

Illuminating the King

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. Merry Christmas. Great to be with you and wonderful to see some festive outfits out there. I got to tell you, it is actually hot. Getting festive is kind of hot and also uncomfortable. I've got suspenders on and I can understand why these babies went out in the 1980s. It just makes you shorter is what they tend to do. They're wanting to stretch up all the time. One of the great traditions of Christmas is the giving and receiving of gifts.

Who's opened Christmas gifts already this morning? Put your hand up. You know, right up so I can see it. Anyone open? Okay. Keep your hand up if you got what you were hoping to get.

Okay. So there's a few hands that are kind of, I'm sort of not sure. It's one of those things, isn't it? That good gifts are not necessarily expensive gifts. They're personal gifts. It's the hope of getting something that we really, really like. So I've opened a couple of things already this morning and nothing grand but personal, such as old gold, rum and raisin.

You know, it's a winner. And I can see a few people around there saying, this is a winner and this is deeply personal. This is the one chocolate that's in my fridge that you must not touch.

In fact, kids, none of the chocolate is available to be touched as a general rule. The other thing is I got a pair of cheap socks. Seinfeld socks. I binge watch Seinfeld. I love Seinfeld. And so these socks, if you had given me a \$200 gift card to Lincraft, not as valuable to me at all as Seinfeld socks. Lincraft, I'm just not hoping to shop there anytime soon. It's just not something. Bunnings, however, very different. The good gifts are gifts that are deeply personal, that connect with you as an individual. They're not necessarily expensive. And so what we're doing this morning is we're looking at that passage which Ash just read out for us in Matthew. And we're going to see there, we're going to look very briefly at the three gifts that this baby Jesus receives.

[2 : 3 0] And what it says about him, they're deeply personal gifts. And then what those gifts say about him and the response that different people have because of those gifts and what they say about Jesus.

So come with me, open up the passage, Matthew 2. If you've got the St. Paul's app, you can crack that open as well because I've got a bit of an outline to make it easy for you to follow along. So Jesus received some very strange gifts as a young child from a bunch of strangers. Verse 11, Jesus was presented, we are told, with gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. Now as a poor peasant girl, Mary might have been totally pleased with this. These are expensive gifts. So this baby Jesus might have been born in a stable, but it appears that he comes with some kind of trust fund or something.

These are expensive gifts. But she's baffled as well. These gifts are deeply personal. These three gifts reveal three significant things about Jesus. They reveal who he is, what he came to do, and how he went about doing it. That is what it cost him to do it. So gold, the first gift, points to the kingship of Jesus. You see, gold was a gift that was bought to an audience with a king in the ancient Near East in the first century. They tend not to do it nowadays. For instance, one year, our grateful nation of Australia gave Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, the 50th edition of Who's Who in Australia as a gift with a gray scarf. So it's a little bit different nowadays. We're not handing over gold to Queen Elizabeth. The Magi, when they handed over this gift of gold, were in fact expecting a king. That's their expectation. They asked, where is the one born who has been born king of the Jews? What alerted them to the arrival of the new king is the second half of verse 2, where it says, we saw his star in the east and we have come to worship him. Now these Magi are astrologers. They're magicians. They're interpreters of dreams. And in the ancient world, most people believed in astrology. And so the Magi, if you like, are considered the elite. These guys are the university lecturers of their day. They're the academics. They're the wise men, the knowledgeable ones. When these guys saw the star, they immediately recognized something significant, something very special has happened. That's because there was a particular event in history that caused stars to be associated with kings and rulers of nations. And that was when

Julius Caesar died in 44 BC, one of the most astonishing flukes in history took place. A nova appeared in the sky magi over his funeral. And from then on, from 44 BC, stars were connected with great leaders and rulers of some fashion. They became the fashion in the ancient Near East. And so these Magi see the star and they put two and two together. What would have encouraged them also to dust off their passports was that there was also a very strong rumor around in the first century that world dominion was going to shift. Politics was going to shift and Judea was going to be the center. Famous and diverse first century historians like Tacitus, Josephus, Suetonius, all recorded this shift, expectation of a shift in the first century.

And so it would not have been much of a leap at all for these Magi to conclude the political change in the air when they saw the star. Now what these stargazers saw was most likely the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. It happened three times in the year 7 BC, which is most likely the year that Christ was born. It happened on the 29th of May, the 3rd of October and the 4th of December.

[7 : 17] And the Magi would have also known historically that Jupiter was regarded as a royal pattern, planet, and Saturn was the symbol for Israel in the ancient Near East. And so these competent astronomers would have concluded that this new age has now begun with a new king and the rule has now shifted to Judea. And so they set out on this long and difficult journey to find the ruler of the world and offer this king gold. But incense, that's an odd one. That's an unexpected gift. Incense in the first century was used by the priests in the temple as they mediated between God and his people.

It symbolized relationship with God. And so the Magi were recognizing Jesus as the ultimate priest, the one who would mediate between the creator God and his rebellious people.

Any new mother would have been totally thrown, however, by the gift of myrrh. You see, myrrh was used in the ancient Near East in the first century to embalm the dead. It was a symbol of death.

Imagine one of the presents under the Christmas tree for your children today. Wrapped up nicely in Christmas is a toy coffin.

A little toy coffin to play with. With a dead person you can put in it. Unusual, unexpected gift. Unusual, unexpected gift.

[9 : 31] Unusual, unexpected gift.

Unusual, unexpected gift. How much it cost him to do it. Then we get three personal reactions. What is interesting is how people respond here to the who, the what and the how in these verses.

One thing you notice throughout all the historical biographies of Jesus is that when Jesus turns up, people are divided in their opinions of him. Right from the get-go. Right from the get-go.

And you see that even right here as a baby, right from the start of his life, people are divided in their opinions of him. Two camps are forming already.

We have three ideas here, but two camps are forming. One is full of praise and welcome. The other is full of hatred, opposition and indifference.

[10 : 49] First of all, we have hostile Herod. Herod lies through his teeth. In verse 8, he says, Now, Herod, as we know, the rest of the text will tell us, has as much interest in worshipping King Jesus as I have in taking up knitting lessons.

Later in the chapter, we read Herod didn't fool the Magi at all. They saw straight through him and they sneak off down to Egypt without telling Herod where Jesus is.

And he is furious. Herod is furious and so furious that he orders all of the boys, two years old and under, around the surrounds in the Bethlehem LGA to be put to death.

What a tyrant. He wants Jesus dead and he wants to make sure that he doesn't miss him at all. Herod is the Roman appointed king of the Jews.

He doesn't like the news that another king has been born. He's threatened. And he's infamous for his cruelty in which he dealt with any rivals to his throne.

[12 : 17] He killed one of his wives, several of his sons, anyone who was a threat to his throne. His response here is hatred and fear.

A hatred of anything or anyone that threatened his self-centered autonomy. Now we know that this account here of deception and fear and bloodshed and injustice and homelessness are all too familiar.

There is a great deal wrong with our world today. And we know it. But we, I think, walk into controversy when we ask where all this evil and wrong has come from.

You see, one end of the spectrum says that the big problem with the world nowadays is the rich and the powerful ones. They're the ones to blame. They're just all selfish and making everything, you know, ordered for themselves.

The rich and the powerful ones to blame. And that particular view of the world, which is generally a liberal progressive view of the world, means that the poor and the minorities in this world are the heroes of the world.

[13 : 32] The other end of the spectrum, which is more your conservative perspective, insists that it's the immoral and the irresponsible people in the world.

They're the main problem. They're the problem with the world. You know, if you're poor, you just need to get a job. That's your problem. You need to work harder.

That's your problem. This view of the world tends to make hardworking, decent, middle class people the heroes of the world.

Now, at the first glance of this story, it seems here to side with the first view, the liberal progressive view. Herod is an unjust ruler, abusing his power, slaughtering the innocent.

However, the full teaching of the Bible is that the source of evil in this world is every single human heart, liberal or conservative.

[14 : 38] Every single human heart. Herod's reaction to Jesus is, in a sense, a picture of us all. If you want to be king and fundamental value of Western civilization is individual autonomy.

We want to rule our own lives. When someone else comes along and says, in fact, no, I'm the king, then one of us has to give way.

Someone has to give way. Only one person can sit on the absolute throne. And Jesus comes into this world and he claims to be that king who has the right to sit on the throne, to be the ultimate ruler of all things.

He calls for our allegiance so supreme that it makes all other commitments look weak in comparison. It is a claim to absolute authority, a summons to unconditional loyalty, and it inevitably triggers deep, deep resistance within every human heart.

Who has the right to rule my life? That's the most disturbing question possible for the autonomous human heart.

[15 : 55] We want to remain on the throne of our lives. Some of us, potentially gathered here today, listening online, some of us use religion to stay on the throne of our lives.

Trying to put God in a position where he owes us something. Because we're so righteous and we're doing these good things for him. Some of us flee from religion.

Become atheists, we loudly claim that there is no God. Either way, we're expressing our natural hostility to the rule of the true king. Religious or not.

Herod could not get rid of Jesus. Even with an army at his disposal. In fact, one of the great ironies of this text is right at the end. Herod is dead and Jesus lives.

Next, we have the passive priests. We've got hostile Herod, we've got the passive priests. Their reaction is not as hostile as Herod, but it's just as negative. You see, these are the ones who simply do nothing about Jesus.

[17 : 07] The Magi turn up. Verse 4. Herod gathers together all the chief priests, the scribes of the people, inquiring them where the Messiah was to be born.

And they told him. They told the Magi. Down to Bethlehem. All the prophecies say Bethlehem. Ah, fantastic. And then they go back to doing whatever it is that you do.

Their sheer silence and inactivity of the religious leaders is overwhelming in view of the magnitude of what has just happened.

They didn't lift a sandal. Why not go with the Magi? Why not just go with them and check it out just in case? Why not go with them and check it out just in case they did nothing.

Their knowledge of Jesus was no substitute for their obedience. Finally, the final reaction we see is the only positive one and that's the malleable Magi.

[18 : 37] That's the only word I could come up with that sort of went with an M. Malleable Magi. And their response is remarkable. In the rest of the Bible, these guys are always viewed negatively.

Only Matthew puts these guys in a positive light. Impressed by what they saw in the sky at night, they journeyed west to Judea. Massive journey. Massive journey.

To find out what it all meant. It's astonishing that men with so little to go on should venture so far, endure such hardships in travel, face such uncertainty of finding the one to whom the star pointed.

And what's more, they gave him these costly gifts and the worship and honor of their lives. Where the religious leaders expended no time, no energy, no expense or inconvenience at all.

Where Herod expended a great deal of time and energy and expense and inconvenience in order to try and find Jesus and kill him. The Magi expended a great deal of time, no money, no expense or money.

[19 : 50] As the king over their lives. The Magi are the worshipers. Those who joyfully ascribe dignity, authority, honor to King Jesus and whose lives are ultimately satisfied in him.

it's a call that Jesus continues to cry out to the nations to the people of all the world throughout the histories for the last 2,000 years to throw your crowns at his feet as the gracious loving king who gave his life for us when Queen Victoria ruled as the British monarch in the 1800s she controlled one third of the planet massive she said one day that she couldn't wait to meet Jesus and she was asked why she said so that I too can cast my crown at his feet she recognised that even as one of the most powerful people in the world she too had a ruler one who deserved her everything even her crown which brings me to what is your personal reaction indifference hostility or worship two camps really positive camp and negative camp there's really no middle road

I want to speak to two broad groups here that are potentially gathered here and online firstly to those who are Christians those who accept Jesus on his terms of what he says he is and what he proved to say that he is that he is your Christian you engage you believe in Christmas and Christianity it's important to know that as a Christian that every Christian still has a heart with residual anger and hostility towards God very important for you to recognise that and it will always be there to the end that is why it's so hard for you to pray to give to obey to grow to love Jesus so hard to love there is still a little bit of Herod in each of us there is still something in us that wants to fight with God day in and day out we can't just glide through the Christian life we have got to be far more intentional about our Christian growth and prayer about accountability to other people to overcome our bad habits that is the reality if you think that you can glide through the Christian life by yourself you are deeply confused about it if however you're here today and your responses may be indifference and hostility

I'd like to give you some respectful advice if I may let's call it respectful advice for those unsure about Christmas and Christianity or perhaps even the existence of God let's just take it a step further there remember I think this is really important for you to understand remember that your view your view is not an objective view it's not an objective view it's not an objective view of Jesus of God of Christmas and Christianity the philosopher Thomas Nagel who himself is an atheist was very candid very candid he wrote this I am talking about the fear of religion itself I am speaking from experience being strongly subject to this fear myself

I'm an atheist and I want atheism to be true and I'm made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well informed people I know are in fact religious believers it isn't just that I don't believe in God and naturally I hope that my belief is right I actually hope there is no God I don't want there to be a God I don't want the universe to be like that my guess is this cosmic authority over our lives is a problem and it's not a rare problem that is his point is that whatever you are on the spectrum here today you're not neutral you might think well there's another alternative

[24 : 56] Jesus sorry Steve don't make the connection there there's another alternative Steve I'm just neutral there's no such thing as neutrality there's no such thing as neutrality about whether Christmas is true if the son of God was really born in a manger then you and I have lost all rights to oversee our lives you cannot be objective about a claim like that and so keep that in mind if you don't believe in Christianity and therefore at the very least question your doubts for your own sake question your doubts now I figure you've got several things on your plate in the next today and in the next few days one of them for me is sleep but can I encourage you that real soon that you might want to look at this issue of who

Jesus is what he came to do what it cost him to do it the magi were the knowledgeable men of the east they were the academic elite but their knowledge about these events around Christmas only took them so far their observation of the star took them to Jerusalem to the palace because that's where they assumed that he would be and they got that bit wrong in the end they had to consult the Bible God's word in order to find Jesus and in finding Jesus they found what they had been looking for all of their life he is the wisdom that they had been searching for all of their life now I want to say this without explaining it so let me just do that Jesus is the answer to everything that you are searching for in life he is the goal he is the destination and can I encourage you at least to be like these wise men and search for Jesus go to the source the evidence is overwhelming and it is compelling read one of the biographies of Jesus consider Jesus and ponder who is

Jesus what did he come to do what did it cost him in order to do it and what does it mean for me now what does it mean to bow down and worship him over 2000 years later now I want to encourage you this morning because it's Christmas and because we're a Christian church and we want to just delight to give you out there in the H and behind us is a bunch of resources on a table they are all free take them take them this Christmas as a gift from us and search for Jesus have a great day and half down in