

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 5,

Matthew 2-3

6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

You know, we all think we know the Christmas story. But what if I told you the heroes weren't who you thought they were? And the villains? Well, what if they had accomplices hiding in plain sight? We're going to dig into the incredible analysis of Dr. Craig Keener to unpack the shocking way this story flips our expectations about power, character, and what it really means to follow God. And it all really boils down to this one big question.

Who were the real villains here? Because the answer, it turns out, is a lot more complicated than just one evil king. It forces us to look at the huge gap between knowing what's right and actually doing something about it. So here's where we're headed.

First, we'll meet the very unexpected people who show up to worship Jesus. Then we'll dive into a paranoid king's deadly plot. We're going to see how the entire world of this story gets turned on its head, meet a radical prophet out in the middle of nowhere, and finally face his stark warning about a coming fire of judgment.

All right, let's jump right in with the first people to arrive on the scene looking for this new king, the Magi. And right away, the story starts turning our expectations upside down. So, to get the shock value here, you have to understand who these Magi actually were.

They were Persian astrologers. Now, for a first-century Jewish audience, these weren't the wise, benevolent kings you see on Christmas cards. No way.

The term Magi often meant foreign sorcerers, people associated with Israel's enemies. They were literally the last people on earth you would expect to be the heroes of this story. And this just lays out the first big switch perfectly.

The people who should have been the heroes, you know, the king of the Jews, the high-ranking priests, the biblical scholars right there in Jerusalem, they're totally absent. Instead, it's these suspicious outsiders, these foreigners who travel for months just to worship. Okay, so now let's talk about the main bad guy, King Herod, and maybe even more importantly, the insiders who basically stood by and let his horrific plan unfold.

And make no mistake, Herod was an absolute monster. This guy murdered his rivals, he strangled his favorite wife, and he even arranged for his popular brother-in-law to accidentally drown in about three feet of water. His paranoia was so extreme that he even had two of his own sons executed.

In fact, his cruelty was so legendary that even the Roman Emperor Augustus supposedly joked, it's better to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons. So the idea that he would order the murder of a bunch of toddlers in some backwater village, yeah, that was completely in character for him. But here is the most crucial, chilling part of the story.

When Herod asks his Bible experts, hey, where's the Messiah supposed to be born? They knew the answer right away. They could quote the exact verse from the prophet Micah that pointed straight to Bethlehem. But what did they do with that world-changing life-or-death information? Absolutely nothing.

They didn't go, they didn't warn anyone, they just went back to their scrolls. And this whole topsy-turvy thing, it's not just about the people. The entire map of the story gets flipped upside down, taking a foundational story for Israel and turning it completely inside out.

Okay, so you've got to remember, the defining story for Israel was the Exodus. The absolute bedrock of their identity was God saving them from slavery in Egypt and leading them out to freedom. For them, Egypt was the ultimate place of bondage.

But Matthew just flips that whole story on its head. Suddenly the Holy Land, the place that's supposed to be safe, becomes the source of danger. And where does the family run for their lives? To Egypt.

The old land of slavery becomes a safe haven. Jesus begins his life as a political refugee, living the Exodus story in reverse. So fast forward a few years and another character shows up who is the definition of an outsider challenging the system.

And that, of course, is John the Baptist. He doesn't show up at the fancy temple in Jerusalem. Nope, he comes out of the wilderness.

Everything about John just screamed outsider. He lived out in the wilderness, the place you went to get away from corrupt society. He dressed in camel's hair, just like the famous prophet Elijah, basically signaling that a real prophet was back on the scene.

And his diet? Locusts and wild honey. This was a guy who had totally rejected the comforts of the world he was about to confront. And his message was just as wild as he was.

When the religious establishment came out to check him out, he flat out told them their family tree was worthless. He said, God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones. In other words, your religious pedigree, your heritage, your status, it means absolutely nothing.

Everybody starts from zero. And all of this builds to the climax of his message, which is this incredibly stark warning of a great separation, a final judgment that's coming for every single person. Just listen to how he greets the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees.

You offspring of vipers. In that culture, this was a devastating insult. It was believed that baby vipers chewed their way out of their mother, killing her.

He wasn't just calling them snakes. He was essentially calling them parent murderers. I mean, talk about not pulling any punches.

John then gives this famous prophecy that someone is coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Now, we often hear that and think of it as one thing, like a purifying

fire. But if you look at the context, as Dr. Keener points out, John is actually talking about two totally different things happening to two different groups of people.

And this breaks it down perfectly. John uses this image of a farmer harvesting grain for the people who repent, the wheat. They're going to be gathered safely into the barn.

That's the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But for the unrepentant, the useless chaff, they're going to be thrown into a fire that never goes out. That's the baptism of fire.

It's judgment. It's the ultimate reversal, salvation for one group, destruction for the other. So, it all leaves us here.

From those Bible experts in Herod's court to the crowds listening to John out in the desert, just knowing the right answers, knowing the right prophecies, well, it wasn't nearly enough. The whole story is practically shouting at us that real faith demands a response, which leaves us with a pretty tough question to think about. If knowing isn't enough, what does it truly mean for us to act?