WE HAVE COME TO WORSHIP HIM

Matthew 2:1–12

Key Verse: 2:11

“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.”

This Christmas we’re studying the first two chapters of Matthew to know better what the birth of Jesus means. Through his genealogy we find not only that is Jesus our King, but also that, if we learn the faith of David, God gives us the same grace and the same hope. In the last part of chapter 1 we find a special name of Jesus, “Immanuel,” God with us. This name of Jesus means that he never gives up on us; he stays with us to forgive our sins and heal us spiritually. As we follow Jesus, we learn to help people in the same way. In chapter 2 Matthew contrasts King Jesus with King Herod. It mainly tells us who Jesus is and how to truly worship him. Through this Bible study may God help us know Jesus more personally, worship him, and experience the joy of the Magi.

Verse 1a says, “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea…” Through the genealogy Matthew has shown that Jesus was a direct descendant of David. Now he adds that he was born in Bethlehem in Judea, the hometown of David. The prophets had predicted that the King, the Messiah in David’s line promised to come, would be born in Bethlehem (5–6). Next, Matthew says it was “…during the time of King Herod…” This was the first Herod, Herod the Great. Actually he wasn’t Jewish but Idumean, but his ambition was to become king of the Jews, so he traveled to Rome, begged Caesar, and got his way. Many Jews considered Herod an illegitimate king, so he was always trying to prove himself. He ruled from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. and married several women. He was famous for his great building projects. He built his own grand palace residence south of Jerusalem, called Herodium. He built his crowning achievement, the Jerusalem Temple, to get the Jews to like him, but his achievements couldn’t solve the inferiority complex in his heart. He became more and more paranoid about his position. He became suspicious of everyone. He had one of his wives killed, as well as three of his own sons and some in-laws. So the phrase “during the time of King Herod” points to a dark time in Israel’s history. Often it’s during the darkest times that God chooses to shine his light the brightest.

The last part of verse 1 says, “…Magi from the east came to Jerusalem...” Who were these men? It’s believed the Magi originated with a people called the Medes, with a famous mystic named Zoroaster. The Magi became part of the Persian Empire and later were influential in ancient Babylonia—basically, modern-day Iraq/Iran. They were also called “wise men.” They studied astrology, astronomy, math, chemistry, and ancient religious texts. People called them “magicians,” and they became royal court advisors to kings. They were peers of Daniel in Babylon. It’s likely that during the 70 years of Jewish exile in Babylon the Magi were exposed to the Old Testament. When they studied it, they found a great hope: God had promised to send the Jews a King who would be for all people. These Magi accepted that God’s hope in this King was for them, too.

When they arrive in Jerusalem, what do they do? Read verse 2. We can see several important points here. In Greek the emphasis in this sentence is on the word “born.” Herod had grasped for his position through political manipulation, but Jesus was “born” king of the Jews. Next, it says they “saw his star when it rose.” In the ancient world people believed the birth of a great leader was accompanied by the appearance of a special star. The prophecy of Numbers 24:17a points to the Messiah’s star: “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 Magi believed this prophecy. Each night, as they searched the sky, they were looking for “his star,” and one night, it finally appeared. When it did, they were convinced it was “his star,” and they decided to go and see him. But that was a lot harder than we might imagine. It meant traveling at least a thousand miles on foot, spending many months, a good deal of money and putting everything else in their lives on hold. They couldn’t be completely sure, but they were willing to take a chance on this star and go and see.

The last thing we notice in verse 2 is that they say we “have come to worship him.” The word “worship” is important. It’s more than just an outward gesture; it’s something that can be done only when we give our whole hearts. Actually, all human beings are made to worship. But most of us tend to worship the wrong things. Many worship material things such as investments, houses or cars. They’re very serious about those things. Others worship a boyfriend or girlfriend, a wife or husband or child, or some kind of hero like a singer, athlete or movie star. They’re most serious about those things. The Samaritan woman in John 4 had humiliated herself by worshiping men, who only made use of her and left her used and empty. Matthew the tax collector had worshiped money that left him utterly lonely. People act like they’re so self-sufficient, but deep within everyone is longing to worship something or someone meaningful. In life we go through so many objects of worship, always feeling empty. We’re like Jacob, who first grasped for a position of honor, then for a beautiful woman Rachel, and finally for wealth, only to find that when he had these things, he was so burdened and fearful. At long last, he realized that he should worship God alone. Honestly, what often keeps us from worshiping God is our sin. Our sin makes us either too proud or too despaired to worship God. But God is still inviting us to come and worship him. In Deuteronomy God predicted that his people would become corrupt and idolatrous and suffer greatly because of it. Still, he promised: “But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Dt4:29). This gets at what worship really means. It also explains why God led the Magi to find Jesus when he was born.

But their worship isn’t just an example for us; it also tells us something crucial about Jesus. In the birth of Jesus Matthew is telling us that Jesus is the one worthy of our worship. In fact, he’s worthy of the worship of all people, no matter where they’re from. The Bible clearly tells us that no human being should ever be worshiped; our worship should be reserved for God alone. So Jesus, worthy of worship, is more than a man; he’s God Incarnate, Immanuel.

What effect did the Magi have? Read verse 3. Unintentionally, they were disturbing. Especially their question was disturbing. How could people from a far-off land know about the birth of the king of the Jews when the Jews themselves were totally unaware? The Magi’s arrival exposed the Jews’ shameful lack of interest. It particularly disturbed Herod, who thought *he* was king. Interestingly, when Herod was disturbed, all Jerusalem was disturbed with him. After living under his rule for over 30 years, people came to know what kind of man he was; when he was upset he was capable of any evil. Under Herod people were terrorized and traumatized.

What does Herod do? Generally, he’s not interested in the Bible, and now suddenly he calls for an official state Bible study. However, he’s not searching the Scriptures like the Magi. He’s not interested in truth; he just wants to use information from the Bible for his own agenda. Read verses 7–8. He’s figured out that the Messiah was supposed to be born in Bethlehem; now he wants to know *when* it happened. He says it’s because he wants to go worship him. But that’s a lie; according to verses 13 and 16 what he was really doing was trying to kill the newborn child. Herod is arrogant enough to think he can stop God from accomplishing his will.

Let’s look at the answer the chief priests and teachers of the law give him. Read verses 4–6. Here we should note where Bethlehem was. It was about six miles south of Jerusalem, less than a two-hour walk. It’s sad that these religious experts have the perfectly correct answer but are not in the least interested in going to Bethlehem to see if what the Magi said was true. They have the prophecy of Micah, which the Magi don’t have, but they aren’t motivated to do anything. In fact, they have all God’s revelation at their fingertips, and the Messiah born virtually in their backyard. But because they’re not interested, it does them absolutely no good. It’s just like Christians today who have the whole Bible and all kinds of religious knowledge but who never really do anything with it, who never take any action. And it’s like some people whose only interest is to use what they learn from the Bible for their own purposes. In light of this, why do we go to church, why do we study the Bible?

In verse 6 we learn more about who Jesus is. Let’s read verse 6 again. This verse predicts that the Messiah would be the Shepherd of God’s people. What a contrast! Herod was obsessed with his own vanity and power and was so vicious and cruel to his people. But the Messiah, the Good Shepherd, would sacrifice himself to care for his people. This concept of a shepherd started with David. David grew up as a shepherd boy. He risked his life to protect his father’s sheep. When he became a man, he applied those same lessons as a leader for his people. David embraced all those in Israel who were distressed or in debt or discontented (1Sa22:2). He embraced not just his own tribe but all the tribes of Israel. Because David was a real shepherd, people loved him as their king. David was nothing but a flawed human being, just a shadow. But Jesus was born to be our true Shepherd.

How is Jesus our Shepherd? During his earthly ministry we can see it not just in his preaching and teaching but in the way he treated people. He healed the sick, even late into the night. With compassion he fed the hungry. He made friends with the lonely and the outcasts. He spent time with people no one else wanted to bother with. He treated women and children with respect. There was no one too messed up for Jesus. He cared for people personally. Ultimately he showed he’s our true Shepherd by dying for our sins as the Lamb of God on the cross (Jn10:11; 1:29). A prophet described our Shepherd Jesus: “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa53:3–6). No one else would do it, but Jesus the sinless Son of God willingly bore all our sins in his own body on the cross (1Pe2:24). Because Jesus is our Shepherd, he’s worthy of our worship, and we *want* to worship him as our King, we *want* to love and serve him with all our hearts and souls and strength. No one has to force or push us.

Now let’s finish the story of the Magi. Look at verse 9. It’s amazing that only when they leave Herod in Jerusalem does the star reappear. And not only does the star reappear—it leads them to the house where Jesus is. It’s nothing less than a miracle. How do they respond? Read verse 10. It literally says, “…they shouted with very great joy.” They were Magi, but they throw away their dignity and start dancing. They’re so filled with joy because now Micah’s prophecy is confirmed by the same star leading them to Bethlehem. It means it’s all true. Their great joy comes not from money, food or pleasure, or from people, but from discovering the truth. The real joy of Christmas comes not from spending time with family and friends, with traditions and relaxing; it comes from discovering the truth in Jesus and meeting him personally.

Finally, what do the Magi do? Read verses 11–12. First of all, they do what they set out to do; though he’s just a little child, they bow down and worship him as their true King. Next, they open their treasures and present him with gifts. They give him not cheap stuff as afterthoughts, but their costliest, most thoughtful gifts, fit for a king. Probably unbeknownst to them, their gifts predict what Jesus would do—gold was for a king; frankincense was for a priest; myrrh was for someone who would die. And after their worshiping and giving, protected by God, the Magi just go home. They don’t *get* **anything** for Christmas—they only **give**. Matthew, the former tax collector, was especially moved. Their worship is so pure. Getting doesn’t make us joyful. Worshiping Jesus and giving him our best makes us truly joyful.

In today’s passage we learn about Jesus. Jesus is God, the only one worthy of our worship. And Jesus is our Shepherd. We also learn what it means to truly worship him. May God help us repent of our divided, disinterested hearts and learn how to give our whole hearts to worshiping Jesus. When we do, may he fill us with the great joy of the Magi.