

## Look to the Skies

From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”

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### Introduction

When I was around 16 years old, I had had the privilege of attending a Summer arts camp for high school students. The camp was held on the campus of Bucknell University in central Pennsylvania. We attended the camp for 6 weeks. The instructors kept us very busy, but we also had occasional free time.



*Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA*

One thing I enjoyed doing when I was that age was climbing trees. Bucknell University was founded in 1846, so by the time I got there it had plenty of very old, very sturdy trees that were perfect for climbing.

One evening after dinner, I decided to climb up a big maple tree next to my dorm. A good friend of mine wandered by, so I invited him to join me. We sat up in the tree for a while, and one of us noticed that the streetlamps had come on below us. This created a pool of light below us that didn't reach up into the tree.

Before I get too far into this story, let me mention to all the young people in the audience that there are ways to spend your free time that are much more profitable than what I'm about to describe. The young people in my ministry are often surprised to find out that I was young once too. I had what I call my “BC” period -That's the time “before I met Christ”. So, let's just say that I'm not encouraging you to repeat everything that I got into.



*Bucknell campus at night*

Back to the story...

There is a funny quality with the physics of light and the way that it interacts with the human eye. If you have a pool of light, and you're outside the pool of light, you can look at the area covered by the pool of light and see things there. You can see things around you pretty well.

However, things (and people) in the pool of light can't see you - to them, you're just a shadow.

My friend and I decided to test this. When an unsuspecting fellow student wandered into the pool of light, we looked down and said, "Hey, dummy!" This got the person's attention. They heard the sound of someone talking to them, but something followed that we in the tree found interesting: *They couldn't tell where the sound came from.*

The first person we did this to looked to the left. They then looked to the right. They looked behind them. They spun around. They looked really confused. My friend and I up in the tree found this was very entertaining. Somehow, we suppressed the urge to giggle. After a while, the person gave up and continued walking, although they had a very suspicious look on their face and kept looking around.

We did this a few more times. Each time, we got similar results. In one case, the person checked the bushes along the walk to see if anyone was hiding in there. *But, no one looked up.* That was, until, we lost our discipline and let out a laugh. When given a second sound, the person looked up. It turns out we were not quite as well hidden as we thought. The person couldn't tell who we were, but our location was no longer a secret.

This person was clever. He looked up and said, "You know, you're not supposed to be up there - I think I might report you." Then, he went on. This got us thinking. Was he really going to report us? If he did, would the camp counselors really have nothing better to do than look in all the trees for mischievous campers? We considered the possibilities and decided that it was time to climb down. After doing that, we sought out some more, shall we say, profitable activities.

I learned something that night. I think that my experience was symbolic of how many people go through life. A lot of people go through life very absorbed in what's directly around them. They don't pay attention to things outside of a very narrow focus unless they have some reason to do so. Or, unless someone tells them. For example, I went to a firework display once where an announcer talked for a bit, and then said, "We're ready to begin - feast your eyes to the skies". So, of course, everyone looked up. That's where you expect fireworks to be. But, unless we have a reason, unless we're told to do so, we keep our gaze focused on things around us. We don't, so to speak, look up.

That's a shame, because the Bible sometimes uses the idea of looking up as a symbolic action of seeking God. In Psalm 121 it says:

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the mountains—  
where does my help come from?
- 2 My help comes from the Lord,  
the Maker of heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:1-2)

In a later Psalm, we read:

1 I lift up my eyes to you, to you who sit enthroned in heaven. (Psalm 123:1)

We're in our series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe". Today, our message is, "Look to the Skies". We're going to meet some people today who did just that. They looked to the skies. We're going to discover why it's a good idea for us to follow their example.

Let's read in Matthew:

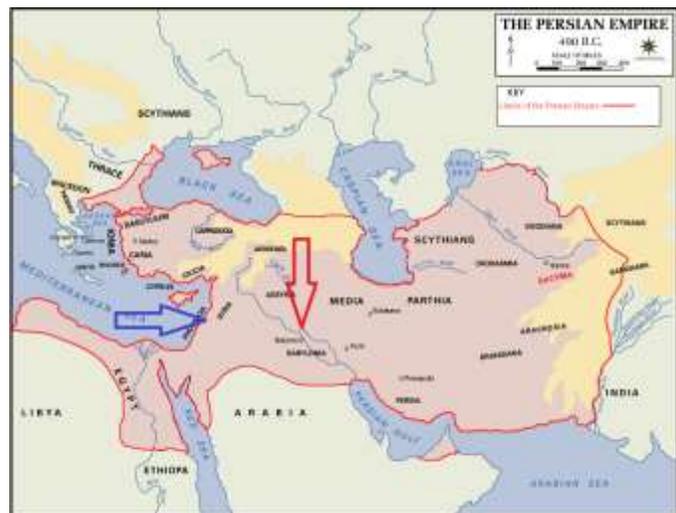
1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." (Matthew 2:1-2)

What's happening here? In chapter 1, Matthew started with a genealogy. We learned that one thing Matthew wants to point out early in his book is the fact that Jesus was qualified to be the king of Israel. The genealogy showed us that Jesus was qualified because he was descended from Abraham and David. Next, Matthew describes the birth of Jesus. In particular, he talked about the birth of Jesus from the perspective of Joseph, the man who took responsibility for taking care of Jesus during his childhood. There, we learned that Jesus was qualified to be a great king because he was said to be a great king by a supernatural being, an angel. Now, we're presented with a highly unusual event. Jesus receives a visit from some men called "the Magi". Among the things we'll learn through this story is that there is something about this visit that contributes to Jesus' qualifications for royalty.

### Who were the Magi?

Who were these men, and why did they come to visit Jesus? Today, we have lots of historical records about the Magi from archeology. The term "Magi" referred to a group of religious leaders from Babylon and Persia. This is what we today call these territories "Iraq" and "Iran".

We first meet the ancestors of the Magi in the book of Daniel, the second chapter. We won't look at the whole story but let me hit the high points. The Hebrew people were invaded by the king of Babylon, king Nebuchadnezzar in the year 597 B.C. God



*The Persian Empire, 490 B.C.*

told the Jewish people that they should surrender; that he was using Babylon to judge their sin. Much of the population was deported and taken to Babylon. Daniel was a young Jewish man who was with those people. If you look at the map, you'll see a blue arrow pointing at Jerusalem, and a red arrow pointing at Babylon. Once in Babylon, Daniel distinguished himself as a young man having talent that was useful to the King.

One day, King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream. Among his advisors, the king had a group called, "the wise men". They were learned men, but they were also thought to have magical powers. They were diviners and magicians, along with being knowledgeable about world affairs and history. Normally, the king would call on these men to interpret his dream.

*For reasons we don't know, the king was discontent with these men.* The normal pattern would be:

1. The king has a dream
2. The king tells his dreams to this magical group.
3. They interpret the dream.

On this occasion though, Nebuchadnezzar decided to shake things up. He told these men that he would not tell them his dream. If they were so magical, they should tell *him* what his dream was. Then, he would believe them. As it turns out, the king's inclinations were right. His "magical men" weren't very magical at all. His "wise men" weren't very wise. No one could tell him anything.

At this point, Nebuchadnezzar comes to feel that he has been fooled by these men for a long time. The penalty for fooling the king: Death! All the wise men of the king's court were sentenced to execution. This would have included Daniel, not because he agreed with the methods of these men, but because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was lumped in with the others.

Daniel prays, and God gives him a great miracle: Daniel is told both the dream and its interpretation. So, Daniel holds a rare position of power. He knows the king wants to execute all the "wise men". He has a way out for himself and his friends. He could use his newly acquired power to wipe out all his competition. But here's a twist: Daniel doesn't take advantage of his power to wipe out his competition. Instead, he protects them. Here's what he says:

Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him." (Daniel 2:24)

So, Daniel was taken to the king, where he explains both the dream and its interpretation. He is careful to say that he is doing this by the power of his God, so that God will get all the credit.

The king realizes that he has been treated to a rare and awesome display of supernatural power. Here's how Nebuchadnezzar responds:

The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery." Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. (Daniel 2: 47-48)

Look again at that last line: *Daniel was put in charge of all the wise men*. So, rather than use his power to wipe out all these men, Daniel showed them mercy. Because he showed mercy, he was put in a position of great power and influence over these men. From this point forward, they had to listen to Daniel. And why wouldn't they? He saved their lives!

Daniel spent a long time in Babylon. He wasn't always successful at getting the wise men to listen to him. Some of them continued in their old ways

Later, during Daniel's lifetime, Babylon was invaded and conquered by the Persians. That's why the whole region became known as the Persian empire, as you saw in our map above. Daniel survived that transition of power. He even rose to have great influence over the leaders of that regime. The wise men of Babylon, and now of Persia, watched all this.

One day, Daniel died. He did so after leaving an incredible legacy among these people who later became known as the "Magi".

Tragically, great legacies can be overlooked. After Daniel died, others came along and introduced what we can only call corruptions into the thought of the Magi. One of those people who brought corruption was a man named Zoroaster.

On the one hand, Zoroaster believed in one true God. That was good. On the other hand, Zoroaster believed that one of the ways to discern the will of God was to use Astrology. Astrology involves tracking the positions of stars and planets with the hope that you can see the future. Here's an important note: *The Bible looks on this dimly*. Recall, some of the wise men didn't listen to Daniel. Those men liked Astrology, too. So, the religion of Zoroastrianism was born. It eventually became the dominant religion of Persia.



Zoroaster

So, we've learned a lot about the history Magi. We need to add just two more things before we can move on. First, during their whole history, the Magi were important. These were people who advised kings. At times, they were used as dignitaries who visited other countries. When we meet the Magi in Matthew 2, it's in the context of a visit to

the political king of Israel, Herod. These were men who could expect a king to want to see them.

Let's illustrate this. If I were to ask if you have personally spent significant time with the Governor of your state, how would you respond? Me, either. Now, if you were the Governor of Pennsylvania, or even Lieutenant Governor, you could call the Governor of New Jersey and expect him to receive your call. If you were one of those people, and you visited, you could expect the Governor to make time in his calendar.

So, one day, King Herod is told, "Magi from the East are here". He responds by inviting them in.

Next, the context of the day was worldly. Centuries before the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, great thinkers, people who were advisors to kings, looked to the Greek philosophers for wisdom. One of those voices was Socrates. Socrates lived in Greece 400 years before the time of Christ. He was a man who believed that people didn't need anything supernatural to live. All you needed was to look at the world around you. If you had reason, philosophy, and mathematics, you could work your way to ultimate truth. To use our symbolic way of thinking, Socrates did not believe that you needed to look up. A lot of people in the ancient world agreed with Socrates. *A lot of people agree today.*



*Socrates, Fifth Century B.C.*

Compare this to the Magi. Being learned men, they could very well have heard of Socrates. If they didn't know about Socrates, there were plenty of thinkers like him. But, unlike Socrates and his followers, the Magi clearly were not satisfied with the things of this world. They knew that people could never find all the answers here on this earth. So, the Magi looked up. They looked to the skies.

Remember, their faith had become corrupt. When they looked to the skies, they were using Astrology. This is where we learn some amazing things about God. Our God is complex. He is merciful. Sometimes we must simply leave his decisions to him. Even though the Magi were looking to the skies the wrong way, God blessed them. Perhaps he blessed them because in their hearts they were looking for the right thing. Perhaps he remembered that some of the wise men of Babylon listened to Daniel 600 years before. We don't know. But he blessed them with a supernatural sign; an amazing object that they called "the star".

When the Magi saw that star, they knew they were looking at something of incredible importance. So, they packed their things and set out on a journey from Persia to Israel. We don't know their exact starting point, but they likely travelled hundreds of miles across desert. The trip took weeks, if not months.

So, let's review what we know about the Magi. Their roots go back at least as far as the time of Daniel in Babylon, six centuries. They may have remembered Daniel and his teachings.

Their ancestors had been exposed through Daniel to belief in the one true God of the Hebrew people. But their faith had been corrupted. Their memory of Daniel had become distant. At the time of Christ, much of the world was already becoming secular, following teachers like Socrates. He taught that all the answers to everything were found here on earth. But the Magi weren't content with this earth. *They looked to the skies*. When they did, God blessed them.

Let's read on in Matthew.

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.  
(Matthew 2:3)

So, here are the Magi. They saw something that really excited them. It motivated them to travel hundreds of miles across desert. They get to their destination, and they find out that nobody there has any idea what's going on. In fact, far from being excited, everyone there is upset.

Add to the problem, the Magi apparently were blinded by their excitement. They secure a visit to the home of the political King of Israel. They walk into his courts. There's a crowd of all the important people of Jerusalem. Anyone who matters is there. Because he's receiving foreign dignitaries, Herod is likely sitting on a big throne, wearing his royal robes and crown. The Magi say, "Hey, we're looking for the one born king of the Jews".

Sometimes people can be "wise" without being very smart. The Magi are talking to someone who thinks *he's* the king. The reply they get is, "What?" The Magi may have quietly looked at each other and said, "oops".

Here's why king Herod was likely disturbed. You may have noticed that I've been referring to him as the political king of Israel. King Herod was not born king of the Jews. He was not a descendant of David, as the ancient prophecies foretold. He wasn't even Jewish. He was from the land of Edom to the south. King Herod was a political opportunist who was in the right place at the right time. He was appointed king by the Romans because he got along with them very well - Not because he had any loyalty to the people of Israel.

King Herod was also a very good example of someone who saw no need to look to the skies. To his credit, he was an intelligent and talented man. Herod was chosen by Rome because he was a good military leader. He was seen by the Romans as someone who could keep order in the conquered land of Israel. He also knew how to manage budgets. He undertook some important and very expensive building projects during his day. His life involved big budgets, big projects, and political force. In his mind, he could find everything he needed around him.

Herod was also very evil. We'll learn how evil in our next session. For now, we'll just say he had a bad habit of killing anyone who threatened him. The Romans didn't care as long as he kept the peace, but he was hated by the population. All of this is why Herod was not interested in hearing about someone who was born the rightful king of Israel. To him, this was very bad news. How does he respond?

4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." (Matthew 2:4-6)

One of the themes that Matthew presents is the way God shows his power and his faithfulness through fulfilled prophecy. Matthew shares one of those prophecies here. This is from the prophet Micah, who lived over seven centuries before Christ. He talks about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem, exactly where Jesus was born. Once again, God can predict something 700 years in advance, and it comes true. That requires great power, and great faithfulness.

Herod might have noticed that the prophecy used the word "shepherd" when referring to the way that the great king would deal with the people of Israel. Herod was very heavy handed and oppressive. The rightful king would be gentle and caring, like a shepherd watching over his flock. How does Herod react to this wonderful sign that God was at work in his kingdom?

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." (Matthew 2:7-8)

Those of you who looked ahead know that Herod isn't interested in worshipping the newborn king. He wants the newborn king dead. Herod figures that he can fool the Magi into doing his detective work for him.

Consider the tragedy here. Here's Herod, a man who has all the resources of a King. He lives in the heart of a nation founded to represent God. He has access to great teachers of the Hebrew Scriptures. They all come whenever he calls them. Does that make Herod honor God? No. He only sees the world around him. His reliance on money and political power have rendered him incapable of "looking up". This "newborn king" is only a threat to Herod's power. So, Herod plots to kill him.

Let's read on:

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:9-11)

So, once again, the Magi are rewarded for looking to the skies. The star reappears.

People like to speculate on what this object was. Was it a comet? Was it planets whose orbit crossed up in space, causing a bright light? Whatever it was, it wasn't way up in space like those objects. This star was something that could guide people up and down hills and around the curvy roads that surround Jerusalem. It eventually sat close enough to one house that anyone who cared would know exactly where the star was leading. This was not some astronomical coincidence. This was yet one more display of supernatural power surrounding the life of Christ.

The wise men know it. We're told that they were overjoyed. Some translations say, "rejoiced with exceeding great joy". That's because the term that Matthew uses has no exact English equivalent. He just keeps adding modifiers to the word for Joy. It's like us saying, "They had awesome, gigantic, incredible, unbelievable joy." In other words, they were really happy.

Then, the Magi reach their goal. They've travelled for at least weeks, if not months to get here. What did they see? The house of a poor family. They see a small child being held by his mother.

Remember, these are important men. They hang around with kings. *And when they see Jesus, they bow down and worship.* There is some discussion as to whether the original Greek word should be translated as "worship", or just "pay homage". "Worship" would indicate that they considered the baby to be divine. "Pay Homage" would indicate they knew they were beholding a king. Some say the context of Matthew would lean towards the first interpretation. Perhaps the Magi weren't quite sure what they were seeing, but whatever it was, it was incredibly important.

They then presented gifts worthy of a king. Gold, along with the rare and expensive perfumes: myrrh and frankincense. Some say the gifts represent different aspects of the work of Jesus: His royalty, his human life, and his death. Others say, "let's not get ahead of ourselves". These were clearly gifts that royalty would give to other royalty. The Magi knew that this was a great king, no matter what the surroundings were. And because of the star, they knew that it was not a normal king.

So, Jesus was qualified to be king by his ancestry. He was qualified by the supernatural voices of angels. Now, he is shown to be qualified by political experts who know a great king when they see one.

We'll close in a minute but let me make a quick observation. Since we began our study of Matthew, we've run into situations where we've had to point out disagreements with other groups. As always, I like to point out that we don't spend all our time bashing others. However, sometimes differences are important, and they must be identified. Here's another one of those situations. Many of our Catholic friends refer to Mary as "The Queen of Heaven". We respectfully, but powerfully disagree.

Look at the actions of the Magi:

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:11)

The Magi see Jesus, along with Mary. Whom do they worship? Jesus. To whom do they present their gifts? They present their gifts to Jesus. The Greek language of the original text has words to distinguish people involved in an action: words like him, her, and them. The word here is “him”. The Magi worship Jesus, **not** Jesus **and** Mary. They give gifts to Jesus, **not** Jesus **and** Mary. There is no “them” here. There is no indication that the Magi give the same level of importance to Mary that they give to Jesus. Catholicism says Mary is the Queen of heaven. The Magi knew better.

Let’s read the end of the story:

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matthew 2:12)

The story closes with yet one more supernatural act. The men who looked to the skies are blessed once again. They’re warned in a dream not to trust Herod. And they obey - They run as fast as they can in the opposite direction and return to the safety of their home. Who knows? After killing Jesus, Herod might have taken out the Magi next. God shows these men incredible mercy.

Let’s pull this all together.

## Conclusion

So, we met some men, the Magi, who weren’t content to live their lives looking only at the things of this world. *They looked to the skies.* And God blessed them. Today, the idea of looking to the skies is symbolic. It’s our way of saying that this earth is not our final home. We don’t need to imagine that the positions of the planets guide our future, as is thought with Astrology. We know that everything we need for life and Godliness can be found in God’s word the Bible. We know that the God of heaven listens to us when we pray. Later in the book of Matthew, Jesus will talk about something called, “The Kingdom of Heaven”: *The place for those who look up.*

We met some other men who didn’t see the need to do any of that. We saw Socrates, a man who believed that he could find everything he needed by looking around his world with reason, philosophy, and Mathematics. Today, there are lots of people like him. People who think that their list of degrees frees them from the need to look to God.

We saw Herod, a man of wealth and power. He lived in Jerusalem, the heart of the Hebrew faith. He was surrounded by the best teachers of Scripture in the world. And yet, he thought that all the answers he needed could be found around him. When the king of the universe appeared in Herod's backyard, he could only think of how to eliminate what he saw as a threat.

Again, there are many like Herod today. There are people whose bank accounts are full. They think they have power. So, they think they don't need to look up.

Let me share one final story from the Bible. It's the story of Stephen, a follower of Jesus Christ who was killed for his faith. As he stood before his executioners, here's what we read about him:

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:55-56)

Friends, one day, we all die. One that day, we will all look to the skies for one last time.

*What will you see on that day?*

When Stephen looked to the skies, he saw his risen Lord ready to receive him into glory. If you aren't certain of what you'll see on that day, would contact us? You can visit our web site to find out how: [www.TrinityTeaneck.org](http://www.TrinityTeaneck.org).

We live in a world that is much like the one I lived in when I was a teenager. We walk along in a kind of night, wandering in small pools of light that tempt us to keep our eyes down to the ground. But a voice calls to us. A voice from above, a voice from the heavens, a voice from the skies. It tells us to look up. Look up and see a God who looks down at us and asks us to receive his love. When you hear that voice, don't look to the left or the right. Know that the answers to your questions are not found on this earth.

Look to the skies.