

Session 3

WISEMEN VISIT THE KING

TEXT

Memory Verse

Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

– MATTHEW 2:11, CSB



Wisemen Visit the King

THEOLOGICAL THEME: The Magi followed the guidance of a star to visit the child Jesus, worship Him, and give Him gifts fit for a king.

CALL TO ACTION: Take an inventory of where you live, work, eat, and do life. What nations are represented? Whom might God be putting in your life to hear the gospel? Where might God be sending you next year on mission to share the good news of the coming King?

Christmas gift-giving is a tradition observed around the world. Some historians trace gift-giving's ancient roots stretch back to ancient Rome, when historians believe gifts may have been exchanged around the winter solstice (in coordination with celebrations relating to the god Saturn). In the fourth century AD, gift-giving was linked to the famous gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh brought to the child Jesus by the wise men. From there, the custom of gift giving has grown and changed over the centuries, leading to the tradition of presents under the tree that we know today.¹

Today, we'll study the story of the wise men, their hard journey, and their generous gifts offered as worship of the Messiah.

 What's the best gift you've ever received?

 What's the best give you've ever given someone else?

Session Summary

Matthew 2 recounts the arrival of the Magi seeking the “king of the Jews.” (v. 2). Their presence reminds us of the inclusivity of God’s redemptive plan (Jesus came for all people, not just for the Jews in Abraham’s lineage).

Deeply disturbed by the news of a newly-born king, the tyrant Herod the Great responded to the Magi’s inquiry by consulting Jewish religious leaders about Messianic prophecy and further questioning the wise men (he would later use what he learned to issue an edict to kill all boys under the age of two who lived around Bethlehem).

A star led the Magi straight to Jesus. Overwhelmed with joy, they worshiped Jesus and offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

1. Wise Men from the East (Matthew 2:1-2)



What details did the Magi give in their question to Herod? Why did this get Herod’s attention?



This story only appears in Matthew’s Gospel. How does this account add to the gospel narrative?

The king in view here is Herod the Great, a prolific builder in ancient Israel (some of his building projects are still around today!). He started building the temple in Jerusalem that existed in Jesus’s day (known as the Herodian temple) around 20 BC (work on it was still ongoing in Jesus’s lifetime, John 2:20).² Herod was known for being both tyrannical and vengeful, and we get an underlying taste of that tendency in our reading today.³

Herod is believed to have died in 4 BC, placing Jesus’s birth somewhere between 6 and 4 BC.⁴ Jesus was likely around the age of one when the Magi visited. Some evidence to support this idea is Matthew described Jesus as a “child” in verse 11 (rather than an infant), Jesus’s family was living in a house (not beside a manger), Herod assumed Jesus to be within this age span because of his edict to kill all boys under the age of two, and Jesus’s parents presented the offering designated for poor families 40 days after His birth

(if they'd had the extravagant gifts of the Magi at that time, this option wouldn't have been necessary for them).⁵

These Eastern wise men/Magi (possibly from Persia or Babylonia) would have been associated with what we might call black magic (think of the magicians in the Babylonian court in the book of Daniel). That they had come to worship Jesus, and the inclusion of their story in the Gospels, alludes to God's intention to include Gentiles in His redemptive plan for humanity. Jesus broke Satan's grip on many during His earthly ministry and in this story "we see that even in his infancy, Christ plundered Satan's kingdom and set captives free."⁶

By naming Jesus as "king of the Jews" (v. 2) in their question, the Magi unintentionally challenged Herod's power and position. We'll unpack this more as we continue our study.

 **Application:** How was God at work in unexpected ways in this passage? Where might God be at work in unexpected ways in your life now?

2. Herod's Plot (Matthew 2:3-8)

 What indicates that Herod's motives were not pure in his request to also come visit the Messiah?

 How does the quote from Micah 5 point to Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy?

Matthew recorded that the Magi's pronouncement "disturbed" (v. 3) both Herod the Great and all of Jerusalem. Herod would have been disturbed because of the threat this posed to his claim to the throne, and the people would have been disturbed because they knew of Herod's vicious nature (having previously gone as far

as killing his favorite wife and son to protect his power).⁷ In Matthew 2:16, we learn the people of Jerusalem were right to be disturbed.

When King Herod learned of this threat to his throne, he sought to learn more about the prophecy surrounding the Messiah. We have already seen many mentions of Old Testament prophecy in the book of Matthew, and here we find another. Bethlehem was identified as the Messiah's birthplace in Micah 5:2:

*Bethlehem Ephrathah,
you are small among the clans of Judah;
one will come from you
to be ruler over Israel for me.
His origin is from antiquity,
from ancient times.*

Where Micah said that the Messiah would “be ruler over Israel,” Matthew chose to record that He would “shepherd my people Israel” (v. 6), recalling Micah 5:4⁸:

*He will stand and shepherd them
in the strength of the LORD,
in the majestic name of the LORD his God.
They will live securely,
for then his greatness will extend
to the ends of the earth.*

Jesus would later call Himself the “Good Shepherd” in John 10:11, and God used the shepherd and sheep metaphor throughout Scripture to describe His relationship with His people (Ezekiel 34:11-16).

This portion of our text ends with Herod's subterfuge. He called the Magi together secretly to question them further and asked them to share what they found so he could go and worship the child too. This was a lie as Herod would later issue a decree to “kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under” (v. 16). His desire was not worship but war.



Application: What do these verses teach us about the way different people can respond to the same truths about Jesus?

3. Visiting the King (Matthew 2:9-12)

 How did the wise men display faith in God in multiple places in this passage?

 How might God have used this visit to further confirm the words He had already spoken to Mary and Joseph about the child?

The star the Magi had followed to Jerusalem guided them to Jesus's home. Worshiping the sun, stars, and moon were all forms of idolatry mentioned in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 4:19).

The practice of using the stars to discern the future or make decisions was condemned because it turned the people away from the Lord (Isaiah 47:13-15). God used this pagan practice to point the Magi to Jesus, reminding us He is able to work in and through all things.

Following their long journey, “they were overwhelmed with joy” (v. 10). Overwhelming joy is also waiting for us in the presence of our Shepherd. When they entered the house, they saw Mary with Jesus and fell to their knees in worship.

As was the custom in the ancient Near East, when they found the “king of the Jews” (v. 2), they presented Him with gifts. These sacrificial gifts honored Jesus and were precious and expensive:

Gold: This is the gift we are most familiar with. It is often mentioned in Scripture as being precious and was used in God's temple. Scholars believe that the gift of gold probably helped Mary and Joseph pay for their upcoming escape to Egypt in light of Herod the Great's deadly edict.⁹

Frankincense: An aromatic resin, frankincense was used to make perfume and incense.¹⁰ This was an ingredient in the holy incense God directed Moses to make in Exodus 30:34-35. This special formula was only used in worship of the Lord. Appropriately, it was gifted to the Son of Man in worship.

Myrrh: Myrrh was also an aromatic resin. It was used to make perfume, anointing oil, and in burial preparations (washed bodies would be packed with myrrh and fragrant spices).¹¹ Myrrh was included in the recipe for holy anointing oil the Lord gave Moses in Exodus 30:23-25. This myrrh, too, would find a holy home in Jesus, the King who had come to die for His people.

Finally, this passage includes another instance of God speaking to people through dreams. The wise men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they safely returned home another way. God's plans and purposes would not be thwarted, no matter the designs of earthly rulers.

 **Application:** We may not bring Jesus actual gifts like these regularly, but what are we to bring to Him in worship regularly?

Conclusion

Matthew 2 covers a familiar moment in biblical history and an often-beloved part of the Christmas story retelling: the arrival of the wise men looking for the “king of the Jews” (v. 2). Their inquiry unsettled Herod the Great, who was notorious for his ruthless grip on power.

The Magi's inclusion in this account reminds us of the inclusivity of God's redemptive plan (for Jesus came not just for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles). Even as a small child, Jesus was already disrupting the enemy's plans to divide and destroy.

In response to the Magi's question, Herod consulted the Jewish religious leaders to learn more about the Messiah's prophesied birthplace, which was identified in Micah 5:2 as Bethlehem. Matthew's choice to sub in “shepherd” for “ruler” here points to the biblical image of God as a caring shepherd to His people.

Despite Herod's claim that he desired to worship the child, his secretive meeting with the wise men and future deadly edict showed his true intent: to eliminate the threat.

The star that led the Magi to Jerusalem guided them directly to Jesus's door. God used the ancient pagan practice of astrology to point the Magi to Jesus, showing again that God is able to work in and through all things. When the Magi found Jesus, they were "overwhelmed with joy" (v. 10) and fell down in worship.

As was customary in the ancient Near East when meeting someone of a superior position, they brought gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh (items fit for a king). The gifts and God's warning to the wise men in the dream are further reminders of God's provision for His people and the certainty of His plans.

 How might this account of the Magi challenge our ideas about who belongs in the family of God?

 How do you respond when you feel threatened by God-ordained change in your own life? How can we encourage and challenge one another in the way we respond in these moments?

 How have you seen God use unusual methods to draw people to Himself? Who might He be calling you to have a gospel conversation with this week?

Memorize

Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

- Matthew 2:11, CSB

References

¹<https://www.historyhit.com/why-do-we-give-presents-at-christmas/>

²Alan J. Hauser and Earl Kellett, “Temple, Herod’s,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

³*NIV Life Application Bible*, 1492

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵<https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/html/matthew/matthew.htm>

⁶Charles L. Quarles, “Matthew,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1498.

⁷Charles L. Quarles, “Matthew,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1499.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹<https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/html/matthew/matthew.htm>

¹⁰Charles L. Quarles, “Matthew,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1499.

¹¹*NIV Life Application Bible*, 1493