

Wise Men Still Worship

by Mark Jarvinen

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ “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 shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

*⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ 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, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route **(Matthew 2:1-12 – NIV).***

We have entered the season of the church year called **EPIPHANY**. **Let’s break down its meaning.** The Greek prefix “**EPI**” means “**upon,**” and the root “**PHANEIN**” means “**to show.**” Thus, the meaning is “**to show forth,**” “**to manifest,**” or “**to reveal.**” In Christian tradition, the epiphany, celebrated on **January 6th**, on the 12th day after Christmas (thus the song about “the 12 days of Christmas”), is **a commemoration of the revealing of Jesus as the**

Christ to the Gentiles. Today's text is a classic epiphany text since it references the **star** whose light guided the **Gentile wise men** to the newborn Christ-child, so that they too might worship Him. The Bible does not explicitly state how long after the birth of Jesus it took for the wise men to arrive in Bethlehem. Tradition suggests 12 days, some scholars suggest up to two months. Although our Christmas pageants portray shepherds and wise men worshipping together at the manger scene on the night of the Christ-child's birth, it is far more likely that they arrived separately and some time later, especially since **v. 11** says they arrived at a house and not the stable where the Christ child was born.

We could read today's text and ask ourselves all kinds of questions, about the role of the star in getting the wise men from the east, all the way to Jerusalem. The text does not specifically say that the star led them or went before them. It only says they saw a star in the east (**v.2**), and came to Jerusalem. And how did the star go before them in that little 5-mile walk from Jerusalem to Bethlehem as **v. 9** says it did? And how did the star "**stop over the place where the Child was?**" The answer, quite simply is: "**We don't know.**" The "**how**" of it doesn't matter all that much. We can become overly preoccupied with Bible minutiae, such as how the **star** did its guiding, or how the **Red Sea** split, or how the **manna** fell in the wilderness or how **Jonah** survived inside a fish. These speculations are what even respected conservative scholars have called "**a mentality for the marginal.**" If these become our main questions, we miss the deep central things of the gospel and miss the true cause for rejoicing in passages like this.

The bottom line is that these wise men, who were Gentiles, wanted to worship the one who had been born king of the Jews – the promised Messiah. Let's see what we can learn about worship from their attitudes and actions and then rejoice together in whatever application this knowledge brings us.

I. THE CALL TO WORSHIP IS UNIVERSAL .

First, we learn that anyone may be called to worship Jesus Christ. Notice that Matthew doesn't tell us about the **shepherds** who came to visit Jesus in the stable on the night of his birth. We rely on Luke's gospel to tell us that. Matthew's focus is immediately on the **foreigners** who came from the east. The wise men weren't exactly likely candidates to come and worship the infant Messiah. They were born of a pagan culture, presumably with a limited knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures. And they were Gentiles – regarded as **UNCLEAN** by the Jews. But still they came to worship! Matthew's point is that Jesus was born the Messiah, not just for Jews, but for all people. Furthermore, not only does Matthew's Gospel begin with these foreign Magi coming to worship Jesus, but it ends with the **Great Commission** – Jesus sending His disciples into **all nations** to make disciples. Therefore, the **universal scope** of Jesus' messiahship is clear from beginning to end in Matthew's gospel.

Yes, the gospel is for all people, no matter who they are or where they come from. Regardless of skin color, what language they speak, whether they are male or female, young or old, short or tall, rich or poor, they are candidates for salvation. That's good news for all of us. Jesus is the Messiah for all who will receive Him as

such. All are eligible to be called to worship Jesus as the Messiah, including the *apathetic* and the *hostile*.

The apathetic are those represented by the **chief priests** and **scribes** in our text. Notice v. 4 –

“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.”

They knew of the prophecy from Micah, given seven centuries earlier, stating that it was **Bethlehem in Judea** in which the Messiah would be born. Notice what the chief priests and scribes did after answering Herod’s question. **ABSOLUTELY NOTHING!** It was back to business as usual. Their sheer silence in the face of Herod’s momentous question was staggering. **Why not go with the Magi?** The answer? They simply weren’t interested. They had no desire to worship the true God. They were practicing their religion out of habit. They had just enough religion to **“inoculate”** themselves from true faith in Christ. That is of course what a small pox or flu inoculation does. It gives your body just enough of the disease germs, to build up a natural resistance or an antibody to the disease. **THIS IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCH TODAY.** In the pews of churches across the land sit people who have been inoculated with Christianity. They are religious people who have never come alive to the saving love of God, which is found through faith in Jesus Christ. May the light of God’s love in Christ shine on any apathetic, inoculated hearts that might be here today.

The other kind of people who are called to worship Jesus but also resist God’s love are those who are **threatened** by Him. These are

people ***hostile*** to Christ, represented by ***Herod*** in our text. Notice how Herod feigns interest in the birth of a new king to mask his fear of a usurper to his throne. He asks the wise men to report back to him news concerning this newborn king, not so he can worship him, but rather so he can destroy him. You see, Herod had been appointed king of Judea by the Roman Senate almost 40 years earlier. He didn't want any new king threatening his power base. Herod would do anything to preserve his power. He had already murdered his wife, three sons, mother-in-law, and several other relatives whom he regarded as threats to his throne. Later, in **Matthew 2:16**, we learn that Herod gave orders to kill all the male babies under the age of two in Bethlehem, in order to eliminate the purported threat of a ***“new-born king of the Jews.”***

In the same way today, there are two kinds of opposition that will face true worshippers of Christ – ***indifference*** and ***hostility***. Yet, the wonder of God's grace is that even they can be called to worship the Christ. All are within the scope of God's grace and redemptive love made known in the gospel.

II. THE ATTITUDE OF WORSHIP IS EXPECTANCY.

Expectancy motivated the wise men to seek out the Christ-child. Somehow they had received knowledge that the King of the Jews would be born. They had seen the star while they were still in the east. But merely having the knowledge was not enough. They could have simply noted the star sighting in their journals. But they wanted to see it for themselves. They were filled with anticipation over what they might discover. They became men on a mission – a mission of hope.

A worshipful attitude is an expectant attitude. It is a mindset that seeks after God. It is having eyes that are open to God's presence, activity, and handiwork all around oneself. Expectancy says Christ is near and can make a difference in my life, therefore, I'm going to seek Him out. This seeking spirit moves us out of the world of **"what has been"** and into the world of **"what can be."** **Verse 10** says that when the wise men saw the star over Bethlehem they were **"overjoyed."** Their expectancy over what could be, led to joy over what was now happening.

In many ways expectancy is a **childlike attitude**. Children live on the tiptoes of anticipation. Christmas is coming! My birthday is coming! I can't wait until this weekend! When I grow up, I'm going to be ... It's a positive outlook on the future. Expectancy in worship can bring that same sense of anticipation and wonder to our futures as well because we're convinced that God is up to something wonderful. The expectancy of worship keeps us from becoming jaded and cynical about life – missing the blessing of God's presence and activity all around us.

The **expectancy of worship also helps us endure**. Being able to express their worship to the new born Messiah was so important that the wise men were willing to sacrifice their **time**, (the journey could have taken as long as 6 months), forego their **convenience** (desert travel certainly brought discomfort), and risk their **safety** (outlaws and robbers were plentiful along the way). That is quite a contrast to many of us today. We are interested in worship that fits into our lives and schedules and increasingly our preferred style. We want worship that meets our needs, never-mind whether God is

glorified. And we'll go to church as long as we can get home in time for the kickoff or to the restaurant in time for our reservation. If we're only interested in worship when it's convenient, easy, and entertaining, are we true worshippers? It's been about 38 years since the memorable film entitled **Chariots of Fire**, winner of the 1981 Oscar award for best picture was released. It's been a few years since I last saw this compelling movie, but who can forget **Eric Liddell's decision** not to run on a Sunday in the **1924 Olympics** in Paris? His decision seems even more out of place today than it did when the film was first released. But before we write off his decision as legalistically motivated, or the product of narrow-minded, old-fashioned thinking, we must first recognize that Eric Liddell was prepared to put aside anything, even the personal glory of Olympic fame, that stood in the way of his worship of God. **Would we?** That leads to my third point ...

III. THE HEART OF WORSHIP IS SURRENDER.

Notice v. 11- **“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed and worshiped him.”** Could the Magi have been surprised to find the Christ child in an ordinary house? Shouldn't a King be born in a palace? Yet, they go in and fall down before him in worship. What humility! Today, people like to stand up and clap for someone they admire. But these wise men fell down and worshipped. Literally, the term means **“kissed toward him.”** In other words they adored this little baby and loved him. Therefore, we gather that their actions were not ritualistic, but from the heart. Did these wise men fully understand that this baby was the Son of God? Perhaps not fully. But they did recognize that he was worthy of worship. Think about how many of us have known for

years about the life and ministry of Jesus, including His sacrificial death and His resurrection in power. Then think about how much more enthusiastic and engaging our worship should be than that of the Magi. Yet, how often do we just go through the motions of worship? It's not supposed to be that way. True worship takes place as we bow before the Lord with a surrendered heart that then leads us to serve others.

How do we know that our hearts are surrendered? The wise men gave gifts. **Gold, frankincense and myrrh.** What kind of gifts were these for a baby? They weren't a year's supply of diapers or formula, or onesies. The Magi gave gifts fit for a King – gold and expensive perfumes and ointments. These gifts weren't practical, but the Son of God doesn't need anything from human hands. After all, it would dishonor a monarch to receive **“care packages”** from foreign visitors.

What does the fact that the gifts were precious and expensive really mean? I think the logic runs like this – giving to the Christ child something He didn't need, which was nonetheless something that was valuable and costly to the giver, was each wise man's way of saying to Christ, **“You are my treasure, symbolized by this gift I bring.”** Such surrender and sacrifice are indicative that authentic worship from the heart has taken place. I guess taking up an offering during a worship service is very much in keeping with the spirit of heart-felt worship. Even though the wise men remind us that part of worship is giving back some of what God has given us, we must always remember, however, that ultimately Christianity is not about what we give God, but what He has given us, His Son, Jesus Christ.

Back in 1989, the late evangelist, **Billy Graham**, had his star added to the famed sidewalk along Hollywood Boulevard. Years earlier, he had refused the honor but at the unveiling ceremony in 1989 he said, **“I hope the star will identify me with the gospel I preach. We should all put our eyes on the true star, the Lord Jesus Christ.”** This leads to my final point ...

IV. THE FRUIT OF WORSHIP IS OBEDIENCE.

The wise men were warned by God in a dream (v. 12) not to return to Herod and divulge information about the Christ child. It seems that as a result of their worship, God was with them. And here, God gives immediate instruction. Being wise, they chose to obey. Obedience is the only choice that honors God.

Listen to the words of **I Samuel 15:22** –

“Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”

The fruit of worship – of a heart that intimately communes with God is obedience to his will. **Romans 12:1** says –

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of the mercy of God, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.”

The fruit of worship are lives committed to Christ in holiness and devotion.

As we enter a new year, I challenge each of you to let the example of the wise men lead you into true worship of the Christ who came to be your Savior and who is coming again to be your ultimate ruler and King. Never forget - Wise men still worship. **A-men.**

