

WHAT CHRISITMAS REVEALS ABOUT GOD

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Matthew 2:13-18

CHRISTMAS SERIES: WHAT CHRISTMAS REVEALS ABOUT GOD

SERMON TITLE: "WHAT CHRISTMAS REVEALS ABOUT GOD'S DIFFICULT WILL"

SCRIPTURE TEXT: MATTHEW 2:13-20 / P. 682

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INTRO.

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-- As it's generally told, the Christmas story would receive a motion picture rating of "G" or no more than a "PG." In fact, it's generally regarded as a perfect story for children: a baby with his parents surrounded by shepherds, wise men, and stable animals.

But there's a part of the Christmas story that would immediately qualify it for an "R" rating. It's actually a part of the account of the visit of the Magi, but it is rarely included by anyone because it's so disturbing and seems to ruin the feel-good nature of the Christmas story.

And while that's understandable, it's also unfortunate, because it's this part of the story that gives us insight into God's difficult will - into why a good God allows awful things to happen to innocent people. Indeed, this part of the Christmas story is often referred to as "the slaughter of the innocents."

We find it in Matthew 2:13-18 (p. 682).

I. THE STORY (2:13-20)

A. THE BACKGROUND (V. 13A)

-- Verse 13 starts by saying, "When they had gone…." The "they" refers to the Magi, whose story is being told here. You remember that the Magi (aka, Wise Men) were Gentiles, possibly from the area of modern-day Iran. They were schooled in ancient astronomy and had discovered a new star in a location in the sky that they interpreted as a sign of the birth of the Messiah who had been long-awaited and expected by the Jews. The Magi travel to Jerusalem to pay homage to this royal infant. When they arrive, they make their way to the palace to inquire about the newborn heir to the throne.

This is distressing news to the current occupant of the throne - King Herod the Great. Herod, who had reigned over the province of Judea for thirty years and was insanely paranoid about any possible threats to his power. In fact, he had executed three of his sons because he suspected them of plotting against him.

So when Herod hears from the Magi about the possible birth of the Messiah, Herod's threat level immediately goes to red, severe threat level. Pretending to want to assist the Magi in their mission, Herod calls for the top Jewish biblical scholars to determine where the Messiah might have been born. The scholars agree that the prophet Micah had foretold that King David's hometown of Bethlehem would be the birthplace of the Messiah as well. So Herod sends the Magi off to Bethlehem to search for this future heir to the throne, with instructions to return to Herod once they have found the baby so that Herod also could go to "worship" him. The Magi agree, not knowing that Herod's actual intention is to eliminate any possible rival.

When the Magi leave Herod's palace, the star reappears and this time begins to move and guide them along the 5-mile trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and to the precise house (not stable) where Joseph and Mary and Jesus, who by now is several months and perhaps over a year old, are living. The Magi tell Mary and Joseph their amazing tale, and then upon seeing the infant Jesus, they fall down before Him to worship Him and to present to Him valuable gifts fit for a king - gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Before the Magi leave to start the journey back home, God sends an angel to them in a dream to warn them not to go back to Herod; so the Magi bypass Jerusalem and Herod and return home by another route.

And that's where we usually stop, but that's not the end of the story. Verses 13-20 tell the rest of the story. This is the part that turns an otherwise cute, heart-warming tale into a disturbing horror story.

B. THE REST OF THE STORY (VV. 13-20)

-- A question we ought to ask here is why Matthew even includes this gruesome account. Luke doesn't have it in his gospel, and this "slaughter of the innocents" certainly doesn't seem to fit with what the angel described to the shepherds as "good news of great joy…for all the people."

So why is this event included here? I'll suggest for 2 possible reasons:

1. The Bible's Unretouched Honesty

-- The Bible deals with characters and events in a very open and honest manner. It doesn't pretend that it's always a wonderful life. The Bible records the faults and failings of its characters (even its heroes), and it records events that are difficult for us to understand why God let them happen.

2. Matthew's Jewish Emphasis

-- A second reason why Matthew includes this troubling story may have to do with his Jewish emphasis. Matthew is writing his gospel primarily for a Jewish audience, and one of his major themes is how Jesus fulfills the OT prophecies and expectations regarding the promised Messiah.

Jewish readers would have immediately seen the parallels here between Jesus and Moses. The lives of both are threatened by a ruler's horrific decree to slaughter innocent infant boys, and God works providentially to protect and deliver both Moses and Jesus. Matthew's implication is that Jesus is akin to Moses, but Matthew will make it clear in His Gospel that Jesus is greater than Moses, that Jesus is the Messiah who saves us from the condemnation of our sin.

II. THE INSIGHTS

-- As troubling as it is, this story reveals to us valuable insight into God's difficult will, into why God allows awful things to happen to innocent people.

A. THE FIRST INSIGHT: WHEN IT COMES TO GOD'S WILL AND SUFFERING, YOU NEED TO CONSIDER THE BIG PICTURE.

-- We always associate the Christmas story with romanticized, saccharine images of a mother and a newborn baby, shepherds, and an angel announcing "good news of great joy." But anguish is an integral part of that story. Innocent children were slaughtered when Jesus was born - more than that, because He was born.

-- And that raises for us again the troubling question of why - why would God allow something like that to happen? I mean, every time you turn around in the story of Jesus' birth there's an angel appearing to someone. Why didn't God send an angel to protect the innocent children?

-- I can't answer that fully, but I do have 2 important observations to make:

1. About Hurt

-- The first observation is that Christmas is the story of God's entering into our hurt. At Christmastime God came to share our suffering. Jesus came to live a life that would fulfill Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

-- Whatever His reasons for allowing suffering, God didn't exempt Himself from it.

2. About Hope

-- A second observation is that Christmas is a story of hope for those who hurt. Indeed, this distressing account of innocent infants being slain actually has something important to say to us about hope.

a. Matthew says that this incident fulfills a prophecy made by Jeremiah. Verse 18 is a quote from Jeremiah 31:15.

(1) Ramah (RAY-muh) was a small village about 5 miles from Bethlehem. It was the traditional site where Rachel, wife of the great patriarch Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin, was buried. About 1,000 years after Rachel's death Ramah was the site where Jews were assembled to be deported in exile to Babylon. That's the scene that Jeremiah is describing - the deportation of God's chosen people from the Promised Land to a far-off pagan country. Jeremiah pictures this tragic event as being so sorrowful that the great matriarch Rachel is weeping in her near-by grave. That same kind of grief and sorrow is repeated when Herod orders all the infant boys in the area to be slain.

(2) But Matthew's Jewish readers would have also been familiar with the context of that verse from Jeremiah - that it's a context of hope. Look at the verses that immediately follow the one quoted.

Jeremiah 31:16-17 This is what the LORD says: "Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD. "They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your future," declares the LORD. "Your children will return to their own land."

-- Even as Rachel is weeping, God assures her and her children that He is with them and will bring them back. With God there is always hope, even in the midst of our darkest and most painful days.

B. SECOND INSIGHT: WHEN IT COMES TO GOD'S WILL AND SUFFERING, YOU NEED TO CONSIDER THE BIG PICTURE, AND YOU NEED TO WAIT TO THE END OF THE STORY.

-- You don't fully understand God's will and suffering until you get to the end of the story.

For example, in our text in Matthew 2 it looks like God is showing calloused favoritism towards His Son. After all, God sends an angel to warn Joseph to leave even before Herod realized the Magi had tricked him and he decided to kill all the infant boys in Bethlehem. It's true that God does spare His Son here, but this isn't the end of the story. If you go to the end of Matthew, you'll find Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane for the Father to remove the cup of upcoming suffering. But this time the Father doesn't spare the Son, and Jesus proceeds to endure the horrific anguish of crucifixion.

But the Cross is not the end of the story either. The Son who died on the Cross was raised again. But that still isn't the end of the story. The same Jesus who died and was raised is coming again and will put an end to all sin and the suffering it causes.

CONCLUSION

The words to the Christmas hymn "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" were written by the great American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In 1860, Longfellow was at the peak of his success as a poet. Abraham Lincoln had just been elected President, giving hope to many. But things soon turned dark for America and for Longfellow personally. The Civil War began the next year, and Longfellow's wife died in a tragic accident in their home. Longfellow suffered severe burns on his hands and face trying to save her and was so badly burned that he could not attend her funeral.

In his diary for Christmas Day 1861, he wrote, "How inexpressibly sad are the holidays." In 1862, the toll of war began to mount, and in his diary for that year Longfellow wrote, "A merry Christmas say the children, but that is no more for me."

In 1863, his son—who had run away to join the Union army—was severely wounded and had to return home in December. There is no entry in Longfellow's diary for that Christmas. Then on Christmas Day in 1864 Longfellow heard the church bells ringing in celebration of the birthday of the Savior. It was just months after the terrible bloodshed at Gettysburg, and Lee's surrender at Appomattox was still months away. As he heard the bells ringing, Longfellow was moved to write these words:

"I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;

"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!"