

# The Worshipped King

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Preacher: Thomas Davis

[ 0 : 00 ] Today we are continuing our short series, The King of Christmas. And our title this morning is The Worshipped King, and we're going to read again from the passage in Matthew that Abbey read, verses 9 to 11.

After listening to the king, they went in 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.

This is the passage that gives us the account of the wise men who came from the east in order to find Jesus. These men were also known as Magi, and they were usually some sort of government officials who performed various tasks in the ancient Middle East.

So they interpreted dreams, they were sometimes religious priests, they maybe functioned as physicians, and here, as is the case, they engaged in some kind of study of the stars, that may have been some sort of astrology.

[ 1 : 20 ] Back in the Old Testament, Daniel was made chief of the Magi in Babylon. And I sometimes think that a present-day equivalent would maybe be the kind of expert advisers that the government tends to use, so people like Jason Leitch or Chris Whitty and Jonathan Van Tam.

It's probably important just to note that we don't actually know how many there were, and they would have probably arrived shortly before Jesus' second birthday, rather than when he was a newborn baby.

There's so much that we could look at in these verses. Today, I want us to just focus on three key words that we find in verses 10 and 11.

Rejoiced, worshiped, and offered. The wise men rejoiced when they found Jesus.

They worshiped when they recognized Him, and they offered Him something when they gave their gifts. And the reason I want to think about these is because I think that they are pointing us to three of the deepest longings that we have as humans.

[ 2 : 37 ] And as I hope we'll see, these longings are the driving force behind many of the things that we see filling our news every day. They are the longing for joy, the longing for something to worship, and the longing to have something to offer.

So let's look at these three words and these three longings in turn. So first of all, rejoiced. Verses 9 to 10 describe how the wise men were led by the star to the place where Jesus was, and when they found Him, they were bursting with joy.

And no wonder, because this was the culmination of a very long physical journey of many miles, but it was also the culmination of a long intellectual journey.

These men clearly knew something of the Scriptures because they knew that a king was going to be born to the Jews. And it's highly likely that that knowledge would have come from the influence of people like Daniel or Nehemiah and other Old Testament believers who had served in the Babylonian and Persian governments.

That knowledge has come down to these wise men, and coupled to that is that the fact that they've seen this star and they've discerned that it meant something, and as a result they've gone out looking for a destination that they thought that the star was pointing them towards.

[ 4 : 09 ] And in doing so, these wise men are a great example of people who've recognized the two great ways in which God reveals Himself through the general revelation of the creation and through the special revelation of the Scriptures.

The key thing that I want us to notice is that Matthew 2 is describing a crucial turning point in the experience of the wise men.

They go from looking to rejoicing. Verse 10 describes that beautifully. We have that pivotal moment where the weariness and burden of searching is replaced by the overwhelming joy of finding.

And I'm sure, I'm certain that that's something that we can all relate to because this is pointing us towards one of the deepest cravings that we have as humans.

The longing for joy. And that longing for joy drives us to search, and our search can take us to all sorts of different places. So it takes us to university, to the workplace, to politics, to religions, to relationships, to hobbies, to TV, to parties.

[ 5 : 29 ] In other words, to all the stuff that fills our news. We all go to these places to find that moment when searching turns into rejoicing.

And often we do find that moment, the moment when our studying finally culminates in a degree, or when our applications finally lead to a job, or when our campaigning finally brings an election victory, when our research finally brings a vaccine.

Humanity craves that moment in our history when searching becomes rejoicing. And of course that searching is what brings some of history's greatest triumphs.

But at the same time, it also proves something about humanity that so often we want to hide. It proves that something's wrong with us.

Our inescapable longing for joy is there not because we're perfect and whole, but because we're broken, and there's something missing.

[ 6 : 46 ] Now, to reinforce that, I'm going to say something that is possibly going to sound very controversial, and I'm almost hesitant saying it. This is reminding us that we should be thankful for human misery.

Now, that sounds awful, and I absolutely do not mean for a moment that we should take pleasure in anyone else's suffering. That's something that we should never, ever be glad about.

What I mean is that when we see the brokenness and pain all around us, thank God that no one looks at that and thinks, oh, this is great.

And there's a really powerful example of that for this weekend. The fact that we are all gutted about another lockdown and all the restrictions that that's going to be, that's all incredibly hard.

But it's hard because we all know that community and togetherness really do matter. We should always be thankful that our misery and our frustration shows us that we know something is wrong, because the world would be a desperately wicked place if sorrow and brokenness produced nothing but indifference.

[ 8 : 05 ] Thankfully, thank God we are not like that. And it's proved by the fact that all of us search for joy.

But the difficulty that we all face is that even though we do experience these moments where looking turns to finding, where searching turns to rejoicing, these moments never last long enough.

And we can pick any item from the news to show that. So when you go into the news, either on a website or when you open a newspaper, what's the first thing that you go to look for?

I'll reveal probably too much about myself when I say that the first thing I go to look for in the news is football. And I always go and check what's happening with the football news.

So in England, in the English Premier League, I support Arsenal. The reason for that is my parents long ago lived in London.

[ 9 : 11 ] My elder brother was born near Highbury, so that was Arsenal's football stadium. So he supported Arsenal. And I went for that classic life choice strategy of copying your big brother.

And so as a result, I support Arsenal and 16 odd years ago, Arsenal won the league without losing a game known as the Invincibles. And that was in a moment, a moment of great joy.

Today, Arsenal are 15th and are doing rubbish. And the joy of that title winning moment all those years ago does very little to help.

And it doesn't even need to be all that long ago. I don't know if anyone here supports Liverpool. Just six months ago or less, Liverpool won their first title in 30 years.

Does that mean that they're not searching for joy again this season? Not at all. And it's the same in every other area of life, same in medicine. So 100 years ago, a vaccine for tuberculosis was discovered.

[10:16] That was the disease that accounted for nearly a quarter of all deaths in the 1800s. That must have been a moment of incredible joy when that vaccine was discovered. But does the joy of that moment 100 years ago mean that we stop searching now for a COVID vaccine?

Not at all. It's the same in politics. I'm sure many people rejoiced when the SNP won the last Scottish election. Not everyone would have, but many people would have. But does that mean that they're not bothered about winning this time?

Of course not. In all these areas, the moment of joy never lasts long enough. And all too soon it's just replaced with a new search.

And I guess that raises the key question. Is there a moment of joy great enough so that the searching really stops?

And it's easy to think, well, the answer to that is probably no, because in life everything fades eventually. Christianity's answer to that question is yes.

[11:27] And this is it. The coming of Jesus Christ is the single moment in history that has changed everything.

There has been a crucial historical shift. The waiting has stopped. The searching is over. Our Savior has actually come. And that's why Christianity is just unique.

And it's why Christianity is so amazing, because every other search for joy is looking forward for something. So some people are looking forward for Brexit.

Others may be looking forward for independence. Others looking forward for that job or for that husband or wife or for that house. Everybody's looking forward for something.

Christianity is saying that in our search for joy, we need to look back at something. We look back and see that Jesus has come, that he was born, that he did die, and he did rise again.

[12:33] It has all actually happened and an irreversible historical shift has taken place in the history of the world. And when we see that for ourselves and when we put our trust in Jesus, that irreversible change happens in us too.

Now, I can't fully describe that, but I can 100% testify to that. I can't say the exact moment when I became a Christian, very few people can.

And I can't say that I've never had any problems since, but I can absolutely say to you that Jesus Christ has changed my life in a way that has meant that I never have to search again.

And that is because trusting in Jesus brings a peace and a security and a settledness to life that changes everything. The searching stops and irreversible change has happened and it is so good. In Jesus, searching is turned to rejoicing. Our second word is worshipped.

[13:57] Verse 11 gives a very important description of what happens next. It says that the wise men saw the child and they fell down and worshipped him. The men, the wise men, worshipped Jesus when they recognized him.

And in doing so, they recognized his authority. They were searching for a king and when they found him, they bowed down knowing that even though he was only a child, he was born to be ruler.

And they also recognized his worth. And that's really what lies at the heart of the whole concept of worship, recognizing that we are standing before something whose worth is worthy of our worship.

And these wise men knew that even though Jesus was before them as a child, he was also before them as something far bigger, something that the whole Bible and the whole of creation was pointing towards.

And all of that is reminding us that to worship something is to recognize its worth and to say, I will bow before this because it matters more than me.

[15:14] And understood in those terms, we realize that worship is a constant activity of humans. And that's because humanity longs to find something to worship.

That's why all around us, people are bowing down to things and acknowledging that that thing, which is the object of their worship, is bigger than them and matters more than them.

And that longing to worship is virtually inescapable. The only way to avoid it is to either say that worth doesn't exist, but I'm not sure any living human being actually thinks that. Or it is to make ourselves the object of worship. And that's just a hideous display of self-centeredness that usually leads to the destruction of others.

And if you read the rest of Matthew chapter 2, you'll see Herod as a tragic example of that. The prevailing human behavior is to find something to worship.

Something that's more important than us to which we will bow. And usually, it's the stuff that we see in the news.

[16:27] So football is definitely another example of that. So too is wealth, ideologies, success. We can pick two examples in a little bit more detail. One is animals.

So it's crucial that we value the animal kingdom, but many people take it to the point where certain animals, rarely all animals, often certain animals are raised to such a level that we bow before them and venerate them as though they were of more worth than us.

I think that the archbishop of that religion is the whale, which isn't the poor whale's fault. But I'm always struck by the fact that in the Western world, we will drop everything to save a stranded whale.

And of course, at one level, that is brilliant. I love whales. They're one of my favorite animals. But why is it that a community will rush to the shore to crowd around a dying whale when nobody even blinks, when a homeless man or woman lies washed up on the pavement?

The second example is the arts. Again, the arts are to be deeply valued. That's the great realm where humanity displays its God-given creativity. But we're so quick to pick a singer or an author or a celebrity and think that they matter more than us.

[18:01] And it goes to the point where if they like something, we like it. If they believe something, we'll believe it. If they oppose something, we'll oppose it. If they wear certain clothes, we'll start waiting them. And today we reach the point where we have certain celebrities who are known as influencers.

And I think that's maybe a little bit of a worrying term because you can only be an influencer if you have people under your influence. In other words, if you have people bowing down to what you suggest.

Now, in all those examples that I've given, we have to remember that some of that, a lot of that can be good. Much of it is probably harmless, but all of it shows that humanity longs for something to worship.

And of course, it raises the question, what do you worship? Or maybe it's better to ask, what do you feel unworthy of? What do you feel is bigger than you?

A celebrity, a job title, an ideology, a campaign, an achievement, a degree? And you have to ask yourself, are you really unworthy of that?

[19:35] And our instinctive answer can often be yes. We can very quickly feel that we are unworthy of someone or something. The Bible's answer to that question is no.

So while yes, the Bible makes it clear that humanity is broken, at the same time, the Bible never, ever allows you to think that as a human being, you are worthless.

And this is where I think it's important for us to recognize and to remember that the biblical worldview is based around what we could call a hierarchy of worth.

I've just made up that term, but I hope it explains what I mean. At the top is God. God is the creator, sustainer, and ruler of all.

And he, of course, is at the top of the hierarchy of worth. At the bottom is creation. So nature, science, arts, wealth, achievements, sport, politics, all the stuff that you can see there on the screen.

[20:48] All of it is still worth something, but it is in third place. In the middle is humanity. Lower than God, because he alone is God, but definitely, definitely higher than everything else.

Humanity is the crown of God's creation. We stand above everything else in a category of our own, only below only God.

And this is where we need to remember that the wise men who worship Jesus were wise men.

Now, what I mean by that is the fact that they were competent intellectually.

I'm saying that because if anyone is going to worship anything that's below them in that hierarchy of worth, in other words, if you're going to worship something that's in the bottom layer, the only way you can do that is if you stop being wise and instead become a fool.

And that's because saying that you are unworthy of anything below you is actually crazy. It's crazy to say that a football team matters more than you, or that a political victory matters more than you, or that a celebrity matters more than you.

[22:25] And the only way we can worship these things is by becoming idiots. The wise men were wise because they recognized that in front of them was the only thing in existence that is actually

above them.

And that is why the only thing that the Bible ever expects you to worship is the Creator God who is infinite, absolute, and supreme.

He is the only thing above you. And that's why our worship should only ever be directed upwards in that hierarchy. And to worship anything else is to worship something that is totally beneath you.

And it's reminding us that humanity on the one hand wants to ignore the fact that we're broken, but on the other hand humanity simultaneously completely fails to recognize how precious and important we are.

And it is for this reason that being a Christian is so intellectually satisfying because it shows us an object of worship that does not require us to be an idiot.

[ 23 : 56 ] Because you only have to stop and think for 10 seconds that bowing in worship to a political leader or a job title or a fashion craze is totally bonkers.

But if we recognize who God is, that He is our Creator, that He's the absolute of all reality, that He's the origin of all energy and power, that He's the designer of all order and coherence, He's the foundation of all goodness and truth.

He is the judge of all that is evil and more than anything else, He is the eternal source and overflow of immeasurable love. If we recognize that, then we can fall on our knees and worship, and it makes perfect sense.

There is only one way to satisfy our longing for worship and to not be an idiot at the same time, and that is to worship the God who made us and who placed everything else beneath us.

He is the only object of worship who is actually worth it.

[ 25 : 17 ] But not only that, if our worship is directed in the right way, then we have a reason to care for everything else.

Recognizing and worshiping God as our Creator and our King means that we can look at everything in the world around us with deep thanksgiving and appreciation. We can look at every other human, every single human, and see the image of God in them.

We can look at nature and arts and leisure and sport and wealth and politics and science and all of these things, and instead of worshiping it, we worship the one who made all these things and who sustains them, and we see the value and the good that God has placed in all of them.

And this also explains why our misdirected worship causes so many problems, because if we direct our worship downwards in terms of this hierarchy and we choose something to worship, then we are instantly narrowing the sphere of what we regard as acceptable worship, and inevitably we start resenting, suspecting, or even hating those who've chosen something different down there to worship.

So for example, we might pick a certain political movement or individual as our object of worship.

And because we've made our selection, people who've made a different selection are a threat.

[ 26 : 56 ] And more widely we see it in things like race, where we make an idol of our race. People view other races as something to be despised. People view people with those of different ideologies as those who are to be silenced.

There was an example of this in the news just two days ago, where the MSP Andy Whiteman resigned from the Scottish Greens because he was basically, he felt that he was threatened by his party because he was going to vote in a way that didn't follow the party line.

And so he didn't fit anymore into that narrow category of what was acceptable, and for him he felt he had to step down.

And we see examples of that in so many ways. And all of that is because all these false gods that are below us are too small for all of us.

It is only when we look upwards to God, the maker of heaven and earth, it is only if we look up that we see an object of worship that is big enough for everyone.

[ 28 : 13 ] And in appreciating him, we cannot but appreciate everyone and everything that he has made. And that of course is why the two great commands of Christian living are what?

Love God and love one another. And when you look at that diagram, it actually becomes blatantly obvious that if you're looking up at God, you cannot simultaneously look down upon everyone else at the same time.

In Jesus, we find an object of worship that truly is worth it. Our last word is offered. So the wise men found Jesus and rejoiced.

They recognized Jesus and they worshiped. Thirdly, they offered him something when they gave their gifts to him. Now, I think this is amazing. Here you have the wise men. They followed the star of where the universe was pointing.

They followed the scriptures to the king that they were waiting for. When they find him, they recognize that he is bigger than they are. They fall down on their knees and worship him. This is the biggest moment of their lives.

[ 29 : 35 ] And you would think that at that moment, they would feel at their most insignificant as though they were nothing before him. And yet, despite the immensity of the one whom they are worshiping, they come to him with something to offer.

And these gifts are presented that honor this child's royal status and whether the wise men knew it or not, also pointed forward to Jesus's mission to offer himself in death as our savior.

These wise men are totally unworthy and yet they had something to offer. And yet again, this is pointing to one of our deepest cravings, the longing to have something to offer.

Often people will say that Western society in 2020 is totally consumerist, that we just want stuff. And we can see why people would say that.

But I think that the truth is our longing to receive stuff is actually quite superficial. I don't think it runs that deep because the longing that goes much deeper is not the longing to have something.

[ 30 : 49 ] It is the longing to be able to offer something. And that I think explains why when people are depressed, we don't tend to say, I'm depressed because I think I'm penniless.

We say, I'm depressed because I think I'm useless. As humans, we have a deep longing to offer something.

And that displays itself in all the things we keep mentioning. We want to offer something in support of an ideology. We want to offer something to help a campaign. We want to align ourselves with our team.

We want to cheer in front of our favorite singer. We want to come home to our family and for them to be proud. And all of that is good. It's good to look at the world around us and to think I've got something to offer.

But the amazing thing about being a Christian is that as you stand before God Almighty, the infinite Creator and sustainer of all, as you stand before Him, He looks at you and He says, you have got something to offer.

[ 32 : 07 ] And that's because God does not call a crowd of worshipers just to stand and admire Him, do His thing. He is calling a kingdom of workers through whom He's going to accomplish His purposes.

And that's an amazing reminder that if you are a Christian or if you become one, then it is a theological fact that you have something to offer. The useless Christian is a theological impossibility.

And that's because you are God's handiwork. He's made you as a human. He's made you a Christian if you are one and He will make you one if you aren't yet.

And having made you as a human and remade you as a Christian now, He will use you. And that makes tomorrow morning blooming exciting.

Because even though things are changing and even though lockdown is coming and even though we don't know what the next few weeks are going to bring, God looks at you and says, you've still got so much to offer.

[ 33 : 13 ] So go for it this week. Go into Monday and Tuesday and the rest of the week following Jesus, listening to Him, serving Him and displaying His goodness through your good works.

Because God is standing looking at you today saying, you have got something to offer. God accomplishes His purposes through people like you.

And so you can offer something to your family, to your colleagues, to your community. You can offer something that is of eternal value and which makes God Himself smile.

And I think that's an incredibly important thing to remember that I don't know about you, but so often I do stuff. You're doing stuff in life, you're trying to work, you're trying to get things done.

And you go to bed at night with a feeling that you just haven't done things particularly well and that you've made a mess of things and you haven't been able to accomplish everything that you wanted to do.

[ 34 : 26 ] And as a result, I think often we are going to bed frowning at what we've done or not done or failed to do. I think God is reminding us today and saying, while you are frowning, I am smiling.

Because I'm working in you and through you. You are mine and you have something to offer.

So the wise men rejoiced when they found Jesus. They worshiped when they recognized Jesus.

They offered Him something when they gave their gifts.

These correspond to our deepest longings, our longing for joy, our longing for something to worship, our longing to have something to offer. As I close, I want you to remember something incredibly important.

It is impossible to escape these longings, but it is incredibly easy to anesthetize them.

[ 35 : 32 ] So you can easily go to all the stuff that we see in the news and you can find things that will relieve these longings, but only temporarily. Anesthetic takes away pain.

It doesn't do anything to actually cure you. Jesus has not come to anesthetize these longings. He has come to totally satisfy them.

And He went all the way to the cross to do it. And so we close by coming back to the words that we started with.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfected of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself so that you may not grow weary or faint hearted.

[ 36 : 53 ] I don't know about you, but that's what I need to hear this week. Amen. Father, we thank You so much for Your Son, our Lord Jesus, the One who gives us joy that's indescribable, the One who is our object of worship and who is totally worth it, and the One in whom and through whom we have something to offer, and help us all to see these great truths.

And may we come to You to find our longings satisfied. Amen.