

# The Magi Crown Their King

## Christmas Sermons Part 1 (Revised)

### Matthew 2:1-12

Summary: At the end of Jesus' (long) Gentile ministry He feeds four thousand gentile families, implying gentile inclusion in the Messianic Banquet(!). The gentiles get the bread, which not only includes satisfaction of appetites, but also restoration of abilities. Both feeding miracles were surrounded by compassionate healings – healings focused not mainly on pain relief, but on restoration of image-of-God faculties that enable us to participate in the divine nature.

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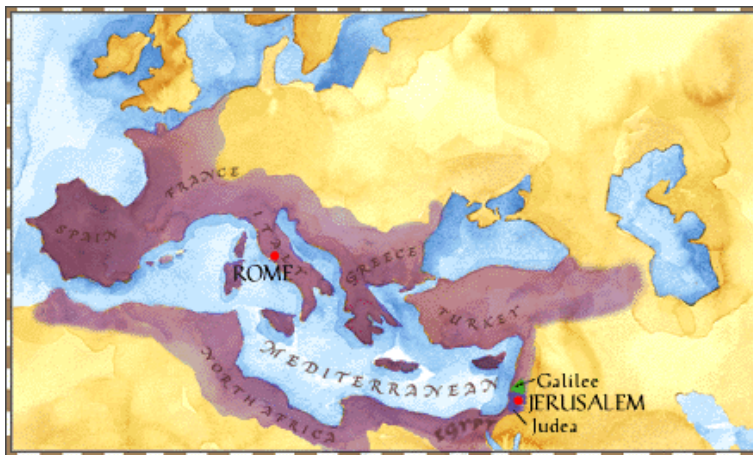
**Matthew 2:1-12** 1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" 7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." 9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

## Introduction: Parthia Takes Over Israel

The year is 40 B.C. Herod the Great is 33 years old and he is the governor of Galilee – but not for long. War has been in the winds for years now, and finally – it is happening. There are two equal superpowers in the world – the Roman Empire and the Parthian Empire. Parthia was to the east (modern day Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan).



Rome controlled the west (modern day Europe).



And in between these two giant powers is the tiny sliver of ground known as the land of Israel.



So when hostilities heated up between Parthia and Rome, that was never good news for the Jews. They had been bracing themselves for years, and now is the time. Here come the Parthians. One Parthian general sweeps through up north and conquers all of Asia Minor. And another general takes Israel. Rome is soundly defeated in both theaters, and Herod the Great becomes Herod the nobody and runs for his life back to Rome. He manages to escape with his life, and Israel is now under the control of the Parthian-backed king.

Rome was an incredible military force, but the Parthians had an almost invincible cavalry. They had what they called the light horses and the strong horses. The light horses had no armor, and were extremely fast and agile, and the riders were trained from childhood. They carried only a bow and a quiver of arrows, and they could shoot easily at a standstill or at a full gallop – in any direction. They

had a strategy where they would pretend to retreat, and then turn around and shoot arrows backwards at the enemy. (That is where we get the phrase “Parthian Shot” – someone getting in the last word in a fight.) When they ran out of arrows, they would just ride back to the line of camels in the rear that had huge supplies and just grab another quiver full. That was part of their strategy of remaining in constant motion in all directions. They would ride all round the enemy with a relentless barrage of arrows. The Romans had mostly infantry with javelins and swords. But their javelins had nowhere near the range of the Parthian arrows. So the light horses would stay out of reach of the Roman javelins and just rain down wave after wave of arrows into the Roman formations.



Then came the strong horses. The strong horses and their riders were both covered with armor. The riders carried a heavy javelin and once the archers had softened the enemy up, the strong horses would just charge through enemy lines with overwhelming force.

I read about several of these battles. One famous one took place fifteen years before this war.

The Roman leader Crassus led an army of forty thousand against Parthia and surprise-attacked an area in Parthia that had very few defenses. All the Parthians had in that area was a ten thousand man cavalry. But with those Parthian tactics, it was no contest. Those light horse riders just rained endless storm of arrows on the Romans and slaughtered twenty thousand of them, and took another ten thousand captive to sell into slavery. Crassus lost three-fourths of his men as well as his own life.

That was 55 B.C. Now in 40 B.C., the Parthians have invaded Roman territory, and Rome loses Israel. A year or so later, Mark Antony, who was probably the greatest Roman general ever, comes down into Israel to re-assert Roman control. The Parthian army is back in Parthia, and so Antony just has to defeat the king they installed, which takes him almost three years. And during that time Herod the Great managed to gain the favor of the Caesar and is appointed king of the Jews (not just Galilee this time, but all of Israel).

After that, Mark Antony decides to go after Parthia. He has a huge army now – 100,000 men, and that force, combined with his military genius and the lessons he has learned over the years on dealing with Parthian tactics – he is confident that will be enough. That campaign was a disaster, and 35,000 of his men are killed. All of that gives you a little background on what was going on in the world that Jesus was born into.

## Who Were the Magi?

Matthew begins his account of Jesus' birth after Jesus is already born.

### *Herod's Reaction*

**1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."**

Who are these Magi? And how did they know about Jesus just from seeing a star? And why is everybody in Jerusalem so freaked out?

**3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.**

That term translated **disturbed** is a very strong word. The only other time it appears in Matthew it is translated “terrified.”

## **Matthew 14:26 When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.**

That word is used to describe the terror that gripped Zechariah when the angel appeared to Him in the Temple (Lk.1:12). It is used to describe a riot in Acts 17. It is used to describe what was going on in Jesus' heart just before the crucifixion (Jn.12:27). It is a word that describes extreme, desperate alarm and agitation.

And it is not just Herod, but **all Jerusalem with him**. All the people are terrified, too – why? Usually it is assumed that Herod was upset because of the king of the Jews comment, because he was paranoid about any threat to his throne, and the rest of Jerusalem was upset just because Herod was upset. They probably had a saying, “When Herod ain't happy, ain't nobody happy” – because when he got upset people started dying.<sup>1</sup> That is true, but I don't think that is what Matthew is indicating here. It does not say that first Herod got upset, and then all the people in Jerusalem reacted to Him. What it says is they were all upset along with him. They were upset about the same thing he was upset about.

And if you get your theology from Christmas cards, you have to wonder why everyone would be so alarmed. Three old guys in bath robes bump into town on camels and everyone freaks out? What is the big deal? Why is everyone so uptight?

### ***Gentile Pagans***

If you research the Magi, most of what you read is about their religious beliefs and practices. And that is a tricky thing to pin down because over hundreds of years of history their religious beliefs changed. But with everything I read, from what I can tell there is only one thing about their religion that is pertinent for understanding what is going on here in Matthew: they were pagans. The Magi were associated with magic, pagan sacrifice, and false religion. So when the original readers saw that Magi were coming, the first reaction would be negative.

But what is really interesting about these guys is not really their religion – it is their political role. At the time of Jesus, the Parthian government had a king and a congress. The congress was called the Megistanes, and it was made up of two houses. The lower house was made up of the princes and nobles (people of royal lineage), and the upper house, or senate, was made up of the Sophoi and Magi. No one could be crowned king in Parthia without the approval of the Megistanes.<sup>2</sup> They were the Parthian king-makers. And the Megistanes had the legal authority to depose a king if they did not think he was fit.<sup>3</sup> So the Megistanes was a very powerful body in Parthia, and the Magi were the power brokers in the Megistanes. They were also very wealthy and very numerous, so their influence went beyond their official political authority.

Now I realize when you look at a Christmas card there are always three of these Magi, but nothing in the Bible indicates there were only three. They gave Jesus three gifts, but any size group could give three gifts. For all we know the entire upper chamber of the Parthian senate was there. And even if it was just a small number – these are important dignitaries; they would not have traveled one thousand miles, crossing over Roman borders without a considerable security force with them. When

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<sup>1</sup> Herod the Great was a man of great ability. Winsome, a consummate politician, successful military leader. He was a good ruler in many ways (brought prolonged peace, eliminated terrorism, even remitted taxes and sold his own gold plates for the poor). But he was insanely suspicious, jealous and maniacal. Herod was above everything else – PARANOID (especially toward the end of his life – around Jesus' birth). He was a heartless, vicious, ruthless man without a conscience. He was constantly plotting murders. The descendants of the Maccabees were the Hasmonaeans. He decided they were a threat, so he decided to kill them – all. When he realized he was about to die, he ordered that a list of the most distinguished Jewish citizens of Jerusalem be arrested and sentenced to death on trumped up charges so there would be mourning when he died. He had ten wives – favorite was Mariamme. Herod decided her brother (the high priest) was a threat, so he had him drowned. Later he said her being alive might bring about some political problem, so he had her executed. Then her mother Alexandria. He slaughtered two sons, then five days before he died his third son.

<sup>2</sup> “Poseidonius affirms that the council of the Parthians is composed of two classes, one of relatives, (of the royal family,) and another of wise men and magi, by both of which kings are chosen.” (Strabo, book 11, chapter 9, section 3 - <http://rbedrosian.com/Classic/strabo11c.htm>). For a helpful summary of the role of the Magi in Parthia see the article “Magi” in the Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, pp.311-34.

<sup>3</sup> In 40 AD they apparently deposed Artabanus (<http://www.persianempire.info/parthia15.htm>)

Herod looked out his window he did not just see three guys on three camels. He saw representatives from the Parthian senate surrounded by who knows how many of those dreaded Parthian war horses. And these great king makers from the superpower in the east arrive in the capital of Israel and come up to Herod, the king of the Jews, and ask where the new king of the Jews is being born.

Now, if you know anything about Herod – he was as paranoid as they come. If anyone even looked like they might think about being a threat to his crown he would kill them – including his own wife and sons – almost his entire family, anyone who was the slightest threat. Now the Parthian king-makers are asking about the new king of the Jews? It is no surprise that Herod is a little rattled. Nor is it any wonder all of Jerusalem was afraid. Parthian officials showing up again in Roman territory – that is a terrifying thing for everyone. But they are claiming they are not here to provoke a war. They tell Herod the reason for their coming is simply to worship the child that had been born. Gentile, pagan, magicians from high up in a hostile foreign government have arrived in Israel to worship a baby. That is really something you don't see every day. But Matthew wants us to see it, and he wants us to see the worship of these Magi right alongside the responses of the people in Israel – especially Herod and the religious leaders. Let's look first at Herod.

## The Hostile King

**7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.**

Herod was very clever. He was covering his bases in case they did not return, which is exactly what happens.

**12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.**

**13 ... an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "... Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."**

**16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.**

Evidently they first saw the star quite a while ago, so Herod just kills all the babies born in the last two years just to be safe. (Evidently their journey from Parthia took them between a year and two years, so they were not there at the manger scene.) So the king orders all the babies in Bethlehem killed. What historical event does that remind you of in Scripture? Herod is the new Pharaoh of Moses' day. When Moses was born Pharaoh was killing all the baby boys in Israel, but God intervened to spare Moses, whom He had chosen to be the one to deliver His people. And now the same thing is happening with the new Moses. Jesus is the great Prophet like Moses prophesied in Deuteronomy.18, and, like Moses, God had to save his life from a wicked king when he was born. But in this case the wicked king – the new Pharaoh – is the king of Israel!

What is interesting is that this hostility did not appear until he is confronted with Jesus. Before Jesus came along, Herod was a practicing Jew. He is the one who built the Jewish Temple – a more magnificent Temple than Solomon's. He was all for honoring the God of the Bible – right up until Jesus came. And Jesus is always the "skandalon" – the litmus paper that exposes whether faith is real or not. And when someone claims to fear God, but then turns hostile when confronted with Jesus – Jesus said, "If you don't love the Son you don't love the Father."

## The Apathetic Jews

So that is the hostile king - the other Jewish reaction Matthew wants us to see is that of the religious leaders – the chief priests and the scribes.

**4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 " `But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "**

These guys put together a great little sermon right off the top of their heads. They could have answered the question with one word: “Bethlehem!” But they add some flare. They put a little twist on the quotation from Micah 5:2, then, without missing a beat, they add a line from 2 Samuel 5:2, which applies a statement about David to the Son of David. It is a brilliant little sermon. It is amazing the clever things some guys can come up with extemporaneously.

They give a great answer. But you have to wonder – if they have all this great information about where the Messiah was born, what are they doing in Jerusalem? They wax eloquent about how the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, but they do not join the Magi in their trip down there. They just stay in Jerusalem. “Back to work. We can’t be bothered with actually going to worship the Messiah; we have religious duties that need performing.”

Such apathy. For their knowledge? A+ Rhetorical skill in proclaiming that truth? A+ Application? F They did not put their knowledge into practice. The amount of information in their heads was through the roof, but that information did not govern their lives.

How does that happen? How can you learn and learn from God’s Word, and still have no impact on the way you live? One word – unbelief. When you put information into your head, it will have no influence on the way you live unless you believe it. And the deeper your faith in something goes, the more that thing will impact your behavior. For example, your belief in gravity. That is a belief that runs deep. Everything you do is governed by your belief that gravity is real. It governs the way you move, the way you set something down, the way you drive your car, the way you throw something, catch something, pour something – everything. You never try to set something in mid air and it falls to the ground and you say, “Oops – it didn’t occur to me to take gravity into account.” That never happens, not because of your degree of knowledge about gravity, but because of your belief in it. Some people have lots of information about gravity, others know very little. But all of us believe so deeply that it exists that it governs all our actions.

When it came to their knowledge of messianic prophecy, these Bible experts were fully educated. But that education did not get their feet moving down toward Bethlehem or their hearts singing for joy, because their level of belief was too shallow. I am sure if you asked them, “Do you believe this prophecy is true?” they would have said, “Of course.” And at some level maybe they did believe it, but that belief just did not penetrate deep enough into their way of thinking to actually control their behavior and decision making. If you ask me if I believe Scripture when it says sin is never worth it, I would say, “Yes – I believe that.” In fact, I would stake my life on it. But at the moment of temptation, how often do I choose sin instead of God’s way? Why? Because my belief does not run deep enough.

Do I believe in an eternal hell? Absolutely. But does that belief drive me to have enough compassion on the lost to share the gospel with them? Not always.

One of the things I have always wanted to do is make sure there is enough content in my sermons, so even a knowledgeable Christian can learn something. So I work hard to make sure there is plenty of content in the sermons. But there is a danger in that. The danger is that we start to become satisfied with mere education. We assume we are growing spiritually just because we are gaining new

information. That is a mistake. If we fall into that error we will end up like these Scribes – fully educated and abysmally disobedient.

Did you know that every passage in the Bible is meant to be obeyed? Every passage in the whole Bible was written to accomplish some purpose in your life – either to get you to act in a certain way or to think in a certain way. The purpose of the passage is not accomplished in you until that change in your life actually takes place. Until your behavior actually changes, or your way of thinking actually changes, then the purpose of the passage is not fulfilled. Learning is important, because you cannot put it into practice until you have learned it – but if you do all that learning and the changes do not happen in your life, the learning has not done anything other than make you more culpable on Judgment Day.

In my sermons I try to not just talk about what the passage means, but also what I have learned about how to apply it. But when I do that, I am mostly talking about ways I am working to apply it in my life. And that might not be helpful to you, because you are in a different situation than I'm in. For example, maybe I preach a passage about the fact that we should never worry because of God's power and goodness. And when I get to the application part I say, "When you're worried about future suffering, fight those thoughts off by clinging to these promises about suffering..." And for some of you that is helpful, but others are thinking, "That's no help to me, because I'm not tempted that way. When I struggle with worry, it's not because I'm afraid of future suffering, it's just that my head becomes so clogged up with hundreds of different thoughts about things I need to take care of, that I just get confused and discouraged." I did not preach about how to deal with that part, because I did not think of it from that angle.

This is where small groups come in. There are a number of ways a small group can be edifying, but one of the best ways is they are the perfect context for a group of saints to gather together on a regular basis to help each other apply the Word of God to their lives. That is why we are starting these new home groups around the goal of application of God's Word to our lives. We are going to have some special training for the leaders, but beyond that we are praying that all of you, as you offer your insights to one another in these groups will be able to pool experience and knowledge and we can all increase our progress in sanctification, so we do not end up like the chief priests and the scribes of Jesus' day.

## Magi Rejoice

So what is Matthew up to in this text – telling us all this information that is not in the other gospels? He is doing the same thing he does later with the Canaanite woman, and several others. He is contrasting the unbelief of the Jews with faith on the part of gentiles. Look at these pagan, astrologer, magician gentiles.

**9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.**

**Overjoyed** is actually a pretty mild translation of that phrase. Literally it says, they rejoiced with joy, great, very much. Just the word "rejoiced" would have been enough, and "rejoiced with joy" is a way to lift it to the superlative. But Matthew says that, and then says they did that in great measure, then adds that it was a whole lot of superlative joy in great measure.

I do not know of any more extreme description of joy anywhere in the Bible. Why are they so incredibly happy? They are that happy because they are about to get what they wanted. What's that? What was it that they wanted so badly that they traveled all the way across the Arabian Desert to get it? Your initial reaction might be to say, "They wanted to see Jesus. They traveled all this way to see the one who was born king of the Jews, and now they are finally going to get the chance." But that is actually not what the passage says.

**2 Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.**

They did not just come to see Jesus; they came to worship Him. And now that they are going to have the opportunity to worship Him. That is what is filling them with such uncontainable joy.

### ***Daniel's Influence***

How did these gentiles from a far off land have that much love for the Jewish Messiah? How did they even know about Him? It is interesting – the Magi actually play a significant role in the book of Daniel. Remember when the King had a dream and demanded that his advisors tell him what the dream was and give him the interpretation?

**Daniel 2:1 In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. 2 So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed.**

In the Greek translation the word “magician” is “Magi” – the same word as in Matthew 2. Even way back then the Magi had a high position in the government as personal advisors to the king.

Do you remember what happened with those guys? (They are not the ones who pushed the king into sending Daniel to the lion’s den. That was the Satraps.) The Magi were the ones who were supposed to reveal the king’s dream. And when they could not do it, he decreed that they all be put to death. And when Daniel heard that he cried out to God to give him the interpretation, which God did, and Daniel told it to the king. And the king responded by cancelling the order to kill all the Magi, and then he did this:

**Daniel 2:48 Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men.**

That included the Magi. Daniel was placed in charge of the Magi. What do you suppose Daniel taught them? Maybe he told them what he said in Daniel 9:25 – that the Messiah would arrive 483 years after the decree to rebuild Jerusalem? I won’t get into a long discussion of all the historical dates, but suffice to say that decree took place roughly 500 B.C. So Daniel said the Messiah would come five hundred years after the decree to rebuild the Temple, and now it has been five hundred years.

These particular Magi are obviously not like the rest of the Magi. They are not pagans. They are not Zoroastrian priests. They are godly men who love the true, living God of the Bible, and they love Him so much they are ecstatic with joy at the opportunity to worship Him. Sounds to me like Daniel had a lasting influence on some of the Magi.

### ***The Star***

So Daniel’s influence could explain how they knew the general time, and how there could be some God-fearing, Messiah-worshipping Magi. But how did they know the exact time? According to Matthew, it was because they saw His star. What does that mean? There are a lot of theories. Some say it was a comet, others say a nova. One popular theory is that it was a particular alignment of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars in the constellation Pisces. Jupiter is the star of Zeus, the king of the gods, and Mars is the star of the hostile powers of the West, which could include Israel. So some have suggested that it makes sense that astrologers would interpret all that as a sign that a king was being born in the west. But that theory has some real problems. It says they saw the star, and came to Jerusalem to ask where the king was born. Then, after they were told that Bethlehem was the place, they head down to



Bethlehem. Then the star appears again, and leads them to the exact place. They follow the star, which means the star is moving, and then the star stops right over the house. If the positioning of Jupiter can be determined with such precision that they can tell the exact house that it is over in Bethlehem, then why did they first go to Jerusalem and have to ask where the Messiah was born? They can see the star from Parthia one thousand miles away, but not from Jerusalem six miles from Bethlehem? Then they follow it right to a particular house? That does not sound like Jupiter to me.

Nor does it sound to me like it matches what the text actually says.

### **7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.**

That word “appeared” means “to shine.” He is asking about the exact time the star started to shine. Jupiter has been shining since day four of the Creation. So the question is, what light in the sky lit up right when Jesus was born?

Can you think of any light that appeared in the sky when Jesus was born?

### **Luke 2:8,9 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby ... 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.**

What light started shining in the sky when Jesus was born? The glory of God.

And when that light appeared, angels also appeared and told the shepherds exactly what was going on – that the Savior was being born. I can’t say for sure if that is the same thing that happened with the Magi, but if it was then that would explain how they knew the King of the Jews was born from seeing a light. There is no light that can let you know the King of the Jews is being born unless there is some revelation connected to it.<sup>4</sup>

We do not know for sure exactly how God revealed it, because Matthew does not tell us. And he does not tell us because that is not the point he is making. His point is to contrast the reaction of the Jews with the reaction of these gentiles. The Jews miss the birth of their own Messiah because of unbelief, and these gentile Magi are eager to worship Him, and are overjoyed at the prospect.

And that shows us two things. One is that the Jews were apathetic about the Lord. But the other is that God will stop at nothing to see to it that His Son is honored among the nations.

### ***Christ will be honored by the nations***

Do you realize what an amazing thing it is that these men come to worship Jesus? There are probably about ten or twelve people in the United States who are alive right now who will someday be elected President. Some are children, some teenagers, college students – various ages. But those people will be President. But even if there were a way to figure out who they are, you would not have dignitaries from the Chinese government, or the Mullahs from Iran coming to worship them. It is an amazing thing that Parthian dignitaries come to worship Jesus.

Matthew is the gospel written for the Jews, but from beginning to end he emphasizes again and again that Jesus is a universal Messiah for all nations. The first worshippers of Jesus are gentiles,<sup>5</sup> and the last words of Jesus in Matthew are “**Go and make disciples of all gentiles (nations)**” (Matthew 28:19). Universal worship of His Son is a huge priority for God the Father. He will move heaven and earth to get it done. Why does a man who can barely pay his bills pay ridiculous amounts of money on

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<sup>4</sup> Why did the light appear only to the Magi and shepherds, but there is no historical record that anyone else ever saw it? God does not make His glory visible to everyone. In Exodus 14:20 the pillar of fire appeared as light to the Israelites and darkness to the Egyptians.

<sup>5</sup> It is possible that Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds had also worshipped Him, but there is no mention of their worship in Scripture. The Magi are the first people who are said to have worshipped.

an engagement ring? He wants to go all out to let her know how much He loves her. And that is how God is with His Son. He wants to go all out in bringing honor to His Son.

When it came time to fulfill the prophecy about Jesus being born in Bethlehem, how does He get Mary and Joseph to travel from their home in Nazareth down to Bethlehem? He could have done it by arraigining a family reunion, or sending Gabriel to go tell Joseph, “Go to Bethlehem now,” or a hundred other ways. But what did God do instead? He gets Caesar to take a census of the whole world. So in Luke’s gospel God moves rulers of superpowers like pawns to fulfill a little detail of prophecy about His Son. And in Matthew’s gospel God alters the very heavens to bring worshippers from a far off land. God will move heaven and earth to bring honor to His Son. And that is one thing that is so great about being a gentile who gets to be in on God’s giant diamond ring. We get to be in on the massive, all-out plan to bring honor to His Son. That is the most important significance of what we are doing here this morning. You and I, sitting here this morning singing the praises of the Lord Jesus Christ and echoing the worship of Jesus that began with those Magi two thousand years ago – it is all part of the extravagance of the Father’s love for His Son.

## **Conclusion: Undaunted by apathy**

I would like to explore what we can learn from the Magi about how to worship, but we are out of time, so that will have to wait until next week. But I would like to make one observation that can help us in our celebration of Christmas today.

The Magi worshipped Jesus and the Jewish leaders did not. But that is not the main contrast Matthew draws. The most significant contrast is an emotional one – the Magi were beside themselves with joy and the Chief Priests and Scribes were indifferent and apathetic. The degree of our joy is a huge part of how much we honor the Lord Jesus Christ in our worship.

And so that is one thing we have gotten right in our cultural celebration of the birth of Jesus into this world – the fact that we have made it all about joy. We sing Joy to the World, and we talk about spreading Christmas cheer, and we say, “Merry Christmas,” and we exchange gifts to express and amplify our joy – all that is good. We are following biblical cues about the birth of Jesus. The angels rejoiced and sang when they announced the good news of great joy. The shepherds rejoiced. The Magi rejoiced with exceeding, abundant, overflowing, ecstatic joy. This season really should be all about joy.

However, there is a danger. We can easily fall into celebrating Christmas with the same kind of joy the unbelievers around us have this time of year. Their joy comes from family, pretty lights, cookies, gifts, special meals, songs – everything but Jesus Himself. And it is easy for us to fall into that because Jesus is invisible and those things are so very visible and tangible. What is the solution to that? Some say, “Let’s just trash all the gift giving and Christmas trees and lights and all the various components of the celebration.” Is that the solution? Should our celebration of the incarnation of the living God be staid and somber and dull? No – God gave us things like food and music and decorations and symbolism and gift-giving as expressions of joy that actually have the ability to enhance and amplify godly joy. In Esther 9:22 God’s people celebrated a much smaller occasion of God’s deliverance and it sounds like something right out of a modern Christmas story:

**Esther 9:20 Mordecai sent letters to all the Jews ...21 to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar 22 as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.**

So all those are great ways to express joy over God’s salvation. The key to avoiding the error of the Jewish leaders at Christmas is not to ban the tools of celebration God has given us. The key is to

use them as tools to enhance and amplify our joy in Jesus Christ, rather than doing what the world does and drawing our joy from those things themselves. If the source of your joy this time of year is the gifts and the lights and the food – that's idolatrous paganism. And one way to tell if you've fallen into that is what it takes for your Christmas to be ruined. Is your holiday ruined if your plans don't work out? Or if you don't get to do certain traditions? Or if you burn the rolls? Or if you can't afford to buy any gifts for your kids this year? If those things can ruin your Christmas then you're Christmas probably wasn't Christmas anyway, because the source of the joy was the tools of celebration rather than the salvation of God. But if the source of your joy is the fact that God provided a Savior – then what would it take for your Christmas to be ruined? Something would have to happen to Jesus. And I can promise you – that aint going to happen – ever!

Whatever is left of your Christmas celebration – make sure the source of your joy the good news of great joy - the fact that God sent a Savior so all who believe could have forgiveness of sins and eternal life, and then use the food and the gifts and the lights and family and all the rest to express and increase that joy, and do it with all your might!

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**Benediction: Luke 1:46-55 "My soul magnifies the Lord 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ... 50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. 51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm... 53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful 55 to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."**