



WE HAVE COME TO WORSHIP
MATT. 2:1-12

Intro cards. Incredible Christmas formal!

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,

It's here that we're introduced to the famous "wise men" that perhaps grace your nativity scene. Now I don't want to be a Christmas curmudgeon, but as we celebrate Christmas I want to make sure we do it in a way that is more rooted in Scripture than tradition which will mean making a few modifications to some of the Christmas lore we know and cherish—especially when it comes to the wise men. The song "We Three Kings" is a good start.

They're not kings. They're magi. We get our English words "magic" and "magician" from this word. Word historically associated with astrology, magic, interpretation of dreams. We know from history that Magi were high-profile officials who played influential roles in the religion and politics of their culture. They were educated wealthy men. It's not surprising then that Scripture tells us that they often served as advisors to the king and were called wise men. Tradition tells us that their names were Melkon, Balthasar, and Gasper—but we don't know their names. We're not told how many wise men there are—just that they brought three different gifts. There could have been a dozen, they're could have been 30, we just don't know. And because of their status, they almost certainly traveled with a big entourage to protect them and the riches they brought with them.

And in this case wise men specifically from the east, which mean, contrary to the song "The First Noel" the start they were following was not in the east. THEY were in the east. And the better translation of vs 2 is "as it rose" some Bibles may have a note there. To be sure, they were traveling West, from the east. The east is a very vague references but they most likely from either Persia or Babylon. So what we have here is a group of astronomers and dream interpreters wealthy high ranking officials men from probably Persia or Babylon traveling to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life seeking the king of the Jews. 2 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." This isn't completely random. Almost certainly a reference to Numbers 24:17 where, years earlier, a prophet named Balaam prophesied about a star and its relationship to Israel's king: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel..." Now we can't know for sure if the wise men were familiar with this verse, but it is a correlation that seems to go beyond coincidence—the magi don't call this "a" star but "His" star. One commentator says it this way. "See then the promise in Numbers: a man from the east prophesying a star and a King among the Jews... [and] the following fulfillment in Matthew: Magi from the east following a star to the king of the Jews." (Platt, 32). These aren't cool coincidences—the divine rescue plan is coming into place.

So these magi, perhaps unknown to them, are fulfilling prophecy as they're looking for this king. And when they get to Jerusalem they were "asking around" (saying is a present participle). And what's shocking

is that no one seems to know. This a group of men from a pagan culture, come to see the Jewish-King that's been born and no one knows about it!

And word of their search gets around to king Herod. Several Herods mentioned in NT. This is Herod the Great. He had been installed as a client king in of Judea in 40B.C. He was known for his incredible building projects that he undertook including the renovation of the Jewish temple and the temple mount. He was a shrewd diplomat and politician. But he was also a nasty guy. He was extremely paranoid about people threatening his throne and because of that he killed a lot of people—he drowned the high-priest, he killed, his wife and at least two of his sons. Perhaps his most brutal act was the murder of all males under two years old in Bethlehem in an attempt to make sure he got rid of this child that had been born king of the Jews. More on that in a second.

You've got these distinguished magi who have come to Bethlehem, and word gets around to the king of the Jews that these men have come to worship the one who has been born king of the Jews. Now being very insecure about his throne you can imagine how upset King Herod was, the text says in vs **3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;** he was “troubled”—which is probably and understatement—and all Jerusalem with him. This wasn't because Jerusalem would be sad to see Herod replaced by a rival king but because they knew a threat to his power meant more violence—which is exactly what would happen. And in vs 4 he assembles all the chief priests and scribes—the priests represent Jewish worship and the scribes represent Jewish law—and asks them where the Christ—the—messiah was to be born, and they responds 5 **“In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:** 6 **“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.”** This is a quote with a few modifications of the prophecy given by Micah in Micah 5:2, and this mention of Bethlehem, and Judah, and this ruler shepherd imagery which is inserted from 1st Samuel—is so important. Just like the shepherd-king David was anointed in Bethlehem, the true and final shepherd king from David lineage has been born in Bethlehem—and he has come to set the world right! But it's not going to be without some difficulty.

Vs7 we learn that Herod calls the Magi into a secret meeting and says, “hey when did that star appear to you guys? Just curious. Y'all go and search diligently for the child and let me know when you find him so that I can come and worship him too.” And of course, we know this is all fake. Herod plan was to kill the male children of Bethlehem in order to prevent this king from usurping him, and he's asking the wisemen for a time frame so he can guess what age kids he needs to kill, and so he deceives the wisemen who then take off to Bethlehem, which is 5 miles south of Jerusalem.

9 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. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. So this star was not constantly shining. It appeared to these men at least once before they got to Jerusalem. And it appears to them again now and it guides them to Bethlehem. There is a lot of discussion about what this star could have been... in light of the fact that it seems to appear at just the right moments, we can safely assume that this was a supernatural light from God drawing and leading these men to worship his son.

11 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.

They weren't at the manger scene! Close to a year later—so put your wisemen in the living room. So they immediately fall down and worship this king and as was custom when an inferior came to see a superior they brought gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Scholars are divided on whether each gift should be invested with specific meaning. Some say that gold represents Jesus' royalty bc gold was often

associated with kingship, that frankincense represented his deity because frankincense was kept in the temple and used for various offers, so it was associated with worship of God and then myrrh is associated with anointing of man and thus represented Jesus's humanity. Myrrh was a fragrance used as a perfume, mixed with wine it was an anesthetic, and mixed with other spices it was used to embalm people. Other scholars say that rather specific associations these represented extravagant sacrificial offerings for a king. My guess is that these men probably gave better gifts than they knew, and what they gave as simply generous gifts, but in light of the background associated with these gifts and NT's explanation of who this child is, these gifts certainly seem to take on unique significance.

12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. So they're tipped off to Herod's evil plan and don't go and report to him like he had asked and they take another way home. So this is the account of the famous wisemen and while they often play a more sentimental role in our Christmas traditions, there are a variety of meaningful takeaways for us in these verses.

This king draws worshippers from all the peoples of the earth.

The book of Matthew is written to a largely Jewish audience. And therefore it is interesting that the very first people to worship Jesus aren't Jewish—they're Gentiles from a pagan culture. They've come from the east—perhaps hundreds of miles—to Judea to worship this Davidic king. This takes on even more significance in Mt 28 when Jesus commissions his disciples and tells them to go and make disciples of all nations. Don't miss it Matthew bookends his Gospel with an emphasis all the peoples of the earth. He begins with people coming from the nations to worship the king and ends with people going to the nations to proclaim the king. This rescuer has come to be glorified in the salvation of sinners not only from the Jews but from the east—to the ends of the earth.

You've got to believe that these wise men after seeing the star, the child, and the vision not to return to Herod, went back to the East and told the story. And when we think about Christmas and Christ's first coming we must do so with a realization that at this moment there are 7165 people groups, representing 3.18 billion people or 41.9 percent of the world's population that are unreached with the Gospel (unreached = <2% evangelical and <5% professing Christian). Map. And they need more than our pity. They need the Gospel. That's why we're taking up the Lottie Moon offering. That's why we have a team going East this spring to serve with some of our overseas workers. Not going east this Christmas? That's ok—you'll have people in your home and you'll be in people's homes who haven't heard the Gospel. People who've heard the name Jesus, maybe own a Bible and maybe been to church, but never heard the good news that Christ has come to live the life they should have lived and die the death they deserved to die and stands ready credit them with his righteousness the moment they turn in faith to him. And so as this king drew those far away in his first coming, let us be intentional this Christmas about drawing people Christ who are not ready for his second coming.

This king desires genuine worship over religious expertise.

These wise men give us an example of what genuine worship and even childlike faith looks; what a God-glorifying response to His son looks like. These folks aren't theologians. They're not experts in the Hebrew Scriptures, they're simply following God's light as he guides them to the king and their doing so with incredible joy. Look at verse 10, "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." This is really joyful! Joy is one of the indicators that their worship is genuine. Look at this joy in pursuing the king. They don't want stuff. They just want to see him—be in his presence. They don't have everything figured out—they haven't memorized Deuteronomy—but they've humbled themselves, brought, gifts, to offer joyful worship to a child.

And we're supposed to contrast the response of these men with little knowledge about God to the response of the religious experts—the scribes and Pharisees—who know the Scriptures backward and forward. And when these men come telling them that the Jewish Davidic king has been born, what do they do? Run over to Bethlehem? No, they don't do anything. They are completely indifferent. The people who knew the most cared the least. Their heads were full, but their hearts were hard.

And I ask people all the time how much they enjoy Jesus, because I think that's at the center of God glorifying worship. I'm an advocate for theological training and discipleship but never as a way to move beyond the joy of beholding the king. And I know too many Christians that have little joy in Christ, little affection for him, spent little time in private devotion—but love debating about the end times, talking about the age of the earth, and speculating about angels and demons. And I'd simply want to ask you this Christmas—amidst your busy life perhaps amidst all the Bible verses you memorized—has Christ lost his luster? Do you at all identify with these wisemen? Rejoiced greatly with exceeding joy? IS the joy of biblical Christmas the joy of your personal life? Not asking if you're a theologian. Their simple faith was still a true faith. Better a simple faith with a joyful heart than an academic faith with a cold one. God measures the genuineness of your faith from the inside out.

This king conquers by dying not killing.

As we have two different responses in these passages we also have two different kings—two “kings of the Jews” that we're supposed to compare (got to read further to get to Jesus). And I think this comparison offers an interesting commentary on our culture's view of strength and power. You've got King Herod who in many ways is a paradigm for worldly strength, riches, military and political power, ruling over people—professional success. And you've got King Jesus—who at this point is a baby. By outward appearances born out of adultery, in his adult life he preached the Gospel and loved the least of these, he was faithful to his Father, but he was poor, didn't have a permanent residence, hung out with tax collectors and sinners was betrayed by one of his friends, and was executed in his mid 30s. Which king is more attractive to us? Which king's version of strength do you more naturally admire? Is it the king with a gold bracelet sitting on a cushion or the one with a crown of thorns hanging on a cross? Which one of those is a life well lived?

Is there not a part of us that is drawn to admire a worldly strength characterized by power and success establishing yourself over a spiritual strength characterized by love and trust for God and submitting yourself to him? Francis Chan, “Sometimes people talk about Jesus like he's a great Savior but not a very good role model.” We want to love him but do our best to avoid living like him. But friends that would be a huge mistake because in many ways Christ's strength was displayed in his weakness. Phil 2 says he stepped out of heaven—surrendered benefits and privileges that were rightfully his and made himself nothing and became obedient to death—that is strength. That's a hero.

And that would start in a cradle in Bethlehem and end on a cross outside of Jerusalem. And it's with this realization the Scripture seems to present the myrrh as more than just a respectful gift. Myrrh was a perfume, but it was also an anesthetic mixed with wine and an embalming solution. Jesus is presented with myrrh in his cradle and the next time he will be presented with myrrh is on his cross mixed with wine. And would you know that when a man named Joseph of Arimathea comes and asks for Jesus' body, Jn. 19:39 says that Nicodemus anointed him with 75lbs worth of myrrh and aloes. I've heard people say this is like bringing a casket to a baby shower—that's an overstatement. But it does seem like what we have here is a kind of foreshadowing of the reality that this king was born to rescue sinners through self-sacrifice. King Herod spread death but King Jesus came to end death. He came to rescue his people and make his blessings flow far as the curse is found. But participating in that rescue is not a default for anyone and his kingship is often met with one of two reactions...

This king elicits either surrender or rebellion.

The final contrast we see here in this text is perhaps the most obvious and that is the reactions of Herod and the wisemen when it comes to this shepherd king in Bethlehem. Herod sees him as a threat to his personal reign and power, his reaction is to try and destroy him. The wisemen see Christ as a blessing from the Lord and they respond in worshipful surrender.

Same Jesus—two different responses. And I even though this happened 2000 years ago these two reactions are very current...haven't changed one bit. Herod wasn't mad because this child was a rescuer, he was mad because he was a king. The divisive element in the kingship of Christ is not that he came to rescue you but that he came to rule you. And there is a version of Christianity out there where you can enjoy the benefits of his rescue, and skip out on the what is perceived to be the burdens of his rule. But it's not true. Only those who are ruled over by Christ participate in the rescue of Christ. If you do not submit to Jesus as your Lord, you do not have him as your Savior.

Jesus hasn't just come to help me live a better life, he's come to take over your life—and that either sounds like a threat or it sounds like rescue. And how your view Christ's lordship and rule largely depends on how you view yourself. If you are the captain of your own ship and your own ruler, then you'll see this as a threat. But if you accept that no one has done more to make you miserable than you, the idea that someone would come in and show me how to do it, sounds like rescue. It's an acknowledgment that you are more fit to rule me than I am to rule myself. As a Savior, Jesus saves me from the penalty of my sin. As Lord, he saves me from my pitiful efforts at self-governance—he saves me from myself. The good news of Gospel isn't just that I'm forgiven but that I'm under new management.

Joy to the world, the Lord has come, Let earth receive her king.