

What Death Steals, The Lord Can Restore: Celebrating Easter on Christmas Morning
Matthew 2:16–18 | 12.18.2016 | The Promised One @OBC

For the last 3 weeks, we've looked at the challenge of how Matthew uses the OT.

In **Matt 1:23**, he says the virgin birth of Jesus was to fulfill the words of Isaiah 7:14.

He does the same thing in **Matt 2:6**, where he quotes Mic 5:2 to explain the birthplace of Jesus in Bethlehem and its significance as the place where kings are born.

Last week, we saw how **Hosea 11** informed the way Matthew understood Jesus' flight to Egypt. He says, this was to fulfill the words of the prophet: "Out of Egypt . . ."

This morning we come to another passage which quotes from the Old Testament.

Verse 18 cites Jeremiah 31:15 to explain the Herod's actions,

. . . but instead of focusing on the literary problem, how Matthew quotes Jeremiah

. . . I want to consider the emotional problem: Why would God bring his son into the world in such a way that a dozen or more children would be killed?

. . . What kind of God is it . . . that brings his Son into the world with such a loss of life?

Do you feel the problem?

Surely . . . if we were living in Bethlehem . . . you would be faced with this dilemma

In one moment . . . the shepherds came rejoicing at the birth of the Christ-child.

But in the next . . . some of these same shepherds would lose sons or nephews

What going on? Wasn't the birth of the Christ a message of good news?

 Didn't Jesus come to save Israel from their enemies?

 How could God let his birth create such devastation?

 What is he doing?

In our day questions like these remain:

Why the miscarriage?
Why the prolonged infertility?
Why the job loss?

Why the broken marriage?
Why my child and not theirs?
Why the sudden the health crisis?

These are questions that come up in a fallen world . . . and especially when we consider matters like infanticide or any personal tragedy that results in death.

The temptation . . . when we face such pain . . . is to hide these pains from others or to medicate them through any number of devices.

But that never takes away the hurt . . . and only prevents God from bringing peace.

So this morning . . .

. . . instead of skirting these questions and splashing in the shallow end . . .

. . . we need to head into the storm, and see exactly what God is doing.

. . . **What do we learn about God from this horrible tragedy in Bethlehem?**

. . . **How might God's Word give us help as we face our own tragedies?**

This is the goal of the morning . . .

And I the quotation from Jeremiah 31 then . . . is not a problem for Matthew's Gospel

. . . it is actually the key to understanding the loss of life in Bethlehem.

. . . and the key to learning how God works in a fallen world.

So . . . to approach the problem, here are three truths we must learn

1. **As an All-Powerful Creator, God can create life from nothing**
2. **As a Sovereign Lord, God can bring good from evil**
3. **As a Gracious Redeemer, God has the power to raise the dead**

As an All-Powerful Creator, God can create life from nothing

From the beginning to the end of the Bible, we discover a God whose power is unbounded. Genesis 1 records that he made the world by his Word. As **Psalm 33:5** says,

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.

ATST, Psalms 115 and 135 both say God dwells in heaven, doing all that he pleases.

On this truth, John Piper has observed

God is absolutely sovereign. . . . Therefore He is not frustrated. He rejoices in all His works when He contemplates them as colors of the magnificent mosaic of redemptive history. He is an unshakably happy God. (*DG*, 49–50)

Unlike you and me, God is not constrained by space or time or any lack in power, wisdom, or goodness. He brings into effect everything he wants. This is why Isaiah 46:9–10 says:

¹⁰ “For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me,
declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’”

These truths of God’s sovereign freedom are present everywhere in Scripture but they take on a special appearance in the virgin conception of Christ.

In his wisdom, God made man and woman with the co-capacity to create life.
But this is not the only way human life might be created.

In Adam, God created a man from the dust of the earth.
In Eve, God made a woman from man’s rib.
In Isaac, God brought forth promised son from a post-menopausal woman. (*Ge* 18:11)

This is why . . . Romans 4:17 says of Isaac’s birth:

God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

But now God does even more, in creating the human in whom God would dwell bodily.

As the Angel said to Mary in Luke 1:37: ‘Nothing will be impossible with God.’”

Based on this truth, Mary was able to follow God fully and receive her calling to become estranged from Israel, even as she received the Son of God.

Indeed, this is the starting place for us to walk with God too . . .

If you are going to keep faith in the face of any crisis . . . you must come to grips with God's absolute sovereignty.

If you're questioning God's rule . . . when the crisis comes . . . your boat will capsize.

But . . . if you have embraced what Scripture teaches about God and his Rule, you have a foundation on which to build, a light in the darkness, and hope in the graveyard

So this is this the first truth:

As All-Powerful Creator, God is Absolutely Free to Do as He Pleases. . .

And this doing as he pleases . . . includes creating life from nothing

Which is a great encouragement, that no matter what happens, God is never under-resourced and he is always ready to employ creation to carry out his plan . . . #2

As a Sovereign Lord, God can bring good from evil

It is astounding to think . . . God ordered everything in Israel's long history to prepare the way for Jesus' BIRTH . . . AND not only his birth . . . but also his identification as the MESSIAH

In Matthew we find the Evangelist saying Jesus fulfilled the ancient words of Isaiah, Hosea, Jeremiah, and the Prophets.

But what's more interesting is how each of these "fulfillments" come from different periods of time . . . from different events in different nations.

Isaiah 40 says God controls the nations and turns the hearts of kings. Indeed, nowhere is this sovereign rule put more directly to the test than in Christ's birth.

But true to form, God is absolutely committed to carrying out his plan . . . and thus the Christ child comes exactly as God intends.

Seeing how God directed the nations over 18 C's gives us confidence in how he works good for his people . . . even bringing good from evil . . .

Consider . . .

First, in the fourteenth century BC . . . God redeemed his people Israel thru the Exodus

Around the 18th C BC, God moved Abraham's offspring from Canaan to Egypt.

Egypt would be the place Israel would live for 400 hundred years, until 14th C BC, when he delivered them through the Exodus.

The exodus became *THE* identity-forming event in Israel's history. So much so all OT pointed back to it . . . when Jesus came he too went had to go to Egypt.

Looking back, we can see that Israel's plight was not in vain. Pharaoh's wickedness would ultimately be a peg on which God would hang his greater glory. And it would be a necessary piece in the puzzle of bringing Christ.

Next, in the 10th C BC . . . God called a king from the town of Bethlehem.

A century before David was anointed king, God orchestrated the unlikely marriage of Ruth, the Moabitess, and Boaz the kinsman-redeemer of Judah.

As the end of Ruth records, Boaz fathered Obed; Obed fathered Jesse; and Jesse fathered David, the beloved king of Israel. And where was this family located?

Bethlehem . . . In this little town, God ordered events such that when the prophet Micah sought to speak of the kingdom's restoration, he wrote of Bethlehem.

Because this village of [300 people](#) was the place where God's king came from.
Again, God was ordering history to fulfill his purposes.

The same is true in the 8th C . . . when God raised up Assyria to discipline his people.

The sign of a virgin giving birth to a child named Immanuel is set in the days when Assyria invaded Israel and threatened Judah.

It's safe to say, if Assyria was not challenging Jerusalem, God would not have given this sign. But such speculation is folly . . . because this is exactly what happened.

The sign and its first fulfillment occurred in the 8th C . . . but it's ultimate fulfillment came 800 years later

At the time, Assyria's threat was great . . . but ultimately, God turned it for good

Fourth, in the 6th C . . . Babylon came to deport Israel from their land.

At that time, God promised Jeremiah a return to the land and a new covenant.

Once again, God ordained the actions of the nations, such that they would discipline his people . . . without putting a full end to them.

Jeremiah 31:15 speaks of Rachel weeping because her children have been carted off into captivity. But immediately, God speaks of their future return.

Again, God has orchestrated events in history . . . in particular in Judah's exile and return . . . he prepares the way for Jesus . . . AND for knowing him as the CHRIST.

This is what each of these events in history do in Matthew's Gospel

The virgin birth . . . is explained by the promise in Isaiah that God is with us when . . . Assyria threatened.

The birthplace in Bethlehem . . . is related to Micah 5:2 because this is the place where kings are born.

The flight to Egypt . . . is interpreted as a necessary step for Israel's savior . . .

Just as Moses had to flee from Egypt, to return to Egypt, to lead his people out of Egypt . . . so Jesus fled from Egypt in order to return to save his people

and

now... The slaughter of the I's . . . is explained by Jer 31:15 ... AND ... it's immediate context which promises restoration and return of Rachel's children

This is where we turn now . . .

But not without recognizing . . . how God regularly turns evil events into good

Indeed, . . . **As Sovereign Lord . . . only God can bring good from evil.**

As a Gracious Redeemer, . . . he also raises the dead to new life.

Verse 16 reads . . . READ

A few remarks about Herod are needed to understand verses 16–18 . . .

Herod the Great was Rome's deputized king of Judah from 37–4 BC.

He was a brilliant and cruel leader, whose most lasting improvements in Israel included his temple and the construction of Masada near the Dead Sea.

Yet, he may be most famous for his willingness to protect and preserve his rule. One fifth century historian said it was better to be Herod's pig than his son, for he killed three of his sons and a wife. So, the barbarity described in Matthew, though not explicitly recorded outside Scripture is on par.

What is recorded outside Scripture about Herod, confirms our understanding of his evil.

Josephus: He was a man who was cruel to all alike and one who easily gave in to anger and was contemptuous of justice. And yet he was as greatly favored by fortune as any man has ever been in that from being a commoner he was made king, and though encompassed by innumerable perils, he managed to escape them all and live on to a very old age. As for the affairs of his household and his relation to his sons, he had, in his own opinion at least, enjoyed very good fortune since he had not failed to get the better of those whom he considered his enemies, but in my opinion he was very unfortunate indeed. (Ant. 171.191–92)

Later **Josephus** would say: "the man's character had nothing human to recommend it"

This is the man whom the Magi tricked . . . and not surprisingly his response was rage.

Embarrassed and fearful of the king the Magi came to worship, his wrath boiled over to destroy the child-king.

v. 16 indicates his target was all boys 2 years or younger in region around B.

It may have been that Jesus was born two years earlier, or as some commentators have observed, Herod may have rounded up for good measure, or out of spite.

Either way, the point isn't to figure out the details of the infanticide, but to weep over the loss of life in Bethlehem. Which is why Matthew quotes Jeremiah 31:15.

Jeremiah 31:15 reads,

“A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.”

And Matthew quotes it to help explain this Bethlehem tragedy . . . [] but is that all?

By now, you should know when Matthew quotes from the OT, he pays special attention to the historical context of the passage.

In fact, it is fair to say that whenever NT authors quote one verse, they have in mind the whole context.

So what is the context of Jeremiah 31:15?

Interestingly, it is the only dark blot in the 31st chapter of Jeremiah.

While Jeremiah as a book is full of weeping, ch 30–33 are all consolation.

Why the disparity? Well, J is written at a time when Israel is on the way to exile.

Rachel’s weeping in verse 15 is a reaction to this exile, but the whole of the chapter is one of forthcoming redemption, as 30:3 introduces Jeremiah 31–33

“For behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord when I will restore the fortunes to my people, Israel and Judah, says the Lord and I will bring them back to the land I gave to their fathers, and they shall take possession of it.”

Jeremiah 30–33 looks beyond the exile to a time when God will restore his people. If we had time, we could read all three prophecies in Jer 30–33. I’d encourage you to do so, . . . for now let me highlight the main points.

30:4–11 = God promises salvation to his ppl brought by a New David leading a New Exodus

30:12–17 – He offers to restore to life (resurrect) a people sick unto death . . .

30:18–24 – He will restore Worship in God’s House by bringing a royal priest near and establishing a new covenant

31:1–6 – From this new covenant, he will reunify Israel and Judah into one people

31:7–14 – He will gather from the wide earth his people by means of redemption and for the end joyful service and worship in the land.

Skip v. 15

31:16–22 – The heart of restoration is found here: God will create a new people who will repent and return to the land . . . but more importantly, they will return to embrace him.

31:23–40 – Establishment of a NC as the climax and summary of all other promises

So these summary statements give you a sense of the consolation offered in Jer 30–31.

But what about verse 15?

Jeremiah 31:15 is the place where God begins to restore the grief-stricken.

In the verse, Rachel stands in as a place holder for the nation of Israel.

It is not Rachel, the wife of Jacob that is crying; it is R. as figurative mother of Israel.

And she stands in Ramah, a village mentioned in Jeremiah 40:1–2 where Jeremiah was imprisoned . . .

. . . This village is one that watched the Babylonians take Judah into captivity. And it places Rachel's as responding to the loss of her children.

Just as Rachel wept as she lost her life giving birth in Genesis 35 . . . so now . . . figuratively speaking . . . Rachel weeps again as her nation loses their sons.

This is the intense sorrow Matthew picks up.

In Bethlehem, the town where Rachel was buried . . . which may also be near Ramah Matthew cites Jeremiah 31:15 to say that the sorrow of the exile has returned.

Only this time, this exile isn't deportation to another land, it's the loss of innocent life . . .

It's a grievous scene! One that makes the future look bleak.

Matthew's quotation does not mean the OT "predicted" Herod's action . . . as much as Matthew reads the current events of Jesus birth in the light of Israel's previous exile.

Thus . . . Matthew connects Herod's rage to Israel's time in Egypt by way of Hosea 11 and to the exile in Babylon by way of Jeremiah 31

He explains these events of Jesus' birth by saying: At the time of Christ's birth . . . Israel was still in exile, still under the reign of a deadly king, still in need of deliverance.

But like with Hosea 11 . . . which traces the exodus from Egypt . . . So Jer 31:15 ID's the restoration from Babylon . . . **and more than that resurrection from the dead!**

Indeed, while Christ's resurrection stands on the other side of Matthew's Gospel . . . we cannot make sense of this tragedy without the resurrection.

Indeed . . . all such loss of life drives us to long for resurrection . . .

. . . **And resurrection is the goal of Matthew's Gospel**

Thus we should read Christ's nativity in light of his coming crucifixion and resurrection . . . but we should also see how Jeremiah 31 contributes to this Easter Hope.

If you keep reading in Jeremiah 31:16–22, this is what you'll find

Two verses of God's promise to restore the children of Rachel.
Two verses recording Judah's sorrow for disobedience.
One verse of God's internal longing to restore his people.
Two verses that direct Israel back to himself, even as he creates a new thing.

And what is this new thing? . . . it is a people who embrace their God, because God has given them a new heart and ratified this new heart with his new covenant.

So let's read . . . READ vv. 16–22

In verse 15, Rachel refuses to be comforted because the only thing that will comfort her loss is the restoration of her children. But amazingly . . . this is exactly what God promises 16–17.

First, in v. 16, Yahweh speaks directly to Rachel's pain and loss.

But unlike a compassionate friend who can't do anything to help, God says "stop weeping" because he IS going to do something. What's that?

The end of the verse answers: "they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is a hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country." Twice he declares he will restore her children, but why?

Verse 16 explains: "FOR / BECAUSE there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord."

Whose work are we talking about? And what is that work?

Clearly, the antecedent to "your" is Rachel. Her weeping has not been in vain.

Whereas Jacob's wife, Rachel was separated from her son because she died in childbirth—she actually named him "Son of my Sorrow" . . .

This time, under God's new covenant . . . he would reward her tears and restore her children.

IOW . . . God is promising to restore, regather, reunite his children . . . as v. 17 -22 say

And which . . . v 23–40 confirm by promising a new covenant that will remove sin once for all

In other words . . . God who sent Babylon to punish his people because of their sin was promising in the future to forgive their sin and restore them thru a new covenant.

And with this New Covenant . . . would come a New Creation . . .

What had fallen prey to destruction in this world . . . would be born again in new life

Friends . . . don't miss it . . . these promises offer life from dead / resurrection life

So do you see why . . . Matthew might have had interest in Jeremiah 31?

And why we who live in the land of the dying . . . should have an interest in the new cov?

Because through this new covenant . . . God promises to make all things new!

In Jeremiah, the seed promise is return from exile . . .

But in Matthew, the promise has grown into something more . . .

In the birth of Jesus, we not only have a promise that we will return to the land . . .

. . . but that he will give us a new land, in a new world, where sin is no more,
. . . in this new creation death is dead, tears are gone, and children are not lost.

Indeed, the prophets often picture the New Jerusalem as a place where children play in the streets – Read Zechariah 8

And so . . . I believe that Matthew's quotation of Jeremiah is meant to reach into the depths of our sorrow . . .

And it promises that whatever death steals from you, God can restore it . . . **IF YOU TAKE REFUGE IN CHRIST**

This is the message of Christ's birth . . .

Jesus has come not to celebrate with the happy, but to comfort the mourning.

And how can he do that when death is the cause of pain . . . He will raise the dead!

For men and women . . . whose sin has destroyed them / isolated them / hurt them . . . he offers pardon and healing and his own life.

For sufferers . . . who have lost parents, spouses, children . . . he promises a resur.

Indeed, by bringing Jeremiah 31 into the context of the loss of these little ones . . .

I believe the Spirit of God would have us understand that these infants whose lives were cut short WILL be raised to glory in the resurrection.

While the question of what happens to babies when they die is debated, I believe these two passages (among a few others) present one of the strongest arguments that when these babes leave this world, **it is because God has called them to himself.**

And they like us, await the resurrection of the dead, when the children of God will be reunited at the throne of King Jesus whose death resurrection make all things new!!

And oh . . . what a day of rejoicing that will be . . .

When the mothers of Bethlehem who trusted in their Messiah are reunited with their children and both turn and give praise to king Jesus!

“

When all who trust in Jesus are raised to life and reunited with those they've lost . . . and together with tears of joy they sing and dance and shout for joy to the Lord.

“

When believing mothers are swarmed by the children they lost to miscarriage . . . and together they turn and give thanks to Jesus.

When believing fathers who lost Christian sons in war are raised to new life together.

When mothers forgiven of their abortions are reunited with their children . . . and together they sing the song of the redeemed.

When children who lost their parents too young . . . are reunited with the F + M who prayed for them.

What does it mean . . . when Revelation 21:4 says . . . God will wipe away every tear?

It not only means that all sorrows will cease in that day.

It also means all pain and loss from this age will be recovered for those in Christ.

God remembers all your tears . . . one day he will give you double-comfort for each 1.

Do you believe that ???

That is what God promises. Your losses are not in vain, if you are in Christ.

Yes, the mothers in Bethlehem lost their children, but how much greater the loss . . . if they didn't . . . and the birth of Christ never came!

But Christ has come . . . and this means trouble for us now . . . but life forever.

Do you see what kind of God this is?

He is NOT a safe God . . . but he is good. And therefore . . . you can trust him . . .

He has not come to give us instant comfort but eternal life . . . and for those who know the bitterness of death . . . he has an infinite supply of mercy and comfort.

Take hold of him . . . and he will hold you fast . . . for one day, he will turn your mourning into laughing, your agony into glory . . . IF in your tears you cling to him.

As another prophet has said: Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD.