

WHY GOD?

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By Pastor Stan
Matthew 2:13-23

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INTRO.

-- We're just getting started in our series through the Gospel of Matthew, and today we come to one of the most troubling and difficult passages in the entire book.

Cf., Matthew 2

-- This passage is actually connected to and part of the story that we looked at last week - the story of the Wise Men; but it rarely is included in the telling of that story. The reason, as we are about to see, is that this part of the story takes a violent, life-and-death turn. What has so far been a "G" rated story suddenly becomes "R" rated.

The event we're about to consider is often called "The Slaughter of the Innocents." It puts a dark cloud over the story of Jesus' birth and forces us to confront the ages-old problem of why a good God would allow horrific things to happen to innocent people. What we are about to read raises serious questions about God's sovereign will and about His goodness and justice.

Read Matthew 2:13-23

I. The Story

A. The Passage's Clear Indication

1. As we consider this passage, we need to begin with this general observation: Matthew is clearly indicating to us here that God is sovereign over everything that happens here. Nothing that happens here happens because God is unable to do anything about it. Nothing that ever happens is ever out side of God's sovereignty or beyond God's power. Matthew makes it clear in this passage that God is directing affairs to guide and provide for Jesus.

2. We see God's providential working in two ways here - through the dreams and through the prophecies.

a. The Dreams

-- Three times in this passage God instructs Joseph in a dream, in two, and possibly all three, of them by sending an angel with a message for Joseph.

Cf., vv. 13; 19-20; 23

-- Matthew wants us to know that God is actively at work, guiding and watching over Joseph, Mary and Jesus.

b. The Prophecies

-- We also see God's sovereign and providential working through the fulfilled prophecies mentioned in this passage. Three times Matthew tells us that an event in Jesus' life fulfilled a prophecy made hundreds of years earlier.

Cf., vv. 15, 17, 23

-- For the Jewish audience that Matthew was addressing these fulfilled prophecies would serve as confirming evidence that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Look, for example at the first of those fulfilled prophecies.

v. 15

-- The passage that Matthew quotes here is Hosea 11:1, a passage that is originally talking about God's delivering Israel from bondage in Egypt. The way that Matthew looks at it, God's actions with Israel in the OT were often a picture (sometimes called a "type") of what God would later do in Jesus' life. So God is now going to re-enact Israel's sojourn in and deliverance from Egypt in the life of Jesus. Just as Israel's deliverance from Egypt was a prelude to the first covenant at Mt. Sinai, so Jesus' exodus from Egypt will lead to a new covenant that will be accomplished ultimately at Mt. Calvary.

B. The Passage's Troubling Questions

-- But the very fact that God is working so meticulously to bring about these events also raises a very troubling question: why would God allow something as evil and horrific as "the slaughter of the innocents?" Couldn't the God who rules over nations and directs the events of history have kept Herod from carrying out this evil act? After all, Herod was old and in poor health and actually died shortly after this incident. God could have taken Herod's life a few months earlier and prevented this awful act of evil and suffering. And what seems especially troubling is that God intervenes to warn Joseph and Mary and to save the life of Jesus but allows the other families in Bethlehem to experience the unimaginable pain of having their infant sons slaughtered.

II. The Insights from the Story

-- As troubling as this story is, it does also provide us with some valuable insights that lay a foundation for struggling with the issues of evil and human suffering.

A. The First Insight: There Is a Mystery in God's Will Regarding Evil.

-- The first insight is that there is a mystery in God's will regarding evil. There is no easy way of resolving the tensions and answering all the questions raised by this incident.

A simplistic answer would be that such events are the result of God's granting us humans a free will, giving us the ability to choose to obey or to disobey God. While there is an element of truth in that, it doesn't really solve the problem of God's will regarding evil because there are times when God intervenes to prevent free will from being exercised for evil purposes. For example, in the OT Pharaoh wanted to capture and re-enslave the Jews, but God prevented that from happening by opening a path through the Red Sea. Or in the book of Daniel the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to execute the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace, but God prevented that from happening by keeping them alive and delivering them from the fire. And, of course we see God's over-riding the free will of Herod here in the story in Matthew 2. Herod wanted to kill Jesus, but God prevented that from happening by sending an angel to warn Joseph.

The question of why God permits certain evil acts and prevents others is really a part of a larger question of why God has chosen to allow any kind of evil at all. While we can give some responses that partly answer that question, ultimately, the complete answer remains a mystery to which only God knows the full answer.

B. The Second Insight: The Triumph of Evil Is Never Final.

1. The second insight from this difficult story is that the triumph of evil is never final. When we read these verses in Matthew, it appears that Herod's evil decree and act have prevailed. But a deeper investigation into the story reveals that there is actually hope in the midst of what would seem to be a hopeless tragedy.

2. Matthew says that this incident fulfills a prophecy made by Jeremiah.

v. 18

a. This is a quote from Jeremiah 31:15. Ramah was a small village about 5 miles from Bethlehem. It was the traditional site where Rachel, the wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, was buried. About 1,000 years after Rachel died the Babylonians conquered Judah and gathered the Jews at Ramah to deport them in exile them to Babylon. That's the scene that Jeremiah is describing - the deportation of God's 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 grief is now repeated when Herod orders all the infant boys in the area to be slain.

b. Matthew's Jewish readers would have been familiar with this passage in Jeremiah and would have known the larger context of the verse that Matthew quotes. Sorrow is not the final word in that passage - the context is one of hope.

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Jeremiah 31:15-17 Thus says the Lord: "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." **¹⁶**Thus says the Lord: "Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. **¹⁷**There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country.

-- Even as Rachel is pictured as 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 experiences. The message in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, is that God's full and final triumph over all evil is certain.

C. The Third Insight: Part of God's Answer to Evil Involved Subjecting Himself to It.

-- When Jesus was born, God took on human form and entered into this world of evil and suffering - and subjected Himself to it all.

We see that in the third fulfilled prophecy in verse 23.

v. 23

1. Now, here's the interesting thing: no prophet actually prophesized that Jesus would be a Nazarene. You won't find that anywhere in the OT. Matthew wasn't quoting or referring to any specific prophecy. By the time of Jesus' birth Nazareth was looked down-upon as a low-class and no-class place. If you were from Nazareth, people considered you to be an uncultured bumpkin, a real loser. It's something like someone here coming from the state where I was born - West Virginia. Virginia is the state of Presidents, but West Virginia is the state of hillbillies who live in shacks and drive around in rusted-out pickup trucks. Well, that's the way people looked at someone from Nazareth - with derision and scorn.

Although the prophets never said that the Messiah would be a Nazarene, never said those exact words, they did say that the Messiah would be rejected and scorned.

Isaiah 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.

2. Whatever God's reasons for allowing suffering, He didn't exempt Himself from it. Admittedly, it looks as if God is exempting Himself here in today's story. It appears as if God is showing a calloused favoritism towards His Son. After all, God sends an angel to warn Joseph but doesn't warn the other families in Bethlehem. It's true that God spares His Son here, but if you keep on reading the Gospel of Matthew, you will find Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane for the Father to remove the cup of suffering. But this time the Father doesn't spare His Son, and Jesus proceeds to the Cross and its horrific suffering.

But the Cross isn't the end of the story. The Son who died on the cross was raised again. And even that 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 suffering and will establish His Kingdom of righteousness. He will wipe away every tear and there will be no more mourning, no more grief or pain. For He will declare, "Behold, I make all things new!"