

"Respond to the Invitation to Worship"

Matthew 2:1-12

'Where is He who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and we have come to worship Him.'

What do we do with the wise men? Every year Christians seem to have this little conundrum about the Wiseman. Should we include them in our manger scenes? Do we put them in our Christmas plays? Were there three or more than three? Was it an actual star they followed or a confluence of planets or a comet? Did they show up the night He was born or later? And most importantly, should we sing 'We Three Kings of Orient Are' or do we take a stand against it because they weren't kings and there may not have been 3?

I'm going to go out on a limb and settle the issue once and for all, using the Bible to end this discussion. Does the Bible give us the account of the Wiseman in conjunction with the birth of Jesus? Yes!! If we remove the Wiseman from the birth account of Jesus we miss something the Holy Spirit wants us to see when we put Luke and Matthew's accounts together. Without both in the picture we miss out on the fact that God revealed Jesus first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. First to the poor and then to the rich. Both the shepherds and the Wiseman responded by faith to the revelation God gave them and both were overjoyed when they followed God's leading. And both groups (meaning all people) needed salvation from their sins, and most importantly both (meaning all people) need to bow down and worship Jesus the Messiah.

And here's the point we often miss about the coming of the Wiseman: this is about worshipping God and His Son Jesus. That's what Christmas is all about; recognizing, believing and worshipping Jesus Christ. Wasn't that the purpose of the wisemen's visit?

^{2:2} 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

And what happened when they found Him?

^{2:11} On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.

And didn't Herod acknowledge what the proper response was to do at the birth of God's Messiah (even though he had no intentions of doing so)?

^{2:8} Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.

So let's go through the account of the wisemen's visit to learn what we can about worship.

Most of us have the impression Matthew's gospel doesn't contain the birth of Jesus Himself, but that's not true. Ch. 1 ends with,

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he

gave him the name Jesus. 2:1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem

Herod was a ruthless ruler. Born an Edomite (a descendent of Esau, a son of Jacob), Herod portrayed himself as a Jew, but in actuality he was only half Jewish and the people knew it. None the less he tried to eat kosher and give the impression he was a law-abiding Jew. In reality he was a butcher who murdered his wives, sons anyone else he thought was a threat. He ruled from 40 BC – 4 BC, dying shortly after Jesus was born in approximately 6-5 BC.

These magi/Wiseman can best be understood from the book of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar surrounded himself with advisors, some of whom dabbled in black magic, some with the dead and some with the stars to help the king know the 'will of the gods'. Daniel and his 3 friends became advisors and were found to be "10 times better than the king's magicians and enchanters." When Nebuchadnezzar had his dream of the statue in ch.2 he summoned his magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to figure out what it meant. Daniel and his friends were not part of that group but learned of the problem and Daniel offered his help because he served the God who gives and reveals dreams.

So the Wiseman were kings' advisors who came from the East, probably from Persia where a strong Jewish population remained from the days of Daniel, Nehemiah, Esther and Mordecai. So these astrologer type Wiseman knew about the Jewish prophecies regarding a ruler from Jacob whose star would rise according to Num. 24:17. How many months they had travelled we don't know. Herod tried to figure it out and over exaggerated it to be safe to two years. Probably 6-12 months. Either way, a long time to make a journey just to see a baby. But not any baby, the baby who was the rightful born king. Royal babies are called princes who are in line to be king. This one is special; born king.

I believe, as we'll see later, that these Wiseman had faith in Israel's God, believing God's Word to be true. So to come and worship was not an option; it was proper and necessary. Sometimes we say that worship is a sacrifice of our time but the Wiseman show us,

Worship Involves Giving our Time Back to God **(2:1-2)**

God and Jesus deserve our worship. They created and sustain the world we live in. They gave us life. They have our life in their hands. Our time is in their hands. So worship is not something we do because we have nothing else to do, worship is an appreciation for God and the act of giving His gift of time and life to us, back to Him. The time we spend worshipping God is a thank offering back to God for giving us breath and life and is the appropriate response to a gracious and forgiving God.

Jim Elliot, the martyred missionary to the Auca's of South Ecuador, once said,

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

We cannot keep our possessions or our time; they are temporal gifts from God. But we only gain when we worship and glorify God with the time and resources He has given us. These Wiseman took possibly two years out of their lives to give for the purpose of worshipping Jesus. They went away rejoicing implies they felt it was a wise use of their time. If worshipping God individually at home or corporately as a church is an interruption to your very busy and less important schedule, then you have lost the wonder of who God is and are living a thankless life.

The Wiseman assume, since it is a Jewish prophecy, that the people of Israel would be excited and knowledgeable about this birth. So they approach the capital Jerusalem and the current man in power, Herod, who called himself King of the Jews (but the people did not). What the Wiseman discover is the birth of the baby king is unknown! The people who should know don't seem to know. This was a crucial point in their journey to worship Jesus. Would they continue or would they be deterred by the lack of knowledge and interest by the majority? Which is a good reminder to us that

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Worshipping God Requires Overcoming Deterrents **(2:3-8)**

And there are a few here. We read that when Herod heard of this he "*was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him.*" Disturbed means 'greatly agitated' and even used in Acts for 'causing a riot'. If Herod was upset, the people would be as well because that meant someone or a group (like themselves) were going to suffer because of Herod's anger. Yet here we see the kind of people who may deter us from worshipping Jesus,

Those who are opposed to worship (vv.3, 7-8)

While Herod will pretend to want to worship, everybody else knows he hates the worship of anyone other than himself. People who don't know God don't know why we want to worship God. Even people we love and care about yet don't share our faith can be deterrents to us worshipping God. Their refusal to go with us always creates tension. Sometimes they plan something that will interrupt our time with the Lord. Unsaved family plans to come over when you would normally be involved in worship. You get pressure from your peers, fellow employees when they hear you go to church or attend a small group or Bible study and you feel their opposition and sometimes verbal persecution. It's very real and we sometimes have to choose between honouring God or people.

But its not just those opposed to worshipping God. It's also

Those who are indifferent to worship (vv.4-6)

That can deter us from worship and being with God's people. The indifferent here are the religious people themselves who, unlike the Wiseman, hear that the Messiah is born, know that's what the Bible says but make no effort to find out for themselves. It's obviously true for the religious leaders (the teachers of the Law and chief priests who knew where to find the prophecy about the Messiah's birth in the Bible) but the people obviously knew why the Wiseman were there but there seems to be little interest (or perhaps they were too afraid) in the birth of the Messiah.

And it's sad when even other believers can deter us from fellowship or worship, yet it happens. We all make choices about our priorities. And we leave an example to follow based on those choices when it comes to choosing God over our own interests. If we're honest, the ones who deter us the most are probably believers than unbelievers.

So not surprisingly, as the Wiseman show us,

Worshipping God Takes Perseverance **(2:9-10)**

I'm sure the Wiseman discussed the attitudes of the people and Herod's fake desire to worship. This could have been a make or break event. They may have discussed 'Well, no one seems to be interested. Maybe we misread the sign. Maybe we were wrong about this. Why should we sacrifice our time, resources and energy into something so many people don't seem to care about?' But if they momentarily discussed these things, they rejected these excuses and persevered. And they even persevered in spite of the temporal disappearance of the star:

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

It was only when they decided to persevere and went on their way that the star appeared again and directed them to the house where Jesus was. Isn't that like God? He directs us clearly at times but then at other times He doesn't affirm our direction until we actually walk out in faith. Like the parting of the Red Sea. Under Moses, the people saw the Sea part and walked through. But under Joshua, the people had to set their foot in the water of the Jordan before the Jordan dried up.

Psalm 34:8 says, '*Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him.*'

The blessing comes after the trust. When we've put our trust in God's will we experience the blessing that taking refuge in Him brings. Taste and see for yourselves the blessing of trusting God. The wisemen tasted and were rewarded with seeing God direct them and the blessing that worship brought. Because they discovered that

Worship is an Exercise of Great Faith **(2:11)**

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 and of incense and of myrrh

They saw the baby Jesus. What made them think He was the One born King of the Jews? They believed the Scriptures and they saw God's leading hand on their journey. This journey and the act of worship took great faith because Jesus had never done anything for them personally. He was not in a position to help them; to give them instruction, to promise them a time frame when they would be rid of the Herod's of the world or even assure them that they would have a safe journey back. Worshipping God and Jesus is an exercise of faith that we believe God's promises will come true one day about Jesus' return, about the kingdom on earth, about the removal of all the Herods of the world and about the new earth and eternal life. If our worship is only a response to when and what God does for us, then all we are ever looking from God are temporal rewards and answers to prayer. Not worshipping God for who he is and what He has in store for us. John Piper wrote a book called Future Grace, with this whole perspective in mind. Too often our focus is on thanking God and Jesus more on what they have done for us than when we read the Bible and there's just as much focus on what God has in store for us that we should worship Him in faith for. True worship is to thank and recognize God and Jesus for what they have said they will do for us even though it hasn't come true yet.

And when the wisemen finish giving Jesus (and Joseph and Mary) these gifts that are consistent with what one offers royalty and shows honor, we read

¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

While it's obvious the wisemen didn't go back the same way they came, it's also fair to say that

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When we've Truly Worshipped, We Leave Changed **(2:12)**

How did their worship of Jesus change them? Because their journey to worship Jesus required great faith that this boy was the Messiah and would rule from David's throne one day, God blessed them when they trusted Him by giving them discernment to understand Him and His will more. Because up until now they had never been given a dream from God. They believed His promise in Num. 24:17-19, believed and followed the sign of the star and saw the boy Jesus and because they had obeyed God they were in a place to hear from God. And, if they were Persian wisemen who were familiar with Daniel and the dreams he received from God they would not have had a problem with God speaking to them in that regard. Somewhere in all this they also saw through the deception of Herod. And perhaps it was because they believed all the prophecy about the Messiah in Num. 24:17-19,

¹⁷ 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; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth. ¹⁸ Edom shall be dispossessed; Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed. Israel is doing valiantly. ¹⁹ And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of cities!"

Where was Herod from? Edom? What did the prophecy say? Edom would be dispossessed by the one who comes from Jacob, whose star they saw and would rule one day with a scepter. Herod would be dead before Jesus was barely old enough to speak.

Each time we 'taste and see' God through worship we are blessed and grow in our faith in God. Worship is not only about God and Jesus being glorified but its one of the ways in which God changes us to be more like His Son Jesus.

If I had asked you at the beginning of the service, 'What is worship?' some of the responses would have been singing and prayer. Yet we just went through a passage about worship where we never saw singing or prayer. What then is worship? Worship is expressing the worth of God by our life,

- When we obey God's instructions in His Word, because we value God's will more than our own.
- When we spend time in His presence and with His people showing we are thankful for the gift of life and time that are His not ours.
- When we choose His will over the desires of friends, family and gospel-opponents who seek to deter us from our purpose of worship
- When we in faith read His Word, pray and sing His praises believing He is with us and is directing our life

The next question after what is worship, is have you worshipped today? How has your understanding of worship been enriched by the wisemen's desire to worship Jesus? We sang His praises, we heard and hopefully read His Word and probably prayed today, but did we do so as

worship? Did we do it out of obedience or habit? Did we do it by faith or by routine? Did we do it because we wanted to or because we had to?

How we answer those questions will reveal the answer to this question: did our worship of Jesus and God change us this morning? That we tasted His goodness and we saw again how worthy God is of praise and how humble and thankful we should be because has blessed us over and over again.

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