

KNOWING WHEN TO RUN!

Today's Text: Matthew Chap. 2

Extracts:

Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. 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."... (But) being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their country another way. Now when they 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 [Matt. 2: 7-8, 12-14]

I recently viewed a National Geographic video of an American short-tailed shrew fighting with a snake that had attacked it.¹ The shrew is a small mouse-looking animal with a snout. Shrews ferociously guard their territories. The shrew can protect itself from predators by hiding or by emitting offensive odours to make itself distasteful. When it is attacked or wants to attack, it emits toxic material in its salivary glands to subdue its prey. In the video that I saw, a huge snake with very strong jaws tried to swallow the little shrew which cleverly dodged the snake's head and planted its snout on the snake's body. In no time, the huge snake went limp, dead! A little later, another shrew fought with the first shrew over territory. They had a tough fight. In the end, the shrew that earlier killed the snake ran off!

In the first case, the shrew fought with and defeated the snake. In the second, it ran away. There is a lesson here for believers. We are constantly under spiritual attacks at home, church, school, business or office. We know that God has equipped us with His whole armour as we fight against principalities and wickedness in high places [Eph. 6: 10-18]. How do we decide to stay and fight or to run?

Let us obtain some guidelines from this week's study.

¹ Animals Attack: Shrew vs. Snake

National Geographic video

<http://video.msn.com/?mkt=en-us&vid=d12e46b3-4ec4-42ff-b2a8-e69e32382ab5&playlist=videoByUuids:uuids:373a8291-7b10-4cd7-a5b0-a4a0ec336342%2C7bfe8046-c4b1-4110-b58e-01d6e529a294&from=MSNHP&tab=m1189615355930>1=42003>

1. What kind of fighter are you?

Even when you do not want a fight, people will certainly provoke you to have one! You cannot avoid it. For example, as you grow up in life, you are bound to step on toes. At home, you are bound to compete with your siblings for your parents' attention or favours. At school, you may do better at studies than others. At work, you may earn higher pay and promotions faster than your colleagues. In business, you may tend to have better results with much less efforts. At church, older and more experienced ministers may wonder why God seems to be using you more than they themselves. Therefore, even when you do not want trouble, it will look for you! So, sooner or later, you have to fight for your protection or integrity.

However, it is not every time that you are provoked that you fight. You have to weigh the odds that you face. For example, you may look at your strength compared to your attacker's and/or you may weigh your chances of success. The likelihood is that, if you believe that you can win, you may stay and fight. Again, that can be a big assumption. You could be underrating your opponent! Let us examine some interesting circumstances in which you may find yourself:

a) *The Weakling*

The odds are stacked against you. You are weak and your chances of success are slim. You are a weakling. You do not need anyone to tell you to run because you will lose if you stay to fight. That was what David did when King Saul sought to kill him. David's wife was the king's daughter. As Saul set watch over their house to kill David that night, his wife told him, "If you do not save your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed." So, "David fled and escaped to Samuel at Ramah" [1 Sam. 19: 1-18].

We see in David's case that he ran to the prophet Samuel for protection, believing that the king would fear to hurt him in the prophet's house. We learn from that story that the weakling should run to a stronger protector in order to get victory. Otherwise, s(he) will merely be running from pillar to post! So, when you run from danger, make sure that you are running to a safer place, preferably into God's hands.

b) *The Underdog*

Where you have two unequally matched opponents, the weaker one is called the underdog. The general opinion is that the underdog will lose no matter what. If you find yourself the underdog, the right thing to do is to run. But what if the matter has to do with your integrity? For example, should a candidate in an election give up before the election day just because s (he) is heavily favoured to lose? Should a student opt not to take

a test just because it is too hard to pass? Should an underdog not take chances even when failure stares him/her in the face?

Let us examine two cases from Scripture where David was clearly the underdog. In the first case, Goliath was a Philistine giant that was feared by the army of Israel. Each day, he came and challenged Israel to battle but no one was bold enough to accept it. One day, David (who was not yet qualified to join the army of Israel) sent supplies to his older brothers in the war front. He heard Goliath boasting and offered to fight him, even when he was too small to fit into King Saul's armour. He approached the giant carrying only five smooth stones and a sling. As the giant came at him, David said to him, "You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defiled." David flew a stone in his sling and it struck the giant in the face and he died [1 Sam. 17:1-50].

In the second example, David was in the wilderness where he was hiding from King Saul. The people of Keilah sent to him to help them against the Philistines that were robbing their threshing floors. As an underdog, running away from his stronger foe, Saul, he should not dare to come out of hiding. *He asked the Lord if he should go and God gave him clearance.* He went with his 600 troops and defeated the Philistines. Then word went to Saul that David had been seen in the walled city of Keilah. So he went with his thousands of troops to kill him. *David again asked of the Lord who told him to run* [1 Sam. 23: 1-13].

We learn from those two cases that *the underdog stayed to fight in the first instance but ran in the second instance on clear directives from God.* So, if God asks you to run, do not look back!

c) *The Bully*

The bully is the aggressive person who intimidates or mistreats weaker people. Can you recollect how you almost dropped out of school because of some bully? On the surface, the bully thrives on the lack of confidence of the weaker person. But the day that you have the courage to withstand a bully, you surprisingly discover that s(he) is not as strong as you had feared!

Sometimes, you yourself may be the bully. You throw your weight around on account of your position to punish or reward others. You always want to be heard or seen in every gathering. At what point do you think it is appropriate for you to speak (fight) or keep quiet (run)? If you allow the weaker person to expose your glass jaws, you could die with shame!

Take the case of Joshua and the army of Israel after they had conquered Jericho. The next place to take was a tiny city called Ai. Joshua sent spies to check on the city's defence and they came back with a report, saying, "do not weary all the people there, for the people of Ai are few." Joshua significantly cut his troops and went with about three thousand men who were routed by the small army of Ai, and "the hearts of (Joshua's) people melted and became like water" [**Josh. 7: 1-5**]. The bully had been disgraced. However, it turned out that their defeat was because of the sin of Achan during the invasion of Jericho [**vv. 10-26**], just as the bully's empty pride easily makes him/her fall. So, if you find yourself playing the bully, run when you see a fight because you may not win unless it is the right fight, the one where you are not in the wrong.

d) *The Matador*

Bull fights are common in Spain and Latin America. The main bull fighter whose job it is to kill the bull during a bull fight is called the matador. He is not supposed to run away from the bull. He must wait and fight until he kills the bull. Therefore, as the bull charges at the matador, he has to be very alert because one false move can mean instant danger when the bull gores him by piercing his flesh with its horns. There are occasional instances of such. For example, a matador can become too overconfident, too complacent or too old. There could be one of those rare chances that his usually clever moves fail to deceive the bull. Therefore, the matador can be likened to a person who stays to fight no matter the odds until s(he) wins.

The word of God says, "resist the devil and he will flee from you" [**Jam. 4: 7**]. That implies that there are certain areas of our lives where we must not compromise our Christian values, no matter the odds we face. For example, when Stephen, one of the seven deacons chosen by the disciples to supervise the administration of the early church, was brought before the council of the Jews for blasphemy for preaching Christ as the Son of God, he did not run or back away. Instead, he faced them boldly and defended his faith. They stoned him to death for that [**Acts 7:54-60**].

Compare Stephen's case with that of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, Daniel's companions who were brought before Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon for not bowing down before the gold image that the king had made. Under threat of instant death in a fiery furnace, they stood their ground, saying to the king, "*Our God* whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning furnace, and *He will deliver us from your hand...* but if not, let it be known to you, O King, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up" [**Dan. 3: 8-18**]. The king threw them into the fire but it could not hurt them because God

had sent “the Son of God” to deliver them [vv. 19-25]. The matador killed the bull!

From the forgoing, we can conclude that *clear spiritual guidance from God determines when to run*. It has nothing to do with your human strength or advantages. Only the Lord can determine your appropriate response. Joseph’s escape to Egypt with Jesus and Mary will make this conclusion clearer.

2. The Son of God runs from a man!

After the birth of Jesus, some wise men came from the East to worship Him. They came to King Herod in Jerusalem to ask where they could find “the King of the Jews” that had just been born. When Herod heard that, he and his cohorts were troubled because the news was a threat to his own rule. So he gathered together the chief priests and scribes to inquire where the Christ was to be born. They referred to the prophecy of Micah [Mic. 5:2] that He would be born in Bethlehem. So Herod sent the wise men there and asked them to please let him know Christ’s whereabouts so that he could also go and worship Him [Matt. 2: 1-8]. But he had ulterior motives that were inimical to the safety of the Son of God.

Ordinarily, we would not worry about humans plotting against the Son of God. God’s position is well captured by the psalmist when he wrote [Ps. 2: 1-5]:

Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, “Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us.” He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision. Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, and distress them in His deep displeasure.

God could protect His Son from any human attack. What did He do? First, He warned the wise men in a dream not to return to Herod in Jerusalem but to go back home by a different route [Matt. 2: 12]. Next, He sent an angel to instruct Joseph in a dream to take the Child Jesus and His mother, Mary, and flee to Egypt. Under the cover of night, Joseph fled with his family and escaped to safety in Egypt. Without any feedback from the wise men, Herod massacred all children in Bethlehem and its districts who were two years old and under [v. 16] and thereby hoped to kill the Son of God!

God had the power to stop Herod’s plan but He did not because the massacre had been prophesied by Jeremiah [Jer. 31: 15; Matt. 2: 18]. Joseph and his family remained in Egypt until after the massacre and the death of Herod [vv. 13-15]. Thereafter, God again instructed Joseph in a dream to return to the land of Israel. However, on arrival in Israel, he heard that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod as king and he was afraid. God warned him in a dream to turn aside into the region of Galilee, to the city of Nazareth [vv. 19-23]. By asking Joseph to run,

God was able to protect the Child Jesus from physical harm in the hands of king Herod.

3. Conclusion: Everyone who runs away is not a coward!

From this study, we learn the following principles:

- *To run away from a fight does not necessarily make you a coward!* You are merely responding to a higher calling. If it is in running away that you will get victory, run. His Son returned from Egypt alive while His pursuer, Herod, died. Therefore, whenever you find yourself in a decision situation [= a point where you have several alternative choices out of which to choose one], ask God first and let Him show you which way to go, as David did at Keilah.
- *That you have turned the other cheek does not mean that the first cheek is not hurting!* Your decision to run may hurt your self-pride or the interests of others (such as family, friends, colleagues, etc) but the higher authority that you have obeyed will vindicate you and reward them. Innocent children were slaughtered in the place of the Son of God that had escaped to Egypt but God made them the first saints of the New Testament.
- It is immaterial whether you are a weakling or an underdog or a bully or a matador. *Do only what God commands you to do.* If He asks you to stay and fight, do so even if it may kill you, as in the case of Stephen and all the martyrs in the early church. But if He tells you to run, do not hesitate a moment, just as Joseph did. If you refuse to run, you are on your own!

Those who know their God shall be strong and shall carry out great exploits [**Dan. 11: 32**]. However, if you know Him well, you will know when to run because He will *always* tell you so.