

MATTHEW

2:1-23

Matthew 2:1-23

Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 10th November 2024 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: James 1:21-25

Introduction

Last week we began a fresh study of the gospel of Matthew. And as a quick reminder, we looked at the particular focus of each of the gospel books, that present Jesus as:

- **Matthew:** The son of David (The King of the Jews)
- **Mark:** The son of Man (The servant of God)
- **Luke:** The son of Adam (The perfect man)
- **John:** The Son of God (The Saviour of the world)

...The son of David, the son of Man, the son of Adam, and the Son of God, respectively. Again, that is Matthew presents Jesus as The King of the Jews. Mark presents Him as the servant of God. Luke presents Him as the perfect man. And John presents Jesus as the Saviour of the world. And together they reveal the character, purpose, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

Now, with Matthew seeking to present Jesus as King of the Jews, we saw in chapter 1 that began with Jesus' earthly lineage, proving that He was from the royal line of David, and as such had a rightful claim to the throne, noting in the process that Jesus was also descended from Abraham (and of course, we know that He was *the* Seed of Abraham that had been promised).

Next, having shown Jesus' royalty, Matthew records Jesus' birth — showing Jesus' deity. That He wasn't a mere man, but God Himself, that as he wrote; *that which was conceived in Mary was of the Holy Spirit*. And he furthermore quotes the prophecy in Isaiah chapter 7, that *they shall call His name Immanuel,* "which is translated, *"God with us."*

Overview of chapter two

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- **v1-12** — The wise men visit Jerusalem and Nazareth
- **v13-15** — Joseph, Mary and Jesus flee to Egypt
- **v16-18** — Herod slaughters many children
- **v19-23** — Joseph, Mary and Jesus return to Nazareth

And having done so, as we enter chapter 2, we see that rather than record the detail of the shepherds who visited Jesus at His birth, or the purification ceremony in Jerusalem that took place 40 days after His birth (as Luke does in *his* gospel), he instead records the arrival of the wise men —the Magi as they were — up to 2 years after Jesus' birth. *Why?* Because they arrived to recognise Jesus as King of the Jews.

And given that was the case, their arrival was rather uncomfortable for king Herod, who not only had no royal claim to the throne, but wasn't even a Jew — for he was of Idumean descent... that is, he was descended from Edom, he was one of Esau's descendants. And so following the visit of the wise men, as recorded in verses 1-12, Matthew records in verses 13-15 that Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod which is recorded in verse 16-18, before they returned to Nazareth after Herod's death, as noted in verses 19-23.

So then, as we work our way through this chapter, we'll see Matthew record how the wise men recognised Jesus as King of the Jews. And in doing so, he'll show how Jesus fulfilled at least 4 of the Old Testament prophecies concerning Him (of which there are over 300). But studying this chapter shouldn't be a mere academic exercise, for there are some real challenges to our attitudes and actions that we'll see. And the first of those is our fondness for tradition.

For on Christmas cards, in Nativity plays, in Christmas carols, movies, TV shows, Christmas jumpers, Nativity scenes and more, we have seen time after time, the depiction of 3 kings riding camels, following a star all the way to Bethlehem, to Jesus' birthplace, and meeting up with the shepherds as the snow settled on the ground outside. Yet none of that happened. And if we're interested in the truth, then that matters. It *should* bother us. Because this isn't a mere children's story, but a factual account. Yet the world wants to turn fact into fiction.

And it wants to do that because it's much easier to talk about Jesus when He's a figment of our imagination, when He's just a cute baby in a manger, with Joseph and Mary's new found friends gathered around cooing over Him. But we have a *real* Saviour that was born for you and I, because we have a *real* problem that is called sin. And we must not lose sight of that. And so as we go through our study this morning, I'll be sure to make clear the error of some of those traditions.

Indeed, we should note that Jesus Himself warned the Pharisees and scribes that their tradition had made the Word of God of no effect, quoting from Isaiah that *"This people honours Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me."* We must not do the same. Indeed, we must not let tradition try and separate Christmas from Calvary. For in reality, the two are inseparably linked.

Chapter two

So, let's take a look at this chapter. We read in the opening 2 verses:

Matthew 2:1-2

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 have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

So, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David as it is known (for that is where King David was born). And His birth happened while a man named Herod was king — a crooked man who was from a troublesome family that lived for power and influence. Indeed, Herod, a descendant of Esau, had ended up on the throne through deals and political conniving.

And he sought to make a name for himself, building palaces, fortresses, cities, and even remodelling the temple in Jerusalem. And make a name for himself he did, but not for the right reasons. For he was a cruel man, who even murdered his wife and three of his sons in one evening, leading Caesar Augustus to say, "It is safer to be Herod's pig than his son." Not a ringing endorsement of character! And, so, unsurprisingly, we'll even see in this chapter that he was not an honest man, and interested in himself more than others.

But in contrast we find wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, not for their *own* glory, but that of another — essentially asking where Jesus was, that they might worship *Him*. And there's a few things we should note about this.

First, we read that these were wise men — and no, that's not an oxymoron! But specifically, they were Magi, not kings — whose roots we can trace back to the Persian Empire at the time of Daniel, who was put in charge of them in Babylon, where this group of formerly superstitious astrologers had converted to worship the God of Daniel. And, no doubt familiar with Daniel's prophecies (including the exact date that Jesus would later ride into Jerusalem as King), they had been anticipating the appearance of this specific star ever since, knowing it was significant.

Secondly, they had seen His star in the East, but hadn't followed it through field and fountain, moor and mountain (as one incorrect carol says), for had they of done so, they would not have needed to ask Herod where Jesus was. Rather, they had seen the star in the East, which had *triggered* their journey towards Israel, but as we'll see later in this chapter, they had not seen it since. So, knowing the palace was in Jerusalem, and that they were looking for a newborn king, it seemed a good first place to check.

Third, notice the effort in their actions here. I mean, they had travelled hundreds of miles from home to go and worship Jesus. What complaint can we possibly have about driving 5 minutes to get to church? It's not exactly a hardship is it?! Yet somehow, our cozy homes, comfortable beds, and other worldly distractions win out more than they should.

And fourth, notice the heart of their actions here — for they came to worship Jesus, not for what they could get, but because of Who He was. And what a reminder that is to us — for all too easily we can approach our times of sung worship wanting to get something out of it, wanting God to bless us through it. And incredibly He does do that. But let our hearts be the same as the Magi, worshipping Jesus for Who He is (and what He has already done) rather than trying to butter Him up to bless us.

Now, the arrival of these wise men asking where the King of the Jews was, wasn't *exactly* what Herod, who thought *he* was king of the Jews, was wanting to hear. And we read in verse 3:

Matthew 2:3

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

And no doubt he was troubled, for first, he was an Edomite, ruling over the Jews. In no way was he a rightful king of the Jews by any kind of royal lineage. And second, the Magi were known as the king-makers of the East, with one of their specific roles being to appoint new kings. But third, notice that we read that all Jerusalem was troubled with him — why? Well, one of the lies that tradition has done a really good job of selling is that there were just 3 of these wise men, making a wrongful assumption that because there were 3 gifts, there must have only been three gift-givers. But that would be like me saying I received chocolate, socks, and cake for my birthday, and you making the assumption that only 3 people had bought gifts for me, when in fact a dozen different people could have each bought me chocolate, for example.

Indeed, it is far more likely that there were *many* wise men that showed up, with a notable entourage around them easily numbering in the *hundreds* of people, with perhaps even 1000 armed cavalry or more. And, it should also be noted that they would have arrived on horseback, not by camel; that's yet another tradition that's taken hold, despite the well known love of horses that the Persians had.

So, in a rush to find out what on earth was going on, we read of Herod's next move in verse 4:

Matthew 2:4

And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

And the Greek word translated as *inquired* here, and as *demand*ed in the KJV, carries the idea of an asking with urgent need. Clearly, he felt threatened by this potential usurper to what he thought was his throne. And the people he asks this question of are the chief priests and scribes. That is; the heads of the 24 courses of priests (the spiritual leaders), and the scribes, who were the copyists of the Scriptures and records. And they give him an immediate answer:

Matthew 2:5-6

So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.' "

And so, without hesitation, and it seems without even needing to consult the Scriptures, they are able to provide this answer from Micah 5:2 — and we might think that's wonderful to be able to quote the Bible like that. And it is.

But you know what, it did them no good whatsoever, for it meant absolutely nothing to them. You see, they gave the right information, but the wrong response. For, despite being just five miles from where the Messiah would be born, and with now perhaps hundreds upon hundreds of people turning up to see Him, they didn't even bother to make that short journey themselves to see if this was really happening. How hard hearted was that?! Did they assume these Magi couldn't have been right? Did they not care? Whatever their reason, this revealed a problem with their hearts.

Now, put down your devices and Bibles for a moment, and let me ask *you* a question. How many of you can tell me what John 3:16 says? ... Now, I know you can repeat it. You know the words. But have they made any difference to you? Has Jesus changed your life? or just your plans on Sunday mornings? It's been well said that a man's priorities can be determined by his calendar and his chequebook (or bank app). And that *is* a good indication. But a better gauge still is a man's love for Jesus, for that will affect everything else.

A great worry I have with many Christians today, is that they are terribly excited about Bible prophecy and the book of Revelation, trying to figure out who antichrist is, and so on. But that misses the entire point of the book, for it isn't the *revelation of antichrist*, but *the revelation of Jesus Christ*. And as one commentator said, "*What good is it to understand Bible prophecy if it doesn't make a difference in your life?*" If your study of prophecy isn't leading you closer to Jesus, if it's not changing how you live *for* Him, then something is very wrong, for we need to be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving ourselves (as James warns and exhorts us in his letter).

Now, with an opportunity missed by the priests and scribes, Herod makes *his* next move. We read:

Matthew 2:7

Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared.

So, Herod arranges a private meeting with the Magi — I presume because he wanted to keep a lid on the idea that anyone other than him could be king — and he quizzed them to find out how old this boy was. He wanted to know how he could identify Him.

Matthew 2:8

And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

And he is telling them an absolute whopper here, for he had no intention whatsoever of worshipping Jesus. A reminder if ever there was one that just because someone says they want to worship Jesus, it's no guarantee that they actually do. So, if you're looking for a husband or wife, remember that when you're getting to know someone — you don't want to find someone that says they are a Christian, but someone that *is* a Christian. There's a world of difference between the two.

Now, in Herod's case, he didn't want to worship Jesus, but rather he wanted to remove this threat to his throne as quickly as possible. And so he sends the Magi off to Bethlehem, assuming that Jesus must still be there. But we read:

Matthew 2:9-10

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

So then, just because Herod *sent* them to Bethlehem, it doesn't mean they *went* there. And in fact, we can be sure they didn't go there at all, for a few reasons we'll get to.

But rather, as they leave Herod's presence, the star which they had previously seen, that had triggered their long journey to Israel, appeared again, and — what do we read? — it came and stood over where the *young child* was. What it doesn't say is that the star went to Bethlehem, or stood over the manger, or even over where the *baby* was, but rather, where the *young Child* was.

In fact, the Greek word used here — **paidion** — is very specifically speaking of a little child, and *not* of a baby. And that's because the wise men, these Magi, never visited Jesus' at his birthplace. And so all the carols, cards, and nativity scenes that depict the wise men at the manger, are wrong.

It also means the translators of the New Living Translation of the Bible have made a terrible error by adding to this verse that "the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem." - for the word Bethlehem is not to be found in the Greek here — meaning they have added in tradition to the truth, and as we'll see, that creates really problematic implications.

But rather, what happened is that the wise men (that is the Magi) went to Nazareth, for we read:

Matthew 2:11

And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

How do we know this was in Nazareth? Well, first we read that they came into the *house* — and there is no mention of the manger at all. Second, Joseph isn't present at this moment, unlike the moment where Jesus was born. And third, most significantly, we see these *gifts* offered to Him. How does that determine where they were?

Well, we read in chapter 2 of Luke's gospel, speaking of Joseph and Mary:

Luke 2:22-24

Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the LORD"), and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

And if they offered these things, then it meant that they were doing so because they couldn't afford to offer a Lamb — or they would not be following the law as they should. But we read in verse 39 on:

Luke 2:39-40

So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.

So then, given that the Magi presented these gifts — including gold — to them, they *could* have afforded to offer a lamb *after* their visit. But since we see here that they *didn't* offer a lamb, but that they *performed all things according to the law of the Lord* then we can confidently conclude that the moment Luke records here occurred *before* the Magi visited, and therefore Joseph, Mary and Jesus had *already* returned to their home in Nazareth before the Magi arrived.

To believe that the Magi went to Bethlehem is to believe what Luke wrote, and thus what the Bible says, is in fact wrong. And that cannot be the case.

Now, there's more to note in this verse, so let's read it again:

Matthew 2:11

And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

First, let us note that the Magi fell down and worshipped... *Him*. That is, they worshipped Jesus, and *not* Mary. If ever there was a time to make it clear Mary should be worshipped, this was it. But she should not be *worshipped*, despite how rightly she should be highly esteemed.

Second, we should note the gifts that were given to Jesus by the Magi, for they were symbolic. Gold spoke of His birth, and their acknowledgement of Him as King. Frankincense was the spice used by priests, and spoke of the fragrance of His life. While Myrrh spoke of His death. One commentator summed it up like this, saying: *The three-fold office of Jesus, the Messiah, is seen in the gifts of the wise men: gold for a Mighty King, frankincense for a Ministering Priest, myrrh for a Martyred Prophet*. But one more thing we should note about these gifts is that they were costly. And worship of our wonderful Saviour *should* cost us something. May our hearts be as David's, who said he *would not* offer God that which cost him nothing.

Now, with the Magi having offered their gifts, we read next:

Matthew 2:12

Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

So God, knowing what Satan was trying to do, and that Herod was expecting the wise men to return to him with news of exactly where Jesus was, spoke to the Magi, and told them that they should not see Herod again. And we read that they listened, and left Israel for their homeland. And it was so important that they heard *and* obeyed this message, for while Herod had told them that he wanted to come and worship Jesus, that was not his intent.

Matthew 2:13-15

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him." When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

So, while the Magi had left for home without seeing Herod again, it would have soon been commonly known that they visited Nazareth, for you can't have hundreds of people turn up at your house without your neighbours noticing! And so God warned Joseph to flee to Egypt.

Joseph's response? Immediate obedience. In fact we read here that he got up during the *night* and took both Jesus and Mary, setting off for Egypt where they stayed until Herod died. And this is one more reason why the Magi can't possibly have visited *before* Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple 40 days after His birth, for Joseph set off with his family for Egypt immediately here.

But let's note that immediate obedience of Joseph's, for it is a great example to us. So often we *know* what we should do, but we don't do it. Whether ceasing from sin, or acting as we should, whether taking on a particular ministry, or stepping back from one. If we're going to obey God, we need to do so without delay, trusting that where God guides, He provides — just as He did here, with Joseph and Mary not only having the need to travel to and live in Egypt, but the means, due to the expensive gifts that had just been given.

With them temporarily living there, Matthew notes that this fulfilled the prophecy of Hosea 11:1 that said "*out of Egypt I called My son.*"

And it's worth us noting that this seems clear from our perspective. But before this happened, no doubt some looked at the Scriptures and said "it says the Messiah will come out of Bethlehem *and* Egypt — how can both be true?!". So, let us consider that any future prophecy we may be unclear about today, will one day be as clear as this once we see it fulfilled.

Now, you might be wondering what was going on with Herod, who was waiting for news from the Magi of where Jesus was. And Matthew gives us the answer to that in verse 16:

Matthew 2:16

Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.

Herod wasn't just angry, but exceedingly angry, for he felt deceived, for the Magi never came back, never revealed what they knew about Jesus' location. And so, he commits this awful act, that was yet another attempt by Satan to not only destroy the line through to Christ, but Christ Himself, that you and I might not have a Saviour, that we might not be redeemed, that we might not have the relationship that He was jealous of.

And in this atrocity, we get a better understand of how old Jesus was at this moment in time (from an earthly perspective at least), for we know from what we read in *Luke* that He must have been more than 40 days old, but we learn from *here* that He was under 2, or else Herod's instruction wouldn't have made sense. And given the word used for child, it seems that he was more than a year old for sure.

And given the horror of what Herod did, it is no surprise what we read next:

Matthew 2:17-18

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: "A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more."

I don't know about you, but I can't even picture how distressing this must have been. But that was how depraved this man was, a man who had no regard for his own sons, let alone anyone else's.

Now, what we do learn in this verse, as the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:15 is fulfilled, is that the weeping was heard in Ramah, which was a city about as far north of Jerusalem as Bethlehem was south. And so, perhaps, with Herod not knowing where Jesus was, simply drew a circle around Jerusalem and said kill all the boys under 2 that you find inside that area. A horrid, horrid man.

Matthew 2:19-23

Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead." Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

So then, this is the last of the four times that Matthew records God spoke to Joseph via a dream. Three of those times in this chapter alone. And we might think "I wish God would speak to *me* like that — then *I* would obey Him too". But I don't think we should dare say that if we're ignoring any of the 1189 chapters of the Bible where He has *already* told us how we ought to act and live. Let us have immediate obedience to what He has *already* said to *us*. Not asking Him to speak to us afresh when we're too lazy to *read* His Word to us as often as we ought.

Now, here, Joseph takes Jesus and Mary back to Israel, avoiding Archeleaus, for he was another member of the wicked Herod family. And in settling back in Nazareth, Matthew notes that this fulfilled yet another prophecy about Christ, that He would be called a Nazarene.

But where was that prophecy from? Well, it's not as clear, at first glance, as the others. But we find that the Hebrew word for Nazareth was **Netzer**, meaning a branch or shoot. Which is what Isaiah 11:1 and Isaiah 53:2-3 speak of, pointing to Nazareth, with chapter 11 saying:

Isaiah 11:1

There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots.

Conclusion

Now, as I close this morning, let me repeat something our founding pastor has said several times before about Herod — which is that Herod actually got one thing right, for he realised that either Jesus was King, or he was. It couldn't be both. And likewise, either Jesus is the King of our lives, or we are. And so the question is, do we want to take matters into our own hands, like so many before us have done, or do we want to trust God in all things, letting Him reign as we ought to let Him reign in our lives.

Application questions

To help apply these things, then, let me ask you three things:

- Are you placing tradition above the Bible?
- Are you a doer of the Word, or a hearer only?
- Who is really king of your life? You, or Jesus?

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