

The Promised Sovereign and Shepherd

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 00] Well, a very good afternoon to you, and welcome to the Wednesday Lunchtime Bible Talk. My name is Paul Brennan. I'm one of the staff members here at the Tron Church. Now, we're in Matthew's Gospel, so if you want to turn with me to Matthew chapter 2.

If you're in the church Bibles, that should be 807. And we're reading the first 12 verses there. Matthew chapter 2. Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

For we 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 so 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.

[1 : 30] And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child. And when you've found him, bring me word that I may come to 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. That's the word of the Lord.

Now, before we come to this word together, let's pray. Let's gather our hearts to the Lord. Let's pray. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, you are a good God.

[2 : 45] He delights to give good gifts to your children. Thank you for the greatest gift of all, which we remember and which we proclaim, particularly at this time of year.

The gift of your son. Your son who came to rescue your people from their sin. Your son whose coming was long promised. In him we see light dawning on a dark world.

Your son who came to rescue your people from their sin. And so would you fill our hearts and minds afresh with wonder, the wonder of his coming this Christmas time.

would you please help us to bow before him, to extol our God and King, to respond to his coming with joyful reception and loving service.

what a wonderful gift you have given your own son. And so we pray as we consider these words this afternoon.

[3 : 54] might you speak to us, might you make our hearts sing, because of the wonderful joy, the wonderful coming, of your promised King, your promised Savior.

So fill our hearts this afternoon with joy and wonder, we ask, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. It can be quite easy, I think, for us to domesticate Christmas, to domesticate the Christmas story.

Amid all the hype of the Christmas trees, the lights, the shops, the parties, amid all that, the story, the historical events at the root of it, they do get a look in.

They get a small look in. They get a domesticated look in. We see it mainly in the nativity plays, up in primary schools, up and down the land.

Perhaps it's a nativity scene you might come across in a shopping center. It's seen as something quaint, something for the kids. But the reality could not be further from the neutered nativity with small children dressed up in all sorts of animals, more than you can imagine.

[5 : 12] The reality is the reality we read of here in Matthew's Gospel. And far from being a story limited to one couple, Mary and Joseph, who lived a long time ago in a place far away, it is the story of cosmic proportions.

We saw last week at the end of chapter one that in the birth of Jesus Christ, God himself has come to dwell with his people. But not only that, Jesus is God's savior come to rescue his people. This is huge. This, if true, is the central moment in human history. God himself stepping into the human story.

And here at the start of chapter two, Matthew pulls the curtain a little further back on what was going on and it's staggering. The child that was born, Jesus, he was the promised king. He's God's king, God's ruler, God's sovereign, God's shepherd. And since the very beginning of time, God's purpose was to establish his rule over this whole world, the world that we live on.

[6 : 31] That was the task he first gave to Adam and Eve to extend his kingdom of light over the whole earth. But as the story unfolds, there is another kingdom, a kingdom of darkness with Satan at its head.

And since that moment of temptation in the Garden of Eden, a battle has raged, a cosmic battle, a battle between God's kingdom of light and Satan's kingdom of darkness.

And it's a battle that's been fought all through time in our world. But at Christmas, with the birth of Jesus Christ, we witness an invasion from on high on enemy-occupied territory.

The kingdom of light breaks in on the dawn on the dark worlds. The king of that kingdom is born a child. And it is that reality that explains what we read here in chapter 2.

This cosmic battle comes down to this earth. It is that true story that shapes everything we see in all of history.

[7 : 45] It's the true story that we find fragments of in the stories that we love. That great battle, that great cosmic battle. I recently got into Star Wars.

I'm about four decades late to the party, but I've got into it. And they are probably the biggest films of all time. I never thought I'd admit that. I never thought I'd be a Star Wars person, but I am.

And I think it's because in those films you see a great cosmic battle between two sides, good and evil, the dark side and the Jedi.

Darth Vader versus Luke Skywalker. It's cracking stuff. And in Star Wars, it's the good guys that often look small and weak and destined for defeat.

And likewise here, with the birth of Jesus Christ, it looks very unimpressive and weak indeed. But there is something of cosmic proportions going on.

[8 : 52] The king, God's king, has really arrived. Three points this afternoon. Firstly, Jesus' birth proclaims the arrival of the promised sovereign shepherd.

Secondly, Jesus' birth provides, provokes opposition from his own people. And thirdly, Jesus' birth produces worship from Gentile magi.

So firstly then, Jesus' birth proclaims the arrival of the promised sovereign shepherd. We see here the fulfillment of the long-promised shepherd king.

The language of kingship is littered throughout this passage. Into the narrative, look down with me, chapter 2, verse 1. Into the narrative, pops Herod. He's the king of Judah.

Verse 1, and again, verse 3. And you see the wise men coming from the east. They come to Jerusalem, verse 2, and they ask, where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

[10 : 00] Look on to verse 6. It speaks of a ruler. It speaks of one who will shepherd the people of Israel. And then we see later on the wise men coming to the baby, to the child Jesus, worshipping him, bringing him gifts fit for a king.

Matthew couldn't be clearer. The king long-promised has finally arrived. Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah, the promised sovereign shepherd.

Matthew is quoting there from the Old Testament, from Micah, in verses 5 and 6. You see, Herod, clearly shaken by these wise men who come to his city looking for the king of the Jews, he asks the chief priests, the scribes, to look into it.

And they refer him to Micah, who spoke those words in verses 6, 5 and 6. He spoke them centuries before.

And he spoke of a ruler who would truly shepherd his people. Now the shepherding language here can perhaps confuse us.

[11:10] We can perhaps paint an unrealistic picture in our minds. We often associate shepherds with kind of nice, gentle sheep cuddlers, the sort of guy you might see on the TV in the sheepdog competitions rounding up sheep.

You know, the sort of man wearing a flat cap, donning his barber jacket and a check shirt. But I think that's an unhelpful picture of a shepherd. I was speaking just the other weekend to one of our students and her family have, as far back as she can remember, been crofters looking after sheep. And she was telling me what looking after sheep really involves. And it's tough work protecting the sheep from danger, ensuring that they were fed out late into the night looking for the lost sheep. Shepherds were a tough lot, she says. And that is much closer to what a shepherd is in the Bible. Matthew here is quoting from the prophet Micah. And here he speaks of a promised ruler who would shepherd his people.

But not just his people, but the entire world. The Bible often presents and describes God as a shepherd, as a leader of his people.

[12:25] In Psalm 78, it describes God as one who struck down every firstborn in Egypt, who led his people out like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.

God is a shepherd who leads, who fights, who protects. Later in that same Psalm, we read of the under-shepherds that God appointed for his people.

It says this, he chose David, his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds, from following the nursing ewes, and brought him to shepherd Jacob his people.

David, King David, was God's chosen shepherd king. And it is one of his descendants, the promised shepherd king that Matthew introduces to us in the opening pages of his gospel. And that fact has massive implications. The arrival of God's king is not a neutral event.

[13:31] As these opening verses in Matthew's gospel make plain, his arrival on the world scene does things. It provokes response. Jesus is the shepherd king who leads, who fights for his enemies, and protects his people.

One preacher put it like this, the gospel is the coming of God into the human situation. And since that human situation is characterized not only by need, but also by rebellion and revolt, it means that not only gladness, joy, and blessing, but also conflict and battle are involved in the divine visitation.

Jesus is God's king. And we see in this passage two responses to God's sovereign shepherd, two completely contrasting responses as he comes into the world.

So firstly, Jesus' birth provokes opposition from his own people. We see here the determined resistance from those who are most privileged.

The birth of Jesus threatens Herod. He was the king of Judah, and he had by this point been on the throne for a good few decades, and he was known to be a particularly unpleasant and cruel king.

[14:58] He seems to have killed off most of his family, including his own wife, to protect his reign. He was paranoid. And so you can, in a sense, understand his hostility when in verse 2 some wise men arrive, and they say they're looking for the newborn king.

Now when you walk into someone's palace and ask where the king is, it will naturally unsettle whoever is sat on the throne. And in fact, Matthew tells us verse 3 that Herod was troubled and all Jerusalem with him.

That's perhaps a bit of an understatement. He quickly summons the religious experts to find out more, and he discovers that the child is likely to be in Bethlehem, and he dispatches the wise men under the guise of wanting to come and worship him for himself.

But his intentions were not as they appeared. We discover down in verse 16 that he orders all male children born in Bethlehem under two years old to be killed.

That was his intention. He perceived a threat to his own throne. And of course, Jesus is a threat, but perhaps not in the way that Herod understands it.

[16:22] This is far bigger than just the throne of Judea. Jesus is the king of the cosmos, and he demands that all people in all places at all times bow the knee and worship him.

He is the king of the universe. Herod's opposition here is a reflection of the greater opposition to Jesus' kingship from Satan's kingdom of darkness.

This is just one manifestation of it. And the gospel always has and always will provoke opposition. God's king always has and always will provoke opposition.

Wherever the truth is proclaimed, it will inevitably lead to division, to opposition, to confrontation.

Every human being that has ever lived naturally wants to have self on the throne.

And so when Jesus comes along with his claims to sovereignty, one has to win out. Only one person can sit on the absolute throne.

[17 : 34] And so when the gospel is declared, when Jesus' kingship is announced, many will fight it. We see that all the time, don't we?

You perhaps have a friend who you've brought along to church. You can see in their face, you perhaps hear in the words that they say, that something of the gospel has gripped them.

But they hold off. They keep it at a distance. They avoid coming to church again. They're aware of the implications. Jesus wasn't just claiming the throne of Judea, he was claiming the throne of the entire world.

God. If Jesus really was the Son of God, the promised Savior, the long awaited shepherd king, then we really do lose the right to be in charge of our own lives.

If he really is who he claims to be, if he really is who Matthew says he is, then we lose the right to be in charge of our own lives. And people will fight that. If you're a Christian here, you will have fought that.

[18 : 50] But it's also the case that the fiercest and most determined resistance comes from those who are most privileged. We read there in Matthew's account that all Jerusalem were troubled along with Herod.

They shouldn't have been. This was the king they were waiting for, a king long promised, a king that the prophets announced centuries beforehand.

This is one they were waiting for. This was a king they had knowledge of, they were to expect. But as we know through the rest of the New Testament, it was those who should have responded first, those most privileged, Jesus' own people that rejected him first.

And that is often the pattern, isn't it? As a nation, we have enjoyed greater gospel privileges than probably any other nation in the history of the world.

For centuries, we've had the Bible in our own language. We've had national churches, great freedoms to proclaim the gospel. But look around.

[20 : 03] Generally speaking, church membership is in decline. Secularism on the rise. And this is particular to the Christian West.

In almost every other area of the world, religion is on the rise, Christianity is on the rise, and set to grow for the foreseeable future. We who have been most privileged are now most resistant.

It's a sobering reality, isn't it? It's a sobering warning to our generation. but it's often those who are most privileged that are most hardened. But that's not the only response that we see in our passage.

Not only do we see opposition from those who should have known better, we see lastly that Jesus' birth produces worship from Gentile Magi. We see here the joyful reception from those you wouldn't expect.

these wise men come from absolutely nowhere. All we're told is that they come from the east. We don't know what country. And Matthew couldn't be clearer.

[21 : 13] These are Gentiles. These are not Jews. These are not the people of Israel. They haven't been heirs to the privileges of God's revelation through the prophets. And yet here they are, having traveled some considerable distance.

They've come to pay homage to Jesus, to the king of the Jews. It is the Gentiles, rather than the Jews, who are depicted as coming to the Christ in this passage.

Just look at their reaction to discovering where Jesus was to be found. Look at verse 10. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

That is perhaps to understate it. They were deliriously happy. Their long journey was now at an end. The one they had sought, they had found. And as soon as they see Jesus, they fall down and worship him.

They offer him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Gifts fit for a king. Because they knew, better than his own people, that Jesus was a king.

[22 : 22] The long promised king of David's line. The long promised shepherd king. king. And what a joyful reception they gave to him, those gentile wise men.

And it points us, doesn't it, to the universal gospel. Jesus is the king of the universe. And he calls all people in all places to bow and worship him.

he calls you today. No matter who you are, no matter your background, no one is too far gone, no one too insignificant.

We don't even know the name of the country these men were from, and yet they heard something. They came, they bowed, and worshipped Jesus.

And so often that is how God works, calling those you'd least expect. Just flick back to the start of Matthew's gospel. Look at Jesus' family tree.

[23 : 28] If you were in church on Sunday a few weeks ago, you would have heard Terry McCutcheon preaching on the Christmas family tree there. And we see there, in that list of names, people that you would never expect.

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth. God calls to himself and uses for his purposes all sorts of people. And isn't it the case that so often we see the joyful reception of Jesus from those you'd least expect?

Perhaps you've written off friends, family, yourself even. Well, don't. He calls even you.

So then, two responses to God's long-promised sovereign shepherd. Opposition is ultimately fruitless.

Herod's plans are thwarted, as we'll see next week, as will all the plans of those who determinedly resist Jesus as king. How foolish Herod was.

[24 : 41] He was a pretend king who tried to resist the king of the entire universe. How futile. And so do those today who reject Christ as king.

It is ultimately futile because he is on the throne even now. And he will return one day to claim his kingdom. And on that day, every knee will bow.

Every knee will have to confess that he is the king. And he is coming in judgment. To reject him is futile and foolish.

And so we're to turn now. Turn to him and fling yourself upon him for mercy. But for those who genuinely seek, for those who genuinely seek and find him, they will find him.

The wise men from the east are able to return home, having searched for and found and worshipped the king they sought. They joyfully received Jesus, the king, and they worshipped him.

[25 : 53] So will you joyfully receive Jesus as king? God's God's God's promised sovereign shepherd has come, and he comes to rule his world.

Will you worship him? Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your word.

We thank you for these words recounting the events of the early days of Jesus' life. And Lord, we see in his birth a great fulfillment of all those promises, and particularly the promises of your shepherd king who would come to rule once and for all your people.

And so, as we see your king, might we joyfully receive him, and with many others across the world, sing praises to our king, because he is good, and because he has come to rescue his people, to rule over them with great grace and mercy and love.

So, please help us, Lord, to respond to him and to joyfully worship him. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[27 : 46] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.