

# The King of the Jews

SERMON

By

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**December 27, 2003**

**TEXT:** Matthew 2:1-12

**PROP:** That Jesus is the king of the universe requires that we obey him and serve him.

## **Matthew 2:1-12 (ESV)**

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. **12** And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

It is interesting that the birth of Christ had to be announced by humble shepherds and Gentile foreigners. The great rabbis of Israel seemingly had no knowledge of the coming of the Messiah. These rabbis were noted for their knowledge of the Torah yet they did not believe the evidence that had already been presented to them. The Magi had come to see the Messiah sometime after he was born, perhaps a year or more. Certainly it was long after he had been circumcised and presented in the temple where he was recognized by the devout Simeon and Anna. The very people who should have

known of his birth could not accept the truth that the Messiah had come. Zachariah, a temple priest, knew of his birth from the testimony of his wife Elizabeth and no doubt he had spoken of this to many others. Why then did it take wise men from the East to trouble Herod with this news? Surely the leaders of Israel knew that the Messiah would be a great King who was none other than God himself. Confronted often by the Old Testament claims concerning the Messiah they refused to believe it.

All through history and even in the days in which we live people do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah. They do not recognize that Jesus is very God of very God, the Lord of lords and the King of kings. The shepherds who did recognize the Savior were illiterate and despised because their work prevented them from keeping the ceremonial law. They were regarded as thieves and yet the angel of God appeared to them and no others. Similarly, the wise men, were Gentile foreigners to whom the angel of God appeared and to no others. To no one among the leaders of Israel had the angel of God appeared. To this point in time, God had given his oracles and revelation only to Israel but this most important revelation was not given to them. Thus we understand that God is sovereign in all that he does.

Matthew gives us the genealogy of Christ from David through Solomon and as such it establishes that Jesus is the legal heir to the throne of Israel. But consider the unlikely historical progression of the line of Christ. The four women mentioned in the genealogy were variously prostitutes, immoral women, or idolaters yet they were progenitors of Christ. Matthew's genealogy mentions men that were enemies of God such as Rehoboam, Manasseh and Amon yet God was pleased to bring forth his Messiah from such forbears. How mysterious are the dispensations of grace. The base things are chosen and the eminent are passed by! The advent of the Redeemer is revealed to the shepherds who kept their flocks of sheep by night, but not to the leaders of Israel who were left in darkness. We stand in awe at the sovereignty of God.

The glad tidings of the coming of the Messiah were also announced to a group of men known as Magi (μ ) who probably lived in Babylon. They were in the East when they saw the star of Christ. These men were not kings but priests or court advisors such as Daniel and his three friends. They were known to be astrologers who studied the heavens and interpreted the stars but the stars could not have informed them of the coming of Christ. Some suggest the Magi saw a planetary conjunction or a supernova that appeared much brighter in the heavens than the rest of the stars. But such astronomical phenomena cannot inform the observer of the birth of Christ and much less can they inform the observer that the King of the Jews had been born. That being the case we wonder how these Magi knew that the great Messiah King of the Jews had been born. Such information can only come by way of revelation. Perhaps God revealed the birth of Christ in a dream just as the Magi were warned in a dream that they should

not return to Herod. It is also possible that these Magi were exposed to the theology of Yahweh from the Jewish community who had been deported from Judah. The deportation of Judah took place in 587 BC and the line of Christ continued there. They may have been descendants of Daniel or of Magi who had served the king with Daniel.

### **Matthew 1:11-16 (ESV)**

**11** and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

**12** And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, **13** and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, **14** and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, **15** and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, **16** and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

It is quite possible, therefore, that these Magi were not only exposed to the religion of Yahweh from men such as these, but God in his mercy must have converted them such that they desired to see the Messiah who was born King of the Jews and to worship him as God. The Scriptures are clear in this regard that without regeneration no man will desire to worship the True and Living God. The reason the Jewish leaders to whom the Magi came did not desire to find Jesus and worship him is that they were unconverted. Herod wanted to see Jesus not to worship him as he said, but to kill him. Apart from conversion this is the attitude all will have toward the Lamb of God. Most, it would seem in our day, desire Christ to exploit his birth for their businesses. It is big business to sell their merchandize in the temple of the Lord. Their desire for Christ at this time of the year is simply good business and it was typical of those whom the Magi met as they came to worship the Lord of Glory. When Joseph and Mary came to Bethlehem they were faced with the same commercialism that we face today. Tens of thousands of people had come to Jerusalem for the Fall feasts, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkoth and of course the Romans used this occasion to collect their taxes.

Bethlehem was but four miles from Jerusalem and housed the overflow from the feasts and that is the reason the inns were all full. The shepherds were in the fields keeping the animals that were to be used for temple sacrifices. It was big business indeed. It is very unlikely that Christ was born in December because the only feast at that time of the year was Hanukkah, the feast of Dedication which was mainly celebrated at home. Then too, Zechariah's service in the temple occurred in June and we know that Mary visited Elizabeth when she was six months pregnant and that would

place the visit in December at Hanukkah time. Jesus was conceived at that time and born the next year during the fall feasts. So things haven't changed much since those days. We have the same commercialism and big business interests surrounding the birth of Christ. No matter when his birth is celebrated businessmen profit greatly and their real interest in Christ is not much different from that of Herod. It is in fact similar to all unbelieving interest in Jesus. Where do you stand in regard to all of this? Is it really your desire to worship Christ? Do you desire to see him and pay him homage as our great God and Savior? It matters little that you love the traditions of these December holidays but it has eternal consequences that you should love Messiah Jesus and desire him above all else.

The Magi would see Jesus. Little else mattered to them than that they should worship their God and King. Would spectacular astronomical events be enough to move these Magi to undertake such a strenuous and dangerous journey? Surely there must have been a very compelling reason for their coming to Jerusalem and to bring with them such costly gifts. These men were not even under the jurisdiction of Israel. If they were citizens of Israel, if they were Jews, there would have been much more reason for them to honor a royal birth. However, if this baby was God incarnate, if he was the Messiah upon whom the salvation of all of God's people depended, we would have no problem understanding the strong desire of these Magi to see Jesus. No mere prince was this but the creator of all that exists and the one in whom all things consist.

This child was to be the glory of Israel, and yet in Israel there were few indeed who, like these wise men desired to worship him and honor him with their rich gifts. Apart from the saving work of Jesus the incarnate God every one of us would perish in our sins. Apart from Jesus there would be no blessed hope of eternal life yet the preaching of the cross of Christ is foolishness to most. The relevance and profound importance of Christ lies not in his birth but in his death. Joseph was to name the child Yeshua or Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. Most people who go through the traditional motions of observing the birth of Jesus have nothing to do with his death which they find to be repulsive. It is just as Isaiah writes, *"Who has believed what they heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."* (Isaiah 53:1-3, ESV)

Does it get to be a mere mechanical habit to attend public worship? Do you become accustomed to the liturgy of singing and praying? Do you listen to the preacher with apparent attention during the sermon? But are you really interested? Do you really

long to know what it is all about, to know especially whether you have a part in it, whether Jesus came from heaven to save you, whether for you he was born of the virgin? To desire after Christ as the Magi did is far from normal behavior. By nature our ears do not hear and our eyes do not see that which is most needful for us. When we listen with deep attention to the word of God, search God's book, and engage in thoughtful meditation with the view of understanding the gospel, then we see the attitude of the Magi developing and maturing in us. When we feel that there is something weighty and important, something worth knowing, in the gospel of Jesus, then are we encouraged that the Holy Spirit is at work in our heart.

When the Magi inquired after Christ they did not merely desire to know his whereabouts; **they were searching for him that was born King of the Jews**. They were, therefore, fully convinced that he was the King of the Jews, and had recently been born. Most it would seem do not possess even that most basic understanding of Jesus. The world knows about Jesus. Indeed, they know enough about Jesus to use his name in their cursing and blasphemy but they are not convinced that he is the King of the Jews. To speak of the King of the Jews was not to speak of Herod. He of course was the reigning king in Israel but for the Magi to ask this question knowing that Herod held the throne could only mean they were asking about the Messiah. When Herod heard of their inquiry he called the priests and scribes together to determine where the Scriptures said the Messiah would be born. They pointed Herod to Micah 5:2

### **Micah 5:2 (ESV)**

2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old,  
from ancient days.

This ruler who was to come from Bethlehem was not a mere king but one who existed in all eternity. This ruler was none other than God himself. Here was the one who would shepherd God's people, Israel. *"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."* (Genesis 49:10, ESV)

The great giver of the Torah had come in the flesh. Blessed Shiloh was here with his people. During the early days of the judges Shiloh was center of religious worship in Israel because the tabernacle was located there. Every part of the tabernacle prefigured the Messiah and therefore was identified with Christ and his church. Therefore that

Shiloh would come to Israel meant that Yeshua the Messiah would come to Israel as her God and Lawgiver. What could be a more significant and compelling reason to seek for the King of the Jews. But we observe that not a single one of the Jewish leaders who informed Herod of the location of the Messiah went the short distance from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to visit him. Here were men who believed that the Torah was true but that was not enough save them. Knowing what the Bible clearly taught about the Messiah did not compel these rabbis to worship the Messiah. **There will be many in hell who confess to believe the Bible is true.** It is one thing to believe the Bible is true but it quite another to believe the Bible unto salvation. As James notes, "*You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!*" (James 2:19, ESV)

Do you see yourself here? It is actually no small advantage to you to believe your Bible true. There are some who have a hard time believing even that, for the influence of liberalism keeps a great many from the saving knowledge of the Bible. It is not, of course, an advantage which will save you, for many go down to hell believing the Scriptures to be true, and thus they accumulate guilt upon themselves from that very fact. But it certainly is an advantage to be assured that you have God's word before you, and you are not troubled with questions about its inspiration and authenticity. But my friends, you need to go further and become a true believer in Jesus. You need to confess with your mouth that Jesus is Yahweh God and you need to believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, then you will be saved. These Magi evidently had progressed to that point where they truly believed that Christ was born, and born a King. Many who are not saved, yet know that Jesus is the Son of God. I pray God that all of you believe unto the salvation of your souls. I pray that you, like the Magi, make a profession of faith that compels you to go to Bethlehem, as it were, to worship the King of the Jews, Jesus the Messiah.

So we have seen that the Magi obeyed the Lord and left their home far to the East of Jerusalem to seek the royal child who was born King of the Jews. God revealed to them the Birth of Jesus the Messiah and their belief in the true God issued in their worship of the Savior. They did not say, "We have seen his star, and that is enough." Many say, "Well, we attend church regularly, is that not enough?" There are those who rest in the rituals and traditions they observe. We were baptized and were regenerated by it. We are present when the Eucharist is transubstantiated and we have bowed before it and we have received saving grace from it. But such people foolishly worship sacrament instead of the Lamb of God. To such people the star which leads to Christ they mistake for Christ himself, and worship the star instead of the Lord. May none of us ever be as foolish as to rest in the performance of traditions and liturgy. God will say to you, if you depend upon sacraments or upon public forms of worship, "*Bring no more*

*vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly."* (Isaiah 1:13, ESV)

What does God care for outward forms and ceremonies? When we see men putting on cassocks and albs and singing their prayers, and genuflecting we wonder what sort of god it is they worship. Surely he must have more affinity with the gods of the heathen than with the great YAHWEH who has made the heavens and the earth. When we consider what YAHWEH has made and it is obvious the infinite, eternal and unchangeable God is not contained in temples made with hands, or that he cares for vestments, processions, postures, and veneration. Instead of concern for the correct performance of ritual we ought to desire to worship the Most High in all simplicity and earnestness of spirit. and never find satisfaction with outward ritual, lest we be foolish enough to think that to see the star and such like is sufficient, and therefore fail to find the incarnate God.

Notice how these Magi were not satisfied with merely getting to Jerusalem but they did not conclude their arduous journey until they went to Bethlehem, to the very house where the child was, and entered into the presence of the Lord of Glory where they fell down and worshipped him. They might have satisfied themselves in getting to Jerusalem which was the center of worship in Israel where was located the magnificent temple with its impressive ritual and traditions. Here was effected the sacrifice for their sins. Here the Lord was pleased to meet with the high priest as the federal representative of all Israel to deal with the sins of his people and to bless them. **But the Magi would see Jesus and him only.** Perhaps they knew the tenuous nature of the beautiful temple complex and that it would soon be destroyed with not one stone left upon another. Perhaps they knew that the exquisite beauty of the temple was a mere shadow of the glory of God in Jesus the Messiah and that all its sacrifices and ritual would be fulfilled and brought to an end with the death of Jesus their Savior. How often we get so wrapped up in the traditions and ritual and programs of the church that we fall short of true faith in Christ and we are not vitally connected to Christ who is the source of our blessedness and the source of life itself. We must get to the blood of Christ, and be washed in it. We must get to the life of Christ, and let that life be in us, that we indeed become sons of God and heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ and be eternally glorified with him. You must not rest until you can say, "Jesus loved me and gave himself for me, he is all my salvation and all my desire."

That Jesus is the King of the universe requires that we obey him and serve him. After worshipping, the wise men presented their gifts. One broke open his chest of gold, and laid it at the feet of King Jesus. Another presented frankincense — one of the precious products of the country from which they came; and others laid myrrh at the Redeemer's feet; all these they gave to prove the truth of their worship. They gave

substantial offerings without regard to the cost. And following the example of the Magi, you too must give the Savior yourself, your heart, and your substance. One in whom the Holy Spirit has worked faith will not be able to refrain from devoting his life, his strength and his all to Christ. With some people, when they give Christ anything, or do anything for him, it is done grudgingly. They say, "The love of Christ ought to compel us to the service of God," as if it were possible that the love of Christ should somehow fail to do it. But the Bible actually says that the love of Christ does control us and compel us. Not that it ought to control us or might control us but it does control us. *"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."* (2 Corinthians 5:14-15, ESV)

The necessary fruit of conversion is joyful service to God because the love of Christ controls us and compels us to that end. If it does not control us, it is not in us. If anyone loves Christ, he will very soon be finding out ways and means of proving his love by his service and obedience. As Spurgeon put it, "If you have gold, give it. If you have frankincense, give it. If you have myrrh, give it to Jesus. And if you have none of these things, give him your love and your (commitment). Give him your tongue to speak of him. Give him your hands to work for him. Give him your heart, soul, strength and mind. You will indeed love him, for he first loved you, and gave himself for you."