

Advent: Behind Enemy Lines | The Hunt for the King | Matthew 2:1-18

December 14, 2025 | Matthew McNutt

[Title slide] We are in the second week of our Advent series, but you won't find Christmas cards or nativity scenes designed with what we're looking at. Our series is called "Behind Enemy Lines." Why? Paul sums it up well in his second letter to the Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 4:4 (NLT) Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.

Satan, the god of this world. Actively blinding people to God. And this wasn't just Paul being dramatic; the Apostle John wrote,

John 12:31 (NLT) "Satan, the ruler of this world ..."

The ruler of this world. In other words, when Jesus took on flesh and came into this world to save us, He was going behind enemy lines, it was an incursion into an enemies' territory that was determined to not give up an inch to God. Last week Pastor Nate challenged us to wake up the Spiritual war that is going on all around us and for us, but he also encouraged us to take heart because the war is already won. Satan is fighting a losing battle, but it isn't stopping him from trying to take others down with him.

Which brings us to today's passage. The birth of Jesus. But as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, Satan uses those he has blinded to launch a counter strike. In this passage we will see spiritual warfare, the danger of missing God even when we know scripture, and be challenged to consider what the priorities are in our lives today. Let's dive in:

Matthew 2:1-18 (NLT) ¹ Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod.

As Rome conquered different nations, they would install local leaders in charge who then reported back to them. Herod was an Idumean and Nabatean by ancestry who lived in the region and had aligned himself with Rome in such a way that they gave him the ruling position for the region.¹

¹ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew (The NIV Application Commentary)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 93.

People called him the king of the Jews. He reigned for over thirty years and was known for his ruthlessness and brutality. It was in the final years of his reign that Jesus was born.

About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ² “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.”

Your Bible might call them Magi. Maybe you’ve sung a song about them, “We three kings of Orient are; bearing gifts we traverse afar, field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.” Why three kings? And wait, aren’t they wise men or magi? Who called them kings?

That tradition started a few centuries after the fact, some early Christians started calling them kings in an effort to say they fulfilled² *Psalms 72:11 (NLT) All kings will bow before him, and all nations will serve him.*

We need to be careful to let scripture speak to us, not try to make it say what we want it to say. We can keep the song. It’s fun, but they weren’t kings. And there weren’t three of them. Tradition numbers them at three because there were three gifts, but it’s more likely that there were a dozen of them, along with attendants and servants.

The term “Magi” referred to a priestly caste in ancient Persia. It involved Babylonian elements like astrology, demonology, wisdom, magic. They were leading figures in the religious and political spheres of their land.³

So why would these pagan priestly figures even know about a Jewish prophecy? Remember Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abendigo? Centuries before, Babylon had taken captive Jewish people and forced them to live in their lands. While many of them had return to Israel, there were still those who had stayed behind. Which is why pagan religious leaders in those lands were aware of and even familiar with Jewish prophecy like Balaam’s prophecy,

Numbers 24:17 (NLT) A star will rise from Jacob; a scepter will emerge from Israel.

² Ibid, 94.

³ Ibid, 93.

So, when these Magi, these wise men, saw the sign of the star, it captured their interest. As a result, they traveled 900 miles to learn more about it. They would have spent months preparing, securing resources, and then months traveling. It was a significant undertaking.

All because they saw a star. Or did they? When I was younger, I found myself wondering how a star could point out a specific home. It might give a direction, but how could it be that accurate?

I believe it was a more direct intervention from God that guided them. Throughout the Bible angels are referred to as stars.⁴ And the Christmas story is full of angelic interventions. An angel guiding them explains how the wise men were able to go to the exact location of Jesus. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Whether it was a celestial event or an angel, the point Matthew makes is this: God was actively leading people who were willing to follow. And so the wise men spent months preparing and traveling 900 miles to arrive in Jerusalem and ask King Herod where the newborn King of the Jews was.

³ King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem.

The Hebrew phrase "everyone in Jerusalem" specifically refers to the religious and political leadership of Israel.⁵ Why were they disturbed at this news? Shouldn't they have been excited? Perhaps they were too preoccupied with their own power and the arrival of a Messiah, which they outwardly claimed to desire, was a threat to their status, their wealth, their power. They certainly would feel that way when Jesus began His public ministry, eventually to the point of crucifying Him.

⁴ Herod called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote:

⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'"

⁴ Ibid, 96.

⁵ Ibid, 97.

⁷ Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. ⁸ Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!”

Herod believes he has been successful in hiding his true intentions. These wise men were from 900 miles away, in a time with no internet, no cell phones, no social media. They didn't know Herod or his reputation, so they took him at his word.

Perhaps there was one red flag they could have noticed. Why were they, as outsiders, the only ones willing to make the journey? Bethlehem was only six miles from Jerusalem. Why weren't any of the other religious leaders jumping at the opportunity to see this newborn king?

⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! ¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These were traditional gifts for royalty or people with high religious, political or social status.⁶

We've all seen the nativity scenes with baby Jesus, the shepherds, the wise men, the kneeling sheep and cows. Why does this verse call Jesus a child and not a baby? Because the wisemen arrived when Jesus was a toddler, between one and two years old. It had been a long journey. We know he was around that age because of what happens a few verses later.

¹² When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

This would have added time to an already long journey, but these travelers obeyed God.

¹³ After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother,” the angel

⁶ Ibid, 100.

said. “Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

¹⁴ That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, ¹⁵ and they stayed there until Herod’s death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: “I called my Son out of Egypt.”

¹⁶ Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men’s report of the star’s first appearance.

Herod’s brutality and jealous rage is horrific. In a town the size of Bethlehem, this was most likely around 10-30 toddler boys who were murdered.⁷ It would have devastated the entire community. I’ve heard people take the approach to this passage by celebrating God’s protection of Jesus, that God will care for those He loves. Which has always bothered me because I don’t think anyone in that town felt cared for by God in that moment. Why was only Joseph warned to flee?

¹⁷ Herod’s brutal action fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ “A cry was heard in Ramah—weeping and great mourning. Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted, for they are dead.”

Rachel was the personification of the mothers of Israel, referring back to the captives being stolen from them and taken to Babylon. Their cry was being heard once again.

Jesus arrived behind enemy lines. Satan’s counter strike was heart breaking. He used the paranoia and selfishness of this regional King and the corrupt religious leaders of the day to try and kill Jesus long before His ministry could begin. The Christmas story is terrifying at times.

Why? Because it was and is a war, a spiritual war in which God was and is reclaiming His creation from the false god humanity choose to follow. And yet, this counter strike ultimately failed. The Messiah escaped to provide salvation to all.

God’s Mission is Our Spiritual Good

⁷ Ibid, 112.

What does this brutal piece of the Christmas story teach us? The spiritual warfare we are surrounded with is not primarily over our physical well-being, it's over our hearts and souls. It's why the Bible doesn't promise we'll be exempt from suffering; this life is such a tiny piece of eternity and God's mission is for your eternity to be with Him, for you to be restored to a full relationship with Him, not because this life doesn't matter, but because it isn't the whole story. It's why Paul wrote the Corinthians,

2 Corinthians 4:18 (NLT) So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.

Paul was writing people going through brutal suffering and persecution, but he was reminding them that we are in a war that God has already won. The heartbreak Bethlehem felt at the brutal loss of their young sons was awful but it is the things that cannot be seen that give us hope, not the troubles in front of us now. Salvation is guaranteed because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Herod and these other leaders were blinded by Satan, they fell victim to his lies. But Matthew records Jesus' words to His followers that listened, understood and believed:

Matthew 13:16 (NLT) "But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear."

Do you see? Do you hear? Herod's sin is a warning against the danger of spiritual blindness. It is a challenge to our faith. It is an invitation to alignment with God's values, God's priorities.

Is God Our Priority?

You know what is incredible to me in this story? These pagan priests traveled 900 miles in response to God's sign; but God's people, His leaders and people who claimed to be followers in Jerusalem were not bothered to travel six miles. Have you ever considered that? "Let us know how it goes" was essentially the message they gave the wise men.

Which seems ridiculous, and yet. How often do we choose comfort, convenience, material things, status, and so on, over God?

In John 21, after Jesus' resurrection, there's a moment where He appears again to them while they were fishing. Jesus was standing on the shore;

the moment Peter realized it was Jesus, he jumped in the water and swam to Him.

Colossians 3:2 (NLT) Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth.

Do we have Peter's excitement and passion for the things of heaven, for Jesus? Or are we like the religious leader's in Jerusalem who couldn't be bothered to travel six miles to see the Messiah?

I want to challenge you to **consider the six-mile checkpoints** in your life. Ask yourself,

- *What am I currently unwilling to inconvenience myself for spiritually?*
- *Where do I know Jesus' will, but I'm not actively moving toward Him?*
- *Where has comfort replaced obedience in my life?*

The religious leaders knew the prophecy, but it wasn't worth acting on to them. Be like the wise men, willing to go any distance to get to God.

I also want to invite you to **Name the Loss**. Two thousand years ago, Jesus' arrival – the gift that we celebrate – was also a moment of profound loss and pain. Christmas includes lament. If this time of the year brings pain for you, don't ignore it, don't run from it. Name the loss, bring that pain to God. Reach out to others, your small group, close Christian friends, who can support you through their presence, their prayer, and their comfort as you lament.

I want to close with these words from 1 Peter 5:10. The spiritual warfare that rages around us brings suffering, but we celebrate the hope we have because of God's victory.

1 Peter 5:10 (NLT) In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation.

Let's pray.