

THE FOOLS, THE WISE, AND THE KING Matthew 2:1-12

Turn in your Bibles, please, to Matthew 2:1-12. The story of the wise men coming to Bethlehem to visit the baby Jesus is one of the most intriguing stories in all of Scripture. So strange is the account of the star in the East and the wise men's journey in search of an infant king that many discount it as pure fiction. But if one can believe that shepherds heard a direct word from an angel as to the location of the baby Jesus, and if one can believe that the nighttime Palestinian sky was lit up as bright as the noon day and filled with angels singing praises to God, then believing that God spoke to a group of Near East astrologers through a supernatural star should be no problem, right? I mean, which one of these revelations would be more difficult to pull off for God?

So we who believe the Bible have no problem believing in the story of the wise men. And today we are going to walk through this ancient drama together and see a number of precious spiritual truths, but here is the one that I want you to remember if you forget all the rest: **worship is the only proper response to our revelation of Christ, and true worship means true sacrifice.** I want to repeat that. **Worship is the only proper response to our revelation of Christ, and true worship means true sacrifice.**

As we consider the visit of the wise men to the baby Jesus, I want us to focus briefly on three areas. We will look at the **place**, then at the **people**, and then finally at the **praise**. So where is the place in our drama? Why Bethlehem, of course. But what an unusual place for the birth of a king! Bethlehem was a bedroom community of the great city of Jerusalem, just about five miles away. The place where the temple was and where all the great religious feasts occurred. But according to one author, little Bethlehem had at the most a population of 1000. It was so small that here's what Micah had to say about it when he predicted it would be Messiah's birthplace: But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *Though* you are little among the thousands of Judah, *Yet* out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth *are* from of old, From everlasting." (Micah 5:2)

Friends, may I say that God is forever taking that which is obscure and lowly and bringing great glory to His Name! You see the name Bethlehem means "house of bread", because the region surrounding Bethlehem was very fertile. And could there have ever been a more perfect name for a town in which a boy was born who one day would truthfully proclaim, "I am the Bread of Life?" And I'll tell you something else. God is forever coming to people just like the lowly people of Bethlehem, just like those shepherds that Luke writes about, and changing their lives. Don't ever think that you are too small and insignificant to be seen, loved, and lifted up by Jesus!

But now let's take a look at the **people** in our drama. First of all we have the wise men, or in the Greek, the magi. We do not know a lot about the magi, but we know that they were probably from Persia or Babylon and that they were intelligent men. Some were skilled in philosophy, medicine, and natural science. Daniel refers to them as part or all of the group that tried to interpret the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. And while some were soothsayers or sorcerers whose power was demonic, others were **humble** men who sincerely sought to know and follow God, and this is the type that came searching for Jesus.

You see, there was a wide spread belief in the Rome and in the East, among Jews and Gentiles alike, that the time was ripe for a Ruler to come out of Judea that would acquire a universal empire. And being intelligent men, the magi certainly would have known about this belief. They likely had heard of Daniel's prophecy of the time this Ruler would come. Daniel 9 says that it would be 69 weeks of years, or 483 years after the decree to allow the Jewish captives to return from Babylon, that this Ruler would be born. And they did the math and realized that the time was fast approaching. And so hearing and knowing of this Ruler that was to come out of Judea, when they saw the supernatural star that God placed in the west toward Palestine, with hearts of faith that this was God's sign of His Ruler to come, they set out for Judea to find Him.

Now, we will return to the wise men in just a little while, but for a few minutes I want us to take a look at Herod. Herod, King of Judea, who was also called Herod the Great. Herod was not humble toward Christ, as the wise men, he was **hostile**. Now, by some standards Herod was a great king. He was appointed governor of Judea in 47 BC, given the title of king in 40 BC, and reigned until his death in 4 BC. It was the only time in Palestinian history that there was relative peace, much because of Herod's strong leadership. He was a great builder, building a magnificent theater and amphitheater in Jerusalem, whose ruins still stand today, and he also rebuilt the Jewish temple. And at times Herod showed great generosity. One particular example is that during a period of hard times he remitted the taxes and even melted down his own gold plate and sold it to help feed the starving people. So Herod did have a good side about him.

But like all of us, Herod had a corrupt, sinful nature, which in his case manifested itself by insane jealousy. And his jealousy caused him to be a man of great cruelty. He was so jealous of the popularity of his wife and two of his sons that he had them all assassinated. So it is no wonder that when Herod heard the news that the Jewish Messiah had possibly been born that he ordered all the baby boys under two years old in Bethlehem to be executed. He was the mighty ruler of Judea. Caesar alone had more power than he. And he would take no chance that a baby born in Bethlehem might indeed grow up and one day usurp his throne.

May I say to you that the world is still full of Herods today. Whether they are rich or poor, powerful or powerless, the world is still full of people who are **hostile** toward

Jesus. Herod did not want Jesus to come the first time, and these people do not want Him to come the second. Some say that they are the master of their own fate, the captain of their own destiny, or so they think. They have no time for God in their lives. They think that life would be miserable following the commands of Jesus. And if someone told them that Jesus was coming to take control of their lives, just like Herod, it would scare them to death.

And then there are others who are hostile toward Jesus because they know that if Jesus came He would judge them because of their sin. They curse, they cheat on their tests, they cheat on their income tax, they cheat on their spouse, they lie, they slander, they fill their minds with trash, and like Herod, some have assassinated their children – but they've done it inside their own womb. And all of these are guilty of eternal death, and it scares them to death when they think of facing Jesus. So some who are hostile toward Jesus are afraid of His lordship, and others are afraid of His punishment, but both fear the thoughts of His coming again for what would happen to them.

But we see a third attitude displayed at Jesus' coming, and that was of the chief priests and scribes. They weren't **hostile** like Herod, they were just **ho-hum** about it all, and they just didn't care. When you think about it, their attitude is quite amazing. For these were supposed to be the God-fearing people of the day. And it was not a false faith they practiced, it was Judaism, the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And they were the ones to which Herod went and asked where Jesus would be born. And they gave Herod the right answer, from Micah 5:2, Bethlehem of Judah. So here they were. They've just been told that their long-awaited Messiah might be in Bethlehem, and they don't even travel five miles to find out.

Have you ever wondered what it meant to be a hypocrite? Well, now you know. It's someone who we as kids said liked to play church. You know about playing church. You start with a preacher, and can have a music man, a pianist, some ushers, and you really should have at least one in the congregation. And you pretend you are in church, worshipping God. But it is all a game, it's fun, just like playing kick ball is fun. But did you know there are a lot of teenagers and grownups who are still playing church? They still like to play church because they think they are accumulating frequent flyer miles each time swoop in and out on Sunday morning, and one day they will have enough miles for a free flight to Heaven. But they have no love for Jesus Christ at all. They couldn't care less about serving or sacrificial giving. Titus talks about these with the ho-hum attitude in Titus 1:16: "They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work".

Friends, you can say that you are a Christian all day long. You can jump through all the religious hoops that a church can come up with. You can say that you prayed a prayer years ago and asked Jesus to come into your heart. But if you have no passion to know Jesus Christ in a personal, intimate way, if you have no passion

to obey His Word and please Him by godly living, then I charge you to hear the Word of the Lord! James 2:17 says, "Thus faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead".

But do you know what? Even genuine Christians can backslide into this thing of playing church. They are saved, satisfied, and they are really sweet, but you can't count on them when you need someone to go to war with you with the devil. They may be on the front lines one moment and AWOL at the beach the next. They are the epitome of the person who someone envisioned perhaps walking up to the clerk in a general store and saying,

"Mr., I'd like to buy three dollars' worth of God. Please, not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb, not a rebirth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I'd like to buy about three dollars' worth of God, please."

May I say to you that I don't know of anything that breaks God's heart any more than those He has saved by His grace, but all they really want is a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. Churches are full of them. Many of them in Alabama have made a commitment to two weeks from tomorrow night that is much more important to them than their commitment to two weeks from today at 11:00. Someone might call them and ask, "I need to go visit my grandmother in Birmingham on Monday night the 9th. Can you ride with me?" And they'll say, "Sorry, I've already got plans to watch the game". Then the caller says, "Well, I might decide to go on Sunday morning the day before". And without blinking an eye they'll say, "I'll be glad to go then". They are the classic ho hummer.

Well, we've seen that the wise men were humble men, seeking to please God in their lives, traveling hundreds of miles in faith to find God's long-awaited Messiah. And we saw that Herod was a hostile man, rebelling against the lordship of Jesus in his life. And we saw that the chief priests and scribes were indifferent about the whole thing. They just wanted to be left alone in their own little make-believe world of playing church.

I wonder, which category do you fall into this morning? You certainly fall into one of the three. You may be here and deep down in your soul you are hiding a hostile attitude toward Jesus. You know His claims as the Son of God, and you've heard His call upon your life. But even today you are still resisting Him, just like Herod, clinging to the right to be the ruler of your own life, fearful of what He might make you do if you gave your life to Him.

Or, you may have a ho-hum attitude about Jesus. You may be real comfortable and smug with all of your "church habits". They are many and you can do them in your sleep. But Jesus is not really precious to you. You are not really interested in selling out to serve Him.

It is my prayer today that you will be as the wise men. Look again at verse 11. They saw Jesus, and then they worshipped Jesus. They acknowledged that He was worthy of honor and glory. But they didn't stop there. They opened up the treasures and gave to Him gifts. Oh, beloved, what a lesson!!! True worship, worship that pleases God, always involves sacrifice. True worship costs. It will cost you your time, your money, and your energy. But may I ask, what in this world is worth a greater sacrifice? The King of glory is lying in a manger before you. One day He hung on an old rugged cross for you, just so you could escape eternal torment in hell and live in eternal bliss in Heaven. What is worth more than committing your life to worshiping and serving Him? May God give us all grace to seek and to worship the Lord Jesus Christ today. For when we truly seek, God promises us that we shall find!