

Christmas Lesson

Seekers of the King

MAIN IDEA

Wise men pursued and worshiped the newborn king of the Jews.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How do we pursue and worship Jesus?

TEACHING AIM

To encourage adults to celebrate Jesus' birth and pursue a deeper love relationship with him



Bible Comments

Understanding the Context

The story of the Magi who came from the East to celebrate the birth of the King of the Jews routed the wise men through Jerusalem and to King Herod the Great, who deliberately mislead them and sought to kill Jesus. The long and arduous journey of the Magi was made more taxing by the treachery of Herod. However, their steady focus serves as a compelling paradigm of the passionate pursuit all believers should have to discover and worship Jesus Christ. Moreover, their academic status in society (which earned them the popular title “wise men”) reminds us, as the old saying goes, that “wise men still seek him.” There is no folly in aiming one’s life toward the passionate pursuit of Jesus Christ.

However, the Magi did not merely seek the newborn king and then return home; they planned to bring gifts worthy of his stature. This practice also serves as an example. We too are reminded of our need to offer God sacrifices honorable and pleasing to him.

However, the Magi did not stop there. They also worshiped Jesus. How ironic that these men from the East bowed their heads and offered their treasures to Jesus while the rest of Judea and the Roman empire were not only indifferent to his existence, but some tried to kill him (and eventually succeeded). The story of the birth of Jesus gives us a picture of how we should celebrate the birth of Jesus. It reminds us that Christmas is an opportunity to pursue a deeper love relationship with God. How do you plan to pursue and worship the King?¹

Interpreting the Scriptures

The opening chapter of the Gospel of Matthew provides the genealogy of Jesus that traces his Jewish background and lineage to King David. Since the Messiah was the “son of David” it was important for a Jewish reader to see this genealogy to accept Jesus as the long-anticipated Messiah of Israel. The

Gospel of Matthew repeatedly presents Jesus as the messianic fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

2:1–2. Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem was important because it fulfilled the Micah 5:2 forecast of the city as the birthplace of David’s successor and the new king of Israel, the Messiah. However, not everyone was excited about Jesus’ birth. Herod the Great had ruled Judea for several decades. History reveals him as a great builder and political genius, but also as a ruthless ruler who would not spare his own wife and children if he thought ill of them. Therefore, the news from the Magi that a king was born in Bethlehem did not trigger joy in Herod but great alarm (resulting in his attempt to have every male child two years of age and younger in Bethlehem, killed.)

The Magi from the East are sometimes mistakenly called “wise men” (a bit of a misnomer), as well as “kings” (e.g., the song “We Three Kings of Orient Are”). This is a tradition that developed a century or more later from Scriptures that described foreign kings bringing their gifts to Jerusalem’s king (cf. Psalm 68:29). The term “Magi” (Greek *magoi*) is related to the English word *magician* but encompassed a variety of terms in the ancient world.

Most notably, it described astrologers from Persia (Daniel 1:20; 2:2; 4:7; 5:7). Since many Jews remained in Persia after the Babylonian exile, it is possible that some had familiarity with the expectancy of a Jewish king. In fact, the Roman historian Suetonius mentioned the existence of a widespread belief in the ancient world that a Jewish king would arise and rule the world. Suetonius wrote, “Throughout the whole of the East there had spread an old and persistent belief: destiny had decreed that at that time men coming forth from Judea would seize power [and rule the world].”²

The Magi said they had traveled to worship the newborn king because they had seen his star in the east. Certainly, there is well-known prophecy about the Messiah as the “star out of Jacob” (Numbers 24:17), and the Book of Revelation describes Jesus as the “bright Morning Star” (22:16). Scholars debate the exact astronomical occurrence the Magi saw, with some speculating it was a comet, or the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, or a supernova, or some other astronomical event. It is also possible that it was an entirely supernatural manifestation.

2:3–4. It is understandable why an evil man like King Herod would be disturbed at the news that a rightful king would be born during his reign. But what is shocking is that all of Jerusalem was disturbed, perhaps due to widespread concern about how Herod would react to this news. The chief priests mentioned in this passage were Sadducees who were in charge of the temple, while the “teachers of the law” were Pharisees, who both studied the law (i.e., “scribes”) and were teachers of it.

2:5–8. Herod inquired from the religious leaders about the prophecy concerning the location of the birth of the Messiah, and the religious leaders rightly identified Micah 5:2, a passage which foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Shockingly, although they recognized the place he was to be born, they did not act on this news either positively or negatively. When Herod learned of the birthplace, he sent the Magi to find the boy, but he disguised his real motivation (cf. Matt. 2:16).

2:9–10. As the Magi made their way toward Bethlehem, they were overjoyed to see again the star appear over the place where the child lived. The star’s reappearance suggests something supernatural—more than the alignment of planets or the explosion of a supernova. The joyful response of the Magi thematically matches the angelic announcement of “great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10).

2:11. When the Magi arrived at the house they saw Mary, but when they saw Jesus they worshiped him. The word “worshiped” in this passage does not mean they recognized his divinity, but rather it was a term for paying homage. In other words, they bowed before him as a true king. Not only did they honor him, but they opened their treasures and gave him gifts. The particular gifts were gold, frankincense, and myrrh—three expensive items. The presence of three gifts gave rise to the popular belief that the Magi were three in number; later tradition even named them.

Although we are familiar with gold as a valuable quantity, frankincense and myrrh need some explanation. Frankincense is an incense derived from amber resin that when burned produces a sweet odor and can be used as a perfume (Song of Songs 3:6). In Israel, priests used frankincense in the temple (Exodus 30:9). Myrrh is an incense made by mixing other elements

(Exod. 30:23) and was called a perfume for the “lover’s bed” (Esther 2:13; Psalm 45:8; Proverbs 7:17; Song of Songs 3:6). However, myrrh was also used for burial to cover the smell of a decaying body, which is how Nicodemus prepared Jesus for burial (John 19:39).

2:12. Although the Magi were specifically instructed by Herod the Great to find the newborn king and report back to him his precise whereabouts, the Magi did not follow Herod’s instructions. The text tells us a dream warned them about Herod, and so they returned using an alternate route. Any standard route for the Magi required them traveling from Bethlehem through Jerusalem (which Herod would have learned about), so perhaps they traveled west toward the *Via Maris* (the Way of the Sea) and proceeded north through Capernaum, Damascus, and then toward their homes. The discernment and obedience of the Magi are noteworthy and stand in stark contrast to the diabolical efforts of Herod the Great and the indifferent attitude of Jerusalem’s religious leaders.

Focusing on the Meaning

The story of the wise men who pursued and worshipped the newborn King of the Jews raises questions for us; How do we pursue and worship Jesus in our lives? How can we celebrate Jesus’ birth and seek a deeper love relationship with him during the Christmas season?

Every family that celebrates Christmas develops various traditions and routines. Our family enjoys worshiping in a Christmas Eve service and then gathering as a family at home to read the Christmas story. What about you and your family? How are you planning to worship Jesus this season?

Christmas is a time of exchanging gifts, and it is easy to think that the only reason for Christmas is the gifts we give and receive. However, the real reason for Christmas celebrations is to proclaim the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world! The Magi gave the first Christmas gifts to Jesus’ parents to celebrate the birth of their son and our Savior. This Christmas, what gifts are you planning to give to Jesus? Are they gifts worthy of a king?

Teaching Plans

DISCOVERY PLAN

Connect with Life

1. Before class time, gather index cards and pens. Distribute these to class members and ask them to complete the following sentence on their index cards: “Today, people seek...” Call for and briefly discuss responses. Say, *Today’s lesson is from Matthew 2. We will discover who was seeking the King of the Jews and their reactions when they found him.*

Guide Bible Study

2. In advance, enlist a class member who enjoys research to prepare a three-minute report on Herod the Great. (Refer the individual to the “Searching for Jesus” and “Finding Jesus” sections of the *Study Guide*, along with Bible dictionaries and commentaries.)

Recruit a volunteer to read Matthew 2:1–8 aloud, and then ask the researcher to present his/her report.

On the whiteboard write the name “Herod” at the head of one column, “Magi” at the head of a second column, and “Jesus” at the head of a third. Ask, *What characteristics describe Herod? Did Herod represent the spiritual climate of that time? Why? Write the words darkness and evil in Herod’s column.*

3. Say, *We will now play True or False to test our knowledge of the Magi. When I read a statement, raise your hand only if the declaration is true.* When a statement has been identified as false, ask someone to restate it, making it accurate.
 - Magi were philosophers, scientists, and astronomers. **(T)**
 - Magi knew whom they were looking for as they came from the east. **(T)**
 - Magi were obedient to Herod’s rule. **(F)**
 - Magi were present at the stable in Bethlehem. **(F)**
 - Magi were led by a star all the way to Bethlehem. **(T)**

Ask, *Who were the Magi?* List the responses in the Magi column on the whiteboard. At the bottom of the column, write the words *Seekers of the truth*.

4. Recruit a volunteer to read Matthew 2:10–12 aloud. Say, *When the Magi came into the presence of Jesus, they bowed down and worshiped him—and their lives changed.* Ask question two from the “Questions” section of the *Study Guide*. Say, *You cannot interact with Jesus and remain the same.* Ask, *How does verse 12 confirm this statement? Why did Jesus come into the world to break through darkness and evil?* Write responses in the “Jesus” column on the whiteboard. At the bottom of the column, write the words *Perfect Love—Source of Life*.
5. Before class time, gather three gift boxes. On a piece of paper write the word *Gold*, on another sheet of paper write *Frankincense*, and on a third sheet write *Myrrh*. Place one paper in each of the gift boxes. Divide the class into three groups and give each a gift box. Say, *When the Magi found Jesus, they opened their treasures and presented him gifts. Giving these gifts was also an act of worship.* Instruct each group to open their gift box to discover the gift inside. Say, *Using the Study Guide, discuss the significance of the gift with your group. How does your gift highlight a specific aspect of Jesus’ life?* Allow time for groups to report. Say, *All three gifts were associated with royalty.* Ask, *What have you given God that is of great value?*

Encourage Application

6. Call on a class member to read aloud Deuteronomy 4:29 and another to read Jeremiah 29:13. Ask, *Why do we seek Christ?* Say, *Jesus Christ is the source of life. If you are seeking Christ, I invite you to remain after class so that I can talk with you.*
7. Ask, *Has God placed a seeker in your life? What gifts do you have to offer that individual?* (examples: a supportive relationship, the encouragement of your testimony, an invitation to church or a small group).

8. Lead the class in praying silently for their seekers, and then close in prayer. Say, *Before we go, let's worship Jesus.* Select a Christmas carol related to this lesson to sing or play.

DISCUSSION PLAN

Connect with Life

1. As class members arrive, play Christmas music. Begin class by asking, *Are you ready for Christmas? What preparations have you made?* Allow for responses. Again ask, *Are you truly ready for Christmas? How have you prepared to experience the Messiah and genuinely worship him?* Say, *The events recorded in the Book of Matthew took place four hundred years after Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah. We begin with the birth of Jesus. Today's lesson will reveal who pursued him and how they responded when they came into his presence.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Read Matthew 2:1–6 aloud. Present a brief lecture on King Herod the Great. (Use the *Study Guide* and Bible commentaries as resources.) Ask, *How was Herod's life reflective of the world, which was dark and lonely? Why was Herod disturbed when he heard the King of the Jews had been born?*
3. Say, *Men from the east came to Jerusalem in search for the newborn Messiah.* Refer the class to the *Study Guide* and Matthew 2:1–9 as you ask, *Who were the Magi? Who were they pursuing?* Read Matthew 2:2 aloud. Before class time, procure a map of Jesus' ministry. Identify on the map the countries from which the Magi likely traveled to the city of Jerusalem. Ask, *Why did the Magi think the newborn baby would be in Jerusalem? Why did they have a secret meeting with King Herod?* Locate Bethlehem on the map. Say, *It was Herod who sent the Magi to Bethlehem to find the Christ child.* Read aloud Matthew 2:7–8.
4. Recruit someone to read Matthew 2:10–12 aloud. Ask, *What do we learn about Jesus from where the Magi found him?* Say, *The Magi had an*

immediate response when they came into the presence of Jesus; they bowed down and worshiped him. There was no doubt they were in the presence of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Ask, What is your response when you come into the presence of Jesus? What are some ways you worship Jesus? How do you pursue a deeper relationship with him?

5. Call attention to verse 10. Say, *We may also express our worship in action. Not only did the Magi bow down and worship Jesus, their worship included gifts they brought for him.* Ask the class to name the gifts that were presented to Jesus as you write them on the whiteboard. Ask, *What was significant about each gift?* (Refer the class to the “Worshipping Jesus” section of the *Study Guide*.) Allow for responses. Under the word *Gold* on the whiteboard, write *a King*; under *Frankincense*, write *a Priest*; and under *Myrrh*, write *He came to die*. Note that each gift foretold the roles of Jesus.
6. Ask, *Do you recall what Herod told the Magi he wanted to do when they found Jesus? Who expressed genuine worship? How is your worship an acknowledgment of Jesus as the Son of God?*
7. Say, *In a dream, God warned the Magi not to go back to Herod.* Read Matthew 2:12 aloud. Ask, *What would you imagine was the difference in their trip to find the newborn child and the journey home to their countries? Do you experience a life change when you come into the presence of Jesus?*

Encourage Application

8. Ask the class to turn to the *Study Guide* sidebar “Preparing for Worship.” Say, *These steps can prepare you to give gifts in worship.* Read the six steps aloud. Ask, *What are some specific ways you can honor God through your worship?*
9. Close in prayer, acknowledging that God is to be praised and worshipped.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this Christmas lesson are from the New International Version (1984 edition).
2. “The story of the star and of Magi from the east seeking a king would not have been foreign to the ancients. In the first place, according to both Suetonius and Tacitus, at the turn of the era there was abroad the expectation of a world-ruler to come from Judea (Suetonius, *Vesp.* 4; Tacitus, *Ann.* 5:13).” See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 233.

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