



**Rachel Weeps**

**Matthew 1:13-23**

Tragedy. I often open my sermons with something funny; something to light to introduce subjects which are serious. Today I'm not going to do that. I'm going to open what I'm going to say with some figures:

Each year, nearly 15 million children under the age of five die around the world. By that I mean die needlessly of preventable diseases or in wars or civil strife. Usually deaths are easily preventable – by administering vaccinations costing a couple of quid. Or providing clean water which may cost as little as £1000 for a village, or providing basic education on good sanitation and simple health precautions.

It's amazing that in a world where there's more than enough food to feed each person to a good standard that some 40% of children under the age of five in the developing world still suffer from malnutrition. The scandal is that too often food is too expensive for poor families to afford, for no other reason than to protect the economies of richer countries; like ours

Over the last few months we have heard stories in this church from Russia and South Africa of tragedies in the lives of children whose only crime has been to have been born in a society where their needs are not met. Even in our own land we hear tragic stories of children being abused and even killed.

What sort of world do we live in that this can and should happen? The problem is we look down history and see the human race has been committing these atrocities on itself since the dawn of time.

Why doesn't God do something about it? Why has He let this happen for so long? Let me start dealing with this by looking at the relationship God had with the human race at the start:

*Genesis 1: 26 Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground."*

*27 So God created human beings in his own image.  
In the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

*28 Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground." (NIV)*

In other words, God created the human race to be rather like Himself. We were made to have dominion over the planet, to fill it, to govern it, to control nature and the environment. And we've done just that as a species. Govern means just that. We're in charge of this planet and all on it as a race and species. I'd compare it to the tenancy on a property. Whilst you're in it, you're responsible for it. But when the landlord comes to inspect, you're in trouble. But he doesn't do that every day, or every week. Sometimes rarely. We are God's tenants, His occupants, and we have a responsibility for it's right stewardship. And He made sure people had an idea that was expected of them – creation, conscience, His written word. I don't have time to go into this in detail today – perhaps another time.

**1. Humans are responsible for their actions and all have sinned and come short of God's glory**

So why doesn't God jump in every time we screw up. Because He's replaced the responsibility for one another and for this earth into our hands. It's our responsibility and we have the power as a race

and a species to change things and clear up our own messes.

What a great job we made of it! For all our advances, we haven't eradicated suffering through progress – we've inflicted more horrors in the civilised technological age of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that almost all the other centuries put together. We're responsible as a race. Yet in each generation we produce a despot – Robert Mugabe, Saddam Hussein, Pol Pot, Jozef Stalin, Adolf Hitler in living memory.

Why didn't God do something about it? Let me answer that in two ways:

- what did we do to stop it? “All that is required for evil to prosper is for good men to do nothing” - attributed to Edmund Burke – Irish political philosopher 1727-1797. Whether it be on a national scale or whether it be in our private lives, it is easier not to notice and mind our own business than to do something about injustice. Yet God made us to be beings that are just and holy, loving and merciful like Himself – but all have sinned and come short of God's glory. No wonder the world falls short too. God gave this race the responsibility for this world. We still have it until such time God comes for a day of reckoning. And that isn't quite yet
- God HAS DONE something about it. He has left us creation as a model, our conscience and His written word. And – His own people to be a model of good stewardship – an example – and to intercede on behalf of others. People who would call on God to intervene. And as a result He left a presence in the world that could and should make a difference on every scale of human existence.

So if God has done something about it already, what has he done?

## **2. Why doesn't God intervene? He jolly well has!**

Somehow we like the Christmas story to be twee and pleasant. But here in the Christmas story is a very dark element that rarely gets read and could hardly be celebrated – genocide by King Herod. Herod was a pretty ghastly king. He was half-Jewish and kept the Jews sweet by modernising the temple and fortifying Jerusalem. But he knew that the Jews saw him as a foreigner in effect and stamped out opposition, not being afraid to kill anyone who crossed him or challenged his authority. He even had some of his own family murdered. He reminds me of Saddam Hussein. Same scale of despot, same level of murder.

Because he thought he had a rival, the Bible says he enquired diligently of the wise men when the star had appeared then worked out that if he killed all males in Bethlehem under two, he's probably get rid of this rival the wise men sought.

We don't know how many boys were killed. Most scholars would take an educated guess at 20 or 30. But that's still a lot of children. How comes God spared His Son and allowed Herod to have his evil way and kill these children? It doesn't seem just. But then our thoughts start to go towards the millions of children who have died as a result of genocide in our own generation, and the children dying of preventable causes in this world this very day.

Jesus was spared, the children were murdered. Why?

Jesus came into a world where the human race is responsible for itself. He came straight into the injustice that caused a child to be born into less than perfect conditions. His family experienced immediately what happens in every generation – an evil king and genocide of innocents. It wasn't just those 30 Herod had killed – he was responsible for thousands of deaths. But before we stand in judgement on Herod, let's remember that we can be as bad. It's our society that has contributed directly and is contributing still to major conflicts in the world, starvation in other parts of the world, greed that has collapsed the financial system and causes hardships to the poor. We are part of that society and we are responsible.

So why did God spare Jesus on this occasion? Matthew's quoting of Jeremiah 31 gives us the answer here.

***15 Thus did the Lord say: A voice of lamentation and weeping and mourning was heard in Rama; Rachel did not want to stop weeping for her sons, because they are not. NETS***

He takes us back to a time some 580 years previous where the invading Babylonians invaded the Bethlehem area and took away the children and young men into Babylon. Near Bethlehem was Ramah where Rachel, the wife of Israel (Jacob) was buried. You can still visit her tomb near Bethlehem. It seemed an awful fate for these young people who seemed to have had nothing to do with the sins of Judah that caused their nation to be destroyed by Babylon. But Matthew knew what came next. He understood the context of the passage.

*16 Thus did the Lord say: Let your voice cease from weeping, and your eyes from tears, because there is a wage for your works, and they shall come back from a land of enemies; 17 there will be permanence for your children. NETS*

Those young people taken away were to become the vanguard of the return. Out of the tragedy of human sinfulness and injustice God was going to do something amazing. The people that came back from Babylon laid the foundations of a strong faith in restored Judah.

Yes, the slaughter of the innocents was a wicked act, but out of the sin of evil men, God was going to bring something good out of it.

Jesus was spared – what for – to die. His was a road of suffering that led to the cross. A suffering that would make a difference to countless millions of men and women down the history of the last 2000 years. Out of the minuses, God was going to produce pluses. Jesus was spared on that occasion yes, but He's not escape death – that was His destiny.

*William Willimon: If love, God's love, is to come down to us, not to angels, but to us, there is going to be some pain in it, yes, and blood too. Someone will get hurt, for we are very hurtful in our loves and hates. If our allegiances are to be dethroned, it will not be pretty. We hold on tight to our gods, and will not let them go without their being pulled from us. At Bethlehem we see a prelude to events later at a place called Calvary. The one called King of the Jews goes head-to-head with our kings and kingdoms, and there is pain, and violence, weeping and blood. All for us and our salvation. All in the name of love.*

And because of His death and resurrection, God has through His people and the Holy Spirit's power have made a massive difference to the lives of countless millions of people and the history of the world. Because in standing as witness to Christ, we as God's people have been that channel God has used to bring His light and life into the world. You don't have to look back far into history to see that Christians were at the heart of major social reforms in this country. In many ways it's so sad that the church these days stands back rather than is at the cutting edge of our society.

And when we see injustice and suffering in our society and world – well God's people have been at the vanguard of that too. When we see the rule of despots, so often we also see a church that's ineffective in its society – not lovers of mercy and justice.

So God has done it again. He's acted in this world and made the responsibility of bringing His love and His kingdom into a lost world using human beings – us, His people. Injustice and evil men still have sway in this world and the question we must ask ourselves is – what in the power of God's Spirit are we doing? What could we do? Bring them salvation is the most obvious thing – but actually we live in one of the most powerful and influential nations in the world. It's a democratic country. We have a voice and we can use it. For the sake of the innocents – who are still there and still being slaughtered by evil men, we need to meet felt needs and bring them Jesus.

I'm going to finish with a story that's been going around our emails in the last few weeks. I first heard it a few years ago. It's just a story but the point it makes goes to the heart of the issue here.

*The Atheist Barber: A minister and an atheist barber were walking through the seedy part of their city. As they saw the suffering around them, the barber said "This is why I could never believe in a God of love. If he is as kind as they say, why doesn't he do something about all this crime, disease, poverty, drug-dealing and vandalism?"*

*The minister said nothing until they came across an unkempt and filthy man with hair down his back and far too much stubble on his face. The minister said to the atheist: "You can't be a very good barber, or you wouldn't let people live around here without a haircut and a shave."*

*More than a little offended, the barber answered: "Why blame me for that man's condition? I can't*

***help it if he's like that! He's never given me a chance! If he'd only come to my shop, I could fix him up and make him look respectable."***

***The minister replied: "Then don't blame God for the condition of these people. They've never given God a chance. If they would only come to him, he would fix them up and turn their lives around."***

**At the moment it lies with people's choice as to whether they accept Christ – and Christians' choice whether they follow Him and do something about a lost world.. But a complete reckoning is going to come to the whole of our race one day. Until that time, evil and suffering may be there – but the way of by which people are rescued from it is there too.**

**How can I sum this up. I'll give you this quote I found somewhere:**

***Even though God is completely powerful, he has not yet removed suffering and evil from the picture. He's waiting...Waiting for as long as possible, to give as many people as possible the opportunity to make their peace with him....Seize the day...***

*Preached by Mark Reid  
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Scripture Quotes as marked.*