

“Not So Little Town of Bethlehem” (An Exposition of Matthew 2:1-23)¹

Introduction

This morning we are looking at Matthew’s account of the visit of the wise men (or magi) after the birth of Jesus Christ. We don’t have time to unpack everything in the chapter, but I thought it would be instructive for us to examine the responses of the various people in our text to news of the birth of Christ. We see the wise men, who were no doubt foreigners from a pagan land; King Herod; and also the chief priests and scribes.

Their responses to the good news of the birth of the Savior could not have been more different. *King Herod* was **“troubled”** (v.3) by the news (and then later *enraged*), for he saw Christ as a rival to his own throne. *The chief priests and scribes* knew what the Scriptures foretold about the birth of Christ, but were somehow shockingly *apathetic* to the news of its fulfillment. They could not even be bothered to make the trip to Bethlehem to see for themselves. And then we have *the wise men* (or magi). They rejoiced and spared no trouble or expense in going to see Jesus for themselves. And when they finally saw Him, they **“fell down and worshiped him”** (v.11)!

In many ways these are some of the same responses that many people still give to the good news of the gospel of Christ, even at Christmas.

King Herod

First, we are going to look the response of *King Herod*. In v.1-2 Matthew sets the stage for us by telling us how the news of the birth of Jesus came to Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel:

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, 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.”

Now the first thing that you might notice in those verses is that there are two (2) kings mentioned. Who does Matthew tell us was the reigning king in Judea? These were **“the days of Herod the king”** (v.1). Now Herod the Great was *not* a Jew, and was *not* in the line of King David. He was a puppet king of sorts, set up by the Roman government in order to keep order in Judea.

What was Herod’s initial reaction to the news of the birth of Jesus? In v.3 we read, **“When Herod the king heard this, he was *troubled*, and all Jerusalem with him . . .”** He was **“troubled”** or greatly shaken-up. The news of the birth of Jesus was *not* good news to Herod – it was *bad* news; it was *troubling* news.

But Herod wasn’t the only one who found this news troubling, was he? Matthew tells us that **“all Jerusalem”** was *troubled* right along with Herod (v.3)! Matthew Henry writes:

“ . . .one would have thought Jerusalem should rejoice greatly to hear that her King comes; yet, it seems, *all Jerusalem*, except the few there that *waited for the consolation of Israel*, were

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

troubled with Herod, and were apprehensive of I know not what ill consequences of the birth of this new king, that it would involve them in war, or restrain their lusts; they, for their parts, desired no king but Herod; no, not the Messiah himself.²

This demonstrates for us the sad truth of John 1:11, where we are told, **“He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”**

Why was Herod so **“troubled”** about the birth of Jesus? Why was the *good news* such *bad news* to him? Matthew gives us a hint in that *three (3) times* in our text Herod is referred to as **“king”** (v.1, 3, 9). Herod was nicknamed “Herod the Great” because of his many accomplishments during his long reign in Judea. He was largely responsible for the building (or re-building) of what is known as *the Second Temple*. (It is also often referred to as “*Herod's Temple*.”)

Herod reigned in Judea for about 40 years. And his reign was *marked by paranoia and violence*. He took any possible threat to his own power and throne so seriously that he reportedly had three (3) of his own sons killed, along with one of his wives! If he was willing to do *that*, then certainly you can see that what he did in ordering the deaths of all of the male children two-years-old and under in Bethlehem (v.16) would not be out of character.

So Herod was **“troubled.”** *And so what did he do?* In v.4 we are told, **“and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.”** *He asked the right people – “all the chief priests and scribes of the people”* (v.4). *All* of them! It reminds us of the story of King Ahab that we mentioned last Sunday, who inquired of about 400 prophets (1 Kings 22:6), but nevertheless he did *not* truly want to know the Word of the Lord.

And Herod also asked *the right question*, but for *all the wrong reasons*. It says that **“he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born”** (v.4). He was asking about the coming of the *Messiah*, *not* just a Jewish king in some *general* sense of the word.

But rather than *believing and rejoicing* at the good news of the birth of the Savior, Herod saw Jesus as a threat to his own rule and power. Rather than *seeking Him and worshiping Him*, he sought to *kill Him* instead! See what awful lengths the wicked will go to to try not to have Christ to rule over them!

The Chief Priests and Scribes

Second, we are going to look at the response of *the chief priests and scribes*. As disturbing and even frightening as Herod's response was, the response of the chief priests and scribes was, in some ways even *more* disturbing.

King Herod summoned them to ask them what the Scriptures said about where the Christ was to be born. They knew the right answer, didn't they? Matthew tells us that they quoted Micah 5:2. In v.5-6 he writes,

“They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

² Matthew Henry, [*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*](#) (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1614.

**are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.””**

They knew what he was asking, and they knew *why* he was asking it. Remember, the whole city was abuzz with the news of the visit of the Magi. The whole city knew that they were saying that the Christ, the King of the Jews, had *finally* been born.

Yet what did they do with this news? Nothing. They did *not* make haste to go to Bethlehem. They apparently could not even be bothered to go see for themselves. And Bethlehem was only about seven miles south of Jerusalem! Even in their day that was not that difficult of a journey to make, especially if it was for the purpose of seeing the long-awaited Messiah with their very own eyes!

J.C. Ryle notes,

“We might have thought that the scribes and Pharisees would have been the first to hasten to Bethlehem, on the lightest rumor that the Savior was born. But it was not so. A few unknown strangers from a distant land were the first, except the shepherds mentioned by St Luke, to rejoice at his birth.”³

They did *not* seek Jesus. They did not worship Jesus. They did *not* bring him gifts fit for a King. They did not believe in Him. How sad that these men who were *so well acquainted with the Old Testament Scriptures and its multitude of prophecies of the Savior who was to come*, rejected Him when He came.

Their heads were *filled* with the knowledge of the Scriptures, but *not* with the knowledge of the Christ of whom the Scriptures testify. They knew the prophecies *about* Christ, but did not know *Christ*, and rejected Him when He finally came.

The Jewish rejection of their Messiah, especially by the religious leaders of that day, is a constant theme in the Gospel of Matthew. (Indeed *they* are the ones who eventually sought to put Jesus to death.) In John 5:39-40 Jesus told the unbelieving Jews:

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”

And how many are much like them today? Many are *apathetic about the Lord Jesus Christ*, even at Christmas. Many refuse to so much as darken the door of a church where they might actually hear His gospel. How many are familiar with the Scriptures, and yet refuse to come to Christ by faith that they may have life!

The Wise Men

The *third* and *final* response to the birth of Jesus that we want to look at this morning is that of the magi themselves - the **“wise men”** (v.1). They were most certainly pagans, possibly star worshipers or astrologers of some kind, and God used a star (**“his star”** - v.2) to lead them to worship *Jesus* instead.

3 *Expository Thoughts on Matthew*, p.8

The “magi” or wise men certainly *didn't* head to the small town of Bethlehem – they made a bee line to the big city, the capital of Judea – Jerusalem! Where else would the king of the Jews be born, right? In v.9-12 we read:

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. When they saw the star, *they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy*. 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. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

What an amazing display of the grace of God in saving sinners. The least likely people in this story to find salvation were the ones who did just that by the grace of God. What was their response to the message of the birth of Jesus? They *sought* Him. They “***rejoiced exceedingly with great joy***” (v.10). They “**worshiped**” Him (v.10)! And they *offered Him gifts* (v.10)!

That is the response that we should emulate! What faith! J.C. Ryle again writes:

“We read of no greater faith than this in the whole volume of the Bible. It is a faith that deserves to be placed side by side with that of the penitent thief. The thief saw one dying the death of a malefactor, and yet prayed to him, and 'called him Lord.' The wise men saw a new-born babe on the lap of a poor woman, and yet worshiped him and confessed that he was the Christ. Blessed are they that can believe in this fashion!”⁴

What a testimony to the grace of God in the salvation of sinners! What unlikely converts from among the Gentiles even at Christ's birth! Nothing would keep them from coming to Christ, believing on Him, and worshiping Him!

Have you trusted in Christ for salvation? Do you rejoice in Jesus Christ? Do you worship Him as your Savior, the King of kings and Lord of lords? Do you offer yourself as a living sacrifice to Him out of gratitude for His great mercies toward you in the gospel (Romans 12:1-2)?

The Scriptures all bear witness to Christ. See all of the various prophecies concerning Jesus Christ that were fulfilled just in this one chapter alone! Not only the birthplace of the Savior, but also Herod's murderous attempt to kill the child Jesus; Joseph, Mary, and Jesus's flight to Egypt; and their return instead to Galilee, that Christ might be a Nazarene! All of that just in this chapter alone!

There is no excuse for *unbelief*. There is no place for *apathy* about Jesus. May we who believe never cease to '**rejoice exceedingly with great joy**' (v.10) and *fall down and worship Christ*, our Savior and Lord, giving Him our very best in all things! - Amen

4 Ibid, p.10