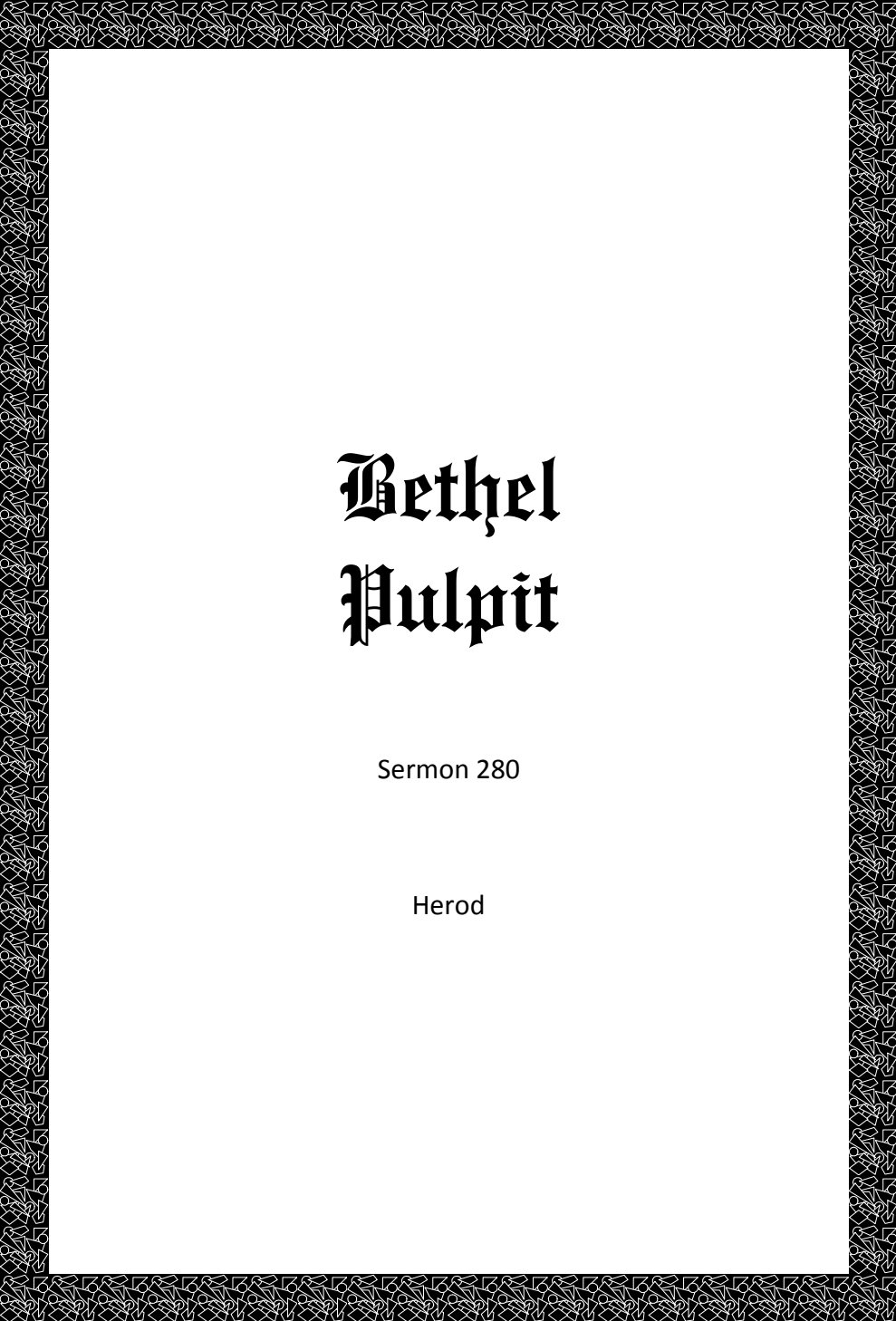




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 280

Herod

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 16th December, 2007**

Text: “*For Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him*” (Matthew 2. 13).

Have you noticed how this chapter begins? “In the days of Herod the king.” And have you noticed how the gospel according to Luke begins? “In the days of Herod, the king” (Luke 1. 5). Now who was Herod? He must have been one of the most evil men who ever lived, and he was reigning in Jerusalem at the time of the birth of Jesus. He was a usurper; he had no right to be on the throne. Secular historians tell us that his reign was marked with unparalleled cruelty. He even murdered his favourite wife and he murdered at least one or two of his own children. He was a cruel monster. It seems there was a deep, dark background to this chapter, as if he was the instrument of Satan seeking to overthrow the work of God and seeking to overthrow the coming of the Saviour.

“In the days of Herod the king.” Now secular historians describe him as *Herod the great*. Humanly speaking, he was a great king. He was very powerful as well as very cruel. But beloved friends, the great point is this: Herod, sin, Satan, can never overthrow one of the purposes of God. It does not matter whether Herod is on the throne or who is on the throne. It does not matter what is taking place in the world or what is not taking place in the world. It does not matter what wickedness abounds. It does not matter what wickedness there is abroad. Not one of God's purposes can ever be prevented; not one of God's purposes can ever be stopped. Not all the power of earth and hell can ever overthrow God's purposes. He says, “For the Lord of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it? and His hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?”

“In the days of Herod the king.” That was when Jesus was born in Bethlehem: “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea *in the days of Herod the king*.” Herod, sin, Satan, hell, could not prevent the birth of the Saviour. “When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.” And nothing could prevent the coming of the Saviour.

Now beloved friends, there was something worse than Herod, if you think of those whom Jesus came to save. You think of your own sin and guilt. You think of the sin and guilt of all God's people from when Adam fell to the end of time, and the hatred and the rebellion and the guilt; but all that could not stop the coming of the Saviour. Nothing could prevent that wonderful birth, not all the problems and perplexities. How could the eternal Son of God become Man without ceasing to be God? And if the plan is that He should be born with a human birth, how is it possible that He should be born and yet not be a partaker of original sin? None of these things, none of them, could prevent the birth of the Saviour. And what a mercy that He came! What a mercy that this very simple fact is here recorded: "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king"!

But then it is not just the birth of the Lord Jesus that Satan cannot prevent. Satan cannot prevent an heir of glory being born. There have been some impossible things, and yet if there is an heir of glory to be born, that heir of glory will be born and all the power of hell can never stop it. Then you can look again. Not all the powers of hell can ever stop an heir of glory being born again. O the impossibility of it!

"Far off, depraved, and wont to stray,
They shall to Jesus come;
For covenant love marks out the way,
And brings the outcast home."

Nothing could prevent the birth of the Saviour; nothing can prevent the birth of an heir of glory; and nothing can prevent their new birth.

Let me just give you one instance: the dying thief. It seemed as if Satan had prevented his new birth, didn't it? He was dying, not long to live, and with the other thief he was reviling the dying Saviour. Yet it seemed the new birth took place while he was hanging, dying on the cross. Nothing could prevent it. Grace must reign; God's purposes must be fulfilled in judgment and in mercy. Nothing can prevent it, and so you have the evidence of the new birth in the dying thief's prayer: "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom."

"Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king." As we read on in the chapter, we find the wise men with something stirring in their hearts, led by the star, and they land up at Jerusalem. Let

us be clear, the star of Bethlehem never led them to Herod's palace, never led them to Jerusalem. It seems to me that they were delighted to follow its gracious leading until they were almost there (and Bethlehem is not far from Jerusalem). They thought, Well, that is it; we are thankful for it, but we are near the palace now. They trusted their own wisdom. Beloved friends, you need the Lord of life and glory to lead you all the way to heaven, not to trust to your own wisdom for the last bit, or when things seem clear and plain, no longer to rely on the Lord.

“When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.” Now they all knew the answer. It is a solemn thing – there was not any grace there, but they knew the answer: “In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet.” Have you thought of that solemn point, that not a single one went down to Bethlehem even to see if what the wise men were saying was true? “In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet.”

And we read that “Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem.” That word has somewhat arrested me. The most wicked man, he *sent* them to Bethlehem; Herod, he *sent* them to where the Saviour was. Herod, he did not go himself, but he sent them, and he sent them to the right place, and he sent them to the right Person. There is quite a lot of deep divinity here. “Herod ... sent them to Bethlehem.” God still uses wicked men to accomplish His own purposes. God still uses even Satan to accomplish His own purposes.

“Great is the mystery, truly great,
That hell's designs should hell defeat;
But here eternal wisdom shines,
For Satan works what God designs.”

“He” – Herod – “sent them to Bethlehem.” The word that has lingered on my spirit this week concern this verse is this:

“He bids affliction drive us home
To anchor on His grace.”

Herod was a cruel king; people were afraid of him, but, “He sent them to Bethlehem.” And sometimes you will have a deep sorrow and you will

have a cruel affliction, but it will be a mercy if it sends you to Bethlehem, if it sends you to where the Saviour is.

“And he sent them to Bethlehem.” I do not want to be misunderstood on this, but good Ralph Erskine, the Scottish divine, once said that his sins had done him a lot more good than his good works. Now you take that advisedly. What he meant was this: his sins, when he was under the consciousness of them, feeling the vileness of them, they forced him to the sinners’ Saviour and Friend. God is in control. He was then; He is now. He is above all things, God blessed for evermore, and He can use the most wicked men and He can use the most cruel providences to send sinners on an errand to the throne of grace, seeking His help, seeking His mercy, seeking His salvation.

And then we see the dreadful deceitfulness of this man Herod: “Go and search diligently for the young Child; and when ye have found Him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship Him also.” Now the wise men believed him; they did not doubt him; they did not know his character; they did not know how evil he was; they did not know he was wrong; they did not know he was deceiving them; they believed what he said. They were going to go to Bethlehem; they were going to go back and tell him exactly where the infant Saviour was to be found. But the Lord has a blessed ability of delivering His own people, and these wise men were godly people, and they were relying on the Lord, and they were looking to Him for His help and His leading and His guidance, and He would not let them be deceived. Doesn’t Joseph Hart say,

“The simplest Christian shall not err,
Nor be deceived, nor die.”?

In this case, how could they know? How could they know what was going on in Herod’s cruel heart? The Lord knew. He knew what Herod was planning and He knew what was in Herod’s heart and He knew his deceit and He revealed it to these wise men. “Being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.” The Lord has a wonderful ability to undeceive us. Sometimes we can be deceived in people. Sometimes we can be deceived in our feelings. Sometimes we can be deceived in our own exercises. But the Lord has this blessed ability to undeceive us and rather than that these wise men should fall into danger, Almighty God sends them a dream and clearly warns them.

And then we see Herod in this act of rage and this dreadful cruelty. He “slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under.” “Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.” Now God knew what was taking place. God was not deceived. This awful massacre of these children in Bethlehem was Satan’s attempt to overthrow the work of redemption. The Son of God had come into this world to save sinners. His reward was with Him and His work before Him. He had to live on earth a holy life. He had to reveal the Father’s will. He had to bring in an everlasting righteousness. He had to go to the cross to suffer, bleed and die, and there make a way of forgiveness, a way of salvation, a way to heaven. And then He was to rise again triumphant, and Satan was seeking to overthrow all this; Satan was seeking to stop it. “Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.” But he could not. The Lord Jesus cannot be overthrown. His work cannot be overthrown. His purposes cannot be overthrown.

Do you know what you read a few verses after this? That “Herod was dead.” The chapter starts off, “When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king.” But when the chapter ends, Herod was no longer king; he was in hell. “The Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” Almighty God will always have the last word – King of kings and Lord of lords. The wise men knew it. “Where is He that is born King of the Jews?” Herod was king, but the infant Saviour was King of kings and Lord of lords. Before the chapter ends, Herod is in his grave. The Lord Jesus could not be destroyed, or His work, or His purpose. He lives and He lives eternally; He lives for evermore.

“The Saviour lives no more to die!
He lives, the Lord enthroned on high!”

But, “Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him” – Satan’s enmity. We have it in the Garden of Eden: the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent’s head, and it shall bruise His heel. I read to you those few verses, they are not so well known, the mysterious Book of the Revelation (chapter 12. 1-5). Yes, I believe it does refer to the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, that Child going to be born and this terrible dragon, Satan, with all the powers of hell. No, I do not believe that glorious, wonderful woman to be Mary. Dear, godly Mary – never despise her; she was a most godly woman. But this glorious woman of Revelation chapter 12 is the church of God, because, as revealed in the Old Testament, it was of the seed of the woman, it was from Israel, according to the flesh that

Christ came. The Child was caught up to heaven in Revelation chapter 12. That terrible dragon could not destroy the infant Saviour. It is a most dreadful description of that awful dragon, that monster. If you read the rest of the chapter, he sought to destroy the woman, but he could no more destroy the woman than he could destroy the Child. I am not going to give you an explanation or exposition of Revelation chapter 12. I think it could be a profitable thing if when you get home this afternoon you are able to read it through.

“Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.” There is an interesting point here: the flight into Egypt. I think there is a truth here that we need to take notice of. The Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was God’s dear Son, and He dearly loved Him, and He was watching over Him. He was going to keep Him safe. But Joseph was clearly told he had to make use of human means. He had to flee from Bethlehem. He had to go down into the land of Egypt. This is God’s own dear Son. You say, Well, His beloved Father could have protected Him, kept Him safe. But Joseph had to take the infant Saviour down into Egypt and to wait there until this cruel Herod was dead.

“For Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.” Now Herod could not destroy the Saviour. Satan could not destroy the Saviour when He was born, when He was an infant, and Satan can never destroy a sinner saved by grace. That is the mercy of it. But when the new birth takes place, Satan will seek that young child to destroy him. When the Lord begins to work in your heart, Satan will oppose it with all his enmity and with all his power. He will try to overthrow it. He will try to draw you back into the world. He will try to cause you to fall into sin. He will show you the dangers of the way. He will tempt you to unbelief. “Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.” But you see the life of God in a sinner’s soul in the new birth can no more be destroyed than the life of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ could be destroyed when He was born at Bethlehem. Hold that fast. “He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” It is really this point that Bunyan is trying to explain when Christian left the world as a city of destruction and when he saw the wicket gate he went and knocked at the gate. Just as it was being opened and he was entering, there was an arrow that flew close to his head and just missed him. Christian was informed of how Satan has special hatred and malice against a sinner about to step through the wicket gate.

“Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.” I think you will find it if ever you are led into any special pathway in obedience to the Lord’s will. I think of an open profession of the Lord’s name. Now Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. Satan will put obstacles in your way. But,

“If thou press on, the crowds will fly,
Or if thou faint, to Jesus cry,
And He will send supplies.”

“Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.” But if you are led in any special pathway, you believe it is the Lord’s will, you are clearly shown it – it may be some move in providence; it may be something at work; it may be something in the church of God – and you feel sure it is right, it is the work of the Spirit of God, do not be surprised if Satan opposes it and tries to overthrow it and overturn it.

“Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.” The Lord Jesus constrained His beloved disciples to get into the ship and He said, “Let us pass over unto the other side.” Immediately there was a storm. Do you know why Satan did not want the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to come over to the other side? Have you ever thought why? There was a poor, lost sinner, the mad Gadarene on the other side, and the appointed moment had arrived “not to propose, but call by grace.” There was going to be a display of sovereign grace in the salvation of the mad Gadarene, and Satan would do all he could to overthrow it. But they came safely to the other side and that poor sinner was wrought on by effectual grace and brought in humility to the Saviour’s feet. It is a wonderful truth, that poor, sinful man, “sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind” at the feet of Jesus. It would be a wonderful thing if that work were wrought amongst us!

“Feeling well our ruined state,
We humbly fall at Jesus’ feet.”

He was sitting at rest; he was in his right mind; he was clothed; and he was at the feet of Jesus.

But, “Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.” Down the ages Satan has been seeking to overthrow the church of God. You think of the dreadful times of persecution. You think of the days of the martyrs in our own country and the Covenanters in Scotland and the Huguenots in France. “Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.” Because he

knows that he cannot destroy the Saviour, he seeks to destroy His handiwork in His people. But the emblem of the Scottish church in its best days was the burning bush. “The bush burned ... and the bush was not consumed.” And Jesus says, “Upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

But, “Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.” O that work of grace in a sinner’s heart, and sometimes you do not feel much faith or much love; you feel dead and you feel dark, and Satan is seeking to destroy God’s work in your heart, just as he sought to destroy the Saviour when He came. Sometimes you wonder where the scene will end. “A bruised reed shall He not break,” and He will not let Satan break that bruised reed. “And the smoking flax shall He not quench,” and He will not let Satan quench that smoking flax. Humanly speaking at Bethlehem, a tiny Child with a poor man, a poor woman His mother, and all the powers of Herod, the powers of the state, all their enmity, seeking to destroy that young Child. But it was impossible; they could not do it. And the work of grace in a sinner’s heart is indestructible. Have you a sweet hope that the Lord has begun with you and He has taught you “in your darkest frame to build your hopes on Jesus’ name”? O that work of grace in your heart, however weak, however faint, however small, is indestructible.

“His grace shall to the end,
Stronger and brighter shine;
Nor present things, nor things to come,
Shall quench the spark divine.”

“For Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.” How Satan seeks to destroy the believer’s hope, that little hope you have! But really the point is not whether it is little or whether it is large: it is where it is anchored. If it is real, it is anchored “within the veil; whither the Forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus.” And that hope is indestructible; it cannot be destroyed. Now surely, surely some of you, many of you, have been brought in your sinfulness and in your need to rest your only hope on Jesus’ name. You cannot deny it. “Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast” – it is indestructible; it cannot be destroyed – “and which entereth into that within the veil; whither the Forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus.”

“Does Satan tempt you to give up,
And call no more on Jesus’ name?”

Cast not away your little hope;
Come hither, and behold the Lamb.”

O that hope of a child of God, however weak, however tried, however tempted, it can never be destroyed.

“For Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.” Well, I do not suppose you expected a sermon on Herod this morning. In recent years I have felt and found when Christmas time comes that I am led to think about and read some different aspect of it. Surely in the spirit of it, beloved friends, we are living in the days of Herod the king, whatever name you want to give instead of Herod. It is all about us in the world, and then of course we have it in our own hearts, and the cruelty and the malice of Herod and Satan seeking to overthrow the Lord Jesus and His purposes and His work, but he never can; he never will. And his malice and cruelty seeking to overthrow you and me, and our little hope. But blessed be God, he never can and he never will.

“For Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.”