

Christmas and the Problem of Evil

12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him." 14 When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, 15 and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: 18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more." 19 Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, (Matthew 2:16–19)

Most times the Christmas songs, Christmas illustrations and Christmas cards stop at verse 11 of Matthew 2. The next few verses seem quite horrible, quite out of place for our Christmas joys and Christmas celebrations. They don't fit in with the glowing manger scenes, and songs about peaceful, quiet Bethlehem. Many people regard them as an addendum, not really part of the Christmas story.

We all understand why. We would like the Christmas story to be a protected nook of warmth and peace and love, and for a few moments, imagine the world to be a happy, generous, welcoming place. If you listen to a lot of the songs and watch the movies, they will even use the words "the spell of Christmas, the mood of Christmas, the magic of Christmas" as if it is a kind of inebriating glow of oblivious happiness where all the evil in the world becomes good for a few weeks. Norman Vincent Peale: "Christmas waves a magic wand over this world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful."

For some reason, Matthew didn't share that view and composed his Gospel with dark dangerous Bethlehem right next to bright, beautiful Bethlehem. Wise kings from the East right next to a foolish, brutal king of Israel. New life right next to death. Mary rejoicing right next to Rachel weeping.

Everyone, at some point asks the really hard questions: why do bad things happen? If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why doesn't He stop evil people from doing evil things? Every religion, every philosophy, and really every human being has to grapple with why there is suffering, pain, injustice, cruelty, abuse, tragedy, and calamity in the world. Is it random? Is it meaningless? Is it out of control? Is it karma? Is it cycles of reconciliation? Is it the two poles of yin and yang?

Now there are wrong ways of dealing with that problem. One way is to say there is no God. There couldn't be a God, with all this suffering, they say. But the problem with that approach is that if you say there is no God, then you are really saying there is no evil either. Because without God, there is no morality, no standard of good and evil, and so you cannot really say that babies being murdered is evil. "My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?" ~ C. S. Lewis
In a godless universe, babies being killed is just one more random event in a random universe, molecules bumping against each other, one thing destroying another, but nothing to wring your hands over; nothing to lament, or decry, or refuse.

The other wrong way is to say there really isn't any evil. Evil is just an illusion, or a subjective

judgement. Evil is just people being misguided, or making mistakes. Sentimentalism is one form of this: where we try to imagine the world like a Christmas card: candles, gold, flared lens lighting, everything serene and sweet and perfect. And even when we know that the world isn't like that, we at least want to pretend that it is, or make our little section of life feel like that. But the Bible doesn't let us do that.

The Bible does not pretend there is no evil, nor does it want us to pretend there is no evil, not even on this day. The presence of evil, and the problem of evil is in large part, what the Bible deals with. It tackles the question: if God is all-powerful, and God is all good, then why is there evil in the world? Why do people do evil to each other and get away with it? Why is there tragedy, and calamity, and suffering?

The darkness of what happens at Bethlehem tells us that God does not want us to have a sentimental Christmas. In fact, look up the town of Bethlehem in the book of Judges, and you will find one of the most horrific stories in the Bible involve people from that town.

The question is why? Why put these together? Did Matthew not understand what Christmas is all about? Or could it be that we have misunderstood what Christmas is all about? Why is this shocking story recorded in the Bible? Why is it right there next to the beauty of the virgin birth, and the angel visitation and the wise men?

The answer is that Christmas deals with the problem of evil, it does not avoid it. Christmas does not dull us to the problem, anaesthetise us to the problem or help us to escape from the problem. Christmas deals with the problem head-on.

I. Christmas Reminds Us of the Presence of Evil

We know the account quite well. Joseph and Mary come to Bethlehem because it is Joseph's ancestral city, and they had to go there for the worldwide census. While there, Jesus is born before they can get settled in a home. They stay there, go to Jerusalem for the dedication of Jesus according to the Law when he was 8 days old. The wise men have not yet arrived; after all, if Joseph and Mary had had gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, they would not have had to present the poor man's offering of two turtledoves; they could have afforded the lamb. And it seems they perhaps intended to settle in Bethlehem, perhaps be near relatives, for we read they are now in a house.

Somewhere in the next few weeks or months, these wise men from the East, perhaps Babylon, perhaps Persia, perhaps Yemen arrive. They were professional astrologers, philosophers, an ancient combination of scientist and consultant, political advisor and researcher. Whether it was through the prophecy of Balaam in Numbers 24:17 that said a "A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel", or whether it was through Daniel's influence in Babylon and then Persia as one of the magi, the wise men, however it was, they understood the star and they arrived in Israel. At first, the star gave them *information*, not *location*; they understood it meant a king was born in Israel, but not where in Israel.

So they did the logical thing: they went to the capital city of Jerusalem, where the king lived and told people they were seeking a king. Perhaps they assumed he was born there. Once there, they get ushered into Herod's presence.

Herod is troubled by this news, because he wanted no usurpers of his throne, and when foreigners arrive on your doorstep reading signs in the sky, there might just be something to it. Jerusalem is

troubled, not because they know the details, but because Herod is troubled, and if Herod was troubled, that meant trouble for you.

So Herod, no student of the Scriptures himself, calls the scribes and priests, the religious experts. He asks them, "If Messiah the King were to be born, does the Bible say where He would be born?" "Yes", they reply, "Micah prophesied that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem." Bethlehem is just down the road, 6 miles from Jerusalem. Herod dismisses them, and then calls the wise men secretly.

He doesn't want anyone else to know this; he is gathering information from different sides, scheming to understand the whole. He then asks them when the star first appeared. He is now going to make an educated guess as to how old the child is by now.

Herod thinks like a schemer and a plotter. He assumes that the newborn king in Bethlehem must have spies, protectors, supporters. And he doesn't want to alarm them by arriving himself. So he tells the wise men to go to this nearby town of Bethlehem, because he has information that that is where the King of Israel might be born. Amazingly, Herod simultaneously believes in the Scriptures and is trying to defeat them. He believes the prophecy and wants to make sure it doesn't happen.

"Look around," he says, "knock on doors, ask. When you find him, come and give me the exact address, so I can come and join you in worshipping him."

Off they go towards Jerusalem, and then, to their great joy, the star that had previously given them information, now moves in a supernatural way to show them location. In Scripture, the stars and the angels are often identified with one another. And indeed, it takes them to the very spot, the very house, and they enter in and worship with their gifts.

But at this point, God sends two dreams. A dream comes to the magi to tell them not to return to Herod, but to escape and find a way back home that avoided Jerusalem. Another dream comes to Joseph to tell him to pack up and get out of Bethlehem, and in fact, get out of Judea altogether.

Herod probably waited a few days before sending out some men to look for the magi. And when he found out that they had not been his obedient little scouts, he flies into a rage. He senses that his plan to quietly assassinate the Messiah has become known and is now falling apart, so he now orders a mass execution. Soldiers are sent to do a task that would probably haunt them the rest of their lives: find every male child under the age of two in Bethlehem or within a mile or two from there and kill him. What soldier would not be haunted for the rest of his life at having to grab infants from their screaming mothers, and kill them, in some cases maybe even having to kill the father or mother defending the infant.

Now Bethlehem was a small town at this time, about 300 people, and scholars estimate that the total number of infants under the age of two would have been between 10 and 20 children. So this was not a massacre of hundreds or thousands, but certainly it was a massacre nonetheless. The town of Bethlehem must have been shattered by grief, as burial after burial took place for all the little ones pierced, stabbed, crushed, or destroyed by evil hands.

Christmas reminds us of the problem of evil.

Herod the Great does not appear on our Christmas cards for good reason. There are no little Herod the Great figurines to hang on our Christmas trees, and for good reason. Herod, as we've seen was truly a wicked man.

Here's a short character sketch. We know a lot about him because Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian wrote two whole books on him, meaning we have more information on him than we do on Julius Caesar or Augustus or Alexander the Great.

Herod was what the Romans called a client king: he ruled as a national king over his people on behalf of Rome. He did so for about 35 years. He was an architect and builder like no other. He built the port city of Caesarea, using innovative technology. He refurbished the Temple in Jerusalem. He built seven fortresses for himself across the city.

But Herod was not a moral man. He married ten wives, and each of them produced princes for him. So you can imagine the intrigues and schemings between all these princes to end up as number one. Herod even had three of his sons put to death. He had his favourite wife – Mariamne put to death. He invited the High Priest down to Jericho and then drowned him there.

In fact, in the weeks leading up to his death, Herod knew that people would celebrate once he had died. So to make sure there would be people crying when he died, he arranged for all the prominent Jewish leaders of the time to be rounded up, herded into one of his mini-stadia, the hippodrome, and then all executed on the day of Herod's death, so that there would be people crying and not celebrating when he died.

Such a butcher was Herod, that the Roman emperor Augustus Caesar, knowing that Herod was a Jewish king and would not eat pork, apparently said, "I would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son". So with that kind of background, it is easy to see how this terrible act in Bethlehem was entirely in keeping with Herod's character:

The thing about someone like Herod is that he seems to be evil in its worst form: someone who plots evil, has the power to do his evil, and apparently gets away with his evil. Herod here performed what is surely one of the worst atrocities we ever encounter: the murder of infant children. Not killing in self-defence, not even the evil of revenge-killing. Purely destructive murder to protect his own wealth, power, and position, at the expense of the lives of defenceless infants. Ordering the wholesale, indiscriminate slaughter of babies, toddlers, knowing full well that 99% of them will not be the young King he is targeting. This is monstrous evil. But it is done with money and power backing it, while the peasants in Bethlehem had next to nothing to prevent this evil.

The Bible doesn't hide this passage away, or tuck it into a footnote. The Bible places this in plain sight right after the romantic scene of men on camels looking up at the stars. They are not different stories. They are the same story. Here is the presence of evil, taught clearly, unequivocally.

The Bible says, God exists, and evil exists. Not like two gods equal in power. Rather, one God, and evil exists as an infection, as a parasite, as a distortion and twisting of the original.

Now the Bible is not trying to rub your nose in the evil, or try to destroy the consolation or joy we have at Christmas, or try to say that joy and peace is all fake. No, those would be satanic things to say. But what the Bible is saying is that this evil happened right there in the same place where the Saviour of the world was born.

To put it another way, the Bible is hinting at the fact that the very reason Christmas exists is to solve the problem of evil. The reason Jesus was born is because people like Herod exist. Jesus was born because of corruption and abuse and murder and genocide and abortion and infanticide. Jesus

was born because of tragedy and bereavement and loss and grief and sorrow. If there were no Herod, no murderers, no loss of children, no crime, we would have needed no Saviour, and therefore no Incarnation, and no Christmas.

Christmas doesn't need to be shielded from evil. We don't need to look the other way when we read this passage, because Jesus didn't come to look the other way. He came to confront it. ⁴ “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:4–5)

If you had met one of those mothers, and she had looked at you through her tears, and said, “Why? Why?” What would you have said? Would you have said, “There is no God, this is all random, so don't worry because none of it matters. Would you have said, “Don't worry, be happy. It's not that bad. It just seems that way now.”

Or would you have said, “I don't know. But your boy died because of another Boy who came to put an end to all dying. I cannot tell you why in the plan of God it had to be your boy that was killed, but I can tell you that Christ the Saviour has been born, and because of that, this kind of suffering will not be forever.”

II. Christmas Reminds Us of The Power Over Evil

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: “A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more.”

Matthew takes us deeper into the mystery. This terrible act of Herod upon the people of Bethlehem was predicted by Jeremiah, 600 years earlier.

Now Matthew had already quoted multiple prophecies about Messiah. In chapter 1, he quoted from Isaiah's prophecy about a virgin conceiving. We just saw how Micah's prophecy came up when looking for his birthplace. He quotes from Hosea when Joseph and Mary head to Egypt. Here, in reference to the murder at Bethlehem, Matthew quotes a prophecy from Jeremiah.

Prophecies sometimes have a near and a far fulfilment, a first and a second fulfilment. The first fulfilment of this prophecy was when Judah was deported by the Babylonians. The city of Ramah north of Jerusalem was a kind of border city of the north and south, a gathering place, where the captives would have been taken, and there, amidst all that death, and the killing of many, Judah went into exile. And you can imagine all the mothers weeping, and all the grief and pain of that moment of defeat and humiliation.

But the far and second fulfilment is here in the time of Herod. Because one mile north of Bethlehem, there was an area known as Ramah as well, and even today, tour guides will tell you that that is where Rachel's Tomb is. So in another Ramah, a second time, mothers are weeping because of Herod's mass murder of the children.

Now at first, the fact that it is predicted might disturb us. Because if it was prophesied that it would happen, then it means that it was known in advance. And then it seems as if it had to happen no matter what, predestined to happen. That disturbs us because we then conclude that the same power which predicted it could surely have prevented it. But the Bible doesn't run down the rabbit trails of hypothetical worlds and what if and why nots.

Instead, the Bible derives comfort from the power to predict the future. If God could write future

history, then it means it was fully under his control. Not one tiny event is out of the hands of God. If there were even one maverick atom, one random molecule, one uncontrollable electron outside of God's sovereignty, there could be no prediction, no prophecy, no control, no determination. When God tells you the future, it is because He is in control of the past, present, future. Nothing in His universe is random, by chance, by accident, coincidental. God is not gambling on the future, guessing about the future, speculating, risking, hoping. God can tell you the future because He is in control of the past, present and future.

He predicts not only the good things of Messiah's birth, and the birthplace, and the arrival of kings, but also the tragedy of Herod's wickedness.

But here is the balance Scripture teaches: God can be in control of it while not being the author or creator of the evil, God may control down to the second how and when evildoers will do their evil, but not be the one making them do evil. The best example of that is that Peter tells us that it was foreordained that Christ die on the cross, while at the same time those that put him on the cross were guilty of murder. It was an act of evil, but controlled by, used, by, allowed by a good God who meant it for good.

When you think of the worst things that have happened to you, or perhaps meditate on the possibility of the worst things happening to you, here is a Scripture that reminds us, God knew it all from the foundation of the world.

There is no comfort in thinking that evil is out of control, or that evil surprises God, or that God wants it to stop but cannot. There is great comfort to know that while evil is God's enemy, God rules over it. He knows its every move, he permits its advances, and prevents some of them.

So if you had met one of those mothers, and they had said to you, "How could this have happened?" would you say, "Satan must have won this battle, and your child was a casualty"? Would you say, "God is doing His best, but He can't stop everything"?

Or would you say, "I don't understand why this is. But I do know this was known before the foundation of the world, this was written in Scripture, and it is part of a plan with deep, perplexing tragedies. Your son's blood is part of a story that God is writing, and it is not accidental. It is not random. It is not for nothing. God is in control of this evil. And God is not evil."

III. Christmas Reminds Us of the Punishment of Evil

19 Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

If you had taken a snapshot when Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem, you might have been tempted to say, "evil gets away with it, evil has power and riches on its side." If you had taken a snapshot when he sent his killers through Bethlehem, plunging swords into children, you might have said, "This is a wicked, unfair, unjust world." If you had taken a snapshot of Joseph and Mary fleeing with baby Jesus, you might have said, "Evil is stronger and intimidates others".

But that would be the mistake people make. They view evil with a narrow lens, one small snapshot at a time, not with the wide angle lens. Evil removed from the wider context always brings despair and hopelessness.

If you just zoomed out by about a year, you would see something different. The Jewish historian Josephus writes that God judged Herod for his sins in his body. By his descriptions, it appears

Herod had intense itching, painful intestinal problems, breathlessness, convulsions in every limb and maggot-infested gangrene, possible gonorrhoea, and infections in bladder and rectal area. He was an encyclopaedia of diseases. He was told by his physicians to bathe in the hot waters by the Dead Sea, which didn't help. The medical team decided to place the king in a tub of hot oil, which, needless to say, didn't help and even temporarily blinded him. And in a short space, the tyrant was dead, and no one mourned for him.

And if you zoomed out even further, you would see his legacy dying: one by one, his sons being killed or removed.

And then you would see the baby boy whom he tried to kill surviving, returning from Egypt, the family moving back to Nazareth, and then the boy growing into manhood, and then begin teaching, with a power in Him that Herod could not begin to imagine. And you would see that young man stand in front of Herod's son, Herod Antipas, and remain silent in his presence, since he had cut off the voice of God by executing John the Baptist.

You would see that young man voluntarily die on a cross not only for His friends, but for His enemies. If you zoomed out further, you would see His Resurrection, and then His Ascension, and the beginning of the church. If you kept zooming out, you would see all the ripple effects of that death and resurrection, defeating evil in one individual at a time, one culture at a time. This is why He was born: He was born to die.

In fact, if I understand several Scriptures correctly, I believe each of those infants murdered in Bethlehem were ushered into the presence of God. Not because they were without sin natures, but because God applied the future work of Calvary to each one of them, and allowing each one entrance into glory. This doesn't remove the heinousness of their murder, but it is another sign that evil is matched and defeated. The Boy who was not killed would one day die voluntarily on the cross, making it possible for each one of them to be ushered into God's presence.

“Why do bad things happen to good people? That only happened once and He volunteered.” - R.C> Sproul

If you zoomed out far enough, you would see the last four chapters of Revelation. That boy, now a king on a white horse, returning to Earth, defeating the armies of antichrist, imprisoning Satan and ruling the Earth for a thousand years, judging all sinners, and then creating a new heavens and a new earth. And finally you would see it: ⁴ “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:4).

The point is, even in just this small snapshot, we see the evil of Herod not succeeding in killing the Messiah, and we see the wages of his sin poured on his own head. But keep zooming out, and evil looks more and more like something being punished.

For the Almighty God, who, has supreme power over all things, being Himself supremely good, would never permit the existence of anything evil among His works if He were not so omnipotent and good that He can bring good even out of evil. - Augustine

And so, if you had seen one of those mothers, and she had said, “Why was this allowed? How could Herod get away with this?” The answer would not be, “Well, there has to be a balance of good and evil in the world.” The answer would not be, “Well, sometimes good wins, and sometimes evil wins”. The answer would be, “Your child died, and the child Jesus lived. But He was born to die, to not only save your child's soul, but to destroy all evil once and for all.” This happened so that it will not keep happening forever.

At Christmas, we can say three things: 1) evil is real, it is not an illusion. It was present in the very town where Jesus was born.

But we can also say, 2) evil is not wild and without bounds. It was predicted at Bethlehem and therefore comes under God's providence. He is using it for His own purposes. No evil takes God by surprise, though all of it grieves Him and displeases Him.

And then 3) even the Christmas story, with the death of Herod gives hints that evil will not prevail; it will be punished. Sometimes in this life, definitely in the next, and eventually it will be removed from the experience of God's people altogether.

Christmas is not meant to be a time of escapism from evil. It is not meant to be a kind of pretend game. Christmas is the dawn of the defeat of evil. It is the beginning of the end of suffering and pain. It is the beginning of the tide turning. It is the entrance of the light that cannot be overcome by darkness.

That's why the angels said that they brought "good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.
¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a **Savior**, who is Christ the Lord"