

## WHERE'S THE KING?

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The Christmas story has so many wonderful parts with wonderful characters and even more wonderful messages. One of my favorite parts of the story involves a small group of astrologers, sometimes referred to as “*the Magi*”, who became fascinated by their discovery of a new and brightly shining Star. It was the Star that pointed them in the direction of Bethlehem. They were some very wise men to find that Star. They were even wiser to follow it because that Star eventually led them to the place where Jesus was staying. But, sometimes we focus so much on the Star and the wise men that we tend to overlook some of the other characters who reacted to the arrival of these wise men. And boy, did they react because the arrival of those wise men in Jerusalem caused quite a stir. And, those events are something that we can't afford to miss when reading the Christmas Story. It has a great deal to say about what people do with the Spirit of Christmas. And remember—the ***Christmas Spirit*** is another seasonal name that really refers to the ***Holy Spirit***—because as we've seen the past two Sundays, the Holy Spirit shows up all throughout the Christmas Story. And indeed, He shows up with this Star of Bethlehem. So, listen to what Matthew's Gospel has to tell us about these wise men and notice the great disturbance that they caused when they entered into the gates of the Holy City.

This is what Matthew has to say: <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.***” Matthew 2:1-6 (ESV)

Now, for our purposes this morning, they are the verses that we'll focus upon. Picture in your mind what is happening here—and do it from King Herod's perspective. What if you happened to be the King there in your palace in Jerusalem, and you are sitting there on the royal throne wearing a very kingly crown on your head, and your royal attendants usher in three richly robed foreign dignitaries. They walk up and see you sitting there on the royal throne. They see that you are the one wearing the royal robes and kingly crown. All these things should have been like a neon sign blinking, “***This guy is the king!***” But instead of bowing down to you, they look at you then glance all around and then ask: “***So, where's the King?***” Wouldn't you have been a little bit disturbed by that? You would have turned

to them and said, ***“Wait a minute guys! What are you talking about?—I’m the King!”*** So as you can imagine, King Herod was quite deeply troubled by the fact that these stately foreign visitors, who seemed to be quite “in the know,” were acknowledging that there was a King around these parts all right, but it wasn’t Herod.

And notice that it not only says that Herod was troubled by all of this, but that all the people of Jerusalem were disturbed by the question that the wise men were presenting—particularly that part that asked, “Where is the ***King of the Jews?***” They were troubled because they recognized that these wise men were apparently convinced that the Messiah—the Christ—had come. Although King Herod didn’t appear too well versed in the Scriptures, his advisers and religious leaders were thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament prophecies that promised the coming of a perfect King—One who would be born of the House of David by way of a virgin. He would be the Son of God and be named Immanuel—meaning “*God with us.*”<sup>1</sup> And not only that—but when this King came, He’d supplant all other kings—including Herod—for His rule would be over all peoples and nations of the earth and His reign would last forever.<sup>2</sup> And Herod knew that if this had indeed come to pass, well he’d likely find himself in the unemployment line—a prospect that he did not relish.

And so Herod and his subjects were deeply disturbed that these wise men had come from afar asking all these troubling questions about this ***“King of the Jews.”*** And that phrase itself—***“King of the Jews”***—it was the most disconcerting thing of all. The prophets of old had described this ***King of the Jews*** when they proclaimed the words of the Lord saying: “For the time is coming,” says the LORD, “when I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David’s line. He will be a King who rules with wisdom. He will do what is just and right throughout the land.” Jeremiah 23:5 (NLT2) “For my people will serve the LORD their God and their king descended from David— the king I will raise up for them.” Jeremiah 30:9 (NLT2) And it was words like these that upset both Herod and the people of Jerusalem because if the Messiah had come, then things were going to change. He would start a whole new era, under a whole new plan of salvation. And they didn’t want this because they were perfectly satisfied with the status quo—they liked the plan that they currently had. It was a plan that didn’t require any real personal commitment to anyone, other than to themselves. Under their existing plan, Herod might be the king politically, but each person individually remained the king of their own hearts. They were their own self-rulers, and they were perfectly fine with leaving things that way.

And not only that, but they knew what else the Old Testament prophets had said—they said something about God’s Son. They proclaimed: <sup>6</sup> “For the Lord declares, “This is the King of my choice, and I have enthroned him in Jerusalem, my holy city.” <sup>7</sup> His chosen one [i.e. the Son of God Himself]

replies, “I will reveal the everlasting purposes of God, for the Lord has said to me, ‘You are my Son. This is your Coronation Day. Today I am giving you your glory.’”<sup>8</sup> Only ask and I will give you all the nations of the world.<sup>9</sup> Rule them with an iron rod; smash them like clay pots!”<sup>10</sup> [And then the prophet goes on and turns to the world’s rulers and says:] “O kings and rulers of the earth, listen while there is time.<sup>11</sup> Serve the Lord with reverent fear; rejoice with trembling.<sup>12</sup> Fall down before his Son and kiss his feet before his anger is roused and you perish. I am warning you—his wrath will soon begin. But oh, the joys of those who put their trust in him!” Psalm 2:6-12 (TLB) But, none of that sounded too good to them—especially that part about being ruled over by an iron rod or being smashed like unholy pots of clay. That sounded like this newly arrived Messiah meant business—He’d be very demanding and would require absolute loyalty. And because of all of that, they’d need to clean up their acts considerably. And that was the last thing that they wanted to do.

That, then, is a summary of how King Herod and his subjects in Jerusalem reacted to what these wise men were asking. Which brings us to an important question: *Why has Matthew bothered to make this a part of the Christmas Story? And what does all this have to do with the Spirit of Christmas?* Well, part of the answer is this: The ***Spirit of Christmas*** is all about the ***human heart***—or more precisely—what needs to be ***in*** the human heart. And the fact is that the reaction of Herod and his loyal subjects to these wise men provides a fairly accurate reflection of what the typical response of the human heart has always been.<sup>3</sup> You see, the human heart does not like any other king to rule over it because it insists upon ruling over itself. And it insists upon ruling itself into order to preserve its nature.

So, what is the nature of the human heart? In its natural state, it isn’t pretty. God knows all too well the nature of our hearts, and in His Word He describes their basic characteristics as follows: “The heart is the most deceitful thing there is and desperately wicked. No one can really know how bad it is!” Jeremiah 17:9 (TLB) “For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, lying, and slander.” Matthew 15:19 (TLB) So what does God have to say to such people—the one’s like King Herod who insist upon ruling over their own wicked hearts? Well, God would tell them the same thing that He told the people in Ezekiel’s day. It is the same message that He had for the people of Herod’s kingdom—and, it’s the same thing that He tells us today. For those who have such sick hearts, God offers a true heart transplant—albeit a ***spiritual*** one. And, so God says:<sup>19</sup> “I will give you one heart and a new spirit; I will take from you your hearts of stone and give you tender hearts of love for God,<sup>20</sup> so that you can obey my laws and be my people, and I will be your God.” Ezekiel 11:19-20 (TLB)

But, the procedure for a heart transplant of a ***spiritual nature*** is a very strict one. In fact, it is every bit as strict as the ones performed on hearts of flesh in a hospital surgery room. Before anyone

can receive this new heart—this **new spirit**—there is a strict requirement. This requirement demands that they come to realize something. They must first realize and acknowledge the condition of their old heart, and want to exchange it for something that only God can offer. God’s Word points to this when it tells us: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart. . .” Psalm 51:17 (NKJV) Once you begin to realize the broken nature of your heart, then you are a candidate for a spiritual heart transplant—one that will restore your heart and make it completely new.

And it is essential that one’s heart be transformed in this way because the heart is intended to be a very special place. It is intended to be the **“dwelling place of God.”**<sup>4</sup> And, we can’t expect God to dwell in a broken down place. Where God resides, things are all made well—they are made whole, and are never broken. So, how does God go about removing that old broken heart and then give us a new one? He does this by giving us an **appointment** with a **master surgeon**—One who knows exactly the surgery needed to save you from an eternally fatal heart attack. And for those who will just keep that appointment, this master surgeon reaches into our hearts and guarantees a successful outcome. God promises this, for the Bible tells us that it is God “who has placed His mark of ownership upon us, and who has given us the **Holy Spirit in our hearts** as the **guarantee** of all that He has in store for us.” 2 Corinthians 1:22 (TEV)

And when you truly allow the Holy Spirit into your heart—whether it’s Christmas time, or any time—He knows exactly what to pour into your heart to make it all brand new. And, you won’t be disappointed. Then, you will have a sure hope. Do you know what it is that the Holy Spirit pours into broken hearts to change them into something brand new? The Apostle Paul answers this when he writes: “This hope does not disappoint us, for God has **poured out His love into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit**, who is God’s gift to us.” Romans 5:5 (TEV) Did you hear that? God gives us a **gift**. He gifts to us His Holy Spirit—it doesn’t cost a thing, and you don’t have to wait until Christmas Day to get it. It is available to anyone, at any time. And when you accept the Holy Spirit into your life, He pours love into your heart. And when that happens, it not only becomes brand new—but it also becomes oh **so pure!** And that is a good thing, because it is an especially blessed thing to have a pure heart. This baby in a manger whose birth we’ll celebrate in just over a couple weeks—He eventually grew up to tell us: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Matthew 5:8 (NKJV)

Which brings us back to those wise men—those foreigners who had traveled hundreds of miles across the desert, possibly from as far away as Iraq: What motivated them to make such a long and tiring journey? It wasn’t just their interest in stars. Rather, it was their desire to find a **Savior**. Somehow—it certainly remains a mystery—but these wise men knew that the Star leading them to the

stable where Jesus lay was more than some physical phenomenon. Personally, I believe that when they gazed upon the Star of Bethlehem—they could sense that this was actually the Holy Spirit, manifesting Himself as a bright and shining light showing them the way. Now, this is not without precedence. It happened before, when the Holy Spirit led the Israelites through a different wilderness in the form of a pillar of fire during the Exodus.<sup>5</sup> And because of that, these wise men were among a very select group of people who were so doubly blessed by seeing with their own eyes **two of the three parts** of the **Trinity**—the Holy Spirit as they carefully watched and faithfully followed the Star, as well as the Son of God, when they finally came and bowed down to the Baby Jesus in Bethlehem.

When we think about King Herod and his subjects, as compared to the wise men, there is such a stark contrast in the responses that they had to the coming of Jesus. The responses of their hearts couldn't have been more different from each other. The one group was troubled by the news of Jesus' birth—and ultimately Herod even sought to kill the baby Jesus rather than to submit his heart to Him. But, the response of the wise men was one of worship and adoration as they placed their royal gifts before the manger. The reality is that people have been giving the very same responses—one way or the other—ever since, with many rejecting Jesus as Savior, while a remnant bows down to Him in worship and faith and obedience. The wise men, representing that remnant, laid before Jesus the very best that they had. That's what Jesus requires. But, Jesus doesn't want you to lay your frankincense, myrrh and gold before Him. He wants you to lay down your heart at His feet.

Now, I asked earlier why Matthew took the time to include these verses about Herod and the people of Jerusalem in his version of the Nativity. I think that the answer lies in the terrible consequences connected with the very asking of the wise men's question—because if it is necessary to ask the question, then it tells volumes about the vacancy in one's heart. For what a tragic question it would be if those wise men were to peer into the recesses of someone's heart, look around, and ask: **"So where's the king?"** What a broken and self-deceived heart that would be. Hearts like that seem to follow every **"star"** except the One that matters. They'll follow movie stars or sports stars, stars colored in green printed with dollars signs, and any other star that shines with the pleasures of this world. But, the only Star that matters is the Star of Bethlehem—the **Star fueled by the Spirit of Christmas**, the **Holy Spirit**—the star that shines the purest of light of all upon those who truly seek the Light—**who seek pure hearts**. Indeed, blessed are the pure in heart for that Holy Star will come to rest above their hearts and declare: **"Herein lies the King—the Messiah, Jesus Christ."** This Christmas Season, let that Star shine upon you.

Let us pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 7:13-14 (NKJV) <sup>13</sup> Then he said, "Hear now, O house of David! *Is it* a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel 7:13-14 (NKJV) <sup>13</sup> "I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. <sup>14</sup> Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, Which shall not pass away, And His kingdom the one Which shall not be destroyed.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas*, Viking: New York (2016), p.67

<sup>4</sup> Gerald P. Cowen, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), s.v. "HEART," WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 13:21-22 (NKJV) <sup>21</sup> And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night. <sup>22</sup> He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people.

Note: The pillar of fire or pillar of cloud is sometimes equated with the "Angel of the Lord." See John MacArthur Study Bible, Exodus 13:20. Also, see Isaiah 63:9 where the "Angel of the Lord" is understood to be God's "Holy Spirit" (see Isaiah 63:10-11) and "the Spirit of the Lord" (Isaiah 63:14). *NET Bible*, First ed. (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 63".