

HARD KNOCKS: When Your Throne Is Threatened

A Study of Matthew 2:1-12

Characteristic of Completeness: Humility/Submission

Big Idea: How will you crown Him: with the thorns or the throne?

Related Scriptures: Matthew 16:24-25; 27:11, 29, 42; Luke 1:30-33; 23:2;

John 14:15; 15:14; 18:33-37; 19:12, 15, 19-22; 1 Corinthians 15:25; 1 Timothy 6:13-16

Introduction:

- A. Jesus seems like such a nice guy to those who don't know Him well. They don't understand what a threat Jesus is. Or maybe they do.

You see many people really like some things Jesus had to say and what He stood for: love, peace, humility, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, grace, generosity, serving others. These are noble endearing, non-threatening qualities. I suppose these qualities are what prompt many people to say, "I really embrace what Jesus taught and modeled. He was a great teacher. A true moralist. A profound philosopher. An ambassador for peace and goodwill. But I don't believe He was God or a Savior or anything."

Only one problem. When you get to know all that Jesus said, He doesn't leave much room for this kind of thinking. One pervasive claim spoils the wonderful-teacher-moralist-philosopher-ambassador image. He claims to be King. Not just any king, but the capital "K" king. The Son of God. The King of the Jews. The Messiah. The King of kings and Lord of lords. What good teacher makes such a claim if it's not true?

Commensurate with His kingly claim, He exercises His royal authority, issuing commands and expecting obedience. For example, in ► John 14:15, Jesus says,

^{NAU} John 14:15 "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."

Then in ► John 15:14, He says,

^{NAU} John 15:14 "You are My friends if you do what I command you."

If you think about it, normal folks don't say these kinds of things. It's threatening.

- B. In fact, ► this whole king deal is what eventually got Jesus crucified. As I traced through the last days of Jesus on earth in preparation for this sermon, I was struck by the centrality and controversy of His kingship.
1. The Jewish chief priests and scribes brought Jesus before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate and accused Jesus of making Himself out to be a king. Luke ► 23:2 records,

^{NAU} Luke 23:2 And they began to accuse Him, saying, “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.”

2. The priests and scribes cornered Pilate with their logic. According to ► John 19:12, the Jews cried out to Pilate,

^{NAU} John 19:12 . . . “If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out *to be* a king opposes Caesar.”

3. So, according to ► John 18:33 and following, Pilate questioned Jesus:

^{NAU} John 18:33 . . . “Are You the King of the Jews?” ► 34 Jesus answered, “Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?” ► 35 Pilate answered, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?” ► 36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.” ► 37 Therefore Pilate said to Him, “So You are a king?” ► Jesus answered, “You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. . . .”

4. According to ► John 19:15, the chief priests cried out to Pilate:

^{NAU} John 19:15 . . . “Away with *Him*, away with *Him*, crucify Him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.”

5. Once sentenced to flogging and crucifixion, Jesus was mocked all the way to His death for claiming to be King.

- a. The Roman soldiers mocked His kingship. In ► Matthew 27:29, we are told:

^{NAU} Matthew 27:29 And after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!”

- b. Pilate mocked His kingship. John ► 19:19 tells us:

^{NAU} John 19:19 Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It was written, “JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

- c. And the people mocked His kingship. According to ► Matthew 27:42, they said:

^{NAU} Matthew 27:42 “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him.”

- C. Christ’s ► kingship continues to be a watershed issue today. Who will rule your life? Who has the right to rule? Who is really calling the shots?

Just because you may be a believer in Jesus doesn’t mean the issue of kingship is resolved. In fact, it’s my biggest ongoing struggle: Who will rule my life today?

I have a confession to make: I like to be king. I don’t want to relinquish my throne. I fancy myself as being in control of my own life. I like to call the shots, to be at the helm, to be in charge. I don’t really want to surrender to some other authority.

And so, as a believer in Jesus, every moment of every day, I’m faced with a decision: How will I crown Jesus? How will I crown Him: with the thorns or the throne?

Sometimes I crown Him with my throne. That is, I humbly surrender to Christ’s kingship. I listen to what He says to me through prayer and the Scriptures, and come under His authority. I obey. I follow. I apply. I sacrifice. I serve Him.

Other times, I crown Him with my thorns—the same kind of crown of thorns the Roman soldiers gave Him. I reject Him as King. I keep my throne. I can try to sugarcoat it with some nice-sounding rationalizations. Like, I’m busy. Or, I’m in season of life where I just can’t. Or, I’m doing all right on my own. Or, I’m a pretty good person, so why do I need to surrender?

But whether or not the thorns are in a pretty arrangement—whether they’re polite or belligerent—the message is exactly the same: I’m not relinquishing my throne. And if I do not give Jesus the throne of my life, by definition, I give Him the thorns of my rejection.

In ► Matthew 16:24, Jesus says,

^{NAU} Matthew 16:24 . . . “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.

To deny myself is to surrender my throne, to abandon my self-willed control. To take up my cross is to crucify my royal, arrogant, self-king complex, so I can follow the real King.

- D. The big idea of my message this morning comes in the form of a question I keep asking ► myself: How will you crown Him: with the thorns or the throne? Who will rule your life? Who has the right to rule? Who is really calling the shots?

Our Characteristic of Completeness for the week is ► Humility and Submission.

In our study through the gospel of Matthew, we come today to the story of ► three parties distinguished by how they crowned Jesus. We're going to look at each of the three like we look in a mirror: to see ourselves and perhaps put in place some things that are out of order. The text is Matthew 2:1-12. Jesus is just an infant. He can't even walk or talk, and yet, already His kingship creates a stir. Already, some crown him with the thorns; others, with the throne.

- I. Let's begin with ► the first party, the first group to crown Jesus.

- A. The story begins to unfold in ► Verses 1. It says,

^{NAU} Matthew 2:1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem . . .

1. This tells us something about the time when all this happened.
 - a. It happened "after Jesus was born." Scholars have estimated that Jesus was born in the winter of 5 B.C.¹
 - b. It also happened "in the days of Herod the king." Historians generally believe that this Herod the king died in the spring of 4 B.C.² So, the appearance of the magi probably occurred sometime between the birth of Jesus in the winter of 5 B.C. and the death of Herod in the spring of 4 B.C.
2. We are also introduced to the first group who crowned Jesus: ► the magi.
 - a. The term, "magi" is the plural form of the word, "magus." The Greek word used in Matthew describes, "a wise man and priest, who

¹ Johnston M. Cheney and Stanley Ellisen, *Jesus Christ: The Greatest Life Ever Lived*, (Eugene, OR: Paradise Publishing, 1999), 26; Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), adapted by Wayne House, *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 104; Kem Oberholtzer, class notes, Western Seminary, "Prophets to Gospels."

² Hoehner, adapted by House, 104.

was expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various other occult arts.”³ This dispels the traditional notion that the magi were kings. They most likely were not kings, but rather, political astrologers often consulted by kings.

- b. Scholars believe that the magi of our text were likely from Babylon.⁴ Probably Gentiles.⁵ Magi were common political figures in Persia and Babylon.⁶ In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word used for “magi” in our text is also used in the book of Daniel⁷ to describe the magicians and conjurers who were among the advisors to the king of Babylon.
- c. It is interesting that the Old Testament takes a dim view of astrology and astrologers.⁸ And yet, astrology and astrologers were commonly respected by the people in the days of Herod.⁹

B. As recorded in ► Verse 2, the magi say some surprising things:

^{NAU} Matthew 2:2 “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”

- 1. This verse raises a number of questions—How did they know and what about the star?—which I don’t intend to explore today. But one thing seems quite clear. The magi did not come to see the newborn nice guy. Or the newborn moralist. Or the newborn philosopher. Or the newborn mascot for peace and goodwill toward men. They came to see the newborn King. They got that straight. The word used for “king” describes the possessor of the highest office, a ruler who has unquestioned authority.¹⁰
- 2. And more than that, they came to worship Him, to crown Him with the throne of their lives, to surrender to His authority.

³ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “μάγος,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

⁴ D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1984), 85; Stuart K. Weber, “Matthew,” *The Holman New Testament Commentary*, Max Anders ed., vol. 1, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 20.

⁵ Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., “Matthew,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (USA: Victor Books, 1983), 20.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Daniel 1:20; 2:10.

⁸ Deuteronomy 18:11; cf. Isaiah 2:6; 47:11-15; Isaiah 47:13-15; Daniel 1:20; 2:27; 4:7; 5:7; Jeremiah 10:1-2.

⁹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, 2d ed., The Daily Bible Study Series, (Edinburg, Scotland: The Saint Andrew Press, 1958), 17.

¹⁰ BDAG, s.v. “βασιλεύς.”

3. And more than that, they traveled far, they went out of their way, they interrupted their lives, they suspended their daily demands just to be in the worshipful presence of the King.
4. And more than that, they're not professional God people. They're not religious. They're not choir boys. They're pagan astrologers. And as I said, God is not into astrology; He forbids it. So we can be confident that God didn't reveal Himself to the magi because He was real happy with what they were doing. The magi are distinguished by their response to the King, not their past.

Of the three examples from our story, the magi were the least informed when it comes to Jesus. They didn't have a Jewish heritage. They weren't experts in the Hebrew Scriptures. With a heathen background in politics, astrology, and the occult, they come to Jesus to surrender themselves before Him. If the magi can do it, anybody can.

- C. Beginning in ► Verse 9, we get an even clearer view of their submission. They encounter king Herod and then we are told:

^{NAU} Matthew 2:9 After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over *the place* where the Child was. ► 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The magi worshiped Jesus. Notice all the ways this is shown. “They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” “They fell to the ground.” “They worshiped Him.” “They presented to Him gifts.”

Frankincense is a resin extracted from trees and burned as fragrant incense.¹¹ Myrrh is an aromatic oil. It was used for embalming; it was used as a perfume; it was even mixed with wine to kick it up a notch.¹² All three gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—were quite expensive.¹³ The magi gave what they had in honor of the King.

- D. Furthermore, these magi listened to and obeyed the voice of the Lord. Verse ► 12 tells us:

^{NAU} Matthew 2:12 And having been warned *by God* in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

¹¹ *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “frankincense.”

¹² *Easton's*, s.v. “myrrh;” cf. Mark 15:23.

¹³ Carson, 89.

They listened to the Lord. And they obeyed.

The magi provide ► a model for what it looks like to surrender our throne to Jesus the King. They worship Him. They go far out of their way, interrupting their lives, suspending their daily demands just to be in the presence of the King. They give what they have to honor the King. They listen to Him. They obey Him.

Do you bear any resemblance to the magi? How will you crown Him: with the thorns or the throne?

II. Well, let's take a look at our ► second example. It's Herod, the Roman king of Judea.

A. Verse ► 3 of our text says,

^{NAU} Matthew 2:3 When Herod the king heard *this* [that the King of the Jews had been born], he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

This verse tells us a number of things.

1. First, king Herod felt threatened. After all, *he* is the king of the Jews. We know from history that Herod became increasingly ill and paranoid in his later years. In fits of rage and jealousy, he killed close associates, his wife, and two of his own sons. So, he doesn't want to hear about some newborn King who may overthrow him. He is troubled.
2. And all Jerusalem is troubled with him. Why?

When a murderous, mad king is troubled, it's perfectly understandable for those near him to be troubled as well.

But I suspect there's more to it. Perhaps word from the shepherds who first saw the baby Jesus had gotten out. If the magi from Babylon heard it, surely many in Jerusalem did, too. Bethlehem is only about five or six miles south of Jerusalem. But it had probably been months since the remarkable story from the shepherds first circulated.

Just when the rumors may have begun to die down, now, here come the magi to town looking for this newborn King. The magi were political figures representing the Persian Empire to the east, which included Babylon. The Persians were generally on friendly terms with the Jews dating back to the days of Daniel.¹⁴ But they were enemies of the Roman Empire to the west, in

¹⁴ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 4, s.v. "magi," by D.W. Jayne (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, 1976), 32-34.

which Jerusalem was then a border town.¹⁵ So Jerusalem was caught in the middle. The people of Jerusalem must have wondered why the magi would be interested in the story promulgated by some shepherds. Was there some political agenda? Was this a calculated attempt to provoke the Romans by insulting Herod, the king the Romans had put in place? Was this a precursor to some aggression?

B. Verse ► 4 says,

^{NAU} Matthew 2:4 Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he [Herod] inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

Apparently, Herod is familiar enough with prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures to know that a Messiah was expected. Herod was part Jewish and part Edomite.¹⁶

But he wanted to double check on the prophecy concerning the location of the Messiah's birth. So, he calls in the Old Testament experts: the chief priests and scribes.

Citing Micah 5:2 in the Old Testament, the chief priests and scribes tell Herod that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. Verses ► 5 and 6 say,

^{NAU} Matthew 2:5 They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: ► 6 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'"

C. Verses ► 7 and 8 continue:

^{NAU} Matthew 2:7 Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found *Him*, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him."

Herod is asking when the star had appeared so that he has some idea of how old this newborn King is. And, of course, he's not interested in worshipping Him; he wants to kill him. In fact, when the magi do not return to Herod, we learn later that Herod orders the murder of all children two and under in Bethlehem, based on the time the magi said they first saw the star.

Herod is not the least bit interested in giving Jesus the throne; he gives Him the thorns—thorns of antagonism. Herod wants to eliminate the threat.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Oberholtzer.

- D. Many ► follow in Herod's footsteps today. And, frankly, it's understandable: the newborn King is a threat. If Jesus is King, that means He has all authority, and we have zero. It means we are His subjects; we are accountable to Him; He makes the rules; we have no say.

When it comes to Jesus, I fought hardest just before I surrendered. I seemed to sense that my own kingship and my own little kingdom was at stake. I remember as a young man sitting around a campfire at Apache Lake after a day of water skiing. I was smoking my pipe and waxing philosophical; I was an intellectual then. I said, "If this world is God's game, where I am some mouse in a maze and God is expecting me to take a certain path to get the cheese, well I am *not* playing." That's just one way of saying, "When it comes to my life, I want to be king."

Within a year, after putting up my best fight, I believed in Jesus for eternal life. Ever since, I still cycle in and out of my selfish desire to be king again. But I know who the real King is.

My guess is that many of you know some Herods, but there aren't many Herods here. Herods don't generally go to church. There is probably a much greater representation of the third group to which we now turn.

- III. The ► third group is represented by the chief priests and scribes in our story. Remember, king Herod consulted them to confirm where the Messiah was to be born according to Old Testament prophecy. Herod knew who to ask. You see, the chief priests and scribes were experts in the Hebrew Scriptures. They were the religious elite.

Without much hesitation, I imagine, the chief priests and scribes respond with ► the quote from Micah 5:2:

^{NAU} Matthew 2:6 "AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL."

Interesting that the quote includes the term, ► "ruler." It describes the one in authority.¹⁷

The chief priests and scribes exhibit a number of distinguishing traits.

- A. First, they know the Bible, but they don't apply it. They can rattle off verses, but they don't seem to be relating them to their own lives. They know the Bible speaks of a ruler, but they're looking for a sugar-daddy ruler to expand their own kingdom, to rule out problems in their lives, like those problematic Romans. They're not really listening for what God has to say to them personally through the Scriptures. They're not looking to surrender. It's too threatening. They like the throne.

¹⁷ BDAG, s.v. "ἡγεμῶν."

You'd think *they* would be the ones seeking the Savior. You'd think *they* would be the ones tracking down the rumor from the shepherds. Instead, their response reflects a strange indifference. How ironic that the newborn King elicits strong responses from the pagans, both positive and negative, but these religious folks just ignore Him. Herod crowns Jesus with the thorns of overt antagonism; they crown Him with the thorns of passive aggression.

But their passivity has limits. They ignore the kingship of Christ as long as possible, but there comes a point when they've got to join Herod. Keep pushing for surrender and eventually they go off. Remember, it was the chief priests who said to Pilate, "Crucify Him. . . . We have no king but Caesar."¹⁸

- B. The religious folks—the chief priests and scribes—are the opposite of the magi. The magi are pagans; the religious folks have got religion. The magi worship Jesus; the religious folks go through the religious motions trying to make themselves feel better, ignoring Jesus. The magi go far out of their way, interrupting their lives, suspending their daily demands just to be in the presence of the King; the religious folks are caught up in their own presence, their own agenda. The magi give what they have to honor the King; the religious folks are looking to advance their own little kingdom. The magi listen to the Lord and obey Him; the religious folks listen to themselves talk and perfect their self-sovereignty.
- C. And what about you? Which of ► the three parties in our story describes you best right now? The magi? Herod? Or the priests and scribes? How will you crown Jesus: with the thorns or the throne?

I have a suggestion. You may have noticed that we talk a lot of applying Scripture to our lives at Moon Valley. Application is a big deal to us. And sometimes I suspect people get the impression that maybe the process of taking a biblical text and drawing a principle and making personal application is a unique technique of some kind. It's not. Here's what application is: It's simply surrendering to the kingship of Jesus Christ. That's all it is. Applying the Bible to our lives is simply the way we become less like the priests and scribes and more like the magi. The magi didn't know much, but they applied what they knew. Application is simply obedience. Application is surrender. Application crowns Jesus with the throne. The alternative is thorns.

And so, as an act of surrender, as act of crowning Jesus with the throne, I invite you to join me this week, to go far out of your way, to interrupt your life, to suspend your daily demands, to quiet yourself in the presence of the King, and listen to what He has to say to you in the Bible. To apply it. To obey.

¹⁸ John 19:15.

When the priests and scribes were asked where the King was to be born according to the Scriptures, they had a ready answer. But they had no answer for the more important question: Where does the King want to work in your life right now?