

Why did they have to die? That's one of the main questions – maybe the main question – that our text provokes as we read it. Why did all those little boys have to die? It's a hard question, an unpleasant one to think through. But we do think through it, both because the Bible brings it up and also because we still have these sorts of tragic questions in our own lives today. Yet as we go to God's Word, we'll find that even in the midst of such horrible tragedies as the martyrdom of the little boys of Bethlehem, God still brings forth good.

Right up front, we have to acknowledge that there are things which God allows and does that we cannot fully comprehend. The Lord tells us this in clear and plain words throughout Scripture. For example, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Or another, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"

God is holy, perfect in power, love, wisdom, and knowledge. We are creations, limited in our wisdom and knowledge. And on top of that, our wisdom, knowledge, and every other aspect has been corrupted by sin, reduced and twisted from what it was originally created to be.

At times, we simply have to confess with Job as he cries out to God about things he doesn't understand: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

But all suffering, both in the Bible and in our own lives, isn't a total mystery. There are lessons the Lord teaches, both of discipline and rebuke and also of comfort and assurance, when these things befall us. One of these is a reminder of why Jesus came, a reminder of just how terrible sin and wickedness truly are.

Herod is a clear example of this evil and how awful it is. He has been made "King of the Jews" by a decree of the Roman Senate. And even more that the Senate, it is ultimately God who has placed Herod in power. Scripture says, "For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." As one given authority by God, Herod was to use it to praise good and punish evil, to defend the weak and innocent, to seek the welfare of those under him.

But what does Herod use his power and authority to do? To serve himself, to keep power and authority even at the expense of those under him. When a perceived threat to his power arises, a Child whom magi declare to be the true "King of the Jews," Herod uses his authority to try to destroy that Child. And if all the boys of Bethlehem and the surrounding region have to die to make sure the one Child is killed, then Herod will gladly give that order. This is the evil Christ came to defeat.

This evil has its source in sin and the devil, who is the prince of all those who do not serve the Lord. At other times, the devil has had those in his grasp massacre the innocent to try to stop God's plans. Herod has a parallel in the Pharaoh of Exodus, who orders the killing of all Hebrew boys, drowning them in the Nile in an effort to weaken the people and keep them in slavery. In Revelation, the scope of this conflict is seen in the great dragon who tries to kill the Child of the woman – Jesus –

and then after his failure to do this goes on to make continual war of the rest of the woman's children – those who believe in Jesus.

The devil hates Christians because they are connected to Christ. He hates all people, because all people are made in the image of God – something he was not made in. He knows that he is bound for the lake of fire and sulfur, but in pride and wrath he desires to bring as many men and women down there with him as he can, and inflict horrible suffering on those who follow Christ rather than him. Consider what the Church is enduring in Nigeria, where whole villages are burned, men and women are massacred, and children are kidnapped.

The devil especially hates children. He hates children because children remind him of the Child who was born and crushed his head, who took away his power, who broke down the gates of his dark domain and bound him. It's the devil who was behind the brutal practices of the Canaanites who burned their children alive on metal idols, or Romans who discarded unwanted children on hills outside their city. It is the devil who is behind the killing of millions and millions of unborn children in our own country, an average of just over three thousand a day in 2024, sacrificed on the altar of adult desires and goals, discarded and dismembered because they aren't wanted.

And the attacks of the devil and sin include things even more "ordinary," though those who suffer them feel anything but ordinary. Deaths in accidents, senseless violence, miscarriages. Death from illness, and old age. All around, death lays claim to those we know and love.

But in the midst of all that sorrow and pain and tragedy, and important truth remains: God's plan is not stopped. Herod goes to insanely wicked lengths to try to stop the prophesied King of the Jews from coming. But for all his rage and evil, Herod cannot thwart God's will.

God knows Herod's plan before it comes, and so He sends one of His holy angels to warn Joseph. Joseph – a wonderful example of faith and obedience – immediately gets Mary and Jesus and flees for Egypt. The family is provided for by God through the rich gifts of the magi, which would've allowed them to drop everything and start up anew in Egypt. God has also caused the Romans to conquer both places – Egypt and Judea – so that the family's move is no more difficult than moving from Wyoming to Texas.

This was all arranged beforehand by the Lord, who foretold it in prophecy, as St. Matthew quotes from Hosea: "Out of Egypt I called my son." The Holy Family is sheltered in Egypt just as the family of Jacob – the twelve tribes – were sheltered there as well. And they will be brought out when the Lord knows is right.

The devil doesn't cease fighting against God when his pawn Herod fails. He will try all sorts of schemes and plots, from tempting Jesus to getting Jesus' hometown folks to try to stone Him to pressuring Jesus through His own family to stop His ministry. Eventually it will seem like he succeeded, having the Jewish Sanhedrin falsely convict Jesus of blasphemy and getting them to pressure the Roman governor into crucifying Him.

As Jesus hangs there on the cross, it will seem like it was all over. His mother, who had carried Him out of the house in the darkness to escape Herod all those years before, will watch in sorrow as her

Son dies in agony. Even His closest disciples will sadly say, “We had hoped that He was the one to redeem Israel.”

And yet, as we thankfully know, this was the plan all along. God had decreed through His servants the prophets that His Christ would be the atoning sacrifice for sin. As Isaiah had declared, “Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.”

The devil thought he was stopping God’s will, but he had actually been used by God to bring it about! In Scripture, the Lord had declared beforehand His death and resurrection, and the devil and all the forces of hell had been powerless to stop it. God’s plan of salvation had not been stopped, because it could not be stopped.

By that plan, Jesus had gone to the cross to defeat sin and death for all people. He had bled and died so that all who were given faith in Him might live forever. Because of Jesus, all those little boys – and all Christians – will live forever. It had been a horrible, awful thing when Herod’s soldiers massacred the children of Bethlehem. Yet by a power greater than anything Herod, or even the devil, could imagine, the Lord God used the soldiers’ swords to bring those children into glory.

That’s revealed through the prophet Jeremiah. He foretold the awful grief that would be felt by those mothers, holding their dead children, weeping in Ramah and refusing to be comforted. And yet right after that he declares this promise: “Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country.”

The Almighty God brought the children back from the grave, from the land of the enemy who is Satan and death, and instead carried them up to the glory of paradise, the country which God has prepared for all who love and trust in Him. Their blood had been shed by evil men, but the Child who was born among them covered their sins with His own precious blood. They were cleansed by Him, credited with His righteousness, blessed with His life.

We call them the Holy Innocents, not only because they were martyred in innocence, but because their loving God blessed them with the perfect innocence of His Son. Those infants and children now stand around the throne of the Child, singing His praises for bringing them through death into life everlasting.

This is the comfort granted to all who believe in Jesus while suffering in this life. When our brothers and sisters in Christ in Nigeria and around the world have their blood shed by the wicked, whatever pain they endure at the end is immediately gone, replaced by joy and gladness that go beyond description. The servants of Satan who kill them become unwitting tools of the Lord, being used by Him to bring His saints to glory.

When the life of an unborn child ends before he or she even draws a first breath, whether it is happens through intentional wickedness or completely unknown reasons, God is merciful and loving,

declaring that He has not made any person for the purpose of destruction. And in the case of Christians, we have even more comfort, as that child has heard the Word of God while his mother sat in church, just as John the Baptist leapt with faith at hearing Mary's greeting to his mother Elizabeth. Babies of Christians are prayed for by the Church, and God hears those prayers, looking on those children in love.

And God looks in love on all of His people when He calls them out of this life. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints," as the Psalm so wonderfully declares. Be they nine months or ninety-nine years old, God never flippantly or lightly brings His people to the door of death. But again, because of Jesus, death is not the end, but the door to paradise.

This is hard for those of us who remain, because we don't get to go through that door with them, or see them on the other side – yet. For a little while, we must be apart. But for Christians, it's only for a little while. This life, be it measured in weeks or decades, is a blip when compared to eternity.

We weep with Rachel when our loved ones are no longer with us. But God comforts us, drying our tears and reminding us that they are not gone, but are in their own country, which God has prepared for them – and for us.

The day is coming when we will meet those boys of Bethlehem around the throne of God. We will sing the Lord's praises in a new song with our loved ones who fell asleep trusting in Jesus. We will rejoice that, though the Lord's ways were beyond our understanding in this short life, the riches and joys and peace that He has prepared for those who love Him are even farther beyond description, and they will last forever.

In the holy name of Jesus, amen.