

WHAT CHRISTMAS REVEALS ABOUT GOD

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Matthew 2:1-18

CHRISTMAS SERIES: WHAT CHRISTMAS REVEALS ABOUT GOD

SERMON TITLE: "WHAT CHRISTMAS REVEALS ABOUT GOD'S GREATNESS"

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HEROD MONOLOGUE

Hello. My name is Herod, Herod the Great. There were other Herods - my sons and grandsons, but I alone am known in history as "Herod the Great." It's the title I dreamed of - I did everything I had to do to obtain it. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do or didn't do to be known as "great."

I rose to power in politically turbulent times in the Roman Empire, but I had a real knack for negotiating and surviving those ever-shifting political currents and alliances. It started when Julius Caesar put my father, Antipater, in charge of the territory of Judea in 47 B.C., and my father made me governor of Galilee at the age of 20. When Julius Caesar was assassinated, I allied myself with Mark Anthony, who eventually took control of the Empire.

Antony rewarded my support by persuading the Senate to bestow on me the title "king of the Jews." Now you need to understand that while I was called the "king of the Jews," I wasn't actually a Jew. I was an Idumean - a descendant not of Jacob but of Jacob's brother, Esau. So the Jews, who never did like being ruled by any non-Jew, really hated me. I knew that in order to survive as their king I either had to be loved or feared. And since I would never be loved, the choice was obvious - I had to be feared. If the people wouldn't give me their loyalty out of love, they would obey me out of fear. And that was just fine by me.

I knew how to survive, but I wanted to do more than just survive - I wanted to be great.

I knew that to be looked on as great, I had to do great things. And so I set out to take Judea and change it from being a backward, unrefined butt of Roman jokes into a jewel in the crown of the Roman Empire. The Romans were great builders, and I knew that for them to look on me as great I had to be a great builder too.

I built fortresses throughout the nation. In Jerusalem I built the fortress Antonia overlooking the Temple mount. At Bethlehem I built the magnificent Herodion, complete with gardens, baths, and countless apartments, all on top of a man-made mountain and surrounded by impenetrable double walls. It was one of the largest fortresses in the entire Roman Empire. And at the south end of the Dead Sea on top of a pillar like, mountain plateau I built the stunning fortress named Massada. It was as close as a fortress could come to being invincible. Indeed, the handful of Zealots who fled there after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 held out against the Roman army for 3 years.

But I didn't just build great fortresses; I built entire cities, such as Caesarea on the beautiful Mediterranean coast. Its man-made harbor was an engineering marvel and one of the largest in the entire empire. The city was like a miniature Rome, complete with a great amphitheatre, an arena for sports, baths, an extensive system of aqueducts, an elaborate sewer system, and a massive temple dedicated to the worship of Caesar Augustus. The Romans loved the city and made it the residence for all their officials.

But my greatest project was the Temple in Jerusalem. To strengthen my standing with the Jews I completely rebuilt their Temple. It took 10,000 men 10 years just to erect the retaining walls around the Temple Mount. The entire complex covered 35 acres. The Temple was constructed of brilliant white marble and measured 500' long, 350' wide, and 150' high. It was a magnificent, breath-taking structure.

Yes, to be great you have to do great things. But you also have to be prepared to do awful things as well. You've probably heard the stories - that I executed my own wife and 2 of my sons. It's true, but she was unfaithful to me, and the sons were plotting against me.

Oh, I know it sounds horrible. You probably don't think you could ever do such a thing. Really? Tell me you've never been hurt or threatened by someone and wanted to pay them back, to get even with them. Oh,

you didn't commit murder, but are sure that you wouldn't have if you had the power to order it? Don't think that I'm the only one who can be filled with bitterness and desire for revenge. I'm a whole lot more like you than you want to admit.

After all the great things that I accomplished, it's ironic that I'm primarily remembered for the brief encounter with those astrologers from Persia. I think you call them the 3 magi or wise men. When they arrived in Jerusalem and inquired about a newborn King of the Jews, saying that they had seen a star heralding his birth and had come to worship him, I was naturally very troubled and suspicious. There was always talk among the Jews about the coming of a Messiah who would deliver them from their oppressors and reestablish the glory days of David and Solomon. But when Gentiles from hundreds of miles away came looking for him and wanting to worship him, it wasn't to be ignored. I called for the leading theologians to learn where the Messiah was supposed to be born, and they immediately replied that the prophet Micah had indicated that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, a little town about 5 miles outside of Jerusalem. I gave the Magi directions to Bethlehem and told them to make a diligent search and as soon as they found the baby to return to let me know his location so I also could go and honor him.

But they tricked me; they left quietly without ever returning to Jerusalem. I was furious - and worried. I'm almost embarrassed to admit that I felt threatened by a baby. What if he really was the Messiah. My days were numbered. My dynasty and greatness would soon end. I couldn't take that chance. I couldn't rest until the threat was eliminated. I knew what I had to do to be sure that I had destroyed him. I gave the order. All male babies 2 years and under in the vicinity of Bethlehem were to be killed. It wouldn't be that many - maybe 20 or 25 - not enough to upset Rome but enough to protect me. Oh, I know it sounds like a heinous crime to you - the slaughter of innocents. I suppose it was, but then politics isn't for those with weak stomachs. To be great you also have to be ruthless.

At least, that's what I thought then. I'm condemned now to go throughout eternity knowing my way leads to a greatness that is tarnished and temporary. The great things I did are overshadowed by my cruelty. The great structures I built now lie in ruins.

But the baby the Magi found and worshipped, the baby I tried to destroy, showed the way to true and lasting greatness. Although He was God, He humbled Himself and became man. As a man, He chose not to be served but to serve. He humbled Himself in the greatest of ways, by giving Himself in death on a Cross. And then He was raised from the dead and exalted to reign forever and ever as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.