



# *The King's Ransom*

Matthew 20:28

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Text

Matthew 2:1-12

Topic

The magi from the East follow an unusual star to find  
He who was born the King of the Jews

Title

*"Celestial Light & Magi"*

## Introduction

I often hear Christians refer to worship as a lifestyle rather than an activity. It's a popular way of trying to heighten our awareness that God is worthy of worship 24/7.

What does lifestyle worship look like? Perhaps our text in Matthew can show us.

The wise men we are introduced to, the famous magi of the Christmas nativity, say that they've come to worship and, once they find Jesus, they fall before Him and do just that.

After we see all that they sacrificed and endured, I think we will say that they definitely are an example of lifestyle worship.

The magi are not the only worshippers in this text. I would submit to you that the chief priests and scribes also practiced a lifestyle of worship.

- The scribes studied the Word of God full time and interpreted it to the people.
- The priests made sacrifices in the Temple for themselves and for the people.
- All of them were busy trying to keep the Law of Moses.

Yet, for all their worship, when the announcement was made to them that their King was born, they made no effort to discover Him.

For the Jews, worship had become a *pastime*. It was a huge part of their lives, but only as a religion as they went through the motions.

For the magi, worship was a *pursuit*. They relentlessly pursued God the way a person in love pursues his or her loved one.

With these two examples in mind, I'll organize my thoughts around two questions: #1 Is Worship Your Religious Pastime?, or #2 Is Worship Your Romantic Pursuit?

## #1 Is Worship Your Religious Pastime?

(v1-8)

Mostly in Great Britain, but also around the world, there is mad interest in the pregnancy of Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge and wife of Prince William. She's due in July.

Around 5 or 6BC the King of kings was born. The date of His birth is suggested by the fact that we know King Herod will order the slaughter of all male children two years and under but he himself died in 4BC.

Apart from a few shepherds out in the fields tending their flocks, there was little interest in Jesus' birth among His own people.

There was a group of foreigners, however, who were captivated by His birth. They were fanatic about it, about Him, and pulled-out all the stops to pursue Him so they could worship Him.

They were the magi.

Mat 2:1 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,

Mat 2:2 saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

We don't really know very much about these "wise men from the East." Our Christmas tradition, that there were three of them, is based entirely upon the fact they brought three gifts. One eastern tradition says that there were twelve of them. We have no real information on how many of them there were.

Occasionally you will read their names. This is the only place in the Bible we see them, and their names are not given, so any attempt to name them is a fiction.

The translation "wise men" comes from the word *magi*. It was used of a priestly class of advisors in various cultures. Their technique was to pay particular attention to the stars. They gained an international reputation for astronomy and astrology.

Their use of astrology caused derivatives of the term *magi* to be applied to the occult in general and led to the English term *magic*.

They were not magicians in the sense we use the word today. They were advisors to kings and nobles, interpreters of the celestial heavens.

We can't be sure where in the East they came from. Babylon is a good guess since we read of magi being there in the Book of Daniel. But they could have come from any number of countries in the East.

We can speculate about how they knew about the Jewish Messiah.

- We know that Daniel, when he was a captive in Babylon, was put in charge of the magi. We can safely assume that the magi of Babylon were well-versed in all things Jewish, especially about the coming of the Messiah.
- Other groups of dispersed Jews throughout the East would have made the coming of their Messiah known.

There was a familiar prophecy in the Book of Numbers that said, "there shall come a **star** out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (24:17).

While modern scholars argue this may not be referring to the "star" that guided the magi to Jesus, if they had heard this prophecy from Daniel or other Jews of the dispersion, they would certainly have interpreted it that way. They would have been looking for a celestial sign that accompanied the birth of the One who would wield the scepter in Israel as king.

Daniel also received and undoubtedly shared the prophecy of the "seventy weeks," which revealed that the Messiah would come as Prince of Israel 483 years after the Persian emperor gave the commandment to the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem (Daniel 9:24,25).

It would easily be possible for the magi, as the promised date came near, to put these prophecies together and be watching for the "star" to appear.

We will return to the magi in a moment. Right now we want to look at the other worshippers in this story, the Jews.

**Mat 2:3** When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Herod wasn't a Jew. He was a descendant of Esau, and was thus an Edomite, sometimes called an Idumean. His ethnicity helps us to understand why he was "troubled." The appearance of an Israelite in the true line of the kings, claiming the throne, could really upset the fragile political climate.

The the various nations east of Judaea, e.g., Persia, Babylonia and Assyria, were not part of the Roman empire at all, but rather part of the large and powerful Parthian (Persian) empire, which was a serious rival to Rome and had defeated several attempts by the Roman legions (including one led by Herod himself, before he became king) to subjugate her. There is reason to believe that, at this time, the Parthians were actually threatening Rome along the nearby boundaries of the Roman empire.

The rest of Jerusalem would be "troubled" for at least two reasons:

1. First, if my geopolitics are correct, they could think that these magi might be spies coming in advance of a Parthian invasion.
2. Second, it's been said that "all Jerusalem" was troubled because Herod was a monster who would murder just about anyone. There was no telling what he might do. It was a valid fear. We'll see later in this chapter Herod order the slaughter of all the children under two years of age.

Since the theme of these verses is worship, and since we are comparing lifestyles of worship, I'd suggest something further. The scribes and the priests for sure, but also most of the Jewish people, had settled in to their lives as a subjugated people who were content to think that some day their Prince would come.

Hearing that He might actually be on the scene was upsetting to the daily routine. I mean, if you were expecting a military Messiah who would overthrow Roman rule, couldn't things get pretty hairy?

We in the church expect Jesus to return any moment to resurrect and rapture the church. Or do we? Are there things that we yet want to do or experience that would be interrupted by His coming for us to the point we feel troubled? Have we settled in to a lifestyle that only gives lip service to His coming while we plan for a long, prosperous stay on the earth only seldom interrupted by serving Him when we find it most convenient?

Mat 2:4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

These were men who you would describe as worshippers, at least in their activities.

- They observed the Law, they observed the Sabbath, they observed the feasts.
- They brought their sacrifices to the Temple.
- They tithed and they gave beyond the tithe.

On top of all that, they knew the Word of God.

The comparison we could draw is that a Christian can attend church, serve in the church, give to the work of the ministry, and study the Word of God, but still be more like these guys than like the magi.

This is not the lifestyle worship you want to emulate. This is religion and is lacking in relationship.

Mat 2:5 So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

Mat 2:6 'BUT YOU, BETHLEHEM, IN THE LAND OF JUDAH, ARE NOT THE LEAST AMONG THE RULERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.' "

The answer they gave was a combination of Micah 5:2 and Second Samuel 5:2. They all knew the answer - without even Googling it.

It's clear from the rest of the story that they did not join the magi in their pursuit. Whether from fear of Herod or simply from apathy, they answered the question then went back to their daily routines. They may even have been a little proud of themselves - knowing the Scriptures so well.

These magi were announcing that the King of the Jews, the promised and prophesied Messiah, had been born. There's a hint in the story they were puzzled as to why no one in Jerusalem seemed to know about it or, once they did, care about it.

Herod took their claim seriously; deadly seriously.

Mat 2:7 Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared.

Mat 2:8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

Herod is an important Bible character, and we will talk about him more when he orders the slaughter.



For our thematic purposes today he represents the nonbeliever at his best, or you might say worst: Trying to rid himself or herself of God in order to gain the world but in the process lose their soul.

The Jews had a lifestyle of worship but it fell short because it was merely religion. They went through the motions. There was no passion for God, certainly no pursuit of God.

Take a birds eye view of your lifestyle. Make sure you don't look like these guys.

## #2 Is Worship Your Romantic Pursuit?

(v9-12)

Back now to the magi. Knowing the time they were looking for the sign of the "star."

There is endless speculation surrounding the star. One thing to notice is that they never said it led them. They saw it, recognized it as the sign, and headed to Jerusalem, perhaps assuming the King of the Jews would be born in the spiritual heart of Israel.

Was it a real star? A convergence of planets? A comet? I have come to think of it as a miraculous phenomena rather than a natural event like a comet or an alignment of planets or any such thing.

Mostly for this reason: At the end of their journey it led the magi to a particular house in Bethlehem, apparently hanging low right above it.

The star may have been the *shekinah* of God. In the Old Testament you read of God's *shekinah* leading the children of Israel through the wilderness as a visible pillar of fire or as a cloud.

Whatever it was, these guys had been anticipating it. They were looking for it, for a sign.

Remember Carly Simon's song, *Anticipation?* The song relates Simon's state of mind as she waits to go on a date with Cat Stevens. Too bad for her Cat Stevens became Yusuf Islam when he converted to Islam in 1977.

Still, anticipation is a solid romantic activity. We ought to be anticipating the any-moment return of Jesus, and it should affect our lifestyles.

Wherever these magi came from it was at least a thousand miles away. During Bible times, people could travel on foot up to 15 miles a day. Caravans led by donkeys could travel about 20 miles a day. Camel caravans, fully loaded, could cover 18 to 20 miles in a day. A person riding a fast camel could travel an astonishing 70 miles a day - but I don't know how many consecutive days a camel could do that.

They may have been traveling on horseback. The idea they came on camels is our own tradition; horses were more common in those days, especially in the East.

These guys travelled at least a month, if not two, at a time when travel was difficult and dangerous. They literally took their lives in their hands.

Or I guess we could say they put their lives in God's hands.

Compare them to the Jews who wouldn't travel a safe, well-used, maintained road when it was a mere six miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

Christian recording artist and evangelist Keith Green had a line in one of his songs reminiscent of this: "Jesus rose from the dead, and you, you can't even get out of bed."

Mat 2:9 When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.

Contrary to our tradition, the magi did not arrive on the night Jesus was born. He was already a "young child" when they presented their gifts. He was as old as two because that's the oldest age that Herod estimates He could be when he orders the slaughter of all the male children.

These guys implicitly believed God's Word. They were told that God's Word said the King would be born in Bethlehem, so to Bethlehem they went.

How would they find the house or the child? **We** know, but they didn't. They went anyway, believing God would show them the next step when they got there.

Mat 2:10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

The way this reads seems to infer that this "star" wasn't visible the whole time. But now it was and it was over a particular house in Bethlehem.

One secret to a lifestyle of worship is to act upon what you know rather than wait for everything to be revealed. The mystery heightens the romance for those in love with each other.

Mat 2:11 And when they had 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 gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The magi "fell down and worshipped." They did this to a toddler, in a small house, in an obscure town, among foreigners who were not themselves acknowledging that their king had been born. Jesus hadn't accomplished anything.

Jesus has done a whole lot since then; but He has yet to finish the redemption of creation and, in the mean time, we find ourselves worshippers of someone others think of as powerless to stop the evil in the world. Or, worse, as responsible for the evil.

A lifestyle of worship looks beyond circumstances to the coming of The Lord to rule as King. The magi believed past the toddler. We believe past the resurrection and ascension of Jesus to His return.

Many different theories of the meaning and symbolism of the gifts have been suggested. While gold is fairly obviously explained, frankincense, and particularly myrrh, are much more obscure. The theories generally break down into two groups:

1. All three gifts are ordinary offerings and gifts given to a king: Myrrh being commonly used as an anointing oil, frankincense as a perfume, and gold as a valuable.
2. The three gifts had a spiritual meaning: gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense (an incense) as a symbol of deity, and myrrh (an embalming oil) as a symbol of death.

Whatever else they symbolized, they were both *thoughtful* and *costly*.

The magi put some real thought into their gifts. Are you a thoughtful giver? Some of us are better at being thoughtful than others. I'm reminded of the scene in *Father of the Bride* where the groom gives his fiancé a blender. She sees it as thoughtless at best, demeaning at worst, and it almost breaks them up.

God needs nothing from us, but He allows us the romance of giving. But our gifts must be thoughtful, from the heart, if we are to practice lifestyle worship.

And costly. I know some of you will object to this, but love isn't about being practical. It's about being generous and giving costly, extravagant gifts.

We should really stop and read the famous Christmas story, *The Gift of the Magi*, by O. Henry. We don't have time so I'll just summarize it for you.

[Spoiler alert]

Della and Jim Young, the main characters, are a newly married couple with very little money. Jim has suffered a thirty-percent pay cut and the two must scrimp for everything.

On the day before Christmas Della counts the money she has painstakingly saved for months. She is dismayed to find she has less than two dollars, hardly enough to buy anything at all. After a good long cry Della determines to find a way to buy Jim the present he deserves.

Jim and Della have two possessions of which they are both proud. One is Jim's gold watch which has been handed down from his grandfather. The other is Della's long hair, lustrous, shining, and falling past her knees. Before she can lose her nerve, Della races out of their apartment to a wigmaker to whom she sells her hair for twenty dollars. With the money in her hand Della goes to the stores trying to find something worthy of Jim. At last she finds a beautiful fob for Jim's prize watch.

Meanwhile and unknown to Della, Jim has sold his beautiful gold watch to buy Della her gift. Her gift is a set of beautiful combs for her lovely hair.

The story does a good job of putting costly gifts into perspective. It wasn't the watch fob, or the combs, that were the gifts. It was the surrender of that which was dearest to each in order to give to the other. In the end they both received the experience of a costly gift.

In the Gospel's a woman will break a costly alabaster jar of expensive perfume on Jesus's feet (Mark 13). The disciples rebuke her, saying it could have been sold for a years wages to support the poor.

Jesus received it as an act of worship - of costly, extravagant worship.

Mat 2:12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

Remember - they were only six miles away. Herod wasn't a guy you wanted to cross. These magi were not ninja's or Jedi knights. There's no indication they travelled with security. God would have to be their refuge and their shield once Herod understood they were not coming back.

They were totally on their own, a thousand miles from home, standing out like sore thumbs, and disobeying the local authority.

Off they went "another way," undoubtedly a longer, more arduous way, home.

A.W. Tozer once said, "Many Christians are satisfied with their destination, but they neglect the journey."

In the end, maybe the thing we get most from the magi is that they did not neglect the journey. They left the comforts of home, even country, to pursue God, taking one step of faith at a time. They gave - of their time, their talents, and their treasures - sacrificially and extravagantly. Encountering Jesus wasn't the end of the road; it put them at greater risk than ever. But I'm certain they were not disappointed.

In your heart of hearts, after all is said and done, you want to be like them, do you not?

Then don't neglect the journey. Keep romance alive in your relationship with Jesus.

