

THE GENTILES REJOICE

Matthew 2:1-12

Would you turn to Matthew 2 with me?

As we work through this text we are going to encounter three protagonists: Herod, the chief priests and scribes, and the *magi*.

Let's get a sense of who they were before we go on.

Herod the king was not a Jew, but an Edomite, or Idumean, descended from Esau. His father and grandfather had taken the sides of the rebels during the Maccabean rebellion. Herod became governor of Galilee at the age of 25, and was made king of Judea ten years later. He became known for violently punishing those who opposed him or threatened his authority. He executed dozens of Pharisees and members of the aristocracy, and was just as brutal with his own family. Over the years he ordered the execution of wives, sons, and other family members. Here's a story you may not have heard, that illustrates Herod's paranoia and brutality. He died in 4 B.C. of a terrible illness, probably some form of stomach or intestinal cancer. He was afraid no one would mourn him, and so he ordered that one man from each family in Israel be held captive at the arena in Jericho. He gave orders to his sister, Alexas, that when he died she was to have those men killed, so that there was mourning in Israel. Praise God, she released the men upon Herod's death.

Chief priests and scribes. We might want to think of the chief priests and scribes as the holy men of Israel, but by the time of Jesus' birth they had become far more political than religious, with deep ties and obligations to Herod and his throne. They were members of the Jewish aristocracy, often appointed as rewards for loyalty to Herod and other leaders, and not for their religious faithfulness.

Wise men from the east. According to a Greek historian who wrote about 500 years before Christ, the *magi* were members of a priestly caste from Media and Persia, who focused their attention on astrology, dream interpretation, and magic. They served as royal advisors to various kings, including Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar of Babylon, and Darius the Mede. I believe the forerunners of the *magi* of Matthew 2 had known Daniel, and perhaps even came into possession of the books and Scriptures he owned.

TRANSITION: Now that we understand a little more about these men, let's look at Matthew 2:1-12.

LOOKING FOR THE KING

1 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, **2** 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." (Matthew 2:1-2, ESV)

What was the star? There have been many attempts over the years to identify the star as a particular star or planet or comet, but it really a miraculous sign given to these men by God, like the "great fish" God prepared to bring Jonah back to the shore (Jonah 1:17).

The *magi* come to worship the King of the Jews. The word translated "worship" is used more than 50 times in the New Testament; it overwhelmingly means to worship a deity. That is the sense here. These men were not diplomats or government representatives; they hadn't come to simply recognize the birth of an heir to the throne. They had come to worship.

So we quickly see that God granted these men a miraculous sign, and showed them by His Spirit that the Child was not a mere earthly king, but One deserving worship. The promise of salvation, going back into the book of Genesis, was never meant to exclude Gentiles. It is true that the Lord chose a particular people through whom to bring the Savior, but the Savior was for all mankind, not just the Jews.

AS THE LORD SAYS IN ROMANS 10:20,

20 “I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.” (Romans 10:20, ESV)

TRANSITION: Since the *magi* were looking for the newly born King of the Jews, it only made sense to travel to Jerusalem and speak to king Herod; as far as the wise men were concerned, they were looking for Herod’s son.

WHERE IS THE KING?

3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; **4** and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. **5** They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: **6** “ ‘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.’ ” (Matthew 2:3–6, ESV)

Herod was troubled by the announcement that the King of the Jews had been born. The Gospel is not always good news. It is often heard with anger and resentment. Herod is a perfect example of this. He was a man in need of salvation; in fact, he would die very horribly a year or so after this. He needed the grace that the Savior, Jesus Christ, would bring. But he remained jealous and paranoid, and received this news with every possible negative emotion. The wise men could not have known, but they had just thrown gasoline on an already raging fire.

All Jerusalem was troubled as well (Matthew 2:3). Perhaps this was because they had a good thing going, and didn't want some "Savior" cutting into their profits and lifestyles. More likely, they knew that Herod would respond with violence, and didn't want to get caught up in his rage.

The question on Herod's mind was obvious: WHERE is this so-called "King of the Jews"? He called his own "wise men," the chief priests and scribes, and they told him that the Scriptures pointed to Bethlehem. You might notice that the wise men were looking for "the one born KING of the Jews," but Herod asked his advisors where the CHRIST would be born. He knew enough about the Jews to know that they weren't waiting for just any king, but for an anointed Savior.

DECEPTION

Herod has the information he needs; now he acts to preserve his power, but not his soul.

7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. **8** 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." (Matthew 2:7-8, ESV)

Herod sent the chief priests and scribes away, and calls the *magi* to a private meeting. He wanted to know when the star had appeared. We don't find out until Matthew 2:16 why he wanted to know; we'll see that next week. And then he told the wise men, "When you find Him, come back and tell me, so I can worship Him too." These men wanted to go and worship the Child; they wouldn't cooperate with Herod if he told them that he wanted the Boy dead. As violent and paranoid as he was, Herod was also smooth and persuasive.

TRANSITION: For their part, the *magi* had traveled a long distance over a long period of time in order to worship the King of the Jews. Their interest was in His identity and location. They must have been eager to finish their journey.

WORSHIPING THE KING

9 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. **10** When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. **11** 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. **12** And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:9–12, ESV)

The star appeared to them in the east, and then disappeared. By God's grace they understood that it was a sign that the King of the Jews had been born. By God's grace they knew that this Child was to be worshiped, not as a Child, but as the King of kings and Lord of lords. The Father drew them from the east, more than 1,000 miles, through a long, difficult journey, to Jerusalem. As they left Jerusalem they again saw the star, and "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." They didn't look at the sky and nod in satisfaction; they were beside themselves with joy, perhaps weeping with joy. The star moved, leading them toward Jerusalem, finally stopping over the house where Jesus was. Again, this was not a star or planet or comet; it was a supernatural sign from God for these men specifically. This is important because later on the wise men would be able to say that God Himself, not Herod, had led them to the King of the Jews.

The *magi* entered the house, and fell down on their faces and worshiped Jesus. They had been brought by God the Father from over 1,000 miles away. They had been rescued out of their idolatry and brought face to face with their Creator, who had become a human being.

Israel had long been unfaithful, and the Lord had promised to bring salvation to the Gentiles. What we read here reminds me of what happened decades later in the city of Pisidian Antioch. Paul and Barnabas arrived there and began preaching the Gospel in the synagogues, as always. There was a mildly hopeful response at first, but then the Jews turned against them, and rejected the Gospel. So the evangelists turned to the Gentiles.

Luke wrote,

48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. (Acts 13:48, ESV)

This is exactly what happened with the *magi*. Israel had been unfaithful for centuries. The leaders focused on their power and profits, and resisted anyone who threatened their livelihoods.

Yet we see God in His mercy giving a sign to the Gentile *magi*, bringing them 1,000 miles and more, and persuading them to worship His Son, child though He was. They offered Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, rare and expensive gifts, that no doubt eased the trip to Egypt and helped the little family survive. He brought the wise men out of their darkness, and into the light of His Kingdom.

BRINGING IT HOME

Let's bring this home to our own lives.

When I think about Herod, I think about the tremendous fear that sinners have of losing their own pride and sense of self-control. Few go as far as Herod did to protect themselves – although leaders in some nations do put Christians to death in order to safeguard their rule – but the *heart* of Herod is alive and well in billions today. The act of worshiping a false god is not merely the sin of ignoring Jesus Christ, but the murderous desire for God to be other than who and what He is.

I pray that you are not in that sort of rebellion against the Savior today, and that if you are, He shows you the grace of salvation.

When I think about the chief priests and scribes, I think about the theological games that people play in our time. The chief priests and scribes had liberalized their faith; that is, they had cut themselves loose to define their own truth, and wickedly used the Scriptures to justify their intentions. While the Pharisees sinned in their own way, worshiping the letter of the Law, they at least took the letter of the Law seriously. The highly educated have always been at risk of humanistic religion; rather than being theocentric in their beliefs, with all things focused on God and His Word, they are anthropocentric, making man the measure of all things. Whenever people of faith drift from the Word of God, they drift in a liberal direction. They remake God in man's image, and proclaim a message that appeals to the greatest number of people; it is, after all, the path of least resistance. I pray that if you are tempted to lean in a humanistic, man-centered direction that the Lord would bring you back to seeing Christ at the center of all things.

And when I think of the wise men, the *magi*, I think of the wonderful, unpredictable mercy of God. Jesus said in John 3 that only those who are born of the Spirit of God will see the Kingdom of God, and that the Spirit, like the wind, goes where it wishes; we cannot tell where the Spirit of God will move next. His work cannot be predicted; it certainly cannot be controlled or regulated.

The Spirit of God, working in happy cooperation with the Father's will, opened the eyes of the *magi*; moved them to travel a great distance; kept their hearts full of hope, for what they could not know; maintained that hope in spite of the manipulations of Herod; and fulfilled their hope at the sight of the Child Jesus, whom they rightly worshiped. What a foolish, silly thing to do! Bowing before a Child? Worshiping Him? Honoring this little Boy, perhaps barely walking, not yet speaking, as the King of kings and Lord of lords? Foolish! Idiomatic! Absurd! Comical!

But they left that house in Bethlehem with hearts that were full of the goodness of God, even while the Jews all around them were either ignorant of the Savior, reduced Him to a theoretical event, or raged against His very existence.

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. **22** For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,

23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, **24** but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks,

Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

(1 Corinthians 1:20-24, ESV)

I pray today that you and I would not be the wise ones, the scribes, the debaters of the age, but the fools who believed the folly of what has been preached – Jesus Christ crucified, buried, and raised from the dead, the message that causes some to rage and others to sneer, but which to us is the wondrous power of God and the precious wisdom of God.