



12-25-2011

The Bittersweet, Priestly King
Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh
Ryan Habbena

Sovereign Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The One who has established Himself as the true and living God and has demonstrated His power for all the nations to see. We come before you today in thanksgiving, recognizing you as who you say you are. And Lord we thank you for the gift we have been given, the gift of life in your son. Lord we thank you that you sent Him. And He was meek, lying in a manger. But Lord we know that He is no longer lying in a manger, no longer a child. We know Him as the risen King of Kings, who bears the stars of Calvary, who intercedes for us and is returning. Lord thank you for saving us from our sins, from placing us out of the domain of darkness, and into the Kingdom of your beloved son, and we are now full standing citizens of the New Jerusalem. Lord as we peer into your word today, we thank you for it, we pray that you would change our hearts and minds. May we be cognizant of what you have done. And Lord may we not be mere hearers of the Word, but may we recognize the Word's significance, and may we fix our eyes on Jesus of Nazareth as we see that day of His return drawing ever nearer. In His precious name we pray, Amen.

Well in the Western world, we are steeped in Christmas tradition. Really for the last 1700 years, this tradition has been established and it has grown. Now while there are many positive aspects to Christmas tradition, there are also traditions that have arisen that have obscured certain biblical truths. Now well over the past several Christmases, we have taken a look at several of these. For instance, Jesus was not born in a cave or in a barn. Rather Jesus was living in Bethlehem in probably a middle-class house, and He was probably there for several days before Mary actually delivered Him.

Another tradition is one of the three wise men or three kings. Now this tradition has even given them names, Melchior, Balthazar, and Caspar. And we know the gifts that the kings brought. Now as we are going to see in our text today, the text nowhere says there were three and only three kings and nor does it say there were only three gifts. And that is part of the tradition that has arisen. And today we are going to look at this event of these Magi coming from the east, and visiting the King. And there are many powerful aspects to this story that are subtle and that are obscured often times by our Christmas tradition.

So I want us today to explore, and we are going to explore Matthew 2:1–12, and we will look at who are these men and why were they here. What is their significance and what is the significance of these gifts that they brought. Now here were going to see the chronicling of this visit, we are going to see the beauty of the Scripture. We're going to see the reason of the coming of King and we are going to see a preview of the return of the King.

So what I want to do first is, I want to give a little bit of background on these wise men, now they came from the east. Now to the east, this was the land of Babylon, the land of Persia, and have you ever wondered why did they know and think about this King in Jerusalem. How did they know about Him? How did they know that this star signified anything. Well, we can only surmise certain things from the Old Testament. But first if you recall Daniel, the prophet Daniel, he was a prophet who was in Babylon, which is most likely where these wise men or these Magi came from.

And Daniel prophesized in Babylon regarding the coming of this King, who is the King of Israel. And in Daniel 7:13 and 14, we see a prophecy regarding the coming of this coming King. Daniel declares "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and He came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:13–14 ESV)

So we see that He is a King that is coming and all peoples are going to serve Him. This may have been something that these wise men had read and understood regarding the coming King. And they see all peoples are going to be submissive to Him, so they see this star. And perhaps Numbers 24:17–19 is the background to where they would of understood this star.

We see in Numbers and this is regarding Balaam and him prophesying, by the way Balaam was one of those in this region as well, so this may have been a prophecy that the wise men knew well, Numbers 24:17–19 "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; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth. Edom shall be dispossessed; Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed. Israel is doing valiantly. And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of cities!" (Numbers 24:17–19 ESV)

And so we see again two prophecies that may have been well known in the land of Babylon from where the kings came from, not the kings rather the wise men and perhaps these were the Scriptures that caused them to expect this King to arise. So these being possible, now let's read of the chronicling of this coming of these men from the east.

Now this is in the Book of Matthew. Now in Matthew 1 we read of the the promises of the coming King who is was going to some in the line of Abraham, in the line of David, the One who was going to come and bless all the nations and be the King of Kings.

And so earlier today we read the Scriptures regarding the coming of this King and the way His birth came about. Now in Chapter 2 we read that “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, 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.” (Matthew 2:1–2 ESV)

So here we see the players. We have Jesus, who in Chapter 1, we have seen He is the promised One, who was going to come out of Jacob and come from David and reign as the King of Kings. So Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which is significant, and we will see the significance of that as we proceed in our text. But there is a couple of other players here, we have Herod the king. Now Herod was a king in Israel but he was a token king. Meaning, he was established and set there by the Romans and he was not a legitimate king of the line of David. In fact many people think Herod came from Edom. Which we see in that very text, the true king of Israel is going to come from and destroy those of Edom.

So Herod is a token king, and Herod is an extremely wicked man. His exploits are well chronicled not only in the Scriptures but also in other portions of first century texts. And so we see Herod, we see him in Jerusalem at this time because wise men come from the east to Jerusalem. And they say “where is He who has born King of the Jews”? So this is One who is born King of the Jews. Even that text right there “born King of the Jews”, this is almost a slap in the face to Herod, who is a token king, established there by the Romans, the enemy. “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”.

Now notice where they came to, where did they come to. They came to Jerusalem, that is where they expected to find the King, and as we progress through this text, we are going to see that Jerusalem is not in a good position. And the king is going to have trouble himself in this city, who is opposed right now at this time to God and to His purposes. And note also they came from the east to worship the King to bow before Him.

And remember what we read in Daniel, “when this King arises all peoples and nations are going to serve Him”. So they are really coming to recognize this is the King of Kings and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the true and living God. “So we are coming to worship Him”. Now who are these men? Now first and foremost they are not kings.

There is nowhere in the text where these men are called “kings”. In fact they are called “Maji”, they were really ancient astrologers who would study the stars and prophecies. And now there were certainly a lot of pagan rituals and things that went along with these things.

But these Maji have heard the message of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and have believed it. And their actions proved such, because they journeyed from the east, probably from Babylon or the region of Bablyon, Persia, to Jerusalem to worship Him. Now let’s progress and see what happened here. “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: “‘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.””
(Matthew 2:3–6 ESV)

So the Messiah was going to come out of Bethlehem, and Herod heard of this and he was troubled, and all of Jerusalem with him. So Jerusalem was troubled, all of Jerusalem was stirred up. Now again we think of these men, and again tradition has us of three wise men coming in. And in fact probably many more than three, they probably came in a grand processional. And thus Jerusalem, seeing this grand processional coming in of wise men from the east surely bearing gifts, are stirred up, what is going on here? So Herod, brings in the chief priests and scribes and asks them as to where the Christ is going to arise from. And rightly so, the chief priests and scribes knowing the Scriptures “in the city of David, in Bethlehem, of Judea is where the Messiah is going to come from”. So this prophecy is indeed true.

Now let’s continue to read about Herod’s deception. “Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”
(Matthew 2:7–8 ESV)

Now already here in the text we Herod is being deceptive. Notice that Herod summons the wise men secretly. He doesn’t want anyone to know what he is saying and what is going on, because he wants to keep this under wraps. Because Herod himself is terrified about another king coming, and usurping his power. Herod was an extremely greedy and selfish man. In fact Josephus records him within other first century literature, yes first century literature, we read that Josephus chronicled that Herod because he was scared that people would not properly mourn him, that he commanded people if he died or when he died, to go out and slaughter all the beloved people and men in the country so it appeared people were mourning his death. That is how shallow this man was. That is how wicked this man was.

And thus as we proceed and see the slaughter of the innocence in Matthew Chapter 2, we know that it's greatly within his character. And now the King has come, so let's kill every single child before the age of 2. So he brings them in and says "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word". He sent them to Bethlehem, he told them where to go, but it wasn't that he could come and worship Him. Herod is being deceitful here, there is much duplicity in Herod here. His intentions are not to worship but to destroy.

And thus we continue with this, and we see the wise men go forth. Now again remembering this is probably a large processional of perhaps dozens of people from the east. Now they embark to Bethlehem. Bethlehem is a short distance from Jerusalem, it's not very long, it's less than a day trip from Jerusalem. So they ventured out, Bethlehem is southwest of Jerusalem and they see the star again and "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy". Now contrast that with Jerusalem's response. Greatly troubled, and the king, the leadership in Jerusalem, the king Herod wants to destroy this child. But the nations are coming, marching in procession to Bethlehem "and rejoicing with exceedingly great joy. 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. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way." (Matthew 2:10B-12 ESV)

So again, a star again guided them to the house. Again we see they were in a house, they were not by means rich, in a rich setting, they were in a meek and humble setting, but they were in a house. The wise men came, and in Bethlehem, they fell down and worshiped the King. And is a common custom during this time, one would bring gifts, very precious gifts to royalty. And the wise men offered these gifts, and then the Lord warns them not to return to Herod, protecting the family, "don't go back to Herod, but rather go by a means of another way". And this is something that greatly upset king Herod as we know and proceed that there was of the slaughter of the innocence in light of this.

Now what I want to do today, now that we kind of have the general context and flow of this narrative, I want to focus on gold, frankincense and myrrh. What are these things? Why are they significant? And what do they have to tell us on the work of our Savior. Now again it doesn't say they only gave them gold and frankincense and myrrh, they probably have Him many gifts. But these are the three that are chosen by Matthew. And he chooses these for a specific reason and throughout the rest of the message today, I want to focus on these, because it is glorious and wonderful to see the beauty of salvation history all inter-twining within this text. Now gold, frankincense and myrrh are something we know of. But if you ask someone what are gold, frankincense and myrrh in our culture, what you most likely hear is that were the things that the wise man came to give to Jesus, cause that's what we know.

If we ask what are they? Maybe gold, but maybe why gold is given isn't usually going to be understood. But the truth is within the original context, gold, frankincense and myrrh would have been immediately understood. And their purposes would have been readily understood and with also with a background in what God has been developing in salvation history we would see the significance here.

First regarding gold, and gold is probably is the easiest for us to apprehend. Gold is precious, gold is valuable, gold is the sign of a prosperous and great kingdom. And we see this in 1 Kings. Now Solomon in his kingdom was known as the most glorious time in Israel's history. And in 1 Kings Chapter 10 we read verse 21 "All King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold. None were of silver; silver was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon." (1 Kings 10:21 ESV) So we see gold is the sign of a great and prosperous kingdom and thus the giving of gold to the ultimate son of David, Jesus of Nazareth is a sign of the coming greatness and prosperity of His kingdom. So that is something we can ascertain.

But frankincense and myrrh are a little more difficult. Now in Leviticus, we read in the giving of the Law, regarding the priestly duties in regarding the food offerings we see that "And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the LORD. (Leviticus 24:7 ESV). Now frankincense was sweet smelling, it was known as a sweet aroma. And as we see here it was intimately tied to the priesthood. Frankincense, and this is where we can hear the word "incense" in here frankincense, it was a resin, it was burned and offered up a wonderful aroma, and it was used in the temple of tabernacle duties. So it's a precious aroma, sweet smelling aroma, that was used by priests in the food offering in the temple. So here we see already the gifts to a King and a gift that reminds people of priesthood, and a sweet smelling priesthood.

Then we get to myrrh. Now myrrh is probably the most significant of these three in regards to what Matthew is setting forth here. Myrrh, the Greek word myrrh, comes from the Hebrew very similar "mor", which means bitter, it means bitter. Now myrrh was also used as an aroma, it had a great smell but if one tasted it, it was extremely bitter. And myrrh is also something that everyone would have known as a custom used for burial. Now we even read this in John Chapter 19 regarding the Lord Himself, and verses 29 and 30 "Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, (this is after Jesus was crucified and died) came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews." (correction John 19:39-40 ESV)

So we have gold, the gift of the king. Frankincense and myrrh would have been gifts fitted for priestly activity, but the elements are bittersweet, bittersweet.

And thus we see, here embedded in this text, subtleties which speak of Jesus' ministry. His ministry is going to be one coming forth as the Son of Man, the King, the Son of David. But He is also a priest, and He is going to have an offering that is a sweet smelling aroma to God. But there is also bitterness within His coming.

Now I want us to look at something fascinating here. I think Isaiah 60 is intended for us to be reminded of when we read this text. Because as we read Isaiah 60 which is speaking of when the Lord comes and restores Jerusalem, we are going to get some interesting contrasts here, which help inform us regarding of what is going with this gold, frankincense and myrrh even further. And this is given to the land of Israel "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you; the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house." (Isaiah 60:1-7 ESV)

Now here what is amazing here, within the context this speaking to the restoration of Jerusalem. Remember the wise men, went where, where did they go first? To Jerusalem! And what did they bring? Good news! But Jerusalem, at least it's leadership wanted nothing to do with it. And notice what it said what will brought to this, I think ultimately this looking forward to the end of the age when Jesus returns and cleanses His city. And the nations are going to come and are going to bring their treasures into this city, honoring the King of Kings in Jerusalem. But we have a both a fore-shadow and a contrast here with His first coming. Notice what it said they're going to bring in the millennium, both gold and frankincense.

What's missing? Myrrh. At this time of the first coming of the King, there was bitterness associated with it. Israel was going to reject her King. Their Messiah needed to go to the Cross, suffer and die a painful bitter death. But it was still a sweet smelling aroma and another thing is myrrh was known for its healing properties, myrrh was known for its healing properties. Thus the bitterness that would come to the Messiah, through His teaching, to His sacrifice was ultimately to heal. And in the millennium, when the nations come they will not be bringing myrrh because the bitterness will be removed and the King will cleanse His city.

So gold, frankincense and myrrh is this beautiful picture in the first coming that this indeed the King, we give Him gold. He is a priestly King. We give Him frankincense, but His first coming will be filled with bitterness, we give Him myrrh. Powerful, powerful.

I have two points I want us to consider today as we reflect on these things. And the first is we are all called to worship the priestly King. Jesus is true God and true man. He is the son of David, which means He comes from this royal line. And it was also promised in the Psalms, that the son of David, David's Lord was going to be a priest as well as a King. In Psalm Chapter 110, we read that David see's his Lord ascend to the right hand of Yahweh and He comes and rules along-side and the Lord declares to David's Lord "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a stool for your feet." And then in verse 4 regarding this King, he says "The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind, "You are a priest after the order of Melchizedek forever." Forever. And thus the promise was given even before Christ was born.

Very early on in the Book of Genesis, we read of many promises of the coming One who would crush the serpent's head, the One who would come and bless all the nations. And as we read in the New Testament, all of the promises of God are yes in Jesus. And we see in this picture, this child wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger, in a humble estate, we see this as God's beautiful plan for the salvation of the nations. Not just for Israel, but rather for every tribe, nation, and tongue. Thus when the time was fulfilled, God sent forth His son, born under the Law, born of a woman, to redeem us.

Now the bad news, the terrible news, is that all of us, every single one descended from Adam is born in sin, with the penalty of sin hovering over our heads. All are rooted in our father's fall, and the wages of sin is death. We all have broken God's law, and that is terrible news because the wrath of God is directed against sin and all ungodliness. And He is real. He is the true and living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and He is returning. The Scriptures make it very clear, and in fact we even read in Isaiah here, what is coming. The King is going to come and conquer His enemies and set up His Kingdom.

Brothers and sisters this is not a fairy tale, this is not a fantasy book, this is reality and we already have seen so much of His Word come to pass. It is sure as the sun will rise tomorrow, that Jesus' return is coming. What is our response to be, what is the God prescribed response to the good news. It is to repent and believe in the good news. The good news that Jesus of Nazareth, true God and true man, and He was born of a virgin, but He was born to die. His first coming was full of bitterness and He willingly marched to the Cross of Calvary, laying His life down as a sinless sacrifice. Substituting His perfect righteousness for our wretchedness, nailing it to the Cross.

And we read in Isaiah, that it was the Father's good pleasure to crush Him, because He made intercession. Thus we are called when we are confronted with this good news that Jesus Christ has died and now He is raised forevermore to repent, to turn from sin, to turn from self, to turn from the working of the evil one, and turn in faith to the King of Kings. Who right now as we speak, is reigning from the right hand of God the Father. And we are fast approaching, we are at the threshold of His return where He is going to finish what He started. And He is not going to come to deal with sin this next time, to atone for it, He is going to come to deliver those who are eagerly awaiting for Him and deal out retribution upon those who do not believe in the good news. This truth is stressed over and over again by the words sealed by the Holy Spirit.

So brothers, sisters, friends, if you have not believed in this Jesus, in the King who is returning, this message who that had its origins in Jerusalem, and has echoed throughout the ages, and has reached us half-way across the world, that message has met you! Repent and believe in the good news. Worship the King. Worship the priestly King.

We saw as a foreshadow these Magi come and worship the King. And all nations one day are going to bow their knee to the King and worship the King of Jerusalem, the King of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth. We have the blessed opportunity of being constituents of that Kingdom before it comes in its fullness. Repent and believe.

And we see John chronicle this worshipping of this priestly King, when Jesus was raised from the dead. Thomas really kind of gets a bad wrap. We know him as what "doubting Thomas", right? But Thomas has one of the most wonderful confessions of Jesus of Nazareth in the Scriptures. Now Thomas was doubting and wanted to see. And Jesus arrives and says to Thomas "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." And look at Thomas's answer "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:27-28 ESV)

Is Jesus your Lord and your God if not, we beseech you to submit to Him today.

Second point, as you become a believer in this good news, you become a constituent of the coming city of God. You become a citizen of His kingdom. And all of the history that has been chronicled regarding the people of God becomes yours because you are now part of the people of God and the hope that people of God has, becomes your hope. And we look forward to the time when Jesus returns, cleanses the world and establishes His city.

And let's return to Isaiah Chapter 60 which we read earlier, that's when they were just bringing the gold and frankincense. And let's read further, what is going to happen regarding this city in the age to come. And again I encourage you to read this, and read in faith, meaning (inaudible) expectation, knowing we don't see these things physically right now, we know they are going to come to pass.

Isaiah 60:10–14, this is speaking of the city of Jerusalem, “Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in my wrath I struck you, but in my favor I have had mercy on you. Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; those nations shall be utterly laid waste. The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious. The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet; and they shall call you the City of the LORD, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.” (Isaiah 60:10–14 ESV)

Jerusalem is fallen, and we see at the time when the Magi came, Jerusalem was fallen. We see at the time when Jesus of Nazareth grew and came there as the King, coming in on a donkey over the Mount of Olives that He was met with rejection and He looked upon that city and said “I leave your house desolate”. He was killed outside the gates of that city, He was raised and appeared in that city, and He ascended into Heaven on the Mount of Olives.

And as He ascended, as the men of Galilee were staring up, the angel says “why are you staring, this Jesus will return the same way you saw Him leave”. Jesus is going to return and this child that was born in Bethlehem and was He sought by the king of Jerusalem at that time Herod, is one day going to arrive and cleanse that city and make that place a dwelling place for the soles of His feet. He is risen, and He is the priestly King, and He is going to come, and we read that He is going to cleanse that city. That's our city, brothers and sisters. That is where He is going to rest His feet, and He has promised all of us who repent and believe will dwell with Him where He is at. Then we will see standing in the city the wealth of the nations flowing into the city of the great King.

So this season, as always, it is good for us to look back to see the fore-taste that has been given to us by the work of the King. But His work is still on-going, He is not a baby in a manger anymore! He is the crowned King of the cosmos, who is going to go forth in power and glory in His return! And if this is the case brothers and sisters, what type of people ought we be in life and in Godliness.

So brothers and sisters, we look at this true story, we know many of its dynamics, but it is still unfolding. So let us look forward to its consummation and in the mean time, let us live for this King.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we are humbled by your grace and mercy towards us. Lord today we remember that you sent your Son, precious child, whose newborn hands and feet were even at that time while He was laying in a manger were destined to be pierced. And Lord right now we come before you with that very One as our fore-runner, as our intercessor, and right now as we come before you He is alive, interceding for us. Thank you for Him, Lord. Lord help us, help us in our walk to honor you, day by day, to remember what you have done, and to remember we are walking not by our power but by yours. And to look forward to the time when Jesus of Nazareth returns as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Lord we love you, we thank you, and help us love you not with mere words, but in deed and in truth as we look forward to return of the King. In His precious name we pray, AMEN!

12-25-2011

Sermon by: Ryan Habbena

Conquering King Fellowship

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1540 Deerwood Drive
Eagan, MN 55122

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www.ckfellowship.org

Phone: 651.797.8427