



The Wise Men, the Fools, and the Son of God

Matthew 2:1-12

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Merry Christmas, beloved. I hope that your Christmas celebration was everything that you hoped that it would be this year. However, I expect all of you to have your tree down, your lights put away, and your decorations boxed up by this afternoon. Nah, I'm just kidding. But it kind of feels like you are supposed to, doesn't it? In our fast paced, what's next world, the next thing on your holiday agenda is supposed to be New Year's Eve, right? Christmas is over, move on. But that kind of thinking, at least to me, seems to be more driven by the changing of the days of the calendar rather than the spiritual and cosmic significance of celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior, the very Son of God, Jesus Christ. So, if you will indulge me, I want us to celebrate Christmas one more Sunday, ok? And I want to do it by looking at the account of the visit of the wise men from the east to worship the Son of God.

Immediately as we read this text, Matthew brings us face to face with the truth that message of the incarnation and birth of the Son of God, the revelation of Jesus casts people into three different camps – one group full of hatred and opposition, one group filled with those who are ultimately apathetic and unresponsive and the third group characterized by faith that breaks forth in praise and worship. Herod, along with the priests and scribes, and the wise men in this text stand in stark contrast to one another. Herod displayed an open hatred and hostility toward Jesus. The chief priests and the scribes, though perhaps up to speed on the prophecies, were ultimately indifferent toward Jesus. But the wise men sought out Jesus, and worshipped Him.

The events that Matthew describes in our text this morning occur several months to a year after the birth of Jesus. The family is now in a house rather than in a stable. When the Wise men come to Christ, He is no longer a tiny baby but a small child. Pick it up with me in verse 1 and let's see how Matthew sets the scene for us.

Matthew writes: ***“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.””***
(Matthew 2:1–2, ESV)

Matthew sets the time and the place for us, telling us that Christ was born in Bethlehem, during the reign of Herod when certain wise men from the east came to Jerusalem looking for the one who had been born the king of the Jews. Now, Bethlehem was known as the royal city, the place where David was born, and it is located only about 5 miles south of the capital city Jerusalem so it is very close to Herod’s palace. And in these first couple of verses, Matthew introduces us to some of the main characters in the story.

First let’s consider King Herod the Great and there are some things we need to know about him. First off, though he was the king in Jerusalem, he was not a Jew. His dad was an Idumean, a descendent of the unbelieving Esau, and his mother was an Arabian. Despite that fact, the Romans had made him the king over Judea in 40 BC. He was an interesting guy, to say the least. He had amassed great wealth, was a master politician and was skilled enough to retain his title through a succession of different emperors in Rome. He was, by all accounts, an adept warrior and a pretty good social administrator, handling the famine that had plagued Judah fairly well. He also prided himself in his building skills. He was responsible for building the temple that stood in Jerusalem, various racetracks and theatres, a number of fortresses, including the famed Masada.

But the thing you need to know about Herod was this – he was a power hungry tyrant, a man who held his position by raw power, bitter repression of the people, and open displays of authoritarianism, crushing any possible threat as soon as it appeared. He did this because he knew that he was a fraudulent king, a usurper of a throne that he should not have had. For that reason, he was incredibly suspicious and afraid for his position and power, and as a result no one was ever truly safe around him. This is a man who, out of paranoia, put to death his two sons by Mariamne, his wife, Mariamne herself, another son from another woman, the brother and mother of Mariamne and her grandfather. In view of such executions, the emperor Augustus reportedly quipped, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than son.” One of the greatest displays of his wickedness is seen in the way that he had some of the most distinguished and well-respected citizens of Jerusalem arrested and imprisoned not long before he died. Knowing that no one would mourn his own death, he gave orders

for those prisoners to be executed at the moment that he died to guarantee that there would be mourning in Jerusalem at his death. The only thing more barbaric was his order to murder all of the male children two and under in Bethlehem and the surrounding region, after his meeting with wise men, in the hopes of killing the Messiah. Herod was a wicked fool.

Matthew also introduces us to the wise men. A couple of things to know. Despite popular myth, we don't know that there were three of them, they were not kings, and they did not come to the stable the night that Jesus was born. They were wise men, students of the stars, advisors to kings, men of social standing and importance, kind of like cabinet members in the government. For centuries the Wise men had been a tribe of priests in Medo-Persia and Babylonia who were brilliant and highly educated scholars trained in medicine, history, religion, prophecy and astronomy. They were also trained in what we would call astrology. Expecting a king to be born in Israel, they had their eyes to the sky, looking for some sign that he had come.

The great question, of course, is how they would have been expecting a coming Jewish king, the Messiah. Where would they have gotten this notion? The answer to that is found in the book of Daniel. Daniel 2 tells us that after Daniel gave to Nebuchadnezzar the proper interpretation of his dream: ***“Then the king gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.”*** (Daniel 2:48, ESV)

Daniel was highly regarded and respected by the wise men of Babylon and because of his high position and great respect among them, it seems quite certain that the wise men would have learned much from the prophet concerning one true God, the God of Israel, and about His will and plans for His people through the coming glorious King. They must have known of him becoming King, the one whom Daniel described as “one like the Son of Man” to whom ***“was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”*** (Daniel 7:13–14, ESV) This expectation would have been passed down for centuries in the lore and the traditions of the wise men.

And now, as the text tells us, having seen the star, the Messiah's star, they have come to Jerusalem to see Him. There's a lot of speculation as to the exact nature of the star that they saw. Some suggest that it was a supernova in the sky, others will say a special conjunction of the planets, and still others think it was a meteor or comet or something like that. Some interpreters see this star as the Shekinah glory of God, the same glory that shone around the shepherds when Jesus' birth was announced to them by the angel. That certainly is a possibility. Still others believe that this star was an angel, the angels are sometime referred to as stars.

While it may be fun to speculate about all of these things, we have to remember that whatever the specific sign that God used to alert the wise men to the birth of Christ is not the main issue here. We need to be careful not to become "prophets of the peripheral," and theorize about things that are of relative unimportance and fail to cherish the weightier things of the gospel - the holiness and glory of God, the helplessness of man, the greatness of God's grace, the wonder of the incarnation, the substitutionary sacrificial atoning death of Christ and His triumphant resurrection, the glory of Christ's return and the final judgment.

What is clear regarding this star is that it served God's purpose to alert the wise men to the birth of Christ and then later leads them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem so that they can worship Christ the King. God is behind this. So whether it some strange celestial occurrence or the Shekinah glory of God or an angel or some combination of the three, God is guiding these Gentiles to Christ to worship him. God has appointed Christ as the one true Savior of the world. He is not merely the Savior of Israel. He is not merely the hope of Israel. He is the only hope of the world. God is at work to draw men from every tribe and nation and tongue to exalt and magnify and glorify and worship His Son, the Savior-King. And we see it played out before our very eyes in this text.

The wise men were convinced that the Messiah was born and having seen the star, whatever it was, they journeyed to the capital city of Israel, to Jerusalem. And what a trip it was. In the days of modern travel that we live, it's hard for us to imagine what it would be like to travel on foot or camel-back over 800 miles – the threats, hardships, trials and difficulties of such travel. They are not following the star at this point... the star that alerted them to the birth of the Messiah would reappear later.

So they come to Jerusalem and ask, ***"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*** They are precise in what they are looking for. The Greek is very precise, they are looking for the one "born king" of the Jews. From the moment of His birth, Jesus reigns as King -- that is the idea being communicated here. The shocking thing is that no one knows anything about this

momentous birth. So far as we can tell, they went up and down the streets of the city of Jerusalem asking the question where is he that is born King of the Jews, and the city could give them no answer. They were asking, and they could gain no response. How shocked they must have been. Nobody knows anything? They would have expected that this was the greatest news ever. They asked around and apparently their asking drew the attention of Herod.

Matthew continues: **“When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.” (Matthew 2:3–4, ESV)** Of course Herod was troubled. Herod was troubled because being an Idumean; he knew that his claim on the throne was illegitimate. The news that the wise men were bringing sounded like the birth of a genuine descendant of the royal line of David as a rightful heir to the throne and that could be a problem. And if Herod was troubled, all of Jerusalem was troubled with him for they knew the atrocities that he was willing to commit to hold on to his power. It is not that they would have been disappointed to see Herod deposed, but because they well knew that Herod would resort to cruelty and wickedness to hold his throne. There was no telling what he might do.

So Herod gets some religious guys together to give him the scoop. He calls together the high priest and some who had served in that office in the past --primarily Sadducees -- and he calls the teachers of the Law, the scribes – primarily the Pharisees – who would have knowledge of the Scriptures and of the traditions surrounding the birth of the Messiah. The interesting thing is that this collection of men would have been theologically at opposite ends of the spectrum. But he asked them all where the Christ -- notice that, the Christ, God’s Messiah, the one true King, was to be born and, Matthew says,

“They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: “ ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ”” (Matthew 2:5–6, ESV)

It was not difficult for the religious experts that Herod assembled to discover where the King of the Jews was to be born. Their failure to believe was not due to ignorance. The leaders in Israel knew precisely where the King of the Jews, the Messiah, the one chosen of God to shepherd His people Israel would be born, but they just didn’t care. Interestingly

enough, though they can say immediately where the Messiah would be born, and having heard the news, they cannot even be bothered to take the short trip to Bethlehem. Why is that? Have you ever wondered? I think part of the reason is this: They were not looking for one to rule their souls but to be their champion against Rome and their foes. They saw no need for a Savior to deliver them from their sin, a Redeemer to ransom them, a High Priest to mediate for them, a Ruler to reign over them, and a Shepherd to guard their souls forever.

Here's the thing, this ancient prophecy that revealed the location of the Messiah's birth came from Micah 5:2 and was written in the eighth century BC – 800 years prior. The original prophecy, loosely quoted by the scribes answered the question of where, but there was far more that they could have said. ***“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days... “And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace...” (Micah 5:2, 4–5a, ESV)***

This is the King that Israel should have been looking for, that the scribes and priests should have been breathlessly anticipating. In light of this, again, the attitude of the wise men was one of expecting the whole city of Jerusalem to be worshipping the new King. But that expectation was far from reality. That much is made clear by what happens next...

“Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” ”
(Matthew 2:7–8, ESV)

Why the quiet audience? Herod wants to keep things on the downlow, to avoid publicity and wants to avoid giving any legitimacy to the report of the wise men, so he summons them quietly, privately in order to determine when the star had appeared so that he can determine the age of the Child.

Herod shares the information that he has regarding the whereabouts of the birth of the Messiah and seeks to use the Wise men to find the Christ-child. He is certain that the Wise men will report back to him. From the Wise men's perspective, at this point, it seems that Herod is on board with the desire to find the newborn king having expressed his desire to offer to him worship as well. So having this information, the wise men depart.

Matthew records: ***“After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.”*** (Matthew 2:9–11, ESV)

The very star that had brought them to Jerusalem now went before them to Bethlehem. The response of the Wise men to seeing the star is one of exceeding joy and delight. I bet. It had been hard going getting information in Jerusalem. No one seemed particularly motivated to go and find the new King and here they were heading off to Bethlehem, not really sure where to look. But God intervened again. The same star that shined and led the Wise men to begin the trek to see the Christ, now goes before them and stands just over the place where the young child was. So it's a low star or the Shekinah or maybe even an angel –whatever – they are overjoyed because their journey is almost done. The goal of their journeying almost complete. They were on their way to the Messiah.

They found the king, the new ***ruler in Israel, the one of old, from ancient days, who shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his who would be great to the ends of the earth***, in the humble surroundings of a peasant family. It was not what the Wise men thought they would have found when they set out on their journey – they expected a child king in a palace, honored and exalted. But it was not to be. Instead they found the child in a common home, with a common family, in common surroundings.

They saw the child with Mary His mother. Note that. The child is the center of the story, the center of the vision. ***It is not*** the mother with her child; it is the child with His mother. And seeing the Messiah, these men who had traveled so far and traveled so long, prostrated themselves before the child in lowly worship. The word that is used for worship here is a

word that expresses the idea of falling down, of prostrating oneself, kissing the feet or the hem of a garment. Their faith, their wholehearted searching and adoring worship is utterly amazing.

Just think about this in contrast to Herod or the priests and scribes.

Proud Herod would never be found bowing in the dust, except before Caesar, and that only to get what he wanted from the despot. The scribes in Jerusalem knew nothing of the wise men's uninhibitedness in worship. They bowed in the Temple, in front of others who could see their piety, when it benefitted them. The wise men alone bowed unabashedly, unhindered by their own dignity or pride from falling in worship before the infant Christ, even though His own people did not acknowledge him. It is a picture of Isaiah 60:1-3: ***"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."*** (Isaiah 60:1-3, ESV) Again, they were not kings, but wise men, king-makers, if you will, but the fulfillment of this promise that began in that day has continued like a swelling tide to this day.

And, the wise men who came to worship the Christ child came bearing gifts, specific gifts, prophetic gifts fit only for Jesus Christ, gifts which indicated the true identity of this child. The wise men came bringing gold, the metal of kings, speaking of the royalty of Christ – this One born King of Jews but who is in reality, the King of all kings. The wise men confessed His kingship when they brought to Christ this gift of gold.

Not only did the wise men bring gold, but also they brought frankincense, the resin collected from certain trees that was highly fragrant when burned, and was therefore used in temple worship, where it was burned as a pleasant offering to God. It was mixed with the oil used to anoint the priests in Israel and was mixed into the grain offerings that were offered as thanksgiving and praise gifts to God. Frankincense was used to worship God. For that reason, this frankincense speaks of the deity of Christ, that this is no mere child, but God in human flesh, and therefore worthy of worship. Even more, however, frankincense was in constant use by the priests in the temple, and the ultimate priest, the one who was to make final reconciliation between God and humankind, was there before them.

Last, the wise men presented to the Christ-child a gift of myrrh, a burial spice. It was used for embalming. By any measure it would be odd to present such a gift to a young child, yet that the wise men would present to Jesus the gift of myrrh testifies to Christ's humanity and prophetically speaks of His death which was required to save sinners from hell and death, the cost to create a new people for Himself.

When viewed together, we see what these offerings of worship are intended to convey. This king, born in Bethlehem, is a King like no other. He is both God and man. He is the King who would die to fill His Kingdom, the King who would die to save His subjects, the King who would die to deliver His people from the tyranny of sin and the reign of death, the King who would deliver His people from their just condemnation for their sin by dying in their place and extinguishing the wrath of God the Father against their sin forever, and rising from the dead making rebels into worshippers of God. In this He would display the incomparable power of God. This is the great King; this is God's King, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. The King who is worthy of worship, of praise, of submission, of adoration and of love. The Wise men worshipped Him.

What a massive contrast between the Wise men and Herod and the scribes. Herod's response is hatred and fear. His plan is to kill all of the male children in Jerusalem that would fit the age range of the one born king. Do you see the irrationality of Herod's response? Just think about it. If the Wise men were wrong about this Child, why bother with him? But on the other hand, if they were right, why try to resist the will of God? Does he really think that he can thwart the plan and the power of God? This is the policy of a madman. This is the plan of a man who is insane. If this child is the Messiah, I will kill him. Rebellion against God is entirely irrational. It is folly to fight against God, but sin makes people fools.

The Jewish chief priests and the scribes' attitude is almost as amazing as that of the Herod, but in a different way. They knew the Scriptures and could readily identify the birthplace of God's promised Messiah, but they did not respond to the truth at all. They were educated fools.

But the worship of the wise men -- that is the only right response. The coming of Christ is not simply an occasion for sentimentality; He is not simply a person to be admired. This

Christ child is to be worshipped. There are many in this world and even in the church who say, "Oh, I admire Christ. He is a great moral teacher. He was a great prophet, how he started a revolution of love – people say all kinds of foolish things about Christ.

But isn't it interesting that Paul tells us that not every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is the greatest moral teacher or prophet that ever lived. Not that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ brought about a love revolution that has changed the world, as we know it. Not that every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus was a social revolutionary. But that Jesus Christ will be professed by every knee and every tongue as Lord, as the one true Messiah, the God of Israel, who is the Savior of the world and the gifts the Wise men brought were offerings of worship befitting such a king. Not only that, they would be a great blessing to this poor peasant family. These gifts were obviously the means by which Joseph took his family to Egypt and sustained them there until Herod died.

The pilgrimage complete, God intervened to protect His Son. Matthew tells us: ***And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:12)*** So home the Wise men went, the first fruits of the Gentiles, like you and me, that would come to worship the Christ.

Beloved, there are three types of people in this story. There are those like *Herod* who hear of Jesus and are *hostile* toward Him. They want to eliminate Him from their lives because He threatens their running the show. Then there are those like the *Jewish priests and scribes* who know about Jesus. They can even quote Bible references about Him. But they're *indifferent* to Him. They don't go out of their way to seek Him. And then there are those like the wise men. They responded to the light they had been given and overcame every hindrance until they found the Savior and fell at His feet in *worship*.

Where do you fit in these three groups? There are some whom are hostile to Christ when told that there is salvation in no other way and in no other person except by believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that you can only find life by losing the one you have.

There are those who are apathetic and indifferent to Jesus Christ. Some who are religious and even know the Scriptures fairly well, but who find their hearts strangely cold to Christ, unmoved by His person and unaffected by His glory. The means of grace close at hand like the scribes and the high priests but a heart that is infinitely distant from Christ.

Then, there are those like the wise men who believe in Him who is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, who recognize Jesus as the One who is the King - God's Son. Is He dear to you, worthy of worship, worthy of devotion, worthy of faithful obedience? That was the heart of the Wise men. Is it yours? To worship Christ in Spirit and in truth is not a right – it is the grace and kindness of God to know Christ like that. How I pray we would never take the invitation and honor of worshipping Christ lightly or carelessly or casually.

It is not always those who have the most religious privileges or advantages that give Christ the most honor. The scribes and the priests who had the Scriptures wouldn't go five miles to lay eyes on the Messiah. They were unimpressed with Jesus. The wise men, on the other hand, would trek nearly 1000 miles to come and not only see Jesus, but to worship Him and give Him the honor and worship of which He was worthy. That is a lesson for us. Many times it is those who live closest to the means of grace who neglect them the most. A flippant familiarity with sacred things has the awful tendency to create contempt in the heart. How careful we must be to guard our hearts against a familiarity that breeds contempt – the failure of treating the things that are holy as if they were common.

Head knowledge without heart knowledge is deceitful and deadly. This text shows us how it is possible to have a ready knowledge of the Scriptures and still have a graceless heart. The priests and scribes were quick with a Scriptural answer to the location of the Messiah's birth but they had no desire for Christ. They could tell where Christ was born, knew the prophecies associated with the Messiah, but they would not receive Him. We cannot be satisfied with head knowledge no matter how great it may be. It is a good thing when it enflames the heart to devotion, to obedience and the true worship but by itself it is worthless. You can have much head knowledge and still perish forever. It is possible to be able to describe every leaf on a tree and still miss the forest. Formal knowledge of the Scriptures does not in itself lead to knowing who Jesus is.

Spiritual diligence and perseverance is a blessed thing. The wise men show us the value of the diligent and urgent pursuit of Christ. They travelled, as I said, almost 1000 miles, at much cost and at the threat of much danger to themselves. They had set their hearts to see Christ no matter the cost and they were changed men. Beholding Christ satisfied their souls

True faith is pleasing to God. These wise men believed in Christ when they had never seen Him. They believed in Christ when the scribes and the priests were unbelieving. They believed in Him when they saw him as a little Child on Mary's knee and worshipped Him as a King. They saw no miracles to convince them, heard no teaching to persuade them, saw no signs of divinity and greatness to awe them. They saw nothing but a Child, the child whose star they had seen, whose coming they had expected and when they saw Him they believed they saw God's Messiah and they bowed down and worshipped Him. This is the kind of faith that God delights to honor. Let us walk in that kind of faith. Let us not be ashamed to believe in Jesus and confess Him freely, though those all around us may remain indifferent and unbelieving or even hostile to the truth. Charles Spurgeon says, and let me close with this: **We worship Jesus! Our Faith sees Him go from the manger to the Cross, and from the Cross right up to the Throne, and there where Jehovah dwells, amidst the Glory of the Divine Presence stands the Man, the very Man who slept at Bethlehem in the manger! There He reigns as Lord of lords! Our souls worship Him again! You are our Prophet, every word You say, Jesus, we believe and desire to follow; You are our Priest; Your Sacrifice has made us clean—we are washed in Your blood! You are truly our King! Command, we will obey! Lead on, we will follow! We worship You!**

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