

Wise and Foolish Responses to the King

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 2 verses 1 through 12, if you would please stand with me as we honor the reading of God's word together.

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

And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for it is written by the prophet, 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. Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child.

[1 : 21] And when you have found him, bring me word that I too may come and worship him. 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 worshipped 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.

May God add a blessing to the reading of his word. Would you please be seated? Did you ever play the game King of the Hill growing up?

Good. It's an easy game to play. All you need is a few people and a hill. Even a small, elevated ground, mound of earth will suffice.

[2 : 26] The point of the game is to be the one standing on the hill, which means pushing whoever is on the hill off the hill.

Or if you are on the hill, to push people down who are trying to push you off of the hill. When I was a kid, our King of the Hill game started out fun.

We laughed and smiled as we vied to be the lone occupant on that small mound of earth. But eventually, our games took a violent turn.

Alliances were formed, sneak attacks commenced, blood was shed from knees and from elbows and sometimes noses. Many friendships were sacrificed in our efforts to be the king of the hill.

But it seemed worth it. Because it's fun to pretend to be the king. While we enjoy acting like a king and receiving royal treatment, we generally don't appreciate being ruled by one.

[3 : 40] We're Americans. We had a king once who ruled us from a distant country and taxed us unfairly. Every 4th of July, we celebrate our independence and the people who sacrificed to purchase our liberty from tyranny.

And so, as Americans, we're leery of any one person having absolute power. We're aware of the individual freedoms that could be lost when one person reigns with total authority.

Human history is full of examples of people whose unbridled lust for power and desire to keep themselves in power resulted in the suffering and death of not only the people they sought to rule, but the people that they currently, presently ruled over.

Men and women for ages have committed all kinds of atrocities to preserve their position atop their thrones.

As the Lord Acton famously said, power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Our text today presents us with two kings.

[4 : 54] One is a foolish king who used violence to preserve his kingdom to keep it for himself, and his name is Herod.

The other is the king of kings who suffered violence to share his kingdom with those who trust in him, and his name is Jesus.

Our text also presents us with a group of travelers who Matthew identifies as wise men. These wise men have interactions with both of these kings, and it is through their meetings with these two kings that we learn from them the main idea for this morning's sermon.

That the announcement that Jesus is king elicits wise and foolish responses. The announcement that Jesus is king elicits wise and foolish responses.

If you recall, Matthew, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote his gospel primarily to a Jewish audience. He sought to show them that Jesus is the Messiah, that he is the king who had long been promised.

[6 : 06] And so he begins doing that by making connections at the very beginning of his gospel by linking Jesus' lineage to the royal line of David. Last week we saw how in the incarnation, Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, added a human nature to his divine nature.

That he is truly the God-man. Truly God. Truly human. He is God in human flesh. Emmanuel. God with us. He willingly laid down his life to atone for our sins, bringing us peace with God and eternal life with him forever. This is great news.

This is news that we should rejoice in, as Mary did when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and informed her that she would give birth to Jesus, the Son of God.

The angel said to her in Luke chapter 1, verses 31 through 33, And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

[7 : 13] He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

And of his kingdom there will be no end. Christmas reminds us that Christ has come, that Christ reigns as Lord, and that he is an awesome king.

A king who is perfect, who is righteous, who is gracious, who is merciful, who is loving and forgiving. A king who has conquered our greatest foes for us.

He is a king who lives sinlessly, who died sacrificially, and who reigns eternally. He is a king unlike any other king. A king who shares his kingdom with those who trust in him.

While the story of his incarnation and birth reminds us of the great joy we have in Jesus' coming, it also reminds us of the depths of mankind's depravity.

[8 : 25] Not everyone, not everyone, in fact, many, reject Jesus. Refusing to acknowledge their sin, refusing to acknowledge their need for a Savior, refusing to worship him, refusing to serve him as Lord.

Instead, in an effort to preserve their place and be the ruler of their own lives, they have behaved foolishly. Why? Why do people do that?

Well, because like Herod, Jesus to them is a threat. And from this text, we first learn about how the news that Jesus is king elicits a foolish response.

So the first response we see is a foolish response, and the foolish response is rejecting Jesus' king.

Verses 1 through 3 again say, 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. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

[9 : 46] Now, when you walk into a king's palace, in the king's presence, and you ask, Where is the king? That potentially is going to send off alarm bells in the mind of the person who is sitting on the throne, especially in Israel.

Israel's history, like that of many other ancient kingdoms, was rife with examples of men who plotted against the king to seize the throne for themselves.

And so when this question was brought to Herod with the notion that there was another king of the Jews whom these wise men sought and had come to worship, Herod was troubled.

Herod was the kind of person who, when he was troubled, made trouble for everyone else. All of Jerusalem, Matthew says, was troubled when they understood that Herod was troubled because they knew that if Herod ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.

Have you ever known someone like that? Maybe a boss? Or a teacher, a coach, or a relative whose bad mood creates a bad environment for everybody else.

[11:12] And so you try to avoid as much as you can any kind of contact with them. Herod was very much like that, only a hundred times worse because he wouldn't fire you or bench you or send you to detention.

He would kill you if he was not happy with you. Herod was a violent ruler even compared to the standards of that age.

He killed members of his own family. He killed his own sons to preserve his place upon the throne and to keep his title king of the Jews.

But truthfully, in reality, Herod had no legitimate claim to the throne or the title king of the Jews. Herod was an Edomite, not a Jew. He was given the title by the Roman Senate after supporting them in the Judean conflict.

[12:14] Rome then gave him the task to govern that region and to keep peace by putting down any kind of revolt against their empire. And Herod knew that he truly was not the king of the Jews, but that didn't stop him from acting as if he were.

Herod sought to eliminate any threat to his throne with swift and fierce action. Even when he heard that the true king of the Jews, the true king was born, instead of rejoicing in God's promise and its fulfillment that the Messiah had come, and instead of receiving this news with gladness, he felt threatened and he jumped into action.

In verse 4, again we read that Herod assembled all the chief priests and the scribes of the people and he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

So here Herod gathers all the best biblical scholars that he can get his hands on. He assembles a group of men who knew Scripture, who knew the Bible well, and amazingly, or perhaps I should say tragically, these men, despite what they knew, did not truly believe it.

They don't go to Bethlehem. They don't look to see the fulfillment of the prophecy. The Messiah has come, but they don't go. They don't seem to care.

[13:52] So knowing what the Bible says and believing what the Bible says are not the same thing. Herod understood enough Scripture to know that this king who was born was the Messiah.

And so he should have abandoned his throne for the one who was truly worthy to sit upon it, but instead he tried to set a trap for him.

Herod thought if he could discern from Scripture where the Messiah was to be born, he could use that information to preserve his place as king.

And so again in verse 5 through 6, the biblical scholars tell Herod that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem of Judea for so it is written by the prophet and you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

So here's Herod's plan. This is his plan. He thought he could use God's word to thwart God's will.

[15:06] Herod thought he was wise. He knew the location of the threat and Bethlehem was a small village on the outskirts of Jerusalem and so now he maneuvered to manipulate the wise men so that he could directly pinpoint his target.

In verses 7 through 8 it says, then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. Again, Herod didn't care about the meaning or the significance of the star.

He wanted to know the time it appeared so that he could discern the age of the child he wanted to kill. And he sent them to Bethlehem saying, go and search diligently for the child and when you have found him bring me word so that I too may worship him.

And so Herod's plan was hatched. In his foolish mind he believed that the threat to his throne would soon be neutralized.

But man is no match for God. Verse 12 says that the wise men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and that they departed from their country going by another way.

[16:26] Now if you jump down in Matthew chapter 2 to verses 16 through 18 you see how Herod responded to the failure of his plan. In a fit of rage he ordered understand this he ordered the execution of every male child in Bethlehem and in the surrounding regions who were two years old or younger.

Babies and toddlers were slaughtered in the streets by order of a fool who felt threatened by Christ and who thought he could defeat God and thwart his will.

So what lessons can we learn from Herod in his foolish notion that he could outsmart God and exert his will over God's will to preserve his place upon his throne?

Well first of all I think that those who foolishly reject God and his word do foolish things. They do foolish things that not only harm themselves but harm other people.

In Romans chapter 1 verses 21 through 25 the apostle Paul talks about this sort of thing when we reject God the foolish things that we do and encourage others to do.

[17 : 51] For although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him but they came futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lust of their hearts to impurity to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever.

Amen. We live in a time where people think that belief in God is foolish. Thinking that existence happened by chance.

That order came from chaos. That we descended from apes. That our ways are better than God's ways. That sin isn't sin and therefore restraints against it should be completely removed.

That we don't need laws or police or people to enforce laws. Let each person do what they think is right in their own minds. Let people do what they want and live their truth and then they say that we'll all live in peace.

[19 : 13] They desire to live in a Burger King world where they can have it their own way. And I say this sincerely how has that gone?

Not well. Not well at all. Secondly, Herod's reaction to Christ being threatened by him in seeking his death reveals the true nature of every sinful human heart.

The Bible says that we are all born with a nature to sin. We are all born with the nature we inherited from our first parents who were deceived into thinking that they could be like God.

That they could be their own king. That they could be their own authority. That they knew better than him. Romans 3.23 says for all that's all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Romans 8.7 through 8 says for the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God for it does not submit to God's law. Indeed it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

[20 : 22] Each of us the Bible says is born with a desire for the world to orbit around us. We don't want to bow to anyone.

We don't want to bow to God. We want God to bow to us. Inside of every human heart is a little king Herod who wants to rule and who is threatened by anyone or anything that challenges our desire to be our own authority, our own ruler, our own determiner of right and wrong, truth and error.

What we need is for that foolish king to be overthrown in our hearts by a king who rules righteously, by a king who reveals truth, by a king who saves us from our sin and our sinful ways.

Who is your king? There is only one fit to rule and his name is Jesus. and one day the Bible says every knee will bow to him and you, friend, will bow to him either in reverence and in worship or in begrudging confession.

Christmas reminds us that our king has come and our king came as a servant to die for his people that they by faith in him will live and will reign with him forever.

[22 : 15] This is a king truly worthy of our praise. I love Philippians chapter 2 verses 4 through 11. Paul talking to the church about the kind of mindset that we should all have like Christ talks about the depths to which our Lord sank to lift us up with him in glory.

He says, let each of you look not only to his own interest but also to the interest of others. Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death even death on a cross therefore God has highly exalted! Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father our churches our societies our culture our world is in desperate need of wise people who are not threatened by Christ coming but who rejoice that he came and who look forward to his coming again so we've seen the foolish response now let's look

at the wise response in verses 9 through 12 the wise response is this rejoicing in Jesus as king rejoicing in Jesus as king verse 9 again after listening to the king they went on their way and behold the star that they had seen rose went before them until it came to rest on the place where the child was and so what we learn from this verse is that wise people are those who seek truth and are led to

to Jesus who is the source of truth but who are these wise men we assume that there are three wise men and that assumption primarily comes from the hymn that we sing we three kings I won't sing the rest I won't do that to you but you know what I'm talking about and so that song as well as the gifts that they brought to Jesus there were three gifts so we think there must have been three and only three but the bible doesn't specify the number at all there could have been more it is also a common misconception that the wise men visited Jesus at the stable soon after his birth but it was more than likely many days after weeks after months after or even years after that event where when they visited him because verse 11 says that Jesus was in a house at the time that they came to visit him and these men came a long way to see him we know that they came from the east biblical scholars believe that they most likely came from

Persia or what is today modern day Iran that would have meant that they traveled some 800 to 900 miles just to see Jesus it's also likely that they knew of the writings of the prophet Daniel from the Old Testament who in time past had been the chief of the courts of the seers in Persia Daniel chapter 9 verses 24 through 27 includes a prophecy which gives a timeline for the birth of the Messiah and so these wise men were guided by a miraculous stellar event the star of Bethlehem now this could have been a conjunction of planets perfectly aligned to create a bright light in the sky or more likely I think this star was a supernatural light that settled over the place where Jesus was just as the Shekinah glory of God guided the Israelites in the wilderness and would come and settle upon the tabernacle as they worshipped him in the days of

[26 : 32] Moses these wise men were astrologers they were scholars who were guided by God's word to God's son it is interesting to speculate over who these wise men were but what is most important about these wise men for us to understand is not who they were but what they did because what they did reveals what made them truly wise as we see in verse 2 those who are wise read and believe in God's word they believe in the God who has authored it and who has revealed himself through it Proverbs 1 7 says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge fools despise wisdom and instruction those who receive God's word are those who revere him they trust that God's word is the final authority on all matters they trust in his word more than they trust in their thoughts their opinions or their feelings wise people revere

God and they receive his word and so one of the things I would like to challenge you with this morning is you know for some of you you like to put together your new year's resolutions and maybe you've started to think about those things my challenge would be to you as I challenge myself is to resolve to study God's word more that's my prayer for this church and with each sermon that I preach I hope that the Holy Spirit will use it to drive you further into God's word because the world needs wise people and those who are truly wise know God and they trust in his word if you want to be wise you'll know God's word and you'll do what God's word says you'll believe it and you'll do it from verse nine we also witness that wise men seek

Jesus in the sermon on the mount Jesus cautioned his listeners against wasting their lives with worry and anxiety seeking after earthly treasures earthly things that will pass away but seeking those things for a feeling of safety and security instead Jesus gives this encouragement in Matthew 6 33 but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you Jesus' command is that we seek his kingdom that we seek his righteousness which is found in salvation through him understanding that he is the true treasure that most people seek because it's only through our king of kings who suffered and who died for our sins that we receive a righteous standing before our creator and entrance into his eternal kingdom wise people believe

God they trust in his word they seek Jesus who is the word of God who became flesh and they humble themselves before him in worship as the wise men did verses 10 through 11 again when they saw the star they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy they were pretty happy and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother and they fell down and they worshipped him then opening their treasures they offered him gifts gold frankincense and myrrh the wise men revered and they worshipped the Lord they did not do as Herod did who did not revere him who did not worship him who did not treasure him and in the eyes of the world this would have seemed like a

really strange thing well you should be giving gifts to

Herod he's the one who's in power he's the one with all the connections why are you going to do this in some podunk town to some child who has parents who are poor why are you going to lavish this person with these treasures because they knew that this child was special they knew that he was the Messiah the true king of the Jews those who know the true worth of Jesus worship him they humble themselves before him and like the wise men they give him their best because they know he is worthy the wise men traveled hundreds of miles hundreds of miles to see Jesus to be in his presence to worship him and to give him treasures and so

[31 : 51] I ask you do you go to the same lengths to spend time with God today do you seek his presence in prayer and as you study his word and as you desire to be involved in his church do you hold your treasures loosely as the wise men did offering them to God for the advancement of his kingdom and for the glory of his great name do you seek him above all others are you willing to humble yourself before him acknowledging him as the true king no matter how foolish that may look or how foolish that may seem to everybody else like Shadrach Meshach and Abednego will you refuse to bow to false kings and false idols who compete for your affections and your attention like the wise men will you leave behind what is uncomfortable to offer your best in service to the

Lord to worship him months ago I was asked to go on a trip and preach at a pastor's conference in India and that conference will be this coming January and I wasn't sure at the time and even here recently wasn't sure if the time was going to work out because I was still completing the final chapter of my dissertation and I knew I would have to defend it and I didn't know if I would be defending it or completing it around the time when we were supposed to go and so I wasn't sure if it was going to work out and honestly I'll confess to you I didn't want to go I didn't want to go because in my eyes after all of this work to be done and to just have a time to just do the regular things that I am used to doing and as I'm thinking about these things I was convicted have you ever like you're and God spoke to me and I'm not talking like an audible voice from heaven but you're it's like your train of thought is going this way and I'm thinking I'm right to want a break maybe these things aren't going to work out I love those guys and I would want to be there but you know maybe next year would work out better and then it's this other thought kind of comes and takes you on a detour and it's God saying to me okay and all along I'm praying God if it's your will I'm going to go I'll do it if it's your will I'll go if it works out I'll go and all of a sudden it's like God intercepts that train of thought and with this thought do you think do you think that I've been with you throughout this whole process and you have gained all of this education do you think that

I wouldn't want you to go to a place and use that education and service to me and the advancement of my kingdom man sorry forgive me but I share that because when God wants you to do something it is not wise to say no it's not wise to say no how can you say no to the king who are we to say no to the king who gave his life on the cross dying and rising again that by faith in him he gives us life and he makes us heirs with him in his kingdom which has no end how can you tell a king like that no it's not wise to tell the king no wise men wise people treasure

Christ and because they treasure him they seek him and they serve him and they give him their best their best humbly acknowledging that without him they are without hope without him they are without peace without him they are lost in sin but in him they have life in him they have peace in him they have hope and that hope will never disappoint because their king is the king of kings who will return a final observation here about what it means to be wise what it means to rejoice in the true king wise men obey god rather than people verse 12 it says and being warned in a dream not to return to herod they departed to their own country by another way scripture doesn't record anything else about these men but as blessed and grateful as they were to be in the presence of the true king i'm sure that they must have returned home bearing witness of the messiah who was promised and who had come surely they knew herod would be outraged by their disobeying his order to return to him and tell him where jesus was but these men were wise because they responded to a higher power the one who has true sovereignty over all things and all people they had been in the presence of the true king the messiah the son of god we know the rest of the story the bible tells us about the kind of king again that jesus is second corinthians 8 9 is one of those places for you know the grace of our lord jesus christ that though he was rich yet for our sake he poverty might become rich the christmas message is that the true king has come and in him there is hope for ruined humanity humanity people who are ruined by sin there is hope of pardon there is hope of peace with god there is hope of glory because at the father's will jesus christ our true king because of the

father's will i should say jesus christ our true king became poor and was born in a stable so that 30 years later he might hang on a cross to die in our place and bear god's righteous wrath for our sins friend there is no king who will do that for you other than king jesus there is no king like jesus and so i ask you is this king worthy is this king worthy of your treasures is this king worth pursuing above all others and all other things the answer is yes absolutely the herod of our hearts must be overthrown the one in whom christ reigns the one who knows the true king and who shares in his kingdom now and forever is the one who is wise and so how do we adjust according to what we've heard in god's word wisdom comes from recognizing

[40 : 14] Jesus as your king it's as simple as that wisdom comes from recognizing Jesus as your king knowing that you are a sinner knowing that in Jesus you have a savior and you don't have to go to bible class you don't have to get some degree you don't have to go on some journey like these wise men you don't have to pay a certain amount of money to receive this king's grace he offers it to you and says if you will believe in me you will have eternal life if you believe in me you will be adopted into my family if you believe in me you will be treated not as a slave or a servant but as a brother as a sister as a co-heir with me forever sounds pretty good doesn't it what a king we have in jesus wise men rejoice in the coming of their king and celebrate it not just at christmas but always and so friends let's resolve to have the true christmas spirit in our hearts and in our minds always as we advance the gospel of our great king together serving as his ambassadors because you know jesus is the true king of the hill he is a king who served his people by dying on a hill he is a king who conquered all our foes who gave his life that we may live he's a king who doesn't push people down and tear their clothes and shed their blood to preserve his place no he is a king who lifts people up he is a king who has shed his blood to cover for our sins so that he can clothe us in his righteousness what other king would ever stoop to such lows to bring others to such heights only jesus jesus is a great king wise people know that wise people serve him wise people rejoice in him the king of kings the lord of lords in a moment i'm going to pray and if you've heard in this message you've heard the gospel and you realize that this jesus is not your king friend god has brought you here today to hear this news and again it's not about what you must do in order to have jesus it's understanding what jesus has done in order to save you and it's you turning to him in faith and it's you saying to him lord save me and if you say that he will and so i'm going to pray if you would like to come up and pray then i encourage you to do that and for the rest of you i would say listen remember who your true king is and this is a great time for you to serve as his ambassadors it's a great time for you to share the gospel and for you to remind people why we have christmas and what christmas is truly about let's pray heavenly father we are so thankful for the king that we have in your son jesus christ there's truly no king like him no other king who would sacrifice to save his people because we're used to kings who do the opposite who sacrifice people to keep their position of power lord thank you for the kind of king that you are that you came and that you lived the sinless life that we're incapable of living that you died willingly sacrificially on the cross to atone for our sins that you rose victoriously conquering all of our foes lifting us up on the hill upon which you rule giving us the privilege to know you and to reign along with you god forgive us that so often in our hearts there's a king that competes for your throne lord so often we want to trust in ourselves and our own reasoning our own understanding so often we desire to stay comfortable that we forget what you've done for us in your calling to be your ambassadors and to go and to make disciples to advance your kingdom in this world lord help us to never lose sight and not forget of who you are who you've made us to be and what you've called us to do that god we would serve you well and that we would give you our best because you are worthy thank you for who you are thank you for the king that you are in
Jesus name we pray amen