

Fleeing Oppression

Matthew 2:13-23

'Oppression' - It's not even a nice sounding word.

But what does it mean? The Oxford Dictionary says it's the exercise of harsh dominion over another; to overwhelm or weigh others down with heavy burdens.

A still worse form of oppression is when it's accompanied by brutality, and over the past year we have seen a number of examples of this on our TV's as tyrants maim and murder their own people, in order to hold onto wealth and absolute power.

However you may want to express it, any form of brutal political oppression is the result of a **sado-masochistic temperament** unable or unwilling to consider the welfare of others before themselves.

In the past century we have the examples of people like **Stalin** (Russia), **Hitler** (Germany), **MaoZeDong** (China), **Pol Pot** (Cambodia), **Mugabe** (Zimbabwe), etc. who collectively were responsible for the slaughter of millions and millions of their own people.

Having said this, it would seem that the history of mankind is littered with even more examples of the brutal suppression and oppression of the masses; ordinary people who simply want to live their lives, and hopefully provide for, and improve the lot of, their families.

Even in the OT, examples of brutal oppression were not unknown. If you search the OT, you will find there are well over 100 uses of this word, 'oppression', and its derivatives, to describe the sad lot of the people in their times of suffering.

Of course, wherever there is such oppression, we must not forget to look at the character and nature of the one who is the oppressor.

So, what to do?

How can people avoid or overcome times of political oppression?

Is the only solution to rise up and demand ones rights and justice?

In our reading in Matthew, we discover that Jesus also was not immune from political oppression. Following his birth, the magi visited Jerusalem with the message that a mighty king had been born.

Having received this message, **Herod the Great**, who was an excellent example of a narcissistic, sado-masochistic tyrant, immediately sought to eradicate the perceived threat to his power. This was a man who was responsible for the deaths of thousands of people, including Jewish priests; not to mention the murder of three of his sons and one of his 10 wives.

When Herod learned that Bethlehem was the place where the promised messiah was to be born, he ordered the brutal oppression and massacre of probably a few dozen children in the area around Bethlehem, as recorded for us in vss.16-18.

Now, while it may not have been an event noteworthy enough for major historians to record, it was a further example of the character of Herod, who was known for his brutality and total disrespect for life and God.

The short record of this event in Matthew's gospel also reveals how Joseph was warned by God, in a dream, to take Mary and Jesus, and flee to Egypt (vs.13).

When faced with any kind of brutal oppression, the **choices** people have seem to be rather limited.

1] You remain where you are, stay quiet or hidden, and do nothing to attract attention to yourselves. You remain a victim, and hope for better days when the bully will be stopped by changing circumstances.

2] You remain where you are, network with others to build resources, until you are able to rise up in protest to over-throw the tyrannical ruler and his forces. We have seen this in recent months, where people feel they have nothing left to lose and have taken to the streets in protest. Many thousands have been brutalised and killed by these tyrannical despots.

3] You get away, as fast and as far as you can, and try to build a new life for yourselves. If it is possible, you hope to return to your home when the socio-political situation changes. Again, we see many people today opting for this solution, BUT, so often it is only those with money who can afford to escape. In our reading, it would seem, for Joseph and Mary, the third option was God's choice. Their flight to Egypt was unplanned and immediate. While it was still night, Joseph took Mary and Jesus, and began the journey as a refugee fleeing oppression (vs.14).

We do not know for how long the family remained in Egypt, other than the statement in vs.19 that, after Herod died, Joseph had another dream in which he was told that it was safe for them to return to their home in Nazareth (vss.19-22).

As an aside, and based on the record of Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian, when Herod died he was suffering symptoms that included 'intense itching, intestinal pain, shortness of breath, convulsions, and gangrene of the genitalia'.

Doctors today have diagnosed that he died of chronic kidney disease complicated by an unusual infection called Fournier's gangrene.

Now, some may think Herod's manner of death was divine judgement, because of his godless brutality toward so many innocent people. Whatever you may think, it certainly was not a pleasant way to die.

Herod's death marked the end of a most cruel era, however, his son, Archelaus, was nearly as bad as his father, in that, before he took control of Judea, history records he quelled an uprising of the Pharisees by killing nearly 3,000 of them. Is it any wonder Joseph was concerned and did not return to Jerusalem (vs.22), but went north to Galilee.

This whole period of history in Israel is marked by episodes of brutal oppression; first by the Greeks, then the Romans, and finally by Herod and his descendants. These acts of brutal oppression did not end for over 100 years after the birth of Jesus. It came to its climax around 70AD when the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, and around 135AD when all the Jewish people were exiled from the land of Israel.

What should our response be to the brutal suppression of people by despotic tyrants?

We may choose to:

- 1] ignore the situation, because it doesn't directly effect us - It's someone else's problem.
- 2] take some form of direct action to assist the victims or hinder the tyrant. This may take the form of aid & development programs, or some political or economic pressure.
- or 3] react in a way that is emotionally driven and not well thought out. This can be potentially dangerous.

These kind of responses are usually based on our value of life; our sense of justice; and the Godly wisdom we apply to all circumstances. One thing that is sure, every generation will have its share of despots and tyrants, whether in the school yard, the work place, or in global politics. How we respond to, or deal with, these situations reflects our faith relationship and prayer walk with God, as well as our dependence upon the daily leading of the Lord Jesus in our lives.

In the gospels of Matthew [24:15-16], Mark [13:14] & Luke [21:20-21], Jesus is recorded as warning of future days when such brutal oppression would again take place. The question is, was Jesus referring to the events of 70AD, or was he speaking of a time of such tribulation that is yet to come?

HOWEVER - political oppression by tyrannical rulers is not the worst kind of oppression to grip the hearts and souls of mankind. The worst kind of oppression is **spiritual oppression**.

This is when the evil one (ie. the devil; satan) is given a foothold in your life. It comes about not because we are tempted, but because we fail to **resist** and so **yield** to the temptation.

The NT is clear when it calls on us, as followers of the Lord Jesus, to flee all manner of temptations. This means to avoid and run away from them; to completely remove ourselves from the place where the temptation exists. It means to not dwell on the temptations, but to quickly and prayerfully replace them with godly thoughts and actions.

Consider passages such as:

1 Cor. 6:18 '*Flee sexual immorality. ..*'

1 Cor. 10:14 '*.. my beloved, flee from idolatry.*'

1 Tim. 6:11 *'But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness.'*

As we take authority over these temptations that would seek to oppress, brutalize and destroy us; and remove ourselves from their power and influence, then we are able to do as **James 4:7** says; *'.. submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.'*

Victory over all manner of spiritual oppression is only available as we involve the Lord in the struggle, because the source of all spiritual oppression is ultimately the same.

As we read in **2 Peter 2:9** *'.. the Lord knows how to rescue/deliver the godly out of temptations/trials'*, and **1 Cor.10:13** says *'..God is faithful, who will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear ..'*

Make no mistake, the devil is a **narcissist**, with a **sado-masochistic** temperament. He loves only himself, and seeks to totally destroy all people to show his hate and contempt for God.

Therefore, we are to be sober and vigilant (1 Pet.5:8) and escape the snare of the devil (2 Tim.2:26), while making sure we wear/put on the protection the Lord has provided for us - 'the armour of God' (Eph.6). Only as we look to the Lord can we be saved from the oppression of the evil one. Only as we look to the Lord can we experience true freedom, hope and justice.

When Joseph rose in the night and took Mary and Jesus to escape the oppression, they were not just fleeing the oppression of the tyrant Herod. They were also fleeing the oppression of the evil one, who constantly seeks to thwart the purposes of God.

Herod is a classic example of someone who had sold his soul to the evil one and destroyed himself in the process. Greed for wealth and power had so corrupted his mind, that he lost all sense of his own humanity.

As followers of the Lord Jesus today, we should not forget that we live in a world where there is still so much violence and oppression.

As followers of the Lord Jesus, we should seek the Lord and ask how **HE** would have us respond toward those who are **oppressors**.

As followers of the Lord Jesus, we should seek the Lord and ask how **HE** would have us respond toward those who are **victims** of oppression, whether economic, political or spiritual.

In Christ, may our responses always be honouring to **Him**, and a blessing to others. AMEN