

CHRISTMAS

at Chets

RESPONDING TO THE BIRTH OF JESUS

BIG IDEA: Worship should be our response to the love that God showed when He gave Jesus for us.

DATE: Wednesday, December 10 and Sunday, December 14, 2025

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 2:1-12

OPENING QUESTION

The tradition of gift giving at Christmas comes from the Wise Men and the gifts they brought for Christ. Our culture has distorted this origin and now Christmas is often more about what gifts we get or experiences we enjoy instead of what we can give.

What is the most expensive gift that you have ever given? Maybe it cost you a great deal financially or maybe you had to give up some other resource (time, energy, reputation, etc.). **What motivated you to give this gift? Was it worth the sacrifice?**

We experience different motivations for giving. Sometimes it is out of a sense of obligation. Other times it's to impress the recipient or someone who witnesses the giving of the gift. Maybe we're giving simply to meet a need. The most meaningful gifts are compelled by genuine love and care. They are a response to the blessing that the recipient is to us and to others.

TRANSITION TO LESSON: As we discuss the Wise Men and the other characters from this part of the Christmas story, we want to be reminded that we become what we worship (the things that we give worth to). King Herod worshiped power. The religious leaders worshiped religion. The Wise Men worshiped Jesus, and the fruit of their obedience was the privilege of experiencing God.

THE SETTING

Unlike other parts of the Christmas story, the Wise Men only appear in the Gospel of Matthew. Writing to early Christians that were Jewish converts, Matthew intended to prove that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah, and His birth wasn't just good news for the Jews, but for all people. Matthew offers no specifics about their identity, number, or place of origin. He's also vague about the timeframe of when they arrived. Some refer to them as kings (such as the Christmas carol, "We Three Kings") while most simply call them generic names like Wise Men or Magi because so little is known about them. *Magi* is derived from a plural Greek word that implies learned men, astrologers, or priests.

STUDY THE BIBLE

Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

*⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."*

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

DISCUSSION

We're going to focus on the main characters in this passage by answering questions about each of them. You might find it helpful to draw this grid on the white board in your LifeGroup room or have table groups complete it on their own.

As you answer these questions about the passage, look for similarities and differences with the way that we live and how others in our culture live.

	King Herod	Religious Leaders	Wise Men (Magi)
Who were they?	King of Judea	Likely Pharisees and Sadducees	Gentiles (not Jews). The Greek word <i>magos</i> implies learned men, astrologers, or priests (not necessarily kings).
Where did they come from?	Ruled Judea under Roman authority. A descendent of Esau (brother of Jacob), creating an often-hostile relationship with the Jews.	Two rival groups of experts on the Jewish law who agreed on their answer to Herod's question.	East of Judea (Persia? Babylon? Arabia?). Likely 800+ miles from Herod's palace in Jerusalem.
What did they know about the coming Messiah?	He did not know the prophecies.	Knew the prophecies about where to find Jesus.	Likely familiar with Old Testament prophecies. Prompted to follow a star signifying the birth of the king of the Jews but didn't know exactly where to find him.
How did they respond to the news of Jesus' birth?	Opposed Jesus. Fearful of what Jesus might mean for his rule, Herod dispatches the Wise Men to locate him and plots his murder (Matt. 2:16).	Ignored Jesus. They didn't do anything (apathetic).	Worshiped Jesus. They sought Jesus, found him, bowed down, worshiped, and gave expensive gifts.

As you discussed the passage, did you notice anything about individuals who prioritize themselves over the ways of God?

The only certainty in life (well, besides death and taxes) is the sovereignty of God. Herod's priority was his self-preservation. The religious leaders knew what they were looking for but failed to live with any sense of expectancy. But the Wise Men prioritized God's leadership and were brought face-to-face with the Messiah.

We often talk about the Wise Men as givers of expensive gifts. Does it broaden your perspective on what it means to worship when you think about the long and difficult journey that they must have taken?

Worship comes from an Old English word, *worthship*, and it means to give something worth or value. We sing songs of God's greatness and faithfulness. We sacrifice our time, resources, comfort, and preferences for His purposes. We bow our heads or get on our knees as a physical posture of reverence. All are expressions of worship in response to the gift of Jesus.

How was meeting Jesus different from other encounters with newborn dignitaries that the Wise Men might have had? How do you think the experience changed them? How has it changed you to know Christ?

We're not accustomed to humble dignitaries. Royalty is an exclusive status often accompanied by wealth, power, and fame. Jesus changed everything. He humbled Himself first by becoming a human, then by living a simple/modest life, and through His death on the cross (Philippians 2:6-8). As Psalm 113 reminds us, the Lord is over all creation yet looks down over the earth and cares for the poor and lowly. The Wise Men knew a fraction of what we do about the person and work of Jesus, yet their encounter still prompted worship. We should never be surprised by God's ability to redeem and work through the ordinary and broken.

RESPONSE

The Wise Men set out on what must have been a challenging journey with expensive gifts and prized possessions. They followed God's leading and worshiped Jesus even though their destination was undoubtedly different than what they had in mind when they departed. The gift of Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection proves God's love for us. **How do you need to worship Him this Christmas?** Is it by changing an attitude of ungratefulness, by doing something that you know will require sacrifice or discomfort, or simply by thanking Him for His many blessings?

COMMENTARY

Adapted from Dan Doriani's "Who Were the Magi, and Why Did They Worship Jesus?"

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/who-were-the-magi-and-why-did-they-worship-jesus-matthew-2/>

Note: Quotes in the commentary are from the ESV translation of the Bible, not the NIV translation printed above.

God's Plans Prevail

Skeptics doubt that a star with supernatural origin could have led anyone to Jesus. They dismiss the story as legend, citing parallels to pagan myths in which stars guided heroes to their destination. In ancient literature, astrological phenomena also accompanied the birth or death of notable kings, including both Julius Caesar (death) and Augustus Caesar (birth). Skeptics therefore propose that Matthew fabricated this episode or perhaps adapted a legend. If Matthew's sources misled him, he was deceived. If he invented this episode, he was a deceiver. But why would Matthew concoct a story of worshiping astrologers for a predominantly Jewish audience? Roughly like gambling today, astrology was a plague, denounced by prophets and ethicists alike. But if God chose to summon Gentiles by speaking their language, then Matthew could put that fact to use, since it matched his themes.

The Birth of the King

Matthew stresses God's mission to the Gentiles (1:5–6; 4:15; 8:10–12; 15:21–27; 28:18–20), beginning with the men who travel so far, at great risk and cost, to pay homage to the one "born king of the Jews" (2:2). They expect to find the future king in a palace. But no son has been born to Herod, so he takes the announcement of a new king as a threat and thus is "troubled" (v. 3). This fits Herod's character. As a ruler, Herod was talented and vigorous, but also violent and paranoid enough to kill several of his sons as well as his favorite wife. His desire to kill Jesus coheres with his pattern of eliminating all threats. If Herod, cruel and violent, is "troubled," it is no surprise that Jerusalem is too, although one might have hoped for more of a populace awaiting its Messiah.

Herod consults rival groups of experts and inquires closely as he asks "where the Christ was to be born" (v. 4). "Inquired" is in the imperfect tense in Greek, implying that Herod questions them repeatedly. Given that the "scribes" were conservative teachers and (typically) Pharisees, while the "chief priests" who rested atop the temple hierarchy were Sadducees who collaborated with Rome, we see that Herod chooses to consult antagonistic groups regarding the birth of Messiah. When they agree, Herod knows he can trust their answer. Citing Micah 5:2, they reply, "In Bethlehem of Judea." They also add the essential line, "From you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel," as well as a perfect citation formula, "for so it is written by the prophet." "It is written" signifies that this is God's abiding word. "By the prophet" acknowledges the prophet as God's agent. So they know the answer and face no more than a 5 mile (8 km) journey, yet, reading Matthew, we see none of them traveling to see Jesus.

Once Herod knows where the child is, he plans his murder. He questions the wise men, gains their confidence, and feigns a desire to join them in worship after they identify and locate the child. The magi believe him, but God's plans supersede Herod's.

More Than Respect

One can understand Herod's fear. The belief in astrological signs is widespread, so he reacts to the magi. Besides, Herod is an Idumean, not a proper Jew, and because he is both a tyrant and a usurper (having taken the kingship by force and intrigue), he knows he has few friends. Yet, like many fears, his is also irrational. If Jesus is indeed the God-ordained ruler of Israel, why would he dream that he could kill him? And if the wise men were wrong, why would he try to kill a harmless child? Herod is cunning, but his sin makes him a fool.

Meanwhile, as the Jews stay home, the Gentiles head to Bethlehem, and the star eventually "came to rest over the place where the child was" (Matt. 2:9). They find the house, "saw the child with Mary his mother, and... fell down and worshiped him" (v. 11). We observe that the magi worship him, not them—that is, not Jesus and the holy family or Jesus and Mary. Mary is not, as some say, a member of the "Christian pantheon." But do the magi fully comprehend Jesus' identity? Do they fall in worship before the one they know to be God incarnate?

If the magi do not know enough to worship in the fullest sense, they at least move in that direction, as the statement of their homage suggests (Matt. 2:2, 11). In that spirit, the wise men joyfully offer heady gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It is too much to think that they infuse each gift with symbolic weight (such as myrrh for burial). Rather, gift giving was essential in that culture, especially when approaching a leader. Frankincense, gold, and myrrh were costly, the sort

of precious thing found in one royal court and given in another. (Joseph and Mary possibly sold them to finance their journey to Egypt.) If there is symbolism in the gifts, it lies in the allusion to Psalm 72 and its prophecy that the nations would come to a king greater than Solomon, bringing gifts and falling before him as "all nations serve him" (Ps. 72:10–11).

Cultural norms required reciprocal gifts. The magi, as representatives of the nations, go home empty handed, but Jesus more than repays them in the end. As they leave, God warns them by a dream "not to return to Herod, [and] they departed to their own country by another way" (Matt. 2:12). Once Herod realizes he has been duped, he seeks to kill Jesus another way (v. 16).