

# Matthew 1:18 - 2:12

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[ 0 : 00 ] As I drove into church from cults one morning this week, the Five Live phone-in was on the subject of the true meaning of Christmas. Now, even when I heard that that was the subject being discussed, I cringed somewhat as to what I would hear. The potential for shallow and inane contributions was disturbingly high, but more by default than by design, I continued to listen, at least for the 15 minutes or so that it takes for me to get from cults here into town.

The very first caller that I heard speaking on this phone-in was Tony, and his contribution was anything but inane or shallow. He said something along these lines, as I recall, "This is going to be my last Christmas. I've got lung cancer, and in August I was given fifteen months tops to live. I won't be here by next Christmas." And Tony went on to express his heartfelt and very moving conviction that Christmas was all about family. Now, as you can imagine, with a call of that nature, the calls that followed were somehow shaped by what he had said.

And really all of those who subsequently called, certainly for as long as I was listening, invariably echoed his words in one form or another. Christmas is all about family. But is it all about family? Indulge me for a moment and imagine that some of the original actors in the Christmas drama phoned in to Five Live to express an opinion on the true meaning of Christmas. Imagine the following. The presenter leading the program, we have a caller from the East, rather vague, but we'll run with it. And your name, sir? Mr. Magi. Unusual, but each to his own. So, Mr. Magi, what are your thoughts on the true meaning of Christmas? And these are the words that he would speak. We saw his star in the East and have come to worship him. It's all about him. It's all about Jesus. It's all about worshiping Jesus.

It's always a good call to follow the example of wise men. So, this morning, let's do just that and follow their footsteps as they lead us to the place of worship, bowing before the one born.

[ 3 : 04 ] King. And as we endeavor to retrace the journey of the wise men, there are four markers that can help direct our path and allow us to ponder on this great and central Christmas imperative to worship Jesus. And the four markers that will guide us on our way this morning are, first of all, a star, a star that speaks of the God who calls to worship. But then secondly, a search, a search that speaks of men determined to worship. But then a son, the child worthy of worship. And then finally, a sanctuary, a sanctuary, the house appointed for worship. A star, a search, a sun, and a sanctuary.

First of all, a star, a star that speaks of the God who calls to worship. The wise men explain the reason for their presence in Jerusalem as a search for the sun, and they declare, we saw his star in the east. What do we know, or what can we say about this star? Well, much fun has been had trying to identify the star with some known or possible astronomical phenomenon. Fun, perhaps, but largely, I suspect, fruitless. The key truth, it seems to me, is that the star, be it one employed by God, its trajectory directed by God, or indeed created out of nothing by God, the key truth is the means that the star. The star serves to call the wise men to worship Jesus. The star, first and foremost, speaks of a God who calls these wise men to worship. But is providing a star, by whatever means, all that God does to call the wise men? Well, as we consider the passage before us, we can answer and say that evidently not. That is not all that God did. He didn't simply provide a star, however extraordinary that star was. What God also does is He enables these men, again by means largely mysterious, to recognize the significance of the star. Is it possible that these men, perhaps from Babylon or Persia, were familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures and prophecies concerning a Messiah to be born?

They may have been. They may have been. We don't know. It's possible. Were they familiar with Balaam's oracle recorded in Numbers chapter 24, reading from verse 15? Then he uttered his oracle, the oracle of Balaam, son of Beor, the oracle of one whose eyes see clearly, the oracle of

one who hears the words of God, who has knowledge from the Most High, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls prostrate and whose eyes are opened. I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near.

A star will come out of Jacob. A scepter will rise out of Israel. Might they have been familiar with these prophetic words of Balaam? They may have been, or then again, perhaps not. We simply don't know.

What we do know is that God calls these men to worship His Son, Messiah Jesus, and that God graciously enables them to hear and respond to His call. Another question related to this matter of God calling these wise men is this. Why does God call them to worship? With the emphasis on them, why these men? Why does God call them to worship? Why magi from the east? Why wizards from wherever?

[ 7 : 42 ] Why Gentiles from afar? Why these men? Well, in calling them, God is revealing His purposes for the child born in Bethlehem. He is revealing that this is a child to be worshipped by all. This is a child to be worshipped by all peoples, by all nations, by all men. Yes, even those coming from distant lands.

Of course, in declaring this to be so, we simply have an echo of all the manifold Old Testament prophecies that point in that same direction concerning the Messiah who would come and whose kingdom would be an everlasting kingdom and that would extend from sea to sea and over all lands.

And so God, even at the birth of Messiah Jesus, echoes and confirms His purposes concerning this child as being one who would be king over all and worthy of the worship of all. And what about you? What about me?

Has God called you to worship His Son? Is He calling you even now to worship Jesus? We began our service this morning with a call to worship. Let us worship God. You see, God continues to call. He continues to call us to worship.

Worship. Worship the Son. Worship Jesus. So our journey in the footsteps of the wise men begins with a star, a star that speaks of a God who calls to worship. But our next marker is a search, and a search that speaks of men determined to worship. God calls. But what of those called by God to worship? Having heard the call, there now begins the search. Where is the one born King of the Jews? And what I want to do as I think of this search on which these men involved themselves, I want to reflect on the determination of the wise men in pursuing their objective, in answering the call to worship Jesus, the one born King of the Jews. The search, first of all, as we've already commented on with the children, required time and effort and resources. If they did come from Babylon, and it's perhaps as good a likely location from which they came as others that might be suggested, it would have been a journey of some 800 miles, probably an 80-day round trip. We were speaking with the children of how long it would have taken them to get to Bethlehem, very roughly, but of course they then had to return home. And so we're talking of maybe three months at least that they would have had to have dedicated in order to participate in this search. Such an expedition, such a journey would have to be carefully planned and resourced, and would likely have involved considerable numbers of attendants and guards and copious supplies, we would imagine, for such an endeavor. And we can certainly say this, that for these wise men, every other task, every other duty, every other priority had to be put to one side. Only one thing mattered, to find and to worship the one born King.

[ 11 : 45 ] So the search involved time and effort and resources, but the search, secondly, was marked by conviction and resolve. Have you ever imagined what the wise men expected on arrival in Jerusalem?

They are directed by God to the truth that one born the King of the Jews had been born. Not unreasonably, they make their way to Jerusalem as the likely location for that birth. And what do you think they imagined they would find? I would have thought that they expected to find a city celebrating the birth of the King, a throng of worshipers that they could join with in worship of the newborn King.

But what do they find? Well, what they find is sublime ignorance and indifference to the search that they are on. We're only given one sentence of recorded speech from the wise men.

Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his start in the East and have come to worship him. A question and a statement. And I wonder how many times they asked that question.

We don't know. But I wonder how many times they asked that question, where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? Perhaps they asked it many times as they approached Jerusalem and as they met those who lived around about Jerusalem and in Jerusalem. Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? And in response, blank stares or quizzical looks. I wonder, do we have any indication that they might have begun to waver in their resolve? Well, we have no such indication. Far from it. Rather, let's notice the conviction in the very manner in which they pose their question. The very manner in which they pose their question reveals great and deep conviction. What is the question? Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? Now, let's just think about the question for a moment.

[ 14 : 08 ] They're not asking if a king has been born. They are persuaded. They are clear. They are in no doubt that a king has been born. Their question is simply, where? Indeed, there is in the question they pose the expectation that they will have an answer, that they will find the king. Indeed, they reveal conviction concerning his identity as the king. On all these things, they are clear. There is a king.

He has been born. He has been born. He will be found. The only question they have is, where? Where is he? And so, even in the manner in which they pose the question, we see that their search is characterized by conviction and resolve. This is a search that reveals men determined to worship Jesus.

And there is there, surely for us, and we don't need to labor the point, but there is surely there a challenge. What about you? Are you determined to worship Jesus? Are you willing to employ all your energy and resources, your time and gifts in the worship of Jesus? Is worshiping Jesus more important than any other thing? Does your resolve to worship Jesus with the wise men remain firm and sure, even in the face of the unbelief and indifference and even hostility of others?

A search. A search. A search that speaks of men determined to worship. But our third marker concerns a son, as in S-O-N, the child worthy of worship. The wise men, in, as we've just commented, their only recorded words, declare that their purpose is to worship the one born king of the Jews.

Now, there is a legitimate debate as to the meaning that should be given in this instance to the word employed by the wise men, the word worship. And indeed, the very same word that Matthew uses in verse 11 to describe the wise men as worshipping the child. The Greek verb that we have translated worship quite accurately and rightly could be used of an act of reverence or homage to a human king.

[ 16 : 55 ] It could be and is used in that way on other occasions. Equally, it can be and is used to describe the worship that is rightly directed to God and to God alone. In determining the matter, or at least in coming to some kind of conclusion, I think it is significant that Matthew on a number of occasions uses the word, this word translated worship, in the latter sense, the worship of God. He uses it in different ways, but he uses it on a number of occasions in that sense when describing what is rendered to Jesus. Leaving aside the obvious reference here in the text that we're looking at, let me just give you a couple of examples of that. In Matthew chapter 14 and in verse 33, we read in the occasion, the familiar occasion of Jesus walking in the water and the disciples' response to this. And we read there in verse 33,

Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, Truly, you are the Son of God. God. And the use of that word on this occasion, and very particularly the words that are pronounced, indicating that here the word is being used in that very particular way of that worship, which is rightly granted to God and to God alone, and here being rendered to Jesus.

Then one other occasion in Matthew chapter 28. In the same chapter, in fact, we have two occasions when this word is used of that which is rendered unto Jesus. In Matthew chapter 28, and in verse 9, the occasion is the resurrection, the women who have gone to the tomb, and they meet with Jesus. And we read, Suddenly Jesus met them. Greetings, he said. They, the women, came to him, clasped his feet, and clasped his feet, and worshipped him. And then again, the disciples, on the occasion of the Great Commission, and from verse 16, Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him.

A son, a child worthy of worship. But as we consider this matter, perhaps the underlying key question, concerns the identity of the one being worshipped, leaving aside for a moment how that word could be understood. Is the one being worshipped worthy of the worship to be offered to God

alone? Well, what are we told about the one born in Bethlehem in our passage? We limit ourselves to our passage. What are we told? Well, we have three sources, or three witnesses, even in these brief verses in Matthew chapter 22. The wise men themselves can act as our witnesses. Surprisingly, Herod also serves as a witness. And of course, the chief priests and teachers of the law. Let's just look at each of them in turn, briefly. What about the wise men? Well, the wise men speak of the child as the one born king, and the one whose birth has been announced by a star. Now, that alone indicates that this was no ordinary king. This is a king before whom the wise men, as we see, gladly bow. And there's a stark contrast here, although it's not explicitly drawn out, but there's a stark contrast with King Herod. They met with King Herod, but there's no indication that though he was a king, there's no indication that they render unto him anything like that which they render unto the one born king. So, we have that witness from the wise men. Then we have Herod. You see, Herod, in the question that he poses to the religious leaders, even in asking the question, he points the finger, in a sense, in the direction of the identity or the possible identity of the one who has been born. In verse 4, we read, when Herod had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them, Herod asked them, where the Christ was to be born. So, even in asking the question, it already reveals that in Herod's mind, the one of whom the wise men are speaking might be, could possibly be, the Messiah. And so, the question, where do the prophets say that the Messiah, the Christ was to be born? Now, while it is true that Herod would not have known or believed all that the Old Testament prophesied concerning the promised Messiah, and in particular his divine identity, he nonetheless identifies Jesus as the Messiah, and in doing so, points, albeit unwittingly, to his divine identity. Herod also serves as a witness that would help us establish if this child is indeed worthy of worship. Then we also have the chief priests and teachers of the law who recur to the Old Testament prophets in answering Herod's question. And what do they say? Well, they recognize that the prophecy that they quote speaks of the Messiah as not only being born in Bethlehem, that was Herod's particular concern, the location of his birth, but they also recognize that out of

[ 22 : 47 ] Bethlehem would come a ruler, a ruler that is to be contrasted with the reference to the rulers of Judah, a ruler, immediately then followed by a ruler. So, you have the rulers, you have many rulers, but in contrast to many rulers who come and go, there is this one ruler, a ruler, and that alone, it gives a hint as to his special identity and position. But then they say more. They speak of this ruler who would be born in Bethlehem as one who would shepherd God's people, Israel. For out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people, Israel. So, more information, more evidence concerning the identity of the child. He will be a shepherd for his people. And even that language points forward poignantly to Jesus' own language, describing himself as the good shepherd, and very particularly the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. But back to the wise men and what they did, the worship that they rendered to Jesus, the wise men who may not even have been privy to the testimony of Herod and the religious leaders that we are privy to. We don't know if they were given this information or not. They may not have been. But whatever they were told by Herod or by the religious leaders, we have to come to the conclusion that we simply don't know to what extent these men understood who

Jesus was. They certainly knew what they themselves declare in the few words that are attributed to them. One has been born King of the Jews. Their actions in bowing before Him and worshipping Him speak also of what they knew. But how much they knew and the extent to which they understood who Jesus was is simply unknown to us. But we can say this, and this really is the heart of the matter, they knew enough to know that He was worthy of their worship. And in this, we are struck by the contrast, the somber contrast, with the chief priests and the teachers of the law, so familiar and commendable that they were so familiar with the prophecies concerning the Messiah, and yet so blind to His glorious appearing. And is it not often poignantly the case that many times those who are nearest to the means are furthest from the end? That was certainly true of these men. A son, the child worthy of worship. Well, what about you? Do you recognize Jesus as the one worthy to be worshiped? Do you know enough to worship Him? Do you know the one born in Bethlehem and crucified at Calvary, the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep? A star, a search, a sun, and finally, one further marker on our journey, a sanctuary, a sanctuary, the house appointed for worship. We read in verse 11, on coming to the house. They've met with Herod. They've had this dialogue with Herod. They see the star again, and it guides them to the location where Jesus is to be found. And there we read, on coming to the house,

the end of their search, on coming to the house. Now, several weeks, perhaps several months have passed since the birth and the family. They're no longer in the outhouses of the inn, but are in a house, not a palace, but neither a shack. This was the house appointed for the worship of Jesus by the wise men.

I wonder, as they approached the entrance to this humble home, did they waver in their conviction and resolve? Did the wise men exchange glances as if to say, Surely not here? Well, there is no indication that they harbored any such doubts. But of greater importance than the place of worship is the act of worship itself. And we can describe the worship rendered by the wise men in the following way. Their eyes were fixed on Jesus, their knees were bowed before Jesus, and their hands were opened towards Jesus. Their eyes fixed on Jesus. They saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Very careful. The language used by Matthew to describe what happens. They saw the child with his mother Mary, they bowed down and they worshipped him. They worshipped him. They worshipped the child. They worshipped Jesus. Their eyes were fixed on Jesus. He is the one they had come to find. He is the one they had traveled across the world to find. And when they find him, their eyes are fixed on him. Nobody else matters, because their eyes are fixed on him. And their knees are bowed before Jesus.

In fact, we would imagine more than their knees, quite possibly their whole bodies, prostrate before the one born king before Jesus. And their hands are fixed on him. And their hands are fixed on him. And their hands opened towards Jesus, open hands offering Jesus the very best that they possessed, gold and incense and myrrh.

[ 29 : 04 ] And is this not the worship that we too can and must render to Jesus? Our eyes fixed on Jesus, our knees bowed before him, our knees bowed before him, and our hands open to offer all that we have in his service. Is this not what Paul describes as our spiritual or reasonable worship? Writing to the Romans in chapter 12 and in the first verse we read, Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual or reasonable act of worship. Our sanctuary is not a house in Bethlehem. Our sanctuary is the world. The world is the stage upon which we serve and worship Jesus, the risen Jesus, the reigning Jesus, the one born King. It's all about him. It's all about Jesus. It's all about worshipping Jesus. And so, I would urge you, as I trust I urge myself, worship him, worship Jesus with all that you are and all that you have. Let us pray.