

**CHRISTMAS SORROWS**  
**MATTHEW 2:13-23**

What is your dream of the perfect Christmas? Paint the picture in your mind: who are the people who are around you? Where are you celebrating? What are you eating? What gifts are you giving and receiving? What will make the perfect Christmas day?

On the first Christmas day and the first Christmas season, few were thinking about “Christmas.” It was just an ordinary winter season. It was just another day, just another month, just another season to get through. There was nothing extraordinary about the time. A few undoubtedly had heard some vague rumors about strange things that had happened in their town of Bethlehem a few weeks earlier, but it seemed to be just that — strange rumors. It probably was just the stories of a few untrustworthy shepherds; you can’t trust shepherds, and this was just another example of why they weren’t trustworthy.

And then some wealthy men from Babylon showed up to visit Mary and Joseph. How unusual that was. Why would they travel so far? And why would they come evidently only to see Mary and Joseph and their baby? Then just as mysteriously the men disappeared the same night that Mary and Joseph did. And then soldiers from Jerusalem and Herod came — and then horror struck. The soldiers seemingly went crazy. They charged into homes and started grabbing all the young boys of the small town and killing them. All of the youngest boys — all of them under the age of two — were cruelly and savagely and for no apparent reason, killed.

We do well to remember that for everything else grand and glorious and spectacular that happened that first Christmas, it was also a time that was covered in sorrow. The dreams and longings and desires of many families were seemingly crushed when Jesus arrived. His birth was declared with joy by the angels and affirmed by the shepherds and attested in the Temple, but it also was greeted with tears of immense grief. When Christ came, He came to the sound of “Christmas Sorrows.”

Where was the hope for those who endured such tragic loss those days? And where is our hope when we come to this season, or any day, burdened by loss and sorrow and grief? Through the story of the slaughter of the babies in Matthew 2:13-23, the apostle reminds us our hope is that —

**JESUS IS THE GREATEST KING.**

*In this passage of contrasts between the humble Jesus and the arrogant Herod, we see the greatness of Jesus:*

- 1. Jesus Has a Greater AUTHORITY (vv. 13-15)**
- 2. Jesus Offers a Greater HOPE (vv. 16-18)**
- 3. Jesus Gives a Greater SALVATION (vv. 19-23)**

This passage contrasts two kings (Herod and Jesus), and two types of kingdoms. Even in His infancy, there are signs and revelations in this passage of Jesus' greater kingdom. **How is His kingdom greater?** Jesus and His kingdom are greater in three ways:

### 1. Jesus Has a Greater AUTHORITY (vv. 13-15)

- It is tempting and easy to avoid the hard parts of Christmas. We are tempted to limit our guest lists to the people who are easy for us to entertain. We are tempted to give gifts to the lovely (and who will give us gifts in return). We are tempted to go look at Christmas lights and attend Christmas concerts rather than serve the unfortunate. We are tempted to avoid reading the slaughter of the babies in Mt 2.

“Our nativity scene is really cheap, but the kids made it years ago. It gets prettier every year. But it’s from Luke: straw, a baby, Mary and Joseph, and some animals....

“We have angels, all kinds of angels, around the house, on the mantle. They’re from Luke....

“All of our decorations are Lukan. We put them away today....

“Luke is over now and we go to Matthew. Exit the women; in come the men. Exit the stable, now it’s a king’s palace. Exit the shepherds, enter the wise men from the East. Exit the angels, and in comes Herod.

“We have a little music box. It plays carols — ‘Silent Night, Holy Night’ and ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem.’ Just open the lid and it starts playing. It’s on the coffee table. It’s Lukan. Music is from Luke.

“Put the lid down on that because exit Mary, enter Rachel. Exit lullaby, enter the scream: ‘I heard a voice in Ramah. It was Rachel weeping for her children.’

“It’s just so hard to accept that the gospel has enemies, that good news has enemies, but there it is. Herod intimidated, and all Jerusalem troubled....” [Fred Craddock, in *Preaching that Connects*.]

- Despite the sorrows that lie at the surface of this story, there are joys that undergird the story as we contemplate the authoritative Savior who is revealed through the story.

- **Jesus' authority is seen through the *angels*** (v. 13).

- ✓ This is the third dream (of 5) in Mt. 1-2 (1:18; 2:12, 13, 19, 22) — a form of special revelation.
- ✓ This is the second appearance of an ***angel of the Lord*** (Zacharias, Lk. 1:11). We do not know who the angel was, but we do know that he came with authority. Those who heard the angels all responded to their commands as having the authority of God (vv. 19, 22; 1:24; Lk. 1:20, 38).
- ✓ It is appropriate to notice that Joseph consistently responds in this story with obedience. There was urgency in leaving Bethlehem (v. 13) so he left that ***night***.

- ✓ Later, there was urgency to avoid Judea, where he naturally would have returned (v. 22), so he immediately left for Galilee. Joseph's unquestioning obedience is worth emulating,
- ✓ But it is more significant to notice that he is responding to an authority higher than him. His obedience acknowledges that the angels (and God who sent them) can compel his obedience. He is in a position of submission to them (and apparently, he willingly and unquestioningly submits).

- **Jesus' authority is seen through His name and position.**
  - ✓ In Matthew 1:18 – 2:12 and Luke 1-2, Mary, Joseph, and Zacharias are prominent. All are mentioned repeatedly by name. But now notice that Mary is not mentioned by name in this story. Throughout this story she is only ***the mother*** (e.g., v. 13).
  - ✓ And more than that, Jesus is also mentioned before her — ***the Child and His mother*** (vv. 13, 14, 20, 21). And several times Jesus is mentioned without reference to Mary (v. 13b, 15, v. 20b, 23).
  - ✓ Jesus is prominent and Jesus is authoritative. While God cares for all His people individually, including Mary, what dominates this account and book is the coming Messiah who will provide salvation for all people (1:21). This story emphasizes the authority and uniqueness of Jesus.
- **Jesus' authority is seen through His destination.** The command to flee to ***Egypt*** is fascinating — Why would the angel command them to go to Egypt?
  - ✓ It was relatively close (about 75 miles to the border and another 100 miles to a safe location) and Herod had no authority in Egypt.
  - ✓ It had a population of about 1 million Jews at the time (according to Jewish historian Philo)
  - ✓ During Greek rule, Alexander the Great had established a Jewish sanctuary in Alexandria.
  - ✓ It **fulfilled** an OT prophecy — ***My son*** in Hosea refers to the nation of Israel and the exodus some 700 years earlier (Hosea refers to the Exodus in 2:15; 11:1; 12:9, 13; 13:4); ***My Son*** does not refer to the coming Messiah 700 years later. In what way does Jesus in Egypt fulfill Hosea 11:1?
    - Hosea was not knowingly predicting the coming Messiah, but Jesus' return from Egypt was pictured by Israel's exodus 1400 years earlier — the Exodus was a type of Christ's advent.
    - Just as God brought Israel out of Egypt in keeping the promises to His chosen people, so now He brought out His greater ***Son*** to be the Messiah.
    - What was true of God's people Israel would also be true of Christ, the leader of God's people.
    - There is also a sense that He brought out the Messiah when He brought out the nation from Egypt in that the Messianic line was preserved (Mt. 1:3-4ff).
    - He didn't send Christ to Egypt to stay there; He sent Christ to Egypt to demonstrate His faithfulness to His promise as the covenant God of Israel.
  - ✓ Here, too, we see the authority of Jesus — He is the unique fulfillment of Scripture; He fulfills the promises of God like no other prophet or king. Herod is a king; Jesus is ***the great King***.

- **Jesus' authority is seen through His protection.** It has also been noted that while God could have used supernatural means to protect Jesus and Mary and Joseph, He used natural means.
  - ✓ God intervened in this account with supernatural appearances of angels in dreams, but all the rest of the actions are “natural” —
    - There is no instantaneous removal of them to another location (Phillip in **Acts 8:40**)
    - There are no protecting angels (**Mt. 26:53**)
    - There was no hiding in plain sight (Ex. 2)
    - There are no thwarting plagues (Ex. 8-11)
    - There is no immediate death of Herod; there is no elusiveness that would allow them to stay where they were, yet untouched (**Jn. 7:32; 10:39**).
    - God didn’t even use the magi to protect them and take the family to Babylon with them. They went to Egypt on a rushed and undoubtedly tiresome and potentially fearful journey.
  - ✓ God can use supernatural means (like dreams) to accomplish His purposes; most often He uses ordinary means (like gifts and donkeys and Egypt and obedience).
    - Most often (even in the life of Christ), God used “ordinary” means of protection and provision in order to demonstrate His sufficiency and authority in the ordinariness of life.
    - God was just as authoritative over Herod when Joseph led his family to Egypt as when God used His angels to warn the magi and Joseph in dreams. He is always authoritative everywhere.
    - We look for “Fed Ex” packages when the Lord tells us not to test Him (**Mt. 4:7**), but to trust Him and His provision. He will see you through to all His purposes for you in your acts of faithfulness. Don’t be concerned at the lack of dramatic provision; just be faithful to His commands, trust Him, and He will care for you and give you exactly what you will need.
- The world hates Easter because it hates the claim of a resurrected and powerful Ruler. The world is not especially offended by the arrival of Jesus because it sees a baby as powerless and weak. Even in His arrival, though, we see that the story revolves around Jesus and the authority of Jesus. Matthew doesn’t want us to see a baby in this story; he wants us to see and submit to *the authoritative King*.

## 2. Jesus Offers a Greater **HOPE** (vv. 16-18)

- **Life often seems hopeless.** **Herod** was a wicked ruler. When the magi didn’t return to tell him about Jesus (they **tricked** the one who attempted to trick them, **2:8**), he became **enraged** — he “exploded” in an outburst of anger.
  - ✓ The sense is that he is now being controlled by his anger; he isn’t just expressing anger, but he is overwhelmed and submissive to his anger. We say that anger is controllable; but in his fear, he is blinded to truth, irrational, and enraged.
  - ✓ This was typical of Herod — he had two of his sons and one of his favorite wives executed out of fear that they were plotting against him and his throne.

- ✓ Another time he killed 2000 people in a village and then burned it entirely to the ground.
- ✓ It was said that it was better to be Herod's sow than his son. He was brutal even to family.
- ✓ That brutality now was irrationally expressed against Jesus and Bethlehem.
- Herod had queried the magi about the timing of their arrival (2:7); to make sure that the baby Jesus would not be missed he overestimated the age of the baby and killed any baby boy that might have had any possibility of being Jesus. So, he killed all boys ***two years old and under***.
  - ✓ When Matthew says he ***sent and slew...*** he wants to demonstrate the suddenness and ruthlessness of the action. While irrational in his rage, Herod was decisive.
  - ✓ If Herod could not find and kill Jesus, he would kill others in His place.
  - ✓ At the time, the population of Bethlehem may have been under 1000, so it seems likely that the number of babies killed was likely between 10-20 (not 100s, as I read again this week in a blog).
  - ✓ What is significant is not the number of babies that died, but the fact that any babies died. It doesn't take the murder of 100 or 1000 babies to make an act horrid. If one baby had died, it would have been a horrid tragedy.
  - ✓ Further, what is significant is not just that babies died, but that Herod was in rebellion against God. Here we have the first definitive rejection of Christ. Jesus would later say, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt. 10:34). This is the first instance of the divisiveness of the Messiah and the opposition to the Messiah.
  - ✓ The history of the world is largely the history of mankind's war against God and Christ:

"Those innocent and precious babies of Bethlehem were the first casualties in the now-intensified warfare between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God's Christ, God's Anointed. Within two generations from that time (in A.D. 70) Jerusalem would see its Temple destroyed and over a million of its people massacred by the troops of Titus. Yet that destruction will pale in comparison with that of the Antichrist — a ruler immeasurably more wicked and powerful than Herod — when in the Great Tribulation he will shed more of Israel's blood than will ever have been shed before (Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21-22). All of that bloodshed is over the conflict with the Messiah." [MacArthur, pp. 44-5.]

- ✓ In the rebellion against God, life seemed hopeless for those 10-20 families. There was no "Christmas celebration" in those houses. There was wailing and lament and anguish and sleeplessness and hopelessness. There would be no justice when the ruler was the murderer.
- **When life seems hopeless, Christ is still full of hope.**
  - ✓ While Herod acted swiftly, decisively, and mercilessly, he had no chance of succeeding. It has been said that "The One enthroned in Heaven laughs and scoffs at the Herods of this world (Ps. 2:4)."
  - ✓ We see a hint of that in the lament of the families. In vv. 17-18, Matthew quotes Jer. 31:15.

- Nebuchadnezzar had taken Judah into captivity in Babylon; all the best of the nation was gone — its leaders, its spiritual guides (e.g., Daniel), and its forms of worship.
- Rachel (symbolically of Jewish mother who lost her children — the “tribes” of Israel) weeps because the nation does not exist in the way that had been anticipated — the children are removed and nation is gone (note Jesus’ own tears in similar ways over Jerusalem during His ministry, Lk. 19:41-44).
- Just as there was weeping over the nation in 586 B.C., now there is weeping over the death of the baby boys at the hand of Herod.
- Don’t miss the rest of Jeremiah 31 — it’s one of the most important OT passages — it is a chapter of confidence and hope in God, who will restore the nation (v. 16) within a few generations and will later enact the new covenant (vv. 27ff; cf. Lk. 22:20).
- What is the hope for these mothers who have lost their children? Their loss marked the beginning of God’s great act of redemption. The death of the children was not the end, but the signal of the beginning of redemption and God’s faithfulness to His promises.
- While all seemed hopeless in Bethlehem that day, it actually marked the arrival of the Messiah who would sit on the throne of David, inaugurate the New Covenant, and fulfill Abraham’s Covenant. “The exile is over, the true Son of God has arrived...” [Carson]
- The heir to the throne of David has arrived, and the means of return those who are in captivity to Satan is initiated. Here is hope (in the midst of grief)! Matthew said that Jesus **fulfilled** Jeremiah 31:15, but he would also have us recognized that He also fulfilled vv. 16ff.
- ✓ While the families grieved, what they did not know was that *now* there was real hope for them.

- None of this is to minimize the reality of the sorrow and loss of the families of Bethlehem. But it is to remind us that while there is loss, we receive a greater glory and a greater joy (2 Cor. 4:16-18; Rom. 8:1-2; 35ff). That leads us to one final aspect of Christ’s greatness —

### 3. Jesus Gives a Greater SALVATION (vv. 19-23)

- An angel again appeared to Joseph (v. 19), announcing **Herod died**.
  - ✓ His death was horrible and painful: his intestines rotting and producing worms, foul body and breath odor (because of the intestinal problems), kidney dysfunction, difficulty breathing, and suffering convulsions. He died in agony (around 4 B.C., so likely only months after Jesus’ birth).
  - ✓ He left his kingdom in disorder:
    - He was afraid that he would not be mourned when he died, so he gathered as many Jewish leaders as he could, imprisoned them and ordered that they be put to death when he died so there would be weeping when he died.

- He changed his will several times shortly before he died and murdered his son Antipater because he suspected Antipater was attempting to usurp his authority.
- He left his other three sons (Antipas, Archelaus, and Philip) over a divided kingdom.
- **Archelaus** ruled in Judea, where Joseph intended to return; but Archelaus was just as ruthless as his father, killing 3000 worshippers at the Temple shortly after Passover.
- Joseph was warned in a final dream not to go back to **Judea** (probably back to Bethlehem) and went to **Nazareth**, Mary's home before their marriage.
- Nazareth, as you know, was a despised place — one of Jesus' own disciples asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn. 1:46).
- Yet that, also, was a fulfillment of prophecy. Matthew wasn't thinking about a particular OT passage (there isn't one), but he was emphasizing that the Messiah would be despised and hated by his own people (Jn. 1:46); if He had been raised in Jerusalem He could not have been mocked for His heritage (Mt. 8:20; 13:55-57).

- Amid the disorder is a note of hope and salvation. The angel commands Joseph to take Jesus back to **the land of Israel** (v. 20) and then Matthew says in the next verse that they went **into the land of Israel**.
  - ✓ This is an unusual phrase; it is the only time it is used in the NT.
  - ✓ In **Heb. 11:9** it says of Abraham that “by faith he lived as an alien in *the land of promise*.”
  - ✓ It is probable that is what the angel and Matthew intended Joseph and us to recognize — Joseph is not merely going back to his home, he is going back to the promise and provision of God for the entire nation of Israel. The provision of Jesus is not just a son for Joseph and Mary, but a redeemer for the nation.
  - ✓ This may have been in Mary's mind in her song (Lk. 1:54-55).
  - ✓ It clearly seems to be in Zacharias' mind when he sang his song — allusions to the Abrahamic covenant dominate that hymn (Lk. 1:69, 72-74, 77).
  - ✓ These are a reminder that in the tragedy of the day and season, there is a promise of salvation for those who trust the Messiah.
  - ✓ There was not life or hope in King Herod or his kin; there is every hope of salvation in King Jesus.
- The salvation of Israel and all men would come through the despised Nazarene — the gift of salvation already being initiated in his early years.
  - ✓ The irony in this story is that while there were many tears over the murdered babies in Bethlehem — what has been called “The Massacre of the Innocents” — it took the death some 30 years later of another baby born then — the *only* Innocent Man — to provide hope and salvation for those children and their families.
  - ✓ And that is just what Jesus provides. The story of Christmas is only partly a story about birth. It's mostly a story about death — and not the death of the Bethlehem babies. It's about the death of the promised Messiah who came to earth, laying aside the privileges of Heaven, so that He could die as a substitute for sinners who would believe and trust in Him for salvation.

- ✓ If you are not a Christian, recognize that like Herod, you are a rebel against God and Christ. And unless you repent (turn away from your sin) and believe (trust Christ for your salvation), you are hopeless. But if you believe that Christ died to pay for your sin and to free you from the power of your sin, you can have salvation.
- ✓ Will you believe in Christ today and this Christmas season? There is nothing greater you can do. And there is nothing greater that we can do as believers but to tell the real story of Christmas to those who find the baby acceptable but the crucified and resurrected Savior reprehensible. Tell them the good news of who He is and how they can be saved from their sin.

“The rulers of this world rage against Christ. But why should you? The hands he holds forth for you to kiss are hands that were pierced by nails when he was crucified in your place. One day he is coming as the great Judge of all. On that day the wicked will be punished, but today is the day of his grace. He invites you to come to him....the only refuge from the wrath of God is God’s mercy unfolded at the cross of Jesus Christ.” [Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1: 43.]

**BENEDICTION:** Luke 1:76-79