



D. Todd Cravens
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When Providence is Painful

Scripture: Matthew 2:16-23

Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Providence, Fulfillment, Prophecy

Introduction

We are in our fifth week of our sermon series through the Gospel of Matthew. Last week we met the Gentile wise men, from Arabia or Babylon, who traveled a great distance to find the newborn Jewish king. The arrival of these foreign men in Jerusalem stirred king Herod and the whole city also. It was revealed that the word of God foretold that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem. These Gentile wise men were determined to find and worship this new king, but apparently no one else in all of Jerusalem was so determined. Herod expressed a desire to worship the new king, but he was pretending. He asked the wise men to report back to him after they found the royal boy and sent them off to Bethlehem.

The supernatural star that started them on this journey then led them to the very house that contained the child they sought. These Gentile men joyfully entered and bowed before young Jesus and worshiped him. That night they were then warned in a dream that Herod's words to them were false and his motivations were evil, so they did not return to Herod, but instead returned home by a different way. Joseph was also warned in a dream of Herod's murderous intentions. The angel of the Lord told him to rise immediately and flee to Egypt to save the child from Herod. Joseph obeyed. That is where we ended last week.

This morning, we turn our attention to the last half of chapter two, which focuses on the final two events surrounding the first year or two of Jesus' life. These events are hard and forces us to consider what we are to do **when God's providence is painful**.

Both of these events are explained in reference to the fulfillment of God's word (2:17, 23). Both of these events are difficult. Both involve suffering of varying degrees. However, either of these events surprised God, but rather they each unfolded under the sovereign oversight and direction of God. He governed these painful events directed them according to his providential plan that fulfilled his purposes.

This means that Christians are called to keep their faith and trust in God *when his providence is painful* and even when we cannot fully see his all of his purposes. How does the last half of this chapter do this? Let's look at these two events.

Bereavement in Bethlehem (v.16-18)

The first event results from Herod's fury when he discovered that the wise men were wiser than he expected and didn't return to tell him where this newborn king was. Thus, in his fear of any threat to the legitimacy of his reign, aiming to kill the young king, Herod commanded the death of all boys aged two and under who lived in and around Bethlehem. This painful event fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah (v.17).

Relocation to Nazareth (v.19-23)

The second event takes place after Herod's death. The angel of the Lord, who commanded Joseph to flee to Egypt now commands him to leave Egypt and return to Judea. Joseph obeys, but he is forced to relocate to the town of Nazareth, which is the last place he wanted to settle down. This relocation and redirection also "fulfilled what was spoken by the prophets" (v.23).

The Doctrine of Providence

The fact that both of these events involve suffering and hardship and that both of these events fulfilled part of God's plan, forces us to consider the doctrine of providence. Before we consider it, we must first define it.

The doctrine of providence is the teaching of Scripture that affirms not only did God long ago create¹ all things, but also that he presently sustains² all things (i.e. keeps them existing), and actively cooperates³ with and directs⁴ all things so that they ultimately accomplish and fulfill all his purposes for which he created them in first place.⁵

The doctrine of Providence

- 1) God created all things,
- 2) presently sustains all things,
- 3) actively cooperates with and directs all things
- 4) so that they fulfill all his purposes

¹ Gen. 1:1-31; Jn. 1:3.

² Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:17; Acts 17:28; 2 Ptr. 3:7; Neh. 9:6.

³ Eph. 1:1; Ps. 22:28; 75:6-7; 104:10, 14, 19, 27; 135:7; 139:16; 148:8; Job 12:23; 37:6-13; 38:12, 22-30; Prov. 16:9, 33; 21:1; Dan. 4:34-35; Jer. 10:23.

⁴ Ps. 103:19; Dan. 4:35; Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:11; Rom. 8:28.

⁵ This is my definition which has been modified from Wayne Grudem's found in Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 315.

In summary, we might say that the Bible teaches us that there is divine purpose in all the pain that his people experience. Some of those purposes he reveals to us, while many of them he does not. God is not obligated to reveal any of his purposes to us, since the penalty of our sin has completely removed from us the right to ask anything God. (This is why when we go to God so ask things of him [i.e. when we pray], we go to him in the name of Jesus because only Jesus has the right to ask the Father.) However, because God is gracious and merciful, he nevertheless does reveal to his much of his ways and work in this world.

Deuteronomy 29:29 (ESV) “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

God reveals enough to sustain our faith in him, but he does not reveal so much that faith and trust are no longer required, since “without faith it is impossible to please Him” (Heb. 11:6). Thus, when it comes to understanding the reasons behind your suffering, you will never have all of your questions answered, but He will give you enough to sustain your faith in Him.

The primary question is, are you one of his covenant children. The hope that we will consider today only applies to those who are in a relationship with God through Jesus. Are you in a real, living relationship with him? Have you received his Holy Spirit? Are you a believer in God through Jesus Christ? Have you surrendered—fully and completely—your life to king Jesus of the Jews? This is the central question you must answer today. Apart from Jesus, there is neither hope of salvation nor hope of experiencing the sustaining grace he gives to his children as we walk through suffering.

Bereavement in Bethlehem (v.16-18)

We begin with a part of the Christmas story that we almost never hear when the Christmas story is read or retold.

Matthew 2:16-23 (ESV) ¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

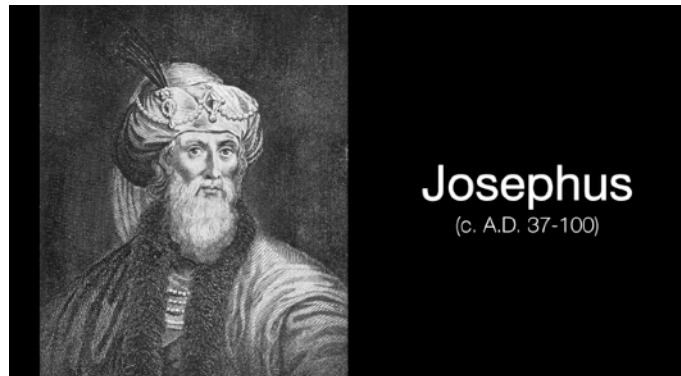
¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”

This story is terribly tragic, but Matthew shines light on the **providence** of God in that this sad event was spoken of beforehand through the prophet Jeremiah. God foresaw that this would

happen, instructed Jeremiah to speak of it, and thus intended to communicate his purposes through it. But what might those purposes be?

Scholarly Doubters

Before answering that question, we should note that some scholars believe this never really happened, but was rather that it was made up by Matthew. It boggles my mind as to why Matthew would ever dream up something like this. Many scholars doubt the truthfulness of this event because Josephus (c. A.D. 37-100), a first century Jewish historian who wrote extensively about Herod the Great, did not mention this event. While it is true that Josephus did not mention this event, he does reveal enough about Herod's character to easily understand that such a horrific command could have easily been given by such a king as Herod.



Josephus records that Herod was a brutally murderous king. Herod married 10 wives, each of whom gave birth to a son. As soon as the 10 princes were old enough to understand that only one of them could follow Herod as king, they began plotting against one another with attempted poisonings.⁶ Herod suspected his favorite wife, Mariamne, of infidelity and treason and ordered her to be murdered. Not long after that he murdered his mother-in-law as well. He executed three of his own sons for treason, ordered the high priest to be drowned, murdered several cousins, a couple of uncles, and just before his death he ordered his troops to arrest hundreds of Jewish leaders from across the country and "sequester them in the stadium in Jericho," where upon his death they were to be executed so that there would be mourning in the land when the king died⁷ because he knew that no one would mourn his death. Herod executed anyone who threatened his reign, thus it is easily conceivable that he would command the execution of baby boys in Bethlehem.

Perhaps Not Recorded Because Not Known

Perhaps Josephus did not mention this event because he did not know about it. Bethlehem, at the time, was a insignificant and small town of no more than about one thousand people, and perhaps even as few as 300.⁸ Given that population, that would mean that there were only about two dozen or so children age two or under, with roughly half of them being male, thus at

⁶ Paul Maier in an interview with Tony Reinke available at <https://tonyreinke.com/2014/12/14/the-christmas-massacre-of-the-innocents-history-or-myth/> accessed 13 October 2022.

⁷ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 57.

⁸ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 92.

most around 12-15 would have been male children. Given Bethlehem's relative insignificance in the region, this simply may not have been a major news event. Certainly it would have been in Jewish circles, but the wider Roman world may not have paid much attention to the death of a dozen or so Jewish boys. Thus, it could be that by the time Josephus was writing, which was about hundred year later, this simply had not been noted as newsworthy.⁹

Perhaps Known But Editorially Rejected

Perhaps Josephus did know about this event, but made the editorial choice not to include it in his record. It could be that in comparison with all the other brutal atrocities happening at this time, such as Herod's desire to murder hundreds of Jewish leaders, that Josephus knew of this event, but chose not to include it. We simply do not know why Josephus didn't include it, but *the fact that he didn't does not mean that this is not fact.* "The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence."¹⁰ Just because an event has no extra-biblical reference does not mean that the event did not take place. There is no extra-biblical reference to the resurrection, but Christians do not for this reason doubt that it actually took place.

Fact & Fulfillment

What is important is that Matthew does not doubt that this actually took place. He views it as ***both fact and fulfillment***. He includes this terrible event because in it he sees the fulfillment of something spoken by Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived about 550 years earlier and he lived through the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah and the subsequent exile. The passage Matthew quotes is found in chapter 31. The context of that chapter is the time of the Babylonian exile.

The town of Ramah was located about five miles north of Jerusalem and was on the route the exiles were forced to travel on their way to Babylon (Jer. 40:1-2).¹¹ Rachel's tomb was near Bethlehem¹² and she is personified as weeping for her exiled descendants as they pass by her grave. *Matthew sees a connection with what happened in the past in Ramah with what was happening now in Bethlehem.* What is the connection?

From Exile to Hope

The experience of exile is the connection. Just as long ago the mothers in Israel wept as their children were forced into exile in Babylon, so now the mothers in Bethlehem are weeping as Jesus is forced into exile in Egypt. Last week we noted that Jesus is now beginning to retrace the steps of the nation of Israel. He is now the representative of Israel. ***In order to redeem Israel, Jesus must represent Israel.*** Just as the nation of Israel was known as God's son¹³, so

⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander E. Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishers, 2015), 83.

¹⁰ Paul Maier in interview with Tony Reinke.

¹¹ Köstenberger and Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*, 85.

¹² Gen. 35:19-20.

¹³ Dt. 1:31.

Jesus has been proclaimed to be God's Son.¹⁴ Just as Israel experienced exile, so Jesus is experiencing exile. If Jesus is to fully redeem Israel, then he must fully relate to Israel; he must walk where Israel walked, and experience what Israel experienced.

But there is more than mere identification of experience. There is also the *promise of hope* and blessing that will follow suffering and loss. In Jeremiah 31, immediately after the verse Matthew quoted, God promises the exiles hope and restoration.

Jeremiah 31 (ESV)

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD:

"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.

¹⁷ There is hope for your future,
declares the LORD,
and your children shall come back to their own country.

²⁰ Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he my darling child?
For as often as I speak against him,
I do remember him still.
Therefore my heart yearns for him;
I will surely have mercy on him,
declares the LORD.

²⁵ For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish."

²⁸ And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the LORD.

The same LORD who rightly sent Israel into exile—because of her persistent sin and willful breaking of the covenant—is the same LORD who promises to rebuild and replenish, to reward and to remember. The same LORD who sent them into exile in tears, now promises to bring them back in hope and to satisfy their longing souls, if only they would put their faith in him (v.22). The same LORD who lead them out in "lamentation and bitter weeping," promises to bring them back "turning their mourning into joy, and giving gladness in place of sorrow" (Jer. 31:13).

¹⁴ Mt. 1:20-25; cf. Lk. 1:32, 35.

Matthew notes that Israel went into exile in Babylon by way of a painful process that involved suffering and loss but would eventually lead to the restoration of the entire nation. In the same way, Jesus went into exile in Egypt in a painful process that again brought suffering and loss to Rachel's descendants but would lead to the complete fulfillment of the restoration, healing, and salvation prophesied by Jeremiah.¹⁵

Thus, through there are tears came the promise of hope. Through exile came the promise of restoration. Through death comes the promise of life. Although suffering surrounds the beginning of Jesus, God in his providence is presenting to the world the one person through whom "every tear will one day be wiped away."¹⁶

Fulfillment of the New Covenant?

But there may be one more reason Matthew points us to this passage. After these sweet and hopeful promises, in the first half of Jeremiah 31, follows the amazing promise of the coming New Covenant, in the last half of Jeremiah 31, which God himself promises to enact. Matthew may hope that his readers will call this to mind as they consider the fulfillment of Jeremiah that is beginning to unfold through the life of this young king, Jesus. The royal region of the descendants of David was interrupted during the exile, but now a new king has been born and with the birth of a new king will also come the fulfillment of the New Covenant.

The tears of the Exile are now being "fulfilled"—i.e., the tears begun in Jeremiah's day are climaxed and ended by the tears of the mothers of Bethlehem. The heir to David's throne has come, the Exile is over, the true Son of God has arrived, and he will introduce the new covenant (26:28) promised by Jeremiah.¹⁷

Summary

God's providence is at work in this sad scene of suffering. What are God's purposes in this? God has sent his son Jesus in the flesh, not to escape suffering, but to enter fully into it, all of it. To faithfully enter into it, to faithfully walk through it, and then to powerfully overcome it.

The nation of Israel was like a son to God and was supposed to represent God to this broken and cursed world, but they failed. Thus, God has now sent his own Son as a new representative, as one who would not fail. He, Jesus, was sent to redeem Israel and thus he must pass through the same experiences as did Israel so that he can succeed where they previously failed. Just as Israel in sorrow went into exile, so Jesus in sorrow must go into exile.

However, he will not stay in exile. Out of exile comes the promise of **hope**. God promises to deliver his people; to restore, redeem, refresh, rebuild, recreate, and reunite! This is what He promised in the **New Covenant**. God promised to pour out His Spirit within the hearts of a

¹⁵ Köstenberger and Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*, 85-86.

¹⁶ Revelation 7:17; 21:4.

¹⁷ Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, 95.

new people whom God would transform from the inside out. This is what Jesus came to fulfill! Matthew sees this and he is giving us a hint of what we will see unfold through the life of this child, called Jesus.

Relocation to Nazareth (v.19-23)

The second event involved less suffering than the first, but still the hardship and difficulty are evident. In 2:13-15 an angel appeared to Joseph and warned him that Herod was about to try to kill Jesus and thus, he was to take Jesus and Mary and flee to Egypt for safety. Now, that same angel reappears to Joseph with a new message that it is time to relocate the family "out of Egypt" and back into the land of Judea.

Matthew 2:19-23 (ESV) ¹⁹ But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰ saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." ²¹ And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. ²³ And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

The **providence** of God is seen here in God sending an angel to redirect Jesus and his family back to Judea from which they had previously fled. God first intervened to protect his Son and now he intervenes again to redirect his Son. The providential care of God guided Joseph *into* Egypt, and now the providential care of God is guiding Joseph and his family *out of* Egypt.

Joseph again immediately obeys the command of the angel. It is the same angel who had told him to go to Egypt in the first place who now appears to him again. He previously said "stay in Egypt until I tell you" (2:13), and now he returned to tell Joseph that it was safe to go back.

The language of the angel, in 2:20, "*...those who sought the child's life are dead,*" is almost identical to the language used by God when he told Moses to return to Egypt (Ex. 4:19). You may recall Moses had to flee Egypt because Pharaoh sought to put him to death (after it was discovered that Moses had murdered an Egyptian who was beating a Jew).¹⁸ However, after the death of Pharaoh, God commanded Moses to return to Egypt. It may be that we are intended to see similarities between Moses and Jesus.

- Just as a king sought to put Moses to death, so king Herod sought to put Jesus to death.
- Just as Moses had to flee the city to save his life, so Jesus had to flee the city to save his life.

¹⁸ Ex. 2:15.

- Just as at the time of Moses' birth the king commanded the death of all male Jewish children in Egypt, so near the time of Jesus' birth a king commanded the death of all male Jewish children in Bethlehem.

Matthew does not himself draw out these similarities, but the language used by the angel almost certainly would bring Moses to mind among anyone who knew well the history of Israel and their Exodus from Egypt.

The difficulty and hardship in this instance, though almost nothing when compared to the events in Bethlehem, is still very real and present. Joseph, for a second time, must pluck up his family and move them to another country.

Though the distance was only about 80 or so miles back to Bethlehem, moving your wife and toddler along with everything one owns is no small chore. This journey would likely take about a week.

We do not know how long they lived in Egypt, but almost everyone who has had to move house before knows that resettling can be very unsettling.



Mary would have to abandon her Mother's Morning Out group, Jesus would lose the friends he was just beginning to make in the neighborhood, and Joseph would certainly have to say goodbye to the coffee club at the local Dunkin'. And now he would have to quit one job and soon find a new one. Would his boss give him a letter of recommendation or not? He certainly could not give him two weeks notice. Would they have time to visit the Pyramids before they left?

One wonders if there would be marital disputes over what to take with them and what to leave behind; what to throw out and what to keep? Would husband and wife perfectly agree with the pacing of the travel? How fast or slow should they take the trip? Would they have money for a hotel along the way or would they simply stop and sleep at a rest area? They'd not had good luck in the past at finding room in Inn's, but hopefully this time would be different. Would they spend a few days at the beach in Gaza or go straight back to Israel?

And where should they settle? The angel had only said, "...*go to the land of Israel...*" (v.20). That's great, but Israel had a lot of cities. Which should they settle on? Jerusalem was nice, but kind of noisy. Jericho had potential, but construction was slow there. Then there was Bethany, Beersheba, and Bethlehem. Herod was dead, so they could return to where they lived in Bethlehem. This may have been what Joseph was intending.

However, upon arriving back in the land of Israel, he learned that Archelaus was ruling over the region of Bethlehem and Jerusalem. In fact, just before his death, Herod divided his realm between three of his sons, Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip.

Joseph feared (v.22) Archelaus, who was known to be just as brutal as was his father.¹⁹ Apparently, Joseph's fears were well founded, for God again spoke to him in a dream and directed him to Galilee. Joseph then settled in the town of Nazareth (v.23). Matthew does not tell us this fact but Nazareth was where Joseph and Mary had lived before the birth of Jesus (see Lk. 1:26; 2:4). Thus, they ended up back where they started. It is interesting that Joseph did not initially intend to live in Nazareth. Upon his return to the land of Israel, he at first chose to avoid Nazareth since he only went there as a result of the providential direction of God given through a dream.



Once again, Matthew sees this relocation to Nazareth as part of the providential direction of God. He explains the deepest reason for why they lived in Nazareth as being, "...so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene" (2:23).

There is no specific OT prophecy that directly relates to messiah being called a Nazarene, thus many people have stumbled over this and claimed that Matthew once again is making stuff up. However, Matthew provides us with a clue to his meaning.

Notice that he references "**prophets**," in the plural. Whatever Matthew has in mind, it was something spoken of, not by a single prophet, but by *several* prophets. Therefore, Matthew does not have a specific quote or statement in mind, but rather he is referring to a theme of which multiple prophets spoke. What might that be?

The answer is found in what it means to be called a Nazarene. This was an insult because Nazareth was a despised city, even among other Galileans. Recall that when Philip told Nathanael that he had found the messiah and that he was Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael replied saying, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" (John 1:46).

Thus, Matthew's point is that messiah would largely be a despised leader rather than a celebrated deliverer. He is preparing us that messiah will be humble and rejected, rather than rich and celebrated. We see this point being made several times in the Psalms (Ps. 22:6-8, 13; 69:8, 20-21), by Isaiah (11:1; 49:7; 53:8), and by Daniel (9:26). This is most clearly seen in Isaiah.

¹⁹ Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, 96.

Isaiah 53:2-3 (ESV) he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.

³ He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

In God's providential plan to redeem a broken world, he sent his Son to be broken. Recall Jesus' words at dinner with the disciples the night before he was crucified, "This is my body, which is broken for you."²⁰ In God's providential plan to redeem a suffering world, he sent his Son to suffer. No one suffered like Jesus. He was despised, rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief!

The reason there is suffering in this world is because there is sin in this world. The only way to escape suffering is to escape sin and Jesus is the only person who never sinned, thus if you want to avoid suffering then you must be united with Jesus. He said, "*In this world you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world*" (Jn. 16:33).

Conclusion

Do not let the fact that suffering exists keep you from believing in and having faith in God. If any human being ever had the right to stand before God and say "Why must I endure suffering? I don't deserve this!," it is Jesus. Jesus deserved no suffering and yet he suffered more than anyone. Jesus was completely innocent and yet he suffered greatly. And yet *he* believed in God. Even though he suffered greatly he maintained his faith in God. In fact, we are told,

"...for the joy set before him, he endured the cross..." (Heb. 12:24).

The joy that God has to give to those who cherish him more than the absence of pain, is of infinitely greater worth than simply living a life free of suffering.

I had lunch this week with a paralyzed man who came into a living relationship with Jesus because of his paralysis—because he started reading his Bible when he began losing the strength of his limbs—and he said, "Some people think I'm crazy, but I would not trade what I now have with Jesus through my weakened body for a whole and strong body without Jesus."

The providence of God is sometimes painful, but Jesus came to walk with us through the pain in this world so that in the next world we can walk with him in presence of God. Jesus came to

²⁰ See ESV footnote at 1 Cor. 11:24.

overcome sin, so that those in him would not be overcome by sin. He came to redeem us from the power of Satan, and to deliver into the power of God.

Jesus came to enter into our exile so that he could deliver us from exile. He came to deliver a sure and certain hope to a hopeless people. He came to be despised by man in order to deliver men who trust in him from being despised by God.

When providence is painful, saturate yourself with God's word.

When providence is painful, steadfastly hope in the Savior who suffered?

When providence is painful, remember that God has good purposes through the pain?

When providence is painful, surrender your life to king Jesus who can and will transform your heart.

When providence is painful, be like the wise men and bow before him in worship.