

How Will You Respond To Jesus?

Matthew 2:1-8

We begin this morning with a brief consideration of the historicity of Jesus. You might ask why start there. I would suggest to you that an understanding of whether Jesus existed determines in large part how we will respond to Him and the claims in Scripture about Him. We'll see those responses in our text from **Matthew 2**. We'll also look briefly at Luke's account of Jesus's birth as well. How people respond in these passages to His birth is not any different than how people today respond to Him. Some respond with indignation. Some respond with indifference. Some respond with indecision. Some respond with interest. These responses determine if they will reject Him or receive Him.

Was there a real Jesus? If so, was He just an ordinary man or was He truly God come down in the flesh? If the Jews were looking for the Messiah, why did they miss all the obvious Old Testament signs? When He did arrive as a baby in Bethlehem, why was there so little response to the shepherd's news? Wasn't there even an inkling of curiosity?

The historicity of Jesus goes beyond the pages of Scripture. People may discount the Bible and claim it's nothing more than a bunch of stories, some of which are true while others are just nice stories with moral lessons or fanciful tales like a good sci-fi movie that is purely fictional. They can say the Bible is full of errors and contradictions and so disregard and disbelieve any assertion to the Bible's accuracy. Set the Bible aside for a moment and consider that even secular historians, and by that, I mean people who are not Christians, admit about the historicity of Jesus.

Bertrand Russell, philosopher and avowed atheist wrote the following in his essay "Why I Am Not a Christian": "Historically it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if He did we do not know anything about Him."

That is an extremely bold statement, when not many

knowledgeable people today would make such a claim especially in light of the historical records of ancient secular scholars. Many people certainly have questions about Him, but when it comes down to it, only a few people really think He didn't exist. Josh McDowell in his book *Evidence That Demands A Verdict* writes that "even the American revolutionary Thomas Paine, who held Christianity in utter contempt, did not question the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. While Paine believed that the biblical statements about Jesus' deity were mythological, he still held that Jesus actually lived. He said "[Jesus Christ] was a virtuous and an amiable man. The morality that he preached and practiced was of the most benevolent kind; and though similar systems of morality had been preached by Confucius, and by some of the Greek philosophers, many years before; by the Quakers since; and by many good men in all ages, it has not been exceeded by any."

The evidence of the historicity of Jesus is as obvious as that of Julius Caesar or Nebuchadnezzar or Napoleon.

Otto Betz states that "no serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus."

There are many non-Christian sources that speak of the historical Jesus and of the movement called Christianity that he began.

For example Cornelius Tacitus was a Roman historian who lived from A.D. 55-120. He has been called the greatest historian of ancient Rome. He wrote two volumes: *Annals* and *Histories*. *Annals* covered the period from Caesar Augustus's death in A.D. 14 to Nero in A.D. 68. *Histories* covers the death of Nero to Domitian in A.D. 96. Writing about the reign of Nero, he alludes to the crucifixion of Christ and to the existence of Christians in Rome.

Tacitus isn't the only ancient historian who holds to the view of an historical Jesus. There are other reputable men who made the same claim. Other historians like Thallus and Phlegon wrote about the darkness that covered the land during the crucifixion of Christ by explaining it away as a

natural phenomenon caused by a solar eclipse.

Those are just two examples, but the fact is that many ancient historians believed in and wrote about an historical Jesus.

Then there were Jewish historians who wrote about an historical Jesus, all be it, they did not hold Jesus, His followers, or their beliefs in a very positive light. The Talmud, which is the central text of Judaism and primary source of Jewish religious law and theology says: “It has been taught: on the eve of Passover they hanged Yeshu (which translates as Jesus). And an announcement went out, in front of him, for forty days (saying): ‘He is going to be stoned, because he practiced sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray. Anyone who knows anything in his favor, let him come and plead in his behalf.’ But, not having found anything in his favor, they hanged him on the eve of Passover.”

Jewish historian Flavius Josephus who lived between A.D. 37 to 100 A.D., wrote a statement that has been hotly contested among scholars. He wrote “Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure...He was the Christ, and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him.”

In a later writing, Josephus referred to James the brother of Jesus adding yet more credible evidence of an historical Jesus. Scholars since then have determined the genuineness of the accounts written by Josephus.

Now, let's bring back in the Bible. If scholars today are willing to look with confidence at the credibility of reputable non-Christian historians surrounding their writings and not ignore their claims about an historical Jesus, why are they unwilling to look at the Bible in the same way? Why will they consider as factual the historicity of such people as the

various kings and kingdoms mentioned in the Old Testament or that of Caesar Augustus or Pilate and yet say that Christ was not an historical figure? Even Luke in the opening verses of His gospel and then in Acts makes the statement that he did careful research to determine and write about the events surrounding the life of Christ and the years following about the early church. If anyone wanted to refute whether what he wrote was true, all they had to do was interview the same people. The fact remains that they tried to bury the truth and went so far as to pay off guards not to tell what really happened.

To admit that there was a real Jesus brings a person squarely into asking whether Jesus was just a man or was He truly God Himself in the flesh. They must then seriously consider the truth He taught, the life He lived, and the miracles He performed and then make a decision of believing or rejecting what is undeniable.

To deny even the historicity of Jesus is like saying stars don't exist or that there is no such thing as oceans or that gravity is a figment of the imagination.

Since the historicity of Jesus is factual, we are left to wonder then if He was just a man or waif He was truly who He claimed to be, God in the flesh? Josh McDowell points out the obvious by saying that if Jesus wasn't God, He deserves an Oscar.

Here's what C.S. Lewis wrote in his book *Mere Christianity*: “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Christ]: ‘I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim as God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse... You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon: or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord

and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

People who do not hold Jesus to be God in the flesh, look at the evidence and then make a decision based on their own bias because quite frankly they don't want Jesus to be Lord of their life. They don't want to admit that they need a Savior, something that Scripture repeatedly attests to, and that Jesus claimed for Himself. They are happy just holding Him out to be a mere man so that they don't have to deal with the commands He imposed or the sin they so readily enjoy. They want Him to be a lunatic who was deceived Himself about His own identity or they want Him to be a liar who set out to intentionally deceive others. **But then how do you account for both the miracles He performed and the morality He lived and taught?**

I am currently reading in my devotions a compilation of teachings by twelve early church fathers like John Chrysostom, Irenaeus of Lyons, Gregory the Theologian, Basil of Caesarea, Jerome, Augustine, and Athanasius the Great. One of the important doctrines they repeatedly defended wasn't just the historicity of Jesus, but the fact of his deity, that He was God in the flesh. A number of erroneous factions grew claiming that Jesus was only a man, but these men stood against such false teaching to defend His deity. As Paul wrote, if Jesus was just a man, then He is still in the grave and we are still dead in sin, doomed to an eternal destiny separated from God. **How will you respond to the claim that the Word was God and became flesh and that Word, referring to Jesus, came to be the light of the world so that all who receive Him by believing in His name will be made the children of God?**

At the end of the day, no matter how you look at the evidence, there are only two possible choices: you either reject Him or receive Him. Please turn in your Bible with me to **Matthew 2:1-8**.

Let's look first at those who reject Christ.

I. THOSE WHO REJECT CHRIST

Looking at our text around the birth of Christ, there are three basic responses to Christ regarding those who reject Him. The first response from our text comes from King Herod. It is the response of indignation.

A. The Response of Indignation – **Matthew 2:1-3, 7-8**

Knowing a little history about Herod helps us understand why he felt threatened when the Magi marched into Jerusalem asking where they could find the baby who was born king of the Jews.

We read in **verse 3** that Herod was troubled and all Jerusalem with him. Let me say here that while they were both troubled, they were troubled for different reasons. The word **“troubled”** literally means to shake together or stir up as you would stir up or agitate water. It can mean to be unsettled or thrown into confusion. It can also mean to be frightened or terrified.

In **Mark 6** we have the account of Jesus walking on the water. It says in **verse 50** that when the disciples saw Him, they thought He was a ghost and were troubled.

In **Luke 1:12** when Zacharias saw the angel who had come to inform him that he and Elizabeth were going to have a child, he was troubled.

In **Luke 24:38** when Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room after His resurrection, Jesus asked them why they were troubled.

In **John 14:1, 27**, as Jesus was eating the Passover with His disciples the night before His crucifixion, He told them not to let their hearts be troubled.

Matthew wanted to convey that Herod and the people living in Jerusalem were frightened and terrified at the news about this newborn king.

Herod was terrified because this supposed king was a threat to his reign. Understand that when the Magi rode into town, there were more than three. We like to sing about the three kings who came bearing three gifts making the assumption that's all there

was who came from the east. In reality, no one really knows how many there were and with them would have come a contingent of soldiers. The 1,000-mile trek was dangerous because along the way there were any number of robbers waiting to waylay unsuspecting travelers. The precious gifts they bore would have been easy pickings if the number was small and they were unguarded. Their presence as royal representatives along with a large army would have terrified Herod.

One reason he was troubled is that the Magi were more than just scientists who studied the stars, they were also considered kingmakers. Riding into Jerusalem with an army of any size asking about a newborn king looked to Herod like they were picking a fight and naming a new king in his place.

Add to that the fact that earlier in his reign he had thrown the Parthians out of Palestine. The Magi were part of this empire that dates back to the Babylonian and Persian kingdoms during the time of Daniel. Like the Jewish zealots, they were looking for a strong king to lead them against Rome in order to take back land that had belonged to them. They thought that because Caesar Augustus was old and Tiberius had retired as the commander of the army, that Rome was vulnerable.

Herod had strong reason to be both suspicious and jealous of any would be king that threatened his position. He was ruthless and cruel. His father Antipater had been appointed as governor of Judea by Julius Caesar. Antipater then had his son Herod appointed as prefect of Galilee. In that role he stopped numerous Jewish guerilla bands. He then fled to Egypt when the Parthians invaded Palestine but went to Rome where Octavian and Antony declared him to be king of the Jews. He invaded Palestine in 39 B.C. and eventually drove the Parthians out to establish his kingdom.

A third reason for Herod to be troubled is that while Rome had declared him to be king, he was not of Jewish descent and had no legal right to the throne. He was not from Jacob's lineage, he was an Idumean, an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. Even though he had married a Jewish heiress to make him

more likeable by the Jews, he was not the rightful heir to the throne. Anyone who threatened his position as king was put to death. He had his wife and her mother murdered along with two sons. Five days before his own death, he had a third son killed. If that wasn't bad enough, he also arrested many of the leading citizens of Jerusalem and thrown in prison. He told his soldiers that when he died these people were also to be put to death. He knew that no one would mourn for him, so their death would ensure that there would be weeping in Jerusalem. But the greatest act of cruelty came with the news from the Magi who wanted to know where the king of the Jews was born. His fear of another king, even though he was an infant, fueled his hostility and indignation toward the possibility of being replaced unleashing the murder of baby boys two years and younger. No wonder he was troubled. His response was one of indignation. How sad to think that some respond to Jesus with utter hatred.

Because of Herod's cruel character, we can better understand why the people of Jerusalem were troubled, but for a different reason. They were terrified at what Herod would do in response to the news of a newborn king. They probably knew that it meant bloodshed of some kind and they were right.

There is a second response we see in our text. It is the response of indifference.

B. The Response of Indifference – Matthew 2:4-6; Luke 2:8-18

Indifference is a lack of interest or concern. You just don't care one way or the other. It's an attitude of apathy. That's the kind of response we get from the religious leaders here in Matthew and from the people in general in Bethlehem at the news shared by the shepherds the night that Jesus was born.

Here were religious leaders who knew all the Old Testament prophecies surrounding the Messiah, yet chose to do nothing. They were learned men who studied and taught the Scriptures, literally miles away from Him. Since Bethlehem wasn't that far from Jerusalem, they probably heard the news about the birth of Jesus and the stir it caused when the

shepherds joyfully told what they had experienced. After all, since it was a required taxation where people had to register at the location of their ancestral home, people from Jerusalem most likely were in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth and took the news back sharing it with friends and neighbors, whether they believed it or not.

It's also believed that the sheep being tended out on the Bethlehem hillside were destined as sacrifices in the Temple. So news would have made its way to the priests. **But did any of them travel to Bethlehem to see for themselves if what they heard was true?**

We aren't given any record in Scripture to indicate that religious leaders traveled to Bethlehem on the night of the birth or that when the Magi showed up in Jerusalem that religious leaders stopped what they were doing to go and inquire about the newborn king of the Jews; to ask the Magi about the signs they had seen in the star. They knew the Old Testament but ignored Balaam's prophecy in **Numbers 24:17 "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel"** a Messianic reference to Jesus. The coming deliverer of Israel would be like a star as we see Jesus say of Himself in **Revelation 22:16 "I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright morning star."** The scepter Balaam speaks about is the Messiah's royalty and the victory He would bring over the enemies of His people.

When Herod called the religious leaders to inquire about the birthplace of the king, they didn't even hesitate to give an answer. They knew the Scripture well enough to point Herod in the right direction.

But did any of them bother to go? Were any of them moved with awe and wonder at the possibility that the Old Testament prophecies were true and had at last been fulfilled? It tells me of their apathy and indifference. They were literally miles away from the Messiah and yet their indifference resulted in a refusal to go see Him for themselves. They had the right knowledge but the wrong response. He was close to them, but they were far away from Him.

The religious leaders weren't the only ones to show

indifference. Those who heard the news from the shepherds were as equally unconcerned about the coming of Jesus as the religious leaders. We read that they were amazed at the news, but we don't read that any of them dropped what they were doing to go and see for themselves in contrast to how the shepherds responded when they heard the news. You might expect that had others gone, they might have given up their room so that Mary and the baby would have been more comfortable rather than sleeping in a stable.

There are people today who remain indifferent. They are too busy with the mundane, the urgent, or their leisure to stop and consider that Jesus is who He claims to be – Christ and Savior. They're too busy with responsibilities. They're too wrapped up in their own lives. They're too overwhelmed with the pressures of life. They're too caught up in reaching their dreams. All the worries of their fleeting lives make them indifferent and apathetic to see that Jesus has come, the one who came to seek and save them. They may feign some interest during a holiday like Christmas or maybe Easter, but their interest is short lived due to their indifference. Their interest doesn't last. Even though they may know that Jesus is the answer to their quest, they would rather just shrug their shoulders in indifference and continue on their own path alone, than to believe that Jesus came to pay their ransom and receive eternal life. Many reject Jesus because they are indifferent.

There is a third response in our text. It is the response of indecision.

C. The Response of Indecision – Luke 2:18

Indecision is the inability to make a decision, to waver between two choices. It's not like indifference. Indifference doesn't care. Indecision just can't make up the mind. When Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal, the people were indecisive about who to serve. He told them to make up their minds – if God is God then serve Him or if Baal is god then serve Him. They waffled. They couldn't make up their minds. They were wishy-washy in their thinking. James would say

they were double minded.

When the shepherds announced the news of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, some were amazed but remained indifferent. Others were amazed but indecisive. Is this really the long-awaited Messiah? They didn't know for sure. They couldn't make up their minds. During His ministry years, some saw the miracles Jesus did while others heard Him teach but in spite of all the evidence, couldn't decide.

A person who is indecisive about whether Jesus is really who He claims to be, has made a decision to reject Him.

If you remain indifferent or indecisive listen carefully to the words of **Hebrews 3:12-13** **“See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.”**

Don't reject Jesus because of indifference or indecisiveness that results in unbelief and leads to a Christless eternity. Indifference and indecisiveness are forms of unbelief. And don't enter into a Christless eternity because of indignation toward Him. Believe what the Bible says about who Jesus is both about His historicity and about His deity. So many rejected Christ, but the Magi chose to receive Him, to believe the signs.

II. THOSE WHO RECEIVE CHRIST – Matthew 2:1-2; Luke 2:15-20

In these passages and in the lives of the Magi and the shepherds we see the response of interest.

A. The Response of Interest

Their interest came from belief. They were ready to respond when they heard the news and saw the signs. They didn't hesitate to go and look with heightened awe and wonder about the news that the Savior and king had been born. We can understand the shepherds going. Being Jews, they had an awareness of the Old Testament prophecies and the angel host confirmed what they had long waited for.

They left their flocks and headed into town to see for themselves the news of the Savior's birth. But the Magi are another story. They were Gentiles who lived a thousand miles away. **How would they have heard about such a prophecy and why would they be interested?**

There are two possibilities. One possible way they heard is that it came from the Jews who had been taken from their land during the conquest by Babylon and dispersed throughout the kingdom. They would have taken with them their worship of God along with the prophecies of the Messiah.

The second possibility is that it came through the life of Daniel who was promoted as chief among the wise men under Nebuchadnezzar after correctly revealing and interpreting the King's dream. Daniel's reputation continued into the rule of the Medo-Persian empire. His godly influence no doubt had an impact on that body of wise men that extended to the Magi who over the following centuries brought these wise men to see for themselves the one they had also been looking for. The signs in the stars led them with interest to Jerusalem. It wasn't just out of curiosity. We are told in **verse 2** that they came to worship this newborn king of the Jews.

Is that your response? When you read the truth found in the Bible, does your interest cause you to come and worship?

Why is it today that people are more interested if Taylor Swift will show up at a football game, than if Jesus will show up?

Why are people willing to stand hours in a line or pay someone to stand in line for them so they can get the latest iPhone rather than stand in line to see Jesus?

During His ministry years, Jesus taught and performed miracles. You can be certain that He had become the topic of conversations among both religious leaders and common people. Who was this man anyway? On one occasion Jesus asked His disciples who people thought Him to be. They gave various responses.

Some people have name recognition. We know the name of Abe Lincoln.

Some people are known for their reputation. We know the reputation of Charles Manson.

Some people are known by where they live. We know the President lives in the White House.

Some people are known for their occupation. We know Sam Bernstein is a lawyer.

But that's not the response Jesus was looking for. Jesus wanted to see if the disciples understood who He was, so He asked a follow up question. **Who do you think I am?** Peter said that He was the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

That's what C.S. Lewis was getting at. **If He's just a man, then He's crazy or deceitful, but if He is really the Christ, then what are you going to do with what you know?** When it comes to Jesus Christ, you only have two choices. You must make a choice to receive Him or reject Him. **If He is just a man, and a deceiver and liar at that, why do we celebrate a major holiday around Him by calling it Christmas?** But if He truly is Jesus, the Savior – God with us – then we have every reason to celebrate Him.

Every one of us has a decision to make about the news regarding the one who was born king of the Jews. **What will your response be?** That is the question we must all ask. It's a question that is most obvious at Christmas. Though there are different responses that people make to Jesus, they all boil down to two choices.

Will you, like Peter, your Lord deny?
Or will you scorn from His foes to fly,
Daring for Jesus to live or die?
What will you do with Jesus?

“Jesus, I give Thee my heart today!
Jesus, I'll follow Thee all the way,
Gladly obeying Thee!” will you say:
“This I will do with Jesus!”

What will you do with Jesus?
Neutral you cannot be;
Someday your heart will be asking,
“What will He do with me?”