

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 25 December 2022. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Worship the King! **Matthew 2:1-11**

Every December, there is an old, familiar scene which is depicted in thousands of slightly different ways, and which is posted in millions of places all over the world. We see it on postcards, stamps, store displays, billboards, mugs, colouring books, T.V. commercials, and in advertisements of all kinds. It is a portrayal of three wise men (who are dressed like kings), and a handful of lowly shepherds, assembled together in a cosy-looking stable. A star is hovering over the stable; and a few cute-looking sheep and donkeys are peeking into a manger. An adorable baby boy is lying on a bed of hay in that manger; and a supernatural glow is radiating from His person, and filling the entire area. The baby's mother is looking down lovingly on her child; and everyone in the room is kneeling before the child, and offering him gifts of gold, frankincense, myrrh, and baby lambs.

We've all seen this familiar picture; however, this scene is an inaccurate mixture of two events. The *shepherds* didn't follow a star to find Jesus: the *wise men* did. As for the wise men, they weren't present on the night of Christ's birth at all. They were *not* at the manger with the shepherds. Furthermore, they were *not* kings; and we don't know whether there were three of them, or dozens of them.

As Bible-believers, we need to keep the account of the wise men biblical, and not allow it to be turned into a fanciful legend. The visitation of the wise men was a *real* event, which God orchestrated for a very important reason: and **that reason was to show that His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, is the King of Israel!** That is precisely why Matthew recorded this event in his Gospel. He considered it to be profoundly important. None of the other three Gospels mention the visit of the wise men; but Matthew did. Matthew didn't even record the night of Jesus' birth, as Luke did in his Gospel; but he *did* record the visitation of the wise men. Why? Because his purpose in writing this book was to show his Jewish readers that **Jesus is the King of Israel**, who deserves our *worship*. **Ten times** in the book of **Matthew** we are told that a person, or a group of people, *worshipped* Jesus; and Jesus received their worship, because it was the right thing for them to do. Jesus is no ordinary man. He is also *God*; and He deserves our love and worship.

This morning, we are going to examine the account of the wise men, as recorded in **Matthew 2**. We will learn about the wise men who came to worship Jesus; about the king who tried to *destroy* Jesus; and about the gifts that the wise men gave to Jesus. In these gifts we will find prophetic pictures of Jesus as our **King**; as our **High Priest**; and as our **Sacrifice** for sin. The title of this message is ***Worship the King***.

I. The worshippers of the King of Israel (vv. 1-2)

Read Matthew 2:1-11.

There is much confusion about the wise men. Who were the wise men, exactly? How many of them were there? At what point, exactly, did they see Jesus? From where did they come? And how did they *know* to come looking for Jesus? The Scripture that we've just read answers most of these questions (or, at least, gives us a good idea).

As for *when* the wise men visited Jesus, we know that they did *not* visit Him on the night of His birth. As we saw there in **verse 11**, the wise men, when they arrived, came into a "**house**" in Bethlehem. They didn't find Jesus lying in a manger, because Mary and Joseph were living in a house now. Time had passed since that night when Mary and Joseph arrived in

Bethlehem for the taxing; and since that night, Mary and Joseph had taken up residence in their old ancestral home of Bethlehem, instead of in Nazareth, where they had lived before.

Another reason we know that Jesus was not a baby when the wise men arrived is that Herod ordered all children from **age two and under** to be killed. (**Read Matthew 2:16.**) From the information that the wise men gave to Herod, Herod figured that Jesus was anywhere between one and two years of age by this time. That is why Matthew describes Jesus as a *pedíon* (“young child”) instead of a *brephon* (“infant”). (**Read verse 11.**) Another reason we know that the wise men arrived a good while after Jesus’ birth is that when Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day after His birth, Mary and Joseph offered a pair of *turtledoves* for a sacrifice. If they had just received those expensive gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh from the wise men, they surely would have offered God the costlier sacrifice of a *lamb*. Yet, they didn’t. They offered the sacrifice that the *poor* were permitted to offer to God.

Read Luke 2:1-24.

Now, *how many* wise men were there? The Bible doesn’t tell us this, either; but it seems very likely that there were more than three of them! (**Read verse 3 again.**) The Bible says that all Jerusalem was “*troubled*” by this caravan of wise men; thus, it seems very likely that there were more than three of them. This was a large band of men—so much so, that they probably looked like a small army!

The next question is: *Who*, exactly, were the wise men, and where were they from? We are told that they were from “*the east.*” They were probably from a royal court somewhere in Persia; and as wise men, they were well-educated. They gave advice to their king in matters of science, law, history, politics, astronomy, and so forth. However, these men were wise in more ways than one. Not only were they very knowledgeable of government, science, and astronomy, but they also were very knowledgeable of the Scriptures. In fact, not only did they *know* the Scriptures, but they *believed* the Scriptures. They believed in the prophecies of the Messiah so strongly, that they were willing to make a very long, expensive journey to see Jesus, and to worship Him.

Now, it’s important to realise that these men were not Jews. There *were* many ex-patriot Jews living outside their homeland; but these men were not ex-patriot Jews. They were Gentiles. They said that they had come to see “*the king of the Jews.*” By calling Jesus “*the King of the Jews,*” they were making a distinction between themselves and the Jewish people. Basically, they were asking, “All right, people of Israel....where is your King?” They were so sure that the Jews would *recognise* Jesus as their King, that they went straight to the capital city, Jerusalem. They probably figured that Israel’s King would be living in Jerusalem by now!

The next question is: If these men were Gentiles, how did they know about the Jewish Messiah? And how did they, being non-Jews, know that the star they had seen in the sky was a special sign that the King of the Jews had arrived? It was all because of a man named **Daniel**. In 605 B.C., God allowed Daniel to be taken as a captive to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar, and to be placed in the royal court of Nebuchadnezzar. Because of the superior wisdom that God gave to Daniel, Daniel was soon made the chief governor over all the wise men of Babylon. Daniel was the chief wise man of Babylon for the better part of seventy years; and he was given much power in the administration of the Babylonian government, as well. He also was in the court of at least two Persian kings, after Persia had overthrown Babylon. Because of the high positions that Daniel had in both Babylon and Persia, he had much fame and influence throughout the entire Middle East.

Now, the wise men of Babylon and Persia had been brought up in pagan darkness. They had been taught occultic, magical “sciences,” such as astrology. However, as they saw the power of Daniel’s God, and the powerlessness of their own false gods, there surely must have been at

least some of them who came to believe on the God of Israel; and, naturally, they would have wanted to *learn* all about the true God. Undoubtedly, Daniel taught them the Scriptures. Daniel's influence didn't end after he died, either. By the time of Christ, there were still wise men in royal courts of the Middle East who knew about the God of Israel; and because they studied the Hebrew Scriptures carefully, they knew all about the *prophecies* of the Messiah. They knew that it was time for the Messiah to arrive.

One prophecy they would have known about is the prophecy of the seventy weeks of years. The wise men surely must have known about this famous prophecy in **Daniel 9**. They knew that they were approaching the 69th week of years (**483 years**) since King Artaxerxes of Persia had decreed for the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt. They also knew, from this prophecy, that the Messiah would be "cut off" (killed) at year 483; and since they were now at about the 450 year mark, the time of the Messiah's birth must be nearly upon them. However, there is something else that they knew. They had read in the Scriptures about the appearance of *a star*.

Read Numbers 24:15-17.

God gave this prophecy during the time of Moses, around 1,450 B.C. Strangely enough, God gave this prophecy through the mouth of a non-Jew—a Moabite named **Balaam**. Although Balaam knew about the God of Israel, he was not a true believer in the God of Israel. He was a pagan sorcerer, and a false prophet, who had acquired a knowledge of some of the rituals of Jehovah worship. Yet, on this particular occasion, God seized control of Balaam's tongue, and gave him a true prophecy. He prophesied that one day a "*star*" would arise "*out of Jacob*" (in other words, from the nation of Israel). Surely, the wise men knew this prophecy; and they knew that the word "*star*" represented the Messiah Himself. However, when the wise men looked up into the sky one day, they saw a new, unusual star. Contrary to nature, this star was arising from the *western* sky, not from the east. It was coming from the direction of the land of Israel! It was *literally* arising "*out of Jacob*." At this point, they realised that the prophecy of **Numbers 24:17** was more than a metaphor. Not only was the King of Israel *like* a beautiful "star": God had actually prepared a *supernatural* star in the sky in order to announce the Messiah's birth!

That was all the evidence that the wise men needed. They immediately began to pack to make the journey to Israel, to see the King of the Jews. Undoubtedly, it took some time for them to make preparations, and to get leave from their king, and to make the long journey; but when they finally saw Jesus, they "*worshipped*" Him. (**Read verse 11 again.**) The wise men knew that this baby was not merely a man: He was *God* in human flesh. They knew that this Baby was worthy of worship. You'll notice that they did *not* worship Mary, or Joseph; they worshipped *only* Jesus. That word "*worship*" is translated from the word *proskuneo*. It is made up of two words—*pros* (which means "toward"), and *kuon* (which means "dog"). It has the idea of a dog crouching on the ground and inching toward his master, to lick his hand. *That* is worship, my friends! That is the kind of adoration that belongs *only* to God, and not to any man. Throughout the New Testament, we are commanded to worship *God*, and not any man; and since Jesus accepted men's worship, it means that He is not just a man: He is God!

Wise men *still* worship Jesus today. The wisest thing you could ever do is to fall down at the feet of Jesus, and to worship Him as your King, Priest, and Sacrifice.

II. The wannabe "king of Israel" (vv. 3-10)

(**Read Matthew 2:3-10 again.**) When the wise men appeared in Jerusalem, they asked a question that troubled everyone in the city. They asked, "*Where is he that is born King of the Jews?*" Very soon, the news of these men reached King Herod; and he was *not* happy. *Herod* was called by the title "the king of the Jews"; and he was prepared to do anything to maintain his title, and his dynasty.

Now, Herod himself was not a Jew. His father, Antipater, was an Edomite; and his mother was an Arabian. He had been nominally brought up in the religion of Judaism; but the religion of the Jews meant nothing to him. He was concerned about only one thing: obtaining as much power in the Roman government as he could possibly get! Because of his father's friendly relationship with Julius Caesar, Herod was appointed as provincial governor of Galilee in 47 B.C., when he was 25 years old; and later, he became general of Samaria, and then a tetrarch (the governor of the 4th part of a province). Then, in 37 B.C., he went to Rome to plead for help against an enemy who was threatening his position as tetrarch; and to his surprise, the Roman senate voted to appoint him not just as a tetrarch, but as the "king of the Jews." That was a title that no one had claimed for quite some time. Herod was suspicious of *anyone* who could be a possible contender to that title; and to that end, he murdered his own father and mother; his second wife, Mariamne, and her husband; his Uncle Joseph; and three of his sons, Aristobulus, Alexander, and Antipater. The Jews feared this insane and brutal man; and even Caesar Augustus remarked that it was safer to be Herod's pig than to be his son! Herod knew that no one would weep for him when he died; and thus, he ordered that upon his death, the most illustrious men of the Jewish nation be murdered, so that "all Judaea will weep at it." It's not hard to see how such a man would be capable of murdering all the infants in Bethlehem!

Do you see why it was such a dangerous thing for the wise men to glide into Jerusalem and ask, "***Where is he that is born King of the Jews?***" The very question implied that Herod was *not* the true king of the Jews, and that this child whom they were seeking *was* the King of the Jews by right of birth! Now, you may be sure that these men weren't dumb. They surely had heard of the brutality of Herod; and they must have realised what Herod might be inclined to do if he heard that the Messiah was born. Yet, they boldly asked the question. They knew that if this Baby truly were the Messiah, and King of the Jews (and they were convinced that He was), then *no power on earth* could stop Him from sitting on the throne of David one day!

Now, when Herod heard about what the wise men were asking the people of Jerusalem, he was on the case like a bloodhound. First, he called the scribes and chief priests, and asked them where the Messiah was supposed to be born. Of course, this was an easy question for them. They knew the Scripture well; and they immediately cited the prophet **Micah**, who had prophesied 700 years earlier that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem.

Read Micah 5:2.

Clearly, the priests and scribes had the *intellectual knowledge* of where the Messiah was to be born. However, they were strangely uninterested in finding out about this Babe in Bethlehem, who the wise men were convinced was the Messiah, and whom they had travelled hundreds of miles to worship. Bethlehem was only 5 ½ miles from Jerusalem; yet, it was the *wise men*, not the religious leaders of Israel, who made the effort to travel that small distance to Bethlehem, to see the King of the Jews. While these Gentiles from the east were *very* aware of the messianic times in which they were living, the leaders of Israel were *blinded* to the spiritual reality of what was unfolding before their very eyes! Tragically, this was the attitude of the religious leaders throughout Jesus' lifetime on earth. As Jesus said, the scribes, priests, and Pharisees could discern the signs in the weather, and in the sky, but they couldn't discern the signs of the times. Some of the religious leaders *did* believe (in their heads) that Jesus was the Messiah; yet, they were afraid to follow Him, and to own Him as their Lord, because they knew what Rome did to would-be messiahs, and to their followers! They loved their power and position within the Roman system too much to cast their lot with Jesus, and risk losing everything in this world. Really, they were like most people today. Even though we can now see signs of Christ's *second* coming all around us, most people today are wilfully blinded to the times that we are living in, and are concerned only about hanging onto the pleasures of this world. They love this present world too much to let go of it, and to follow Jesus. My friend, if *you* are afraid to surrender your life to Jesus for fear of what it will cost you, please heed Jesus' warning. Jesus said, "***If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take***

up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Now, crafty old Herod knew better than to display any anger or jealousy at this news. He quietly called the wise men to his palace, and asked to hear their story; and he pretended that he had great concern for the Christ child, and that he desired to worship him also. And so, he sent the wise men to go and bring the child to him, so that he could worship Him also. The wise men began to travel toward Bethlehem; and suddenly, that star (which had *disappeared* from sight as they were approaching the land of Israel), became visible again. (The whole reason they had gone to Jerusalem to seek the child in the first place is that they no longer had that star to guide them directly to the place where Jesus was.) Now that they had this supernatural light to guide them again, they went not only to Bethlehem, but directly to the house where Jesus was. This star (which was, obviously, not a physical star in outer space, but a supernatural light) now hovered right over the house where Jesus was!

III. The gifts for the King of Israel (v. 11)

(Read verse 11 again.) Here in **verse 11**, we find a beautiful prophecy of what Christ would one day do to redeem us. This prophecy was not given in *words*: it was given in *pictures*. The gifts that the wise men gave are *prophetic pictures* of who Jesus is, and of what He would one day do to purchase our salvation. In the next few moments, we will take a look at these gifts.

First, there was the gift of **gold**. Now, when you think of gold, what do you think of? You think of royalty, and kings. Gold is the precious metal with which kings adorn themselves. That is why gold is often used as a picture of Christ's Godhead and Kingship. For example, in **Psalm 21**, the golden crown of King David is used as a symbol of the Messiah's future reign, and of His victory over Israel's enemies. There are many other Scriptures we could examine, as well; but for sake of time, we will examine just one, in **Exodus 25**.

Read Exodus 25:23-30.

The Table of Shewbread in the Tabernacle was made of gold; and it had the likeness of a crown around the edge of the table. Now, what was the purpose of the Table of Shewbread? Like everything else in the Tabernacle, the Table of Shewbread was a *symbol—a picture*. It is a picture of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. The unleavened bread that was set out on the table pictured Christ as the Bread of Life. Just as the priests ate the bread on the Table of Shewbread, so believers “eat” the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ (in other words, fellowship with Him, and draw their spiritual life from Him). Jesus is the Bread of Life; but He is also our King. The gold in the Table of Shewbread pictures Jesus as the King of kings.

The wise men certainly gave a fitting gift to the King of Israel, and the King of kings! Christian, the next time you think of the gold that the wise men gave Jesus, remember that Jesus is your King and your God. He deserves your worship and praise.

Now, let's look at the second gift. We are told that the wise men also gave Jesus the gift of **frankincense**. Frankincense was a prophetic picture, as well. Frankincense reminds us that **Jesus Christ is our great High Priest**.

Read Exodus 30:34-38.

Frankincense was one of the major ingredients of the incense that the priests burnt on the altar of incense. The priests were commanded to keep this incense burning continually, every day of the year. There was also a very special day when the *high priest himself* would take a handful of this incense, and would place it on the altar of incense. That special day was the

Day of Atonement. On that day, the high priest pulled back the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the sanctuary; and he went, all by himself, into the Holy of Holies, to sprinkle the blood of bulls and goats on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. However, just before entering the Holy of Holies, he would stop at the altar of incense (which was just in front of the curtain); and he would pour this special incense on the altar.

Read Leviticus 16:12-17.

This is a powerful picture of our High Priest, Jesus Christ. How so? Because the burning of incense on the altar is a picture of prayer. In **Psalm 141:2**, David said, ***“Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.”*** Throughout Scripture, the burning of incense on the altar is a symbol of our prayers to God. Just as the sweet-smelling smoke of the incense would go up from the altar, so the prayers of God’s people go upward to God; and to Him, our prayers are like sweet-smelling incense. He loves to hear our prayers. He loves it when His people talk to Him.

However, the burning of incense is not simply a picture of *our* prayers: it is also a picture of *Christ’s* prayers for *us*. You see, many times, God will not answer our prayers because there is unconfessed sin in our lives. Many times, Christians’ prayers are blocked, because our hearts are not right with God. However, there is one Man whose prayers to the Father are *always* heard; and that Man is Jesus Christ.

This is why the high priest of the Old Testament was so important. The high priest was a picture of Jesus Christ. Christ is our *true* High Priest before God the Father. In the Old Testament, the high priest would sprinkle incense on the altar of incense just before going into the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the blood on the Ark of the covenant. Likewise, Jesus Christ, our true High Priest, goes to the Father on our behalf to pray for us. Even when we sin and fail Him, He still pleads for us. He has sprinkled His own blood on the mercy seat once for all; and He is now seated on His throne in Heaven, where He continually makes intercession for us. The Apostle Paul wrote, ***“Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.”*** That word ***“intercession”*** means “prayer on behalf of someone else.” Christ literally *prays* to God the Father for us. He is able to do this because He is *one of us*. He is God *and* Man. As a *Man*, He is able to be our Great High Priest. He represents our cause before God the Father.

Christian, when you think of the gift of frankincense that the wise men gave, think of your High Priest, Jesus Christ. He prays continually to the Father for you!

Now, there is one more gift that the wise men gave. They gave the gift of **myrrh**. Myrrh is yet another important picture of Christ. It is a picture of His death for our sins, and His burial.

Now, in case you are wondering what “myrrh” is, it is a gum resin that is used in perfumes and spices. It is sweet-smelling, but bitter tasting. In Christ’s day, myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead, to keep the body from rotting for as long as possible. For this reason, myrrh had a strong association with death.

It is not hard to see how this gift is a picture of Christ, is it? Myrrh reminds us of the fact that Jesus died for us, and was buried. The Bible tells us that one of Jesus’ followers, Nicodemus, furnished the myrrh for Jesus’ burial.

Read John 19:38-40.

Myrrh is a powerful picture of the Gospel message. The Gospel is the “good news” that ***“Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he***

rose again the third day”; and myrrh pictures Christ’s death and burial. However, there is even more to this picture. Another interesting fact about myrrh is that in order for it to release its sweet smell, it has to be *crushed*. Just as myrrh must be crushed in order to release its sweet fragrance, so Christ had to be *crushed* in order to become the acceptable Sacrifice for our sins. Not only was it necessary for Jesus to die: but He had to die an awful, brutal, bloody death. The Bible says that **“without shedding of blood is no remission.”**

A very influential Catholic theologian named **Liguori** once wrote that it was not really necessary for Jesus to go to the cross—that just one drop of His blood, pricked from the tip of His finger at any point in His life, would have been enough to atone for the sins of the world. But is this what the Bible says? It is not! The Bible says that Jesus Christ had to be “crushed” for our sins. Jesus had to become a bloody Sacrifice.

The first-century historian **Josephus** reported that on Passover night, when hundreds of thousands of lambs were slaughtered in the Temple courtyard, the amount of lamb’s blood was so massive, that the priests had to allow the blood to flow down the side of the Temple Mount, outside the walls of Jerusalem. It was so profuse, that it turned the entire mountainside crimson red! The colour of blood could be seen from miles away. God intended the slaying of the Passover lamb to be a picture of the kind of death that He would require of His Son in order to pay for our sins!

It was necessary for Jesus to be *crushed* for us. This was prophesied by the prophet Isaiah, 700 years before Christ’s birth. In **Isaiah 53** Isaiah wrote, **“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.”** In that same chapter, Isaiah also prophesied, **“Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.”** Think of this, my friends! Isaiah said that the Father would allow His Servant, Jesus Christ, to be **“bruised.”** When Isaiah used the word **“bruised,”** he wasn’t talking about a greenish-blue spot that Jesus would get one day when He bumped His knee. The Hebrew word for “bruise” is *dakka*: and it means “to break in pieces, to crush, to destroy, to humble, to smite.” It has the idea of something being utterly smashed, or ruined. In relation to a person, the word *dakka* has the idea of a brutal, horrible, agonising death.

Jesus Christ died a horrible, agonising, bloody death. He didn’t suffer this death because of any sin that He had done. He did *no* sin. He died this awful death for *us*. He died in our place, as our Sin-bearer. *This* is the Gospel message. It is a sobering message, when you think of what our sin cost the Son of God; yet, at the same time, it is the most joyous message in the world. Because Jesus died for our sins and rose again, we can be raised to new life in Christ. Because of what Christ did for us, we can be saved. We can be made at peace with God, and have real, abiding peace in our hearts. Through His death and resurrection, Christ made it possible for us to live lives of joyful service to God on this earth. He made it possible for us to partake of the future resurrection unto life, and to spend eternity with God in Heaven.

Conclusion: The wise men brought appropriate gifts to Jesus. Did they understand that these gifts were prophetic pictures of Christ? With what they knew of prophecy, it is very possible. At the very least, they understood that Jesus is the King; and they obviously understood that He would one day die, because they brought a gift that is associated with death. They had read the Scriptures, and they believed them.

The sad thing is that while *Gentiles* were prepared to believe on Jesus, most of Jesus’ own people were *not* prepared to believe on Him. Despite having every advantage in the world, most of the Jewish people rejected their own Saviour. However, Jews aren’t the only ones guilty of rejecting Jesus. How about you? You have the incredible privilege of hearing God’s Word; but have you *personally* believed on Jesus? Have you truly repented of your sin, and turned your life over to Him? If you have not been saved, don’t put it off! Please repent and believe on Him today!

If you know Christ as your Saviour already, I would ask you this: Have you lost the wonder of what Jesus has done for you? Do you stop every day to thank Him for being the Sacrifice for your sins? Do you spend much time *talking* with Him in prayer? Do you spend time simply worshipping Him in your heart, and praising Him? Do you bring rich gifts for Him, as the wise men did? Are you giving of your time, talents, and treasures to the Lord, out of a heart of love for Him? Should your love for Jesus Christ not be what it should, draw near to Him once again!