

The birth of peace and hope in a world of violence and pain

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word, the Bible. We thank you so much that you speak to us through it, even though it was written down thousands of years ago.

You continue to speak to us through it, and what you have to say is still very much relevant for us today. And so, Father, we pray that you would help us to take a moment to, I guess, work at listening to your word, try not to be distracted by all the things we've got to do, but just to pause and to ponder afresh the meaning of Christmas, and in particular, your son.

I ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I wonder what it is that you want for Christmas next Sunday.

It's running out of time to get it, aren't you? I found some children's wish lists online, actually. So on the next slide, I haven't quite worked out the difference between wants and needs.

This is the one that needs a T-shirt soccer ball radio, but needs a digital camera. Anyway, I'm not sure about that one. This next one is amusing and disturbing.

[1 : 08] Dear Santa, how are you? Well, enough chit-chat. Let's get down to business. This year, I want a space Lego set, some jelly beans, a something joke, and an AK-47 assault rifle.

As I said, amusing and disturbing. Of course, what we want for Christmas changes depending on where we live. I don't know about you, but I've been moved by the images and messages of those who are living in Aleppo this past week during the ceasefire.

In fact, just to give you an idea, in case you've not seen it. So here's some pictures of what it used to look like. Same place on the next slide. Now it looks like this. And again, next.

It used to look like this. Very beautiful, actually. I didn't realise. And then on the next slide, now it looks like this. The last one. The street shot. But now it's this.

So it's quite horrific, really, isn't it? And during the past week, there's been a ceasefire. Well, the first one kind of broke down on Wednesday, and then they restarted again on Thursday.

[2 : 20] And all these green buses are coming in to take those suffering out of the city. In fact, one British Red Cross worker on the ground said this last Thursday, I've never seen such levels of human suffering.

It's hard to believe how people survive. You see, their eyes are filled with sadness. And in fact, yesterday I heard on the news that the evacuation was just suddenly halted, stopped.

And there are now still, as far as I know, a thousand people trapped who can't get out because the government decided that's enough. And so I suspect if you were a civilian from Aleppo, I suspect all you'd want for Christmas is peace and a certain hope of a home where there's no more violence or pain or tears.

And as we come to Matthew's last passage about the birth of Jesus today, which we've been working through over the last couple of weeks for those visiting us, we come to a rather solemn passage.

The last couple of weeks have been very joyous, so we looked at various things. But today it's a bit of a solemn passage as we look at Matthew's account of Jesus' birth. For Jesus was born into a world like ours, where there are evil people who commit violence and cause pain.

[3 : 41] And yet Matthew also notices that what happens at Jesus' birth actually fulfills Old Testament promises and signals peace and hope in a world of violence and pain.

In fact, in our passage today, there are three scenes. And Matthew notes three fulfillments that signal this peace and hope for a world of violence and pain.

And so this passage and Jesus' birth is very relevant for us today, isn't it? Given the events of last week. But it does mean you might have to work a bit harder this morning to see how these fulfillments take place.

So let's get into it. We're point one in your outlines, verse 13 in your Bibles. When they had gone, that is, the wise men had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.

Get up, he said. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. Last week we saw the Magi, or the wise men, came and worshipped Jesus.

[4 : 48] And the video that we saw earlier kind of summarized last week's passage. Now you might remember back in verse 8 that Herod told the Magi to come back to him so that he could go and worship Jesus too.

Of course it was a lie. In the words of the video, Herod was hatching an evil plan to kill the baby king. And so Joseph has another dream. And in this dream he is told to flee to Egypt.

And just as Joseph obeyed the last dream from God when he was told to marry Mary and give the baby the name Jesus. We saw that a couple of weeks ago. So he obeys this time. So we read in verse 14, He got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where they stayed until the death of Herod.

And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet. Out of Egypt I called my son. Now Egypt was a place that was beyond Herod's jurisdiction.

And there was a number of Jews already living there. And what's more, Mary and Joseph have just been given some expensive gifts by the wise men. Remember they were given kingly gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

[5 : 57] Because he is king. And I wonder if these gifts were the very things that enabled Mary and Joseph to buy food and survive in Egypt. And so the dream from God and the fact that they had just been given these gifts, it shows us that God is still in control, doesn't it?

And protecting his son. But Matthew notices something more than that, doesn't he? He notices that Jesus will be called out of Egypt just like Israel was.

Remember, hundreds of years before Jesus, God's people Israel were slaves in Egypt. And what's more, God called the nation of Israel his son.

Like he did in our first reading from Hosea. And just as God's son Israel is called out of Egypt a hundred years ago, or sorry, hundreds of years ago. So also is God's true son Jesus called out of Egypt.

And for Matthew, this similarity is just too coincidental to be an accident. Rather, Matthew sees it as Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament.

[7 : 07] And in particular, Hosea chapter 11, our first reading. How? Well, he sees Jesus as the true Israel, the true people of God.

You see, when God rescued Israel from Egypt that first time through Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, and, you know, Prince of Egypt, the kind of Hollywood stuff likes that Hollywood likes, he rescued them to be his people, to live his way and so enjoy his blessings.

But as we heard from our first reading from Hosea 11, they did not live his way. They kept wanting to turn away from God, it said. And so they missed out on his blessings.

Instead, they went into exile. But at the end of our reading on Hosea 11, it spoke about a time when, because of God's great love for his people, he would gather them back again. Gather his people, even from places like Egypt.

And here is Jesus acting like Israel, being called out of Egypt, just as Israel was, only he did live God's way. And so Matthew sees Jesus as replacing Israel, if you like, becoming the true Israel.

[8 : 17] For he knows Jesus succeeds where Israel failed. And so Matthew sees Jesus fulfilling Hosea 11, because God will now gather his people again in Jesus. The true Israel is now found in Jesus.

Let me see if I can explain. It's coming up to tennis season with the Australian Open. And growing up, my father is a big fan of tennis. And so every January, we'd only have the Australian Open on.

And at the time, this guy on the next slide was the champion, Pete Sampras. I'm pretty sure you remember him. And he was considered the best player ever.

But he didn't quite succeed in getting to the 15 grand slams that he was after. He only got to 14. Then this guy on the next slide followed in Pete's footsteps and surpassed Pete, didn't he?

Federer not only got to the elusive 15 grand slams, he got the all-time record of 17 grand slams. And he's considered the true champion of tennis for all time, so far at least.

[9 : 22] And that's kind of what Matthew sees Jesus doing. Jesus follows in Israel's footsteps in being called out of Egypt. Only Jesus succeeds where Israel fails. And so he surpasses them, if you like.

Jesus becomes the true Israel, the true son of God. And what this means is, if you want to become part of God's people, then it's no longer about joining the Jews and becoming Jewish.

It's now about joining Jesus and becoming Christian. Because Jesus is the true son, the true Israel. The one in whom God gathers his people.

And so it's by trusting in Jesus that we truly become God's people. That's what it means. Well, that's scene one. Scene two, we return to Herod to see how he reacts when the Magi don't turn up.

Have a look at verse 16. When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity, who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learnt from the Magi.

[10 : 28] Herod was king of the Jews at the time, and he did not like competition. As I said last week, he even had two of his own sons killed because he thought they might take his crown.

And so to get rid of this baby who was born the king, Herod commits genocide. He gives the order to kill all the baby boys two years old and under in Bethlehem, and just for good measure, the surrounding vicinity as well.

Now, Bethlehem was not a big town, so we're not talking about thousands here, but it's still genocide. Pure evil, heartbreaking, really. As I said last week, can you imagine watching your own baby son or grandson or nephew being dragged out and slaughtered, probably on your front porch?

And yet, sadly, this kind of violence was not uncommon in the ancient world, nor is it in our world, actually. I mean, I can still remember the genocide in Rwanda. I don't know if you remember that.

Not to mention the conflict in the Congo, the Sudan, other parts of Africa where there are child soldiers, or even today in Syria, like, as I mentioned, Aleppo. Our world is broken, and there is violence and pain and tears.

[11 : 44] But Matthew saw in the tears of those Bethlehem parents another fulfillment. See verse 17? Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled.

A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning. Rachel, who is known as the mother of Israel, weeping for her children Israel, and refusing to be comforted because they are no more.

Rachel is often considered the mother of Israel, and in Jeremiah it speaks of Rachel mourning over Israel being carried off to exile, being no more.

But Matthew knows that his readers at the time were mainly Jewish people who knew their Old Testament. They knew the very next verse from Jeremiah, spoke of peace and hope.

So have a look on the next slide. So verse 15 is what is quoted in our Bibles, and then it goes on to say, this is what the Lord says, restrain your voice from weeping, Rachel, and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded, declares the Lord.

[12 : 50] They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your future, declares the Lord. Your children will return to their own land.

People will live together in peace in Judah and all its towns, farmers and those who move about with their flocks, and I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint.

See, in the midst of tears and pain, God promised peace and hope. The hope of returning to the land where there was no more tears, no more violence, but peace, people living harmoniously together, refreshed and satisfied.

And so as Matthew looks back to the birth of Jesus and the tears of those Bethlehem parents, Matthew sees it not just fulfilling the tears from Jeremiah, but also signaling the hope and peace that Jeremiah spoke about too.

You see, Matthew knows that Jesus grew up and he died for us to bring us peace with God and hope of heaven. So as he looks back to the events surrounding Jesus' birth, he sees not just the fulfillment of tears, but also the signaling of that promised hope will soon be fulfilled too.

[14 : 08] The hope of returning to the land with peace and no more tears. And Matthew is saying what happens here at Jesus' birth fulfills what happened to Israel in Jeremiah, both the tears and the promised hope.

And we know that those who trust in Jesus, those who join Jesus, not only become God's people, but we are also given peace with God now, aren't we?

And the certain hope of a new land, a new heavens and earth, where there will be no more violence or crying or pain. As we read on the next slide from Revelation 21, John says, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

And on this heaven and earth, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. See, Matthew is trying to tell us that Jesus' birth not only signals the way to become part of God's people, true Israel, but it's also the beginning of hope and peace in a world of violence and pain.

But the question is, how will this particular baby accomplish all this? How will Jesus make it possible for us to join him and be God's people?

[15 : 19] How will he bring peace with God and certain hope of heaven? Well, Matthew gives us a hint in our final scene, point three, verse 19. After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who are trying to take the child's life are dead.

So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea, in the place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. So having been warned in another dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.

Herod the Great is dead. And so Joseph and Mary, with Jesus, returned from Egypt. But as it says, I don't go back to Judea, which is where Joseph was originally from, because it seems Herod's rule was divided into two.

And one of his son, Archelaus, was down the bottom of the country and his other son, called Herod Antipas, was up in the north. And it seems that Archelaus was just as ruthless as his father.

And so Joseph goes up to the north to sit under the rule of Herod Antipas. He had the same name as his father, but he had a different temperament altogether. And Joseph and Mary settle in a small town of Galilee called Nazareth.

[16 : 46] As I said last week, I suggested Bethlehem was a small, humble town. And it was in the ancient world. But Nazareth was not just small, it was despised in the ancient world.

In fact, in another part of the Bible, we read this on the next slide, when they find out about Jesus, Philip found Nathanael and told him, we have found the one Moses wrote about in the law, Jesus, about whom the prophets also wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

And Nathanael goes, Nazareth? Can anything good come from there? Nathanael asked. See, Nazareth, it was a backwater town. It was not highly regarded at all.

People looked down and despised people from Nazareth. In fact, when I came from Sydney to Melbourne, I remember chatting to someone who told me, now make sure you don't tell anyone you're up from up north.

They couldn't even say the word Sydney. So that place up north. Well, Nazareth was the place up north. It was despised. But again, Matthew sees something in this.

[17 : 50] Look at the rest of verse 23. At the end, he went to live in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets that he would be called a Nazarene.

See, Matthew sees another fulfillment in this. There is just one problem with this one. And that is, no prophet in the Old Testament actually mentions the town Nazareth or Nazarene.

So it's hard to work out what Matthew is talking about here. Well, there's two things we need to keep in mind. First, Matthew actually says what was fulfilled in the prophets, plural.

When Matthew has a particular quote in mind, he always says the prophet, singular. So it seems like Matthew has in mind a general theme that a few prophets spoke about.

And if you take this together with the fact that those from Nazareth were despised, then Matthew probably has in mind that Jesus fulfills the prophets who spoke about God's king being despised and rejected.

[18 : 50] So for example, on the next slide from Isaiah 53, we read, he was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not.

But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him. And by his wounds, we are healed.

We'll just leave that slide up for a bit. Thanks, Andrew. The one who would save his people, who would bring peace and hope, the one who would accomplish these promises, was despised by the very people he came to save.

And this idea is mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament. Psalm 22, Psalm 69, Zechariah 11. And so the fact that Jesus grows up and is, you know, from the town of Nazareth and is despised, tells Matthew that Jesus is the suffering servant who would die for our sins, who would be despised, rejected, and crucified on a cross.

But you see, this is how Jesus would enable us to become part of God's people. This is how Jesus would bring us peace with God now and the certain hope of a new heavens and earth with no more violence or pain or tears later.

[20 : 13] For it is by dying at the cross that Jesus, as the screen says, would take our punishment to bring us forgiveness and peace with God. And if we have peace with God now, then we no longer need to fear judgment later when we die.

Instead, we can have the certain hope of being welcomed into that new heavens and earth where there will be no more violence or pain or tears. You see, these events around the birth of Jesus are solemn, but they also signal for Matthew that Jesus is the true Israel who will bring peace and hope by being despised and crucified for us.

And that means something for us in our world of violence and pain too, doesn't it? A month or so ago, I conducted a funeral service where the burial was out at Warrandyte.

And I got there early as did the guy who was going to play some music on his cello. And so we got talking as we waited for the family and the funeral directors to turn up. I asked what he did.

He obviously knew what I did. And he started asking me about Christian things, which was great. But he also said, if God is real, then why doesn't he do something about all the pain in the world?

[21 : 35] I think he even mentioned Syria. It's a common question, isn't it? And my answer was, well, he has. he sent his son Jesus born at Christmastime to grow up and die at Easter time.

And he did that so that we might be forgiven and have peace with God now and the certain hope of a new world with no more suffering later. Of course, the obvious question that comes next is, well, what is God waiting for then?

Unfortunately, the family turned up and so we got interrupted because I was hoping he would ask that because the answer is, well, he's waiting for you. He's waiting for you to turn to Jesus so you don't miss out. That's the only reason he's waiting, giving people more opportunity to turn and trust in Jesus so they don't miss out on this new world.

But you see, Jesus was born into a world like ours, one where there's violence, pain and tears and yet his birth signals the coming of peace and hope that he would bring by his death at the cross 30 years later.

Peace with God now and hope of new heavens and earth later but for only those who trust in him. So have you done that? Have you put your trust in Jesus?

[22 : 54] For us who have, then there's three quick things. First, do we realize that what people need most at Christmas is not another pair of socks or undies? Though they might need those too.

But what they need most of all is Jesus. And so secondly, then, do we pray for those who don't know Jesus? I mean, by all means, we should pray for those suffering in Aleppo that they will find food and shelter and safety.

We must and should do that. But we also to pray most of all that they will find Jesus. We had to pray for our carols evening tonight, this afternoon, that those who have been invited and many people have been invited, they would come and hear of Jesus and trust in him who brings peace and hope.

Indeed, we should pray and invite others to our own Christmas service, like the Christmas Eve for kids service, that they might hear of Jesus because that's what the world needs most. Realize what they need most, firstly.

Secondly, pray for them. And thirdly, remember, there's still reason to rejoice even in the midst of pain and tears. I know for some this Christmas it will be hard.

[24 : 09] For one man I know who used to come to this service with his wife, his wife passed away this year and so it will be the first Christmas without her. It's going to be hard.

For others, there are many things going on in life which will make this Christmas hard for you. But in the midst of your own pain and tears, remember there is still reason to rejoice because with the birth of Jesus, came the birth of peace with God now and the certain hope of a new world without pain later.

I don't know what it is that you want for Christmas. I do hope it's not an AK-47 assault rifle. But whatever it is you want for Christmas, do remember and rejoice at what we already have because of Jesus.

Peace and hope in a world of violence and pain. Let's pray. our gracious Father, we do pray for those suffering in Aleppo.

Father, we pray that you would work to allow more to be evacuated. We pray for those who have been evacuated that they would find food and shelter and that they might not be persecuted by those who oppose them.

[25 : 30] But Father, we pray most of all that you would raise up Christian workers in Syria who will share the good news of Jesus so that these people who don't have physical peace now may have spiritual peace with you now and the hope of a world where there is no more violence or bombs or tears.

Father, help us also to remember the birth of Jesus and what it means for our world. Help us to keep praying for those who don't know Jesus and rejoice that we do. And remember that we have peace with you now and a certain hope of heaven later.

We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.