

# Tears at Christmas

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now, I want us to look at part of what we read just now from Matthew chapter 2.

You'll have noticed the stores are coming to the end of their Christmas razzmatazz. There's all kinds of sounds of bells ringing, choirs singing, and music filling the air wherever we go.

But in the midst of all the joyous sounds of our jolly holly holiday, there are other sounds too.

Sounds of anguish and of grief.

All the ho, ho, ho is hollow sham. We're all flawed, and we all have problems and troubles.

Wars still ravage the earth. The floods in the Midlands are still fresh in our mind. Murders, suicides, terrorist action.

[ 1 : 08 ] Food shortage, homelessness, loss of loved ones. Families apart, separated or split up.

Fights and squabbles. Asylum seekers frozen and suffocated in the back of lorries.

Tragedies abound. Can you imagine the hopelessness, the tears, and the prayers? But to whom do we go?

Whom do we seek? Or what? Let's go back just over 2,000 years to that very first Christmas in Bethlehem that we read.

Hear some of the sounds there too. Sounds of bustle of a census crowd. Hear the animals feeding in a stable.

Angels singing on high. Excited shepherds coming to see the baby in the manger. Maybe you can hear Mary's voice in a soft lullaby.

[ 2 : 16 ] But sometime later these sounds were replaced by the shouts of soldiers. The cries of children.

And the wailing of anguished mothers. Something like 18 months has passed since the birth of Jesus. Joseph, Mary and Jesus are no longer in the stable.

Now they're living in the guest parlour. In the house in Bethlehem. The census crowd has gone. But during this time, the wise men, as we call them, come to worship Jesus.

You know the story. But let me just read the verses 16 to 18 of that chapter again. Because it comes as quite a blow.

Quite an alarming few verses. As we read, Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious.

[ 3 : 28 ] And he sent and killed all the male children of Bethlehem. And in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. A voice was heard in Rama, weeping and loud lamentation.

Rachel weeping for her children. She refused to be comforted, because they are no more. An insecure and nearly insane old king felt his rule threatened when he heard from the wise men that not just a king, but the king, the Messiah, had been born.

They had seen the sign of this in the sky. They were astrologer, astronomer type people. And maybe they had heard from their grandparents, whom Daniel had told of the day coming when the Messiah would come.

But God had so ordered the sky that their studies led them to believe that he had come. And of course, they go naturally to the palace in Jerusalem.

[ 5 : 12 ] But Jesus is not there. But the king is disturbed, and the whole of Jerusalem with him, at this news that this king was born.

And when he realized that the wise men had gone back home another way, he was infuriated, and he resorted to this action, this dreadful action.

He ordered all the little boys in Bethlehem, two years old and younger, to be executed. When we talk about the sounds of Christmas, we need to remember these shouts of soldiers, cries of children, and wailing of their mothers, because this is part of the Christmas sound too.

I believe that God wants to communicate to us at this season and this time of the year when we could be overtaken by a sense of joy which is unrealistic because we don't live in that kind of world. There is suffering. And God came to bear it with us. If this is so, then what is God saying to us?

[ 7 : 08 ] First of all, it seems to me he's saying, I know that there is suffering in this world. I've come to bear it with you. I've come to deal with it.

The Bible is always honest. When it tells us the story of Christmas, it doesn't just tell us about angels and shepherds and wise men coming with gifts, the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, but it also tells us of King Herod.

It tells us of the soldiers and of the murder of these little children. It would be virtually impossible for us to imagine what it was like to be a parent in Bethlehem at this time.

Our great-grandson staying with us in the manse is around 18 months old. And the thought of having that little boy murdered is heartbreaking.

And yet, that's what happened in Bethlehem. The soldiers burst into the homes searching through every room until they found a son and they'd carry him off outside to take his life from him, probably in front of their mothers.

[ 8 : 33 ] Oh, what anguish it is. Yet, this is part of the coming of Christ.

Not everyone welcomed him. And, it raises a challenge to us this evening. Do we welcome him? Or we may be sentimental about Christmas and his coming. We may know the stories and rejoice in the good parts, but is our heart hard against him?

And we have nothing to do with him, even though we find ourselves in church and perhaps week by week. Yet, the challenge is do we do we know him?

Do we love him? Or are we set against him in reality? And we're challenged by this. I believe that Matthew, under God's inspiration, is recounting what happened here to challenge us about this glorious event.

[ 9 : 52 ] The most wonderful thing that happened in the whole of the human history, that God came into the world, but he came for real problems, of which Herod is an example.

And we see all around us callousness and cruelty and hardness of heart. But is that our heart? Anguish is still part of the scene even today.

There are many who are suffering. There are many who find little joy in Christmas celebrations. Christmas comes to a suffering world.

It doesn't tell us that God guarantees to take away our suffering. What it does tell us is that he bears it with us.

And he died. Jesus died, finally, to take it away. There's a story told by Eli Weisel, a Jewish author who wrote a book entitled Knight.

[ 11 : 18 ] He tells of being a slave laborer in a World War II German concentration camp. And he writes about the Holocaust and the things that happened to him.

And this is what he writes. One day the people returned, the prisoners returned after a day of slave labor to discover that three gallows had been erected in the center of the camp and three prisoners were to be executed.

And the guards had orders to force all the prisoners to stand and watch the execution. Two of the victims were men, but to the horror of the prisoners they saw that the third was only a small boy. Nooses were put around their necks and all three were made to stand on chairs. Then the chairs were kicked out from underneath them. The two men died instantly as the weight of their bodies broke their necks, but the little boy was so light that his neck did not break.

There he hung, gasping for breath, dangling at the end of the rope, and the prisoners were forced to stand there and watch him for more than thirty minutes until he finally died.

[ 12 : 43 ] In the terribleness of that time, one of the men behind Weisel cried out, you say that there is a God, then where is he? Where is he now?

Weisel said, I turned back and looked at him and said, there he is, he's hanging at the end of a rope. Well, I'm not sure that Weisel understood what he was trying to say, but I'm convinced that, understood or not, this is the message of Christmas.

Our God is not beyond the stars far away in the heavens, and that's where he stays. Our God is to be with us.

He came to be with us, suffering with us, hurting with us, bleeding with us, dying for us. That's the real message of Christmas.

God has come into the world to deal with us and with our problems. We see also that Matthew is pointing out in this gospel account that there's uncertainty, but that God came to lead us through it. [14:10] our world is full of uncertainty. Think of the uncertainty in the lives of Mary and Joseph as they hurriedly packed, and all that they could take were meager possessions to leave Bethlehem and head for Egypt for safety.

my wife Pauline and I have travelled to a few foreign countries, including Egypt, and perhaps some of you have travelled as well.

Many times we've gone with a Christian company who knew where to go and what to see. They knew where it was safe, they knew where we were going to spend the night, they had arranged for us to have meals each day, and we were confident and we could go confidently, but not so for Mary and Joseph, as they fled to Egypt.

They didn't know where they'd be staying, they didn't know what the future held for them, all they knew was that God was leading them. They'd been told by an angel that Jesus was to be the saviour, that he would save his people from their sins, and now they're told to flee, to who knows what and where.

But what was their responsibility in this? How were they to raise the Son of God? What were they to do next?

[15:51] What did the future hold for them? There was so much uncertainty in it all. And our lives too, have uncertainties.

Teenagers wonder if they'll do well enough at school. If they do, will they be accepted into college? And if they are, will they do well enough to pass their courses?

Those of us who are older wonder if we still have a job next year, or if we'll ever get their house paid for, or if our children will amount to anything.

None of us knows when we will die. How long do we have in this world? And that pain that's been bothering me recently, is it something serious?

Life is uncertain. But Mary and Joseph had one great advantage. They knew that God was with them, and leading the way, and that he would take care of them.

[17:02] We can know that too, because of Jesus Christ. We can be safe forever, despite the uncertainties of this world.

Do you know that safety? Do you have that security? Even though life is short and uncertain, do you feel that all is well, because God is with you in Jesus Christ?

this little child, Jesus, was jostled on his journey to Egypt.

One day he would tell the multitudes how God cared for the birds of the air and the ladders of the field, how much more for those who trust him.

he said, and if God feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field, then you mustn't be concerned about what you're going to eat or what you're going to wear, because God cares even more for you.

[18:26] as Christians we have the advantage of knowing that while we do not know what tomorrow holds, we know the one who holds it in his hand, our God, and we can be confident, and we can be sure that he acts for our interest, and nothing will be able to separate us from his love that is in Christ Jesus.

There is uncertainty, but there is a God who will lead us through that uncertainty, and that it seems to me is another part of this message that Matthew is bringing to us as he tells of the story of Herod and his terrible, evil action.

But do you know that this evening? Do you have that assurance of faith? But then the third thing is that there is death, but God came to overcome it.

There is death in our world. death in Bethlehem as the cries of children pierced the air, innocent children murdered, victims of a king's insanity and selfishness, but one child was saved, carried off to Egypt.

death. Yet that child one day became a victim himself, but his death would be different. He died on a cross, not for his own sins, but the sins of others.

[ 20 : 30 ] And because Jesus became the sacrifice for our sin, death was defeated by him. death. Yes, there is death in our world and we will all die physically, but God so loved the world that he sent his son to overcome it.

Can you face death? Death is real. It will always be hanging over us. just as suffering is here and uncertainty is here. But this is the message of the first Christmas. God takes away the sting of death. Jesus Christ has conquered death and has given us victory over it.

We shall be raised from the sleep of death, body and soul. It's sin that brings us to death.

[ 21 : 47 ] It's our wages for sin. And we all earn those wages because we all sin. The sinless son of God bore the sin of his people.

he took their place on the cross and was struck instead of his people. There is pardon and forgiveness to all who come to him and truly ask for that salvation.

There's no other solution to sin. We cannot be good enough to save ourselves. ourselves. We can't even struggle to scrape through by the skin of our teeth.

It doesn't matter how many services we come to in church or how long our prayers are or how well even we know the Bible.

Only by coming to Jesus, asking him to save us and entrusting what he did, are we saved. Have you done that?

[ 22 : 59 ] Have you come to him? Have you submitted to him? Yielded to him? It's by grace that we're saved.

It's God's gift. And it begins here in God's action in sending his son into this dangerous uncertain world so that he might rescue us.

As Christians, this world is not our home. Sometimes we make out in the way that we live that this world is all there is.

And that's a big mistake. we're just passing through here. We're on our way to our long home which is to be with Christ forever.

Christ has secured for us an eternal weight glory. We must pass through death to inherit that.

[ 24 : 32 ] Do you know that you will inherit what God has for his people? You know it not because of presumption but because you believe what Jesus Christ has come to do and succeeded in doing.

Because you trust him. Because your hope is in him. This it seems to me is what this season should mean to us.

It means that even though death is real God came to give us victory over it. To take away its sting. Because he dealt with sin the cause of our problem by taking it on himself and being struck down instead of us.

us. There's a story of a family who started putting up a nativity scene. All of them brought the little figures to put in the nativity scene.

[ 25 : 49 ] Finally everything was in place. Mary, Joseph and the manger, the baby, the angels, the shepherds and all the farmyard animals. Then little Scott came out carrying one of his favorite toys, a figure of a fierce dinosaur saurus rex, king of the dinosaurs.

It was one of those plastic figures that you inflate and in comparison to the other figures it was an enormous thing, towering over them all and certainly not something to have in a nativity scene. His dad said, I tried to tell him, Scott, you have to take that back because it doesn't belong there. Dinosaurs existed thousands of years before the baby Jesus and it just doesn't belong in a nativity scene.

But little Scott insisted so they finally put it there behind all the other figures, a fierce dinosaur hovering over the manger and everything else.

Then he said, dad said, as we stood back and looked at him, it dawned upon us that maybe that dinosaur was saying more than we realized, that over each of us there is this menacing character that threatens to rob us of all our joy, peace and cheer.

[ 27 : 24 ] But that's Christmas. It reminds us that the baby in the manger is stronger than all the dinosaurs of our life, yours and mine.

God has given us the victory through the gift of his Son. God, through Jesus Christ, has come to help us in a time of suffering, to lead us in times of uncertainty, to give us victory over sin, over Satan and over death.

once again, today, he offers himself to us. Again, he calls us to come to him and follow him, to give him our heart.

Perhaps you've had many Christmases, but don't know the one who came. Perhaps you've come to church for years, but have never trusted in him alone.

Let me urge you to do so now. Before this season is over, come to him and live.

[ 28 : 45 ] Maybe you have come to him, but you've grown cold towards him or indifferent. The affairs of life, perhaps trials and trappings of life have distracted you.

Then can I urge you also to come back to him now. Maybe you are walking with him. Then go on trusting him through many trials and tribulations in this life.

God has come to save us.

Let us pray.