

## God with Us

### The Threat

Matthew 2:1-21

Tommy Johnston

---

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."<sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;<sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.<sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

*<sup>6</sup> " 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' "*

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."<sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

<sup>13</sup> Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."<sup>14</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

*<sup>18</sup> "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."*

<sup>19</sup> But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, <sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

(Matt 2:1-21)

I'll never forget seeing the star-studded sky in the undeveloped part of South Africa. Our family had been driving across the country on a particularly adventurous vacation, when we decided to stay the night in a national park that rented cabins. I don't know how far the nearest city was, but it wasn't close—no street lights, no billboards. Once the sun set, it got really, really dark. And that's when I saw it. If you've ventured outside of the urban sprawl on a clear night, you know what I'm talking about: more stars than you ever dreamed of, all shining down against the blackness of space.

As awesome as that experience was, I don't get to see it very often. Living within the urban sprawl, the light pollution of all our street lamps, billboards, and traffic lights—yes, even that six-foot inflatable glow-in-the-dark Santa Claus in your lawn—they all chase away the darkness, and as a result, make the glowing stars fade away. If you chase away the darkness, there is no beautiful starlight to see.

I wonder, if for many of us, some of our struggles with Christmas come from chasing away the darkness of our souls with the trite. It's pretty easy to put on a fake smile, wear an ugly sweater, and bounce from one Christmas event to the other with no spiritual engagement at all. You already know the story, you've sung those songs a million times, and being around family is more work than it used to be. You're in danger of getting to New Year's and actually having your soul be worse off than it was when you started. How do you avoid that, and instead recapture the wonder of Christmas—really the wonder of the one who Christmas is about, Jesus, the King of the world?

### **See the darkness of your soul for what it is, so you can see Jesus for who He is**

Well, friend, just like a stargazer, if you want to recapture that wonder, you must not chase away the darkness of your soul; you must see it for what it truly is, so you can see Him for who He truly is. Only then will the glorious King shine bright in your soul as He should, and only then will you find your heart filled with wonder.

We'll see that in three sections: The first two make us examine the dark backdrop of our souls that rejects the true King. We'll see that expressed in ignoring Him, as well as murderously hunting Him. Against the dark backdrop, we'll see the light of the King shine, as God raises up this King.

### **See your soul for what it truly is: The True King is Ignored – v.1-6**

Matthew is a book particularly concerned with showing that Jesus is the Son of God, God's promised King for His people. Our passage starts off with a group of unlikely people searching out this promised King. We have called them "wise men" for so long that it's hard to get that traditional image out of our heads, but the text calls them *Magoi*, or Magi. This is where we get the word *magician*. These men were likely from modern-day Iraq, ancient Babylon, and they were practitioners of some form of ancient religion that looked up to the stars and their movements to try and figure out what would happen on earth. They would be very close to our modern-day idea of an astrologer: someone staring at the stars for hidden secrets about the world we live in. Somehow, a group of this magi came to the conclusion that the heavens had announced the coming of a great King of the Jews. How they came

to the conclusion is a mystery to us; the text simply does not say. Perhaps they heard something from the large community of Jews living in Babylon back then, maybe Numbers 24:17, for example:

<sup>17</sup> I see him, but not now;  
I behold him, but not near:  
a star shall come out of Jacob,  
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;

Perhaps God just decided to speak to them through the language they knew, even one He expressly forbade for His people: astrology. Regardless, they become convinced that a great king has been born among the Jews, and set off to find him, following this sign in the heavens.

That search takes them to a very dangerous place, indeed: to the court of King Herod, often called Herod The Great. He was given that title not because people loved him, but because he was probably the oldest of his brothers. Still, even his harshest critics had to admit that the guy got a lot done. His list of accomplishments included building a thriving port, rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem far beyond anyone's wildest imaginations, and even making impressive fortresses for himself. Masada is still there in Israel to this day if you go visit. He was skilled in war, having to secure his rule at the front end of his career after a rebellion. He ruled Judea under the authority of Rome and was known to be incredibly paranoid about his power. He had two of his sons killed, along with one of his wives, because he imagined they were plotting against him. It wasn't all in his head, though—his Father had been assassinated, and he managed to fend off numerous threats, political and otherwise, well into his 70s. This guy was the toughest type of survivor. He knew the world was out to get him, so he made sure he got his enemies first. That's what made him so dangerous.

That's the court which our Magi walk into, and they ask, "where is he born king of the Jews?" Not where is the one who WILL be king of the Jews, but where is the one **ALREADY WITH THE AUTHORITY** of king of the Jews. It would be a bit like walking into King Jong-Un's office and saying, "where's this new leader of North Korea I heard about?" Not exactly a great move if you are attached to your head.

Verse 3 records Herod's reaction, and it's surprising indeed: he was greatly troubled, or in inner turmoil. It goes on to say that all Jerusalem was troubled with him.

There used to be a coach for the Chicago Bears named Mike Ditka. He was the type of coach that nobody wanted to be on the wrong side of because his temper was legendary. People used to say he could change the weather with his mood. Someone with enough pull, enough power, and enough negative emotion is someone you probably don't want to be hanging around. So what's Herod going to do?

Well, probably not what people were expecting. He calls for the religious leaders of his day, the Chief Priests and Scribes. These were the two pillars in the religious community of the Jews back in the day, and they didn't see eye to eye. The Scribes were on the scholarly, judicial side; they were the lawyers and seminary professors of their day. The Chief Priests were the ones who actually ran the temple and the various services that went along with it—the worship leaders and politicians all wrapped into one.

Herod summons representatives from both of these parties—who don't like each other and don't agree on anything—and says, "Tell me what the deal is with the Messiah." Their reply is a remarkably straightforward answer from Scripture. It comes from Micah 5, and says he will come from Bethlehem, a nowhere town in Judah, about six miles away—a town that is going to be put on the map by his coming.

### **Informed Ignorance**

It's amazing that Herod got a straight answer out of these two politically opposed parties that go together as well as oil and water. And yet there is something even more surprising, and that is what we DON'T hear about the Scribes and Pharisees saying or doing. After giving the answer, straight from scripture, that this king was going to be found in Bethlehem, we don't hear from them again for 30+ years in Matthew's telling.

It's worth pausing here to recognize what this tells us. These are men who know the scriptures. They know what to expect when the Messiah comes. They even know where He is supposed to come from, and presumably they know the Magi are looking for Him. Even Herod is taking this seriously! And yet what is their reaction? The most religious are the least interested. They outright ignore Him. They react to the idea of the coming of the promised King with a dismissive hand wave and a shoulder shrug. He isn't even worth the trip to go and check out.

Friends, there is a warning here for those of us who have grown familiar with being in church and studying the Bible. Just because we know the facts of the Bible, know the traditions, know the right lingo, and the right people, does not mean we will be eager to bow down before the true King. It's quite possible to be very religious and yet ***not very interested in knowing God and having Him be ruler of your life.***

It might play out like this in your life: you regularly come to church, hear a sermon preached, write down detailed notes, and store away details about its historical background, illustrations you loved, and interesting factoids. Then you can go the whole week without once applying that truth to your own life. You roll up the next Sunday the exact same person you were last week, ready for another nice religious lecture.

Or maybe you're the type who likes the social aspect of the church—being around people with a sense of community. The familiarity of old things, maybe even things that go back to your childhood, is comforting. You don't miss a Sunday—church is part of your life for sure, and yet when push comes to shove, anything that requires you to change the way you live or to ask uncomfortable questions about what God thinks about you, well, that's just somewhere you would rather not go. You get really good at ignoring the things that make you uncomfortable and keeping people at arm's length, spiritually, as a result.

Or maybe you are doing your best to follow Jesus, and yet there are times where what's going on in your soul frankly scares you. You can sense yourself getting less and less engaged with each passing week, and your attention keeps getting diverted elsewhere. You know you shouldn't be ignoring Jesus this way, and yet you find yourself doing it again and again.

Friend, if any of those descriptions fit you this morning, don't try and pretend it isn't so. Covering it with a layer of fake Christmas cheer will only make things worse and will never lead you to the sort of joy-filled wonder your heart should have. Instead, as painful as it may be, you need to look straight into the darkness and call your soul what it really is: sinful, prone to ignoring the glorious King.

As awful as it was for the Scribes and Pharisees to ignore the Messiah's coming, they are little league compared to Herod.

## **See your soul for what it truly is: The True King Hunted – v. 7-8**

### **Herod's Deception**

Herod transparently tries to use the Magi to figure out where Jesus is through manipulation. He feigns interest in following their lead so he "too can worship." Whether the Magi were really gullible or were just having a bad day, we don't know, but it seems like Herod's attempt succeeds in convincing them to aid him. He hadn't survived this long without being good at what he does, and this is a loose end that needs tying up before it can become a noose around his neck.

And yet God has a different plan in mind. Oh, sure, He leads the magi to Jesus' location, and He sends the star again to make sure they find Him. They find Mary and Jesus in a house, worship Him, give Him gifts fit for royalty—gold, frankincense, and myrrh, all valuable commodities in the ancient East and worthy gifts for a worthy King. In so doing, they give us a beautiful example of how our hearts SHOULD respond to Jesus. We should be overjoyed that unworthy people like us get to worship the supremely worthy King!

Afterward, an angel intervenes, telling the Magi not to go back to Herod, but to head home a different way. Another angel tells Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt and stay there until told otherwise. Why the repeated interventions from God? Because unsurprisingly, Herod is about to show just how dark a soul can truly get.

### **Herod's Rage**

I already mentioned how Herod was a transparently rotten guy. When he was on his deathbed, he made arrangements so his enemies would be rounded up and killed. One Caesar was recorded as saying that it was better to be Herod's dog than his son, because of just how unhinged he could get in his paranoia. The annals of history are filled with tyrants of his stripe, ones who, like cornered animals, lash out with all their fiercest attacks when they know they are out of options.

In this case, Herod shows his villainous credentials are top notch. In a fit of rage, he commands all the two-year-old and younger boys be killed in this small town of Bethlehem. He obviously knows that, at most, one of them will be his actual target, but in his rage and desperation he simply does not care. His throne is all that matters now.

We don't know precisely how many children were killed. It probably wasn't a huge number by the standards of genocide and murder the last two millennia have given us. It was no killing fields of Cambodia or gas chambers of Auschwitz. Maybe a dozen or more children were killed, according to

most scholars. Still, I hope the horror of it isn't lost on you. These are BABIES—completely innocent children, ripped from the mother's arms and their families' lives, all because some petty old man is too prideful to bow the knee to Jesus. It's horrendous, it's wicked, and it should turn our stomachs and make us realize how horrible a man this truly was.

### **Herod in all of us**

And yet even worse, we should see a reflection of Herod in our own hearts. There's a little Herod in each of us.

During the Nuremberg Trials, one of the Nazi masterminds of the Holocaust, a man named Rudolph Eichmann, was put on trial. One of the witnesses called against him was a survivor of Auschwitz named Dinur. It was a dramatic scene, with this man who had endured so much from the Nazis, now getting to face the head of the snake and take part in him receiving justice. As the proceedings started, Dinur collapsed, and even after he recovered, he was visibly shaken. Some people thought he must have been so filled with rage and anger that he simply passed out. Others guessed the trauma of his memories were simply too much. Later on, he was interviewed by *60 Minutes* about what happened, and he explained that he was expecting him to be some sort of a monster that would be easy to hate, but instead he saw something more horrifying: a man like him.

"I realized that evil is endemic to the human condition—that any one of us could commit the same atrocities. Eichmann is in all of us." <sup>1</sup>

We think we are so different than Eichmann, or Herod, or Mao, or Bin Laden. But are we really? Our circumstances are certainly different, and by God's grace, He applies the brakes on evil more often than we will ever know, but at our core, each of us has a little Herod in us. We love our thrones, and when they are threatened, we will do anything to protect them.

Let me tell you how you can see this in your own life. What happens when something you hold dear is threatened? Maybe it's a job, a sense of identity, a comfort, even your financial position. Do you find yourself willing to do things you otherwise wouldn't? Maybe you manipulate a situation so you end up where you want to be at the office, or cheat a little bit on your taxes until you feel safe. Maybe you tell lies to avoid consequences of your actions or even tell lies to yourself so you feel better.

What about when the threat gets ratcheted up? Ever feel yourself coming unhinged? Ever find yourself saying something in anger that, in retrospect, felt like someone else said it? Ever done something in anger that felt like someone else was doing it? Ever, in a rage, had your thoughts go somewhere that frankly frightened you? Friend, if any of these are you, God, in His kindness, is showing you the Herod inside you this morning. Don't pretend it isn't so. That will do you no good, and the stakes are simply too high. If you continue down this road, one day you'll meet the same fate that he and everyone else in rebellion against God meets. We all die, and we all end up standing

---

<sup>1</sup>Colson, Chuck. *BreakPoint: The Eichman in All of Us*. <http://www.breakpoint.org/2017/08/breakpoint-the-eichmann-in-all-of-us/>

before the Judge of the universe. No, instead see just how desperate your situation really is. STARE INTO THE DARKNESS OF YOUR SOUL, because then, friend, you'll be ready to see the bright shining light of JESUS for who He really is.

That's where the last section takes us. Against the dark backdrop of our souls, we see the radiant true King, Jesus, raised up by God.

### **See Jesus for who He is: The True King Raised Up – v. 19-23**

One thing this passage makes abundantly clear is that God is raising up His Son, Jesus, to be the TRUE KING.

#### **God's Appointed King**

You can see it in how quickly Herod is dismissed from the narrative. He very unceremoniously gets shown how to exit stage left. For all his terror and might, Herod's life is just a footnote for the real King. I love the way verse 19 says "but when Herod died." When Herod died. This mighty evil king, with his big Machiavellian schemes, the survivor of survivors, died. Oh, by the way, he died, and was eaten by worms in the ground. Not so mighty now, is he?

As you take a step back and look at this passage, you'll see God's hand protecting and raising up Jesus at every step and turn. He is the one who put the star in the sky that the Magi followed. He's the one that gave them understanding to know what it meant. He inspired the scripture that the Scribes and Chief Priests used to identify Bethlehem. He's the one who sent the Magi the star a second time, and then sent them another direction home in a dream. He's the one who sent His angel to tell Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt. He's the one who told them to return. Do you see the pattern? Jesus is God's appointed King, and that means God will ensure He will end up precisely where He wants Him to be.

What sort of a King is He, though? We get hints through the three Old Testament passages quoted or alluded to in the passage. We don't have time to dive deeply into them all, so let me encourage you to study them on your own, maybe later today.

#### **Kind Ruler**

He's a Ruler and a Shepherd according to Micah 5:2, quoted in verse 6. He has both the authority to rule God's people and the tenderness to care for them. This means Jesus is both the King you should kneel to with every inch of your life as well as someone you can trust with the care of your soul.

#### **True Representative**

In verse 15 we are told that His time in Egypt fulfilled a prophecy in Hosea 11. I'm convinced that Matthew is intentionally showing that Jesus is taking on the role of representative of God's people. He is the "new Israel," the new People of God, and He is going to succeed in all the places where they failed, starting with an exodus out of Egypt, to follow with going through the waters of baptism, and even to being tested in the wilderness. Jesus, our representative, succeeds where they failed.

## **Suffering Restorer**

The quotation in verse 18 is from Jeremiah 31:15. Rachel's weeping in that passage was figuratively about her descendants being taken off into Babylonian exile. By quoting this text, Matthew tips us off that Jesus is the return from exile that God's people have been waiting for. Yes, there has been much weeping, much loss, much pain, but it is all going to be made right with the restoration He brings.

## **Good News**

All these threads come together in the good news of the Gospel. That's where His star shines the brightest! Against the dark backdrop of our sin and rebellion against God, He sent His only Son into the world. He is the King of the world, the one who made each of us, and the one we all owe allegiance to. He is also our representative. He lived the perfect life all humans should have lived, fulfilling every part of God's law perfectly, never sinning Himself. This allowed Him to serve as our substitute, to both take our sin and bear it for us on the cross, being killed in our place, and to give us His perfect record of obedience. Three days later God the Father raised Him from the dead and sat Him down on a throne above all thrones, as the King of Kings. Now He is making all things new, starting with the hearts of those of us who trust Him as our Savior and King.

Maybe you're here this morning because someone invited you to our Christmas concert or just because you're interested in what Christianity is all about. Friend, I'm so glad you are here. I wonder if maybe you're beginning to realize that you need to bend the knee to this King for the first time. You don't need any credentials, or to clean up your life first. Let the example of the Magi guide you this morning. Just come to Jesus with genuine humility and trust. He asks you to come with an empty hand of faith, to trust Him enough to ask for His help. If you don't know how to do that or aren't sure what it means exactly, you could ask a Christian friend or go to the Next Steps area where you'll find someone who would love to talk with you.

Maybe this morning you're coming to the realization that you've lost your wonder at the Christmas story, because you've started minimizing your sin. You've gotten pretty good at chasing away the darkness by being pretty good at this church thing and all its trappings. Your life is pretty good by most people's standards, maybe even by other believer's standards. You've become an expert at surrounding yourself with positive messages and positive people and are positively ignoring your sin as a result. If you rarely think about the fact that you're still a sinner, then this is a wakeup call for you. This is a call for you to spend some time realizing just how much YOU STILL need Jesus. Friend, when you do that, you'll recapture your wonder.

© College Park Church

**Permissions:** You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. [www.yourchurch.com](http://www.yourchurch.com)