

December 21, 2025

WORSHIP THE KING: MATT 2:1-12

Introductory Activity

Ask: What are the typical set pieces in a Christmas nativity? (Allow the group to answer.)

Explain: (You might bring a simple nativity with you and set it out as you detail the various pieces.) The traditional nativity will typically feature a barn of some kind, a baby Jesus in a manger, Mary, and Joseph. There will probably be an angel. There will be shepherds, sheep, and possibly some other animals. There will also probably be three ornately dressed wise men or kings.

Ask: Did I miss anything, or is there anything that might be wrong about this scene?

Explain: As we are going to see in our lesson today, the wise men or kings were not present at the birth of Christ. We will also see that the Bible does not tell us there were three wise men, only three gifts. Ultimately, it does not matter what your nativity looks like. What truly matters is that you understand the purpose of the wise men. That is what we are going to look at today.

Summarize Transition: But first, let's back up a little. Matthew chapter 1 provides the genealogy of Jesus. In this list, we can see at least two things. First, Jesus descends from the kingly line of David. Second, we see that the list includes men (that is normal for an ancient genealogy). It also includes non-Jews (Rehab and Ruth) and women (Bathsheba, David's mother, and Mary, Christ's mother). There might be other reasons for this, but the inclusion of these points to the mission of Christ to save everyone regardless of ethnic background or station in life.

Matthew continues in chapter one to focus on Joseph's experience leading up to the birth of Christ. He details how an angel from the Lord explained the divine intervention of the Lord leading to Mary's pregnancy, and that Joseph should marry her. Matthew then skips over the birth of Christ completely. Chapter 2 picks up sometime later with the story of the wise men. We have to remember that Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience, and one of his purposes is to present Christ as the coming King. He does that in his story about the wise men. We are going to see that Christ is not just a King, He is a divine King who should be worshipped.

1. SEEKING THE KING (MATT. 2:1-3)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 2:1-3.

Explain: Matthew sets the scene for us in these verses. He begins by presenting the persons important to the story. First, we have Jesus, who was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea. Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David and was only 6 or 7 miles southeast of ancient Jerusalem. In verse 2, the traveling wise men refer to Jesus as the "king of the Jews." In verse 4, Herod refers to Him as the Messiah when he seeks counsel from the religious leaders. It is clear that everyone knows who the wise men seek. They do not know about the

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Matthew* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- *Exalting Christ in Matthew* (Exalting)
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 1-13* (ACCS)
- *The King Has Come* (Spurgeon)

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baby Jesus, but they know the men are asking about the long-awaited Anointed One (Messiah, Christ) who would set His people free.

Discuss: How would you describe Jesus to a person asking questions about Him? (Allow time for answer.)

Explain: Jesus, even as a young child, was/is Emmanuel, God with us. He is the one who died for our sins after living a sinless life. He is the light of the World who wants to redeem each and every person. The wise men were looking for Him, but “as they began asking around about the One born King of the Jews, all they got were blank stares.” (Exalting, 33). Instead of finding King Jesus, they find a different king. They find king Herod. The Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide gives us a description of the man. (You can read, summarize, or have someone read the paragraph on page 34 of the PSG. See the Notes Box) With this in mind, we can understand why the city was “deeply disturbed.” If this mad king was disturbed, they were disturbed. But why was Herod disturbed? Firstly, Herod was not a legitimate king of Israel because he was not a Jew. He was actually a descendant of Esau and from the land south of Israel. Secondly, Herod was placed in charge of Israel by the ruler of Rome. Thereby, when he heard that a legitimate descendant of David, the prophetically predicted Anointed One, had been born, he was “deeply disturbed.”

Discuss: Why might someone today be deeply disturbed by the Truth about Jesus?

Explain: If the child born in Bethlehem was truly the rightful ruler of Israel and if the prophecies concerning Him were accurate, Herod had a problem. A man like him, who was constantly worried about someone taking the throne in a world filled with contests for greatness and wars of conquest, could only see danger in this situation. The same is true today, when a person really understands the truth about Jesus—that He is King, and I am not—they might be deeply disturbed because that means they are to submit to Him and everything He teaches. You see, in Herod “the opposition to Jesus officially began.” (Exalting, 33) And it continues today by those who do not want to hear the truth or whose hearts are too hard to believe the truth.

In verse 1, Matthew introduces Jesus, the King, and Herod, the king. Then he introduces the wise men. These men were not kings. Instead, they were religious leaders, probably astrologers, in their homeland. “These men were well-respected, with roles in both religion and politics in their own land.” (Exalting, 31) Matthew does not tell us from where they come specifically or how they knew that the star pointed to the King of the Jews. It is probable that they came from Persia. This is the region where, not too long before, the Jews were held in captivity. If this is the case, then the testimony of the prophet Daniel and other Jews might have left behind a witness concerning the Anointed One. It appears that, whatever they knew, they were committed to finding the young King. “From Babylon to Bethlehem is 547 miles of extremely inhospitable terrain. But even if it wasn’t that far—if it was only 200 miles or twenty miles—why would anyone desire to do this? Why leave friends and family (maybe wife and children) for likely a year or two? What’s a stake? What’s the need?

Notes:

“Herod ruled as king of the Jews from 37 BC to his death in 4 BC. While he is known for many building projects including an extensive renovation of the Jerusalem temple, he is better known for his insane fear of losing his throne. He exhibited constant paranoia that someone was going to steal his throne. To satisfy his fears, Herod had his wife, three sons, brother-in-law, and mother-in-law killed because he thought they were trying to take over his throne. As he approached death, he had leading citizens of Jerusalem imprisoned with the instruction that upon his death, they were to be killed. His reasoning was no one would weep when he died, but at least when these prominent Jews died, there would be weeping on the day of his death.” (ETB PSG, 34)

Balaam under the guidance of the Lord prophesied that a King would come for Israel in Numbers 24:17

What's the driving impulse?" (Preaching, 49) We don't know what was driving them, but they knew enough to seek out the King.

Discuss: Why might someone seek out Jesus today or at least begin to express interest in church?

Explain: If we concede that the wise men knew about the Jewish teachings of men like Daniel or the account of God's work in the lives of men like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego or the account of God's empire changing work in the life King Balthasar (remember the handwriting on the wall), we can understand that despite their insufficient information they did know He was God's man and God as man, worthy of worship. We don't always know why people seek out Jesus or listen to us when we reveal the gospel to them. But consider the people you know. Some have great wealth and influence, like the wise men. Some have a faith or an understanding of spirituality that leaves them wanting more, like the wise men. We should be ready to point them to Christ. As we will see in the next passage, those who knew the truth were indifferent to it. It should not be that way with us.

Summarize Transition: To summarize, we have two kings. One is a tyrant who oppresses his people. The other is Emmanuel, who has come to die for His people. We also have wise men seeking something they do not fully understand, but who understand enough to know the One they seek is worthy of their sacrifice and worship.

2. FINDING THE KING (MATT. 2:4-8)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 2:4-8.

Explain: Before we discover some application in this passage, let's look at the basic events they outline. First, we see that Herod had insufficient knowledge of Scripture. He probably knew that the Jews were waiting for the Messiah. During the 400 years following the close of the OT, what we call the Intertestamental Period, anticipation among the Jews was heightened, and others had claimed to be the Messiah or at least functioned in the culturally expected manner of the Messiah. When the wise men came looking for Him, Herod knew enough to at least know what they were talking about, but he did not know enough to fully answer their questions.

We see this today. The often-quoted Flannery O'Connor states that the South is Christ-haunted. In other words, a lot of people know about Christ. They have heard grandma talk about Him or they hear about Him at Christmas or when they attend a funeral or wedding. But, like Herod, they only have cursory knowledge of Him. So, when they have questions, they do like Herod. They seek out someone in their family or social circle to give them information. Herod goes to the chief priests and scribes. Who are these people? The Explore the Bible Commentary explains the religious situation in the 1st century BC: "Priests were divided into twenty-four divisions. The heads of these divisions were called chief priests...Scribes

were initially men who copied the Old Testament Scriptures. However, by Jesus' time, scribes were known as men who understood Scriptures, skilled in the interpretation of Scripture and the application of it to a person's life...This group of chief priests and scribes were probably the Jewish Sanhedrin (the supreme court of the Jews)." (ETBC, 36) So, Herod calls in the religious elite and asks for clarification on the matter. They respond immediately and quote from the prophet Micah. Their rendering of Micah 5:2 is not exact, but it is close enough.

There are two application points we can take away from the actions of the religious leaders and Herod, but first, we need to recognize that Christ is the fulfillment of many OT prophecies. (You might point out the poster from the ETB Leader Pack that addresses these prophecies and note that the first three on the list concern Christ's birth.) While others had, will, and do claim to be the Messiah, there is only one who fulfilled the prophecies concerning the role. This is important, not only for us, but for the people in the room when Herod "assembled" them. They knew where to look in scripture! They knew where to find the Messiah! But they were indifferent.

They were Indifferent to the Person of Jesus and thereby the Mission of Jesus.

Just think about the situation for a moment. They had been waiting for the Messiah for hundreds of years. The wise men show up and ask where He is. They know where to find Him because they know what God said through Micah. But they do not do anything about it. O'Donnell writes, "Matthew gives the impression that the whole city of Jerusalem knew [the wise men were looking for the Messiah], yet not one person went to the nearby town to see if these wise men truly were wise, to see if indeed the 'star...out of Jacob' (Numbers 24:17) had come into the world. What gross indifference to Jesus! 'He came unto his own, and his own received him not' (John 1:11, KJV)." (Preaching, 62) This isn't just some modern understanding of their actions. In the 4th century, a church father in Constantinople wrote, "Although troubled, they nevertheless did not try to understand what was happening. They did not follow the wise men or even take any particular notice. To this extent were they both contentious and careless." (John Chrysostom in ACC 22) They were indifferent. They were contentious. They were careless. They told Herod that the child was to be born 6 or 7 miles away, but that was too far to walk. The wise men, pagan gentiles, had travelled over 500 miles, but the religious men of Israel could not walk 6 miles to find the Anointed One. They had waited hundreds of years, but could not spare a day or two to go ask around.

Application: We live in a day of indifference, contention, and carelessness. People are indifferent about faith, contentious toward Scripture, and careless about their souls. That is true not only of the worldly but of the Redeemed as well. In the church, we can be indifferent about the faithless in our community. We get caught up in all kinds of things and forget the mission of the church. In the church, we can be contentious when it comes to others who oppose us. But we can also become contentious toward Scripture when it highlights our sinfulness: our pride, our racism, our greediness, our indifference. In the church, we can also become careless about the souls of others. We say things like, "I have asked them to come to church 10 times. I am done." "I can't make that home visit because it is inconvenient." "I retired from kid's ministry now that mine are out of the house." "I can't give to the Christmas offering for international missions because I have to buy such and such for Christmas."

Notes:

The religious were indifferent. “They weren’t even curious” (Preaching, 62) about the wise men’s questions. Herod’s response went even further. He was hostile to Jesus.

He was Hostile to the Person of Jesus and thereby the Mission of Jesus.

After hearing the response of the religious leaders, he summoned the wise men “secretly.” He told them to go find the child in Bethlehem and report back so that he could go worship the child as well. We know that Herod was lying to the men because we know that he did in verse 16. When the wise men fail to report back, he doesn’t know what child to eliminate, so he simply eliminates all the boys under 2 years of age “in and around Bethlehem.” Why such hostility toward the baby? As we saw before, Herod was a little crazy and would do anything to keep his throne, but it goes deeper than that. There is a spiritual force at play. Satan knew what was happening. He was smarter than the religious leaders who knew the prophecies and ignored them. Satan knew the prophecies, and he was hostile toward the One who came to fulfil them. If he could put an end to the baby in the crib, he would not have to contend with the Savior risen from the tomb.

Application: We do not see hostility akin to Herod’s in the modern West, but we catch glimpses of it. We catch glimpses in our everyday life, social media, and “entertainment.” If we are aware of the broader international scene, we catch glimpses as well. The people of God are under attack around the world. This is not just a modern thing. Christians have been under attack since day one.

Discuss: Why do you think Satan desires for people to kill and attack Christians around the world?

Explain: Satan failed to kill the baby. He failed to tempt Jesus in the wilderness. He failed to stop His ministry. He failed at the cross. With Jesus’s ascension, the church is left to finish His mission. The church is under attack, and has been under attack, because the church is the missionary force of Christ. If Satan can stop the church through persecution or murder, through temptation or apathy, through distraction or dissension, he can fulfill Herod’s plan at the secret meeting with the wise men.

Summarize and Transition: The wise men sought the King. The religious leaders were indifferent toward the King. Herod was hostile to the King. We are to seek the King daily. We are to be passionate about the King and His mission. We should recognize the hostile forces that plague the church. In truth, “If Jesus is who he says he is, you either love him or you hate him...” This is not a nice Christmas story. This is a nasty conflict of kingdoms.” (Preaching, 64) Let’s see what happens when the wise men resume their search.

3. WORSHIPING THE KING (MATT. 2:9-12)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 2:9-12.

Explain: We should take just a moment to consider the star. Many have tried to explain the star with modern science, and they provide compelling evidence regarding their theories. However, let’s take a step back to understand one important truth: **This is No Ordinary Star.** Again, the church father John Chrysostom helps us. “This was not an ordinary star, for no other star has this capacity to guide, not merely to move but to beckon, ‘go before them,’ drawing and guiding them along their way.” (ACC, 26) His choice of verbs is important: “guide,” “beckon,” “drawing,” and “guiding.” Don’t let this escape you: God was guiding; God was beckoning; God was drawing these men. God might not beckon people today through moving stars, but He still calls and guides us. He calls the unrepentant to repentance through the work of the Spirit and the Words of men. He guides the redeemed through the work of the Spirit and the Words of Scripture. God is a guiding God, and He guided the men to “the house.”

Notes:

“This is actually the first time that we see the star move, and it literally—supernaturally—led the wise men to Bethlehem.” (Exalting, 37)

Note: If God can guide the people in the wilderness using a supernatural cloud, He can place an anomalous star in the sky and cause it move around, disappear, reappear and then stop.

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Verse 11a tells us how they responded when they entered the house. “Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him.” Repeatedly in our study, we have seen the desire of the wise men to worship the child. We should not let this pass us by. They were not coming to honor a newly born prince. They were not coming to admire a child born with spiritual abilities. They were not coming to pay respect to some guru. No! They were coming to worship because they knew **This is No Ordinary Baby**. How they knew it, we do not know. But they knew Jesus was different. “They perceived one thing with the eyes of their bodies but another with eyes of their mind. The lowliness of body he assumed was discerned, but the glory of his divinity is now made manifest.” (Chromatius in ACC, 27) The child was God among us. He was Emmanuel. Jesus is no ordinary person. We could extol Him as the great and mighty Creator or the great I Am or many other things, but let us not forget that Jesus is the Savior of the World who gave His life for you and wants to turn your life around. The greatest thing Christ ever did for you was die on the cross. Only He can take away your sin because He is not an ordinary man. This divine baby in an ordinary house is worshipped by the wise men. They also present Him with gifts.

The second half of verse 11 tells us, “Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” **These are No Ordinary Gifts**. The Explore the Bible Leader Guide explains the gifts. “They gave Him gold, which seemed fitting for the King of the Jews. They also offered frankincense, a substance used in the temple and appropriate for humanity’s heavenly High Priest. Finally, without understanding its fuller meaning, they gave Him myrrh, a spice used in preparing bodies for burial.” (ETB LG, 44) In each of our lessons in Matthew so far, we have seen how aspects of Jesus’ ministry point to the end of His ministry. The first week, we saw how His baptism points to death and resurrection. The second week, we saw how the beginning of His ministry in a predominantly gentile area points to the end or purpose of His mission to redeem the nations. Today, we see that even in the gift of myrrh there is a foreshadowing of his death.

Summarize and Transition: These men from the East follow no ordinary star to find and worship no ordinary child and provide no ordinary gifts. It is interesting that in their actions, Matthew provides us a picture of possibly the first Gentiles to worship the Savior. While the world was indifferent and hostile to the King, these wise men responded to His arrival in worship and honor.

CONCLUDE

January 6th, 12 days after Christmas, the church celebrates *Epiphany* to commemorate God’s manifestation to the Gentiles. In Puerto Rico, this is a really big celebration. It is called *Día de Reyes* or Day of the Kings. When I was in Puerto Rico, I noticed that there were figurines of the three wise men or three kings everywhere. This day is as big as Christmas there. On the night before the Day of the Kings, children will place grass in shoe boxes under their beds to provide nourishment for the three camels (or horses). The “kings” will then leave gifts for children, unwrapped, beside the box of grass. On January 6th, there is a huge parade in Juana Diaz where the kings arrive on horseback (there are not a lot of camels on the tropical island). The whole island celebrates the coming of these kings. There are celebrations in people’s homes, and often these are “crashed” by neighbors and friends. The nation celebrates, at least the religious celebrate, because God did not reserve His Son or the message of the gospel for the Jews. The wise men represent the desire of God to take the gospel to all peoples.

Challenge: We should celebrate this truth as vigorously as the Puerto Ricans.

1. Let us avoid indifference to the mission of Christ.
2. Let us avoid hostility to the mission of Christ.
3. Let us seek to worship the King and honor Him with the gift of our lives and effort.