

Larry Walters was a truck driver, but his lifelong dream was to fly. When he graduated from high school, he joined the Air Force in hopes of becoming a pilot, but he was disqualified because his poor eyesight. So, when he finally left the Air Force, and after watching planes fly across the sky, he got a brilliant idea.

He went down to the local Army-Navy surplus store and bought a tank of helium and 45 weather balloons. These were not your brightly colored party balloons; these were heavy-duty spheres measuring more than four feet across when fully inflated.

Well, in the backyard of his San Pedro home, Larry used straps to attach the balloons to a lawn chair – the kind you might have in your own backyard. He anchored the chair to the bumper of his jeep and inflated the balloons with helium. Then he packed some sandwiches and beer, a radio, a camera, and a loaded pellet gun – figuring he could pop a few of the balloons when it was time to come down, ideally landing safely somewhere in the Mojave Desert. That was the plan.

Unfortunately, on July 2, 1982, things did not go as planned and instead of gently floating up into the sky like he imagined, he shot up like a bottle rocket until he leveled off at 16,000 feet. Understandably, Larry freaked out – and even more so after he drifted over the controlled airspace of the Long Beach Airport and realized he was not alone, for he was spotted by at least two commercial pilots, who alerted air traffic controllers and the Federal Aviation Administration.

At the great height of 16,000 feet, Larry was fearful that if he popped the balloons – the wrong balloons, he would become unbalanced and fall out of the lawn chair; however, after flying for 45 minutes, he eventually got up the courage to shoot out some of the balloons. He descended slowly, and after a total of 90 minutes in the air, he finally reached the ground, becoming entangled in power lines in Long Beach, causing a 20-minute power outage in the surrounding area.

Once Larry climbed down from the power pole, he was immediately arrested by the waiting Long Beach Police Department and later fined. When speaking to the press, and answering the question why did he do it, he responded – “It was something I had to do.”

This morning as we continue in the Gospel of **Matthew**, we are going to be introduced to some wise men who, like “*Lawn Chair Larry*”, did what they had to do – they traveled far to worship the King. So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Matthew 2**, beginning with **verse 1**.

¹Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ²“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”

In the days of Herod – and these were very dark days, Jesus was born in **Bethlehem of Judea**, and we are specifically told it was *Bethlehem of Judea* because there is another Bethlehem much further north in Galilee.

In the days of **Herod** – and we have talked about him in the past, but I want to give you a little more this morning because he is a key character in this passage. If you don't know, Herod was an Edomite, not a Jew – he's a descendant of Esau, not Jacob, and he gained political influence through his friendship with *Mark Antony* who was a very powerful person in Rome at that time, and as a reminder, this is the same Mark Antony who had a thing for *Cleopatra* of Egypt.

Well later, Herod was appointed the king of Judea by the Roman Senate, and when *Gaius Octavian* defeated Mark Antony in a civil war and became the undisputed Roman Emperor, Herod, although a former friend of Mark Antony, was allowed to remain in the position as the king of Judea – a puppet king for sure – because he was collecting a lot of taxes for Rome.

It is said that Herod was a little man just over 5 feet tall – a little man who wanted to prove he was a big guy. As such, he took on many colossal building projects in Jerusalem, erecting palaces, amphitheaters, and aqueducts. He built several fortresses to include the fortress of Masada, and he founded entire cities such as the port city of Caesarea to accommodate the growing population. Then to gain favor with the Jews – not that he cared for them – he remodeled and expanded the temple in Jerusalem to include the Western Wall.

This little man Herod was a great builder with an even greater ego – often driven by paranoia, jealousy, and cruelty. He murdered some 8000 Jews during his reign, he executed his favorite wife *Mariamne* – the one he loved – the one out of ten, and he assassinated anyone who threatened his throne – to include three of his own sons which prompted the Roman Emperor to say, “*It's better to be Herod's pig than his son.*”

Later – well into his 70's, after executing *Mariamne*, Herod contracted a disease, and this is how the first century historian *Josephus* describes it in his book called “*Antiquities of the Jews*”. He writes this of Herod,

The disease then seized upon his whole body and distracted it by various torments. For he had a slow fever, and the itching of the skin of his whole body was insupportable. He suffered also from continuous pains in his colon, and there were swellings on his feet like those of a person suffering from dropsy (which is accumulation of excess water), while his abdomen was inflamed and his privy member so putrefied as to produce worms. Besides this he could breathe only in an upright posture, and then only with difficulty, and he had convulsions in all his limbs, so that the diviners said that his diseases were a punishment.

In layman terms, medical researchers of this day suspect that Herod suffered from a chronic kidney disease, but as a separate medical condition, it seems he also contracted gonorrhea which developed into gangrene of his private parts – parts that became putrefied and infested with maggots. It is said that Herod smelled so bad, that his guards could only be around him for a very short time before they got sick themselves.

Anyway, nearing his death, and realizing that no one would mourn for him, Herod ordered the arrest of one hundred of the leading men of Jerusalem. He put them in prison and demanded that the moment he died, those hundred men were to be taken to the arena and killed instantly. In his reasoning, he stated, *“If the city won’t mourn for me, let it mourn for those who die with me.”* The men were arrested, and Herod eventually died, but his final order was never carried out.

So, that’s the King Herod we are dealing with in this passage. He was a terrible character, but there was another cast of characters who entered the scene – and it’s the **magi** – a word that literally means *wise men*. Now, contrary to the many nativity stories and the hymn, these wise men were not kings. They were scholars and stargazers who looked to the heavens for signs and with regard to their numbers, we don’t know how many there were. There were at least two for sure, because the word *magi* is plural – yes, there could have been three or there could have been three hundred. I guess what I am trying to say is, don’t let the number of gifts they later give dictate the number of people with those gifts, and with that said, if you accidentally drop one of your three wise men figurines from your nativity set, don’t worry about it.

We are told that these magi come from the **east**, likely with a large entourage, maybe from the area of Persia, maybe from Babylon, and something from their knowledge and understanding, possibly something recorded long ago by **Daniel** triggered them to follow a star – a supernatural star – the star of the King of the Jews.

Well, the magi with their entourage show up in Jerusalem – the capital city, they go to the palace where they would reasonably assume to find the King, and they ask “*Where is He? Where is the King that was born the King of the Jews? We have to come to worship the King, who at His first breath, is already the King. So, where is He?*”

Now, as I have already pointed out, Herod was paranoid and jealous and would kill anyone who threatened his throne, so as you might imagine, these questions by the magi got his undivided attention, and with that, Matthew tells us beginning with verse 3,

³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; For out of you shall come forth a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.’”

When Herod heard about this news of a rival King, he was **troubled** – he’s agitated like boiling water, and when he was agitated, so was the city for no one knew what this crazy man might do. Herod then summons all the **chief priests and scribes** – the Jewish religious leaders – we might say the *Jewish wise men*, and he questions them over and over again as to where the **Messiah** was to be born.

Now, how does Matthew know about this activity in the palace? I mean he tells us things in his gospel and no one else tells. For example, it’s only Matthew who tells us about the guards who freak out and pass out when an angel appears and rolls away the stone at the Lord’s tomb. **So, how does Matthew know this?** Well, remember, Matthew had been a tax collector for Rome, and he spent a large portion of his life in the presence of guards – he apparently had inside connections, and it appears he hears what happens in the palace.

In the palace, Herod demands to know where the Messiah was to be born, and the religious leaders – who don’t even need to search Scripture to find the answer, say “*He was to be born in **Bethlehem of Judea***” – which was about five miles away from Jerusalem. Then they make reference to the words of the prophet **Micah** given some 700 years earlier.

**“And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah;
For out of you shall come forth a Ruler
Who will shepherd My people Israel.”**

You want to hear something really mind-boggling? These Jewish religious leaders who called themselves “*God’s people*” who obviously knew this Old Testament prophecy – they just quoted it, they just pointed the way for Herod – to a town just down the road, and yet they do not seek out the Messiah for themselves.

These magi, these Gentiles leave their country, leave their homes and take the time and the trouble to travel across the desert from the east, for months, maybe years to worship the King of the Jews – but these Jewish religious leaders – these Jewish wise men don’t go. They don’t do a thing.

What does that say to you and me? Sometimes we think knowing God’s Word is good enough – but it’s in the doing, it’s in the obeying, not merely in the knowing that counts. You and I can easily become like these Jewish religious leaders, saying, “*Well, I read my Bible. I know the Word, I know what I should be doing, and that’s good enough.*” No, God’s blessing is in the doing, not just in the knowing.

Anyway, Herod sends the religious leaders away but he has more questions, and beginning with **verse 7** we are told.

⁷Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.”

So, Herod calls in the magi and grills them as to when the star first appeared. We are not told what their answer was to Herod, but we can assume that their answer led Herod to later slaughter all the boys, two years old and younger, in Bethlehem to kill this rival King who threatened his throne.

After getting his answer, Herod tells the magi to go to Bethlehem to carefully search for the **Child** – not the baby, but the Child – who could two years old by now, and when He is found, come back to Jerusalem and let him know so he can worship the Messiah as well.

Now, of course, we know this was an outright lie. Herod had no intention of worshipping the new King – he’s out for blood, but at this point, the magi do not know this.

Then, beginning with **verse 9**, Matthew tells us,

⁹ After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was.

So, the magi leave the palace, and this supernatural star reappears and leads them right to where Jesus was in Bethlehem just five miles away.

¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

The magi and their entourage come to the **house** – not a stable, not a cave, there’s no manger mentioned here, but to the family residence where Joseph and Mary were now living, and they saw the **Child with Mary**. Joseph is not mentioned, maybe he’s at work, but when they see Jesus, these Gentiles fall to the ground and worship Him.

We are told the magi give treasures to Jesus – expensive treasures of **gold, frankincense, and myrrh**. Now, let me say something about these treasures. I have read all kinds of commentary and I have heard all kinds of messages which attach some sort of symbolism to these gifts.

Generally, it is said that **gold** symbolizes *royalty*, **frankincense** – which is a gum resin from a tree, used as incense, is symbolic of *divinity*, and **myrrh** which is another resin from a tree, used in medicine, and perfumes, and incense, speaks to *humanity*. Without a doubt, these treasures were fit for a king, but they were also common items of exchange in that day – items the magi would have needed to make their long trip from the east, and as we will see next week, the same items Joseph and Mary and Jesus would likely need to fund their escape from Herod into Egypt.

Now, we are not told how long the magi stayed in Bethlehem, but when the time came to leave, after being **warned by God in a dream**, they did not return to Herod, instead they quietly went back home a different *way* – surely as different *people*.

So, this morning, we looked at several characters. In this passage, we first looked at Herod who was *hostile* towards Jesus and he sought to destroy Jesus before He became a threat to his throne. Herod was afraid that this rival King would interfere with his life, would make demands of him, and would expect obedience and submission. Herod wanted to rule. You know, today is no different. People are still hostile towards Jesus because Jesus threatens their right to rule their own lives. They don't want Jesus to interfere. Jesus bothers them, He changes their plans, and they are not willing submit to Him as Lord.

Secondly, we looked at the Jewish religious leaders who were *indifferent* towards Jesus. These were the teachers of Scripture, they knew the facts, they could have won first place in a Bible trivia contest, they had the book knowledge, but their hearts were far from God. They told Herod exactly where the Messiah could be found – not across a desert, but right under their noses, just five miles away, and yet, they don't even tag along with the magi to see Jesus for themselves. Today, there are plenty of religious people, who claim to know Jesus, and yet because of their *indifference* – there is *no difference* in their lives.

Finally, we come to the magi who *sought* to find Jesus, and the only reason they sought Him out is because God took the initiative and send them a supernatural sign from heaven that they connected to the King they had to worship. God took the initiative and they responded, and today – the mere fact that anyone hears the gospel and is convicted of their need for a Savior is evidence that God is still taking the initiative, so then the question becomes – **“How are you responding?”** Each of us must choose how we'll respond to Jesus.

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