we can gather as we are today to worship Christ. None of us is going to be arrested on the way home for being here today. But that's not true if you lived in so many different parts of the world. There are many, many countries in the world that your freedom, your life would even be at risk simply for doing what we are doing here today. There are Christians in places like North Korea, Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, who are ready to, and perhaps even expecting, not only to suffer for the sake of their faith in Christ, but even to die for the sake of their faith in Christ.

That raises the question for you and me: How precious is Christ to you? How valuable is your faith in Jesus Christ? What are you willing to give up for your faith in Christ? Would you be willing to suffer for His name? Would you be willing to be imprisoned for the sake of Christ, to have all your possessions confiscated? Would you be willing even to die for the sake of Jesus Christ? In fact, Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world today. And so the spiritual battle between Satan and God, between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent continues to rage on in the world today. And so Herod's attempt to kill the Christ child, this was only part of a much larger spiritual war that began in the garden and has taken place ever since. God is saving his people from Satan's rule and Satan is opposing God at every turn. And that war will continue until the return of Christ.

Now, one lesson we can take from this passage as we consider this passage and the larger truth that it points to of the spiritual warfare and the persecution that Christians experience in the world is that those who persecute Christians, they are really seeking to destroy Jesus himself.

Consider Herod. He was a cruel man, he was a wicked man. We know from extra-biblical accounts that he was savage in his cruelty, ruthless, even killing members of his own family to keep himself in power. But even wicked Herod didn't just wake up one day and just out of the blue decide to murder baby boys in Bethlehem. But he had a purpose. He was trying to kill Jesus. He was trying to kill one baby boy, and that was Jesus.

And at a spiritual level, those who oppress and attack and kill Christians today, they are trying, as if it were possible, to silence and to destroy the Christ who lives in His people, the Christ who is made known in the witness and the worship of His people. And so, those who persecute the church and persecute Christians are really seeking to attack Jesus himself, and if possible, to destroy Jesus himself. And so what the risen Lord said to the persecuting Saul could be said to all those who have, since Saul, sought to harm and kill Christians. You remember what Jesus said to Saul? He said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Not "why are you persecuting my people?" "Why are you persecuting me?"

Again, we are so blessed that we don't experience anything like we read about in the scriptures or we hear about in the world, the persecution that God's people often experience. However, that perhaps may change someday. There's no guarantee that it won't. And insofar as we may experience opposition or persecution for our faith in Christ, we need to remember it is really Jesus himself who is the object of the hatred of those who oppose God's people. Now, of course, knowing this and remembering this does not make suffering for the sake of Christ any easier, but it does enable us to pray for our enemies. And that's because we understand that those who are hostile against Christians, those who are hostile against the Christian faith, they are really at war with God himself. They are raging against Jesus himself. And isn't that what Psalm 2 says that we read earlier? "The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his anointed." It's just that they direct that fury and hatred and wrath against the people of God because it's in God's people that Christ is manifest and made known in the world. And so this passage first shows us Herod's fury against Christ.

God's Protection of Christ

Secondly, we see here God's protection of Christ. This is the good news that we can take comfort in, that those who are opposed to Christ, they are fighting a losing battle. They are fighting a war that has already been won against them. And those who belong to Christ, we

have the promise that we will share in Christ's ultimate triumph over Satan and death and hell forever and ever.

So in our passage, we see God at work. He's very active. He sent his angel to command Joseph to flee with Jesus and Mary to flee to the land of Egypt. And Joseph obeyed that very night. And for that reason, he was saved. Jesus was saved from destruction. Later in Egypt, Joseph—or after Joseph came back from Egypt—he was warned in a dream that he and his family should not stay in Judea. Matthew tells us that Herod's son Archelaus was reigning in the place of his father over Judea. We know from other sources outside the Bible that Archelaus was a chip off the old block. He was just like Herod, his father, ruthless and cruel. And so the boy, Jesus, would not be safe in Judea. And so Joseph took his family up to Nazareth in Galilee to live there. That was where Joseph and Mary were from. And that is where Jesus, of course, would grow up. That's where he lived until he began his public ministry when he was about 30 years old.

And so you'll note throughout this passage the hand of God at work here. You'll also note that again and again Matthew refers to the scriptures saying that such and such a prophecy was fulfilled when this took place. And so God's sovereign hand is not only evident in sending his angels and speaking to Joseph, but you see the hand of God here in that everything that takes place in the life of Jesus and the circumstances surrounding his birth and his growing up, everything that takes place is exactly according to the will of God, as that will is at least in part revealed to us in the scriptures. And this holds true for everything that took place in the life of Jesus throughout his entire life here on earth, exactly according to God's eternal plan. Jesus was not only spared as a child, but he would live on until that time that God had appointed for him to offer himself on the cross as a sacrifice for sin. Jesus' life was often in jeopardy; however, he would not die until that day that God had appointed him to die. And that was the day of his crucifixion. And also according to the plan and purpose of God, Christ would be exalted. He would be raised from the grave. He would be exalted to the right hand of God in heaven. He would sit at his right hand to rule as the king of kings and the Lord of Lords. And so what all of this means is that God was protecting, guiding, leading, ruling over the life of his incarnate son, Jesus Christ, from cradle to grave, to resurrection, to glory.

Now, when you consider that, that the God who is sovereign over all, who rules over all things in heaven and earth, it was his will to protect his son, Jesus—when you consider that, it shows just how futile, how vain, how empty was the hope and the desire of Herod to destroy Jesus. And in

the same way, it is futile for anyone today to oppose God's purposes that he is fulfilling through his exalted son, Jesus Christ. And this is a great encouragement to us. No matter whom Satan may throw up in the world to oppose Christianity, to oppose the gospel, to oppose the truth, to persecute the people of God, God's people will be preserved and protected according to God's will. There is no Herod, there is no Nero, there is no communist government, no Islamic state, not even all the powers of hell's fury that can hinder the reign of Jesus Christ on earth, that can stop the spread of the gospel until every last one of God's people is brought into his kingdom.

Now, God in his wise providence may permit the awful persecution of Christians, even the death of Christians. At times we have seen Christians massacred in history. Nevertheless, God is working even through these horrible events to accomplish His purposes, and His church will grow, His gospel will spread, and every one of God's elect will be brought into His kingdom. And we can be sure of this. Because again, when we look to Psalm 2, there is one who rules in the heavens, and he has said, "As for me, I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." And he says to his king, to Jesus, whom he has set on Zion, "I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession." And so Jesus will accomplish his purposes in bringing salvation to his people. And in the meantime, what does God do as he looks down on earth and he sees the futile and vain efforts of evil men to oppose the gospel, to oppose God's truth? Well, according to Psalm 2, God chuckles. He laughs at these futile attempts to hinder his redemptive purposes.

And at the same time, for you and me, the same God who has promised and fulfilled all His words concerning Christ, He is the God who promises you, as a Christian, that He will bring to fruition for you all of the promises that He has made to you in His Word. And so in this life, no matter what you may endure, no matter the trials you may experience, the dangers you may go through, the spiritual conflicts that you suffer in this world, nevertheless, in Jesus Christ, you have the assurance that in the end, you are the victor. You have, in Jesus Christ, victory over death and sin and hell forever. Philippians 1:6: "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion until—or at—the day of Jesus Christ."

And so this story in Matthew chapter two of Herod's failure to attempt—or his failure to kill Christ—it is kind of a miniature version of the larger story of the history of Christian persecution, that is, man's vain and futile efforts to destroy the work and the witness of Christ and his people. And it's the story of God's sovereign activity to protect, to deliver, to build up his church in spite of all the fury and rage with which Satan and his servants attack the people of God.

Two Responses to the Gospel

But there's also a similar story that takes place in the human heart as well, when a person is confronted in the gospel with the claims of Jesus Christ on their life. The gospel is good news that the son of God came into the world, that he has accomplished salvation for sinners such as you and me by his death and resurrection. And the gospel calls all people to repentance and faith and submission to the Lord Jesus Christ. And when any person hears the gospel of Jesus Christ, there are only really two possible responses, and both responses are laid out for us in Matthew chapter two.

The first response is the response of Herod. That is the response of unbelief, rejection, opposition. Just as Herod was dead set and determined to do whatever it took to hold on to his rule over his little part of Israel, even if that meant destroying the Christ child, so the human heart will do all that it can to hold on to its rule over itself. We naturally resist the gospel. We reject Christ. Why? Because we do not want to give up the rule that we have over our own hearts and our own lives. We insist on being our own lords, our own kings, and we will not submit to Christ by nature. That is what we are in our sin.

Now, that opposition to Christ takes place in different forms. And so a person, for example, may tell himself when confronted with the gospel, "Well, faith in Jesus Christ, living a religious life, believing in Jesus, that's not for the strong, the intelligent, it's for the gullible, the weak, the ignorant." Or a person will convince himself that faith in Christ is a crutch, a crutch for the weak, that to live a truly authentic and fulfilling life, one must live by his own strength, one must live according to his own morals and values, ideas of right and wrong. This is the attitude that says, "I will be the captain of my soul, the master of my fate." But it is a rebellion against the rightful Lord Jesus Christ, every much as a rebellion against him as Herod was rebelling against Christ and seeking to destroy him. Or a person may fool himself into thinking, "I will consider the gospel and the claims of Christ someday, but not now. I've got too much to do. My life is too full right now." But that person forgets that our life in this world can end in an instant. And there is no guarantee that tomorrow will come, let alone some vague time called "someday." But this too is a way in which people will refuse to come to Christ for salvation, refuse to submit to him as Lord.

Yet no matter how successful a person may be in this life at refusing to bow to Christ, no matter how successful they may be in living a life rejecting the gospel and the Savior, just like King

Herod, he will fail in the end. The Bible says that at the name of Jesus Christ, every knee will bow, every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Even Herod will be forced to bow and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that is true for every human being.

The other response to the gospel is the response of the magi, and they demonstrate the right response, a response that can only be the work of God's grace in us: when we behold Christ by faith for who He is, the Son of God, my Savior from my sin, and my rightful Lord to whom I submit, in whom I believe and trust for salvation, and do so joyfully.

Conclusion and Prayer

And so what is your response to Jesus Christ? In your heart, how do you respond to the claim that Jesus makes upon your life? He claims sovereign authority and rule over your heart and over your life. He is your creator. And by faith in Him, He is your Savior. Do you refuse to come to Him in faith? Are you, like Herod, waging war against Him in your heart? Or have you surrendered to Him? Have you submitted to the rule of Christ over you? Have you put your hope entirely in Jesus to save you from your sin, to bring you into His glory when death takes you out of this world?

The last verse of Psalm 2 begins with these words, Psalm 2:12: "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled." All those who refuse to kiss the Son, all those who refuse to bow to Christ in this life will perish in the way, just as Herod perished in his way. But the very last words of Psalm 2 say this: "Blessed are all who take refuge in him."

Okay, and so for those who seek Christ as their refuge, who seek and find in Jesus, the Son of God, a savior from sin, blessed are you. Blessed are you who come to the Son of God as your refuge and your savior, because he takes away your sin. He gives you everlasting life. He fills you with His peace and joy. He walks with you in this life. He watches over you. He promises to bring you into that eternal glory when He calls you to be with Him forever. "Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way. And blessed are all who take refuge in Him."

Let's pray.