

Christmas Eve (?)

Circa 2005

The following was seems to have been a Christmas Eve sermon given somewhere around 2005 are Reformed Baptist Church of Northern Colorado.

It was adapted from KLAAS SCHILDER's, "The Weeping of Rachel: MATTHEW 2:17,18." Preached December 29, 1918 at Vlaardingen, The Netherlands.

At Christmas time celebrate new birth, Christ's birth! It is a festival of happiness, of hope, new life, giving gifts as the Magi gave, of remembering the time when God came down in the most personal way imaginable: a human child. Christians and interestingly enough non-Christians gladly sing the songs of baby Jesus lying in a manger. But what makes unbelievers sing about Christ? Perhaps they suppose there is nothing in his birth that confronts them with their own sin. He is the safe child and can be kept at a distance. Cute enough to hug. Placid enough not to threaten

Yet, Matthew's account of the Christmas story tells us not only of singing, but also of weeping and mourning. Perhaps all of our cookies and presents have overlooked that this little child, even while cooing vulnerably in a manger is still able to confront our sin and expose our need for a savior. (Luke 2:11) **For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.**

How strange it is that at the very time of greatest cheer on earth, as angels are shouting for joy; Rachel – wife of Jacob and personified as

Israel mourns for the death of her children. And remember, we speak in Matthew not of the historical Rachel, but Rachel as an image, personified in the people of Jesus' day.

Happiness and weeping? So it always is where God comes down – some will refuse to be comforted and will continue in their sorrow, even when **glad tiding of great joy** are heralded loudly in their ears.

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"A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."

As Messiah enters this world crying, many other babes are silenced, the unfortunate victims of hatred against God. "How can it be," someone might ask, "that the birth of the King would bring so much trouble upon Israel? This isn't the way it is supposed to happen. He is to be born a great king, high and exalted to rule over and **protect his people on all sides from their enemies.**" It might thus be suspected that no salvation could come from this child in the manger, for his coming does not bring peace, but

murder. In fact, it might be supposed by some that his birth was an unfavorable and **disastrous omen**, as Christ has kindled a stronger flame of cruelty than usually burns amid the most seasoned and longstanding wars.

But here we see in the fullness of time something mysterious that the world is not able to bear. Fleshly Israel is put to death; spiritual Israel is raised to life. **In the horrible murder of the children in Bethlehem is the revolution of God.** While Herod the Great becomes a new Pharaoh, killing all males under two years of age, God is hiding his new Moses in the same land he hid the first Moses, Egypt.

All revolutions bring trouble for a season. And still there is comfort here for us: the beginning of the holy dominion. We must understand that clearly. **“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. Saith your God”** (Isa 40:1). Isaiah’s servant brings comfort to his people. But this dominion, this kingdom of God and the peace he brings, also brings with it our violent reactions. Herod tries to stop God’s kingdom from usurping his own. **Rachel will not be comforted.** A mother of Israel will not see the good in the evil.

Rachel mourning for her children is a prophecy that Matthew gets from Jeremiah. But **where did Jeremiah come by it?** We again might find ourselves wondering **how it is legitimate for prophets and Apostles to look into basic history and “create” some prophecy out of nothing?** How can the life of Rachel be justifiably taken in any way prophetic for Jeremiah or Matthew? How can the NT writers and the prophets of old get away with such bad hermeneutical principles, turning someone’s life into a prophecy? The answer is, it is legitimate our only conclusion can be, because God has ordained the history of sinful Israel to be fulfilled perfectly and faithfully in the life of Jesus Christ. We don’t see anything we want in biblical history. But we must see Christ.

Three times in Scripture, Rachel’s tears are mentioned: in **Genesis**, in **Jeremiah** and in **Matthew**. Her tears are bookends of history. **Rachel’s tears begin with the start of a nation and end with the fulfillment of the promises in a little baby.** Her tears first flowed when the promise of the seed of Abraham was given. For Rachel is not to be the mother of Christ. Leah is. Rachel’s tears flow last when the promise to Abraham’s seed was

fulfilled. Christ is born. Yet, her tears are not of joy, but sadness.

Rachel was Jacob's love, the apple of his eye. He served his uncle Laban seven years in order to marry her. But his uncle, taking a page out of the deceiver's (for that is what Jacob means) book, tricks Jacob, and on his wedding night brings Rachel's older sister Leah to his tent. Jacob is forced to work another seven years (fourteen in all) for his wicked uncle, just so Rachel can be his. And so starts the jealousy and treachery of the house of Jacob. Rachel's entry is the beginning of Jacob's troubles, two sisters vying for the love of Israel. One bears children but is not loved. The other bears no children and becomes jealous of her sister.

Rachel is the weeping wife. She knew this: "I am Jacob's chosen. I am exalted above Leah because he loves me." She has a strong compulsion to grin and gloat over her sister. She will avenge the deceit of her father. However God worked things differently. God's choice was not Jacob's choice. He withheld the child-blessing from Rachel and she remained childless.

Leah goes into Jacob's tent and has four boys: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Rachel is barren. The promised Messiah will not come from her body. Jacob will bless Judah and the seed will come from him. "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his" (Genesis 49:10).

Rachel weeps. And Rachel retaliates. She shakes her fist at Jacob and his God. "Give me children or I die," she says. Rachel finds her worth is being a fruitful wife. But what of God? She gives her maidservant to Jacob and Billah conceives. To Billah is born Dan, whose name means vindicated; and Naphtali, whose name means struggle, for Rachel struggled with her sister and thought she had won.

But the children are not Rachel's and Leah is allowed to give birth to two more sons. Asher and Issachar. And Rachel is still barren.

But once Rachel is humbled long enough, God remembers her. He opens her womb. And she gives birth to Joseph. Joseph, clothed in the beautiful garment of many colors. Joseph, who like Christ, is sent to Egypt and

will later save his brothers. **But Joseph is only like Christ, he is not the right lineage.** Still, Rachel dreams of a wonderful life with her husband and her son. For a moment, her weeping becomes laughter. Joseph is *her* son. And at his birth, Rachel cries out to God, “**God has taken away my disgrace. May the Lord add to me another son.**”

God hears her cry and answers her prayer. He opens Rachel’s womb one more time. But the fulfillment of Rachel’s wish would bring an unforeseen disaster. Be careful what you pray for. For it is ordained that Rachel must die. This time, her laughter will once more turn to sorrow. Another son is born to her. But something goes terribly wrong in birth. Rachel will not make it. As her soul departs, she looks upon the little child. Her weak mouth forms wispy words. “What do you say, Rachel?” someone asks. Listen! She stammers out the name of the child: “**Ben-Oni!**” **Son of my sorrow.**

That name is the summary of Rachel's life. Her sorrow completely fills her in her death. **She has desired children in order to glory in them.** Not to glory in God and his grace, but in her own goodness as a fruitful wife

for Jacob. And now—now she may scarcely present her sons next to Leah's, and she has to leave. "Thus I have suffered in vain! **Ben-Oni**.

Thus Rachel dies—not with the smile of faith, but with the tears of a disillusioned life. This is the last word that we know of her. **Rachel's tears!** How great they are! And how heartbreaking. Who understands them? **Not her children**—they are too young; **not Leah**; **not Jacob** apparently. After all, he alters her last will. He changes the name. Not Ben Oni, son of my sorry; but Benjamin: son of my right hand. Jacob will not hold the tears of Rachel in a bottle.

Then do her tears go with her to the grave? The tears of Rachel make an impression on us who read about the situation. **Ben-Oni—that is not a confession of faith, but a confession of pain.** Rachel is the first mother in Scripture who dies giving birth to her child. Her deathbed is soaked in tears. Yet, she remains standing in Israel. A special memorial is erected by her husband. One who considers Rachel's grave considers Rachel's tears. Is this why Jacob is so carefully concerned with Rachel's grave? “**Over her**

tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb" (Genesis 35:20).

Jeremiah

The weeping of Rachel is relevant in all times, especially similar times of sorrow. Hence, the prophet Jeremiah will not let the story of Rachel escape the mind. Jeremiah and Rachel—the prophet of tears and the mother of tears. Not unjustly have people named Jeremiah the prophet of tears in the era of tears. For example, we read, "I am broken with the breaking of the daughter of my people" (Jer. 8:21). "Oh that my head was water; my eye a fountain of tears; thus I might weep day and night for those of my people who are slain" (Jer. 9:1). We read again (9:17bff.): "Call the women mourners; they must commence wailing . . . that our eyes may run down with tears and our eyelids may spout water." And in Jeremiah 13:17, it states: "If you do not hearken, then my soul shall weep in hidden places; my eye shall weep bitter tears; yea, tears shall run down." To conclude with one more, we read in Jeremiah 14:17: "My eyes shall run down with tears day and night, and not cease." Jeremiah has written

the songs of Lamentations—one song of tears in which he curses his birthday. Is it any wonder then that Jeremiah thinks about Rachel?

Laughter forgets laughter, but tears do not forget tears. So it is that Jeremiah speaks about Rachel's tears. He pictures the misery. The ten tribes—the dominion of Ephraim—have been led captive. All ten tribes are called here: Ephraim; and Ephraim is a son of Joseph. Furthermore, if you remember, Joseph is a son of Rachel. Consequently, Rachel's children are those being led captive.

The writer puts matters as if Rachel rose again from the grave. She cries on high from Ramah. She sees her children gone into exile—her children. Even now, she has no portion in Israel. God has forsaken her children. She has borne children in vain. In her life, she wept over Benjamin, Ben-Oni. Currently, Benjamin is bound to Judah's fate (Benjamin's tribe settled in the land directly north of Judah) and is still not exiled. But that shall very quickly come to pass also.

But why is she crying? For her tears are surrounded by hope on all sides. Though Ephraim must suffer for a

time, it will not be forever. Jeremiah 31 is pure gospel, except for this verse about Rachel weeping. God is going to restore the fortunes of Ephriam. “I will build you up again... there will be a day when watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephriam, “Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.” “Sing with joy for Jacob.” “Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears... they will return from the land of the enemy.” “Is not Ephriam my dear son, the child in whom I delight?” Yet Rachel does not trust this soothing consolation and instead refuses to be comforted. With fleshly eyes all she can see is that her children are no more. National Israel is led captive and there is no hope, for we had put our hope in the nation. As the historical Rachel did not live to see her sons escape destruction, so this personification of Rachel cannot hope to see the captivity ended.

Matthew

Rachel's tears are named a third time—in Matthew. Rachel's affliction is then fulfilled: "Then is fulfilled, that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet, saying: 'Rachel mourns her children and would not be

comforted.'" Her pain is made full. Her despair has risen to the top.

The occasion is famous! It is a gruesome story—the murder of children in Bethlehem. Weeping mothers in Bethlehem! Sorrow beyond compare. "Well now," says Matthew, "Don't you see it? If Rachel saw it, she would cry again. Just as the pain of Rachel lived again in Jeremiah's days and inflicted itself newly on the prophet, so it does at present."

The disappointment of Rachel with her death is also present. The same pain which Rachel lived through is present. By her death, she has borne children for sorrow. In Jeremiah's day, she bore children for sorrow. In Bethlehem's fields, she has borne children for sorrow.

The Origin of Rachel's Weeping

But here we reach a **most curious difficulty**. For Jeremiah, Rachel is weeping because Ephriam is her grandson. It is right for a mother to weep for her children. But for Matthew, it is Bethlehem's children that are slain. But **Bethlehem is the territory of Judah, of Leah, not of Rachel**. And Ramah is over the border. Why is it

that Rachel must weep? What about Leah? The picture is that Rachel is looking out from her own land (for Ramah is in fact in Benjamin, just a few miles north of Bethlehem) and weeping over Leah's children, though the text says they are "her" children, Rachel's children! Don't overlook this, as if it is perfectly natural for Rachel to weep over the death of her sister's children, while their own mother remains silent.

Thus we see that Rachel is not crying *as a mother* for her children. That is impossible. We must seek another explanation. The question is only resolved in the judgment that Matthew himself gives. Matthew actually refers us back to Jeremiah. Who is the One that will bring Ephraim back? It is Christ. Christ who comes through Judah. But Rachel has no eye for Christ, at least not here.

What is Rachel's weeping over, properly speaking? It is a weeping from self-interest. She wants children for children's sake; not to establish God's will. Rachel has committed a great sin. She has resisted the spiritual seed, she does not cry over Christ, but over fleshly Israel. Rachel's children, are children born the natural way, not

the way of the promise. And she can only mourn for them.

So we come to our second thought—the origin of the weeping. She weeps about children. She mourns children. Children! that is everything to her. In this way Rachel is a type, a symbol of one who will not spare her own glory. **Was it wrong, that longing for children?** Surely it is exactly in the children-blessing that the power of the promise is found. Children were promised by God. But why? **For Christ's desire.** "In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed," God told Abraham. God spoke about the spiritual seed. Hence the children were God's honor. All those born in Jacob's tent must serve God. As his promise is fulfilled, all proceeds well.

But Rachel does not know this. She has no eye for Christ in the tent. She serves her own self, as in the game with the household gods. Remember! Faithless Rachel stole her own father's gods as she fled from him. And, she hid *them in her tent*. **Who is in Rachel's tent? Not Christ, but other gods.** The children Rachel mourns are for her sake and her own honor is at the center.

In reality, Rachel has only a view to the fleshly childhood. Rachel has a temporal love in her children. In them, she has a self-love. **She buries the advent-notion under feminine greed and envy. She weeps as the temporal perishes. She has no eye for the eternal.**

It is true with her deathbed. It is true in Jeremiah's days. It is true here. The child-slaughter in Bethlehem is a warning of the falling of fleshly Israel and the rising of spiritual Israel.

The children themselves surely stand outside the center. Though many sermons would make the children's death the center and would make Rachel a hero, that would miss the point. For if Herod, or even innocent dying children are the point – **what of Christ?** God sees that Israel as a fleshly people exists for Christ's sake; that those in Jacob's tent bear children, not for Jacob, not for Rachel, but only for Christ. And that is the notion that Rachel does not accept.

The Passion of Rachel's Weeping

We finally see the passion of her tears: "**Rachel will not be comforted.**" The weeping mothers in Bethlehem—

the passionate wailing: it is prophecy and immediate fulfillment. Fulfilling Rachel's passion, they are also incapable of comfort. The prophecy of Judaism weeping; for her children are dying. The honor of their God is not sounded this day; rather a bitter lamentation. That is portrayed in the weeping of the mothers.

Leah's tears can be dried. She also did not weep in Jeremiah's days, for when the temporal perishes, she takes comfort in the eternal, in the gospel of restoration. But who shall comfort Rachel? Beyond that which is bound to perish, she said nothing. The heart of the matter is that Rachel could only appropriate to herself the fruits of religious life instead of glorying in God.

Rachel's trail of tears is not ended. It is frequently retraced. We naturally think about mothers who have lost a child. And our text this morning is not meant to mock this terrible pain. What Herod did was a terrible sin. And the mothers of these children rightfully mourn. Yet, this is still not the main thought of the text. Rather, it is only a slight application. The chief matter is the sin of preserving and cherishing our flesh when God comes to crucify it.

Rachel's pain is yet in the world. It lives in Judaism. It cannot forgive Jesus that the children are dead for the sake of his will. Many also outside of Judaism cry Rachel's tears. If Jesus takes something away, they cry and stamp their feet. Rachel's pain is a crisis for many because we all suffer with Rachel's illness.

When evil comes, we refuse to be comforted. **Note well—we do not refuse to comfort ourselves; rather we refuse *to be* comforted.** We are thankful to be angry. And our anger lashes out at God. When the Christ child comes, suffering also comes; for you cannot hope to deal with your sin other than by crucifixion and death. Yet, what do *you* cry most for? Christ asks the sacrifice. If you push yourself to the forefront, he puts you to the side. He does that when you hold to the flesh rather than the Spirit.

Do you know Rachel's sorrow? Because you recognize Rachel's sin as your own? How is the crisis in your life? Has it humbled you or hardened you? **Do you remain in Rachel's sorrow? Rachel will not be comforted. She will not relinquish her own honor. At this point, punishment is sealed and it gets worse.**

In Genesis, we see Rachel die and her children live. Our joy makes the sting possible. In Jeremiah we read that Rachel's children go into exile. Our joy departs from us. In Matthew, it happens that our joy dies.

God shall wipe all tears from the eyes—except Rachel's tears. She does not want that. She dies in anguish. Do you conquer Rachel's sorrow? Do you allow yourself comforting? If you see God's counsel in Christ, put the eternal over the temporal, serving God and not your own honor.

Most today do not think that the Christ in the manger has any hold on their life. He is the cute, lovable baby wrapped in a blanket— not the king with power to overthrow nations. Secular radio stations play his songs throughout the season. It is too easy to make the child in our image. Not too demanding. Not too holy. Not too glorious. Not too deadly. Unless we let the text of Scripture speak to us through the corridors of time. This makes us question our assumptions of the little child. We can now understand why wise men bowed low before him. With his birth he must put an end to sin. And this only comes through death. What will we weep for?

Yet, there is still something else he brings: the laughter of Sarah. Not the unbelieving laughter, but the believing laughter. *The Lord has made me laugh*. There was melancholy and laughter; a quiet tear and a happy laugh. From this, Christ is born! The two intersect in Mary.

Mary! She is the anti-image of the non-comforted Rachel. Rachel weeps and weeps and weeps. She cannot stand gospel-preaching because she does not want to receive comfort. But Mary is able to elicit the word of comfort for us because she desires to be comforted. And those who are able to understand Mary's tears are able because they have understood the tears of her great Son. The ministry of comfort is heard from her mouth. The same ministry she heard from her Son; the same which she directs on behalf of this Son to the weeping mothers. *“Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears... They will return from the land of the enemy (Jer. 31:16)... there is hope for your future declares the Lord. (vs. 17). Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him, declares the Lord...(vs.*

20). How long will you wander, O unfaithful daughter? The God will create a new thing on earth- a woman will surround a mighty man.” (vs. 22) What new thing you ask? Be it none other than the Messiah, the baby born on Christmas. The comfort of his people.