

A Call to Worship

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on April 22, 2018.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:1–12).

Matthew 1:25 concludes, "[Mary] had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus." Matthew has revealed the name and birth of Jesus, and now he reveals His birth time and location: "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king." Matthew does not reveal that Joseph and Mary are temporary residents of Bethlehem. He does not reveal the providential circumstances of their trip. They are simply there; Jesus has been born; and they will have the unlikeliest of visitors.

"We three kings of Orient are" were likely neither kings nor Oriental. Scholars speculate that they were likely religious men of some kind and perhaps from what was ancient Babylon. Sticking with what we do know: They were "wise men from the east." They traveled to the capital city of Jerusalem. They publically announced that they were seeking a newborn king of the Jews. They witnessed an astronomical event announcing the birth of this king. They arrived in Jerusalem with one singular purpose: to worship Him.

This indeed is odd. Who travels from a foreign land to worship an unknown king? We could better understand this if they were proselytes converting to Judaism. Consider the genealogy of Jesus Christ: from David to Jechoniah, was there any king worthy of worship? The only way this makes sense is if God revealed Himself to these wise men culling them to worship Him as King. In fact, this account of the wise men has much to teach us about worship. We see that we were created to worship; we are called to worship; and we are to be committed to worship.

Created to Worship

God created mankind not as objects of worship but to worship. It is not a matter of *if* we will worship, but *what* will we worship? Creation itself reveals that there is a Creator, and the right response of the created is to worship. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard” (Psalm 19:1–3). To deny this general revelation is to be a fool.

There is a glory yet an insufficiency in God’s natural revelation. The Westminster Confession of Faith clarifies, “Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church” (1.1). In this progressive revelation, the Confession goes on to explain the necessity of the final and complete written canon of Scripture.

God has created us to worship Him, and Him alone, and He has revealed to us how we are to worship Him, which brings us to a group of star-following worshipers from a foreign land. In this historical account, we see both true and false worshipers. True worshipers seek to worship God according to His revelation.

In this “divers manner,” God uses a moving “star” to direct the wise men to worship. They follow God’s revelation, and rejoiced “exceedingly with great joy” in its provision. They fell and worshiped the object of God’s revelation: Christ the King. They accompanied their posture of worship with the practical, tangible gifts of adoration. They truly worshiped Christ the King.

In contrast, false worshipers may see and even know God’s revelation, but they do not seek to worship Him. Upon hearing of God’s revelation to the wise men and their desire to worship the king of the Jews, “Herod the king...was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” Herod was troubled because of envy. He wanted the glory, majesty, dominion, and authority for himself. False worshipers may hear of God’s revelation, but they reject anything that would unseat themselves as king.

Interestingly, “all Jerusalem [was troubled] with him.” Scripture does not reveal why they were troubled, but we may deduct that it was the news of the birth of a new king of the Jews. They were the Jews, and they knew nothing of a newborn king. Troubling indeed.

There are also those who know and study God’s revelation but do not worship Him. The “chief priests and scribes of the people” were assembled by Herod. The connection between a king of the Jews to be worshiped and the Jewish Messiah had been made. They knew the Scriptures and quoted the Scriptures. They knew the Christ would come from Bethlehem. And, they missed Him, even (as we will see) as He lived and ministered

before them. They did not heed the call to worship. In contrast, true worshipers, faithful and obedient to God's revelation, are called to worship.

Called to Worship

The wise men were called to worship by God's revelation. Apparently they had been watching the heavens and saw what they described as "his star when it rose." Speculations abound as to what this was, but to obsess on the unrevealed is to miss the primary point. God was sovereignly directing them by an astronomical form of revelation. So precise was this revelation that they knew that following it would lead to a king to be worshiped. In this call to worship, there is unity in God's revelation and His providence. Notice how this unfolds. The wise men follow the star to Jerusalem.

The Jewish leaders inform Herod of the prophecy of the Christ: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel" (Matt. 2:6). Consequently, Herod sends the wise men to Bethlehem. And, "the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was." God's revelation was a unified revelation to those whom He called to worship.

So, it is for us as well. The Holy Scripture is not a chaotic mix of man's opinion, it is the Holy Spirit inspired Word of God, infallible in truth and divine in authority. Just as these ancient wise men were called to worship so also are we, not by a moving star but by the written Word. The Confession explains that "those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased," God has made "the Holy Scripture to be most necessary" (1.1).

We are called to worship according to the Holy Scripture. For this reason, we gather for worship on Sunday, the Lord's Day. For this reason, we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and offer our prayers in Jesus' name. For this reason, we observe the Lord's Supper and baptism. For this reason, the Word is read and preached. The intent of our worship is to worship God as He has revealed to be worshiped. Just as we were created to worship and called to worship, we are to be committed to worship.

Committed to Worship

The wise men observed God's revelation. They faithfully responded and followed God's revelation. The result: They worshiped Christ directly and in person. "And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh."

They did not worship Christ through Mary nor did they worship Mary. They worshiped Christ exclusively. Similarly, by the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit, we worship Christ directly and in person. Just as real as Christ's presence was before the wise men so is His presence in our worship. This should impact how we worship. We are literally

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worshipping in His royal presence. This calls for reverence not revelry. The wise men fell before Him, not as a form of entertainment but as an act of reverent worship.

Falling before Him in worship, the wise men gave tangible and costly gifts to Christ: “gold and frankincense and myrrh.” The early church speculated that the gold represented royalty, frankincense for divine worship, and myrrh for burial. Also more intriguing is that these gifts of Gentile worshipers are similar to the gifts of the Gentile Queen of Sheba’s visit to the son of David. Regardless of the significance of each gift, a vital part of their worship was offering gifts. Their giving was not spontaneous or need driven. There was no guilt-driven appeal. It was pre-planned, joyful giving as worship. There was no fund raising strategy.

We can learn much from their example. We come to worship Christ every Sunday. We collect tithes and offerings every Sunday. We give not out of guilt or manipulation. We give regularly and routinely in joyful worship of Christ.

Finally, we see that having worshiped Christ, the wise men submitted to God’s revelation for guidance: “And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.” They had followed God’s revelation, and it led them to Christ. They worshiped Him, Christ the King. Having worshiped Him they once again followed God’s revelation in their journey.

How often have we gathered in Lord’s Day worship and having heard the revealed will of God through the preaching of the Word departed forgetting what we heard? How many times has our journey into the work week been *unguided* by God’s Word. Oh church, do you not see the necessity of God’s Word for your journey? He who warned the wise men in a dream is the same One who has given us His written Word that we may know Him, worship Him, and live in Him.

We were created to worship. The call to worship the king of the Jews was heeded by Gentile wise men from the east. Because mankind was created to worship, the call to worship is international: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20a). Because we were created to worship one day the heavenly courts will ring with praises to Christ our King of worshipers from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

So, we are called to worship the King by God’s grace through faith in Christ. We are called to worship by God’s revelation, the Holy Scripture, the Word of God. We are called not as Jews or Gentiles but in Christ. Let us then commit to worship Christ our King. For this reason we were created. For this reason we were called. Let us rejoice every Lord’s Day exceedingly with great joy, bowing down in reverent worship, offering gifts in tangible worship, heeding God’s Word in living worship. For, He is Christ the King, and He calls us to worship Him.