

“A DESPERATE ATTEMPT”
Isaiah 63:7-9, I Peter 2:4-10, Matthew 2:13-23
January 7 & 8, 2023

“The Battle of Antietam in 1862 lasted for 12 hours and ranks as the bloodiest day of the Civil War, with 10,000 Confederate casualties and even more on the Union side. ‘At last the sun went down and the battle ended,’ wrote one historian, ‘smoke heavy in the air, the twilight quivering with the anguished cries of thousands of wounded men.’

“Though militarily a draw, the mediocre Union General George McClellan was able to end the brilliant Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s thrust into Maryland, forcing him to retire across the Potomac River. How was this possible? Well, it had just happened that two Union soldiers had found a copy of Lee’s battle plans and had delivered them to McClellan before the engagement.”

I share this fact of history today because we are in a similar war today. “In some respects, we are no match for our adversary, Satan, whose wiles we are told to be wary of. But as with General McClellan, our enemy’s plans have fallen into our hands. We know his usual strategies - to entice us with lies, lust, greed, and the like. With such knowledge, given us by God’s Word and God’s Spirit within, we too can resist the enemy’s advances.”¹ But unless we become aware of the plans of Satan to destroy us, we are at his mercy, forced to conform to his will and his ways. And when we are unprepared to resist Satan’s schemes, we find ourselves in danger of destruction.

However, we have a loving God who desires that we be with Him to enjoy eternal life. God delights in us and invites us to find His blessings as we follow His commands and abide by His laws. When we choose to follow God, we become His children and He watches out for us and guides us into peace and life.

Satan, on the other hand, hates us with a passion because when we trust in Jesus as our Savior, we will be with the Lord God Almighty for eternity. Because Satan rebelled against God and went to war with Him to become the master of the universe in God’s place, his destiny is eternal absence away

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 269)

from God's presence. Hell has been designed for Satan and all who follow him, so he wants to take as many of us along with him, preventing us from being with the Lord. Satan wants to separate us from the Lord God Almighty, and he holds no punches from us in order to try to get us to give up our faith in the Lord. All who follow Jesus have a target upon them, and Satan sends his arsenal against us.

But God desires that we seek Him and follow Him, so He does great things to help us to find relief from Satan's schemes. Isaiah 63 explains what God has done for us. God "*said, 'Surely they are My people, children who will be true to Me: ' and so He became their Savior. In all their distress He too was distressed, and the angel of His presence saved them. In His love and mercy He redeemed them; He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old'*" (63:8-9).

God is ready and willing to fight for those who wish to follow Him. If we are true to God and remain faithful to all His commands, God provides protection for us so that we do not fall prey to Satan's schemes. He saves us from the destruction that Satan desires for us. And that is what takes us into the battlefield of life, and it demands that we take sides - either God's side or Satan's side. There is no middle ground in this war, for to be neutral is to be against God.

So when God put His plan of Salvation into play for the people of the world to find forgiveness of their sins and be able to be with Him in heaven, Satan did his very best to try to foil God's plan, even going so far as to try to destroy the Son of God while He was here on the earth. Matthew's Gospel lays that out plainly in our reading for today. Listen to Matthew 2:13-23. (READ Matthew 2:13-23).

Satan had already gained control of King Herod, turning his heart away from the things of the Lord and all of the things of this world. So when the Magi came seeking the "newborn King of the Jews," Satan fired up Herod's jealousy and hatred for this "new King," to the point that Herod designed a plan to eliminate the child. As the information from prophecies came forth telling where the Messiah was to be born, Herod shared this information with the Magi to give them a direction to search and find the One the prophecies had foretold. And he had sent them on their way, telling them, "*Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him'*"

(Matt. 2:8). However, there was no intention for Herod to worship anyone but himself.

Satan was working hard through Herod to deceive the Magi into thinking that he would quietly abdicate his kingship to the One the star indicated had been born the “King of the Jews.” But there was no way that Herod was going to let that happen. He would use all his power available to him to wipe the child off the face of the earth. No one was going to replace HIM as the King of the Jews.

But God was a step ahead of Satan’s puppet, Herod. As the Magi find Jesus in Bethlehem, the angel of the Lord reveals Herod’s true intentions to them and they decide to return to their homes without reporting back to Herod. We’re not told how long it took for Herod to find this out, but since Bethlehem was only 7 miles away from Jerusalem, it might have only been a couple of days before Herod became convinced that something had gone wrong with his plan.

Yet, God was also working to protect Jesus, Mary and Joseph. God sent one of His angels to warn Joseph about the battle plan of Herod, and told Joseph to go to Egypt, which was out of the jurisdiction of Herod’s armies, in order to protect Jesus. As long as Jesus was in Judea, Herod would hunt him down to try to kill Him before He could grow up to become the Messiah.

Joseph obeyed the angel’s warning and took Mary and Jesus out of Bethlehem before Herod’s armies could find and kill Jesus. They packed up and left during the night so that no one would know what happened to them. No one would be able to inform the armies which direction they went to try to evade capture, and ultimately Jesus’ death. The few days advanced warning would have provided miles of distance between Joseph, Mary and Jesus and the town of Bethlehem. It was 75 miles to the boarder of Judea and Egypt, so there was lots of ground to cover to protect God’s Son from harm. Traveling with Mary and Jesus would have been much slower than the armies riding their horses, so time was of the essence, and the days before Herod took action were important to this new family’s escape.

Matthew discloses the results of Herod not getting his way. When he determined he had been outwitted by the Magi, he sent his armies out to Bethlehem intent upon eliminating the new King of the Jews. Using the information that the Magi gave him as to when the star appeared at the time of Jesus’

birth, Herod instructed the army “*to kill all the boys of Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi*” (Matt. 2:16). He left no room for any boy to escape death who fit into the age range. Since he did not know which one was the promised Messiah, Herod ordered all of the boys killed. There was to be no mercy on that particular night. No messianic competition would be left alive in and around Bethlehem, prophecies or not.

Now, by the time the Magi had arrived in Bethlehem, the census would have been completed, so there would not have been anywhere near the number of people in the town as when all of the descendants of David had to register for the tax. It would have been only those living in the town that were left, and so as bad as it was, the massacre of the innocents probably was not that great a number. This could be one reason why the tragedy is not recorded in any of the historian’s accounts of Herod’s reign. Either that, or there were so many events just like that one, that it was just included in the general tally of Herod’s victims of his paranoia. But the account in Matthew is recorded so that the Scriptures would be fulfilled and it would add to the Messianic fulfillment of all of the prophecies.

Now, if Satan was ready to pull out all the stops in order to prevent Jesus, God’s Son, from fulfilling His mission of Salvation for all mankind, what do you suppose he is willing to do to prevent you or me from following Jesus and find security in His Salvation? Satan is willing to use any person to do his work to try to prevent us from claiming Jesus as our Savior. It may be a king, or a president, or a senator or congressman, or a governor, or a mayor or a police officer, or even a regular citizen that he uses to coerce, or mandate, or somehow make it so that we are banned or prohibited from claiming and growing in our faith in Jesus. It might even be bishops, or district superintendents, or judicial committees, or circuit leaders, or annual conferences - anyone in a position of authority can be used by Satan to thwart the faith journey of one seeking to follow Jesus. Or, it could be someone who steps into our lives, trying to “help us out,” who craftily guides us away from following the laws and commandments of God. They might not demand that we give up our faith, but slowly they might work to degrade our faith and gently coax us to disobey and give up the commands of the Lord. It works like this:

“On a particular episode of a futuristic show called *The Outer Limits*, a man, a leader of a large armed force, was captured by creatures. They wanted information from him but he wouldn’t give it up because he didn’t want his army to be destroyed. The creatures then brought in a lady they said had also been captured.

“Every day they came to get the woman, took her out, and then brought her back again to the holding room. After a while, day after day, scales began to grow on the lady, making her look like the monsters that had captured them. The leader of the armed forces asked the lady what they were doing to her each day to make her change. She told him that each day she was exposed to certain rays that were apparently making the scales grow on her body. Each day the monsters came to get the lady and each day they asked the man for the information.

“Finally, one day the monsters told the man that if he didn’t tell them what they wanted to know, that they would kill the lady by continuing to expose her to the harmful rays. As soon as they left the room, the lady pleaded with the leader to tell the monsters what they wanted to know. Against his will and better judgment, he yielded because of the compassion he had for the lady whose fate was in his hands. So he sacrificed all of his armed forces in order to “protect” the lady in the cell with him.

“As soon as he gave the monsters the information, the lady then knocks on the door and calls out to the captors saying that she is ready to go. Confused, the man demanded to know what was going on. The lady turned and explained that she has always been one of the monsters. Her exposure to the rays was to rid her of her scales. Her exposure decreased a little every day to enable her to appear to be turning into a monster when she was actually returning to her original character.

“This lady was an imposter. She was made to look like the man she was trying to con.

“Satan does the same things with people. He can change into whatever he knows you’ll respond to.”² He’ll do whatever is necessary to get you to give up your devotion to Jesus. He’ll tell you whatever you want to hear that helps convince you that following his way is best, not only for you but

² (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009] pg. 271, #809)

for everyone else. He'll give you whatever you want to change your heart so that you end up following him instead of following the Lord Jesus. Satan will say and do whatever he needs to do to take us away from eternal life and into eternal death. He'll use whoever he can use to impact your life, and he'll twist any truth to make it sound reasonable and right so that you'll follow it, as you slowly slide away from the Lord and into Satan's awaiting hands. He's the master of all lies, the greatest of all deceivers and the worst of all manipulators, all in the guise of making your life "better," but in reality, destroying you a little at a time.

For some people a direct attack on their person or their family is enough to get them to give up their faith in the Lord. The death of a loved one, the loss of a treasured job, or the break-up of the family can challenge a person to consider if their faith in the Lord is good and right, or if it just brings us more and more hardship and trials.

For others it's giving them all they want to satisfy every selfish desire that leads them away. Every pleasure is satisfied, every delight is enjoyed and every want is granted, and the slow shift of trusting in the Lord God to trusting in the things of this world takes place. The world tells us to get whatever we want, as much as we can, for as long as we can, from whomever we can, by any means that we can, just so that we can satisfy that emptiness within us. However, the emptiness never goes away, because we are seeking to satisfy it in all the wrong things. Only the Lord Jesus can fill that emptiness.

For many it's the slow degradation of what they know is right and good, slightly twisting this verse or that law to make it seem like there's no harm or foul happening. Often it happens through peer pressure, convincing you that if everyone is doing it, then it must be okay. Sometimes it's through isolation and rejection that makes us believe that what we hold as good and right must not be that important, since you're the only one holding onto those truths. Most often it's that day-by-day person telling you that what you believe must not be true because of all the things going on all around you. The little conniving voice seeks to convince you to give up your morals and standards to follow the things of the world rather than the things of God. And if it can start when we are young, even as children, we are

slowly convinced that the laws and commandments of the Lord are just there to hold us back rather than to protect us and guide us to greater blessing.

We see it happening in our world all around us. The media constantly works to twist God's truth into something that is just wrong. They work at us to tell us what is right and what is wrong according to the world's standards. Governments work hard to convince us that they know what is best for everyone, so they make laws that contradict God's commands, or they'll outlaw the sharing of truth, or they'll change the standards of our constitution to be able to incorporate whatever they want into everyday practice and still call it good. They actively seek to turn the good into bad, the right into wrong and the proper into improper. And Satan works through people to bring it all into play, slowly driving out God's standards and making us abide by the world's standards. Since he couldn't stop Salvation from coming into the world through Jesus, this is Satan's desperate attempt to deceive us and separate us from the Lord God Almighty.

“In football, teams studies game films of the upcoming opponent in order to know their tendencies. They want to see what their rival's orientations are so that they can come up with a strategy to beat them. Well, Satan has game film on you. He has game film on me and he knows what our weak spots are. He knows where we are limited. He knows where we are prone to make mistakes. He knows what we would respond to. He knows what our likes are and because he is so good at what he does, he can become anything at any time, for anyone, based on what he knows your response will be. We need to stop looking for someone with horns, a long tail, a jumpsuit that's red, and a pitchfork.”³ We need to be wise enough to recognize the way he works, giving us the most tempting opportunities and the most tantalizing possibilities in our lives, deceiving us to wander away from God's commands, so that we would rather stand strong in all of those commands and find true life.

So God has given us Jesus Christ to bring us back to the Truth. Jesus is the “*living Stone - rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to Him*” (I Peter 2:4). He is the One that we can

³ (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans' Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009] pg. 271, #809)

put our trust and faith in so that “*we will never be put to shame*” (2:6). Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6), and no one comes to God but through Him.

God has chosen us to be His people, a “*royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light*” (I Pet. 2:9). And as we put our trust and faith in Him, we will find rescue from the deceptions of Satan, and find strength to continue on in our faith in Salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And that’s the confidence we see in Joseph and Mary, as they trusted the angel of the Lord, followed His guidance and were protected from the dangers that threatened the child, Jesus. God led them into safety in Egypt, and then, when Herod died, called them back to their own home town of Nazareth where Jesus could safely grow up to be our Messiah. It was not an easy road, but it was filled with blessings and provisions along the way that enabled them to do what God had called them to do.

And God does that for us, too, as we seek Him with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength. Our journey as Christians may take us through challenges and difficulties, but as we stay true to our trust in Jesus Christ, as we daily seek His will and His way for our life, and as we allow God to provide for us each day, we will see His blessings flow to us. Though we may have to do some extreme things to protect ourselves and our families, God will never lead us into destruction, but will deliver us from evil so that we might live as His disciples all the days of our lives.

Satan is desperately attempting to distract us, mislead us and misinform us to take us away from Jesus, our Truth and our Savior. But God is faithful and just to provide us with all we need to continue our journey of faith. It is ours to trust Jesus and follow Him so that we might have eternal life.

Let’s pray; Father, thank You for the example of Joseph and Mary trusting Your guidance so that they could complete Your plan of Salvation and help Jesus grow up to be our Savior. Give us the courage and strength to follow Your direction in our lives so that we do not fall away from You, but rather grow closer to You. Help us to make the difficult choices to always follow You. Then, as we do that we find life with You. This we pray in Jesus’ Name. AMEN.