

SERMON Introduction  
**The BUZZ IN BETHLEHEM**  
Matthew 2

Of all the little towns in all the world why did Jesus have to be born there?  
**WHY BETHLEHEM?**

EX: its real claim to fame is as the birth place of Christ. Imagine the signs outside of town saying “The Home of the Messiah”.

EX; The name Bethlehem has come into our vocabulary because of the life of Christ, otherwise who would have heard of it or named a town after it?

**1. TO FULFILL PROPHECY OF HIS BIRTH**

Some prophecies were perplexing, but this one is specific and clear. Herod’s religious advisors didn’t have to think very long to determine where the New King was to be born.

**Matthew 2:4-6** gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'"

**2. TO IDENTIFY WITH DAVID**

So much could be said about this, but for now we’ll simply note that Jesus was known as the Son of David

**Matthew 20:29-31** <sup>29</sup> As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed Him. <sup>30</sup> And two blind men sitting by the road, hearing that Jesus was passing by, cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" <sup>31</sup> The crowd sternly told them to be quiet, but they cried out all the more, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

**3. TO FULFILL A PROPHECY OF TEARS**

**Matthew 2:16-18** <sup>16</sup> Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. <sup>17</sup> Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: <sup>18</sup> "A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH, WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING, RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; AND SHE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE."

**Why does Matthew connect the event with Jeremiah 31?** He could have simply told the story without making the connection.

To understand the verse we must go back to Genesis and look at Rachel.

Rachel was the younger daughter of Laban, Jacob’s uncle. Between the sisters, Leah and Rachel, she was the “looker, the cover girl” of the two. Jacob loved Rachel and worked for 7 years to get her as a wife, and when the wedding night arrived he got Leah. He was given Rachel later and he had to work another 7 years. Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, but God enabled Leah to bear children but Rachel was barren ( a point of great disappointment and shame to women in that culture). Remember that when Jacob and his wives left his uncle Laban/ father in law, Rachel stole one of her father’s idols. Laban came to find it and she was able to hide it from being discovered. Her idolatry would show up again regarding children.

Leah bore 4 sons to Jacob and Rachel became jealous and cried to her husband, “Give me children or else I die.” (Gen 30:1-2)

Rachel remains barren but does give her maid, Bilhah, to Jacob and she has two sons; at the birth of the second son Rachel says, “I have wrestled with my sister and I have prevailed.”

Later after Leah has two more sons Rachel gives birth to a son – Joseph, and she said, “God has taken away my reproach” (Gen 30:22-23)

C. Bouwman:

But her selfishness received expression in the name she gave to her first-born: "she called his name 'Joseph', saying, 'May the LORD add to me another son.'" With the birth of Joseph, her tears were stopped, her grief was turned to gladness, but she was not quickly content.

For the sake of her own name, she wanted more.

C. Bouwman

Rachel's life was a life of sorrow, a life of tears, because she was sorry for herself; for children she wanted, that she might not be less than Leah. Her life was tears, because she was obsessed with herself and her barrenness. She didn't want comfort because her vision was restricted to herself, she didn't want comfort because she pitied herself. "Give me children, or else I die" is not the language of faith, it's instead the language of the individual focused on the self

Jacob continues to prosper and decides to leave Laban and return to the land of Canaan. God again is gracious to Rachel and gives her another child. On the way back to Canaan, while still outside of Bethlehem, Rachel dies giving birth to her second son, Ben-oni, "son of my sorrow", but whom Jacob calls "Benjamin" – son of my right hand.

I don't mean to be insensitive here, but it is ironic that the thing Rachel most wanted, "another son" became the thing that killed her. In her death her last words are bitter words of "my sorrow."

It's not that Rachel couldn't be comforted, but that she REFUSED to be comforted.

This happens when we get so wrapped up in trying to make life work here and now that we forget the bigger picture, ie – God is at work through the joys and trials to conform us to the image of his son.

### INSIGHTS

Children were what Rachel lived for Gen 30:1. She weeps inconsolably when the thing she lived for was taken from her. This is how we recognize our idols – we are inconsolable when it is taken away.

Rachel weeping is a metaphor for all of us when we fail to view life from the eyes of faith by seeing God's design and glory in our everyday activities.

Here we see the original incident in which "Rachel refuses to be consoled" because of her children. The concept of "Rachel weeping" had entered into the language of Israel because that is the phrase Jeremiah uses in 31:15. By the time of Jesus, the phrase had become a sort of proverb for the mistreatment of Jewish children (ESV study Bible).

EX: it's like someone today saying "Watergate" or "9/11" i.e. an iconic historical reference.

Rachel is the idealized mother of the Jews (though Leah gave birth to six of the sons of Jacob) who lost her children because she died at the birth of her second son. As the "mother of Israel" she wept for all the children taken into exile because most would die. They would be killed by a non-Israelite king of Babylon as the babies in Bethlehem were killed by Herod, a non-Israelite king – an Edomite.

In Jeremiah 31 the prophet speaks of the people/ children of Israel being led into captivity from Ramah – a city that was used as a holding place, i.e. concentration camp. Jeremiah 31:15 depicts the mourning at the prospect of the exile. "They are no more..." the people are being forced from their land and will be dispersed as a nation.

Jeremiah has already employed the Genesis reference somewhat typologically in the new context of the exile to Babylon; how much more appropriate for Matthew to do so in the context of the Messiah's birth, especially since most of Jer 31 speaks of the coming age of restoration. (Beale and Carson)

The prophet preached in the concentration camp at Ramah, but in that camp at Ramah there was not a humbling and a repenting, there is no rejoicing because God promised to forgive and restore. There

was only lamentation and bitter weeping. And it's not the lamenting and wailing of hearts broken by sin; no, the prophet *characterizes* the weeping in Ramah as tears similar to those of Rachel. Rachel thought about herself, and therefore did not wish to be comforted. In Ramah, Israel was thinking about themselves, about how tragic it was that Jerusalem was overpowered, that families were being broken, that homes had to be left. They wailed and they wept, and they refused all comfort, because they *felt sorry for themselves*.

As Rachel did not wish to be comforted, not even on her death bed, so also the exiles and their families remaining behind did not want to be comforted; indeed, they could not be comforted because they were obsessed with feelings of pity for themselves. That's the reason why Jeremiah mentioned Rachel in the context of the weeping in Ramah. The weeping at the concentration camp of Ramah (Jer 31) was an echo of the weeping of Rachel of long ago.

**We understand: Israel's wailing at Ramah was not the cry of faith, but of *unbelief*. God had announced a return, and that's why it was not for Israel to wail in self-centered pity on the assumption that this is the end of her offspring, that her youth would disappear in exile.** No, God had spoken differently. As the tears of Rachel of long ago, so also the weeping of Israel at Ramah was an expression of unbelief; they got so mired in themselves that they were blind to the promises, and so *refused* to be comforted.

“Here is the *climax* of the "Rachel syndrome". And why was it the climax? Because of the specific circumstances of the deaths in Bethlehem. Why was it that their children were killed in the first place?

It was because of Jesus Christ!

In Matthew's terms, the boys were killed because Herod came to learn that the Christ was born in Bethlehem; the wise men told him. And we need not suppose that the parents had no inkling as to why Herod's soldiers killed every boy age 2 years and under. They knew of Christ's birth. Had the shepherds not told of what they heard in the night sky? Besides, we may be assured that the coming of the foreign wise men to this small town did not go unnoticed either. They knew what God had done, what God was doing in this Infant. *But the knowledge they received did not meet with faith in their hearts*, and so they did not appreciate that behind Herod's sword was *the effort of Satan to devour the Child as soon as He was brought forth* (Rev 12).

Soon after the baby is born there is an attempt on his life. This is a continuation of the enmity between the serpent and the seed of the woman that began in Genesis 3. This is an outward manifestation of the spiritual struggle between good and evil.

**In Bethlehem there was weeping, ..., but there was no appreciation that here the seed of the serpent was bruising the seed of the woman in an effort to kill her offspring. Here was no active faith, no eye for what God was doing in obtaining redemption. That's why they wept, and that's what we have to learn from Matthew's use of the quotation from Jeremiah.” BOUWMAN**

Jeremiah depicts tears with a message of hope, a return

Matthew depicts tears with message of hope- the Messiah has survived

With the coming of the new Davidic king the Exile has ended; the tears of Bethlehem bring a conclusion to the tears of the Exile.

Matthew is quoting from Jer. 31:15, a prophecy about the exile. Jeremiah uses the imagery of Rachel weeping for her sons Joseph and Benjamin to describe the sorrow of Israel at the time of the exile. In the next section of Jeremiah's prophecy, he foresees the return from exile, a new exodus. He describes the future days of God's restored relationship with Israel.

Matthew's use of this prophecy appears to portray Jesus as a new Moses who fulfills the prophecy of a second exodus. Like Moses, Jesus escapes slaughter as an infant. Like Moses, He is sent to rescue God's chosen ones. (Reformation Study Bible)

This is true only because of Christ who took the ultimate Exile for us. He wept over Jerusalem because she had rejected the prophets.

The New Covenant that was introduced by Jeremiah 31 is fulfilled by the new David. The Exile of the people of God is over as they are brought into the intimacy of covenant relationship through the blood of Christ.

The tears and weeping of the first Christmas give way to joy and hope if we accept the consolation of the gospel. If we submit our hearts to God's gracious plan and salvation then we find consolation. If we continue to give our own agenda the top priority then we'll refuse to be comforted.

### **WHY DO WE REFUSE TO BE COMFORTED? —UNBELIEF**

#### **Because of our sins**

We forget what sinners we really are and think "I can't believe I did that; God can't forgive me now." Be comforted by the GOSPEL. You're a bigger mess than you dare think...and God's grace is greater than your sin.

#### **Because of sins committed against us**

You've been so hurt by someone else that you forget that God is still in control and that he will not waste this hurt. You forget that you have sinned against HIM in even bigger ways. OUR SMALL SINS AGAINST God are more sinful than someone's big sins against us. why? Because we sin against an infinitely holy God.

#### **Because of our circumstances**

Things haven't gone our way and it is sooo easy to lose perspective and not be comforted. EX: Persecuted church – pray for them not loose heart, but rather to see that "they are blessed for suffering for Christ." It doesn't make sense to us, but that is what Jesus says.

EX: Bad news that hits us.... It is so easy to put the worst possible spin on the situation – "Things will always be bad". "We'll never get a break". "We can't sell our house.it will cost too much, we won't have the money to buy or rent here, etc"

In the flesh I'm prone to REFUSING TO BE COMFORTED by the fact that we have a great God who can meet our needs.

The fact of the matter is that there are many Christians who, despite their profession of faith in the name of Jesus, yet resist being comforted. They do not receive comfort, not because they do not want it; rather, they do not receive comfort because they want it on their own terms. They want comfort, but at the same time want to keep freedom, their possessions, their work, their children. They are reluctant to accept that their sufferings may be necessary for Christ's sake. (Bouwman)

What if the worst happens? We can still be comforted because God is still on the throne; he is still at work on our behalf – Romans 8:28ff – God is committed to us and to His agenda of conforming us to the likeness of Jesus. That may not be our agenda so we feel the discomfort or distress. It is in those times that we know whether or not we do the Christian life to serve God or to get him to serve us.

#### **Sacred Romance**

**When we are caught in the socio-drama of our smaller stories, blind to the true story we need to ask, "I wonder what God is up to in all this?"**

**The process of our sanctification rests entirely on our ability to see life from the basis of that question.**

The ability to have this perspective and to find consolation in Christ is evidence of a NEW HEART. The refusal to be comforted is the essence of unbelief; it is living with eyes on self.

### **HOW TO FIND COMFORT**

The gospel is the trump card. When we value the reality that every moment is a God moment; that He wastes no moments, but works in them for our own good – not necessarily our ease-, then we can find some consolation and comfort.

The big picture is that God is at work to conform us to the image of his son. God is like an artist who takes pains with his greatest work. CS Lewis quote

THIS IS THE MOVEMENT OF FAITH – to trust the heart of God and the purpose of God in the midst of difficulties.

#### 4. TO IDENTIFY WITH HIS MINISTRY – BETHLEHEM = “HOUSE OF BREAD”

God doesn't send an airtight argument; he sends “Bread”, a person; He comes to be with us.

The baby in the manger is the Bread of Life

At the center of the gospel story is God losing a child – the ultimate inconsolable experience.

Whenever we go through something that may seem inconsolable, we can know that God has entered in with us. He too has experienced being sinned against and being treated unjustly. Above all He knows what it is like to lose His ONLY SON. He sent his son so that we might find ultimate consolation.

It is ours through believing and resting in Christ.

He is the Bread of life who comes to die so that we might have life.

Jesus weeps so that our tears can come to an end. He lives, dies and rises again so that He might be the bread of life for us.

THE TABLE

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