

Rachel Weeping for Her Children

Call to Worship: Psalm 47

1st Scripture: Jeremiah 31:15-40

2nd Scripture: Matthew 2:16-18

Hymn #702- *Wonderful Grace of Jesus*

Hymn Insert- *The Power of the Cross*

Hymn Insert- *Before the Throne of God Above*

Introduction

After the wisemen had left, we saw last time that an angel of the Lord had appeared to Joseph, ordering him to take Mary and the young Jesus to Egypt, because King Herod would seek to kill the child. Remember, Herod had told the wisemen to report back to him, once they found the child. While he claimed that he wanted to worship Him, obviously he was fixing to kill him, out of concern that his throne was in jeopardy. And so, Joseph and his family escape to Egypt by night, and only return, after receiving word from the Lord, following the later death of King Herod.

Now, Matthew tells us what happens after King Herod realizes that the wisemen were not going to return to him. And here too, Matthew will bring forth another OT prophecy that was fulfilled, this time from the Book of Jeremiah, Chapter 31:15. And the profound thing about this recorded event, is that it undeniably affirms, both, what Matthew has recorded about the wisemen, as well as, all that he has stated, surrounding the birth narrative of the Lord Jesus Christ. As horrible as this event is, it is an extremely important witness, added to the compilation of Matthew's recorded testimony. And so, this is where we will be camping out for this morning, before moving forward in our narrative, next time, Lord willing.

I. A Brief Summary of Matthew 2:16-18

And so, when the wisemen fail to return to King Herod, Herod is furious to say the least. And being the paranoid, bloodthirsty man that he is, he takes matters into his own hands, seeking to ensure that this young child never comes to reign. He sends out a delegation of soldiers, and has them put to death every single male child in Bethlehem (and in all the surrounding districts), aged two and under, based on his understanding of how old the child King would be, in accordance with his discussion with the wisemen. He wants to cover every angle, and so, he

goes over and above every possible limitation. The child is in the age vicinity of somewhere around one, and not over two. Every child under two is to be killed. The child is a male. Every male child under two is to be killed. The child was born in Bethlehem. Every male child, under two, in Bethlehem, and in all its surrounding districts is to be killed. This is how paranoid and jealous King Herod was of his throne.

[Note: This would certainly have been intentionally reminiscent of the time when the Israelites were in bondage to the Egyptians, and the wicked Pharaoh of the time, who was concerned about the growing number of Israelites, had ordered that all of the male newborns be killed and cast into the Nile River. And of course, Moses was spared and preserved, being the one whom God would later use to lead and deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. There are definitely parallels to what happens here, and how Jesus becomes the greater deliverer, after escaping to Egypt, and later is “called out of Egypt” as we saw last time]

And so, needless to say, there was great heartbreak and weeping in Bethlehem, as Herod’s orders were carried out. And it is here that Matthew quotes Jeremiah 31:15, making the claim that this horrific event fulfilled that prophecy. “A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more” (Matthew 2:18).

Now, before we head back to Jeremiah to consider this text in its immediate, original context, let me note two facts, one for informational purposes, and one to open up the power of the testimony that this event bears to all that Matthew has stated so far.

1) Now, the prophecy, in Matthew’s context is pretty obvious, in that we know that this weeping and mourning taking place, over the loss of children, is due to the fact that all of the males (two and under) were killed by Herod. And clearly, “Rachel,” here spoken of, represents all of the mothers who have suffered the loss of their children, who, as any mother could relate, would have refused to have been comforted, following the unjust murder of their young sons. The loss of a child involves a level of inner pain, which no words could describe. The loss of a child as a consequence of the murderous decree of your King, only adds bitterness and pain to the overall loss.

But, why is “Rachel” mentioned here, as representing the mothers of Bethlehem? Well, there are two reasons for this, one of which, can be unlocked by the prophecy’s mention of the town of “Ramah,” which would have been one of the districts near Bethlehem, where Herod’s decree had been carried out. Now, Ramah was located in the land of Benjamin, which was just north of the territory belonging to the tribe of Judah (in fact, before David, Jerusalem itself, was actually within Benjamin’s boundaries for that matter, although under Jebusite rule). That said, one reason then, that Rachel, Jacob’s wife, is mentioned as representing the ailing mothers here, is because Rachel was the mother of Benjamin, where Ramah was.

Secondly, remember Rachel was not buried where Jacob and Leah and Isaac and Abraham were buried (“the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought, along with the field, as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite”). Rachel died unexpectedly, while giving birth to Benjamin, while they were en route, and Jacob had buried her somewhere between Ramah and Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19). And so, Rachel’s grave would have been in the vicinity of where these horrific events had taken place, which is why she is listed then, as a representative of the weeping mothers, who lost their sons during this horrific time. And so, I just wanted to mention that, to give us a better understanding of the meaning of this prophecy, within Matthew’s context.

2) We must also recognize how significant this event is to the overall testimony of Matthew. Think about this. There is no way that this horrific event was hidden or forgotten. Everyone would have heard about what had happened there in Bethlehem, and in her nearby districts. While, we don’t know how many children were killed, we can assume that it was more than a few. This would have been a well known, historically recorded event. It was big, especially for the Jews of the time.

Well here, Matthew is actually avowing that the trigger for this entire event, surrounded the birth of Jesus, and Herod’s response to Micah’s prophecy! No one in their right mind would go to the extent of seeking to attest to the witness of the wisemen and the virgin birth of Christ, by claiming that this is what provoked Herod, to give the order to murder all of those children, unless it was true. It wouldn’t be too hard to disprove this, if Matthew were lying. And so, tying the birth of Christ to what had happened in Bethlehem and its surrounding districts, and then,

identifying that with OT prophecy, is either insanely foolish or profoundly accurate, especially when speaking to a *Jewish* audience. You just couldn't pull this off, if it were untrue. It would be like saying that my birth was at the root of Nixon's impeachment and the Watergate scandal. I would be insane to think that I could get away with such a claim, unless it could really be proven to be true.

Anyway, that said, let us go back to Jeremiah 31, so as to examine this prophecy in its original context, with the hope of magnifying Matthew's relevant use of it here.

II. Jeremiah 31:15

Now, let me give you a very quick contextual background for Jeremiah, as a prophet, before moving into our main text in chapter 31. Jeremiah is a profound Book of prophecy, because he starts prophesying during the thirteenth year of the reign of King Josiah (and so, the northern kingdom has been long exiled, up to this point), and he continues right into the time that the southern kingdom of Judah is exiled by the Babylonians. And so, the drama of Jeremiah is absolutely profound, as you follow Judah, before, during and into the exile.

Now, it's important to recognize that the captivity of Judah came in gradual stages, until eventually, all of Jerusalem was destroyed and the remaining people were finally carried away. In other words, King Nebuchadnezzar didn't just come in and tear everything down. He actually sought to keep Jerusalem running as a vassal city, until King Jehoiakim had rebelled against him. This was the beginning of the end for Jerusalem. And then, when Nebuchadnezzar had later made Zedekiah (Jehoiakim's brother) king (in place of Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin), and after eleven years, he had rebelled, it was all over. Nebuchadnezzar wasn't going to take anymore chances, in sparing Jerusalem. And so, he destroyed virtually everything important in the city, leaving a small remnant of harmless citizens behind under the leadership of a man named, Gedaliah, who governed whatever remained. And even that, ultimately, later fell apart. And of course, along the way, as the Lord continually progressed in extracting the people of the city and bringing about destruction, His patience grew thinner and thinner, as each king continued to follow in the footsteps of the former wicked kings, failing to repent at every gracious opportunity

granted by God. Needless to say, God's grace and patience were profoundly exhibited, right to the end.

Now, where does that leave us, as we come into Jeremiah 31? Sometime, during the eleven year reign of Zedekiah, after many had already been exiled, because of the rebellion of Jehoiakim, and after Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, had been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, who had replaced him with his uncle (Jehoiakim's brother), Zedekiah. And during this time, interestingly enough, Jeremiah actually sends prophetic letters from Jerusalem to Babylon, to the Jewish captives, who have already been exiled there. And the general purpose of these letters is to encourage those who are there, to know that God will once again, restore His people to their land. They are prophetic letters and messages of hope, which God was using to offer comfort to His rebellious people, calling them to turn back to God, and to wait upon Him, as He was still, even now, determined to show His people mercy and grace, in spite of the judgment He had already sent upon them. You can imagine how utterly defeated, distressed and hopeless the exiles would have been, and so, God graciously provides them with a word of comfort, giving them a sure hope to rest upon, even in their time of captivity. A remnant would be spared and brought back! Now, of course, in these letters, God makes clear why they went into captivity (because of their ongoing rebellion, idolatry...etc), but He does this to turn them back to Him, especially in light of the future hope of mercy that He is giving them. [Jer. 29:1-5ff; 30:1ff; 31:1ff...etc]. [Skim Jer. 31:1-14, if time]

It is within this context then, that we come to verse 15 [Read Jer. 31:15-17]. And so, in its original context then, what is verse 15, which Matthew quotes as also being fulfilled in our primary text, speaking about? The weeping of Rachel for her children here, speaks of the exiling of Judah, and especially Jerusalem, into Babylon. The children (speaking of the people of God; vs. 17) have been cast out of the land by God, and Rachel weeps for them, as it were, as she looks upon a barren, empty land, that once housed the prosperous people of God. And again, in this context, it is a prophetic text that looks back at what has already happened, but for the purpose of emphasizing the mercy and grace of God, which will bring the people back, in due time, as we have seen in the verses that follow verse 15. And so, verse 15, serves as a "Yes, weeping is here for a time; the reality of what had been prophesied about for many years

(because of the ongoing rebellion of God's people) has taken place; judgment has come, but mercy and grace are not that far away. Indeed, they are already active and they will ultimately bring about healing and restoration! And so, this is where Jeremiah 15 brings us, in its immediate context.

[Note: verses 31:31-34, where God, once again, looks beyond the restoration of the captives, to the greater redemptive glory of the New Covenant, where God will deal with the heart of the problem, not only for Israel, but for all nations. We don't have time to go there, but it does show you that these prophecies do, indeed, carry us to a greater redemptive fulfillment in Christ!]

All of that said, how does all of this then translate into Matthew's use and proclaimed prophetic fulfillment of verse 15, as we now move back to consider again, our main text in Matthew 2?

III. Bringing it All Together (Matthew 2:18)

How then does this benefit the overall testimony of Matthew's Gospel, and why, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, does he make use of this prophecy?

1) At the very basic level, of course, the Holy Spirit had intended it to represent what had happened during the time near Christ's birth. In other words, God, speaking through Jeremiah, had this event in mind as well, when Jeremiah was called to proclaim this prophecy. Like every other OT prophecy used by Matthew (and all of the writers of the NT, for that matter), this prophecy was actually meant to serve a greater redemptive purpose in the New Covenant. And so, once in a while, it is good for us to remember that, and I don't want to lose that fact in any of our OT analysis.

2) As I stated earlier, it serves to further prop up the entire narrative surrounding the birth of Christ, because this event was undeniable. Showing its origin, in its relation to Christ's birth, highlights the importance of Christ's birth, adding to the unique and unusual nature of it. Again, the whole prophetic package (born in Bethlehem, Seed of David, Immanuel, being called out of Egypt, and now this, and all that is to come in the remainder of the Gospel) provides a rock solid testimony to the Messianic office and calling of Christ, especially to a Jewish audience.

3) Finally, the Jews would have well known that this text, in Jeremiah's context, was not meant to throw the sorrows of the Jews back into their faces, but rather, it was to point them to the hope that rested on the horizon, just beyond the path of sorrow and suffering. This prophecy, while exposing the reality of present sorrow and despair, was given for the purpose of pointing them forward to the better, coming hope of redemption and restoration. In other words, the emphasis of this text is not on the present loss (due to Israel's rebellion), but rather, on the future hope of restoration (due to God's unchanging Grace)! It's another way of saying, "Because God changes not, we are not destroyed, and mercy finds us, yet again!" This was a text of hope.

And Matthew utilizes it for that same reason. Because, even in spite of the horrific actions of King Herod, the Christ, whom He sought to destroy, has escaped, and has carried out and completed the fullness of His mission; redemption, not from physical Babylon or Assyria or Egypt, but from much worse, our sin, which has brought about death and has separated us from our God, from the beginning! And so, present disaster exists, but the path leads to good news (A Gospel) where our sovereign God brings about eternal redemption for all who put their faith, trust and hope in this Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ! And that is the greatest weight of blessing that even this horrid event, in redemptive fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, provides! Rachel weeps for her children in bondage (locally, to Babylon), and Eve weeps for her children in bondage (universally, to sin); sin and the devil reek havoc, but Eve's Seed overcomes for us, crushing the head of the serpent, and nailing our sins to His cross! And they are buried in the tomb with Him, and He rises anew, leaving our sin still forever buried.

IV. Conclusion

1) Brethren, this is all our hope and joy! Even now, Rachel may weep, but joy comes in the morning!

2) Unbeliever, this is your only hope!

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25