



My in laws came over a little over a week ago to celebrate Christmas early. One of my mother in laws' gifts was a little scrap book, filled with little cut outs of Christmas cards from over the years. All sorts of familiar scenes – the manger, the wise men, Bethlehem at night – all beautifully done.

But looking through, I can't say I saw any pictures from this part of the Christmas story in Matthew 2. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen this account of the "slaughter of the innocents" on a Christmas card or decoration of any kind this time of year. I guess it's safe to say this is the part of the Christmas story no one wants to talk about.

But as brutal as it is, the Holy Spirit made sure to include this for a reason. In fact, it wouldn't be possible to appreciate the full depth of Jesus' birth without this account. So let's dig into why it happened, and what it means for us.

First, a bit of a recap is in order. On Christmas Eve, we heard the account of Jesus' birth in Luke 2. Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem because of a Roman census, and that's where baby Jesus is born. Angels appear to a group of shepherds, and these men tell everyone they possibly can about the good news.

The next part of the Christmas story a lot of people are familiar with are the magi. They get included in a lot of nativity scenes, which is a little misleading because they didn't come to visit Jesus until sometime after Jesus' birth. These were wise men from the east who saw a star, knew that it was connected to the promised Savior, and then made the long journey from their homeland to Judea. We're not exactly sure how long it took them, but it may have been as long as two years!

Matthew records how these wise men arrive in Judea, head to the capital city of Jerusalem, and that's the first sign we get that trouble is brewing. [READ 2:1-3]. Herod is the first person to be unhappy when he hears about the birth of Jesus. Why? He views it as a threat to his power. Another king? Herod thinks to himself. I don't want a rival to my throne. I need to find this child, and have him eliminated.

Herod does some research, figures out that Bethlehem is the town the Savior has been prophesied to come from, and then tries to make the wise men his unwitting agents: [READ v. 7-8].

But while Herod may have thought his secret plan was foolproof, God knew about it the entire time. First, the Lord warns the wise men in a dream to go home by a different route, making sure that the identity of Mary and Joseph stays a secret. Then, he sends another dream to Joseph, and Joseph faithfully listens, immediately taking Mary and Jesus to safety in Egypt.

And if this was just a cozy bedtime story for the Christmas season, that's where the story would end. God shows his wisdom and power. Jesus is kept safe. Herod ends up looking like a fool.

But that's not what happens. [v. 16]. Troubling verse, isn't it? God can send dreams to the wise men and Joseph, but he doesn't warn anybody else that the soldiers are coming? Joseph can grab Mary and Jesus, but he doesn't warn his neighbors? Those are details you would expect to find, but they aren't there. It doesn't seem to make much sense.

But perhaps the most frustrating part about this account is that we don't get a satisfactory explanation. We do get a partial explanation – this happened to fulfill an OT prophecy. That means this is an important part of the Christmas story, and of Jesus' time on earth. But do you think that Jeremiah passage would have comforted the mothers in Bethlehem? The broken community that had to dig graves for toddlers?

That lack of answers didn't just happen in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. It still happens today. When bad things happen in your life, you know the general reason. We live in a world broken by sin. That's the reason there's war, death, abuse, neglect, pain. But while that might answer in a general sense why bad things happen, it doesn't answer the questions we are really asking. Questions like: why did my grandpa die? Why did that child get cancer? Why did that mass shooting happen?

It brings us to a painful question. If God is in control, why isn't it more obvious? We heard that God sent his Son when the time had fully come, that he controlled the events of human history so that Christ could come at exactly the right time. Why couldn't he use that power to make sure the slaughter in Bethlehem never happened? We know that Jesus is the true God, that he did miracles throughout his ministry. Why isn't there a miracle here? Why isn't there one in your life?

Well, let's try to grapple with some of those questions. Starting with some of the details in the story.

First, let's say for a moment that Joseph got that warning in a dream, he grabs the family, then knocks on a couple doors in the neighborhood to warn the other people before they start heading to Egypt. Let's even assume that when these other families in Bethlehem hear about it, they don't think that Joseph is crazy, they actually listen, and they all flee before the soldiers arrive. What do you think would've happened next? Do you think the soldiers would have gone back, that Herod would've said, "Aw man, what a bummer! Guess I won't be able to find that newborn king after all."

If you think that, you're crazy. We know from other ancient documents that King Herod eventually killed his own sons when he thought they were a threat to his throne. Caesar Augustus, the Roman ruler during this time, once said, "It is better to be Herod's pig than his son." If those families had fled, Herod would not have stopped at just Bethlehem. He would've sent soldiers to a dozen more towns, maybe even every single town in Judea. How many more children would have died? How many more mothers would have mourned?

But that raises another question. God had the power to simply destroy Herod. Why not take him out? For that, we don't get an explanation. But we can say this. All those children in Bethlehem were believers. They went to heaven when they died. But Herod had no faith in his heart. Spiritually speaking, King Herod was in a lot more danger than those children were. The fact that God allows Herod more time to repent is a sign of his mercy.

But if we stop with just the historical details of this account, or really of any tragic event, we would be missing out on the biggest question, the one God wants his people to be asking at Christmas time.

Why would God send Jesus into a world like this?

All of us love our children, and so we do everything we possibly can to keep them safe. You teach them to look both ways when they cross the street. You make sure they know not to touch the hot stove. You go looking for a safe place to live, for the best schools that you can find, because you want the best for them.

God does almost exactly the opposite. He doesn't send Jesus to the wealthiest, the wisest, or the most powerful. His earthly parents are poor common people. Jesus isn't born in a palace, he's born in a barn. And his life is in danger from the very start.

And sure, Jesus escapes to Egypt during this time, he is kept safe. But don't let that fool you into thinking he took the easy way out. Because eventually, Joseph and the family go back. Sure Herod was gone. But what does this mean? It means that God's Son is going to die. Young as Jesus is on the return trip, he is already making his way to the cross. The place where he will suffer unimaginable pain, the place where he will be tortured and killed.

What kind of God would do all this?

A God who would stop at nothing to save you.

So in Matthew 2, God is not keeping his Son safe at the expense of these other children. He is keeping Jesus alive for now, so that he can be sacrificed at just the right time. For the children in Bethlehem. For all his children. For you.

That's the beautiful truth of this account. But there's something else too.

I think during the Holidays in general, but maybe Christmas most of all, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to be happy. You burn yourself out making the perfect plans and celebrations. You hope that people are excited when you open the presents you gave them. You hope you really do feel joyful as you hear the Christmas gospel at church.

But if Christmas is about just chasing a feeling, or emotional happiness, it's going to be disappointing. Because those things don't last. And if you come to church and think to yourself, "I hope by the end of this service I get that gospel joy I'm always hearing about..." well, if that's what you're thinking, what happens if you go home and still feel sad? If you still feel lonely? If you're still grieving someone? Do those emotions mean that the Christmas message didn't work on you?

No. Because gospel joy is not an emotion. It's a reality.

The Lord includes this account in the Christmas story because he wants you to know he refuses to ignore your suffering. He sees it. He really does understand it. But none of that suffering takes away the reality of what Christ has done for you. None of it will stop Jesus from bringing you to the place where there will never be tears again.

So there may be losses you don't get over in this life. There may be times where it feels impossible to celebrate anything. That was true in Bethlehem too. I guarantee you none of these mothers "got over" the brutal loss of their children. But they still had joy and eternal peace with God, because Jesus had come into the world. And that's true for all of us too.

A couple weeks ago, we had Joan Forbes' funeral at church. After the blessing, the family requested to play a song I had never heard before. It's called Scars in Heaven. Let me read you just a few of the words. [READ]. Those babies from Bethlehem don't have scars anymore. Their mothers aren't weeping anymore. And it's because God did not spare his one and only Son. It's because Jesus chose to be born into this world of death for all of us. Even for me. Even for you. Amen.