

Prayer

Lord God Almighty; we give You our heartfelt praise knowing that what we do makes no sense to those who have not known the joy of salvation and the freedom of divine forgiveness. May we both honour You and also seek to show all people the glory of the Creator of the World. Lord God Almighty, we praise You; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme:

Pray for pastors who have to spend time with people in society who want to be married in church or have children baptised. Pray that they use these opportunities for the Gospel

On-going prayers

- Pray for all who suffer bullying or stress in the workplace
- Pray for the African Union meeting in Cairo, and Zimbabwe
- Give thanks for food and drink

Meditation

Praise is the outpouring of love from a heart;
We reserve our highest for Jesus!

Honour is a flow of respect we give a greater power;
We give our tribute to Jesus!

Glory is the dawning of spiritual magnificence;
We see it supremely in Jesus!

Power is untouchable and unstoppable energy;
We are blown by the Spirit, because of Jesus!

Awe is breathtaking, heart stopping wonder;
We are blown away by Jesus!

Worship of God is the highest privilege of humanity;
We have this great freedom in Christ!

Bible Study - Matthew 2:13-18

¹³ When they left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you; for Herod will seek to kill the child.'¹⁴ Joseph then got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and left for Egypt,¹⁵ remaining there until the death of Herod. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet, 'I called my Son out of Egypt.'

¹⁶ When Herod realised that he had been tricked by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the children of two years old and under in the vicinity of Bethlehem, according to the time he had learned from the Magi.¹⁷ The prophecy of Jeremiah was then fulfilled:

¹⁸ 'A voice was heard in Ramah, of weeping and great grief; Rachel mourning for her children. She refused to be consoled, because they were dead.'

Review

The Magi had been miraculously led to the new-born Messiah by a star, outwitting the despotic Herod on the way (2:1-12)! If Herod had ever entertained any thought of coming to worship the infant Jesus (which is doubtful) the rebuff he received from the Magi (2:12) ensured that his response to this would be fierce and cruel. Our passage tells the terrible story of the 'slaughter of the innocents', when Herod inflicted his vengeance on the children of Bethlehem and Jesus was taken from the country by his parents. It is a terrible story, and one which many find almost impossible to understand, asking why Matthew would wish to record such a story. We will stay close to the text to try and understand why Matthew tells the story, largely by reference to scripture.

To begin with, an angel appeared to Joseph to warn him of the danger and give instructions to save the young family (2:14). The story of the flight to Egypt has fascinated many over the centuries, and we know about it from other written sources from the first and second centuries. Both the Talmud (a compilation of 1st and 2nd century Jewish law) and the writer Celsus (2nd century) refer to this event, mischievously suggesting that Jesus learned the 'tricks of his trade' from Egyptian mystics! The reference to Jesus is hostile, but in a literary sense it does confirm that this event happened. Indeed, it would have been natural for a Jew under threat from Herod to go to Egypt, for there was a community of more than one million Jews living in Alexandria (Northern Egypt) at that time, many of whom needed to escape either Herod's clutches or his taxes!

The key to our understanding of this passage is Matthew's quote from Hosea 11:1 in verse 15. We will understand this better if we read the whole verse, however; 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son'. The whole verse shows that the driving force behind the flight to Egypt was God's love for His Son. God intervened in human history to preserve His plans for the future; protecting Jesus just as any good parent would do. This quote also draws a parallel between Jesus and Israel. In ancient times Israel had come 'out of Egypt' under Moses and were formed by this into a nation. Matthew saw Jesus' going to Egypt and coming back again as proof that He was the New Israel, God's chosen.

What happened to everyone else however is what churns the stomach and makes us ask the difficult questions. Appallingly, Herod murdered the children under two in the region of Bethlehem, to make sure no Messiah was left there, and because he has been outwitted by the Magi (1:16). Why would God allow this? It is difficult, but right, to try to find some balance here. If, as was likely, the population of the region was around 1,000, the murder of around 20 – 30 children was a small matter for Herod, who killed his wife, half the Sanhedrin, 300 court officers, and had all the senior figures of Jerusalem massacred in a stadium when he died himself! Yet none of this justifies what happened in our eyes. Was Jesus' life worth more than these other young children?

Matthew does not reply directly to this, but implicitly, he says 'yes'. However, we must accept that what happened was the evil action of a tyrant, not the responsibility of God, and what Matthew does is to quote scripture in order to make sense of what is otherwise incomprehensible. In verse 18 he quotes from Jeremiah 31:15, which refers to the weeping which accompanied the gathering of God's people in Ramah as the people of Judah were herded together to be taken into Exile (586 BC). However, if you read on, you will find that this passage is not one of mourning, but of mourning removed and replaced with hope. Two verses later on Jeremiah says; 'there is hope for your future, says the Lord; your children shall come back to their own country' (Jer 31:17). As so often when scripture is quoted, we need to know the wider picture to gain a full understanding of what is said! Jeremiah never questioned the suffering of the people of Israel at the time of the Exile, indeed, he endured it himself, but he did point towards the hope of God's salvation and a 'New Covenant' (Jer 31:31ff).

This, however, is Matthew's point. There could be no justification for Herod's cruel actions, but God was at work. Beyond these terrible things it was God's intent to bring His salvation into the world through the Saviour, His Son Jesus. Jesus was special and unique, and this

is why He was saved from Herod's terrible crime; He was saved for our benefit, and we should give thanks.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Have you seen an angel, or had a message from God in a dream? Have you been able to talk to others about it?
2. Do you believe that God has His hand in the events of history today, just as in Jesus' day, or was what happened then special to those days?
3. Do you find the references to the Old Testament helpful or difficult to follow?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The terrible things that happen in the world are often used as an argument against God. Why does He allow terrible things to happen? Sometimes there is little answer to be given, but in the case of the 'slaughter of the innocents' we should not give Satan the pleasure of attacking God for something that was pure evil. The greatest concern at this point of history was for the survival of Jesus, the Messiah, and God's priorities should be our priorities.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *What terrible things are happening in the world around you that you believe to be evil and an affront to the love of God? Whatever you observe, God has an answer, but are you part of the solution? Ask the Lord to show you.*
- *Find out about how children are abused today, and see whether there is anything you can do about this; there may be, or there may not be. Make sure you know what is happening to children throughout the world.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, may we never get up and walk away from the challenges that you have placed before us. Grant us the courage to face the greatest spiritual and physical challenges according to your will, and so show our love for You who first loved us. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. AMEN