

What Christmas Teaches Us About Our Purpose: Joyful Worship

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Matthew 2:10-11

WHAT CHRISTMAS TEACHES US ABOUT MAN'S PROBLEM: OUR SIN

Three weeks ago we began talking about what Christmas teaches us about our sin problem. It seems like sin isn't so fitting of a subject when we are supposed to be celebrating the birth of Christ. But it is the birth of Christ that reveals the immensity of our sin and our separation from God. The fact that we all experience discontentment, loneliness, bitterness, emptiness are all indicators that we have put our hope in things that were never meant to satisfy the deepest longings and desires of our hearts. Jeremiah 2:13 reminds us that we have worshipped and served things other than God and in so doing, we have been left empty handed and empty hearted – ravaged by the effects of sin. Jeremiah says, “For my people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living waters, and have dug out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.” Christmas teaches us that our sin is heinous enough to merit the crushing of God’s Son (Isaiah 53). While we were alienated and separated from God, without hope, because of our mis-worship, God in His unfathomable grace gave His son, Jesus – who would save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

WHAT CHRISTMAS TEACHES US ABOUT GOD'S PROVISION: A SAVIOR

It is only against the dark backdrop of our sin that we can see and appreciate God’s provision of a Savior. Only talking about the Savior apart from the sin is like boarding an airplane and trying to convince the person sitting in the seat next to you that he needs to wear a parachute. Upon hearing your recommendation he might look at you and think you had lost your mind. As he sat there and considered, in the quiet of his own mind, what others might think or say if he were to sit in his seat for two hours with a parachute affixed to his back, his perception of his dignity might seem more valuable than any potential risk. But take that same gentleman off the aircraft and show him that 53 of the 75 rivets securing the leading edge of the wing are loose and will most likely tear away in flight and he will most gladly wear the parachute – whatever the cost. Apart from a clear understanding of our sin, a Savior seems foolish. But when we understand the weight of our guilt and sin before a holy God we become most thankful for the person and work of Christ who is the perfect sacrifice for sin. We can then sing with Isaac Watts, “When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.” Christmas teaches us that we have a loving God who has provided for our greatest need – forgiveness of our sin in Christ (Psalm 130:3-4).

WHAT CHRISTMAS TEACHES US ABOUT OUR PURPOSE: JOYFUL WORSHIP

Christmas not only teaches us about our sin problem and God's gracious provision of a Savior, but it also teaches us about how we should respond to God's provision in Joyful worship. Our purpose (chief end) is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever! One man said, "Worship is man's response to God's grace." Worship is the response when we see our sin against the backdrop of God's holiness, and then come to understand that He graciously sent His son to bear our burden. Christmas reminds us that we are estranged from God – enemies because of our sin. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, [He] made us alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2:4). That, brothers and sisters, should make our hearts overflow with joy, adoration, thanksgiving and praise!

Our text for this morning is Matthew 2:10-11, but I find so much that is worshipful in the preceding narrative that I would like us to back up to verse 1 and walk through this text together. I will stop us along the way and point out a few ways we can worship our glorious God! Matthew, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, records this:

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, 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." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "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.'" Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 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." 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. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 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. Matthew 2:1-11

SEEKING THE KING

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, 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." Matthew 2:1-2

As Matthew opens his post-birth narrative of Christ he sets the stage with two groups of characters – Herod, the sickly king of Judea and the wise men from the east. Let's press pause on Herod for a moment and talk about the wise men that have traveled to worship the One who was born King of the Jews. Who were these wise men or Magi? The Magi were a highly educated caste of priests in the Persian Empire. They were prominent figures in the religious arena and though they themselves, contrary to popular tradition, were not kings; they often served as political advisors to the king. They were brilliant men who were trained in medicine, history, religion, astronomy and astrology. They were students of the sky – stargazers. Not only did they study the stellar expanse seeking to understand how the heavens operated, but as astrologists they also looked to the stars seeking answers for this life and the next.

Being from the area in or around Persia, we know that the wise men traveled an incredibly long distance to come and see Jesus. The straight-line distance from Babylon to Jerusalem is somewhere in the ballpark of 500 miles, but the typical caravan route would have probably led the wise men northwest along the Euphrates River towards Syria and then south, along the Mediterranean Sea, towards Bethlehem – a distance of well over 900 miles. This trip was no walk in the park. It was long, costly and dangerous. At a rate of 20 miles a day it would have taken the wise men about 45 days to reach Jerusalem. What does our pursuit of Jesus look like? Are we willing pursue Him no matter the cost?

As Gentiles with their own religious distinctives, how did the wise men connect the star that they saw to the birth of the King of the Jews? There were a large number of Jews who remained in and around Babylon after they had been exiled there. Though the wise men were Gentile pagans, they were probably well acquainted with key Jewish beliefs - including their anticipation of a coming Messiah. It's very possible that they were aware of Balaam's prophesy in Numbers 24:17, "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." Having been aware of the prophesy, when the star arose, they set out to follow it in hopes of bringing gifts to the new King. Look at verses 3-6:

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "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.'" Matthew 2:3-6

Heading in the right direction, but unaware of Jesus' specific whereabouts, the wise men traveled into the capital city of Jerusalem. They must have thought that there was surely a group of people from Jerusalem that had already left or were preparing to go and visit Jesus as well, but that isn't what the wise men found when they arrived in town. Instead they found that their arrival angered the sick and dying king Herod. Some of our stories and Christmas songs speak of three wise men, but it

is highly unlikely that three lone men would have embarked on such a trip on their own. Though we aren't sure of an exact number, it's likely that the wise men were accompanied on their journey by military escorts as well as servants. Some historians have estimated that there could have been as many as 200 people in their caravan. As you can imagine, this group of Gentile strangers would have definitely raised eye brows and turned heads as they strolled into town.

Matthew tells us that when Herod was made aware of an entourage in town that had come to worship the one who was "born" King of the Jews, he was troubled. The Greek word here for troubled means to shake with anxiety (paranoid). I think he was troubled for two reasons. First, Herod was fearful of invasion from the East, and second he felt threatened by the thought of a competing King. Not knowing himself where the new King had been born, Herod assembled the chief priests and the scribes hoping they would know where to find Jesus. How Herod was unaware of Jewish prophesy is hard to understand, but the religious leaders were aware of Micah's prophesy some 700 years earlier that the Ruler, the Shepherd of God's people would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Every prophecy concerning the coming Messiah was literally fulfilled in the person and work of Christ. God is certainly faithful to His Word!

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 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."

Matthew 2:7-8

Shaken, Herod is plotting in his mind how he might be able to eliminate any threat to his throne. In a secret meeting he asked the wise men what time they had seen the star rise that led them to Jerusalem. Though Herod said that he wished to honor Jesus as well, we know that Herod had no intentions of worshipping Jesus. But God wasn't going to allow an angry, tyrannical king to stand in the way of His redemptive plan. Remember, "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, He directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" Proverbs 21:1. Notice the two responses to the Savior – King. Herod despised Jesus and wanted to kill Him while the wise men were seeking Jesus and desired to worship Him. These are the two responses to Jesus today.

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. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 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. Matthew 2:9-11

After the wise men left Herod, the star that led them to Jerusalem reappeared in the sky and led them to the house where Jesus was. The word "star" in verses 2 and 9 is the Greek word ἀστήρ (aster). It is the general word for any luminous body in the sky. Bible teachers have speculated as to the nature

of the star. Some have proposed that it was a comet or supernova. Others have said that it was a conjunction of planets (Jupiter and Saturn) in the sky. I'm not convinced that these are the best answers. Notice that the star appears and then disappears (v.2) and then moves (v. 9).

I am more persuaded that what the wise men saw was either an angel or the glory of God. It's interesting to note that the Hebrew word שָׂרָף (Saraf) is the verb that means to burn. When we read of Seraphim in the Bible it literally means the "burning ones". Angels were guides in the Old Testament. Speaking of leading or guiding Israel to Canaan, God said, "Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared" Exodus 23:20. It could also be that God supernaturally revealed some of His glory to the wise men. Remember in the Old Testament God led Israel through the wilderness in the form of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. At the end of the day, we don't know exactly what this light in the sky was, but we do learn that God can use whatever means he wants to lead a person to Jesus!

We also see God's wisdom and grace in reaching out to the Gentiles. God used the wise men's (Magi's) broken system for discovering truth and He supernaturally guided them to the one who is the Truth (John 14:6). It is interesting to note that the Jews who had the Scriptures, and are only 6 miles north in Jerusalem are completely uninterested in the birth of Christ, while the Magi (Gentiles), from far-away are coming to worship the King of the Jews. In Matthew 11:25 Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children..." As astrologers, the wise men's practices would have fallen under the umbrella of "science". Isn't it neat that the picture we see here is that of the science of the day bowing before Jesus in humble adoration!

Matthew says that the wise men rejoiced exceedingly with great joy when they saw the star reappear in the sky. As you can imagine, they were probably weary from their long trip and seeing the star they knew that they were close to finding the new King. I wonder what the wise men thought as they crossed the threshold of the door into the house where Jesus and His parents were living. There before them was a helpless child. As they looked at Him they were looking into the eyes of the King of Kings, the radiance of God's glory, the Lord of the universe, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, holy, eternally dwelling in unapproachable light, and yet Jesus wasn't dressed like nobility, He didn't reside in a castle, and there was no scepter in His hand or crown on His head. He wasn't sitting on a throne and He had no armies at his command.

Though Jesus couldn't walk or talk, the wise men saw a King. Though they probably didn't understand that they were looking into the eyes of deity - God in flesh - they nonetheless responded like anyone who understood that they were in the presence of a King would respond - They fell down and worshiped Him. The word worship here is the Greek word προσκυνέω (proskuneo) and it literally means to bow down in reverence. This is a fitting response to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

In Matthew 4:9-10, just before the beginning of Jesus' public ministry Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness telling Him that if He will (proskuneo) him, he will give Jesus the kingdoms of the world. Satan said, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"

In Acts chapter 10 Peter was sent to Cornelius' house to preach the gospel to him and his family. Verses 24-26 say, "And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped (proskuneo) him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man."

Just four chapters later in Acts 14:8-14 Paul and Barnabas are ministering in Lystra when they come across a man who was crippled from birth. Noticing that he was listening, Paul looked intently at him and said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking. And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

John in Revelation 19:6-10 is writing about his vision of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. He says, "Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God." Then I fell down at his feet to worship (proskuneo) him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God."

But here in Matthew 2 when the wise men droop themselves in humble adoration and worship to the infant Christ, there is no rebuke. There is no redirection of their worship. Why? Because they are doing what is right. They are worshipping the only one whom all worship is due. They are

reverencing the only One whom blessing and glory and honor and power and majesty and dominion and praise, and authority are to be rightly ascribed (Jude 1:25, Revelation 7:12).

Though the text doesn't tell us anything about the wise men recognizing the deity of Christ, Matthew wants us to see that their response to the majesty of the King is one of adoration and humble worship (proskuneo). They bow down before Him and offer gifts in worship. It has long been understood that these three gifts symbolized who Jesus was and what He would become.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WISE MEN'S WORSHIP

GOLD FOR THE TRUE KING (ROYALTY)

Gold is one of the most precious and costly metals known to man. It has long been a symbol of nobility and wealth. It is fitting then that the wise men would bring Jesus a gift fit for a King. Jesus' Kingship is one of the overarching themes of Matthew's gospel. We worship and adore Jesus – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We should note that Jesus will not be your savior if He is not recognized as your Lord. The 18th century British admiral Lord Nelson was known for treating his opponents with unmatched courtesy and kindness. After one naval victory a defeated officer strode confidently across the quarterdeck of Nelson's ship and offered the admiral his hand. With his own hand remaining at his side, Nelson replied, "Your sword first, sir, and then your hand." Before we can be Christ's friends, we must be His subjects. He must be our Lord before He can be our elder Brother.¹ Is He the King of your heart?

FRANKINCENSE FOR OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST (DEITY)

Secondly, the wise men brought Jesus frankincense. Frankincense is a white resin or sap that is gathered from trees in Arabia. It was harvested by making incisions in the bark of the tree and then waiting for the sap to flow out and harden – this laborious process along with its fragrant smell made it a very prized and costly possession. Because of its cost, it was used only for the most special of occasions. The high priest would often burn it in temple worship as an incense that was pleasing to God (Exodus 30:8). The wise men's gift of frankincense is symbolic of Jesus' deity. We worship and adore Jesus - our great High Priest. The writer of Hebrews tells us, "It was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself" Hebrews 7:26-27. Is He your great High Priest?

¹ John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7 The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 36.

MYRRH FOR OUR SACRIFICING SAVIOR (HUMANITY AND DEATH)

Lastly, the wise men brought Jesus the gift of myrrh. Like frankincense, myrrh is also a very fragrant substance that is derived from tree sap. It was often used as a perfume but it had several practical uses as well. In John 15:23, wine mixed with myrrh was offered to Jesus as an anesthetic as he hung on the cross. In John 19:39 we are told that Nicodemus brought a mixture of about 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes to prepare Jesus' body for burial. The gift of myrrh symbolized the death of Christ. We worship and adore Jesus - our sacrificing Savior. That child that lay in Mary's lap was the lamb of God who had come to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

Those soft little hands, fashioned by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb, were made so that nails might be driven through them. Those baby feet, pink and unable to walk, would one day walk up a dusty hill to be nailed to a cross. That sweet infant's head with sparkling eyes and eager mouth was formed so that someday men might force a crown of thorns onto it. That tender body, warm and soft, wrapped in swaddling clothes, would one day be ripped open by a spear. Jesus was born to die.²

As the sun set on Jesus' earthly ministry he said that of himself, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" Matthew 20:28. It's encouraging to note that when Isaiah writes about the return of Christ in Isaiah 60 he says that people will bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD (Isaiah 60:6). Where is the myrrh? They bring gold and incense, but no myrrh. Why? There is no myrrh because the myrrh speaks of His death. The next time Jesus comes, He won't come to die – He will come as the reigning King of Kings and the Lord of Lords!

WE WORSHIP JESUS FOR WHO HE IS (HIS PERSON):

Are you captivated by the splendor of His majesty; are you in wonder at His creation; are you thankful for His goodness, grace and mercy; are you humbled by His holiness; are you in awe of His immensity; are you silenced by His manifold wisdom, are you perplexed by His perfections; do you bow down before His supremacy; do you adore His faithfulness, reverence His sovereignty, and exalt His immutable character; do you magnify His power, glory in His self-sufficiency, and celebrate his righteousness?

WE WORSHIP JESUS FOR WHAT HE HAS DONE (HIS WORK):

Jesus came to give sight to the blind, set free the captives from the prison of sin, death and darkness, to cancel the legal demands of the law that stood in opposition and judgment against us, to be the faultless obedience that we could never be, to reconcile us to himself through his perfect blood, to

² John MacArthur, *God With Us* (Zondervan, 1989), 116.

become our ransom and claim us as his own, to secure our justification and forgive our sin scarred record, to impute his righteousness to our bankrupt accounts, to take away all condemnation for those who believe, to give us a clear conscious and free us to worship him in spirit and in truth, to free us from the futility and love of sin, to enable us to live for him and not for ourselves, to rescue us from his final judgment, to gain His joy and ours, to give us confident access to the presence of God through His death on the cross. That is who was lying in the manger!

CHRISTMAS REMINDS US THAT WE WILL WORSHIP FOR ALL ETERNITY

Worship is the occupation of heaven, so practice now what you will be doing for all eternity!

[Around the throne] the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" Revelation 4:8

[Behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...] Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. Revelation 7:9, 13-15