

I. Introduction

Good morning! Christmas will be here in two short weeks – are you ready? Some people may be ready, but most of us are probably still putting up decorations and shopping for gifts. Those kinds of preparations have their place, but it is much more important for us to prepare our hearts for Christmas.

Christmas commemorates the extraordinary miracle of the incarnation. Consider these words from the gospel of John: **(John 1:1), “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”** And, **(John 1:14), “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”** John calls Jesus the “Word,” and tells us that the Word is God and that in Jesus he and the other disciples saw the glory of God. They understood that Jesus is Lord and God and that He came down from heaven by His own choice to be born of the Virgin Mary and to live among us as a man. This is the great miracle of the incarnation – along with the crucifixion and resurrection, one of the three greatest events of Jesus’ life.

The disciples saw the glory of God in the coming of Jesus, but what about us, do we see God’s glory? I pray that all of us will open our eyes to see God’s glory this Christmas. Let’s prepare our hearts and minds for glory. Let’s prepare with daily prayer and through the reading of the Scriptures; let’s prepare by meditating on the amazing miracle of the incarnation.

Even before the disciples saw the glory of God in Jesus’ coming, there were others who understood and came to worship Jesus. For example, the wise men came from the east to worship Jesus at the time of his birth. As one step in our preparation for Christmas, let’s take a look this morning at their story in Matthew 2:1-12.



II. Scripture Reading, Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

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.

III. Teaching

After Jesus was born, Magi came from the east to worship Him. Scholars tell us that the word Magi comes from the Persian word, “magus” and that it is the root of the modern English word, “magician.” The Magi were scholars of esoteric knowledge and observers of the night sky and they were considered to be wise men. The Bible says only that



they came from the east, but for a variety of reasons, it seems likely that they came from Persia, the area known today as Iran.

There is a legend that the Magi were kings from various countries, but this legend did not develop until many centuries after the Bible was completed and it has no historical support. Therefore, despite the popularity of the Christmas Carol, “We Three Kings,” there is no real reason to think that the Magi were kings. Further, we really don’t know how many Magi came to Bethlehem, the number three comes from the list of three gifts, but that does not necessarily mean that there were only three Magi. In fact, in the Eastern Orthodox Church, it is thought that there were twelve Magi.

John of Chrysostom, a fourth century archbishop of Constantinople, considered the Magi to be Persian wise men in his writings, and this 7th century mosaic of the Magi carrying their gifts shows them dressed in Persian clothes. In fact, for a variety of reasons, it seems likely that the Magi were from Persia. This is an intriguing idea, because it may help to explain why the Magi came looking for the Messiah.



If you have been a Christian for a few years, you are probably comfortable with the story of the Magi, but I think that anyone reading it for the first time would probably think that it is a very strange story. Why would the Magi give expensive gifts to a baby and then leave, never to return? And, why would they leave the safety and comfort of their homes and travel a thousand miles to do this? The long journey would have been dangerous and there was a real risk that King Herod might kill them as soon as he met them. No king likes to be told that he has been replaced, and King Herod was especially known for his murderous plots against all competition, including his own family members. In fact, when we read all of Matthew chapter 2, it seems likely that Herod allowed the wise men to live only because his first priority was to find and kill the newborn king.

Yet, despite all of the dangers and disruption of their normal lives, when the Magi saw the new star they made preparations for the long journey, even including bringing expensive and carefully chosen gifts for the new king. But here is another mystery. Why did the Magi think the new star was a sign that a king had been born, and very specifically, a King of the Jews? The Bible doesn’t explain, so we don’t know for sure, but if the wise men came from Persia, that is an important clue.

Do you remember the story of Daniel in the lion’s den? If you don’t, you can read it in Daniel chapter 6, but the story is that Daniel was thrown into a lion’s den because he refused to stop worshipping the One True God. But the Lord miraculously protected Daniel from the lions. Many people know that part of the story, but do you remember what happened next? Well, the king was very impressed to say the least.



Take a look at **Daniel 6:25-28**. “Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations and men of every language throughout the land: “May you prosper greatly! I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. “For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions.” So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.”

All of this happened about 600 years before the time of Jesus, during the Babylonian captivity of the Jewish people. Daniel obviously had a huge amount of influence and it seem very likely that he would have left the wise men of Persia and Babylon with copies of the Jewish Scriptures which had been written up to that time, including his own prophetic writings. We don’t know for sure, but the behavior of the Magi indicates that they knew the prophecies of the Messiah who was to come.

Because of these prophecies, the Magi were probably waiting and watching for a sign that the Great King, the Messiah, had come. For example, take a look at **Daniel 7:13-14**. “In my vision at night I looked,

and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

Through this and other prophecies the Magi could have known that the new king was no ordinary earthly king, but rather an eternal heavenly king. This must have been why they set off on their long and dangerous journey as soon as they saw the star that spoke of the birth of Jesus. They followed the star and asked in Jerusalem (**Matthew 2:2**), **“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.”** Notice that Jesus is, “born king.” An earthly king is not a king until he is recognized as king and crowned, but Jesus was already king when He was born, in fact, Jesus is the eternal King of kings.

The Magi did not come simply to see the new king; they came to worship Him. They seemed to know that Jesus was not just a man, but God come in the flesh. Perhaps they also knew the prophecy of **Isaiah 9:6**, **“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”**

However, it seems that they did not know the prophecy of **Micah 5:2**. **“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”** If they had known this prophecy, they probably would have gone straight to Bethlehem without stopping in Jerusalem, but in God’s sovereign plan, it was necessary for them to stop in Jerusalem. The new star was temporarily hidden, so the wise men went to Jerusalem and asked about the new king. King Herod then asked the chief priests and teacher of the law where the Messiah, that is the Christ, was to be born and they replied by quoting the words of Micah 5:2.

Notice that King Herod also understood that the new king was not an ordinary king, but Christ the Messiah. Notice that the chief priests and teachers of the law knew the prophecies very well. But even so, they did not go to Bethlehem to see Jesus. Herod secretly told the Magi that he would go later, but, as the rest of Matthew 2 shows, he said this only with murderous intent. Herod asked when the star had first appeared, and afterward it becomes clear that he did this only to ascertain how old the child might be, because in Matthew 2:16, Herod gave the command to kill all the male children of Bethlehem that were two years old or less. From this we understand that the star signifying the birth of Jesus had appeared some months earlier while the Magi were still in their home country; by the time they arrived in Bethlehem, Jesus was no longer a newborn.

Matthew 2:11, **“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.”** The Magi came and worshiped Jesus and gave gifts that are rich with symbolic meaning. Gold was a gift for kings and it speaks of Jesus’ sovereign authority as the King of kings. Incense was offered to God daily in the temple and it speaks of Jesus’ divinity. Myrrh seems like an unusual gift, it was used in preparing bodies for burial, but if the Magi were familiar with the prophecies, then perhaps they also understood that the birth of Jesus was the first step in His lonely journey to the cross. The gifts of the Magi truly reflect the meaning of Christmas. Jesus, the baby born in Bethlehem, is God and King and He has come into this world for the purpose of giving His life as a ransom for ours by dying on the cross to pay for our sins.

Today, we have lots of powerful evidence and many proofs that Jesus is Lord and God. We have the completed Bible with the four gospels that record the history of Jesus’ teachings and miracles and that tell us about His death on the cross and resurrection. We also have the rest of the New Testament which tells us about the early church and all of the wonderful miracles that God did among the apostles and disciples. We also have the testimony of millions of Christians told over two thousand years, voices from every corner of the globe that speak of the wonders of Jesus’ love and grace.



The wise men had far less evidence concerning who Jesus is, probably only a portion of the Old Testament and the miracle of the bright star that moved in the night sky to lead them to Bethlehem. But from this evidence they understood that Jesus was Lord and King and they worshipped Him. They carefully prepared their gifts and travelled a thousand miles to kneel before Him. They knew that He is worthy of all honor and praise. We have far more evidence for our faith than they did. But do we understand as well as they did? Do we know that Jesus is Lord of lords and King of kings, Creator God and Savior? How far are we willing to go to worship Jesus? How generous are we in our giving to Him?



IV. Conclusion

Jesus is Lord and God. He is worthy of all praise and honor. This Christmas, let's be quick to honor Him. Let's be bold to speak His Name to the people around us and to tell them about His love and mercy. Let's be diligent to prepare gifts for Him, gifts of praise and thanksgiving for all that He has done for us. Most of all, let's give ourselves to Him and serve Him, because He is Lord and He is worthy of our worship and complete devotion.

V. Prayer

Dear God, thank you for coming to us in the person of Your Son Jesus on that first Christmas 2,000 years ago. Thank you for the wonders of the incarnation and for the salvation You prepared for us through the death of Jesus on the cross. Thank you for the resurrection which proves that Jesus has conquered sin and death and that demonstrates the reality of eternal life. Your love is endless and Your grace and mercy are wonderful, sufficient for our every need. Help us to set our minds and hearts on You this Christmas. Help us to draw near to You; open our eyes so that we might see Your glory. Pour out Your Holy Spirit on us so that we might be filled with Your Spirit and with the power and wisdom of the Spirit so that we can be bold and loving witnesses for You this Christmas and always. In the wonderful Name of Jesus, I pray. Amen!