

“The Response of the Magi” – Matthew 2:1-12

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Meet me in Matthew 2 for our final reflection on the Magi’s journey to Jesus...

It’s been a tough week for our nation. Very disheartening. Very revealing of the misplaced hopes of many. But we are here to hope in the Lord and I am grateful that we get to gather to fix our minds on the One who is our hope, Jesus Christ. And this is a wonderful text to aid us to that end.

One of the most influential Christian figures in our lifetimes was a man by the name of John R. W. Stott. He was born in 1921 and when he died in 2011 there were spontaneous memorial services that sprang up throughout the world. I know of around 40 that are formally acknowledged on a website dedicated to his memory.¹ There was a service in Kampala, Uganda, where my daughters are from. There was one in Dallas, Texas, at a church in Highland Park. There was even one held in Wheaton, IL, where my wife and I used to live, in which Timothy Keller (one of the leading Evangelical figures in North America) preached and Christopher J. H. Wright (one of the leading experts on missions) presided. The outpouring of grief on every continent was overwhelming, but so was the resurrection hope that was preached at each of these dozens of memorial services. The same hope that Stott put before so many through his ministries and writings. In fact, Stott’s book *Basic Christianity* had a shaping influence on me very early in my Christian walk.

In that book there is a famous passage in which Stott wrote,

“If you read the bible you’ll see that nobody who ever met Jesus Christ ever had a *moderate* reaction to him. There are only three reactions to Jesus: they either hated him and wanted to kill him, they were afraid of him and wanted to run away, or they were absolutely smitten with him and they tried to give their whole lives to him...”²

In the same vein, I once heard a sermon by Keller, titled “Imitating the Incarnation,” in which he made this provocative statement: “We must realize that the only possible way to respond to Jesus is ‘extremely.’” He doesn’t mean violently (cf. “extremist” language). He means a knowledge of the true Jesus produces extreme reactions. And I think he’s correct. And if he is correct, then this creates a problem for America’s Christianity. He goes on to say, “the average person in America *likes* Jesus...you *can’t* like Jesus!...no one has ever liked Jesus *who knew who he was*.”³

Do you see his point? It’s the same point that Stott was making. It’s the same point that the biblical narratives make when we see people responding to the real Jesus. There is no neutrality with Jesus. There is no sitting on the fence. There is none of that once we come to grips with who He really is. We can’t be fans when we realize who He truly is. We will either respond with hostility, absolute terror, or outright love and worship. If that’s not the reaction, then we are not seeing clearly enough who He is.

I think our text illustrates this for us in a way. It is the same text we have examined for a few weeks and this will be our final week with this passage before transitioning back to our justification series, back into the epistle of James. So let’s look at the text again. This time I will read a little further, but I’ll begin in verse 1 still to get the details fresh in our mind. Follow along as I read. And remember, this is God’s Word...

“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, ² saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’ ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”’

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.’ ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.” (Matthew 2:1-12)

Now then, the first week we studied these verses we considered something that it teaches us about the Gospel, namely...

The Gospel: The Gospel Is for Outsiders and the Nations (Not Just Insiders and Israel)

This lesson was reinforced for many of us this past week with the celebration of Epiphany. That’s the day on the church calendar that calls to mind the story of the Magi and celebrates the appearing of the Messiah to the Gentiles, which, I think we would all agree, is good news for us.

Week 2, we considered a lesson about God...

God: God Meets Us Where We Are to Make His Son Known and Worshiped

Last week we shifted our attention to the nature of God’s Word and saw, among other things, that...

God’s Word: God’s Word Is Needed and Intended to Lead Us to Jesus

Now, we don’t have time this morning to rehash all these lessons, but you can catch what you missed or review online, on our website (welovethegospel.com). Today I want to focus on a lesson related to God’s Son and how we respond to Him.

Notice again what happens when the Magi get to Jesus. Verse 10 says, *“when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”* That may sound awkward in English, but that’s the ESV’s way of telling us that there are four words in Greek to emphasize the incredible joy they experienced. I’m not sure you could emphasize their excitement any more in Greek than Matthew has here. Verse 11 says they arrive at the house (not the manger; many months have probably passed since Jesus’ birth) and then it says, *“they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.”* From this we are reminded of something important about God’s Son. And this is where we will linger today.

God’s Son: Jesus Is King and Worthy of Our Honor and Worship

This is where the Magi set us an example. And here is where the contrast becomes most pointed between the worshiping Magi and all the other characters in the story. Consider how each character responds to the news of Jesus.

First, there is Herod. He reacts with hostility. We see this in verses 16 to 18. We are told in verse 16, that once Herod realizes the Magi are not returning to tell him where the child was located, he reacts in a murderous rage. Remember, he lied to the Magi and said that he too wanted to worship the newborn King of the Jews and he tried to manipulate the Magi by turning them into his unwitting informants, but God intervened in a dream which warned the Magi not to return to Herod with the information on Jesus' precise location. Still, Herod is a smart man; he had already calculated for the possibility that the Magi would not return with the information, which is why he probed them earlier for the precise time that they saw the star in the sky. From that information he reasons that the child must be two years old or younger, and, therefore, he orders that every child in Bethlehem, within that age range, should be murdered.

Some have expressed skepticism about this story because there is no other surviving source to corroborate it. But it is certainly not hard for historians to believe for a number of reasons. First, while these murders would have been devastating to those families in Bethlehem, it is not as large a scale as you might imagine. It's estimate that the population of Bethlehem would have been less than a thousand residents in that day, so we are talking probably around five to fifteen children who were killed in this onslaught. I'm not making light of that, but as far as historical mass murders go it's not surprising that historians may not have noted this one. For some perspective, that's about the amount of homicides that Chicago was averaging each week the year we moved here from that area,⁴ but my guess is that doesn't make the news very often and no one will remember that they died two thousand years from now.

Furthermore, this kind of killing is entirely consistent with what we know historically about Herod. Herod the Great killed two of his own sons, his mother-in-law, and his wife when he suspected them of envying his rule (his wife, by the way, was later proven innocent of these allegations). Augustus once remarked that "it is better to be Herod's pig than his son." He was also a man who ordered that 2000 Jewish leaders be crucified at the moment of his own death. Why? Because he wanted to ensure that there would be mourning in the land on the day he died and not celebration. Fortunately, that command was not carried out and the dead Herod could do nothing about it. That's the kind of madman we are dealing with.

So is it really hard to believe that this paranoid nutjob would have any problem murdering a handful of infants, if he thought that one of them might one day grow up to challenge his rule? He murdered his own family for those same suspicions! No. This is entirely consistent with what we know about Herod. Fortunately, God intervenes and Jesus escapes with His life, thanks to Joseph's obedience. On the other hand, there was much mourning in Bethlehem those days as several children lost their lives.

Herod did that. Why? Because Herod is so threatened by Jesus and His authority that Herod was willing to go to those lengths to snuff Jesus out. But that's us too. When your kingdom or queendom is challenged, you tend to act hostile to the threat. "That's my money. My choice. My sex life. My power. My preferences. My rights." There is a little Herod in all fallen sinners, because the arrival of Jesus necessarily challenges your right to the throne of your life. It's easy to dismiss Herod as just a madman. He was that. But what was happening in his heart is something that plays out in sinful hearts every day, even if its manifestation is more tempered by the grace of God. But the point to see here is simple enough. Some people respond to Jesus (and His followers for that matter) with hostility.⁵

Second, there are the people of Israel. Did you catch how they responded? Look at verse 3—"When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." They were afraid. But why? Because they were scared of Herod and his reaction, which is understandable given what we know about Herod from history and the second half of Matthew 2. One commentator put it this way: "Think of Herod as a prototype of every tyrant

through the centuries: talented, fearless, vain, cruel, and violent. In Jerusalem, if Herod was disturbed, everyone was disturbed.”⁶

They were afraid. They let their fear of Herod, keep them from going to Jesus. That’s the way a lot of people respond to the news about Jesus. They are curious. They want to know more. They consider going to Him perhaps. But that all gets drowned out by fear. They are afraid of what people will think if they do. They may want Jesus on some level, but there is something they want more—the approval of others. So they don’t embrace Him. That’s the kind of fear that will keep untold numbers out of heaven. A fear of man.⁷ That’s the kind of fear that has kept some of you away from saving faith so far. “What will people think?” That’s the wrong question. Do we fear man more than God? What does God think? They were worried about what could go wrong, more than what was actually right.

Next, we have the religious leaders. How did they respond? You could argue that their response was fear based too, because they may have been just trying to please Herod. Stanley Hauerwas described the religious leaders in this way: “They are the intellectuals of the day—educated, as intellectuals usually are, to serve those in power. They know their Bible and, like many who know the Bible in our day, know how to read the Bible in a manner most useful to suit their ruler’s desire.”⁸ He’s probably right. But that’s the part that freaks me out a little bit.

What this text teaches us is that it is not enough to simply know the Scriptures. It’s not enough to know about Jesus. You have to respond to Him in the right way. But Matthew leaves us with the impression that these men hear the news of the birth of the King of the Jews and they do nothing. They don’t go investigate in Bethlehem. They don’t “*rejoice exceedingly with great joy.*” They don’t join the Magi and lead them to Bethlehem. They answer king Herod and they go home. Who knows, maybe they even tell their wives, “you’re never going to believe this honey! King Herod asked for my help today! Yes, he sought me out. I quoted some Scripture for him and he was really pleased with me! This could mean great things for us baby! We’re moving on up!” They served king Herod beautifully, but they would not rise to go serve King Jesus.

If I were to sum up their response in a word, I’d call it apathy. And this kind of apathy is startling, but it is all too typical. You see this time and time again when religious people encounter Jesus in this book. Jesus Himself said that if the pagans saw the signs that He performed in front of the religious leaders and heard His preaching, they would have repented (Matthew 11:20-24; 12:41-42). But most of the religious people never did. “Sometimes those who most know the faith in the mind know it least in the heart.”⁹

I mean, for crying out loud, it’s five miles! Five miles! That’s like 10,000 steps. Your daily step goal on your step tracker for a day. That’s all they would have had to travel. That’s it. They had a chance to meet the Messiah. The King of Kings. The guy generations of Israelites had been waiting for. The one who would be Lord over the nations. Five miles. How many of you have been to that Hollywood Theater on the Loop. That’s five miles. Going to Bethlehem to check it out, even if you were skeptical, would be like us catching a movie after church. But they hear the news from the Magi and how do they respond? “Ehhh. Nah” “I got more important things to do today.” “We don’t have time right now to put together a Messiah committee.” “Maybe I’ll check it out later.” “Ehhh. Whatever.” Apathy. Glaring apathy and indifference. But this is all too common.

How do you respond to Jesus? How will you respond today after hearing Jesus died for your sins, and is your only hope for salvation, and He saves those who put their faith in Him. How will you respond to the invitation in God’s Word to turn from your sins and trust in Christ to save you. In a little bit I’ll give you the opportunity to come and talk about that if you want. I’ll be at the door after service and we can visit. You can come and say, “I need Jesus in my life” and we can talk and pray together for that very thing. He will save you this morning.

Or you can even fill out one of those response cards, which are normally in the pews, but during the pandemic we have put temporarily at the entrances. Tell us what decision you sense God calling you to make or what questions you have by checking the appropriate box and giving us a way to contact you this week. Drop that in

the offering plate that one of the greeters will be holding at the door at the end of the service and someone from our pastoral staff will contact you this week. That's another opportunity for you to respond to whatever it is you sense God doing in your life.

The point is you have options. Pick the one that makes the most sense to you. But respond appropriately to the good news—that Christ has come and offered His life on the cross to make sinners right with God. Look I've been preaching and pastoring for almost two decades now and I know that there will be some of you in this room who have heard the good news about Jesus today and will be tempted to respond like Herod—walking away from the truth threatened because you know that if Jesus is Lord, you are not, and that spells the end of your way of life; or like the people of Jerusalem—"I can't respond in one of those ways because what will people think?"; or like the religious leaders—"ehhhh...maybe later. I got things to do." Is that going to be you today? Do you really want to be identified with those characters? I hope not. I hope today you will come like the Magi. Not having all the answers. But just knowing that you need Jesus and want to be with Him. And in faith, you come to Him to worship.

Finally, I want you to see something else before we close today. The Magi's actions in the text teach us about the characteristics of true worship. Real quick, let me show you what I mean.

Biblical Worship Is Always a Response

When the Magi see Jesus for the first time, they fall down in worship. They recognize Him for who He is—the Messiah and King. The sight of Jesus, produces worship. That's true for us too. Worship is our response to who God is and what He has done for us in Christ. When we see God clearly, it should result in our worship. It's a response. And the response may or may not involve singing, by the way. That's just one aspect (as we will see). And our worship is a reflection of what we believe about God. So we better believe the right things about God or our worship will not please Him. A. W. Tozer once wrote, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."¹⁰ He's right.

Biblical Worship Is Offered in Humility and Joy

How did their worship express itself? They fall down to the floor, on their knees before the King. What is that? That's a picture of humility. And they rejoice exceedingly with great joy. Humility and joy. Those two things better be a part of your worship, however it is expressed.

Biblical Worship Is Costly

They bring these gifts to Jesus. Gold. Frankincense. And myrrh. These may have a symbolic significance, but that is somewhat disputed (you can see the footnote of this sermon online, if you are curious).¹¹ But the point is that these things are valuable. Their giving cost them something. They sacrificed to give to Jesus. They didn't do it to get something in return. This isn't a transaction. This isn't the prosperity Gospel trash. This is Magi giving to the toddler King in worship and getting nothing back but the joy of the act of worship. This is not duty. This is joy. Our giving is an expression of our worship. That's one of the reasons I like the offering at the end of the preaching. It is a response to what we have seen in God's Word about who He is and what He has done for us in Christ (and by the way, Paul follows that same pattern in Scripture when it comes to collections).

But listen, the worship of these Magi cost them more than material things. It cost them time. Months of travel and sacrifice. It put their lives at risk. But they counted the cost and decided it was worth it to worship the King. Paul said to the Romans (at the turning point of that letter, the point when all of the theology pivots to application), "*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living*

sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1). You see his point? What God has done for us in Christ should lead us to lay down our lives in every aspect for Jesus, the King. And Paul calls this worship.

Biblical Worship Is Accompanied by Obedience

Where do I see that in this text? Verse 12—“*And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.*” These worshipping Magi obey the Lord. They obeyed the leading of the Word of God in Scripture earlier. And now they are obeying the word of God in this dream. It would seem incongruent with their worship, if they disregarded the command of God wouldn’t it? It does in your life too.

Obedience problems are worship problems. That’s why God always sets up our obedience as a response to who He is and what He has done. You know how the Law of God (i.e., the Ten Commandments) begins in Exodus 20? With these words, “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*” And then the laws are given. What is that? That’s God reminding them of who He is and what He has done for them so that their obedience would be a response of worship. Grace first. Then obedience. If obedience is not worship, it’s not pleasing to God. And finally...

Biblical Worship Fuels Missions

This is a point that is taught clearer elsewhere in God’s Word (e.g., Psalm 66), but may be an inference here as well. Why did they want to go back to Herod? Because they wanted to tell Him about Jesus. Now that they had seen and worshiped King Jesus they wanted to tell Herod about Him that Herod too could come and worship. God intervenes because Herod has no intention to worship Jesus and wants to kill Him instead.

But the point is worship leads to outreach. True worship leads to evangelism. You know this from experience. What do you do when you encounter something that excites you and you think your friends have not heard about it? You can’t wait to tell them. Nothing keeps you from telling them.

I mention this regularly. We can’t help but talk about those things we are excited about. If a new restaurant opens in Tyler and you try it out and love it, what do you do? You start telling people to check it out. You work it into conversations. “You got to try this place!”

Friends, that’s something trivial, I know. But do you see the point? When you are excited about something or someone you are dying (in some cases literally) to tell the world about it. And that’s true with Jesus too! It should be. David Platt nailed this point in a sermon I once heard him preach from Psalm 66. He said, “Passionate worship always leads to personal witness. Always.” Do you get that? You with me? That means “if we’re not witnessing, there is a problem with our worship. We’re not seeing God for who He is! We’re not realizing what He’s done!”¹² We are not excited and moved by what Jesus has done on the cross for us! And that is why we are not telling the world!

Listen, church, if we will not be a witnessing church, if we are not going to be a church that is salt and light to the city of Tyler, if we are not a church that is going to take seriously the mission of God and our part of the Great Commission...then we have a worship problem. It’s that simple. And we will never take those things seriously until we get our worship right. That’s why we don’t graduate from the Gospel. We go back to it again and again and again...because that’s what fuels our worship. And, by extension, our witness.

The Magi put before our eyes the Old Testament paradigm of mission. It is a “come and see” kind of mission. That was because in the Old Testament the presence of God dwelled in the temple and the Jerusalem temple was therefore the center of the worship activities. But when Jesus dies, that curtain is torn and a new paradigm

of mission is established. Matthew begins with the old paradigm. He ends the book with the new one. And the new one, found in the Great Commission, is not a “come and see” kind of model. It’s “go and tell.”

Listen church, don’t wait for people to come to us. You come. You worship. You get excited. And you get out there. You “go and tell.” That would be an appropriate response of worship if you know King Jesus.

Let’s pray...

¹ <http://www.johnstottmemorial.org>

² John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1958).

³ Timothy Keller, “Imitating the Incarnation,” preached on February 1, 2013.

⁴ For recent statistics, see: <http://homicides.redeyechicago.com>

⁵ Daniel Doriani writes, “Herod’s violent response makes sense in one way, but not in another. If the Magi are wrong about the prophecy, why bother with the child? If they are right about the prophecy, why attempt to resist it? Does he think he can thwart God’s purposes? Herod’s actions remind us that rebellion against God is irrational. It is folly to fight God, but sin makes people foolish.” Daniel Doriani, *Matthew, Volume 1: Chapters 1-13* (Reformed Expository Commentary; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 31-32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷ “Sadly, the hatred of Herod is only the first failed response. *The people of Jerusalem* were troubled by the word of Jesus’ birth. Their question is ‘Could this somehow lead to my harm?’ It is a sensible question. Herod was likely to kill at random, as too many dictators have been. Still, we cannot live by fear. Even in the face of threats, the Bible says, ‘Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened’ (1 Peter 3:14). Fear must not govern our decisions. It is all too easy to let fear of disapproval or financial loss or relational strife govern our decisions, but we must let the truth guide us. This is what the people missed. They asked, ‘What can go wrong?’ They failed to ask, ‘What is right?’” *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 39.

⁹ Doriani, 31.

¹⁰ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1961), 1.

¹¹ The usual suggestions are that gold signifies the royalty of Jesus, frankincense the deity of Jesus, and myrrh His humanity. For more of a justification to these associations, see David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary Series; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2013), 38.

¹² The sermon is titled “The Cosmic Cause of Christ,” which can be viewed here: <http://www.radical.net/media/series/view/1698/the-cosmic-cause-of-christ?filter=series> .