

# The Barnabas Letter

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*The ruins of Herodium; the palace-fortress of King Herod, the Great.*

## Herod's Christmas Today. Nearby. Salvation

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***King Herod.*** Sitting like a dark stain on the bright pages of the gospels, Herod is the true villain of the Christmas story. First, he deceives the Magi into providing information for a plot to kill the Christ-child. Then, when outwitted by the Magi, he flies into a rage and orders the infanticide of all boys 2 years and younger around Bethlehem. If Herod had had his way, there would not be a Christmas.

Yet, in another sense, without a Herod, there would not be a reason for Christmas. The angels announced, "Today in

the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." Herod, and those like him, are the whole point of a Savior-King. After all, without the stain, what would be the point of the cleansing blood? Herod, wicked King Herod, is the reason for Christ. In order to bear life to such men, Christ was born to die.

Therefore to understand the meaning of Christmas, we must understand the point of Christmas; that is, fallen man. And in order to understand fallen man,

*(Continued on page 2)*

we must identify with him. Herod is the typical man. We are like Herod.

#### God Included Herod

This is difficult. We tend to exclude Herod from the Christmas story, giving bit parts in our pageants and virtually no mention in our carols. But God went out of His way to include Herod. He positioned a star to attract the interest of Persian astronomers, leading them hundreds of miles to Herod's doorstep. They arrived like emissaries (or spies?) from the 'empire-next-door' looking to gain audience (or alliance?) with the new king of the Jews. What more could God have done to get the attention of an insecure vassal-king?

Bethlehem was a barely 3 miles from Herodium, the fortress-palace of Herod. The fortress sat atop a man-enhanced mountain where, from his porch, Herod could see Bethlehem. Christ was literally born right under Herod's nose.

This is an ironic image: a 70-year old king grasps the rails of his palace and plots death for the child. Meanwhile the infant, asleep in a rough cradle, plots life for all. One king clinging to self and the other giving self away. God put Herod on top of the Christmas story because Herod is the point of the Christmas story.

#### Herod is the Typical Man

History presents a complicated portrait of King Herod. He is shown to be both royal and rotten. In one person is shown the best of humanity and the worst. His position, power and wealth, magnifies those two character traits into extremes.

For example, Herod was a architectural visionary. Some have suggested that his Caesarea Maritima, the artificial Mediterranean harbor, could have been included in the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was beautiful, functional and introduced engineering

principles ahead of their time. He built Herod's Temple on the largest man-made platform in history. The white walls shone for miles and it was the pride of the nation.

During the great famine in 25 BC, Herod made personal financial sacrifices to help the nation recover. He brought prosperity through trading, some of it in partnership with Cleopatra of Egypt. He was no stranger to the world stage. He knew both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. And on trips to Rome, he carried the favor of the Emperor Augustus and the Roman senate, which gave him the title, 'king of the Jews'.

But this complicated man - capable of producing such great beauty was also capable of atrocity. By the time of Christ's birth, Herod had executed scores of rivals. Among them were his favorite wife, Miriamne, 3 sons, and a brother-in-law. When Herod was disturbed, heads would roll.

His ruthlessness was known around the Roman Empire. Augustus once joked that it was preferable to be Herod's pig (*hus*) than his son (*huios*). He was referring to Herod's execution of 3 of his sons - out of fear that they would take his throne. The pig was safe, however, because of Jewish dietary laws. Herod was dangerous, unstable and treacherous.

Herod, complicated Herod, was both royal and rotten. In this way, he was the typical man. Not everyone is as brilliant as Herod the architect; not everyone is as murderous as Herod the assassin. Not everyone is as royal and rotten as Herod. But everyone is both.

So Herod, the typical man, grasps the railing on his porch and looks down at Bethlehem. He has sent the Magi there to look for the child. He awaits their report and will then send his soldiers. Herod can see the lights at Bethlehem. Perhaps he can even see the star. But

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**“Two kings, one clinging to self, and the other giving self away. God put Herod on top of the Christmas story because Herod is the point of the Christmas story.”**

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it is all a threat and so he remains at Herodium.

Herod built his life like he built Herodium - as both a palace and fortress. As a palace, it was astounding. There were atriums, art, heated Roman baths. At the base of the mountain, there were acres of gardens supplied with water via aqueduct from miles away. Enough water to supply the complex and fill a 10 foot deep pool the size of a soccer field. It was beautiful, glorious—fit for a king.

As a fortress, Herodium was impenetrable. The double walled structure rose five stories out of a mountain and stood 800 feet over the Judean plain. Towers were at each point of the compass. It had it's own garrison for Herod's guard and room for a contingent of Roman soldiers. Herodium was ultimate protection with ultimate pleasure piped in.

When the Magi announced the birth of a new king, Herod went mad. He had arranged his life to be king forever. So Herod set out to kill the child. This too, is ironic. Herod built his world as a type of immortality project, but then tries to eliminate his only chance for immortality when it comes close. Herod, who wants life more than anything, sets out to murder Life itself.

Life was becoming critical for Herod. At the time of Jesus' birth, Herod was 70 and in poor health. The Jewish historian Josephus Flavius wrote: "He had a fever, though not a raging fever, an intolerable itching of the whole skin, continuous pains in the intestines, tumors of the feet as in dropsy, inflammation of the abdomen, and gangrene of the privy parts."

Despite Herodium's thick walls, despite the oasis of pleasure that it was, it could not protect or heal King Herod. Upon one end of his body, Herod was garnished with a crown. On the other, he was literally disintegrating. The typical man was dying and he could feel it.

Herodium could not save King Herod.

### Salvation for the Typical Man

Herod walks atop his fortress wringing his hands. He has great anxiety. Magi from the east have announced the arrival of the prophesied Messiah-King. Herod worries that the Christ-child has come to take his throne.

But Herod's true fear ran far deeper. He is becoming aware that he is naked and unprotected against death and meaninglessness. All his projects and all his dreams have been a futile attempt to transcend the paradox of the human condition. At his core, Herod senses that he is a royal eternal being, but on the fringes, he can literally smell the rotting.

Herod can look up into the stars and in a sense 'be one of them' but at the same time, he knows with increasing ferocity that he is wasting away into the ground. And none of his power or influence can stop it. Herod is in desperate need of salvation.

This first Christmas was a moment of true possibility for Herod. As he stood upon his parapet looking across the Judean plain - perhaps he could see the Bethlehem star. But the brightness of that star didn't tempt a man to reach up in order to become a god. The Bethlehem star signaled the complete opposite: God comes down in order to reach man. Christ wasn't there for Herod's throne; Christ was there for Herod.

### Salvation. Today. Near.

God brought salvation to Herod's doorstep. "Today, in the town of David, a savior has been born to you..." Herod faces the universal question. Will he believe that God is near? Will he believe that God has come for him? Will Herod let go of Herodium and come to Bethlehem?

That question is the same today. Do you believe that God is near? Has God has come for you? Will you will come to Bethlehem?

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**“Christ wasn't there for Herod's throne; Christ was there for Herod. Will the typical man let go his grasp of Herodium and come to Bethlehem? Will you?”**

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# The Barnabas Letter

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Our Web Address: [www.thebarnabascenter.org](http://www.thebarnabascenter.org)

### Upcoming Opportunities

Date	Event	Facilitator(s)
Jan 15-16, 2010  March 5-6, 2010	<b>Heart to Heart Express</b> —This seminar teaches Biblical principles of marriage with practical application to your relationship. Includes guided confidential personal conversations. <i>Hosted by Stony Point Church &amp; Third Presbyterian (Richmond, VA—November), First Presbyterian Church (Starkville, MS—January) and Hope Community Church (Charlotte—March)</i>	<i>Palmer Trice and Roger Edwards</i>
2010 Calendar COMING SOON	<b>The Quest</b> —A men's adventure weekend including adventure challenges, conversation, study and reflection. <i>April and May dates TBD—please call if interested!</i>	<i>Pete Bondy &amp; Quest Team</i>
Tuesday evenings Groups begin Jan. 26, 2010	<b>Honor's Program for Men</b> —A 14-week small group program where men who struggle with	<i>John Pierce</i>
Thursday evenings Groups begin Jan. 28, 2010	<b>Honors Program for Women</b> —For women whose husbands struggle with sexual addiction to grieve losses and make decisions about their own recoveries. Beginning and Advanced Groups. 14 weeks.	<i>Lauren Petters</i>
Thursday evenings Groups begin Jan 28, 2010	<b>Healing Hearts</b> —For women who have experienced abuse in childhood. It provides a biblically-based, confidential context where women can wrestle with difficult realities related to their harm. Beginning and Advanced Groups. 14 weeks.	<i>Lauren Petters</i>
Monday evenings Groups begin March 1, 2010	<b>Barnabas Training Level One</b> —Built on the Biblical Model taught in Barnabas Training Basic, this small group training will focus on application of the model as participants learn to listen, ask questions, and observe with a keener, more discerning mind and heart.	<i>Barnabas Staff</i>
Groups begin week of Feb 22, 2010	<b>Barnabas Training Level Four</b> —For graduates of BT Level 2, this small group assists 4-6	<i>Pete Bondy</i>
Group begins in Jan 2010	<b>Real Beauty:</b> Uncovering Your Struggle with Food, Body Image, & Beauty—An 11-week small group of women that offers you the opportunity to better understand your story as you hear from and are encouraged by others whose journeys are similar to your own.	<i>Lauren Petters</i>