

“...they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.” Let this image play out in your imagination. Magi, wise men, presumably mature, learned scholars, respectable political advisers, overjoyed at the prospect of seeing a newborn baby. Maybe geeking out a little bit, or a lot.

It makes me wonder, when was the last time you rejoiced exceedingly with great joy? Can you remember? The Greek word for “great” in this verse is a word you know: Mega. Over the course of your life, what has given you mega-joy?

Any way you slice it, the account of the wise men is undeniably odd. It’s fascinating for that reason. Magi, probably from Babylon or Persia, are compelled to come visit one born King of the Jews, and they’ve come to worship. What they knew about Jewish culture and theology is unclear; it was something about the star that grabbed their attention and caused them to set out on this journey. There appears to have been astrological meaning to the star, setting up the idea that God worked through means that these non-Jews could understand, in order to invite them into worship of the true King. And the fact that it was all really happening, that the Star had signaled to them, and Herod took it seriously, and it was corroborated by Hebrew Scripture, and that the star guided the way to the precise location, filled them with mega-joy. Joy at the prospect of meeting the child who would be King. They had prepared so thoughtfully and so hopefully that they even brought gifts, tokens of respect, presented with humility and ecstatic joy.

How do you compare to the magi described in Matthew’s gospel? Meaning, does the thought of worshipping Jesus fill you with mega-joy? When I asked you to think of joyful things before, did ‘worshipping Jesus’ make your list? It’s amazing to me that these magi are so pumped up and excessively joyful about getting to meet the newborn King. I can think of times I’ve been exceedingly joyful: at sporting events, or family milestones, or beautiful locations, but about the opportunity to worship Jesus... it’s embarrassing to admit that it’s harder to come up with specific times when mega-joy was attached to it. Can you relate, or is it just me?

If you can relate, what’s going on with us? If we look again at the magi, we might find an answer. Their stated goal, spoken before none other than King Herod, was to locate and worship the newborn King of the Jews. They are successful in their accomplishing this goal. When the star goes before them and leads them to Jesus they have mega-joy, and they go in, bowing before the Child in a sign of reverence and giving the gifts they had brought. And then, they returned home. And here’s what I am drawn to, and I hope you are as well: there are no conditions attached to the worship of the Magi. In other words, Matthew does not say the joyful wise men arrive, bow before Jesus, offer their gifts, and then say, “All right, now, what are you going to do for us?” That would be conditional worship. There is nothing in Matthew’s record of the event capturing a wise man saying, “We’ve come all this way, at great expense, I might add, and brought these kingly gifts...now what can we expect in return?” You can look high and low, it’s not there. It was enough for them to be in the presence of Jesus, to elevate him above themselves (which is the point of bowing down before him), to honor him with gifts. They believed there was a greatness about Jesus that needed to be acknowledged, unconditionally. They were trailblazers for every non-Jewish person—their journey and worship a living demonstration that the door is open to all people to come and worship the King—an immediate fulfillment of old Simeon’s line, saying that Jesus was “a light to lighten the Gentiles.”

So back to our worship, and our joy. As I think about the example of the magi, I am confronted with the question, “Do I believe there is a greatness about Jesus that needs to be acknowledged unconditionally? Or do I approach Jesus with conditions?” And this gets deeply personal very quickly, it can be complicated, but it can also be quite clear, like, “I never thought of it like that before.” Could it be that we give Jesus conditional worship? If so, it’s no wonder that we lack mega-joy as we think about him. If I come to Jesus thinking, “I will serve you Jesus, as long as you let me live a comfortable lifestyle.” “I will worship you Jesus, if you will guarantee that my family will always be healthy and happy.” “I will honor you, Jesus, but don’t forget everything I have done for you”—I will not be able to worship Jesus joyfully. Whatever I put after the words, “as long as,” is what I’m really elevating. Career. Health. Safety. Success. Romance. Wealth. Conditional worship robs us of joy, because it is centered on things we cannot keep.

What’s truly mind-boggling is that the magi believed there was a greatness about Jesus that needed to be acknowledged unconditionally, and they knew far less about Jesus than we do. We have the advantage of eyewitness accounts about Jesus, reported in the four gospels, carefully crafted biographies of the King the wise men worshipped. We have numerous letters, written by those who had direct interaction with Jesus. We have a book of Revelation that proclaims Jesus’ ultimate victory over Satan and every evil power. We have more knowledge than the magi—but are we as wise as they?

We can be, if we examine the life of Jesus the King, and come to the conclusion that He indeed possesses a greatness that needs to be acknowledged unconditionally. You can come to that conclusion when it finally breaks through to you, why Jesus came and what he did. In obedience to His Father, and for the joy of obtaining you, Jesus came down from the perfection of heaven into this broken world. He did that to pay the penalty for our shameful self-centeredness, substituting himself for us, the scapegoat for sin, the sacrificial Lamb. Sin is a problem we cannot solve. Left unchecked, it destroys us, drives us from God, leads us into despair and both physical and spiritual death, which is Hell. Jesus sacrificed himself to solve it. He did everything necessary to solve it—lived God’s Law, fulfilling it perfectly; he offered that unblemished life as a sacrifice for all sins of all time on the cross; and was resurrected on the third day in keeping with His own predictive word, to offer eternal life in like fashion to all. And the great miracle of Jesus is that sin’s solution; full absolution and forgiveness of your sins; New and eternal life starting today is all yours by faith; by believing He did it for you; that it counts for you; that Jesus has credited your account with all this; it’s all there. You do not have to re-earn it. You don’t have to add to it. Without us asking for it, Jesus did it. Do you say “yes, I want that. I believe Jesus did it, and that it covers me.” Do you? If you do, then you are acknowledging that Jesus has a greatness deserving of unconditional worship. To believe this amazing news is to elevate the King in your heart. To believe this is offer him whatever gift of thanks you have to give. To believe this news is have exceedingly great, mega joy, because what Jesus has given, you get to keep forever.