

# LOOKING FORWARD IN WORSHIP

Leader pages on pp. 120-123

**THE POINT:**  
JESUS IS LORD AND HE  
DESERVES OUR WORSHIP.

## MATTHEW 2:1-11,16-18

<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem,

<sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him."

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

<sup>4</sup> So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born.

<sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem of Judea," they told him, "because this is what was written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah: Because out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

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<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared.

<sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship him."

<sup>9</sup> After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen at its rising. It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was.

<sup>10</sup> **When they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy.**

<sup>11</sup> Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

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<sup>16</sup> Then Herod, when he realized that he had been outwitted by the wise men, flew into a rage. He gave orders to massacre all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, in keeping with the time he had learned from the wise men.

<sup>17</sup> Then what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:

<sup>18</sup> A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.

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### MEMORY VERSE



### KEYWORDS



**Written by the prophet (v. 5)**—The prophet referred to is Micah, who ministered primarily to the Southern Kingdom of Judah sometime between 750–686 BC.

**Overwhelmed with joy (v. 10)**—The presence of the star told the wise men that after their long journey they would be

successful in their quest of find the newborn King.

**Spoken through Jeremiah (v. 17)**—The verse describes the cries of the mothers of Judah as their children were being taken away into exile. A prophecy from Jeremiah 31:15.

# WHY IS JESUS WORTHY OF OUR WORSHIP?

Most churches try their best to offer convenience when it comes to worship. That's not a bad thing. We need to try to remove any obstacle believers might have to be able to worship. We have climate-controlled spaces, preferred parking for seniors, visitors, and expectant mothers. Coffee is often available in the foyer, and since the pandemic, many churches offer a streaming option so that you could join in from the comfort of your own couch or even your bed.

It's easy to forget that there are people half a world away that risk their lives to worship with other believers. For them it takes planning and a little cunning to be there. Some don't have access to Bibles. They pass around scraps of Bibles that they salvaged from the last confiscation they experienced in the village by authorities.

We might worship in comfort, ease, and convenience, but we are a slim minority of the long history of the worshiping church, including the Magi who made the arduous journey to kneel at the feet of the Christ child.

## The Heavens Declared Him // Matthew 2:1-6

Almost every December when our kids were young, we made the journey via minivan from Tennessee to Louisiana to spend part of the holidays with my mom and dad. When you have four boys it takes lots of songs, stories, stops, and snacks. We were a wide load back then. And it seemed no one had the same sleep schedule. I marvel that we all survived with our nerves intact. I still have those kid's songs ringing around in my head from time to time. But really this was a minor trip in comparison to the journey of the Magi.

It was a common custom for dignitaries to visit new rulers. We've been ill-informed by endless movies and musicals to believe that there were just three wise men or kings that made the journey. These were astrologers and dream-interpreters who served kings and probably had more than a few servants in their entourage. The title also appears in Daniel, but in a much more unfavorable light. Why would these men who were practicing astrology, divination, and pagan spiritism get into the story? Perhaps Matthew is writing this because throughout his gospel narrative he discovered God calling out atypical supporting characters through



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Jesus's life, beginning with the family line in the first chapter of Matthew. God is fond of transforming outcasts into "incasts." He's widening the circle and spreading the grace around. Even the most alienated can draw close to Jesus.

### HOW WERE YOU FIRST DRAWN TO WORSHIP JESUS?

From the start we are introduced to Herod the Great. A villain, through and through. He came from Edomite roots (archenemies of the Jews), and he had a lot going on in his world. He was a friend to Marc Antony but enemy to Cleopatra. He was well connected. His father and Julius Caesar were friends. But it's obvious from the start that Herod was a jealous, vindictive, conniving ruler. In the middle of all this tangled mess, God sent His Son.

Many of us have had experiences and situations where we prayed this prayer: "Lord, what have You gotten me into?" We look around and see more villains than heroes. The odds are stacked against us. We all feel like that from time to time, wishing God would navigate us through still waters and paved paths, but more likely, you're seen a few crooked roads, high winds, and one-eyed pirates. Life seems cruel, random, and accidental when we forget that it's all a part of a plan that's bigger than us all. Matthew pointed this out through the words of Micah: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah" (v. 6). He's reminding us as he wrote that we can be in the eye of a hurricane and in the center of God's will at the same time.

This story also shows us what it's like to completely miss God. Herod was a politician not a theologian, so he called all the chief priests and scribe to find where the prophesied King was to be born. They knew the answer from the prophet. It was Bethlehem. It's fascinating to realize that these teachers and theologians knew so much Scripture and yet they didn't take the first step toward Bethlehem.

This was their moment. They stuffed their heads with knowledge but had not a hint of worship. These are the kinds of people Paul wrote about in 2 Timothy 3:5, "Holding to the form of godliness but denying its power." These types of scribes and religious people aren't extinct. Many religious people spend an inordinate amount of time debating over theology and prophecies, but they don't give one iota about actually pursuing God, even if Jesus was just a few miles down the road.

## The Prophets Foretold Him //

Matthew 2:7-8,16-18

There was a shadow mission at work. Consumed by jealousy and a lust for power, Herod wanted to snuff out the threat posed by



### DIGGING DEEPER FRANKINCENSE

Frankincense comes from a shrub or a small tree that can be found growing near the Red Sea. Frankincense was used in a variety of ways in the ancient world. Its aromatic smell made it useful in cosmetics and perfumes. It was also useful for medicinal purposes. In the Old Testament, frankincense can be found as part of worship. In Exodus 30:34-36, the Lord gives Moses instructions to "prepare expertly blended incense" by combining a specific list of fragrant spices that includes pure frankincense. This blend was to be ground into fine powder and placed in front of the testimony in the tent of meeting. It prepared the place that the Lord would meet with Moses. This incense was special, sacred. It was positioned in the "most holy place of the tabernacle." Anyone trying to duplicate it would be "cut off his people."

**What is Frankincense and how was it used in the Old Testament?**

a toddler named Jesus. In this story we see that everyone had a choice to make regarding worship.

Herod worshiped at the altar of self. His world orbited around his overblown ego and narcissism. Herod is an ancient figure of power in the hands of tyrants. I'd rather skip this story. There's nothing good in all the unspeakable, gratuitous violence other than a reminder that the enemy of Christ is real. And the enemy of the innocents remains on this Earth. It is the spirit of Herod that stands opposing the Spirit of God.

- The spirit of Herod seeks to destroy anyone it feels threatened by.
- The spirit of Herod gladly murders children for personal gain.
- The spirit of Herod believes he is not culpable as long as the sword is not actually in his hand.
- The spirit of Herod tells lies to unsuspecting bystanders in the hopes they will do his work.
- The spirit of Herod will never be satisfied because his stomach is never too full for violence.

The biblical text leaves no doubt about who Herod's king was. It was himself. He would stop at nothing to secure his own authority. He gave the order for his henchmen to kill every boy under the age of two in Bethlehem. His brutal rule showed no mercy. This type of injustice finds its place in the long, tragic history of suffering among God's people. It continues even to this day as conflict rages throughout the Middle East.

People who place themselves as the ultimate dictator over their own lives and the lives of others inflict a dangerous blow to everyone around them. We must identify the spirit of Herod when it stealthily creeps into our own lives. Certainly, we'd never reach the heights of violence that Herod reached, but the tools are embedded in our flesh. That's why Paul warned the Ephesians, "Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ" (Eph. 4:31-32).



## WHERE DO YOU SEE HEROD-LIKE BELIEF AND ACTION IN OUR CULTURE TODAY?

This leads to a more personal question for us. Why suffering? Why evil? We must look at the broad arc of God's story. On the eve of Jesus's own moment of savage persecution, Jesus comforted His disciples with these words: "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world" (John 16:33).

## Our Eyes Behold Him //

### Matthew 2:9-11

Like the Magi, we also see the seekers who are watching, waiting, and searching for God. They may have come from different faith backgrounds, but when they catch a glimpse of the Messiah, they lavish the Lord with radical worship and sacrificial giving. The road for them may have been arduous, but they will tell you that it's worth every mile.

Matthew keeps a simple registry of the gifts they showered on Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. Each had symbolic connotations:

- **Gold:** A symbol of royalty. May we never forget that Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords.
- **Frankincense:** A valuable incense used for worship in the temple. We can celebrate that

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Jesus is the cornerstone of an incorruptible temple not made by hands, worthy of worship.

- **Myrrh:** An expensive perfume for embalming and a disinfectant. May we remember the sacrifice of Jesus that cleansed us from the stain and stench of our sin.

As believers, our worship is a gift to God. In our private and corporate times of worship we offer the gift of our lives. Paul urged us to give up our lives as an act of worship that is holy and acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1). This is what worship entails, but very few are willing to do that. They offer part but not all.

### HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN GIFTS AND WORSHIP?

Then there are those who don't even pretend to worship God. They hang out next to the cliffs of rage, rebellion, and disbelief. They don't believe in mystery, divinity, and miracles. They are stuck in the ever-shrinking confines of natural law, vowing to thumb their noses at the glory that lies around every corner and in every cranny of the earth.

### DID YOU KNOW?

The term, *King of the Jews*, is used in Old Testament prophetic writing. In this week's reading, Matthew 2:2, the wise men ask for the one "who has been born king of the Jews." As Jesus faces crucifixion, the term is used to mock Jesus. As Jesus is beaten, the soldiers taunted Him saying, "Hail, king of the Jews" as they slapped his face and placed a crown of thorns on his head (John 19:2). In John 19:15, the chief priests say, "We have no king but Caesar!" But turn to Revelation 19:16, "And he has a name written on his robe and on his thigh: King of Kings and Lord of Lords." Do not get discouraged when people reject Jesus as King. Remember that He is the King of King and the Lord of Lords. He will have the final say.

**Biblical Truth:** One day, everyone will bow and confess that Jesus is Lord.

### How has the term "King of the Jews" been used in Scripture?

## LIVE IT

### Are you willing to trust God's providence in the middle of a violent, tyrannical world?

Each of us must decide who we will be in the story of worship. Some have no intention to go an inch out of their way to worship. Like the scribes, they know all the right answers but are content to stay rather than go. Others, like Herod, will pretend to worship while their hearts are filled with violence and evil. And then there are those who relentlessly pursue the glory of God. How do we keep our focus on God?

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- **Pray:** Our world is broken. We read it in our news feeds and see it on the internet. Spend time this week praying for those who are suffering under the rule of tyrants.
- **Prioritize:** As the new year approaches, spend some time prioritizing how you will spend your time and money so that you can best worship God in every area of your life.
- **Act:** Begin a gospel conversation with an unbeliever. Ask if you can tell your story of how Jesus changed your life and why you worship Him as Savior.



# DAILY READINGS

## 1. WORTHY OF WORSHIP // PHILIPPIANS 2:10-11

The reality of it can be difficult to comprehend, but Jesus really did take on a human body and a human nature. He became a man in submission to the will of God, and Jesus became subject to space, time, and many other human limitations. Even so, He did not stop being God. He had a divine nature just like God. This means that Jesus had all the divine attributes that make God who He is. While on earth these attributes were reflected in His life and ministry. He created life by raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44). This is only one example of Jesus's divine nature recorded in the Bible. Because of His divinity, He indeed is worthy of worship.

**Jesus is the exact replica of God and His glory. He is worthy to be worshipped.**

## 2. READY FOR WORSHIP // ECCLESIASTES 5:1

There is nothing magical about a church building. Its walls and furnishings are made of wood, stone, and paint. The difference is the people who come through its doors. Christians are the ones who bring the sacredness into the church because we have been indwelt by the Spirit. But sometimes our hearts are not in it. We don't go to church to worship the Lord. Rather we go out of habit. Solomon said, "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God." He advised that we dishonor God when we don't ready our hearts for worship. Before worship we should clear our minds of all worldliness and focus on the One who deserves honor and praise. The house of God is a cherished place where saints meet to honor God.

**Let's prepare our hearts to worship Him.**

## 3. PRAISE THE LORD // HEBREWS 13:15

We live in a competitive culture—sports teams vying for championships, people racing to win prizes on TV shows, and all types of stars hoping for that annual performance award. Many people who receive these honors and praises are made proud. But in the Christian world, praise has a different purpose. Yes,

it is associated with the events that take place in our worship services. But the praise we do should flow from a thankful heart, and it should be focused not on ourselves and our accomplishments but toward our God who deserves it. There is no one equal to God, so He has no competition. Only He is great and worthy to be praised and adored.

**God is good and worthy to be praised. Let's just praise the Lord.**

## 4. A HOME IN GLORY // JOHN 14:2

Biltmore House has been noted to be the largest house in America. It is a 250-room castle in North Carolina built by George Vanderbilt for his personal pleasure. Vanderbilt acquired many fine objects from other countries for his home. Because of its magnificence, people from around the world visited the home to get a glimpse at its beauty. But Jesus spoke of a much better home. He said, "My Father's house has many rooms." Jesus tells us confidently what our home in heaven will be like. He knows because He is the architect. We don't know what our home in glory looks like visually, but we know it is a house that Jesus's love built.

**There is no place on earth that can compare to what Jesus has in store for those He loves.**

## 5. IN GOD'S TIME // 2 PETER 3:8-9

Amid the chaos and confusion of our world, there is one bright note. God is in control. His sovereign hand is working out His plan for eternity. The plan of God includes the return of Christ. Jesus is coming, and He is coming soon. This knowledge gives us hope when darkness surrounds us. We may want Jesus to return now, but God is not on our timetable. Before Jesus returns, God wants as many to come to Christ as possible. This reveals the infinite love that is in the heart of God. This also reveals the fate that awaits those who are not saved. It won't be pleasant. The truth is God will keep His promise, and He will send Jesus in His time.

**God may not send Jesus when we want Him too, but He will send Jesus right on time.**