



3 | MATTHEW 2:1-12

THE SEEKERS OF THE KING

Jesus came to earth to bring light into the darkness, and to bring true happiness to anyone who will trust in him.

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Call to Worship

Let us praise God with the angels this morning, who said at Jesus birth: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!"—Luke 2:14

Songs

King of Kings

The First Noel

Beautiful Star of Bethlehem

O Holy Night

Joy Has Dawned

Introduction

We are concluding our series in the book of Matthew called “The King at Christmas.” Our title this morning is: “The Seekers of the King”.

I was convinced it was a helicopter.

I was out walking around the block with Ava (at the time, 7 years old) during the summer (2020). I was convinced it was a helicopter. It was a dark night, and a bright light was shining just above us in Elgin, Illinois. Surely, I thought, the police must be out looking for a criminal; or perhaps there had been an accident. We had just come from our home, and our eyes weren’t yet adjusted for the darkness of the night. But there, plain for all to see, was a light in the sky: a bright, dazzling light that could only have come, I was convinced, from a helicopter. It couldn’t be a star. I’d never in my life seen a star so bright.

But I was wrong. I looked it up on the internet. It was the planet **Venus.**

My eyes were too used to the city streetlights. I had forgotten just how bright, and how beautiful and enjoyable, the night sky can be.

The ancient world, absent of all streetlights, never forgot the night sky. It wasn’t until 1879 that Thomas Edison invented the incandescent lightbulb that lit our world up.¹ Before that, the world was in complete darkness.

Many people, particularly in the countries to the east of Palestine, had developed the study of the stars and the planets to a fine art, giving each one very particular meanings.²

About two-thousand years ago, God lit up our world, and sent the “Light of the World” into this broken place called earth. God decided to send his divine Son into the world. When the **darkness of sin** came into the world, God promised at the very beginning, in Genesis 3, that a Savior would be sent into the world to crush the serpent’s head (Gen 3:15). He would light up our world! And **what gifts** he would give to us. Eternal life. Our sins forgiven. An eternity of no pain or sickness, sin or sadness. An everlasting day of God’s glory. All because Immanuel is born. That brings us to our key thought.

¹ Diane Bailey. *How the Light Bulb Changed History* (North Mankato, MN: Abdo Publishing, 2016), 17.

² N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 9–10.

Key Thought: Jesus came to earth to bring light into the darkness, and to bring true happiness to anyone who will trust in him.

You know at Christmastime we love to give gifts. We start in November sending our gift lists around in our family. I'd like to tell you this morning about a very special group of men who sought out Jesus to give him gifts when he was just a small child. You see there was a star in the east, that is, east of Jerusalem. It was a glorious star. Some say it was likely not fiery cosmic body light years away, but a miraculous light that God used to bring the magi to Jesus.

"Magi?" you say. Who or what are magi? I'm glad you asked. They are some important people came to worship the Christ child and give him their treasure. We read about these people called the Magi or the Wise Men in Matthew 2.

Matthew 2:1-12 | 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, ²saying, "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." ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶"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.'" ⁷Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸And 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." ⁹After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹And 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. ¹²And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

1. THE WISE MEN (2:1-6)

It had been perhaps about two years since the Christ child was born. The Bible says men from the East had come to bring treasures to Jesus. The Bible calls them "wise men" or "magi."

Matthew 2:1-2 | 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, ² 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.”

Who were the wise men? These were men outside of Israel. We discover they are seeking Jesus, but what we find is long before they were seeking **him**, he was seeking **them**! We’ve all asked:

The Wise Men

- How many were there?
- Were they really kings?
- Did they really ride camels?
- What were their names?

We don’t know a whole lot about the wise men. People have come up with all kinds of crazy stuff about the wise men. A lot of folklore surrounds them. Some have given them names. They’ve said there were three.

- One named: **Melchior**, a *Persian* scholar
- One named: **Caspar**, an *Ethiopian* scholar
- And another named: **Balthazar**, an *Arabian* scholar.

The truth is we don’t know their names. And we also have no idea how many were in this caravan. We traditionally say three, but we don’t know. **One of the early Syrian documents say there were twelve.**³ There could have been dozens of them for all we know. It was likely a large contingent (though we cannot be sure), but they came from a long way. It doesn’t say how many.

There have been some wild, made up stories around them, especially out of the Roman Catholic church. The Roman Catholic church would often invent these findings and call them miracles. In the 1100s by Roman Catholic Bishop Rainald of Cologne said he found the skulls of the wise men! The bishop apparently dug those up and knew right off they were the skulls of the wise men! Apparently he said testified that their eyes were still in the sockets fixed toward Bethlehem. Today, believe it or not, they are on exhibit in a priceless golden casket in a great cathedral in Europe (Cologne, Germany). What silliness people will believe out of superstition. We can be positive that whoseever’ skulls are in the Cologne Cathedral, it’s certainly not the wise men.

We don’t need superstitions, because we have the Word of God. We know these wise men visited the Christ child in Bethlehem. We don’t know a lot about them. We don’t know how many. The truth is we don’t know their names.

WHO WERE THE WISE MEN ANYWAY?

The phrase “wise men” is literally “**magi**”.

They were an ancient priestly family from Persia.

They were Persian scholars and astronomers.

³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.51.

Daniel is called “chief of the magicians” or magi (Daniel 4:9).

They acted in the role of **senators and lawmakers**.

They were the **kingmakers** of the Parthian Empire.

They brought gifts to **pay homage** to the new King, the Christ child.

They were an ancient priestly family among the Medo-Persians.

The phrase “wise men” is literally “**magi**” of which we get our word magic or magician. It is descended from a **tribe** of **priests** in the Medes and Persians – modern day Iran.

We find them first in the book of Daniel. In **Daniel 4:9**, Daniel is called, “Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians”, or better translated, “chief of the magi”.

They were the **kingmakers** of the Parthian Empire. Historians such as Herodotus tell us that the Magi were considered “kingmakers” in the ancient world.

The **Magi** of the Parthean- Persian Empire, also acted in the role of **Senators**. They were the law makers. They were the authors and the architects of the “law of the Medes and the Persians”.

We do know the wise men arrive loaded with gifts. You have some very rich men coming with gifts from their treasury. Likely there are servants. Imagine a large group coming to the little town of Bethlehem. We don’t know a whole lot, but what we do know is there were many barriers between them and Jesus.

Barriers for the wise men: distance, difficulty, danger, and distraction.

THE BARRIER OF DISTANCE

There was the barrier of **distance**. What we do know is they came a long way to worship the King of kings. Now if indeed they came from Iraq, modern Iraq, to Jerusalem, even today that would be great trip. But these are men who have come a great distance, perhaps about **300 miles** just to worship the King of kings, the Lord Jesus Christ.

So the wise men come from afar, a very long journey, maybe around 300 miles or more. They didn’t hop in cars or planes to get there. There were no buses. They travelled by foot or camel but without any modern travel.

THE BARRIER OF DIFFICULTY

Not only was there the barrier of distance, there was the barrier of **difficulty**. I want to remind you in this day there were no planes, no trains, no automobiles. There were no hotels, there no restaurants, there were superhighways. Over rough terrain they came. They couldn’t stop along the way at the rest area. There were none. Life in the ancient world was difficult especially as a traveler. Normally the servants would set up the tents in the cold desert nights.

THE BARRIER OF DANGER

Now when they get to Jerusalem, the wise men ask, “Where is he that is born king of the Jews?” (2:2a). Not only was there *distance* and not only was there *difficulty*, there was literal **danger**. When they got there, they faced Herod.

Matthew 2:3-5 | When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea..."

Why was Herod and all Jerusalem troubled?

KINGMAKERS

Remember the magi are **kingmakers**. At the time of the birth of Christ, Israel was the buffer zone between two empires, the Roman Empire and the Parthian Empire. And the Empires of the East, the Parthian, Arabian, and the Indian Empires were without a king at the time. The Roman – Parthian Wars had been going on for 40 years and would continue for another 200. This was war between East and West. Herod is old. Caesar Augustus is old. The East is without a king. They need a king to bring a new war with the west.

In that period of time, in that first century BC/AD, there was a strong rumor all around the Mediterranean that soon a great ruler would come out of Judea. Tacitus, Suetonius, Josephus, and a number of historians refer to it.⁴

Suddenly these Persian king makers appeared in Jerusalem. No doubt they are traveling in full force with all their oriental pomp. They used to wear conical hats with points on the top and large fabric flaps clear down to the bottom of their chin. And they rode Persian steeds, not camels. And when they came in they didn't come alone, the estimates of history are they came with perhaps hundreds of Persian cavalry.

KING MURDERER

Now when this little king Herod looked out his little dinky palace window and saw this mighty army of men from the East with the Magi, the kingmakers, he **flipped!** The king's anxiety is not hard to understand. In the first place, he was sitting on a political and religious powder keg. He had driven the Parthians out of Palestine. The fact that the magi themselves were probably Parthians, or closely associated with the Parthians, gave Herod special cause for concern.⁵

This is why Herod is angry and disturbed out of his mind when the wise men come. He starts murdering all the baby boys after they depart. Herod is maniacal. No wonder the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus once joked:

"It is better to be Herod's pig than his son." (The joke was that since Jews did not eat pork, their pigs were safer than Herod's sons.) — Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus

He's murdered his wife and many sons in his family. When he says, "Let me know when you find him so I can worship him as well" (**2:8**), he is lying. Herod wanted to kill our Lord. He wanted no competition.

The wise men were on a mission to pay homage and anoint the next King of the East, but I believe they knew this was not just the king of the east, but King of the east and west, north and south: King of kings, and Lord of Lords!

⁴ Timothy J. Keller. "Christmas Message," *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).

⁵ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Matthew*, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 31.

THE BARRIER OF DISTRACTION

Here's another barrier, that you might not expect. This one is not for the wise men but for the scribes and the priests. They're so busy and distracted. Here's a shocking observation. When Herod asks where the king of the Jews, the Messiah should be born, they know *exactly* where he's to be born.

Matthew 2:4-5 | Herod gathered "all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet...'"

And they quote **Micah 5**. They know *exactly where he's to be born*, but they inquire no further. They must know something is up, but they inquire no further. **They know their Bibles well, but are they drawn to the king?**

It seems the scribes and priests miss the importance of this moment of the magi, because they're too busy "going to church" if you will. Or they're too busy with the politics of Herod. They're too busy being religious and right, and they miss Christ!

We all have a barrier of busyness. We can be **so busy that we miss Jesus**. Life can be so noisy, that we do not hear the tender voice of Jesus. We do not pay him homage. We can be too busy going to church and doing Christian things, that we miss the presence of Jesus. Don't be too busy for Jesus. Pay him homage. He is worthy!

Wise men will seek him. In spite of distance, danger, and difficulty, they'll seek him. Today we live in such comfort. We can worship God right in front of our computer. That's fine if you are shut it, unable to come. But don't use it as an excuse. Seek Christ no matter what the cost. Every true Christian is moved by the Holy Spirit to worship Christ no matter what the cost. We have left all and followed Jesus.

Jesus said, if you want to follow me, you've got to get on a cross and lose your life. I love that. Every true Christian is dead to this world and alive to Christ. And let me tell you, wise men and women still seek him today.

We've learned about the wise men, but what about the star?

2. THE STAR (2:2B, 7-10)

Look at what they say in verse 2:

Matthew 2:2 | ...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.

WHAT WAS THIS STAR?

How did this "star" get the magi from the east to Jerusalem? **What is this star anyway?** We don't know.

- An angel?
- A comet?
- Alignment of planets?

- A manifestation of God's glory?

Some say it was an **angel**, reflecting the glory of God and guiding the magi.⁶

Others say it was a **comet**, or they try to look at the alignment of the stars at that time.⁷

Others say it was the **aligning** of Saturn and Jupiter.⁸

Since the Bible does not identify or explain the star, we cannot be dogmatic, but it may have been the **glory of the Lord**—the same glory that shone around the shepherds when Jesus' birth was announced to them by the angel (Luke 2:9).⁹ John MacArthur helps us further:

That the star was not merely a physical heavenly body is again evident from the fact that it was able to stand directly over the house where Jesus and his family now lived—which for obvious reasons could not be possible for something that was merely a star (cf Exo 40:34–38; Eze 10:4).¹⁰ —John MacArthur

Many believe it was not a traditional star in the sense of a cosmic body that is light years away, but instead **a manifestation of the glory of God in the sky**. Whatever it was, it was **at least** a manifestation of God from heaven. It was the way God revealed his Son to the wise men.

THE STAR REVEALS JESUS

There are several ancient accounts, pagan and Jewish, of **stars heralding the birth of kings and great men**.¹¹ But probably Matthew had particularly in mind Balaam's prophecy of the rising of a star out of Jacob (Num 24:17), which was understood to refer to the coming deliverer.¹²

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. —Numbers 24:17

Balaam, though he was a wicked man, was forced to prophecy the truth and bless Israel! Not only was Israel blessed, but we are too. That star pointed to the true Star and Ruler of Israel: Jesus Christ.

THE STAR REVEALS GOD'S GLORY

This is a star, but what kind of heavenly body it is, we do not know. It is like the revealed **Shekinah glory** of God. That would make sense. God is becoming flesh, so the Father is guiding them where the true Temple is. So this "star" is, as I said before, likely a

⁶ Dale C. Allison, Jr. "What Was the Star that Guided the Magi?", *The First Christmas: The Story of Jesus' Birth in History and Tradition*. (Washington DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2009), 29.

⁷ *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 18 (1977), pp. 443–449 three astronomers identified it as a nova which Chinese astronomers observed for 70 days in 5/4 BC (the same phenomenon had already been noticed by F. Münter, *Der Stern der Weisen* [1827], p. 29, and by others since: see Finegan, pp. 246–248).

⁸ Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and his Story* (London: SCM Press 1960), 36–38.

⁹ MacArthur. *Matthew*, vol. 1, 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹¹ R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: a Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977), 170–171.

¹² R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 86–87.

manifestation of the glory of God. It seemed to be more than a star, but something or Someone, who guided them, so that they rejoiced!

Matthew 2:9-10 | And behold, the star ... went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

This was an incredible star. I believe it was the same kind of Shekinah glory that shown round about those shepherds in the field, where the Bible says, “And the glory of the Lord shown around them” (**Lk 2:9**). I believe it was just God's great Shekinah glory that was there in the sky, leading these wise men. Sure, it could have been an astrological experience, like the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn as many record during that time, but whatever it is, God chose to display his glory. I believe it was the glory of his presence coming down from the sky. “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psa 19:1), and this was uniquely true this night. God's glory was shining down on those wise men, guiding them to the place where the Christ child was.

THE GOD THE STAR REVEALED

God must reveal himself to us. One thing we cannot argue about is that God must supernaturally reveal himself to us if we are to find him. We cannot find him on our own. He needs to lead us. The wise men needed the star to guide them. We need the same glory – that of the manifest presence of the Holy Spirit – to lead us to Christ. Jesus says:

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. —
John 6:44

Has God revealed himself to you? Without that revelation you cannot know God. Unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of heaven (**Jn 3:3**). He's got to open your eyes.

Without that supernatural revelation from God, none of us can come. We weren't seeking God; he was seeking us. Without that star, the wise men would have never found Jesus. Praise him for the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures that lead us to Christ!

Now once we are born again, we need that supernatural revelation to keep growing. Are you being intentional about walking in the light of the Holy Spirit by the Word of God?

Maybe you are stunted in your spiritual life, and you are looking for answers. I have an answer for you right now. Hear the Lord right now – you need to hear from him daily in his Word if you are going to grow. I can't promise you that a star will appear, but something more lasting than the star has appeared, his final Word in Christ and the Scriptures, and the Holy Spirit pours the power into our hearts.

THE JOY THE STAR BROUGHT

I want you to see the reaction of the wise men to the star. The wise men had supernatural joy. It's hard to express what they were experiencing. Matthew says:

Matthew 2:10 | When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

Supernatural joy is the proper response when God shows up. God is revealing himself to them by leading them to Christ. They rejoice with overflowing joy.

How long has it been since you've rejoiced in God with *overflowing abundant joy*? **This should be a regular, common experience for the Christian.** If this is not the case, then you need to realize that this level of joy comes from a revelation of God. You can see in this joy, adoration, anticipation, and awe. They are humbled even as kings to be a part of worshipping the King of kings. So I need to ask you, are you experiencing this joy?

So we've looked at the wise men and the star. But what about the gifts? What were these gifts that the magi brought to Jesus?

3. THE GIFTS (2:10-12)

Now **Matthew 2:10-11** is where we see the highlight of this chapter.

Matthew 2:10-11 | When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹And 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.

THE PLACE OF THE GIFTS

The wise men come from afar, a very long journey, maybe around 300 miles or more to get to Bethlehem. They didn't drive up in a Humvee. They arrived on Persian steeds! They come to a **house** in Bethlehem (2:11). Bethlehem is an important place in the Old Testament already. Bethlehem means "house of Bread".

It's where Rachel gives birth to Benjamin and dies.

It's also where Ruth and Boaz meet, marry and bear their son Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of King David.

It's where Samuel anoints David to be king of Israel.

Micah says, it's where the Messiah who is the "Bread of Life" will be born (Micah 5:2) in Bethlehem, the "house of bread".

Bethlehem's Inn

We remember that our Lord was born among the animals and laid in a manger, because there was no room in the "inn." The word for "inn" does not mean a hotel or hostel like you would think of today. These kinds of things were only in major cities. Bethlehem was not a major city. "Inn" here means a guest room or upper room. It can simply mean lodging. Bethlehem is just a little town of likely under 500 inhabitants. If you go to the traditional place of Jesus birth today, it is a cave where you would have seen stone mangers, like are common even today. They are feeding troughs hewn out of the limestone.

Bethlehem's Stable

What likely occurred is Mary and Joseph arrived to be with family. The family may have been **scandalized** by Mary's unusual pregnancy and were **conveniently**

“overbooked.” How does a pregnant lady get denied lodging? It shows the poverty and lowliness of this family, and the willingness of Christ to descend so low to redeem us.

Now in many of the homes of that time, and it is this way still in many places throughout the world – you would have the animals on floor one and the home on the second floor, kind of an “upper room” if you will. When we were in Spain we saw many of the country homes built this way to this day.

In the poorer homes, you had several possibilities for keeping animals. (1) The first might have been a large room for the animals attached to the home that opened up into a grazing area, like a back yard. It was in this room, like a stable, that Christ would have been born. (2) Another possibility is that Joseph had a tent since he was travelling, and he may have also put up the tent outside the barn as well. (3) The third and traditional location would be a cave, with a home built on top. According to the Christian apologist Justin Martyr (100–165 A.D.), when Joseph could not find room at the inn, “he moved into a certain cave near the village, and while they were there Mary brought forth the Christ and placed him in a manger.”¹³ Whatever it was, it was crude. Joseph surely did the best he could for the very poor man that he was.

At any rate, they are now in the house. It may be the very same house that they came to, just on the upper floor. I kind of picture it that way. It’s Bethlehem so it’s not like there are a lot of options. There are maybe 20 or 30 families in the whole town – **O little town of Bethlehem, indeed.**

Bethlehem’s Manger Scene

So for all of you with **manger scenes**, the wise men did not see the shepherds. They did not come the night of the birth. They came perhaps two years later. If you have a manger scene, maybe you want to put the wise men at a distance from the manger. They didn’t arrive until they had “moved up” in their circumstances in the lodging area of the “house.”

THE WORSHIP WITH THE GIFTS

Now here are Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus, and here come the wise men. They enter and begin to worship him.

Matthew 2:11 | And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and **they fell down and worshiped him.**

This is very unusual for Western minds, but this is in the East. In the West, we value a person for what they have **done**. In the East, they value a person for who they **are**. In the West, we don’t get this, because this is a little baby. He’s not done anything. But in the East, they get it. This is about who this baby is. This is the King of all kings. They *worship* him. They *honor* him. They *praise* him. Why? Because of **who he is.**

And we see they bring him gifts. “Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (2:11b). Now whenever we think of the Christmas story we think of maybe a pouch for the gold coins and some spices of frankincense and myrrh.

¹³ Justin Martyr. *Dialogue with Trypho* 78.6.

I heard recently one child was asked, “What did the wise men bring Jesus?” And the little boy stood up because he knew the answer. He said, “Gold, Frankenstein, and Purr!” Well there were no Frankensteins or cats involved in this event.

HUGE CURRENCY OF THE GIFTS

Sometimes we think each one had their little gift for Jesus. No, no, no. There was nothing little about these gifts. These wise men are coming from a long distance to pay tribute for a king! “Gold and frankincense and myrrh” were huge currency at the time. We have an example of a kingly tribute in our Old Testament. When the Queen of Sheba came to pay honor and tribute to King Solomon, she came with “120 talents of gold, and a very great quantity of spices” (1 Kgs 10:10). Do you see the parallel?

Now surely these wise men did not bring that kind of money. A talent of gold is the amount of weight a man could carry on his back, between 75 and 80 pounds. In today’s currency, that’s over a million dollars. We’re not saying it was that kind of money. I don’t know how much this was, but it seems it was more than enough to get them located in Egypt and then relocated again after a time in Nazareth. They were in great need for God’s provision, and you know what? He provided through the tribute of the wise men.

They gave from “their treasures.” This was no small amount. They came to sacrifice for the king. Though they were rich, these wise men gave **extravagantly** to Jesus and the holy family.

THE MEANING OF THE GIFTS

The gold, frankincense, and myrrh were gifts that tell us that Jesus was born to die.

Gold: Born as King of Kings

Gold is a gift fit for a king.

Jesus Christ is the King of kings. Throughout history gold has been considered the most precious of metals and the universal symbol of material value and wealth. It was used extensively in the construction of the Temple (see 1 Kgs 6–7, 9; 2 Chr 2–4). It was also a symbol of nobility and royalty (see Gen 41:4; 1 Kgs 10:1–13; etc.). Matthew continually presents Christ as the King, and here we see the King of the Jews, the King of kings, appropriately being presented with royal gifts of gold.

Frankincense: Born as God in Human Flesh

Frankincense pointed to Christ’s divine nature.

When I think of Frankincense, I think of that cradle: God has come in human flesh. Origen, the great church Father, suggested that frankincense was the incense of deity.¹⁴ Frankincense accompanied the incense that was burned during the Old Testament priestly worship of God in the Tabernacle and Temple. Jesus Christ is our High Priest. A priest talks to God on behalf of man. Jesus is our representative before the Father.

¹⁴ MacArthur. *Matthew*, vol. 1, 36.

Frankincense was a costly, beautiful-smelling incense that was used only for the most special of occasions. It was used in the grain offerings at the Tabernacle and Temple (Lev 2:2, 15–16), in certain royal processions (Song 3:6–7).

In the Old Testament it was stored in a special chamber in front of the Temple and was sprinkled on certain offerings as a symbol of the people's desire to please the Lord.

Myrrh: Born to Die

Myrrh is used for embalming the dead.¹⁵

Myrrh is perhaps the most ominous gift given to Jesus. Although as an oil it was most often used as a perfume, it was widely known to be used as a scented embalming oil (particularly by the ancient Egyptians). To give this to a child is rather like turning up at a baby shower with a ready-to-be-engraved headstone as a gift. Why would the wise men bring myrrh? **Because Jesus was born to die.** Jesus Christ is our Substitute and only Savior. Myrrh was given to Jesus twice in his life: once at his cradle and once on his cross.

Conclusion

I think the point of this passage is about what our king is worthy of. Because of who he is, these wise men worship him and give him their treasures.

Jesus is worthy of our worship, isn't he? He's worthy. He doesn't just want your brain – he wants your heart. When the wise men saw the child “they fell down and worshiped him” (2:11a). Saints, take your eyes off of worthless things and worship Jesus.

Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways. —Psalm 119:37

Do you remember what David says when he's offered what becomes the Temple Mount for free?

I will not offer to the Lord that which costs me nothing. —1 Chronicles 21:24

I want to ask you, is Jesus your God and King? What is your tribute to Jesus? Who is Jesus in your life? Is he your king or a trinket? This is a king who **owns the world** but what he wants is your heart. Give him your whole heart and life, and you will never regret it.

Christ was hidden in human flesh from the rest of the world. But the gifts of the magi pointed to who he is. Your life of sacrifice points to who he is! He is worthy of your life!

¹⁵ See Kjeld Nielsen, “Incense,” *ABD*, 3:404–9; Victor H. Matthews, “Perfumes and Spices,” *ABD*, 5:226–28; Joel Green, “Burial of Jesus,” *DJG*, 88–92.