

SESSION 6

THE WISE MEN'S WORSHIP

▶ **The Point**

Jesus is Lord and He deserves our worship.

▶ **The Passage**

Matthew 2:1-11

▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

Neiman Marcus, the Dallas-based department store, has offered some unusual gifts over the years in its Christmas catalog: A complementary pair of Rolls Royce limited-edition cars; A Black Angus steer (on the hoof or already dressed) with mahogany and silver barbeque cart; A custom suit of armor; A "Noah's Ark," complete with a selection of animals (please allow four years for delivery); His-and-her airplanes; A pair of mummy cases (and one includes a mummy); A submarine.³ What started as a publicity stunt in 1959 to attract customers became an annual event. What is especially amazing is that people have actually bought many of these items! You may have received some unusual gifts from well-meaning friends, but it's safe to assume none of them were a fully-operational submarine.

Even Jesus received some gifts as a child that we might consider unusual. But the men who brought them to Jesus thought otherwise, for their gifts were both symbolic and expressive of their great worship of the King of kings. As we observe their worship, we will see that Jesus also deserves our worship.

▶ **The Setting**

Some time elapsed between Matthew 1 and 2. Following Jesus' birth (see chapter 1), magi or wise men in the East saw a star indicating this child was special. They then needed time to journey from a far distance to reach the child. Paintings displaying the wise men at the manger with the shepherds are not biblically accurate but rather were a compression of time artists used in the Middle Ages to portray the birth of Jesus in one clear painting.

What does the Bible say?

Wise men (2:1)—Counselors to the kings of the East who mixed Zoroastrianism with astrology to advise the kings. (See Dan. 2:2,4,5,10.)

Matthew 2:1-11

¹ 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.

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

Notes



DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 57 of the Personal Study Guide (PSG): “**If you could give anyone any gift, what would it be?**” Allow time for each person to respond.

GUIDE: Direct group members to “**The Bible Meets Life**” on page 58 of the PSG. Introduce the importance of genuine worship by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read on their own.

GUIDE: Call attention to “**The Point**” on page 58 of the PSG: “**Jesus is Lord and He deserves our worship.**”

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): In advance, write this question on the board or poster: “What symbolizes worship to you?” As group members arrive, provide index cards and pens. Instruct group members to individually write or draw their responses to the question on their cards. Collect the cards, shuffle, and read them aloud or show them to the group. Discuss reactions to the responses. **Ask:** “Is this all there is to worship? When does worship take place? How far have you traveled to worship Jesus?”

LEADER PACK: Display **Pack Item 3**, the “Map” poster, to refer to the setting for this particular session.

PRAY: Transition into the study by asking the Lord to help us see how worthy He is of our worship. Ask Him to impact our worship through this study so that it becomes more frequent and genuine.



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STUDY THE BIBLE

NOTES

Matthew 2:1-6

¹ 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.'"

ALTERNATE QUESTION:
What are the implications for us that Jesus is king?

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Matthew 2:1-6 on page 59 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 59 of the PSG: **“What have you been taught about the wise men?”**

RECAP: Scholars have not been able to precisely identify the “Magi from the east.” The term loosely applied to a variety of men interested in dreams, astrology, and magic; and dedicated to studying books thought to contain references to the future. They likely were Gentiles of high position. Apparently, these wise men came from the East spurred on by calculations from the stars. God had given them a special revelation, probably through signs in the sky. Their understanding of the Christ child also may have come through contact with Jewish scholars who had migrated East to their country. These scholars could have had copies of Old Testament scrolls that further aided them. As a result, these men may have been well aware of Balaam’s prophecy: “A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Num. 24:17).

GUIDE: Use the Commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to help group members further understand the background of the wise men.

TRANSITION: In the next verses, we not only see that Jesus is the supreme ruler, but we also see that some oppose Jesus’ rule.

Matthew 2:1-6 Commentary

[Verses 1-2] Wise men arrived in Bethlehem from the region of the Medes and Persians. They were part of the rulers' courts and had special functions of advising kings through astrology and the study of dreams. While studying the stars, these wise men were convinced a Jewish king had been born, and they traveled a long distance to see him. They went to Jerusalem, a logical place a foreigner would expect to encounter the king. They asked to see the one who was **born king of the Jews**—not born *to be* king of the Jews but *born king* of the Jews. Ironically, this would be the sign above Jesus at His death on the cross. (See Matt. 27:37.) Herod paid close attention. He certainly would have wanted to know how they learned this information, and they provided the answer. They saw **his star when it rose**. The Greek can refer to stars, planetary conjunctions, comets, meteors or other astronomical events. Both pagan and Jewish accounts associate the birth of great men with stars or planetary phenomena. Upon seeing the rising star, the wise men left for Jerusalem. They wanted **to worship** the child. The word could indicate they knew the child was worthy of greater worship than a mere human, but it could also mean simply that they wanted to pay homage to a special child. Matthew usually used the word in contexts where Jesus was recognized as more than a man. (See Matt. 14:33; 28:9,17.) The wise men would present gifts as homage to the birth of Christ, but they would also disregard a clear command of Herod and find another way home rather than through Jerusalem. (See Matt. 2:12.) Perhaps their meeting with Jesus changed their actions from mere homage to true worship.

[Verses 3-4] Herod had a far different reaction to news that a king had been born. He was **troubled**. The strong Greek word could be translated "in turmoil" or "terrified." The announcement was not good news to this paranoid ruler. When Herod was stirred up, so was **all Jerusalem**. He was ruthless and reckless, and when he was on edge, so was everyone else. Ironically, Gentile wise men rejoiced at the news of Jesus' birth and Jewish religious and political leaders were troubled. Herod took immediate action to squelch all rivals to his kingdom. He called together the **chief priests** and **scribes**. He asked them where the Christ would be born. He knew the expectations of a Messiah, but he did not know details. He was a secular king ruling a religious people. So he went to those who knew the Scriptures and asked.

[Verses 5-6] The chief priests and scribes identified where Messiah would be born, in **Bethlehem of Judea**, a city about five miles south of Jerusalem. It was the home of King David and would be the town of the One who would extend His kingdom into eternity. Micah had foretold the birth of Messiah. (See Mic. 5:2.) The religious leaders referenced that verse to Herod. Micah had indicated Bethlehem was not **least among the rulers of Judah**. Bethlehem was a small farming village, and yet Israel's two greatest kings would originate there.



STUDY THE BIBLE

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Matthew 2:7-8

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."

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Matthew 2:7-8 on page 60 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 60 of the PSG: **"What are some obstacles that prevent people from truly worshipping Jesus?"**

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): In advance, display a nativity set that includes the wise men. Discuss some of the elements that reflect biblical truth and others that are not likely to be true. **Ask:** "Why do you think these additions to our celebration of Christmas have become so popular through the years? How do they either help or hinder genuine worship?"

GUIDE: Use the Commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to help group members understand Herod’s motives and coming plot.

RECAP: Superficial worship was not something new. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah centuries earlier, God said, "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men" (Isa. 29:13). In Matthew 15:8, Jesus quoted Isaiah to show superficial worship was rampant during His ministry. Unfortunately, superficial worship is still among us. We don't have to go far to hear spiritual talk and "church lingo" that is void of real worship.

TRANSITION: The next verses remind us that Jesus' rule should lead us to worship Him.

Matthew 2:7-8 Commentary

[Verse 7] Herod **secretly** summoned the wise men. This may have flattered them, but the purpose was to scheme a way to eliminate the threat to his throne without inflaming the religious leaders who might suspect prophecies of the Messiah were fulfilled. Had the religious leaders heard his scheming, they might have awakened from their slumber of apathy toward the Scriptures. Herod's questioning centered on the **what time the star appeared**. The religious leaders had just indicated Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. So though he did not know the exact location, he did know the town. His intention was not to go to the child but to murder Him. He concocted a plan to find out the age of the child then murder all the boys that age and under to be sure he eliminated the threat to his throne. The wise men must have seen the star more than a year prior to their arrival in Jerusalem. Herod would launch his assault on all boys two years old and under. (See Matt. 2:16.) Initially, he might have wanted to find and kill only the child, but the valiant actions of the wise men in Matthew 2:12 would prevent this action. So he resorted to killing all male babies two years and under to make sure he eliminated the threat. His callous disregard for any life except his own would unfortunately be the legacy he left behind that exceeded even his phenomenal building projects.

[Verse 8] Herod told the wise men he wanted them to find the child so he, too, could worship the new king. The sight of the king and his soldiers searching for a baby would have alerted the parents to hide their children. Herod had no reason to suspect the wise men would respond any other way than returning to tell him where they found the child. Except for divine intervention (see v. 12), the plan might have worked. Why would Herod have had such an opposition to the rule of Jesus? Herod believed Jesus' existence posed a credible threat to his self-made kingdom. As the true King of the Jews, Jesus had authority and jurisdiction, even over the most powerful man in Jerusalem. But why would religious leaders oppose Jesus' rule? They heard that Jesus was born yet did not even travel the five-mile journey to see if it was true. Jesus' rule as King also opposed their self-made religious kingdom. They did not make an effort to see if the wise men's announcement was true. Or perhaps they feared Herod's cunning deceit and knew not to stir the pot of contention. Either way, they missed an event attended only earlier by shepherds and later by wise men—the arrival of the Messiah.

What causes people today to oppose Jesus' rule and reign in their lives? Perhaps we all have a bit of Herod's selfish ambition. We're too busy building our kingdoms and do not want to acknowledge Jesus' reign because it would mean changes in our lives. Or maybe we worry what others might think. Maybe we are just too apathetic to care. Or maybe, like the wise men, we are determined to encounter Jesus for ourselves.



STUDY THE BIBLE

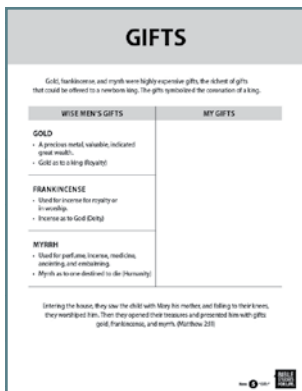
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ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What are some "gifts" we might give in our worship of Jesus?

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Matthew 2:9-11

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.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Matthew 2:9-11 on page 61 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 62 of the PSG: **“When have you felt overwhelmed with joy in following Christ?”**

SUMMARIZE: The wise men presented their gifts to Jesus. Highlight the main points from page 62 of the PSG.

- ▶ **A gift for His royalty.** Gold is the finest and most precious metal and showed great value from the giver to the recipient.
- ▶ **A gift for His Deity.** Frankincense is a glittering, odorous gum made from tree bark, essentially an aromatic, used in sacrificial offerings.
- ▶ **A gift for His humanity.** Myrrh was a much-valued spice and perfume, used in embalming and perfuming ointments.

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 62 of the PSG: **“What are some ways our group can best express worship of Jesus?”**

DO: Direct group members to complete the activity “My Gift for Jesus” on page 63 of the PSG to help them participate in a genuine worship experience.

Use the space below to write a brief poem, song, or prayer to offer as a gift of worship for Jesus. Or you can draw a picture symbolizing your worship of Him.

LEADER PACK: In advance, make enough copies of **Pack Item 5**, the “Gifts” handout, and distribute them to your group members. Invite members to complete this guide, identifying ways they can offer worship to God this week.

Matthew 2:9-11 Commentary

[Verse 9] The wise men, not knowing Herod and fooled by his false humility, left to find the child. Only when God revealed it in a dream did they realize Herod was using them for his own evil purposes. (See Matt. 2:12.) The men were adept at reading stars, so God used that to point them to His Son. The star they had seen at its rising was the original signal that a king had been born. Now the star reappeared. It did two things for the wise men. First, it **went before them**. Perhaps the star moved, or maybe it led them as a sailor follows the stars to get to his destination. However, the text next states that the star **came to rest over the place where the child was**. This would indicate the star moved with them as they traveled. The place where they found Jesus was later identified as a “house.” (See 2:11.) He had grown beyond His first year and his parents had settled into a house rather than returning to Nazareth.

[Verse 10] The wise men were not perplexed or confused by the strange astronomical events that guided them beyond Jerusalem. Instead, they **rejoiced exceedingly with great joy**. In fact, it took three words in Greek to explain their feeling. They had an “exceedingly great joy.” The joy of the wise men was not in a destination but in a person. Finding Jesus, whether then or now, produces much joy. The wise men probably did not understand all their discovery entailed, but who does upon the first meeting? Meeting Jesus leads to a life of discovering who He is. However, what started as joy turned to an even deeper emotion—worship!

[Verse 11] As the star rested above the house, the wise men went inside to find **the child**. This is not the word for a newborn found in Luke 2:12 but for one who has progressed to the next stages of life. The response of the wise men was that they worshiped the child. This is more than merely paying homage. They had fallen to their knees and begun to worship. The word for *worship* here often meant to kiss the hand or to fall on one’s knees in submission. This was an action of surrender and submission. Matthew saw their actions toward Jesus as true worship. Being in Jesus’ presence had led them to worship.

Next, the wise men opened **their treasures**. First, they offered **gold**, a sign of wealth for a king. They also offered **frankincense**, a fragrant substance obtained by making incisions in the bark of several types of trees and used in incense and perfume. (See Ex. 30:34-35.) **Myrrh** was also a fragrant resin that could be used as a perfume, mixed with wine as an anesthetic (see Mark 15:23), or used to prepare bodies for burial. (See John 19:38-42.) All were costly. Whether the wise men foresaw how appropriate these gifts would be to this child, or whether they merely intended to provide a gift worthy of an important person, they certainly came out of a heart of worship at the time Jesus received them.

Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles “Following a Star” (Winter 2005–2006), “First-Century Bethlehem” (Winter 2002–2003), “Who Were the Magi?” (Winter 2000–2001), and “The House of Herod” (Winter 1998–1999) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator. Look for Bundles: Bible Studies for Life.

