

Faithful Seekers of the King

December 24 • Bible Study Guide 4

Bible Background • MATTHEW 2:1–12

Printed Text • MATTHEW 2:1–12 | Devotional Reading • ISAIAH 49:1–7

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: CONTRAST the role and motives of the magi with the role and motives of King Herod; APPRECIATE the magi's deep commitment to honor Jesus; and COMMIT to honor God on a daily basis by spending time in His presence.

In Focus

Craig huddled over his office computer. He had “married” this job eight years ago, sacrificing early mornings, late nights, and family time, even taking work home over the weekends. Consequently, Craig missed church services often and neglected time for praying and reading the Bible. One day at work, he read an email announcement: Carla, one of his mentees, had received the promotion for which he had worked so tirelessly. Torrents of humiliation, anger, resentment, and jealousy obstructed his thoughts and suctioned all the air out of his lungs, constricting his chest. Mouth gaping open, he battled for that first breath, and then the next, before pushing back from his desk and standing to consider his options. Enough is enough, he decided. He had given more than his share to this job. Bleary eyes scorned the recognition certificates lining his wall. He yearned to rip them off their carefully arranged perches. Surprisingly, an idea trickled across his mind. What if he put as much energy and effort into honoring Christ as he put into his job? Before he had become such a workaholic, Craig had put Christ first in his life. Craig looked up to heaven and sighed. It was time to use his life to honor Jesus and not for self-promotion. In this lesson, we learn how the wise men sought to honor Jesus. How do you make it a priority to honor God in your daily life?

Keep in Mind

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh” ([Matthew 2:11](#)).

Words You Should Know

A. Worship ([Matthew 2:2](#)) *proskyneo* (Gk.)—To pay homage to a dignitary.

B. Wise men (2:1) *magos* (Gk.)—Babylonian, Chaldean, Persian, and Median name for astrologers, priests, seers, etc.

Say It Correctly

Herod. **HEH**-rud.

Judea. joo-**DAY**-uh.

Say It Correctly

Endeavoring. in-**DEV**-or-ing.

Effectual. ef-fek-**CHOO**-ul.

KJV

- Matthew 2:1** Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,
- 2** Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.
- 3** When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.
- 4** And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.
- 5** And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,
- 6** And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.
- 7** Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.
- 8** And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.
- 9** When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.
- 10** When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.
- 11** And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.
- 12** And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

NLT

- Matthew 2:1** Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking,
- 2** "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."
- 3** King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem.
- 4** He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"
- 5** "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote:
- 6** 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'"
- 7** Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared.
- 8** Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!"
- 9** After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was.
- 10** When they saw the star, they were filled with joy!
- 11** They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

12 When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

The People, Places, and Times

Herod the Great. His father was an Edomite, and his mother was an Arabian. The Romans made Herod king of Judea in 40 BC. He was a merciless tyrant with a penchant for building projects, such as rebuilding the second Temple in Jerusalem. Herod hoped his projects would gain him favor with the Jews. However, he used taxes to fund his construction and placed an economic burden on the people of Judea. Additionally, Herod was brutally violent. He is reputed to have killed his wife, brother-in-law, mother-in-law, two of his sons, and a large number of rabbis, in addition to the biblical account of ordering the massacre of all boys from the area in and around Bethlehem who were age two and younger ([Matthew 2:16](#)).

Bethlehem. The name means “house of bread” or “granary” and is mentioned five times in Matthew. The town, which is also where David was born, is located five miles south of Jerusalem. As Israel’s most popular king, the town of his birth became a royal city. Hundreds of years before Christ, the prophet Micah accurately prophesied that Bethlehem would be the birthplace of the Messiah ([Micah 5:2](#)).

How do you give honor to God when facing oppression or injustice from those in power?

Background

God’s incarnation is an event that split history. Previous to His coming to live with us, all history looked forward to the Messiah’s coming. The significance of His presence here on earth is reflected by the division within the Gregorian calendar. Human history has been categorized in relation to His birth. Dates and events prior His coming (“Before Christ” or BC) are referenced differently than events occurring after His coming (in the year of our Lord, Anno Domini, AD).

This event was celebrated not only by shepherds and angels, but also by wise men from the East. Although Matthew does not state how many wise men followed the star, tradition assigned three travelers to the three gifts, tying their pilgrimage to [Psalm 72:10](#), and declaring the travelers to be kings.

How can we modify the secular celebration of Christmas to incorporate its spiritual significance?

At-A-Glance

1. Required Preparation ([Matthew 2:1](#))
 2. Change of Focus (vv. 2–8)
 3. Changes of Posture (vv. 9–11)
 4. An Different Direction (vv. 4, 12)

In Depth

1. Required Preparation ([Matthew 2:1](#))

The announcement of Christ’s birth comes from astrologers from the East ([Matthew 2:1](#)). These travelers noticed an unusual, distinctive light in the sky. Understanding its meaning, they were compelled to find and pay homage to a newborn, foreign king. They were Gentiles, experts in astrology, interpreters of dreams, and magicians on a pilgrimage to honor the “one who has been born king.” It is important to note that astrology then was very similar to astrology today.

Preparation included bringing gifts and offerings. These actions remind us that we cannot honor God with empty hands or empty hearts. Honoring our King requires us to come prepared to worship with praise and thanksgiving (Psalm 100), a tithe ([1 Corinthians 16:2](#)), or a repentant heart ([Mark 1:15](#)).

What are you prepared to sacrifice this Christmas season in honor of what God has done on your behalf?

2. Change of Focus (vv. 2–8)

Unlike the wise men whose eyes were trained upward, Herod's eyes were focused on himself and all he could lose to this rival new king. So, he was disturbed when he heard the news. Feeling threatened, he offered lip service, rather than heart service to the Great One the star represented.

The travelers left the comforts of home and obediently followed the star so that they could worship the King of the Jews. In contrast, Herod's home was geographically closer to Bethlehem. However, blind ambition kept Herod chained in Jerusalem, tied to an earthly throne. With the wrong motivation, Herod asked the priests and scribes questions about where the Christ was to be born. But worshiping the King was not his goal.

Why is it hard to choose between focusing on the things of God or focusing on self?

3. Changes of Posture (vv. 9–11)

When the travelers found Jesus, they were overjoyed and came bowing, reflecting the attitude of their heart with the posture of their bodies. Additionally, like the woman with the alabaster box ([Matthew 26:7](#)), they also brought gifts that reflected their best and their full commitment—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts are often said to symbolize different aspects of Jesus' person and work. The gold is said to symbolize His kingship; frankincense worship; and myrrh, a spice used for embalming, His death on the Cross.

Is kneeling or lifting hands in worship a form of honoring God?

4. A Different Direction (vv. 4, 12)

News of the strangers visiting the King probably spread throughout Jerusalem. Furthermore, the scribes and priests understood that the prophecy referred to the birth of their Messiah. From King Herod's inquiry, the scribes and priests could have surmised that Micah's prophecy had been fulfilled. But, unlike the wise men, the religious leaders did not travel from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

The wise men changed direction twice. Their first change in direction was their travel to Bethlehem. Their second directional change was leaving Bethlehem to return home rather than returning to tell Herod about the King, as Herod had commanded. Throughout their journey, the wise men saw, heard, and lived through the daily changes integral to following and knowing God's leading. Their journey remains a legacy for all who truly yearn to worship God.

Do you recall a time when God rearranged your plans and you willingly followed the new direction?

Search the Scriptures

1. How might a high social position lead to a negative idea about God ([Matthew 2:3](#))?
2. Joy is often associated with the Christmas season ([Matthew 2:10](#); [Luke 2:10](#)). How is following Jesus the same as pursuing joy?

Discuss the Meaning

The celebration of Christ's birth is unusual because we are the ones who receive the gifts ([Matthew 2:11–12](#)). How can we redirect the celebration to refocus on our King?

Lesson in Our Society

Traditions are customs that tie us to the past and frame our understanding of the present. Celebrating Christmas is a church tradition. Negro spirituals such as "Go Tell it on the Mountain," "Mary Had a Baby," and "The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy" provide insight into how enslaved African Americans may have responded to the Christian celebration. They welcomed and worshiped King Jesus who "came down from the glorious kingdom." Despite financial, social, and many other challenges, Christmas remained a time for reconnecting with family and celebrating at church.

Focusing attention on the Christ of Christmas is challenging, often made more difficult by the busyness of the season, which distracts rather than prepares for Bible reflection or worship. Like the travelers from the East, we are to look up, recognize His shining light, and follow where the Bible leads.

What church or family traditions help you celebrate Jesus' birth during the Christmas season?

Make It Happen

- Make an appointment on your calendar to worship Jesus.
- Prepare gifts for others in church, such as a word of encouragement or an act of service.
- Volunteer your time to serve those who are less fortunate during this holiday season as an act of worship to the King.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 2:1-12

1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.

Matthew sets the stage in this introductory verse by identifying Bethlehem as the place and the time as the days of Herod the King. The Greek word *de* translated “now” is used primarily to inform the reader of the continuing conversation about Jesus, which began in chapter 1. In a sense, the writer seems to be preparing the reader for more surprises. The first chapter began with a statement of genealogy and Joseph’s vision of an angel. Chapter 2 continues by explaining the events that followed.

“In the days of Herod” refers to the time period when Herod and his sons ruled over a section of Judea (Matthew 2:1-3). Herod the Great was the ruler in power when Jesus was born. He felt threatened by Jesus’ birth and tried to kill Him. Herod had three sons who also ruled after his death: Herod Archelaus, Herod Philip, and Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist and condemned Jesus to die. The entire Herod family, including Herod the Great, was wicked and murderous (see Luke 13:31-32; 23:6-12; Acts 4:27).

By all accounts, this period was marked by political subjugation, religious interference, and conflict within the territories of Israel. According to scholars, Rome gave Herod the title “King of the Jews.” He was a psychologically troubled man who was so suspicious and paranoid that he executed one of his wives and two of his sons.

The wise men (Gk. magos, **MAH-GOS**) were men of rank who more than likely had wealth in abundance; they were considered by some scholars to be kings. Origin, the third century theologian, identified three wise men, probably because of the three gifts.

2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

These wise men were usually knowledgeable in astrological analysis. We now know that African people were familiar with the constellations, and with that knowledge came the ability to interpret the effect of what was happening in the solar systems. The Dogon and Ibos people of West Africa exemplify such knowledge among African peoples. Of course, the ancient Egyptians knew the movement of heavenly bodies as well. Scholars debate whether these wise men came from Babylon, Persia, or Arabia, as the term “East” could mean any of these locations. Herodotus uses the term for a class of priests in Persia.

Upon finding this new King, the wise men would worship and pay homage to Him. They asked a question that changed the mindset of many throughout history and brought the people of God out of their sleepwalking. No longer would the people of Israel and their pretend king be able to avoid the divine interrogative. By asking this

question, these wise ones were forcing Herod and his court to think about the promise of the everlasting God. Imagine, they were foreigners, yet were the first to understand that the Messiah had come—they had seen His star! Not only did they see the sign, but they also came to worship. Remember, these men were deeply learned, and not many things gave them a sense of awe. With all of their learning and wealth, they still came to worship. The word “worship” is the Greek word *proskuneo* (**proce-koo-NEH-oh**), meaning “to kiss the hand and prostrate oneself in homage.” They came to give reverence and to adore this newborn King.

3 When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Given the reputation of these keepers of secrets, Herod, who perceived himself to be the foundation of power and sovereignty in Judah, heard this news and was troubled. The implication is that the news of a king of Israelite descent had been born to replace the mean, destructive ruler from Idumea.

The word translated “was troubled” is from the Greek word *tarasso* (**ta-ra-SO**), which means to “stir or to agitate.” Simply stated, Herod was angry. This man who had worked so hard to be accepted by the people of Israel now realized there was a threat to his usurped title.

4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

In this verse, we see Herod’s strategy for dealing with his troubled heart. First, he called the very people who were guardians of the promise—the chief priests. Note that they were not the high priests. The idea here is that he gathered them together as God would have gathered them. They convened, however, not in response to what God was doing, but to be entertained in Herod’s company.

5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

We find Matthew using his signature phrase: “thus it is written.” The Israelites always looked at what God spoke through the prophets to determine what was happening in the present. This passage states “the prophet,” yet has no name attached to it. For the Israelites, the prophet’s identity was not important because the prophet simply acted as a foreteller. What is important to remember is that they saw the Scripture as being inspired by God. To them, these things were not mere poetic revelings, but divine insight into the future.

6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

Verse 6 is a paraphrase of [Micah 5:2](#). This prophecy gave the religious leaders and the people hope that the promises made to their ancestors, via the prophets, would be fulfilled. Bethlehem (which means “house of bread”) was the birthplace of their beloved king of Israel, David, who was the monarchical ancestor of the Messiah. The promise is made specifically to include the Israelites who were a part of Judah.

This verse features a correlation to the story of the anointing of David as king. The Greek word *elachistos* (**eh-LACK-see-toce**) is translated “least”; it is the superlative form of the word *elachus*, which means “short.” It also means least in terms of size, quantity, or dignity. Recall that David, who was considered the “least,” was appointed king, and this event took place in Bethlehem (1 Samuel 16). Even the prophet was misled by David’s size. Here the prophet is emphatic: “thou Bethlehem ... art not the least.”

Implicit is the understanding that people might have considered Bethlehem to be of no consequence, just as David’s father considered him to be of no consequence. Yet, in God’s eyes, neither David nor Bethlehem were by any means “the least.” Economically, Bethlehem did not have the power to rival Jerusalem or Bethel. Yet God was about to do something great with it. Just as God looked beyond David’s stature and anointed him king, so it will be with the city of Christ’s birth.

The passage states that something substantial—someone of importance—was going to come out of this city. Someone considered to be a nobody would emerge as a chief among leaders. Verse 6 also describes what the leader will do. The Greek word used here for “rule” is *poimaino* (**poy-MY-no**), which means “to tend as a shepherd and to feed the sheep.” His work is directed to all people, not just to the people of Bethlehem.

7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

Having discovered that this King would be born among a people he thought inferior, Herod called the wise men

privately, to ask them when the Child was to be born. The verb phrase “enquired . . . diligently” is translated from the Greek word akriboō (**ah-kree-BOH-oh**), meaning that he wanted the wise men to provide the exact or specific time of the star’s appearance.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

This verse demonstrates Herod’s pretension and deception. He is attempting to use these men of wisdom to lead him to the Christ child. He let them depart for the purpose of accomplishing an objective different from what he states. Again, they are to search for the child “diligently,” which is the adverbial form of the verb from the previous verse (Gk. akribos, **ah-kree-BOCE**). This highlights the determination of those who seek to undermine the work of God.

9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

The wise men did follow a number of the king’s suggestions. They did indeed traverse the land. They removed themselves from Herod’s presence. They did not stop their journey; they kept on walking in the light of the star. An important word here is the Greek word proago (**pro-AH-go**), which is translated as “go before.” The star is now seen as a princely messenger leading an audience into the presence of a powerful king. They were preceded by this divine messenger, which announced to them the place where God, in meekness, now lays. Similarly, the light of God’s Word will lead us until we come to the time and place that He intends for us. The light of God’s presence will lead us to fulfill His purpose in our lives.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

Here we read the wise men’s response. As you recall, when they were talking with Herod, the star was hidden from their sight. In verse 10, “they saw the star.” The word “saw” denotes a sense of realization. This second sight affirmed the experience they had back in their home town. Their knowledge was now confirmed by seeing the star. We are told that they “rejoiced with exceeding great joy.”

11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshiped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

The magi came from the east, and the star guided them to the exact location in Bethlehem. They brought three gifts: gold, for Jesus as king; sweet-smelling frankincense, for burning in worship and prayer for Jesus the divine; and the embalming spice myrrh, for Jesus the crucified Savior.

Much has been made of the symbolism of the gifts. Gold was a sign of wealth representing the king’s or queen’s ability to provide for his or her subjects. It was also used for religious ornamentation. The word “frankincense” (Gk. libanos, **LEE-bah-NOCE**) is taken from the Hebrew lebonah, which refers to the incense tree, as well as to incense itself. Myrrh (Gk. smurna, **sm-EARN-ah**) was an ointment used for burial in many African traditions. The perfumed or scented oil is still used in many parts of Africa and Asia today.

These wise ones had saved their treasures so they would be able to give. In fact, the word “treasure” (Gk. thesauros, **thē-sow-ROCE**) could also mean a deposit of wealth. We are told that they offered gifts to Him. The word for “gifts” is doron (Gk. **doe-ROAN**), which refers to “a present,” but can specifically imply the sense of making a sacrifice.

12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

This verse deals with divine intervention to save the wise men from serving as instruments for carrying out Herod’s work. We are told that the Lord appeared and spoke to them in a dream (Gk. **onar, OH-nar**), which means an utterance similar to what occurred in oracles. In a sense, it means after they had seen the Lord, they could not bear to think of Herod and his request. The word translated “warned” (Gk. chrematizo, **kray-mah-TEED-zo**) means that they were called or admonished. God revealed something to them. For the first time in all of these conversations and in their long journey, God speaks to the wise ones. This dream was so authoritative that they did not return to Herod. Instead, they went back to their homeland another way.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

God Saves Moses
([Exodus 1:22–2:10](#))

TUESDAY

Light to the Nations
([Isaiah 42:1–9](#))

WEDNESDAY

A Peaceful Ruler from Bethlehem
([Micah 5:1–5](#))

THURSDAY

Faithful to God's Plan
([Matthew 1:18–25](#))

FRIDAY

Escape for Family; Massacre of Infants
([Matthew 2:13–18](#))

SATURDAY

Holy Family Settles in Nazareth
([Matthew 2:19–23](#))

SUNDAY

Wise Men Seek, Then Worship Jesus
([Matthew 2:1–12](#))