

Prophets & Angels Protecting: Matthew 2

"It was Christmas Eve 1875 and Ira Sankey was traveling on a Delaware River steamboat when he was recognized by some of the passengers. His picture had been in the newspaper because he was the song leader for the famous evangelist D.L. Moody. They asked him to sing one of his own hymns, but Sankey was reluctant, saying that he preferred to sing William B. Bradbury's hymn, "Savior Like a Shepherd Lead Us." As he sang, one of the stanzas began, "We are Thine; do Thou befriend us. Be the Guardian of our way."

When he finished, a man stepped from the shadows and asked, "Did you ever serve in the Union Army?" "Yes," Mr. Sankey answered, "in the spring of 1860." "Can you remember if you were doing picket duty on a bright, moonlit night in 1862?" "Yes," Mr. Sankey answered, very much surprised.

*"So did I, but I was serving in the Confederate army. When I saw you standing at your post, I thought to myself, 'That guy will never get away alive.' I raised my musket and took aim. I was standing in the shadow, completely concealed, while the full light of the moon was falling upon you. At that instant, just as a moment ago, you raised your eyes to heaven and began to sing...'Let him sing his song to the end,' I said to myself, 'I can shoot him afterwards. He's my victim at any event, and my bullet cannot miss him.' But the song you sang then was the song you sang just now. I heard the words perfectly: 'We are Thine; do Thou befriend us. Be the Guardian of our way.' Those words stirred up many memories. I began to think of my childhood and my God-fearing mother. She had many times sung that song to me. When you had finished your song, it was impossible for me to take aim again. I thought, 'The Lord who is able to save that man from certain death must surely be great and mighty.' And my arm of its own accord dropped limp at my side." **K Hughes Liberating Ministry From The Success Syndrome Tyndale 1988/p69***

It was Christmas Eve over 2000 years ago; Jesus traveled into this world and He was recognized by some. His story was published and He became famous. As He sang His song, some knelt in worship while others took aim to kill Him.

In those early days, His angels worked overtime to protect Him. Today, we'll look at some of those protective measures.

Thousands of years before His birth, news of His coming had been published. This news had spread and was passed from generation to generation. We call this prophecy.

Throughout Israel's history, invading nations carried Jews away captive to far away lands; Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome and beyond. With these captives went their archives, their scripture, and their prophecies.

Clerics and priests from these lands were known for their magic and ability to tell the future using the stars. Consequently, references to celestial bodies and prophecy contained in the Jewish scriptures would have caught their interest.

One of those Jewish prophecies went like this:

Numbers 24:17 *"I see him, but **not now**; I behold him, but **not near**; **A star shall come forth from Jacob, A scepter shall rise from Israel, And shall crush through the forehead of Moab, And tear down all the sons of Sheth.**"*

Evidently, the Magi had even assimilated Jewish prophecy into their own belief system.

It says in Matthew 2:1-2: *"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born **King** of the **Jews**? For we have seen **His star** in the East and have come to worship Him."*

Daniel and his friends had introduced these prophecies to the Babylonians. And now, **600** years later, magi many generations removed arrive on the scene in Jerusalem. No doubt, these prophecies had been passed down to their generation of Magi.

Their intentions were good. They said...

"We have come to worship Him."

But there were others who wanted access to their information for more evil intentions.

Verses 3-6 says, *"When Herod the king heard this [that the Magi had come looking for the New Messiah King], he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. **4** And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. **5** So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: **6** 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel."*

As we'll see, he intended to kill the Christ child.

There will always be evil men with evil intentions controlled by spiritually evil forces that use prophecy, the very Word of God, for more gruesome purposes.

So it is in our text today. The wellbeing of the Savior of the world was at stake. Consequently, the angels were given the important task to protect Him.

Today we'll look at three protective measures they had to take. Let's begin by reading...

Verses 7-12, *"Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also. 9 When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. 11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way." He **"secretly called the wise men."***

When describing the actions of the wicked and their secretive ways, **Psalms 10:6-11** says,

*"He sits in the lurking places of the villages; In the **secret** places he murders the innocent; His eyes are **secretly** fixed on the helpless. 9 He lies in wait **secretly**, as a lion in his den; He lies in wait to catch the poor; He catches the poor when he draws him into his net. 10 So he crouches, he lies low, that the helpless may fall by his strength. 11 He has said in his heart, "God has forgotten; He hides His face; He will never see."*

Wicked men often cloak their evil designs in secret under the appearance of religious piety.

Herod didn't want to alarm anyone as to his true intentions. **So why did he want to determine what time the star appeared?**

He did this because the star could have appeared at the precise time of His birth. At the very least, the star appeared two years earlier in order to direct the magi to the place where Jesus would later be born.

How old did he estimate Jesus was? Verse 16

"Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men."

Whether the star appeared at the exact moment He was born or it appeared previous to His birth in order that their arrival would coincide with His birth, Herod was still covered.

The plans of the wicked are well laid out. They take the time necessary, make diligent inquiry; and do so with an air of piety. Though men are deceived, God sees the true intent; nothing is kept secret from Him.

Proverbs 15:3 *"The eyes of the LORD are in every place, Keeping watch on the evil and the good."*

God was watching and making sure that His son was protected from Herod's evil intentions.

God's first of the protective measures was by way of...

I. **A GPS (Global Positioning Star)**

God used past prophecy and a governmental decree to direct Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. And He used that prophecy to do the same for Herod's assassins.

According to the *chief priests and scribes*, Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2).

The chief priests and scholars made it their business to know prophecy.

They knew the scripture prophesized where Jesus would be born but they lacked some vital information.

We have that additional information recorded here. We know that Jesus' family did not live in Bethlehem.

They were residents of Nazareth but while visiting Bethlehem, their son was born there.

It was this fact that later caused the chief priests and scholars to misjudge Jesus.

John 7:41-43, 52 says, *"Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Will the Christ come out of Galilee? 42 "Has not the Scripture said that the Christ*

comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?" 43 So there was a division among the people because of Him.

52 They answered and said to him, "Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee."

According to **Luke 2:22** their stay in Bethlehem lasted **no more than 40 days**.

We know this because it says that it was after Mary's time of purification (Law = 40 days) that they went to dedicate Jesus at the Temple

Luke 2:22, "Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord."

After this **Luke 2:39** says they returned to their **own city**, Nazareth.

Luke 2:39, "So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their **own city**, Nazareth."

If we look at Matthew closely, it reveals that Jesus was a **young child** when the Magi showed up and that they were no longer in the stable but **in a house**.

Matthew 2:8-11 says, "And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the **young Child**, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also." **9** When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, **the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.** **10** When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. **11** And when they **had come into the house**, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him."

Notice, "...the star which they had seen in the East."

This doesn't mean that they had seen the star to the east of themselves, but that, when they were in the East they had seen this star. This star was over Jerusalem, and had to have been west of them.

With **Matthew 2:2** in mind; it could be said, "We, being in the East, have seen **his** star." It is called his star because they supposed it to have appeared to indicate the time and location of his birth. (**GPS System**)

Matthew 2:2, "Saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

Now, if Jesus was in Bethlehem, why did the star have to go before them rather than just hover over the manger in Bethlehem?

Herod's directions for the Magi were wrong and would have led them astray.

So God caused this same Global Positioning Star to reappear for the Magi once again and direct them to where Jesus could be found.

God knew that His Son's life would be in danger before He was born and so He gave this Bethlehem prophecy 750 years earlier, knowing they would live in Nazareth He and that it would throw Herod off track and keep His Son safe.

And this isn't the last redirection the Magi received.

Look at...**Verse 12** "Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way."

They were rerouted again out of the country another way. (**Take a left; take another left...called Wanda**)

Herod's **secret** or concealed plans were made know to the Magi, because he could not hide them from God.

What a surprise this vision must have been to the wise men. They were innocently preparing to carry the good news of what they had seen to the king! But the Lord knew better than to let Herod see their faces again.

The second protective measure God used...

II. **A FLIGHT**

Verses 13-15, "Now when **they** [Magi] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him." When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

It's wonderful to see how God the **Father** took great care to protect and preserve his **Son**.

Arise, take the young child and flee!

This command calls for immediate departure.

The text gives the idea that the departure of the Magi and the departure of Joseph for Egypt, all occurred in one night. *If so, the **people of Bethlehem** knew nothing of these matters.*

Joseph's mind must have been racing. It must have been very difficult to realize that God plan for Jesus' safety relied upon the effort of a mortal man like him.

The quiet days at Bethlehem and in Nazareth are **followed by a night of fear and flight**. The parents of Jesus were experiencing the same conflicting joys and sorrows that characterize the lives of all those who passionately and sacrificially follow Jesus.

Mark 10:29-30 says, "*So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life."*

Flee into Egypt. This is the only time that our Savior was out of Palestine.

Imagine this; the land that was once a place of bondage and groaning for the Jews, became the land of refuge and safety for the new-born King of Judea.

As true as that is, it wasn't the first time Egypt had become a place of refuge. Abraham and Joseph found refuge there from oppression and Israel had fled there during a famine.

*Egypt is situated to the south-west of Judea, and its border lie **60 miles** from Bethlehem in the desert. **200 miles** would have brought them to the river Nile. It was a Roman province at this time. There were about **one million** Jews in the Nile valley and Onias IV had built a temple for them in Heliopolis.*

In Alexandria, a city of 300,000, some 80,000 of the population were Jews. The Talmud describes how, in Alexandria's great synagogue, all the men of like trade sat together. It's possible that Joseph may have found fellow-craftsmen there.

So Joseph, Mary and Jesus would have been among their own countrymen, and beyond the reach of Herod.

The jurisdiction of Herod extended only to the river Sihon of Egypt.

Joseph immediately complies...

"...he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed"

He knew God chose this method of safety.
"...stay there until I bring you word"

By these words the Angel declares, that the life of the child would continue to be the object of the divine care. Joseph could depend on God.

God would not only send them on this journey, but He would be their constant protector.

*"and [they were] there **until the death of Herod"***

Herod died in the 37th year of his reign. We don't know when he began his reign, so it's impossible to determine the time that Joseph remained in Egypt.

The best historians believe that he died somewhere between 2 and 4 years after the birth of Christ; so their stay may not have been long.

Herod died of a painful disgusting disease in Jericho. The accounts of Josephus and Eusebius say...

*"A burning fever seized him, with an intolerable itching all over his body, and continual pains of the colic; his feet swelled with dropsy; he had an inflammation in the lower part of his belly: a putrefaction in his private parts, which bred worms; a difficulty of breathing, and convulsions in all his members; he had a voracious appetite, a stinking breath, and his intestines abounded with ulcers; when he found that **all means made use of** were ineffectual, and that he must die, he attempted suicide, but was prevented, and soon after expired in a very miserable manner."*

The plans of Herod to end the Savior's life came to naught and instead he lost his own life.

Matthew 2:19-20 "*But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead."*

This too was prophesied by the prophet Hosea.

Hosea 11:1 "*When Israel was a child, I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son.*

This explains why God did not have to intercede more miraculously than He did. He had done a good amount of His prophetic work a long time beforehand.

Now, using that and the Angels, He was protecting His son through human agency. These fulfilled prophecies clearly revealed Jesus to be the foretold Messiah.

But then we come to the tragically sad news of...

Matthew 2:16-18, "Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: "A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more."

Who is to blame? Do we blame God for not protecting these children? We could, but what about those who knew the prophecies and did nothing?

They knew where Jesus would be born and unlike Herod or the magi, made no attempt to seek Him out. And so it was just as likely that they were aware of the prophecy in **Jeremiah 31:15**,

"Thus says the LORD: "A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted for her children, Because they are no more."

And in like manner they did nothing to intervene. The suffering all around is usually laid at the feet of God. **Why is there starvation and so many suffering children in the world?**

Oh, it's always easier to blame God because He is all powerful. But we overlook our own responsibility; we act powerless when we are not. **God doesn't force His will on anyone.**

Men are to blame for their greed, their selfishness, and yes, for their complacency to stand by and simply blame others while taking no responsibility themselves.

The last of the measures used to protect the only One who could Save Humanity from itself would involve...

III. A DETOUR

Verses 21-23, "Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning

over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he **turned aside** into the **region of Galilee**. And he came and dwelt in a city called **Nazareth**, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

After finally crossing over into Israel, they must have been thrilled to be finally in their own country. But their trip home would take longer than they had anticipated.

Normally, they would have traveled through Judea to get to Nazareth but now they had to go all the way around it.

"A young family set out on a long drive for their summer vacation. As is customary with small children, they soon began to ask, "Are we there yet?" After several unsuccessful attempts to communicate how far they must travel, the father became irritated and gave some stern instructions. He said, "We won't be there until it's dark so I don't want to hear anyone else ask, 'Are we there yet?'" The car became very quiet for about fifteen minutes then the silence was broken when little Amy asked, "Is it dark yet?" **Reader's Digest, June 1998, p. 164**

In regards to the fear Joseph had at hearing Archelaus was reigning in his father's place. Let me give you some background.

After old King Herod's death, his kingdom was divided. His son **Archelaus** reigned in **Judea**, the **southern part**, and another son, **Herod Antipas**, in **Galilee**, the northern part. **Another portion** still was assigned to **Philip**. Archelaus had a savage and ferocious disposition, like his father.

It was natural that the parents of Jesus, knowing the characters of these princes, felt it safest to return to their old home in Nazareth by going around Judea.

Observe that Joseph was not warned by a dream against Archelaus. It was a danger he perceived with the use of his own faculties.

Divine intervention is never a substitute for human intuition, discretion, and forethought.

CONCLUSION: 3 Teachings directly applicable:

As with the Magi, unbeknown to us, God is at work in our lives and circumstances in order to direct us, care for us and protect us.

As in the case of Joseph's visitation, when we are in communion with God and ready to hear and do His will, He is able to divinely guide and direct us out of situations that would harm us.

And lastly, as in the case of Joseph's intuition, God has given us human intuitions that when used in consideration of God's word and will, can aid us in avoiding danger.

God went through quite a bit to protect His Son. He used Prophecy and Angels to safeguard His Son, but it took the efforts of submissive mortal men trusting a powerful and loving God to make it happen!

If God wanted to protect someone you know from danger, are you ready to be directed by God, to take flight at a moment's notice, or take the necessary inconvenient detours and delays?