

# Christmas 2015

<sup>22</sup> *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*  
<sup>23</sup> *“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel”*  
*(which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:22–23 ESV)*

**Anticipating Jesus**  
**December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015**  
**Matthew 2:1-23**  
**Rev. Paul Carter**

## **Introduction:**

Good morning. Please open your Bibles to Matthew 2:1. Matthew 2 functions kind of like the opening movement of a great symphony. Very often in the first movement of a symphony the composer will introduce the main theme. Then over the course of the subsequent movements that theme will be developed and expanded upon before being brought to a resolution in the last and climactic movement. That’s exactly what’s going on here. Matthew introduces some of the main themes associated with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As you read through the rest of the New Testament all of those themes grow and develop and come to their appropriate climax. So Matthew 2 is kind of a sneak preview. It hints at some things we should watch for as they develop and grow and come to their fullest expression in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. We’ll read the chapter in its entirety and then reflect upon those main themes together. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

<sup>1</sup> 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, <sup>2</sup> 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.” <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> “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.”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

<sup>13</sup> Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”<sup>14</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt<sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

<sup>16</sup> Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.<sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

<sup>18</sup> “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”

<sup>19</sup> But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,<sup>20</sup> saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.”<sup>21</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.<sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.<sup>23</sup> And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene. (Matthew 2:1–23 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

## Anticipating Jesus:

As we reflect upon this story it seems that Matthew wants us to see that:

### 1. Jesus will gather in the Gentiles

That’s the first thing Matthew mentions AFTER the birth of Jesus. He says in verses 1-2:

<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:1–2 ESV)

This connects to an entire thread of Messianic anticipation. The Jewish people expected that when the Son of David sat upon the throne of Israel his rule would ultimately extend to all the peoples of the earth. He would be a King from the Jews but FOR all peoples everywhere. We find that anticipation in many passages of the Old Testament. David himself looked forward to that day, he said:

<sup>31</sup> Nobles shall come from Egypt; Cush shall hasten to stretch out her hands to God.

<sup>32</sup> O kingdoms of the earth, sing to God; sing praises to the Lord (Psalms 68:31–32 ESV)

The Messianic Kingdom would grow and grow and would attract and draw into itself and unto the worship of God all the nations of the earth. The prophet Isaiah saw that day, he said:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and **all the nations shall flow to it** (Isaiah 2:2 ESV)

Perhaps the prophecy most in Matthew's mind when he recorded this story was the one found in Isaiah 60:3:

And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isaiah 60:3 ESV)

The point is that as soon as Jesus appeared in human flesh he began to exude a supernatural magnetism that drew people into worship from all the nations of the earth. Matthew introduces this theme in the infancy narrative but of course it reaches its climax and fullest expression in the person of Christ upon the cross. Jesus said:

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32 ESV)

As D.A. Carson helpfully reminds us; the “all people” here:

means ‘all people without distinction, Jews and Gentiles alike’, not all individuals without exception<sup>1</sup>

That too is emphasized in Matthew 2. A contrast is made between these Wise Men from the east and the leadership elite in Jerusalem. The Wise Men are seeking Jesus – they are drawn to him from afar – Herod we are told, and all Jerusalem with him, was troubled and made inquiry so as to have him killed. Not all people respond the same way to Jesus, but Matthew is helping us see that Jesus is the long awaited Son of David who will draw people from every tribe, tongue and nation into right relationship with God.

Secondly, Matthew wants us to see that:

## **2. Jesus will replace the bad shepherds of Israel**

We talked a little bit last week about the effect that bad kings had on the people of Israel.

Consider for example the story of king Joash. He started out pretty well but 2 Chronicles tells us:

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<sup>1</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 444.

<sup>17</sup> Now after the death of Jehoiada the princes of Judah came and paid homage to the king. Then the king listened to them. <sup>18</sup> And they abandoned the house of the LORD, the God of their fathers, and served the Asherim and the idols. And wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this guilt of theirs. (2 Chronicles 24:17–18 ESV)

It wasn't just the kings either – often it was the priests and the prophets who led the people astray. Jeremiah in particular was very critical of these leaders, he said:

The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?' Those who handle the law did not know me; the shepherds transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit. (Jeremiah 2:8 ESV)

Jeremiah says: “The people who were supposed to teach the Bible didn't even know it! The people who were supposed to speak for God were filled with a strange spirit.” And so when judgment did finally fall on the land Jeremiah knew who was most to blame, he said:

This was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests (Lamentations 4:13 ESV)

The verdict of the Old Testament is undeniable: Israel had bad shepherds, bad leaders, who led the people away from God and into trouble. In the Book of Ezekiel God shows up himself and indicts these bad shepherds as a group; he says:

<sup>10</sup> Behold, I am against the shepherds ... I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them. <sup>11</sup> “For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. (Ezekiel 34:10–11 ESV)

God says to the shepherds of Israel – prophets, priests and kings – YOU'RE FIRED! ALL OF YOU. You're not doing what I told you to do, you are not serving the people, you are serving yourselves and therefore you are removed. I will come and I will lead my people personally. Listen to what God says:

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep (Ezekiel 34:15 ESV)

And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. (Ezekiel 34:24 ESV)

Now, at first glance, God seems to be saying two contradictory things here. He says on the one hand I will personally shepherd my sheep and then he says, David my servant will be prince among them. David has been dead for a long time when God says this, so this has always been

understood as a reference to the Son of David – the Messiah. Putting that together God seems to be saying that Messiah will be the Son of David and GOD HIMSELF taking over in person the leadership of His own people.

That theme is introduced in Matthew chapter 2. Look at what the Magi say when they come to Jerusalem:

“Where is he who has been born **king of the Jews**? (Matthew 2:2 ESV)

Where is the one who has been BORN TO LEAD God’s people? They know who this is and its also clear that the bad leaders in Jerusalem know who this is. The text says:

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him (Matthew 2:3 ESV)

Herod didn’t rejoice at the news that Messiah had come – he understood the implications. If Messiah had come then Herod was done; he was fired. So he took immediate action. He gathered together the experts in the law and found out where the baby was to be born and he made plans to have that baby killed. Kill the new boss before he takes office – that was Herod’s plan and it fits in very well with everything we know about King Herod.

Herod was a tyrant. He wasn’t even a real Jew. He was an Idumean. The nation of Edom was essentially swallowed up by Judah and the people were forcibly converted. Most Jews looked upon Idumeans as one step up from Samaritans. But Herod was an expert political operative and he managed to have himself appointed King of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40 BC. Herod was known as a survivor. He always managed to come out on top – often by murdering anyone he perceived as a threat. He murdered his own wife and at least two of his own sons. Herod was respected and feared but he was not loved. He knew that the Jewish people hated him and so to make sure that the day of his death would be a day of national mourning he made a long list of people he wanted killed on the day that he died.

And it wasn’t just King Herod that felt threatened by Jesus – again and again the Gospel writers tell us that the opposition of the Pharisees and Sadducees was also rooted in their awareness that if Jesus rose to prominence they would be displaced forever. We read about this last week in our

RMM readings. After the miraculous raising of Lazarus from the dead the leaders of the Jewish people gathered together to discuss the situation. The Bible says:

<sup>47</sup> So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” (John 11:46–48 ESV)

From start to finish the life of Jesus was a threat to the bad shepherds of Israel. It is interesting to recall the words of Jesus spoken at his trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin that so enraged the leaders of Israel. He said:

I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matthew 26:64 ESV)

Jesus says: “No matter what you say or do to me, I am king and I am God and my time has come!”

<sup>65</sup> Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. <sup>66</sup> What is your judgment?” They answered, “He deserves death.” (Matthew 26:65–66 ESV)

From start to finish in Matthew’s Gospel the coming of Jesus means conflict with the bad shepherds of Israel.

Thirdly, Matthew wants us to see that:

### **3. Jesus will end the pain of exile**

As Matthew tells us, Herod orders all the baby boys in Bethlehem to be slaughtered. Now, Bethlehem was a small town so most scholars estimate that we are probably only talking about 12-20 children, but still that is devastating obviously to those people and Matthew commiserates with them and he quotes from the prophet Jeremiah. He says:

“A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.” (Matthew 2:18 ESV)

Rachel here represents the mother of Israel. She was the wife of Jacob in the Old Testament who fathered the 12 twelve tribes. The mention of Ramah recalls the Babylonian exile of God's people. You may recall that Nebuzaradan, the commander of Nebuchadnezzar's imperial guard gathered the captives at Ramah before taking them into exile in Babylon<sup>2</sup>. You can imagine mother Rachel weeping over her children as they shuffled naked into darkness and ruin. God's people have suffered so much in this broken and fallen world.

The point Matthew seems to be making is that as long as we are away from God then we are going to be hurting one another. As soon as men and women are exiled from the presence of God in Genesis 3 we begin killing one another. 1 chapter out of the garden we have Cain killing Abel and it just never STOPS. Away from God we are killing one another. But Matthew is saying that this will not go on forever. Jesus is going to end the exile of God's people. He is going to take us home. He is going to bring us BACK TO GOD and back to one another. And in that place there will be no more killing, no more tears, no more sorrow and no more dying, for the first things have passed away. One commentator puts it this way:

“Despite the tears of the Bethlehem mothers, there is hope because Messiah has escaped Herod and will ultimately reign... The heir to David's throne has come, the Exile is over, the true Son of God has arrived, and he will introduce the new covenant promised by Jeremiah”.<sup>3</sup>

Comfort, comfort ye my people, says the Lord.

Fourthly and lastly Matthew wants us to see that:

#### **4. Jesus will emerge out of obscurity**

After the flight to Egypt to escape Herod, and after Herod dies, Joseph is told to go back to Israel with the child and with Mary. By one means or another Joseph learns that Archelaus – the most ruthless and incompetent of Herod's sons - has been given rule over Judea so he decides to go to Nazareth in Galilee which had been given to Herod's slightly less evil son Antipas. Despite these political and rational motivations, Matthew tells us that all of this happened, ultimately:

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<sup>2</sup> I am following here the interpretation and phrasing of D.A. Carson in *Matthew* in The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 94.

<sup>3</sup> D.A. Carson, *Matthew* in The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 95.

so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene. (Matthew 2:23 ESV)

Now as people living in another country 2000 years later it is very easy to miss the significance of that statement. Nazareth was a despised city – even to other Galileans. When Philip told Nathanael about Jesus:

Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46 ESV)

Remember that Galilee itself was viewed with suspicion by the political and cultural elites in Jerusalem. When Nicodemus tried to speak up for Jesus to the chief priests and Pharisees they said to him:

“Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.” (John 7:51–52 ESV)

Now of course Jesus isn’t actually from Galilee – he is from Bethlehem, but it looks like he is from Galilee – he was raised in Nazareth, the most despised town in a generally ill-favoured region and all of this happened by the design of God:

so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled... (Matthew 2:23 ESV)

Now what’s interesting is that Matthew doesn’t quote any prophet in particular, rather he seems to be saying that in general the prophets foretold that the Messiah would grow up in obscurity and be despised. He may have been thinking for example about Isaiah 52 which says:

<sup>2</sup>For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. <sup>3</sup>He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isaiah 53:2–3 ESV)

God has arranged for the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world to grow up in relative obscurity and to be despised and scorned by men. This is a very common Gospel theme – we actually ran into this theme in 2 Corinthians. There the Apostle Paul says that Jesus is the YES of God hidden inside an apparent NO. When you look at Jesus – particularly when you see him on the cross – he looks for all the world like a GIANT NO – but if you look closer, if you look with the eyes of faith you discover that:



all the promises of God find their Yes in him. (2 Corinthians 1:20 ESV)

The Gospel from start to finish is a mystery – that is to say that it is hidden in plain sight. This is a very important theme in Matthew, in Matthew chapter 11 for example Jesus prays:

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children (Matthew 11:25 ESV)

God has designed the Gospel to EXCLUDE those who are arrogant and worldly wise. Jesus intentionally taught in a way that excluded and bypassed those who were hard of heart and distracted by earthly things. He would hide the Gospel inside complicated little parables and his disciples would ask why he did this. Do you remember that?

<sup>11</sup> And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given... <sup>13</sup> This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. <sup>14</sup> Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: ““You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” <sup>15</sup> For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’

<sup>16</sup> But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. (Matthew 13:10–16 ESV)

Jesus lived and spoke in such a way as to solicit exclusively the response of humble faith. The Gospel message and the Gospel man were intended by God to bypass arrogant and worldly people. That’s why Jesus says:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3 ESV)

Desperate people, humble people get this – arrogant people, self-satisfied worldly people don’t get this. They don’t care. They’re not even looking. They don’t even have the time to press past the rumours and to get to the verifiable facts of Jesus’ life. It didn’t take a lot of digging to find out where Jesus was actually from – but the rumour and the appearance did the job that God intended. It weeded out the arrogant, the dismissive and the self-satisfied.

Again this is very similar to what we see in 2 Corinthians. Paul talked about the Gospel message and the Gospel messengers in exactly the same way. He said:

<sup>15</sup> we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, <sup>16</sup> to one

a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. (2 Corinthians 2:15–16 ESV)

The Gospel is a giant sorting mechanism – God moves the Gospel like a little train bearing incense through all the peoples of the world – beginning with the people of Israel. To some it is the fragrance of life – to others it is the stench of death. Who you are determines how you respond. If you are dead, it smells like death, if you are alive it smells like life.

### **Conclusion:**

Who is sufficient for these things, Paul asks in 2 Corinthians, because we're all dead. So how come some see and some don't? How come some SEE JESUS and welcome him as the King of Kings, the Good Shepherd, The Seed of the Woman and the Saviour of the World – and other people just see one more dusty prophet from deep in the heart of nowhere? The answer comes later in Matthew's Gospel. When Peter begins to see and to understand who Jesus is, Jesus says to him:

“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 16:17 ESV)

Do you see that? You have to have help from God to see who Jesus really is. Nobody gets this on their own. We are all proud by nature. We're all self-sufficient, we are all worldly and distracted. We need God's help to see the truth about who he is, who we are and how he has saved us through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Let us therefore go to God and ask him for eyes to see and for ears to hear and for hearts to receive the implanted and saving Word. Let's pray together.