

# God Saves The King

Matthew 2:1-12    December 1, 2024

Have you had a visit with a king in disguise? King Frederick II of Prussia loved mingling with regular folks incognito. He visited cities, talked with people, and saw the sights dressed as a common man.

He met with bankers, collectors, scholars, and governors. Some recognized him, others did not. Some snubbed him. Others became lifelong friends.

Once while disguised, he interacted with a French governor. The governor was suspicious that there was more to this man than met the eye, but "he did not believe the king would be so foolhardy as to come to France unannounced."<sup>1</sup>

Matthew chapter 2 opens with a beloved Christmas story: Wise men from the east come to worship Jesus in Bethlehem. But He is not in a palace, nor is He wearing a crown. The King of heaven and earth was disguised as a common baby Boy - the Son of a poor carpenter.

After He arrived, some recognized Him, others did not. Some celebrated Him, others sought to kill Him. But why had He left His throne? What was His purpose? Was He simply taking a few days off from court life to see the sights, like Frederick the Great liked to do? As we begin this Christmas season, let's consider once more the *reason* for Christ's visit: To save the world. To be the ultimate Gift - God's *indescribable* gift, given to us that we might live forever.

## **Matthew 2:1 - After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem,**

This is *not* the night Jesus was born and laid in a manger. The wise men were not rubbing elbows with the shepherds from *Angels We Have Heard On High*. When they meet with Jesus, the family is living in a *house*, not a stable. And, after inquiring carefully about the timeline, Herod is under the impression that the newborn King may be as much as two years old.

Who were these wise men? First thing's first: We don't know how many of them there were. Maybe 3, maybe 300! They gave 3 gifts, but undoubtedly they were part of a large entourage.

They came "from the east." They were probably Chaldeans or Persians - maybe even Assyrians.<sup>2</sup> They were *Magi*, meaning that they were experts in astrology and the interpretation of dreams.<sup>3</sup>

At some point, while watching the night sky, they saw *something*. There's a lot of speculation, but we don't know exactly what they saw and how they deduced the meaning behind it. But what they saw was enough to change their lives. They packed their bags and started maybe an 800 mile

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<sup>1</sup> Giles MacDonogh *Frederick The Great: A Life In Deed And Letters*

<sup>2</sup> James Freeman, Harold Chadwick *Manners & Customs of the Bible*

<sup>3</sup> Charles Quarles *Matthew*

journey on foot.<sup>4</sup> But at some point, the trail went cold. And so, since they were trying to find a *king*, they went to the royal city - Jerusalem.

But there's a problem: Jerusalem already had someone *posing* as king, clinging to the throne. His name was Herod, but he was *not* a descendant of David or even fully Jewish. He was an Edomite. And he was a violently wicked man, obsessed with maintaining his grip on Judea.

**Matthew 2:2 - <sup>2</sup>[the Wise men said], "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him."**

The wise men did not understand all of the political intrigue happening in Judea at the time. By the end, they accidentally *inform* on Jesus to one of His most powerful adversaries. Their opening line would have been a dagger to Herod: "Where is He Who has been *born* King?" Herod had no legitimate claim to the throne of Israel. He was a usurper. He killed his way to the throne.

But more than the politics, notice the *incredible* grace of God on display. These magi were *not* sons of Abraham. They were Gentiles - *pagan* Gentiles at that. They dedicated their lives to reading the stars to find meaning - to divine the future. Meanwhile, the *true* Divine reached down *through* heaven to proclaim the truth to them. They're in Persia, thinking *they* know how to tell people's fortunes, and God speaks to them right where they were to say, "Here's right where *I* am!"

However they got the message, these fellows were convinced that they would be welcomed by this new King - that He would be willing to receive them. And though they did not know Him, they knew He was a King Whose arms were open. And they knew He was worthy of *worship*.

They said, "We've come to worship." Not to hob-nob, not to curry favor, not to strengthen their own nation, but to worship.

"We saw *His* star." In this confession, they acknowledge that all the universe has inclined to this Person - this mystery King. But where is He? How could they find Him? They needed help with these questions.

Why didn't the Jews see His star? It's the same sky twinkling above them. Looking at the various characters in this story, there are people who *definitely* should've been there to meet with Jesus with the wise men. Herod, of course, was blinded by selfishness and sin. Sadly, the Jews were too bound by their legalistic tradition to accept that God might do something unexpected.

**Matthew 2:3 - <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.**

Most of us are familiar with the Gospel stories, so this reaction is not surprising. But that doesn't make it any less heart-breaking. The City of David, the place where God wanted His presence to

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<sup>4</sup> *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

dwell in a special way, the place where He *will* set up His 1,000 year Kingdom - *that* city was in absolute turmoil, even “terrified” at the prospect of the King’s arrival.<sup>5</sup>

Why? Well, based on what we see throughout the Gospels, one conclusion we have to come to is that, despite what they *said*, they didn’t *really* want deliverance - at least not what God was offering.

Sometimes we resist deliverance because Christ’s arrival signals the *end* of your kingdom. The end of your rule over life. The Bible lays out very clearly why this is actually a very *good* thing - why we should be incredibly excited about His arrival to earth the first time and His still-to-come arrival a second time. But, meanwhile, we can be overjoyed about His taking the throne of *our* hearts, because when He comes He brings His righteousness, His peace, His joy, His empowering, His grace, His tender love, and His constant presence.

Christ left His throne in heaven to save us. Now we are to leave the thrones of our hearts to *serve* Him. To hail *Him* as King. To own Him as Master and Lord and Redeemer.

**Matthew 2:4 - <sup>4</sup>So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born.**

Scholars note the language suggests Herod asked repeatedly.<sup>6</sup> He questioned separate groups: The *Sadducees*, represented by the chief priests, and the *Pharisees*, represented by the scribes.<sup>7</sup>

These groups did not get along and did not cooperate. Herod wanted to be sure he was getting a straight answer. You see, when he *started* his reign, Herod had killed the whole Sanhedrin to consolidate power.<sup>8</sup> So he asks them both to ensure there’s no lurking conspiracy against him.

**Matthew 2:5-6 - <sup>5</sup>“In Bethlehem of Judea,” they told him, “because this is what was written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah: Because out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”**

As we listen to the religious leaders of Israel, we sense a total lack of urgency or enthusiasm. They give a rather procedural response: “Here’s a geographical answer given by Micah.”

But, while they give a textbook answer, they miss the breaking news: The King *IS* born! He’s here! The *Christ* and *Messiah* you have been waiting for for thousands of years has arrived!

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Blomberg *Matthew The New American Commentary, Volume 22*

<sup>6</sup> A.T. Robertson *Word Pictures In The New Testament*

<sup>7</sup> Frank Gaebelien, D. A. Carson, Walter Wessel, and Walter Liefeld *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Vol. 8*

<sup>8</sup> Robertson

There was a *third* group Herod could have consulted but didn't: The Essenes. Of the religious groups in Judea, they alone expected the Messiah imminently.<sup>9</sup> Their early teachers preached on the spiritual apostasy of Israel and sought to walk in "the way of God's heart."<sup>10</sup>

But here in Herod's palace, the Pharisees and Sadducees read Micah's prophecy with absolutely no interest.<sup>11</sup> Even when the King's arrival would mean they would finally have a *Shepherd*.

At the moment, the sheep of Israel only had a butcher - Herod. But now, the Shepherd had come to gather His flock and save them from the beasts who had been devouring them.

So, in this scene we have the lost lambs of Israel, deaf to the calls of their Shepherd. Standing with them are the wise men. Gentiles from far off. Living examples of what Christ would say in John 10:

**John 10:16 - <sup>16</sup>But I have other sheep that are not from this sheep pen; I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock, one shepherd.**

Frederick the Great was known as a Philosopher-King. He wrote many books full of his ideas - essays on politics and the history of his time. But as he grew older, he became more and more hostile to Christianity.<sup>12</sup> At the end of his life, his circle of friends died off, leaving Frederick increasingly isolated.<sup>13</sup> As a philosopher, he had no enduring answers.

Christ came as a *Shepherd*-King. One Who is devoted to His sheep. One Who gathers into His flock from every time and place on the earth. One Who expands His family by love and grace.

**Matthew 2:7 - <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared.**

Bad sign: Herod was concerned with timing, not the opportunity to go and meet the Savior. Even so, it seems his charade was convincing enough that the wise men didn't suspect anything.

**Matthew 2:8 - <sup>8</sup>He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship him."**

We might expect one of the wise men to say, "Why not come with us?" After all, the wise men had left hearth and home to be in the presence of this baby King. Certainly, Herod could, too.

Now is the time for us to leave the thrones of our hearts and bow in worship before the *true* King of kings. Now is the time to abdicate to Him and to welcome His rule and reign over our lives.

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<sup>9</sup> EBC

<sup>10</sup> *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*

<sup>11</sup> EBC

<sup>12</sup> Carnes Lord *Encountering A Philosopher-King*

<sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick\\_the\\_Great#Later\\_years\\_and\\_death](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_the_Great#Later_years_and_death)

Of course, Herod had no intention of worshiping Jesus. He only had self on his mind. His schemes always brought death.

Here's the kind of man he was: Shortly before his death, he ordered that a large group of prominent citizens would be held in prison so that, at the moment he died they would be executed to ensure that the people of the kingdom would be displaying grief on the day of his passing.<sup>14</sup>

Herod was one of the worst men. But our sinful hearts are no so unlike his. Douglas Hare writes, "*Scoff not at Herod until you have acknowledged the Herod in yourself.*"<sup>15</sup> That God-hating killer lurks within each of us and must be deposed. We must drive him from the throne.

**Matthew 2:9 - <sup>9</sup>After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen at its rising. It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was.**

This was no ordinary star. Some suggest it was a comet or a supernova or an alignment of planets.<sup>16</sup> But here we see it moving around, giving them specific direction to a particular house.

Now, this begs the question: Why, oh, why did God allow the wise men to go to Jerusalem, which stirred up a terrible tragedy for the families of Bethlehem? Why not bypass Jerusalem and send them right to where Jesus was?

God was proclaiming the good news to the *Jews* just like He was to these Gentiles. Though they were hard of heart, though by-and-large they were not watching for His coming, the Lord's desire was to reach out to them, to offer them salvation.

God comes to *us*. That's the story of Christmas. Jesus is Emmanuel - God *with* us. A God Who could do anything He wants, but what He wants is to know you. To love you. To attach Himself to you and give you everlasting life. To have a real and cooperative relationship with you.

But He will not force you. Did you notice what it said at the beginning of verse 9? "They went on their way." The wise men. No scribes. No priests. No one went with them.

Once when King Frederick was in Paris disguised as a common musician, he met an art collector who had many lovely pieces. Frederick asked him, "Might I be allowed to see and admire them?" "Who are you, sir? I don't know you at all," the man replied. Frederick responded he was part of the king's orchestra. The collector dismissed him, saying, "I don't have time to waste [on you]."<sup>17</sup>

Have *you* responded to the call of God? Sometimes we don't always know which turn to make or the answers to every question, but the first issue is: Have you opened the door of your heart to

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Mounce *Matthew*

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Hare *Matthew*

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Richards *The Bible Reader's Companion*

<sup>17</sup> MacDonogh

God? The wise men had a lot of questions. They weren't sure which way to go. But as they responded to what had been revealed, as they answered God's call and sought after Him, the answers came. Direction came. Clarity came. Revelation came. They sought and they *found*.

**Matthew 2:10 - <sup>10</sup>When they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy.**

This wasn't just being glad the long commute was over. This was a time of exceedingly great rejoicing.<sup>18</sup> Compare with the response of the other characters who were disturbed, perturbed, and confused. Which frame of mind would *you* like to be in? Which group would you like to join?

**Matthew 2:11 - <sup>11</sup>Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.**

Were there *other* children in the house? We know Jesus had siblings.<sup>19</sup> If He was 2 years old, it's not unlikely that there could have been other babies in the house. But they *immediately* knew Him.

Their goal was to worship. What a lovely, costly, *personal* worship they gave. Think of the time and effort spent to bring them there. The treasures they offered to this little Baby. Think of the *humility* required. *They* were supposed to be great experts - authorities in their field. Men of position and renown. And here they are, bowed low on a peasant's floor. But oh how ready they were to offer it all to this King - the *true* King. The Shepherd Savior, Who takes away the sin of the world.

The text doesn't indicate that the wise men gave these gifts with purposeful symbolism. But, looking back we see what so many scholars have pointed out. One writes, "[These gifts] foretold that He was to be the true King, the perfect High Priest, and in the end the supreme Savior."<sup>20</sup>

Usually when dignitaries come to offer gifts to a king, the king reciprocates with gifts of His own.<sup>21</sup> That's the etiquette and protocol in situations like these.

What did Jesus give them in return? That day, they probably received basic refreshments and hearts full of joy. As *King*, Jesus gave these believing Gentiles a place in His forever Kingdom, along with a full portion of His eternal inheritance. As High Priest, He made Himself atonement for their sin and ever lives to make intercession for them. As supreme Savior, He rescued them from the power of the grave and out of the fires of hell. These as so much more the Lord gives back to those who give their lives to Him.

**Matthew 2:12 - <sup>12</sup>And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route.**

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<sup>18</sup> See NAC, JFB

<sup>19</sup> John 7:5

<sup>20</sup> Mounce quoting Barclay

<sup>21</sup> EBC

A bit of comedy here. They, of course, were the people who *others* came to for the interpretation of dreams. They were supposed to be the fortune-tellers. But here God has to clue them in on Herod's plan and give *them* the detour home.

As their story comes to a close, I find myself asking, "That's it?" They didn't stay to protect the Baby. They didn't hang around hoping to get a cabinet position in His administration. They weren't selected to be disciples. They went home. *But* they went home with true understanding for the first time. They went home with belief, with hope, with a *real* knowledge of the Divine. They came to Bethlehem as emissaries from the east. They returned to the east as emissaries of the King of Heaven - men who had beheld the Savior, the Messiah, the final answer to every question.

Now what? We don't know. But isn't it obvious that the God Who was so mindful of them before would continue to lead them, to call them, to Shepherd them as they returned home?

While on a boat traveling to Holland, Frederick the Great once met a Swiss scholar named Henri de Catt. The king, of course, was in disguise. Frederick asked Henri many questions, offered him a share of his pâté. Simply enjoyed a visit with this stranger. Six weeks later, Henri received an invitation to enter service to the king. He became the private secretary and close confidant to the king for more than 20 years.

I'm sure most of you have seen Christmas cards or decorations that say, "Wise men still seek Him." That's only true because the Shepherd King still calls to you. He came to earth to be our Savior. God saw to it that *nothing* could stop His mission to save us, to conquer sin, to defeat death. Not Herod, not Rome, not Pharisees or Sadducees, not Satan. *Nothing* was going to stop the Lord from being God's indescribable gift, offered to a lost and dying world. Offered to *you*. The gift of salvation, packaged with forgiveness and joy and peace and perspective and answers and hope and so much more.

You may not know it, but you are in the *presence* of the King. And His desire is to not only make your acquaintance, but to make you a part of His family. But to accept this gift, you must believe Jesus is Who the wise men thought He was. You must choose to leave the throne of your own heart and life - turning from your idols to this awesome and holy and merciful God and bow in worship before Him. You can do it today and have the most meaningful Christmas of your life.