

# **Worshiping the King of Kings**

A Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12

Preached by Paul Liberati, January 3, 2020

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*Where is he that is born King of the Jews, for we have seen his  
star in the East and have come to worship him – Matt 2:2*

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As we think about the significance of Epiphany Sunday, which commemorates the revelation of Jesus Christ to the Gentile world, we also recognize that such a revelation first took place in the coming of the Wise Men to worship the Lord. Therefore, it should be no surprise that, this morning, our Scripture passage is taken from Matthew 2:1-12.

Obviously, this is a very familiar passage, and I think it's safe to say that most of us in this room have heard the story of the Wisemen many times in our Christian lives. In fact, If I were to ask anyone here (including the children), I'm sure that you could tell this story just as well as I can. You could tell us about the star that the Wise Men saw, and how God miraculously put that star right above the house where the young child Jesus was living at that time. You could tell us about the gifts that the Wise Men brought—gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. So, there's no question that all of us are familiar with this account.

But you know, there's also a sense in which we find that, as we continue to read the word of God, the Lord provides us with new insights and very practical lessons for our lives. And, certainly, that's what happened to me as I was studying this passage again. Rather than just seeing the cute little story that we think about as kids, I began to see the tragedy of sin and unbelief. I saw that right alongside the great faith and obedience of the Wise Men, there was the hatred and opposition from Herod and the Jews.

And so, this morning, Congregation, I want us to look at this story from the perspective of not just the encouragement but the warnings and challenges that it provides

as well. Of course, the goal in all of this is that we might go away with a greater sense of commitment to the Kingship of Jesus Christ than we had when we came here this morning.

As we look at this story as a whole, I want to focus on *two points of irony* that really stand out of the text.

1. **There's irony in the fact that God used the Wise Men as witnesses for His Son.**

As you think about that, you might remember that this is somewhat of a pattern that we find in Scripture. God is oftentimes using the most *unlikely* people in the great moments of redemptive history.

For example, we often talk about the fact that the very first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus were women rather than men. The reason that was so significant is that, in those days, the testimony of women was not well-received. The old Anglican theologian, John Polkinghorn makes this point when he says:

One of the strongest reasons for taking the stories of the empty tomb absolutely seriously lies in the fact that it is women who play the leading role. It would have been very unlikely for anyone in the ancient world who was concocting a story to assign the principal part to women since, in those times, they were not considered capable of being reliable witnesses in a court of law.

But it wasn't just at the resurrection that we see this kind of thing because even at the time of his birth we see that, of all people, God chose a group of shepherds to witness for His Son. Again, God was doing something very unlikely because, historically, shepherds were also looked down upon and treated as second-class citizens.

In fact, if you look at some of the ancient rabbinic sources recorded in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 25B) you'll find that there's an extended discussion about this very thing. What we see there is that shepherds were considered as "disreputable" so that, just like women, their testimony held little to no weight in a court of law.

Now, why do I point all of this out? It's because, here in our passage, we're looking at essentially the same thing. Of all the different people that God could have used on this occasion, He chose a group of Gentiles to announce the birth of Christ. The irony of that is so clear, it should grab our attention.

But just to clarify—the irony is not *merely* in the fact that the Gentiles are coming to Jesus because that was something that the Scriptures had always foretold. In Genesis 22, God told Abraham that one day through his Seed, *all the nations of the earth would be blessed*. And in the book of Isaiah (42 and 49) the Bible shows us that, all along the way, God was telling His people that the Messiah would be *a light for the Gentiles and salvation to the ends of the earth*.

The irony, then, is not that the Gentiles would come to Christ, but more so in the way that all these things took place. If you were reading this for the very first time, you would have expected that when the Messiah was born, it would have been the *Jews* who would have first received him and presented him to the rest of the nations of the world. And yet, that's not what we see. Instead, we see the very opposite: Rather than the Jews presenting their king to the Gentiles, we see the Gentiles presenting him to the Jews!

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 have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.

In this passage, we see that God did something that no one would have ever expected. And yet, once He did it, everyone could see that it was the wisest and most righteous thing to do. Yes, it's true that these wise men were astrologers and students of the stars. It's true that as counselors and courtiers, they practiced many things that are contrary to the word of God. Yet we understand that, because of the great wickedness and compromise of His own people, God decided to use these men as true and faithful witnesses for Jesus Christ.

I think if there's anything that we need to see here it's that this passage serves as a warning to the people of God today. It's a warning to the leaders and pastors of the churches across our land. It's a warning that says, Wake up! and recognize that Jesus Christ is King! Essentially, what we need to know is that if the people of God fail to stand up and proclaim the crown rights of Jesus Christ, God will set us aside just like we see in this text. God is sovereign and the glory of His Son will never be without a witness in this world!

In Matthew chapter 3, John the Baptist confronts the Pharisees who thought that, just because they were the biological sons of Abraham, their standing before the Lord our God was secure. But in verse 9, John turns to them and says, *Do not think to say to*

yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.

In Luke chapter 19, Jesus says essentially the same thing. The Bible says that, as Jesus was nearing the city of Jerusalem, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise him saying: *Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!* Then, some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, saying, Teacher, rebuke your disciples. But in verse 40, Jesus answers, and he says to them, *I tell you that if these would keep silent, the very stones would immediately cry out.* You see, Jesus is never without a witness. And when God is looking for a witness for His Son, He'll just raise one up.

And so the question for us is, Today, will we be faithful witnesses to the kingship of Jesus Christ? Or are we, like the people of his own day, so compromised that God has to use people from outside of the covenant community? That's a serious question that we all need to ponder. I mean, How is it that for the last four years in our nation we've had a man who, for all intents and purposes is not even a Christian, and yet he's been saying and doing things that are more in line with the Word of God than many of the pulpits in our land?!

This passage is a reminder that when the rulers of God's people fail to do their jobs, God will still get the job done. Because, rather than using the rulers from the civil and religious establishment that He originally raised up, God goes outside of the covenant community and by a miraculous sign, a star that rises in the East, He provides a revelation of Jesus Christ to, *and through*, the Gentiles world. Well, that's the first thing that comes across as ironic in our text. We see it in the people that God uses as witnesses to His Son.

The second thing that's ironic in this passage is the opposition that takes place when the announcement of the birth of Jesus Christ is actually made.

## **2. There's irony in the fact that the arrival of the Messiah was rejected by his own.**

Congregation, these two points are related but they're not the same. The truth is that it's one thing for the people of God to be unaware of what God is doing in their midst. But it's a completely different story when the people are told what He's doing and they oppose it. In the first case, we can chalk it up as an act of ignorance, but in the second case

we see nothing less than a willful defiance of the Lord. And that's precisely what happened in this situation.

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where Christ was to be born. 5 So they said to him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: 6 But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel. 7 Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.

Now, the tragedy of this passage is that, even after the Wise Men came and told the King about the birth of his Messiah, the King was hardened in his opposition to the Lord.

Historically, there's a good reason for that because if you go back and study the origins of the Herodian Empire you'll see that, from the beginning, the whole dynasty was a usurpation of David's throne. Herod was not the son of David and he was not in the line of Judah. Rather, his mother was an Arabian and his father was from the land of Idumean. Moreover, when Herod was appointed king in 40 BC, he was set up by the Roman Senate to rule, not for the good of Israel, but only for the good of Rome. Herod was a puppet-king who served, not in the name of the LORD, but ultimately in the name of Caesar.

So, of course, there's a good reason why when the Wisemen came, the Bible says that Herod was *troubled* in his heart. He knew that he had no legitimate claim to the throne, and yet he was hearing about that One who does have a claim and right to the throne, for the Wise Men asked, *Where is he that was born King of the Jews?*

Also, even though Herod was an Edomite by descent, He was still raised in the Jewish faith and, therefore, he at least understood the implications of Psalm 2. He understood that, at that moment, he was faced with a very sobering decision: Either he could humble himself and *Kiss the Son*, or He could oppose the Son and *perish in the way*.

But you know, sin is deceitful. When our hearts are lifted up in pride, and our lives have been given over to the comforts and pleasures of this world, we become irrational in our response to the will of God. So rather than receive the announcement with joy, Herod was unsettled in his own heart and chose to seek out and destroy the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, all things considered, the reaction of King Herod shouldn't be much of a surprise for those of us who know our Bibles. Instead, the real surprise is that He was not the only one who was troubled. In verse 3, Matthew says that when Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, *and all Jerusalem with him*.

Now, when it says that *all Jerusalem* was troubled, the reference is not to the general population of the people. Rather what we find is that oftentimes the Bible uses, what we call, "representative language." This means that when it speaks of *the Jews* it's sometimes talking about *the rulers of the Jews* (Jn 1:19), and when it speaks of *Jerusalem* it's sometimes talking about *the leaders* in particular (Mt. 23:37). This is probably what's happening here since Matthew goes on in verse 4 to identify *all Jerusalem* as the "chief priests and scribes of the people" whom, he says, Herod "gathered together."

But again, we come to the great tragedy of our text. Even though all the scholars and theologians of the day knew what the word of God said, none of them had any desire to do the will of God. When Herod came and asked them where Christ would be born, they quickly rattled off the words of the prophecy of Micah 5:2. And yet, the real question is: *Why were none of their hearts moved to seek their Messiah?*

You know it's sad because oftentimes we see the very same thing today, and it teaches us a very practical lesson. And that is that there's a real difference between knowing what the Bible says and having a genuine love for the truth of God's Word.

So often we look to the Church to hear what the word of God says, and learn what the will of God is. And yet, far too often, we see nothing but compromise and apathy from those that we thought we could trust. And so we ask: What's the purpose of all their learning? What's the purpose of all their education? All the searching and all the studying, if when the time comes, there's no real interest in doing what the word of God says?!

In John chapter 5, Jesus is speaking with the Pharisees and the scribes, and it's this very objection that he raises against them. After reminding them of the many witnesses that they had—the witness of John, the witness of his miracles, the witness of His Father, Who literally spoke from heaven saying, *This is my beloved Son*—Jesus reminds them that they also had the testimony of the written word. Tragically, they still refused to come to him and be saved, and so he says to them, in verse 39, *You search the Scriptures, for in them*

you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me. But you are not willing to come to me that you may have life.

### **3. In conclusion, let us learn from the Wise Men and follow their example.**

Now, in contrast to everything we've seen so far (in the *opposition* of the King and the *apathy* of the Church), we also see another and very different response to the birth of Jesus Christ. And it's here, Congregation that we should be encouraged and challenged in our own response as well. Because here we see that when God provided the Wise Men with a revelation of His will, *these men, unlike all the other characters in our text, respond in faithful obedience to the will of God.*

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. 11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Now, it's true that there's always the danger of taking the great stories of the Bible and reducing them to a list of moralisms. So often we hear people warning us that if we make too much of the men in the Bible, we'll lose sight of the glory of Jesus Christ. I suppose that, to some extent, that can be true, and so we should always be careful. But at the same time, it can also be a false dichotomy that has the ability to rob us of the riches that we find in the word of God.

You see, the truth is that there's very little in this passage that's even said about Jesus. Being a young child, Jesus doesn't do anything or say anything at all. And yet, when we come to this text, we can still see the brightness of his glory both *in and through the faith and the actions of these men.* So rather than trying to separate Christ from the men in this text, we need to see that we can gain a better picture of who Jesus Christ really is, by looking at how they responded to the Lord.

As we close out the message, I want to point out just two observations that we can ponder as we go our ways today.

1. Remember that, even though these men were not kings, they were certainly the advisers and counselors of a king. What that shows us is that Jesus, from the very moment that he was born into this world, was not just another king. Rather, he's the King of all kings and the Lord of all Lords! Jesus is the King to whom all the kings of the earth must bow the knee and confess to be the Lord of heaven and earth.
2. Notice that when the Wisemen came into the house, they knew exactly who they came to see. That's why they brought their gifts and presented them to the Lord. And, when it comes to the gifts they brought, you realize that all of this was in perfect fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 60—*And the Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising... The abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, and the wealth of the Gentiles shall come... they shall bring gold and incense, and proclaim the praises of the LORD.*

Congregation, as we reflect upon the actions of these men, we need to acknowledge that, in their response to the revelation of Jesus Christ, we have a wonderful picture of what it looks like to worship the King of kings. And, as we do so, we should also be thinking about our own response as well. Because remember, these men weren't serving Jesus in a vacuum; they were serving him in a context of real opposition.

And so the real question is, What would we do if we were in a similar situation? If we found ourselves in a situation where all the kings of the earth opposed the Lord, and many of the churches began to compromise the truth of God's Word, the one thing we need to ask is, Will we be like *them*, or will we be like the Wise Men in this text?

To say it differently, Are we those who merely know what the word of God says, or are we those who receive that word and desire nothing more than to put that word into practice in our lives? May the LORD Himself provide us with hearts that are ready and willing to serve the Lord Jesus Christ *even in the darkest of times*. Amen.