

Fools and Wise Men, Part 1

Matthew 2:1-3

2183

Tonight we come back to the book of Matthew and I'd like you to take your Bible and turn with me to the second chapter of Matthew, Matthew chapter 2. And we're looking – we began our little glimpse last week - at the biblical story of the visit of the wise men to the birth of Jesus Christ, to Bethlehem. And we spent a lot of time last time introducing to you the wise men, and who they were, and something about them in some detail. And I don't want to take the time to go over that at all. Let me just remind you that what we basically saw was that these men were Persian kingmakers who were coming because they were aware of the birth of the anticipated king that they had no doubt heard about from such as Daniel and others of the Israelites who had lived in their land since the time of the Babylonian captivity.

And these Persian kingmakers were very anxious to look for a king because they did not have a king. The king at the time was deposed and they wanted a great monarch to rise to the throne of the east in order that they might pose a threat to the great Roman Empire of the West. So their feelings were both political and spiritual, and we saw that they came into town and they were immediately confronted with a most interesting character by the name of Herod, and we're going to see more about him tonight. But I shared with you that the reason that Matthew includes this particular part of the birth of Jesus Christ is because Matthew presents Christ as King, and what could be more fitting in a presentation of Christ as King than to have some kingmakers come to crown him as King. And not only were they kingmakers, but they were Gentile kingmakers.

We saw how almost paradoxical it was that the Jewish people who should have been looking for the Messiah didn't even bother with the birth of Christ, whereas these Gentiles, who were a known people at that time, apart from the covenants of God, did seek to acknowledge this king. So He was a king, then, we saw in Matthew's presentation by virtue of his lineage from David. We saw that. And here we see that He is the King by virtue of the fact that there were those in the world who were official kingmakers that recognized him as such. You might say that in chapter 1, Matthew says, "Jesus deserves royal honor," and in chapter 2, He gets it. And He, indeed, even here was being recognized as King of kings and Lord of lords in some sense by these Persian kingmakers.

This is a reinforcement of the kingliness of Christ; His right to reign. And as I told you last time, I can't help but stop and think about the fact that the true King was not known in Jerusalem, His own city. In His own royal residence, the place where of all places He should have been hailed as King, He was not. They didn't seek Him. They didn't care about Him. They never even bothered to come to Bethlehem to see Him. Instead, it was some strangers from a distant land seeking Him to worship and adore. And besides the common people, the leaders, and the rulers, and the theologians, and the priests of Israel were totally indifferent, or else has Herod, filled with bitterness, and hatred, and envy, and jealousy.

And so right here at the very beginning of Matthew's Gospel, we see the way it's going to be. There are going to be those people who are indifferent. There are going to be those people who are antagonistic, and there are going to be those people who are worshipful. And we'll see more about those three groups as we move on.

So the magi represent the firstfruits of the gentile nations and show us, really, that God always had them in His heart. Now as we look at verses 1 to 12, and we're going to look at it now specifically viewing the text. The last time we just talked about introduction. But as we view the text, I want you to see five acts in this incredible drama that is played out in chapter 2; five separate acts. And we'll just title them with a simple word so we'll remember them. "Arrival," that's act one. Number two, "Agitation." Number three, "Acting." Number four, "Adoration," and number five, "Avoidance." Now that's not a very brilliant outline, but it's just a few hooks to hang your thoughts on.

First of all, we come to "Arrival." Let's look at verses 1 and 2. "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came magi." And you remember I told you that really is an untranslatable word that has reference to a certain hereditary priesthood line, a tribe of people who came originally, apparently, from the Medes but through the years had risen to a place of great prominence in the kingdoms of Persia, the Median Kingdom and the Babylonian Kingdom, as well. So it became synonymous in many ways with being a wise man. To be a magi was to have a place of the wise man in a society. So "there came these magi from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him."

Now obviously we have the arrival right here. Shortly after Jesus' birth the magi arrive in Jerusalem. Now there are two things we want to note in the very beginning in verse one. First of all, the phrase, "in Bethlehem of Judea." Now Bethlehem is a quiet little town approximately five or six miles south of Jerusalem. It was once called Ephrathah, and is so designated by the prophet of the Old Testament, Micah.

Now the name Bethlehem is interesting. It means "house of bread." *Beth* is "house," *lehem* is "bread." House of bread, a fitting name for the place where the very bread of life was born. Now this little village sits in a fertile countryside and was very productive. In fact, if I can give you a brief description it might help you to visualize it. I've been there a couple of times and I'll do the best I can.

Jerusalem, as you know, sits on a plateau some 2,000-plus feet above the valley beneath. It just sits atop a high hill. And slightly to the south, an interesting thing about where Bethlehem sits, on one end of it is a higher ridge and on the other end of it is a higher ridge and it's just almost like a saddle and Bethlehem sort of cradles itself in the middle.

The area is, for the most part, kind of a gray limestone. In fact, that's all you ever see there because there's a zoning regulation nowadays in Jerusalem, in that area, that you cannot build any edifice unless you build it out of Jerusalem stone. So that the buildings simply rise out of the ground and look exactly like the ground looks. It's a limestone, grayish color, and it looks like a little town sort of set in an amphitheater – very striking.

Now the little town of Bethlehem has had a long and very interesting history. If you go all the way back to the Book of Genesis, you will find that in Bethlehem, Jacob buried Rachel and set a pillar or

a marker by her grave. And even today, as you take a Mercedes-Benz taxi down to Bethlehem, some guy will point and say, "That's Rachel's tomb," off to the right of the road.

We find also that when Ruth married Boaz in the Book of Ruth, she lived in the town of Bethlehem. And from Bethlehem, Ruth could see clear across the Jordan valley, and that's true. You can stand in that little saddleback and you can look way across the Jordan valley, across the Dead Sea, and see Moab's hills on the other side. Ruth was a Moabitess. Living in Bethlehem, she could have stood and seen her own homeland.

But above all, the town of Bethlehem was the home and the city of the great king of Israel by the name of David. And that is what is characteristically known about Bethlehem. It is ever and always the City of David. In 1 Samuel 16 and 1 Samuel 17 and 1 Samuel 20, we find indications that this was David's city. In fact, in 2 Samuel 23, when David was a hunted fugitive, he cries out and he says that he longs for the "water of the well of Bethlehem." That was his hometown.

In later days, Rehoboam, after the splitting of the kingdom in Solomon's time, Rehoboam fortified the town. But uniquely it stands – many little things happened in history - but uniquely it stands as the City of David. And it was really there – this is important – it was really there in that little place, that little village, it isn't really a city. It was in that little village that the people of God had long expected their Messiah to be born. And there was reason for that, and the reason is the Old Testament prophecy. They waited for David's greater son to come out of David's city. They waited for the Messiah to be born there, and when he was born there they couldn't bother to take note of it.

Now just a little more about Bethlehem to help you get a little visual picture of it. The houses of Bethlehem are built all over the slopes. In fact, it's very difficult to find a flat place unless you go up into the square right by the Church of the Nativity. It seems to be just a whole lot of slopes, and the houses are built all over the slopes.

And very frequently, when a house would be built on the slope, beneath that, because the limestone was not that hard and because there were some natural indentations anyway in the mountain, people would build out a hollowed cave which they would use for a stable. And it is very likely that it was in such a hollow cave that our Lord Jesus was born. Even today, the Catholic Church believes that it has found the right cave. Of course they always find somewhere where they can stick up a church, everywhere but in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. They haven't been able to build one there where Jesus walked on the water, but every other place Jesus ever put his foot they've put a church.

This particular cave that they think they've found in the side of the hill, they have built a church on top of it, right on top. So you go in the church, you go down the stairs – way down – and you go into a little, tiny cave and you have to bend your head and bend your shoulders to kind of crawl into this little cave and that's the place they say Jesus was born.

Now by the way, this isn't any Johnny-come-lately thing. It goes all the way back to the Emperor Hadrian. He first recognized that Christians felt that this cave was the sacred place, so he thought he'd desecrate it real good. So he built a shrine to Adonis, a false god, right on it. And Constantine came through in about the 4th Century and smashed the temple to Adonis and built a church there. And that has continued to be thought to be the site. So it's just a little village built on a pile of slopes where houses usually had beneath them, if they had a stable, a little stable made out of a hollowed

place in the hill.

Now this is Bethlehem of Judea. Not significant. Maybe it's fitting, so when anybody thinks of Bethlehem they only think of one thing, and that's the birth of Jesus Christ. And maybe that's the way God wanted it and so He picked a very obscure place, and yet a place close enough to Jerusalem that it should have commanded the attention of the entire population when the King was born, had they been as sensitive to God as he would have wished.

You'll notice that there is, no doubt, some time that has passed. Between chapter 2 and verse 1 when the wise men arrive and the birth of Christ, there is a time gap. I hinted at it last time and I'm not gonna go into great detail about it, but it seems to me that there are several months, at least, that have gone on. There's a good period of months, Jesus being born sometime near the end of the year, and then Herod dying sometime near the front of the next year. We know that he died, or at least we believe that he died somewhere around the end of March or the beginning of April in a lunar eclipse in 4 B.C. It couldn't be more than four, or five, or six months at the very most, at least in my judgment, after the birth of Christ.

And also you will note this. That it tells us in verse 11 that "when they were come into the house, they saw the young child." Christ is no longer in the manger. He is no longer in the stable. He is in a house. And I told you last time that very likely they had already been to the temple for purification. When a Jewish lady had a baby, there was a certain period of time, she had to go and be purified and offer a sacrifice. I told you that they offered turtledoves, which was the offering of somebody who was in abject poverty.

And had it been any great length of time after the birth of Christ, they no doubt would have taken the gifts that the wise men brought them and they would have purchased a greater sacrifice. So it seems to me that they had not yet received the gifts of the magi, which they would have used in that sacrifice, which means the purification happened before that, which puts it at least a 40-day period before the wise men ever got there. So the child has grown at least a little bit, maybe a few months old.

There's another note of interest here, and I'm just giving you some data to kind of set the stage. You'll notice that it says, "In the days of Herod the king." Now we can spend literally hours discussing this person and all of his background, and where he came from, but that's really not totally germane to our point. Let me just give you enough history so you get the picture.

This man was not really strictly a Jew. He was an Edomite. He was an Idumean is another word for it - Edomite and Idumean being the same thing - coming from an area to the east and to the south a little bit from Jerusalem. He had made himself available to the Romans. Now remember this. The Romans came in and sort of took over that area, and people who were smart sort of played footsie with the Romans a little bit, right? People who wanted to gain something sort of played up to the Romans, and this man was one of those kinds of people. During the civil wars in Palestine and during the time when Rome was trying to establish itself prior to the birth of Christ, Herod played games with Rome and made himself sort of winsome to them, and they trusted him. He gained their favor.

And once Rome had finally conquered the land of Judea, they set up a procurator. A procurator was

like a governor, sort of an official ruler of that little country, and his name was Antipater, Antipater. He was an Edomite, all right? He was an Edomite, and Herod was his son. When they wanted a ruler, they found this guy Antipater and Herod was his son. But Herod had played up so much to the Romans that they appointed Herod as the tetrarch of Galilee.

In other words, they needed one guy to handle Jerusalem and Judea and somebody else to kind of control the rural area. It was a lesser position in significance, but nonetheless it was a position of honor among the Romans. So they put Antipater in Jerusalem and Judea, and they stuck his son Herod up in Galilee. So in 47 B.C., that's before the birth of Christ, Herod was made the tetrarch of Galilee.

Now seven years later, in 40 B.C., that eastern Parthian/Persian/Medean area that we've been talking about from where the magi came, started a civil war, and they came across and attacked that area of Palestine, and Syria, and so forth, and Herod took a quick boat to Rome. He took off. He could see the handwriting on the wall, and he went to Rome to tell them what was going on. The east was beginning to disturb that little buffer area, so Herod took off and fled to Rome. This is Antipater's son.

Now he gets to Rome, and he starts laying it on the Roman senate, and he really plays up to the Roman senate. He convinces the Roman senate that he is pro-Roman, but that he's also from that part of the world and he knows how to handle situations over there, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. He wants absolute authority. So in 40 B.C. or about, the Roman senate made Herod the king of the Jews. Now remember that. They made Herod the king of the Jews and they said, "You take an army," and they gave him an army. They gave him some crack troops, and they said, "You go and you carve out your own kingdom over there and you run your own show."

Well you know, it took him three years to do it? It took him three years to finally gain the power he had in title. Finally, in 37 B.C., he won and he became king of the Jews, and that is a title that he maintained until he died. He always tried to maintain the title king of the Jews.

Now, do you see the question that the magi asked in verse two, saying, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" Well that was enough to panic Herod. I mean, he had sought this thing like a political plumb. He had traveled all the way to Rome and played his game before the Roman senate. He had gotten the right to be the king of the Jews, took an army back and fought for three years to gain the right to make that a reality, and then he had held onto that thing right on down until this time, and now all of a sudden here comes a whole pile of Persian kingmakers. They come streaming into town asking all over the place, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" And Herod is afraid.

Now a little of the shock of this whole scene is indicated in verse 1 again, when "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came magi." Not just there came magi, but, "Can you believe this? There came magi." Or if you're Herod, "Yikes, there came magi," or whatever. Unexpected, lo, startling, shocking, amazing. "There came magi from the east" asking where the King of the Jews was born.

Now frankly, it shouldn't have been so shocking, really. If those Jewish people had carefully analyzed the Old Testament, they no doubt would have had good indication that the time was right. Historians reiterate for us that at that time there was, in the world – now watch this. This is fascinating to me. At

that time, there was in the world a strange kind of expectation for a coming king. The people in the east had it and that's partly why the magi came. People in many places were anticipating the arrival of a king. It was the mood of the day.

Even the Roman historians acknowledge this. For example, Suetonius wrote, "There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world." That's Suetonius, and Suetonius would have written later on about particularly the days of Vespasian, and Vespasian conquered Israel in 70 A.D. So maybe Suetonius wrote a little bit after that. But he looked back and said that was a day when there was an expectation for men coming from Judea to rule the world. They were looking at that place.

Tacitus, the famous Roman historian, tells of the same belief. "There was a firm persuasion," says Tacitus in his histories, "that at this very time the east was to grow powerful and rulers coming from Judea were to acquire a universal empire." So says Tacitus. The Jews, according to Josephus in his volume *Wars of the Jews*, says – Josephus says that about that time, the Jews believed that one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth.

At a slightly later time, we find Tiridates, king of Armenia, visiting Nero at Rome with his wise men along with him, according to Suetonius. We find the magi in Athens sacrificing to the memory of Plato. At the same time Jesus was born, we find Augustus the Roman emperor being hailed as the savior of the world, and we find the Roman poet Virgil writing about the Golden Age, which has just dawned. You see, the Romans were looking for a Golden Age. The east was coming to the west with their wise men. There was a tremendous feeling that somewhere, from some place, there was going to come a great savior of the world, a great leader, a great ruler.

I don't know where all the anticipation came from. It's just interesting that it all came at the same time. The time was ready and there came wise men, or magi, from the east to Jerusalem. Maybe it was that they recognized what Paul wrote to the Galatians, that "in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law." There was a sense in which time was full, and some people could feel it.

These magi, based on information from Daniel, and other information that they had received from the Jews, who were now living in their land since the captivity, and based on their own sense of faith in the true God, and based on their own expectation that God would fulfill his word, and based upon what they saw in the sky, which is called a "star" here, they came to Jerusalem.

Now people always say how many were there? We don't know, but as I told you they weren't they weren't Melchior, Balthasar and Caspar. They weren't one from India, one from Egypt, and one from Greece, who were subsequently baptized by Thomas, and their bones discovered by St. Helena, and deposited in the Church of St. Sophia in Constantinople, and later transferred to Milan, and now you can go there and see their skulls. That's not true. That's all a bunch of fantasy.

We don't know how many there were at all. We don't know what their names were, and so that's pure speculation. But they had a reason for coming. Look at verse 2. Saying – and apparently by the Greek construction here, they were saying this all over the place. They kept on saying, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his *astēr* in the east, and are come to worship him." They kept asking, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?"

You know, it must have shocked them a little bit every time they asked that question to get a kind of a, "Huh?" from everybody. They must have assumed that these people would have known that. I mean after all, they were the Jews and certainly they would know when their king was born and where he was born.

But two things hit me out of that verse as I read it and I want to answer those questions because they were the two that struck me. Question number one, what was the nature of the star? "We have seen his star in the east, and have come to worship him." What was the nature of the star? So I did some reading this week and last week to try and find out what the star was. You won't believe the suggestions.

First of all, some people say it was a genuine, real, bonafide, gilt-edged, honest-to-goodness star. Some say it was Jupiter, because Jupiter is called the "king of the planets." Some say - and this is Kepler's theory - it was the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the sign of the fish. Some say it was just an erratic comet. Some say it was a low-hanging meteor. And some say it was the star of destiny in the heart of mankind.

That's a lot of drivel if ever I heard it. You want to know what it was? I'll tell you what I think it is. Look at Luke 2:9 and maybe this will help to answer the question you've probably had since you were a little kid. If you're still a little kid, you've still got it. Luke 2:9, now here's a good key. Here we are not at the wise men incident, but at the shepherds. They were the first to come, and they were of Israel. They are sort of a picture of the remnant.

"There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, an angel of the Lord came on them, and the glory of the Lord shown round about them: and they were very much afraid." Now what was shining in the sky when the shepherds saw it? What was it? It was "the glory of the Lord." If you go back into the Old Testament and you study the concept of the glory of God, you will find that the glory of God is manifest as light, right? Over, and over, and over again in the Old Testament the glory of God is manifest as light. When God radiates His presence, he transforms it into ineffable light.

When the glory of God appeared in the daytime, it was like a cloud of light. When it appeared at night, it was a pillar of fire. When the glory of God descended on the tabernacle, it was as light. When Moses went up into the mountain and he said, "Show me thy glory," God hid him in a rock and God showed him His glory manifest as light, and it was so much light that it got on his face, and when he came down the mountainside and spoke to the people, his face was lit up.

The glory of God is blazing light, and when Jesus revealed who he was and revealed his glory on the mount of transfiguration, he pulled back his flesh and they beheld his what? His glory as transparent light. And when Jesus comes the second time out of heaven, he will come in blazing light. And Revelation says, "God will turn out all the lights of heaven." All the stars will fall. All the suns, all the moons, everything goes pitch black, and it rolls up like a scroll. And when it's pitch black, then Christ comes revealed as blazing light, and people cry for the rocks and the mountains to fall on them to hide them from the face of his glory.

Now all that just to remind you that God's glory is manifest in the scripture as light, as light. He told

Moses he couldn't look upon his face and live. He'd be consumed. It would be like standing 10 feet from the sun, although it would be like a million million suns. And I believe that it was the glory of the Lord that shone that night when God's glory was descending to earth. It was God's glory descending on the earth, coming in the form of a man. And I believe that that glory of God is the thing that the wise men saw.

Now let me give you a little more support on this because I think it's kind of interesting to trace this thought. The chief word in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for star is the word *kokab*. Not that that's important, just a point of contact with the Hebrew. But it has a basic meaning, and its basic meaning is "to shine or to blaze forth," to shine or to blaze forth. Now sometimes the word *kokab* is used of a real star. Sometimes it's used to speak of just a regular star. Sometimes it's used to speak of an angel. Sometimes it is used to speak of men. So it doesn't necessarily always mean a real star. It can mean anything that blazes, anything that shines in an incredible way.

In fact, in Numbers 24:17, a most interesting Scripture. It says, and this is a Messianic prophecy, "I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not near" - "now listen" - there shall come a *kokab* out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel." That's Numbers 24:17. That is a Messianic prophecy. There will come a blazing forth. There will come a shining one. There will come a star. And people, I believe that the prophesy there is that none other than the glory of God incarnate is the star, the blazing.

Look, for a moment, at Matthew chapter 24, Matthew 24:4. Let's go over to verse 30. Instead of trying to go through all of it, we'll just go over to verse 30. "Immediately after the tribulation -" in verse 29 it says " - of those days the sun was darkened, and the moon doesn't give its light -" it's what I told you " - all the stars fall out of heaven," and everything goes black. And then 30, "Then shall appear -" now watch this. "Then shall appear the sign of the Son of man."

Now mark that phrase out. "The sign of the Son of man." In other words, whenever the Son of man is about to show up, there will be a sign pointing to him. Do you know what a sign is for? The sign is to point you to something that you want to see. You're driving down the road and the sign says Roscoe Boulevard, three-quarters of a mile. The sign is not Roscoe Boulevard, but it's there to point you to Roscoe Boulevard. It has a function. Its purpose is to point you to something, and the Son of man has a sign.

"The sign of the Son of man in heaven." Oh, interesting. That sign is in heaven. And what is it they shall see? "The Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with great power and great glory." Here is his *kokab*, His blazing forth. And although *kokab*, the Hebrew word, is not used in the New Testament, it is the same idea. I believe that this sign of the Son of Man is nothing more and nothing less than the Shekinah glory of God himself. God revealing himself in ineffable, glorious light. In fact, it even tells us, I think it's Revelation 1:16 that the sun shines. The Son of God shines as if he were the sun in its strength.

Somehow - now watch this - somehow connected to Jesus Christ is this incredible blazing glory of God. It is His sign in the heavens. He is a spirit. He is a spirit being. He is also, in a sense, a physical being in the glorified body that He has from His resurrection. But there is a sign that goes with Him, and it is blazing glory, and one day on the mount He showed it to his disciples. And one day, when He returns, the sign of His coming, the sign of the Son of man in heaven will be there blazing glory in the heavens.

Well, you know what I think? I think He had the very same sign the first time He came, too. I just think it was the sign of the Son of man in heaven. And the sign of the Son of man in heaven is not a star. It's not an astral body. It's not a conjunction of planets. It's not thoughts of human destiny rattling around in somebody's mystical mind. The sign of the Son of man is nothing more and nothing less than the Shekinah glory of God revealed in light, blazing and dazzling in the heavens.

I would add this thought. Verse two says, "We have seen - " watch this " - His *astēr*." His blazing – the word *astēr*, incidentally people, the word is translated "star" here, but it is used of other things that stars. So he has his own, and again it means "a blazing forth or a shining." We have seen his shining in the east. We have seen His *kokab*, His *astēr*, His blazing, His glory. The very fact that it's "His star" means it's something very special.

It has appeared. That's an interesting word. "We have seen his star in the east." His star, verse seven. Herod says, "I want to know the time the star appeared." And the word *phainō* in the Greek means "that which lights up." What time was it when that thing lit up? And the same word - interesting thought - the same word is used with lightning. Lightning is a form of *astēr*. Sometimes it's translated as a star in the sky. Sometimes it's translated as lightning. Sometimes as the shining forth of something.

And here, it is a shining forth. We can't push it any further. We can't make it mean a real star. And there is the sense in which Herod says, "When did this particular shining forth light up?" And even that is sort of a hint that it was something that never existed and was called into existence only because Jesus was coming. And so I believe this was his *astēr*, the sign of the Son of man in the heavens. It was there at His first coming, and beloved it will be there at His second coming. It's His sign. It's His star. It's not some astral body.

The pseudoscience of astrology could never predict the Lord. They weren't looking in their little puny deals and seeing, "Well, looky there. There's old Saturn and whatever doing their thing. It must be that He's being born." No, no. What they saw was something they never saw before, and they knew that it had to be something unique, and they tied it together with what the Old Testament said, and what Daniel had told them. No astronomical research gave them their direction. God revealed Himself.

It was no different than the pillar of fire in the Old Testament. You remember the pillar of fire in the cloud when the Old Testament stood over the holy of holies? Well in this, it tells us that whatever this star was, it went and stood over the house where he was born. Now you tell me how a literal star or whatever, could do that. Can't do it. It's none other than the sign of the Son of man. You say, "Well, well, if it was such a blazing, magnificent glory of Christ's sign in the heavens, how come only the wise men over there in Persia and nobody else saw it?"

That's a fair question. That's the second question I ask. How come God it so selective? Well, you know, that's nothing new for God. He can make everybody in the world blind to something if he wants to. In Exodus chapter 14, I found a good parallel, 14:19 says, "And the angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them." Now they're going to go through the Red Sea so the angel's been leading them down the Red Sea. Once they get to the Red Sea, he goes around the rear. He gets behind them. You say, "To push?" No, I'll show you what.

The pillar of cloud, here's the glory of God. "The pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them." Now behind the Israelites you've got the pillar of cloud, God's glory, and you've got the angel of the Lord. And who's the angel of the Lord? Jesus Christ. "And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness *to them*, but it gave light by night *to these*: so that the one came not near the other all the night."

You know what happened? Israel saw it as light and the Pharaoh and his army saw it as what? Darkness. And it was the same thing. There's something about God revealing what He wants to reveal just to those to whom He wants to reveal it and that's all I can say about it. How did they connect it with Jesus Christ's birth? I don't know. I really don't know except that God made it so obvious that they knew, that they knew.

Now do you want to know something very fascinating, people? This may shake you up a little bit. It might mess up your Christmas story next year. But do you know that nowhere in the Bible does it ever say they followed the star to Bethlehem from Persia? No. It doesn't say it led them to Jerusalem. It doesn't say it went anywhere. Not at all. "We have seen His star - " where? " - in the east." They saw the star in the east and it didn't need to tell them where to go. They knew where the Jewish Messiah was supposed to be. They knew the royal city was Jerusalem. They knew that's where all Jewish kings reigned. They knew exactly where to go. They didn't need some star to guide them.

And when they saw his glory, and God made it so evident and obvious as he always does when he reveals what he wants to reveal to whomever he wants, that they didn't even ask the question. They got on their horses and they went. They went right to the right place. And Matthew doesn't give us all the bits and pieces and details of how they saddled a Persian horse, and how many miles, and how it was, and where they ate, and all of that, because this isn't the story of these people. It's the story of Jesus Christ. And they have a place only insofar as it's related to him. So the details aren't there.

But it's incredible to me how God works things out when he wants to get His things done. He gave these magi, god-fearing Gentiles way off in Persia, kingmakers, His sign, and they knew that it was His sign, and they knew where to go, to Jerusalem. And the emphasis of Matthew is so beautiful. He says in verse two that they said, "We have seen his *astēr* in the east and are come - " for what purpose? " - to worship him." They knew that he was to be worshipped. To worship him. They knew there was no other one as worthy as this one, and they were right.

There you have it. Pagans who had nothing to guide them but smatterings of Old Testament prophecies, nothing to guide them but their own science mingled with its funny superstitions. And yet they are the true seekers of God. And when the sign came, with all of their misgivings and lacks in knowledge, they were enthusiastically embarking on a journey to seek a king they had a long time waited for. But the Jewish hierarchy with the Pentateuch in their hand, studying it every day, with the prophecies in their hand, reading them every day, ruled by a bitter and evil man named Herod, were content to be totally indifferent to what was happening five miles away. And here again, we see Matthew's constant attitude of condemnation toward the officials of Judaism, and his constant sensitivity that God is opening the church, He's opening the gospel, to the Gentiles.

Listen, there always are somewhere hungry hearts yearning for a divine savior and willing to follow

even a faint sign that might lead to His feet. It's super when you find somebody like that. There always are those seeking hearts. I remember being on an airplane one time and I was wanting to study because I had a manuscript due and I had to get it to a publisher. So I just kind of whispered almost facetiously, "Lord, don't let anybody unsaved sit near me so I have to witness all the way from St. Louis to Los Angeles because I've got to get my work done."

And sure enough, we had to make a stop, and we got in the wrong plane, or the plane was malfunctioning, and we had to change planes. All the things were messed up, and we got on another plane. A guy came and sat down next to me. So I was studying and studying, and he was asleep. I didn't want him to wake up. I jostled around a little bit and he woke up.

I thought, "Oh, boy." And then he asked me a question. He said, "Are you a teacher? You have all those papers and everything." I said, "Well, kind of a teacher. Yeah, I guess I'm a teacher." He said, "What do you teach?" I said, "I teach the Bible." He said, "You teach the Bible? Oh," he said, "Listen," he said, "this is terrific." He said, "You wouldn't happen to know how I could have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, would you?" That is the truth. And I went hub-bab-bab-bab [mumbling].

You're not supposed to start there. You're supposed to be skeptical. We've got at least one hour of apologetics before we get to that. Somewhere over the Grand Canyon he received Christ. I later baptized him, and he told me after that that he was coming to Los Angeles to work for somebody. I asked who, and he told me, and it was one of our elders. That was interesting.

There always are prepared hearts and here were some who came to Jerusalem. So we see the arrival. Secondly, and this is really interesting. The arrival is scene one and it quickly leads to scene two, agitation. Agitation. Herod is an exact opposite to these people. Verse 3, "When Herod the King had heard *this* - " heard that these guys were there and that they were asking this " - he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him."

Now Herod knew very well that he was sitting on a powder keg. In the first place, he knew that the people of the city didn't like him, and they didn't like Roman rule, and they wanted their own independence and autonomy. And he knew that they had aspirations of overthrowing him, and overthrowing Rome. And he also knew that if the Persians got in on the act, and built this huge confederacy engulfing this individual called the king of the Jews, he was really in trouble, and his army was out of the country temporarily. He knew that the eastern empire posed a constant threat to Rome and conflict was always fomenting, and he knew his job was in the balance, and his life was in the balance, and even though he was 70 years old at least by this time, he still wanted to hang onto every single thing he had.

So he was troubled. He was panicky. It's a word that really means to be stirred up and upset. In fact, I don't know if there is a stronger word than this one in reference to this thought. A good comparative one would be in Matthew 14:26, where the very same word is used and it says this, "And when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea, they were agitated." That's the same word. I mean, this was really an abnormal thing. This was very, very upsetting, and they were in a state of panic.

Now he was agitated, and he had reason. After all, he was the king of the Jews in his own mind. He had fought hard to keep it and maintain it, and now all of a sudden somebody's arrived who's going

to take his throne, and here are the kingmakers to make sure he gets it. Boy, this is serious business. And this kind of rumor, you can just imagine. This kind of rumor is now floating all over the city. "There's a new King. There's a new King of the Jews. There's a new King of the Jews." "Did you hear? The Persians are here." "The kingmakers are here." "There's a new King of the Jews."

And he could imagine the stirring up of freedom riots among the fanatics, and the zealots in the country, and boy, he's shaky. And so he realizes I've got to take some radical steps, and in his rotten, depraved mind the plot begins to brew. Well, he overstated his case, frankly, because from Matthew's record it doesn't appear that the Jerusalem population was at all impressed by the magi's questions. You don't see a mass of people scurrying down to Bethlehem. They didn't seem to get the picture. There doesn't seem to be any stir.

And that's so hard for me to believe. It's shocking. I mean, these famous kingmakers from Persia asking a question like this, you would have imagined that the people would have just come in an uproar. But it's just part of the way it was gonna be because it's simple. The Bible says, "He came on His own and His own - " what? " - received him not." He was in the world and the world knew Him not. And it's true. And when all of normal circumstances should have dictated a high level of interest, there was none. None.

There was no "we shall overcome" revolt fomenting in Jerusalem. There was no "let's get a new king and knock off Herod." I think there's a reason for it, basically, and the reason is they were more afraid of Herod than they were trusting in God. They had more fear of Herod than they had confidence in God's Word. They were really afraid of what he would do. Look what it says. It says that "he was troubled, and all of Jerusalem with him." Why were they troubled? Because they feared him so much, and they had a lot to fear. They had learned through a long and sad experience that there were no limits to the wrath and vengeance of this maniac. And I mean he was a maniac. And they figured, "Man, if these guys upset Herod, we are gonna be in a bloodbath." They dreaded it.

Let me talk about Herod for a minute. He committed some atrocities that are hard to describe. But first of all, let me talk about the positive things. He was a very capable man, and usually diabolical people who rise to this level have some capability. While a young governor in Galilee, he had tremendous victories over the guerillas. There were always these mountain guerillas – I don't mean animal gorillas, but soldiers – but he used to defeat these little bands of guerillas in Galilee, and he brought real peace there. He was very efficient in collecting taxes for Rome, so Rome liked him. He was a capable orderer and a very subtle diplomat.

History tells us he was a very decisive leader in battle and could turn the tide of a battle from defeat to victory. He was the only ruler in the history of Palestine who ever succeeded in keeping peace and bringing order. In times of difficulty, he even gave people back their tax money so that they would have enough. In 25 B.C., there was a tremendous famine, and he melted down the gold plates in the palace and gave the money to the poor. So he was a subtle guy, and he was a sharp guy, and he did things he could to get in with people.

He was a great builder. He built a theater in Jerusalem. He built an amphitheater and he built a hippodrome. You know what a hippodrome is? It's a racetrack. He also built a magnificent palace for himself, and he even began, in 19 B.C., the construction of the temple, the great Herodian temple, but died long before it was ever done, and of course it was totally demolished in 70 A.D. when the Titus Vespasian and his Roman army came and conquered Jerusalem.

He restored some area from its depraved situation. He built the city of Caesarea, which is a magnificent port city. He embellished cities like Beirut, like Antioch, like Damascus, Tyre, Sidon, and Rhodes, and even made contributions to the buildings in Athens. He built the fortress at Masada, which was an impregnable fortress. He had a great welfare program, and when people had trouble getting clothes, he imported clothes for them. So, you know, he did some things to endear himself because he was a smart politician.

But he was also cruel, diabolical, and maniacal. He was hopelessly – historians all agree on this. It's the first line in every article I read about Herod. The guy was incredibly jealous and he was hopelessly suspicious of everybody. He was threatened by everybody and everything, and so he spent his entire life plotting the murder of people. He was plotting murders constantly. He didn't like the Hasmoneans, who were a family of people, so he plotted to murder all of them. They were the descendents from the Maccabees, and you remember the Maccabees were a group of Jewish people who had fought for the freedom against the Greeks, and when the Romans came in, he was afraid that the relatives of the Maccabees might do the same against him, and so he would rather just kill them all so none of them would have any hope of ever doing him in.

He had 10 wives and 12 children. His most notable wife was a lady named Mariamne. Not that that's important, but that's just for you to make an identification. You may see that sometime when reading history books. Mariamne. She had a brother. Her brother's name was Aristobulus, and Aristobulus was the high priest at the time when he was in power – when Herod was in power. And he was so afraid of Aristobulus that he decided he ought to murder him. This is his wife's brother.

So on a hot day, he said, "We're going to have a party down in Jericho." Jericho was like Palm Springs. You go down the hill, Jericho is a great place, wonderful resort, beautiful palms, nice water there, and nice warm sun. It was a fabulous place. So on a hot day, he invited him for a swim down in the Jordan River near Jericho, and finally coaxed the young man to dive into the water, and when he did, of course he had other men waiting, pretending to play and have fun, and they jumped in the water. While they were pretending to play with Aristobulus, they held him under until he was dead, and nobody really knew what happened. So Herod provided a magnificent funeral and went to the funeral and wept the whole time. He even killed his own wife, Mariamne. He also executed her mother, because he didn't want her bugging him, Alexandria. He had two sons of his own that he didn't like, so he slaughtered both of them because he was afraid they'd want his throne.

Five days before his death, he ordered his third son executed. He had a lust for power, a suspicion, and insane eagerness to avenge himself that enslaved the man all the days of his life. Cruel, bloodthirsty, panicky, tyrant. He was known as a killer. The climax of this characterization has to be this. He was about to die. I mean, he knew he was about to die. It was a matter of days. So he retired to Jericho. He gave orders that a collection of the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem should be made. Get all of them, arrest them, and trump up charges, and put them all in prison. All the most distinguished Jewish citizens of the city, and he said, "The moment I die, slaughter them all." And they said to him, "Why?" And he said, "Because no one will mourn when I die, and I am determined that when I die, there will be mourning in this city."

Now when these magi rode into town saying, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" and the Bible says "he was agitated," he was agitated. That was what disturbed him more than anything, a threat to his power, see? And he was really shook. It's so interesting to me the contrast between the

peace in the hearts of the magi and the panic in the heart of Herod. Maybe it's because there were wise men and there were fools, and Herod was a fool.

Doctor Gaeblein says, "The great city with its magnificent religious institutions, its wonderful Herodian temple, then still in process of erection, its aristocratic priesthood and benevolent institutions, had no knowledge of the king. Nay, they did not desire the King to come. They were self-satisfied. This foreshadows the whole story of the rejection of the King, the Lord from heaven. That there was not alone no room for Him in the inn, but there likewise was no room for Him among His own. They received Him not. And Herod the king 'was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.' He feared for his throne, which was not his, and Jerusalem knew what Herod's fear meant. It meant rebellion, bloodshed and suffering." He's right.

What he's saying is the reason everybody else was upset was because they knew the kind of man that Herod was and they feared what would happen. And let me tell you something, folks, they had a right to fear because it wasn't a matter of days until Herod sent his soldiers to slaughter every single baby in the land under two years of age to make sure in his collection he slaughtered this potential king. That's why Jerusalem was shook up. Boy, this is exciting isn't it? Let's have prayer.

Our Father, we are thrilled when we see the Word of God opened to our understanding. And our joy comes because we so deeply desire to understand Your Word. There's a certain sense of exhilaration that comes with that understanding. But we confess, Father, that there is absolutely no exhilaration. There is absolutely no joy when we realize what all of this meant. We look back at a man like Herod who now burns in eternal hell. We look back at chief priests and scribes, elders of the people now lost forever, and recognize that when the King came, they didn't want Him. They didn't know Him. They didn't bother to find out. And even when, 30 years later, He arrived in their city and announced who He was, they wouldn't have Him.

Father, we know it's little different today. Oh, many people claim to be Christians, but I am sure not all of them are. And I'm sure there are many who reject as openly and flagrantly as they did in those days. There's no joy in a man like Herod. Father, all I can think about is what he could have been. If only he had known that instead of reigning for a little while on earth, he could have reigned forever with you. If only he'd have known that instead of having to avenge himself constantly, he could have trusted in You, and You would have been his avenger if any had wronged him. In his quest for peace, if only he had known that You were the Prince of Peace.

We can only imagine the torment of such a soul in hell with all that he must have to remember of slaughter and murder. So there's no joy in that. So Father, we are of mixed emotions in our thoughts tonight. Grateful to understand Your Word better, and yet, at the same time, saddened when we realize what it really says. And yet, Father, we can't help but feel a deep affinity with some men with whom we'll no doubt spend eternity that the Bible calls "magi." A remnant from afar who believed, who became Your people. Thank You for them, Father. Help us to focus on the fact that all humanity is divided into those two areas: those who reject and those who believe. Help us to realize that that's the dividing determiner of destiny.

I just pray tonight, Lord, that no one will go from this place who is not a believer. No one will go from this place to take his place with Herod, or with the indifferent scribes, and Pharisees, and chief priests, and elders; but that all of us will line up with the enthusiastic, and excited, and energetic, and thrilled, and blessed, and worshipping magi, falling prostrate at the feet of the One who lived to die, to

rise, that we might live forever. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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