

Begin the New Year Building Eternal Things

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Two thousand years ago King Herod was as well known in Judea as President Bush is known in America today. In fact, his reputation went far beyond the little country that he governed. In all the Roman Empire, Herod was known for his ruthless actions, his skillful administration, and most of all, his great architectural ability.

By marrying a descendent of the Jewish royal family and by political skill and intrigue, Herod rose to such prominence that in 37 BC the Romans made him ruler over all of Palestine. Herod wanted to be liked and accepted by the Jews, and set upon a crusade to rebuild the glory of the nation that had been lost when it was conquered by the Babylonians nearly 700 years previously.

But Herod had two strikes against him that the Jews of his day never overlooked: he was a part of the hated Roman Empire and he was not really a Jew at all. Herod was from Idumaea, a small national area just south of Israel.

And yet the people marveled at Herod's great construction projects. He had the temple in Jerusalem rebuilt with a splendor that could only be compared to that of the great temple of King David. He built aqueducts, roads, and fortresses. And the greatest of all his fortresses was on top of a hill overlooking a little town called Bethlehem.

Today Bethlehem is a large city, but there were only a few hundred persons living there in the time of Mary and Joseph. The Bible tells us that because the inn or hotel was full, Mary and Joseph had to spend the night in a stable, the place where Jesus was born.

We like to depict the manger setting as a place of clean straw, well groomed animals, and a cute little barn. It likely wasn't that way at all. The manger was probably made of cold stone. They were generally located in small caves, either on the hillside or sometimes under the houses.

The floor of those caves were covered with up to several feet of manure from the sheep that had been sheltered there for hundreds or thousands of years. Black soot from thousands of shepherds' fires coated the roof and walls. It was a stinky, dirty, cold place.

I wonder what Mary and Joseph thought as they entered Bethlehem that night. Undoubtedly they could see the lights of Herod's grand fortress-palace as they searched for a place to rest. It must have taken quite an act of faith to have kept on believing God's promises about the Baby in Mary's womb.

I wonder what the shepherds thought when the angel told them to search for the Messiah in a stable. Wouldn't it make more sense for the King of kings to be born in Herod's great palace?

But now, 2000 years later, Herod's grand structures are just ruins for tourists. Except for his association with the Baby in the manger, he is largely forgotten. And the Baby? No one in all of history has impacted the world as He has.

In just a few weeks a New Year will begin. Each of us will use it to build something. We can follow King Herod's example and build earthly, material things, or we can instead concentrate on building eternal things – love, goodness, and a personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

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