

Matthew 2.16-18 'Weeping in Ramah' Transcript

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Perhaps you've heard of the infamous 18th century French philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778) of the so-called Enlightenment era. Though not an atheist exactly, Voltaire spent a great deal of his life ridiculing the Bible and the Christian faith. In a 1767 letter to Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, he wrote: "Christianity is the most ridiculous, the most absurd, and bloody religion that has ever infected the world...My one regret in dying is that I cannot aid you in this noble enterprise of extirpating the world of this infamous superstition." Further, after his death, an early biographer quoted him writing a letter to a friend, stating, "It is impossible that Christianity survives." He seemed to think that Christianity wouldn't survive another generation, the faith was in its twilight years.

He even published a large two-volume work called "The Bible Fully Explained," basically a commentary with the purpose of quote: "to make the whole building (of Christianity) crumble." Voltaire died with a clenched fist to the heavens, metaphorically speaking. But God is not mocked. And with a cruel sense of irony, as is now well documented, Voltaire's former residence in Geneva, Switzerland, from where he wrote condemning the Bible, was later, after his passing, purchased by Christians and used as a Bible storehouse for a Bible society.

Furthermore, the very printing press he once employed in Ferney, France, for his publications was later used to print Bibles. Curiously enough, one author noted that Voltaire printed Bibles on paper specifically designed for a superior edition of his works. The Voltaire project was unsuccessful, leading to the purchase and dedication of the paper to this superior purpose.

I'm reminded of the Psalmist, "The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!"..... He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them." (Psalm 2:2–4).

The lesson from this story of Voltaire is much the same as what we find in our section in Matthew 2 this morning. Man is incapable of limiting God's ability to perform what he wills. Men like Voltaire, Men like Herod pass and God's work continues, he continues to magnify his own name in the redemption of man.

So Matthew, though having already introduced us to King Herod earlier in his account, he will now highlight one of his final murderous atrocities. Herod instructs, he instructed the Magi, remember you'll recall, he said, "When you find the born king that you seek, tell me so that I too can come and worship him." But in his heart was the devising of the evil one, Satan. And in a rage, Herod's henchmen are sent to slaughter the infant males of Bethlehem and the vicinity around in order that the child Christ might be killed.

As a dying man, Herod is counseling against the Lord God. And as all tyrants, he thinks of himself as benevolent, believing it within his grasp to frustrate and upset God's prophetic program and will attempt to destroy Jesus. But as Proverbs 21:30 says, there is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord.

And so the big idea of this passage, Matthew 2:16-18, is about God's fulfillment of his promises in the Messiah. And specifically, we want to see how Matthew interprets Herod's slaughter of the infants at Bethlehem as a further example of how the life of the Messiah occurred as a recapitulation, a retelling of the story of the nation of Israel.

Last week, we considered how Jesus entering into Egypt and escape from Herod, thereby coming out of Egypt, how that repeated the story of Israel's exodus. And in that link, we observed how Matthew reduced Israel to a single man in Jesus. He represents the true Israelite, the faithful son, and contrasted against the unfaithful nation of Israel. And so it is in this man, Jesus, that truly is one who fulfills the nation's mold and their mission.

And so as we shall see, Matthew will again reach into the Old Testament. And as he hears the weeping of Bethlehem and the cries of the mothers, mourning for the loss of their sons, Matthew hears this as comparable to the voice of sorrow, weeping from Rama in times past as the Babylonians sieged Judah and led the people of God into exile.

And Matthew's purpose for this connection is another New Exodus type link. For in the context of the passage from which he cites as fulfilled, Jeremiah holds out hope of the coming in breaking of God. He holds out hope of a new and everlasting covenant with Israel present now in the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah.

So let's turn to the biblical text and we have simply two headings to consider. The first one is verse 16, Herod's rage, Herod's rage. The Lord frustrated Herod's plan to locate and destroy Jesus. Herod had tricked the Magi into believing that he too wished to worship Jesus, which cannot fool God. And Herod has managed to present himself in a winsome manner to the Magi. And perhaps they genuinely thought that Herod really did want to worship along with them.

And so it was the Lord who had to warn the Magi of Herod's true motives. And we saw this earlier, you look back at verse 12 of chapter two, and having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the Magi left for their own country by another way. And so here we see what

was stated earlier in the story of Voltaire, God is not mocked. We cannot deceive God or stand in his way.

When man stands in the way of the Lord's true motives, of the Lord's truth, in between what man wishes to accomplish versus what God wishes to accomplish, we stand no chance. He is sovereign. Psalm 33:10 says the Lord nullifies the counsel of nations. He frustrates the plans of the peoples. But there will always be those who oppose the truth, remember.

And so in Herod's rage, threatened by the infant king, who would take his power, he sends soldiers to Bethlehem. And he has the male children under two years old in the town murdered so as to try and kill the Lord Jesus. And seemingly the total number of boys in Bethlehem at this time would be probably no more than 20 to 40, historians estimate. But a low number makes the crime no less atrocious. Herod was a man of ruthless cruelty. And it's possible that even this event did not make much of a ripple in the history of the day, given his reputation.

So we have Herod's rage. The next heading where we spend most of our time is Rachel's weeping. Rachel's weeping. Here we come across another one of Matthew's fulfillment formulas. You'll notice there in verse 17, that Matthew says, then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled. So it's one of those fulfillment formulas in Matthew. And it's the first where Matthew specifically tells us the prophet from whom he's quoting. He says, Jeremiah.

Perhaps communicating the importance of what he's about to establish in this connection, he forms an Old Testament link concerning the nation of Israel and tells us that in its reappearance in the life of Jesus, the story finds its fulfillment of that Old Testament account. So Matthew takes us deeper into the theme of the Old Testament scripture as anticipating and fulfilled in Christ's appearance.

But I don't want to leave you all bamboozled in the many layers of rich theology here. It's like a, this passage is almost like an onion that you can continually just peel layers off and it continues to give and give. But we don't want to confuse ourselves. We want to try and stick close to the central thrust of the text and keep things simple.

And so for clarity on this passage, we need to first understand a few of the terms that are being used here in this quotation. I'll begin by reading the passage, which is found in Jeremiah 31:15. Thus says the Lord, the voice is heard in Rama, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel was weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children because they are no more.

Jeremiah is ministering for God in a time where the Southern Kingdom of Judah, remember Israel, it was split into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. And the Southern Kingdom Judah is set to follow her Northern sister, Israel, into exile. Babylon will come and carry them away. That's the context of Jeremiah. And we read in Jeremiah 21:10, the Lord says, for I have set my face against the city for harm and not for good, declares the Lord. It will be given into the hand of the King of Babylon and he will burn it with fire.

The nation of Israel and even the Southern Kingdom of Judah had been like an unfaithful wife to the Lord. By forsaking God, by sinning against the Lord without repentance, they forsook their rights to the land. They forsook the covenantal blessings of peace in the land. Ezekiel put it this way, Ezekiel 16:32, you adulterous wife who takes strangers instead of her husband, they fell into idolatry, you see.

And Rama is a town name and it's an important geographical symbol of the coming exile. Rama was located right at the center between the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. If you imagine Woodlands as Rama, the Northern Kingdom would be Wyndham or Edendale, the Southern Kingdom could be Invercargill if you just imagine that picture as you drive from. That's Rama, it's located right in the center. So it's a representative town.

And so as a voice rises up from Rama, it's as if the nation as a whole is mourning what is taking place. It's a crying out, it's a corporate grief of the nation who are enduring the Lord's discipline for sin, for their breaking of the covenant and not seeking his face. And so Jeremiah is saying that there is weeping coming from Rama, symbolic of the fact that when the defeated multitudes would be exiled away to a faraway land, Rama was the location where all the defeated hostages would be collected and from there they would be ushered off, walked out, marched out into Babylon.

And so the crying of Rama is the grief of the nation. That's what Jeremiah is saying is coming in his context. And we find the same type of figurative language in Jeremiah's reference to Rachel. Rachel was the cherished wife of Jacob, renamed Israel. And the mourning of Rachel is she is a representative of the matriarchs of Israel. And as she is in mourning, as her children are carried away and the nation is seized, are sieged, the focal point of the grief is due to the fact that there is a worldly foreign power over the people of God.

Rachel's mourning is symbolic of the fact that the children of Israel are being carried away by a foreign power. The mourning in the context of Jeremiah would be a reference to the mourning of the families during the murder of the children during the invasion of Judea, the southern kingdom, weeping for their sons who were led into exile.

And perhaps part of Matthew's reason why he chooses this quote to link to the death of the children in Bethlehem is because Rachel was actually buried in Bethlehem herself, Genesis 35. So we have Rama, we have Rachel, we understand now how Jeremiah is using these names to symbolically represent the grief of the nation being led into exile.

And then comes the theology to follow me closely. Herod's murderous act serves in Matthew's mind to retell and remind the nation of Israel of the woeful reality that though they were no longer in Babylon in Jesus' day, they were still truly in exile spiritually. The exile never really ended. They're still under foreign oppression. Without the peace and glory of former times, they are awaiting God to move. Foreign powers dominate Israel.

And Herod's slaughter at Bethlehem serves as a horrific reminder that all is not well in the land. The faithful eagerly awaited a second exodus. The return of God to redeem, restore, and bless the nations through them as foretold in the Abrahamic covenant. So when Rachel weeps and Rama raises her voice, it signifies that the nation's agony continues even in the time that Jesus is born.

And there are further parallels that establish the fact of Israel's exile. Think of Pharaoh down in Egypt. The nation were down there. What did Pharaoh do? Well, he ordered the murder of the young Hebrew boys as well, didn't he? So we have a direct parallel. At the time of Moses, Moses' life was under threat. It's like Herod is the new Pharaoh in Matthew two. And Jesus, you see, is the new Moses. That's what Matthew wants us to see.

That God has sovereignly, he protected sovereignly Moses. And so he will here sovereignly protect the new Moses, the Lord Jesus. Because here is the one who is going to lead the new and final exodus for the people of God. And that's where we find our story in the exodus that Jesus leads.

And so Matthew's reference to this passage in Jeremiah is not simply to highlight for us the grief of Israel or the atrocity of Herod's act, but he calls readers to lean into the anticipated hope that God promised the exiles in Jeremiah's day. You see, Matthew knows exactly what he's doing. He's wrapping his arms around the context of Jeremiah.

Because Jeremiah 31 that he quotes from is perhaps one of the most significant Old Testament chapters in all the Hebrew Bible. In fact, if you aren't familiar with Jeremiah 31, I'd encourage you to go home tonight and read through those chapters there, particularly 31 to 33. Jeremiah 31.

So it pays for us to look at that chapter again. If you want to open your Bibles there, you're most welcome. See, Matthew quotes from Jeremiah 31:15, but in the very next verse to which Matthew quotes, Rachel is called to stop weeping, to grieve no more. And that's important. But Jeremiah says, behold, a day is coming when exile shall be over. God will come and he will fulfill his promises despite her previous covenantal unfaithfulness.

And so despite Babylon, despite Rome in Jesus' day, despite Herod, the text says, Jeremiah 31:16, thus says the Lord, restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears for your work will be rewarded, declares the Lord. They will return from the land of the enemy. At the brink of exile, Jeremiah says, God is not finished and the exile will end.

And of course, the central hope that God holds out through Jeremiah was a new and everlasting covenant. In fact, almost all of Jeremiah 31 from where Matthew reaches into, it's almost all about the days of God's new covenant that is coming with his people. And so if you're in Jeremiah 31, you can look down at verse 31, Jeremiah 31:31. Behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers and the day I took them by the hand to bring them out

of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them, declares the Lord.

But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them and on their heart, I will write it and I will be their God and they shall be my people. They will not teach again each man his neighbor and each man his brother saying, no, the Lord, for they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more.

Jeremiah foresaw by divine revelation that a new covenant was coming of such a nature that God's law would be written on the hearts of his people. This is to say that while the covenant made with Israel at Mount Sinai through Moses was an external covenant with its law written on tablets of stone, its sign being the sign of circumcision of the flesh, external, this time the Lord will form a covenant with his people which will be internal. He will instill his law upon their hearts that they would follow and obey and know and love the Lord from the depths of their heart.

Ezekiel as the other prophets foresaw this coming reality too. Ezekiel 36:25, then I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all filthiness, from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and you will be careful to observe my ordinances.

So how do these things apply? Matthew wants us to recognize the context of Jeremiah 31 that he is drawing from. And so that as we would hear the mourning of Bethlehem as Herod sends his henchmen to do his work, as that mourning comes to our ears, as it comes to the original audience of Matthew, as it comes to their ears, that we would immediately recognize that the time of hope promised by God is now here in Christ. He has come, the new Moses, the new deliverer for God. He's here for his people and he will cut this new covenant that Jeremiah promised in Jeremiah 31, the covenant not by the letter, but by the spirit.

Moreover, God has included Gentiles in this covenant that the nations might be gathered to him. And friends, have you ever considered the cost of this covenant that God has formed between God and his believing? A perfect life, the life of Jesus, an atoning death, the death of Jesus, a conquering over the grave, the resurrection of Jesus, a mediator forever, the ascension of Jesus. What a God we worship and what a savior is Jesus.

If Jeremiah 31 is a chapter, you should probably go home and read. Hebrews chapter eight is another one. In Hebrews eight, the author of the Hebrews quotes extensively from Jeremiah 31, recognizing the fulfillment of this covenantal promise in the arrival of Jesus Christ, this new covenant. Then down in Hebrews 10, again referring to the work of the Holy Spirit, the author quotes Jeremiah 31 again and says this, for by a single offering, that is Christ, he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

The Holy Spirit also bears witness to us after saying, and then quotes from Jeremiah 31, this is the covenant that I will make with them after those days declares the Lord. I will put my laws on their hearts and write them on their minds. I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more. That's our inheritance, friends.

Although Jeremiah 31 references a covenant with the house of Israel and Judah, the New Testament authors clearly state that the fulfillment belongs to all God's people, Jew and Gentile, though it is enacted upon a covenant with the nation. When the nations hear Christ preached and believe, they enter into the blessings of the new covenant in Christ. And God will remember their iniquities no more.

This is why Paul in Ephesians 2 speaks of Christ as forming one new man. That is, he takes Jew and he takes Gentile and he brings them together. And Paul says, establishing peace, reconciling them both in one body to God through the cross of Christ. That's why Jesus in Matthew 22 in that wedding feast parable, he said that the banquet is ready. That is, the kingdom of God is prepared. The way and access to God is now open, but those who are invited, that is, the nation of the Jews with whom the covenant was formed, they were not worthy, they were unwilling to receive Christ and they cried out, we have no king but Caesar and crucified the Lord Jesus.

Jesus says therefore in his parable, go therefore into the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find. Those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad. And so the wedding hall was filled with guests. That is, the nations are invited to come and participate in what God has formed in the new covenant. He says, gather the nations, proclaim this gospel to the ends of the earth.

That's why Paul says in Romans 2:29, that he is a Jew who is one inwardly and the circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the spirit, not by the letter. And his praise is not from men but from God. We remember the new covenant of which we partake in Christ and the Lord's supper. What we just celebrated was the new covenant that is in Christ. The scripture says in Luke 22:20, in the same way he took the cup after they had eaten, saying the cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

So to Paul and his ministry to the Gentiles, he calls himself a minister of the new covenant. 2nd Corinthians 3:6, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the spirit. This is what Matthew is doing as he sees this atrocity in Bethlehem compared to the mourning of the nation as a whole, especially as the southern kingdom of Judah went off to exile.

But he says, look, there's more. So the new deliverer is here. The time of exile is over. The new covenant is being formed. God's arms welcome all those who will come, repent of their sins and believe upon Christ. And so I conclude with this. The Anglican minister J.C. Ryle wrote these words. Remember that the triumphant thing of the wicked is but short. What has become of the pharaohs and Nero's and the Elocitans, who at one time fiercely persecuted the people of God? Where is the enmity of Charles the Ninth of France and Bloody Mary of England?

They did their utmost to cast the truth down to the ground, but the truth rose again from the earth and still lives. They are dead and moldering in the grave. Let not the heart of any believer fail. Death is a mighty leveler and can take any mountain out of the way of Christ's church. The Lord lives forever. His enemies are only men. The truth shall always prevail.

We have seen this morning that God's word and his truth does endure in spite of the scheming and devices of men who oppose him. In spite of unworthy people like us who deserve his judgment, not his mercy, his justice, not his forgiveness. Matthew this morning drew us to Jeremiah 31 and the story of the nation again retold in the mourning of Bethlehem for her children. But all is not lost for the Messiah is here, the deliverer to lead the spiritual exodus and write God's law upon the hearts of his people through the forgiveness of sins that is ours in Christ Jesus.

And so I hope you have been enriched by deeper appreciation of all that is contained in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Shall we pray?