

The Worship of King Jesus

Matt. 2:1-12

Intro. In the interest of presenting Jesus Christ as Messiah and King, Matthew began his Gospel with His birthright...a genealogy that establishes His right to the throne of David. Yet the genealogy begs a question. The language changes at **v.16** where the record says Jesus was born of Mary but not of Joseph. How then, was Jesus conceived? The answer is revealed in the familiar Christmas narrative that follows. The Holy Spirit caused conception in the Virgin Mary. While His genealogy establishes Christ's humanity, the virgin birth establishes His deity. In fulfillment of **Isa. 7:14**, the miracle of the virgin birth served as a sign that separates Jesus from the rest of humanity. Our Savior and King is the unique Son of God, the Lord from heaven. The reason this is so important is twofold. As the bumper sticker says, *"The solution to our problems will not come from the minds of those who caused them."* Our fallen world needs outside help. And second, as Anselm of Canterbury observed, *"Only one who was both God and man could achieve our salvation."* The narrative continues in **Matt. 2:1-12** declaring how Christ's birth was witnessed by signs in heaven and worshipped by men on earth. Here in the Christmas story we're given a prime example of what it means to worship the King of Kings. That's our focus this AM. The worship of King Jesus.

1. The Magi and the Star – vs. 1-3 - after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

To set the stage, we need to consider the phrase, **the time of King Herod**. Who was this character whose name means "hero's song?" Herod was the son of Antipater who was Idumean (or Edomite). His mother Cyprus was the daughter of an Arab sheik. So Herod grew up in a home where there was very little love or respect for the Jewish people! When the Romans took control, they set aside the Aaronic priesthood and appointed their own High Priest. In that era Jewish men actually lobbied and campaigned for this high office just as the papacy did in the Dark Ages. Herod's father, Antipater, supported a Hasmonean candidate by the name of John Hyrcanus who was eventually made High Priest by Mark Antony. With his political sights set on ruling Judea, Herod married the daughter of John Hyrcanus. So Herod was half Idumean / half Ishmaelite / and son in law to the High Priest. As a classic politician, he attached himself to people on the way up. In 37 BC Rome made him Prefect of Judea. But Herod's favorite title was to be called King of the Jews! As a son of Esau, he was fully aware of the irony of his rule over the sons of Jacob. Because of Herod's heritage and policies, the Jews never embraced him.

Among Herod's achievements were his construction projects. He spent 46 years enlarging the Temple Mount with its surrounding walls. He built a palace in Jerusalem dedicated to Mark Antony and another called the Herodian. In the south he built Masada where 1,000 Jews committed suicide rather than being captured by the Roman General Flavius Silva. In the north he built a palace in Caesarea along with an impressive seaport and aqueduct.

But Herod the builder was a madman. Whatever virtues he possessed were overshadowed by His jealousy and ruthless paranoia. He killed the 2,000 survivors of five cities that rebelled against him. He had his brother in law drowned / executed his uncle / and had his wife's grandfather / his wife / his mother in law / and three of his sons put to death. Because he knew no one would grieve at his funeral, he conspired to have all the notable men of Jerusalem assembled in the Hippodrome and executed the moment his death was announced. Only his demise could stop his lunacy and prevent that plan from being carried out. Herod ruled Judea with oppressive cruelty driven by a fanatical neurosis that someone might be greater or garner more prestige than himself.

So the time of Herod was a time of heavy-handed oppression. As Dickens wrote, *"It was the worst of times."* But into this hopeless political scene God sent His Messiah and for that reason, *"It was the best of times."*

In these verses we also meet the **magi**...or as tradition calls them...the Wise men. The **magi** are the most celebrated gentile believers in history! They were the first non-Jews to bow to King Jesus. Their identity is shrouded in mystery. The carols call them kings from the Orient, but they didn't rule anybody and probably came from Persia. Tradition says there were 3 but that's based entirely on the 3 gifts they gave to Jesus. At a museum in Cologne, Germany, their skulls are on display. But tourist beware!...the authenticity of these skulls is a bit "sketchy." They weren't found until the 12th century! Christmas cards picture them riding on camels, but the Persians rode horses. And at least one more adjustment is in order...the traditional nativity scene has them at the manger with the shepherds / the angels / the newborn baby / Joseph and Mary / plus a few barnyard animals. In other words, the traditional manger scene is sort of like Best Buy on Christmas Eve! But **Matt. 2:11** says the magi came **to the house**, not the manger. And as we'll see, the narrative suggests Jesus was about 2 years old when the magi arrived. So if you want a Biblically accurate nativity scene, the wise men need to be somewhere off in the distance because they didn't arrive for almost 2 years!

Many believe these **magi** descended from the seers who served in the courts of Babylon during the days of Daniel. They were a wealthy and respected class of scholars...scientists in their own right. Some believe they were **Zoroastrians** who sought guidance from the stars. From **magi** come the words *magic* and *magician*. Because of their involvement in astrology and the occult, the Jews never regarded them with favor. Yet it's believed these same men were exposed to the Hebrew Scriptures during the Babylonian Captivity. The prophets Daniel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah wrote to the Jews in captivity in the very region the **magi** came from. These prophets of God foretold the coming of a Jewish King who would establish an everlasting kingdom. From v.3 we learn the arrival of their caravan and the provocative questions they were asking disturbed Herod and **"all Jerusalem with Him"**. (v.3) But of course Herod was disturbed! He had no tolerance for potential rivals...especially a Jewish king who might be the One to fulfill the Hebrew prophecies.

Notice v.1 says the magi arrived **after** the birth of Christ. Then according to v.11 - they didn't come to a manger, they came **"to the house"**. Then too, Jesus is referred to as a **child** (Grk. *technon*) while Luke's Gospel says the shepherds found the **baby** (Grk. *brephos*) in a manger. (**Lk. 2:16**) The fact that Herod gave the order for all male children two years of age and younger to be killed, (v.16) was based on the time the star appeared. (v.7) Herod's command sets the age of Jesus when the magi came. So if your nativity set is in the family room, put the wise men in the kitchen.

Though mystery swirls around the magi, we know God led them to Jerusalem. While still in Persia an unusual star appeared to them the night of Christ's birth. Having made the 500 mile journey to Jerusalem, v.2 says they told their story to the leaders there. They said, **"We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."** Notice, they called the star, **His star**. Centuries earlier, Balaam prophesied the coming of a great king. **Num. 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..."** The idea that a king's arrival would be signaled by a rising star was rooted in eastern tradition. But as students of the stars, these magi also believed the Hebrew Scriptures. From the words of Balaam, they expected a special star to rise in Israel that would signal the arrival of a new king.

Yet this king would be entirely unique. The prophecies said he would be righteous and powerful...a shepherd-king. He would establish a glorious kingdom that would never end. Whether the star was natural and creation giving witness to the birth of its creator...or unique and supernatural...is a great topic for a Life Group discussion or around the dinner table.

What we know for sure is that God used a brilliant luminous object to lead the magi to Jerusalem. And like the pillar of fire that led Israel at the time of the Exodus, it may have been for their eyes only! In your discussions about the star...please discard the notion it was an alien spacecraft! But notice the particulars. When they arrived in Jerusalem, the star disappeared and then reappeared. When it reappeared, the star led the magi 5 miles south to Bethlehem...to the very house where Joseph, Mary, and the child Jesus were staying. The point to remember is that God used His light to lead these gentiles to the One who is called the Light of the World. As the Psalmist wrote, **“In your light we see light.” (Psa. 36:9)** The star that announced Christ’s birth was a partial fulfillment of **Isa. 60:1 - “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.”**

In keeping with his purpose of presenting Jesus Christ as God’s Messiah and King, Matthew reports how His birth was witnessed by a astronomical sign from heaven and worshipped by a respected class of men on earth. Though the carols and traditional version of the Christmas story often have the wise men coming to Herod, the magi probably came to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem first. Nobody who valued their life waltzed into Herod’s palace asking where they might find the new king. To do that would be like asking Adolf Hitler where you might meet the new Fuhrer. A more reasonable scenario has the magi coming first to the religious leaders. They expected these men to be on the same page and eager to hear the good news. But Israel’s leaders were troubled. News of the magi’s arrival and inquiry spread through Jerusalem quickly. The whole town was alarmed at the thought of how Herod might react. When his Secret Service informed him of what was going on, Herod secretly summoned the magi to appear in his court. He asked them to tell him the exact time the star appeared. Rather than lash out, Herod used the magi to gain the information he wanted.

2. Herod and Israel’s religious leaders – vs. 4-6

If anyone should have anticipated Christ’s arrival, it was Israel’s religious leaders. They were specialists in God’s Law and custodians of the prophetic Scriptures. **Matt. 2:4-6 - When he (Herod) had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.”** When Herod asked where he would be born, Israel’s wisest theologians quoted **Micah 5:2** perfectly. They knew God said His Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. They couldn’t claim ignorance! Ever since Moses, the Jews had been waiting for their Messiah. The destiny of their nation was linked to His coming. Life under Roman tyranny was oppressive and many were eager for their Messiah’s coming. This explains why so many flocked around John the Baptist...they thought he was the One! But the nation’s theological experts were fast asleep. Later Jesus said, **“Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.” (Matt.15:14)** God had revealed the family / the time / the birthplace / and the manner of their Messiah birth. They should have been looking for him. It would be excusable to be caught off guard if some dignitary arrived with no advance notice. But this wasn’t the case with Israel’s Messiah. Christ’s coming was announced centuries in advance. But when Israel’s leaders heard the news, they didn’t even bother to walk the short distance to Bethlehem to check it out.

But why? Why did so many miss Christ that first Christmas? They missed His coming because of **indifference**. Israel’s leaders didn’t know God or need Jesus. With their flowing robes / clerical honors / and works-righteousness, they didn’t feel the need for a Savior. They weren’t interested. They felt secure in their relation to Abraham and in their system of rites and law keeping. That’s what religion does. It lulls people into a false sense of well-being. Religion is like a rocking chair. It’s something to do, but it won’t take you anywhere...including heaven! Yet still today, millions rely on their church to make them right with God. They attend services.

They give a little cash to charitable organizations. They do good deeds. In their estimation (which is heavily weighted in their favor) they feel they've only done a few really bad things. They feel good about their lives and confident God does too. Yet that attitude is misguided and very dangerous! Today millions are lulled to sleep and indifferent to the promises of Christ's return.

All around us people are indifferent to Christ because they don't realize how much they need Him. If a doctor came up with a 100% cure for cancer, he wouldn't be treated with indifference. People with the dreaded disease would crowd his office. That's how it should be with Jesus. If sinners knew the righteous judgment ahead, they'd seek the Savior who can save us completely and forever. But as it stands, the world is indifferent and even hostile to the Christ of Christmas. So in these verses we see a world leader who was neurotically intimidated and Jewish leaders who were religiously indifferent. Later when Jesus was offered to Israel, He said... **"If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. (Lk. 19:42)** Religion without Christ has a desensitizing effect, but it also blinds people to the truth.

3. King Herod and the Magi – vs. 7-9 - Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

Under the pretense of wanting to worship the new king, Herod plotted to destroy him. At this moment in history, Herod was Satan's man. Jesus said Satan...**was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (Jn. 8:44)** And now this same satanic evil surfaced in Herod because he too was a liar and a murderer. To confirm the fact that Herod was Satan's man, let's take a moment to read **Rev. 12:1-5 – A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.** Based on Jacob's vision in **Gen. 36**, the woman clothed with the sun is Israel and the twelve stars are the twelve tribes. **She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.** In Mary, the nation of Israel was pregnant and ready to give birth to the long-promised seed of woman who would crush Satan's head.

Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The **red dragon** is Satan. The 7 heads represent 7 kingdoms that rose to power / hated / and attempted to destroy Israel. These kingdoms were Egypt / Assyria / Babylon / Persia / Greece / and Rome. The 7th kingdom is the revived Rome...the Rome to come. The 10 horns represent a 10 nation confederacy that will rise to power in the last days. The stars flung from heaven to earth are fallen angels...evil spirits. But notice the second part of **v.4 - The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born.** What person of history tried to destroy a Jewish child the moment it was born? Herod! Herod was Satan's pawn. But Satan's plan failed because as **v.5** says, **She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.** Here in symbolic language John was given a condensed version of the ancient struggle for the souls of men. God's redemption program was on the line. When the Magi didn't return to tell Herod where Jesus was, he was infuriated. He calculated the time the star appeared and ordered all the infant boys in Bethlehem two years of age and younger, to be killed. Like Satan himself, Herod was brutal and merciless...a child killer. He was driven by jealousy and fear that a rival might take his throne. He couldn't stand the thought of people bowing to someone other than himself. Herod was Satan incarnate.

He built his own little empire without God and destroyed any who threatened him or got in his way. But isn't it true that human nature rejects Jesus for the same reason? We want power and control. We want to be the lord and king of our lives. We're reluctant to submit to anybody. Jesus is a rival who threatens our little kingdom. We love our sinful habits / godless ways / and the status quo. We won't let anyone disturb our family, career, position, or ambitions. The Bethlehem innkeeper was in the dark about who Jesus was...but not so the magi or Herod. The magi came to worship but Herod was determined to destroy Him. He sprang into action when he heard some were calling this child, "The King of the Jews." That was his title...his favorite title! How dare they apply it to someone else! The world is full of the Herod type. They stand with the crowd who said, "**We don't want this man to be our king.**" - **Lk.19:14** They reject Christ and His blessings just as decisively as Herod did.

Even though Herod's name appears 11 more times in Matthew's Gospel, he's never referred to as "**King Herod**" again after **2:3**. Having introduced us to the King of Kings...Matthew seems unwilling to call anybody king...especially Herod! So Jesus is worshipped and Herod is washed up. He died just a short time after Jesus was born. Today he bows to the true king of Heaven as every person will.

4. The Magi and the Messiah – vs. 10-12 - When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When the magi entered the house, they bowed down and worshipped Jesus. Like Abraham centuries earlier, God led them out of paganism to a house in Bethlehem. The problem I have with a naturalistic explanation for the star is right here. I can't figure out how a star or planet could come close enough to earth to be beacon over one particular house. It seems to me that any star that appeared over a house in Bethlehem, would also appear overhead when the magi were still in Jerusalem just 5 miles away. Am I right about that?...maybe not. That's my struggle. And this star which they called **His star** in **v.2** seems to have been the same star they saw two years earlier when they were still in Persia!

But...if the star was the brilliant glory cloud known as the Shekinah...the pillar of fire that led the Hebrews out of Egypt...movement and proximity to earth is no problem at all. The Shekinah could have stopped over a particular house. As you may remember, the Shekinah or glory of God departed in the days of Samuel when Israel was conquered by the Philistines and the ark of the covenant was carried off. (**I Sam. 4:21**) **Ichabod** means the glory has departed. The glory departed again in the days of Ezekiel who watched God's glory leave the Temple. The Bible says Ezekiel watched and wept as this brilliant shining manifestation that represented the glorious presence of God, moved above the cherubim in the holy of holies to the threshold of the Temple. The Shekinah then passed through the eastern gate to the Mt. of Olives. God's glory no longer filled His Temple. To Israel's leaders Jesus said, **Look, your house is left to you desolate - (Matt. 23:38).**

That's how the OT ends...with the glory departed. Yet where does the NT begin?...It begins with the glory returning! That's how I understand it. And oh, by the way...the return of Jesus in power and great glory will be accompanied by an incredible display of light. **Matt. 24:27 - For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.** But like so many discussions where we prefer things to be one way or the other...it's possible the Bethlehem star has both a natural and a super-natural explanation. Listen to the next verses in **Matt. 24. vs.29, 30 - "Immediately after the distress of those days ""the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken." "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn.**

They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. So before we write off a natural explanation for the star, we need to figure out what **the sign of the Son of Man** is. I'm still scratching my head about that one. But one thing is certain...On that first Christmas the arrival of Jesus meant the return of God's glory and Revelation calls Him the bright and morning star. We know the shepherds witnessed God's glory the night Jesus was born. **Lk. 2:9 - An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.** And we know John used the word **glory** to describe what the first believers witnessed in Jesus. **Jn. 1:14 - The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.** So the brilliant light that shone around the shepherds the night Jesus was born may have been the same light the magi saw. Like I said earlier, this is an interesting conversation piece for a Life Group or for dinnertime. But it's not critical enough to cause indigestion!

Led by the star God provided, the magi found themselves face to face with the Savior and King of the world. They humbled themselves and bowed down in the presence of Jesus. They knew they were in the presence of One who is infinitely greater than any other. They worshipped him.

Things sometimes tend to get a bit fuzzy when we try to define worship. But worship is really quite simple. Worship is based on recognition of worth. It's our response to how much we believe God is worth. The corollary is this...to refuse to worship God is to see no value or worth in Him. Warren Wiersbe defines worship this way, "*Worship is the believer's response of all that he is - mind, emotions, will, and body - to all that God is and says and does.*" That helps. With the moments remaining, I want to point out five features of worship exemplified by these first gentile believers.

1. v.10 says, When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. To get a better idea of the emotional intensity involved here, the KJV translation has it this way...**they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.** If you turned in a paper with a sentence like that, your teacher would point out the redundancy. In red ink the teacher would say you had too many superlatives! But the response of the magi was magnanimous and superlatives were entirely in order. Prior to this day, their investigations and inquiry had led to hopeless dead ends. But not today! By means of a star, God led them to Jesus, His Messiah and King. These men were overwhelmed with a joyful sense of celebration and we should take a lesson from them! As Sunday rolls around and we gather to learn more about our Savior, our worship should never be dull, starchy, or gloomy! Amen? We shouldn't claim to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus while worshipping with a kisser that looks like it just got slapped with a dead rabbit! In **Psa. 16:11** the Psalmist declared, **You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.** The NIV says **the magi were over-joyed!** That's joyful with a bunch more on top.

2. v.11 says, On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. We considered **Psa. 2** a few weeks ago. In that Messianic Psalm, people everywhere are urged to **Kiss (or embrace) the Son.** The magi hit the floor in the presence of Jesus. God opened their eyes to the glory of God in the face of the infant Jesus. They saw incredible worth in this child. And once again, that's what worship is...it's worth-ship...it's responding to the value we acknowledge in Jesus. It's our response to how much He means to us. When the men of science finally rose to their feet, I imagine them bending low to actually kiss Jesus on the cheek or forehead. They bowed down and worshipped Him. The worship of the magi reminds us that worship is intensely personal because we don't worship a creed...we worship a person, Jesus Christ.

3. v.11b - Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. The words of Isaiah were again partially fulfilled in the giving of these men.

Isa. 60:6 says, **...all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.** When you learn who Jesus is and what He's done for you, you instinctively want to give something back to Him. The magi came prepared to give something as part of their worship. When they opened their treasures, they gave Him their best.

The other day my granddaughter Rebekah posed a question. She said, *"Grandpa, the wise men gave gifts to Jesus. How come we give gifts to each other? Shouldn't we give gifts to Jesus on His birthday?"* Great question! But here's another... *What can we give someone who gave us life? What can we give someone who took the shame and penalty of our sin so we might be forgiven and set free? What gift is most meaningful to Him?* I can answer that...first and foremost, He wants our hearts. Once again, there are lessons we can learn from these first gentile worshippers. Many have commented about the gifts that were rich in spiritual significance and meaning. But the main point is this...the magi honored Jesus with their best. They came prepared to offer something of great value to the One they believed is worthy. That's what worship is and that's what worship does.

4. v.12 - And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. The magi were led to Jesus by GPS. **God's Providential Star.** But having found Him and because they believed in Him, they were brought into a new relationship with God, their Creator. That's what happens whenever a sinner trusts Christ. The simple act of faith brings us into fellowship with God, our heavenly Father.

Notice the verse says, **having been warned in a dream...**By virtue of their new relationship with God, they became objects of the Lord's protection and recipients of His revelation. Up to this point, any conversation they had with God was one way. But now God spoke to them through a dream just as God had spoken to Joseph and Mary. And their new relationship with God did something more. It set them at odds with the devil and Herod his henchman. God specifically warned them not to go back to Herod. The Scripture says they obeyed God's warning and went home a different way. The lesson is clear. To worship and serve the God who is righteous, is to turn from all that is false, unrighteous and displeasing to Him. A relationship with God sets us on a new path. And listen, the person who truly comes to Christ in faith, will go away different. Jesus said, **I am the way the truth and the life. (Jn. 14:6)** So true faith in King Jesus involves repentance. It requires that we turn from old ways to new ways...from old ideas to the truth...and from an old life to a new life. **II Cor. 5:17 - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!**

5. Finally, these men discovered a new purpose for living. They became missionaries. You have to read between the lines to come up with this point...but preachers are good at that. Can you imagine what happened when they returned to Persia? Friends, neighbors, and colleagues surely asked, *"Where've you been? You've been gone a long time... where'd you go...what did you see and do?"* How do think they responded? *"Well, it's too complicated to talk about. / Actually...it was just another business trip / or let's get together when we both have some time to kill and we'll tell you about it."* No way! The magi blurted out the Gospel! The good news gushed out of them...news that God had sent the world a Savior and King. I'm sure they added this...*"We saw Him face to face!"* That's what a witness does. He reports what He has seen, heard, believed, and experienced. Along with the Judean shepherds, the magi from Persia were among the first witnesses of Jesus Christ. And today, nearly 20 centuries later, King Jesus still calls all who by faith have seen His glory...to be His worshippers and His witnesses.

As we study Matthew's gospel, the prayer of our leadership team is that each of us will become worshippers and witnesses of King Jesus to a greater degree in the coming New Year. Why? ...because He is worthy!