

Worship the New-Born King

Christmas Day 2022

Matthew 2:1-12

Nathan Gray

Introduction

I wonder what your experience of buying Christmas presents is like. Do I dare suggest that it is a stress-free process? I would love to say my own experience is calm and thoughtful, and every gift is precisely chosen to show that person how much I love them, but it often descends into “What is the nicest thing I can buy within our chosen budget with about 2 weeks to go and no time for delivery?”

When we read this passage in Matthew chapter 2, it can seem like this was also the wise men’s response when they see the star appear. “Quick, the king of the Jews has been born, grab some nice things and let’s go!” These three gifts are completely useless for a 2-year-old child, as Jesus would have been when they turned up. So, why did they give them, why are they important, and why is it worth coming to church on Christmas morning to hear about them?

My plan is to first retell this fascinating story, uncover the remarkable little details which reveal the true heart of this passage, then we’ll dive into why gold, frankincense and myrrh are in fact perfect gifts for Jesus.

The Story

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.” (Matthew 2:1). And that’s virtually all we know about the wise men. We’re not even certain of where in the east they have come from. They could be Medes or Persians, which is modern-day Iran; about 1,000 miles away from Jerusalem. They are called Magi, or wise men, because they had a deep interest in religion and loved to study the stars. You would place them somewhere between astrologers and astronomers.

In contrast to last week, where the shepherds’ identity of noble-tasked outsiders was so meaningful, our little knowledge of the wise men points us away from their identity and towards their purpose. We don’t know who they are, but we do know **why** they are there. They ask around the town, *“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to **worship him.**”* As God spoke to the shepherds through a heavenly host, he also speaks to the wise men in a language they understand. As they study the stars, the birth of Jesus is revealed to them, and they immediately make their way to Jerusalem **to worship him.**

How come then they travel to Jerusalem and not Bethlehem where Jesus is? Well, the star had made known the birth of new king but not where he had been born. So, their first assumption would be to go the current “king of the Jews”, the current ruler of Judea, a man known as Herod the Great who was anything but. Everything we need to know about Herod can be found in verse 3. Herod is immediately disturbed by the wise men’s search for another king. He cannot accept a potential threat to his throne. And Jerusalem is disturbed with him because they are terrified of how he may react. History tells us that Herod had his wife’s brother, his wife’s mother, his wife’s grandfather, his sister’s husband, and his wife

herself all killed. And verse 16 later tells us *“He gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under”* as he seeks to kill this new king.

Herod isn't the only person to come off badly in this story. Verses 4-6 astonish me. Herod does some research into this new king by asking the Jewish leaders for more information and they recount to him an OT prophecy from Micah chapter 5 that he would be born in Bethlehem. And then they do nothing. As is often the case in Jesus' life, the people who should know who he is, disregard him. The shepherds were glorifying and praising God for this amazing news. Yet, two years have passed, and the Messiah lives in a house in Bethlehem unbothered by his own people. The Jewish leaders read the very words prophesying his birth amidst claims that it has come true, and they don't even bother to check it out.

Crafty Herod then reveals Christ's location to the wise men under the guise of joining their mission to worship him. So, the wise men head off to Bethlehem and on their way the star reappears, and they are overjoyed! After their detour to Jerusalem, you can imagine they are weary and discouraged. But the reappearing star confirms its call and reignites their mission. The star directs them all the way to the house where Mary, Joseph and child Jesus are staying.

Here, they complete their mission. They bow down, they present their gifts, and they worship him. This isn't a quick handshake and £10 gift card. This is not Christmas pleasantries with an extended family member or even the honouring of an important dignitary. This is the lavish and total worship of the king of the Jews.

Three reasons to worship Jesus

This is the heart of this passage – it is all about worship. More precisely, we are pointed to worship the true king of the Jews, Jesus Christ.

Herod wants to be worshipped and the Jewish leaders don't go to worship their own God, but eastern wise men travel a thousand miles to bring gifts and offer proper worship to Jesus.

Their three gifts are most likely just that; three gifts of extraordinary value from their homeland to complete their worship of the new-born king. It is unlikely that the wise men chose their gifts with specific meaning or that they understood the full significance of what their gifts represented. But in God's amazing plan, these gifts speak to us today about the glory of the receiver. Three gifts give us three reasons to worship Jesus.

Jesus is king (gold)

Reason number 1 to worship Jesus is that he is king. Gold has been viewed as a symbol of royalty for centuries. So, it makes a lot of sense for the wise men to bring gold in their search for the king of the Jews. But imagine their surprise when they are turned away from Herod's palace, finding no future king there. Instead, they are directed to a random house in Bethlehem where they find a carpenter and his wife and their two-year-old son. This is the king of the Jews?

Oh yes, Jesus is a far greater king than any earthly counterpart. Firstly, Jesus reigns as creator and sustainer of the entire universe. Colossians 1:15-17 say, *“¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or*

rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Secondly, Jesus rules as a perfect king over all people, restoring them to God. Unlike cruel Herod, Jesus compassionately serves his people, he judges justly, and acts in perfect holiness as he reveals God’s endless love to humanity. When questioned by Pilate in John 18, Jesus said, “my kingdom is not of this world,” “the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth.”

That earthly testimony continues in his heavenly reign. Ephesians 1:19-22 says,

“That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ [God] exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.”

From heaven, Jesus continues to work for the good of those who love him.

The idea of authority always fills us with fear. Too many earthly leaders seek to benefit themselves and not those they lead. But Jesus is the perfect king. Reigning over all, not some small region or country, and reigning with complete love and purity.

Jesus was man (myrrh)

Myrrh had many ancient uses from an early form of deodorant, mixed with wine as an anaesthetic, and embalming dead bodies. Hendriksen writes, “Myrrh was a perfume used by and in the interest of man to make his life more pleasant, his pain less dreadful, and his burial less repulsive.” Reason number two to worship Jesus is that Jesus was human.

This is the real meaning of the Christmas story. Jesus could have stayed in heaven but no he came to earth, to be born as a human baby, to live a human life, and to die a human death. Philippians 2:6-8 say,

*[Christ Jesus] being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

But why did he become obedient to death? Why become human purely to die? As our choir beautifully sang two weeks ago, the Christmas story is really about the cross and what Jesus accomplished there. Let me read out this wonderful final chorus:

It's about the cross
It's about my sin
It's about how Jesus came to be born once
So that we could be born again

It's about God's love
Nailed to a tree
It's about every drop of blood that flowed from
Him when it should have been me

We are sinners, we all get things wrong. Justice must be brought for our wrongdoing, and we cannot save ourselves from the punishment that our sin deserves, that is separation from God in this world and forever. As Col 1:21 says, "*Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. **But** (verse 22) now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*"

Jesus lived a perfect human life so that he could take on our punishment, the punishment he didn't deserve, and substitute our punishable sin for his spotlessness so that we can enter heaven and be with God!

As the myrrh was handed over, I don't think anyone in that room knew what was coming. Another Christmas story song I love is 'Mary, Did You Know.' "Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters? Did you know that your Baby Boy has come to make you new? This Child that you delivered will soon deliver you." This little child would grow up to be the saviour of the entire world. Not by a leading a triumphant army of angels, but by serving the entire human race with his death. If anything deserves worshipping, this is it.

Jesus is God (frankincense)

Exodus chapter 30 tells us that frankincense was an ingredient in an incense that was reserved for the worship of God alone. From then on, we see incense used in the service of God in the day of atonement instructions in Leviticus, as a burnt offering throughout the OT, and as a symbol of prayer in Luke. Frankincense is a clear reference to Jesus' divinity so reason number three to worship Jesus is that he is God. As Col 2:9 says, "*9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.*"

I've already mentioned that we worship Jesus as God for sustaining life, but there are even more reasons, and they follow the common theme that has been running through all three gifts: the restoration of our relationship with God.

If Jesus were not God, then simply he has no place repairing our relationship with God. If Tori and I had a falling out, likely my fault, any number of third parties could try and help, but the relationship would not be restored until Tori and I did something ourselves.

If Jesus were not God, he would also be powerless to do the work necessary to repair the relationship. I mentioned the day of atonement which was an OT practise instructed by God to allow his people Israel to be with him because his holiness could not mix with their weakness. He instructed the high priest to represent the people before him and then perform the sacrifice of an animal to temporarily cover their sins. This practise was also a symbol of what was to come. Humanity needed a permanent sacrifice, once and for all, to cover and defeat sin, to reconcile man to God which had to be the work of God. So, as we've just mentioned, Jesus fulfilled this old practise by sacrificing himself for all.

Then, Jesus came back to life. In doing so he defeated death and claimed the prize of eternal life **with** God for all people who put their trust in him. John 11:25-26 says, "²⁵ *Jesus*

said to her, *“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”*

And Jesus continues the great redeeming work of God in heaven today. Jesus not only played the role of sacrifice, but also the role of the priest. Hebrews 7:24-25 tell us,

“Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. (He is our permanent representative.) Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”

Only by this gateway can we come before the Lord to worship him. Our “burnt offerings” would be tainted by sinful lives. Our prayers would be tarnished by selfish hearts. Because he is God and lives forever, because he is God and he is holy, because he is God and all loving, he has always and is still working to reconcile us to God. Jesus lives eternally to protect us from the punishment our sins deserve so that we can worship God, so that our prayers can be heard, so that we can be blessed by him, so that we join him in eternal life.

Close

Gold for the king and Lord over all, frankincense for the great God and high priest, myrrh for the human who offered his life for all. He is to be worshipped as the good God and king who rules perfectly and sustains all in perfect love. He is to be worshipped as the reconciling God in his work on earth and for eternity. He is to be worshipped for the human self-sacrifice that won our salvation.

Don’t worship an earthly king like Herod, don’t worship anything else in this world. Don’t ignore worshipping Jesus like the Jewish leaders did. Worship him. Worship Jesus. He deserves it all. Ironically, when you consider the significance of these three gifts, three gifts aren’t enough! The only way we can truly bring him worthy worship is this (Romans 12:1-2):

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Be like a wise man. Do whatever it takes to bring him worship. Make the thousand-mile journey from the east. Ask around the town. Put the effort in. Bring your most luxurious gifts. Offer him your life with the same sacrificial love that he poured out for us on the cross.