

# The Wise Men, a Picture of Faith-filled Obedience

December 25, 2017

Matthew 2:1-12

Merry Christmas! You know, I could get used to this one service at 10:00! This morning we come to the last in our series of Christmas messages. For those who might be visiting, we have been looking at the various people in the birth narrative of Jesus, noticing the way in which they are lifted up because of their faith-filled obedience. If there is any connection between all the characters in the story, it is that they were singled out by God for honor, and yet did things that we wouldn't have expected them to do. They responded to the call of God with obedience. And this obedience had to be by faith. What they were asked to do made no sense at the time. The situation came up out of the blue.

Elizabeth was too old to have children, but when it was announced to her that she would be pregnant, she accepted the news. When it was announced to Mary that she was to be pregnant, she accepted the news. When Joseph was told that his bride-to-be was going to have a child and that he was to take this woman and her son into his home, he responded with obedience. When the shepherds heard from the angel that their Savior had been born, they left their flocks and went to find and worship Him. That takes us through last night.

And this morning, we look at the magi. As most of you know, I do not call them kings and I do not say there were three of them. We know they brought three gifts, but we are not told their number. So, that is why I usually refuse to sing, "We Three Kings." There may be much that we do not know about them, but what we do know is vitally important. And as we saw with the shepherds, the fact that God chose to reveal to them the wonder of the coming of His Son ought to humble and encourage us all. In many ways, the fact that He called them leads to the fact that He has called us. Just as the shepherds represented us as common folk, so the magi represented us as Gentile seekers far from God. That is who they were, that is who we are.

Follow along as I read the story of the magi from Matthew 2:1-12.  
READ.

Main point: The magi are a great example of people far from God being drawn to Him through the coming of Jesus.

Indeed, the magi might be the least likely people imaginable for us to anticipate celebrating the birth of Jesus. They were certainly not Jews. They were involved in forbidden activities. They lived far from Israel. And yet they came to bow their knee before this newborn king. Indeed, I can already see them as a model for us all. The presence of the magi is designed to give hope to people like us.

I. The magi came expecting everyone to be as excited as they were. vv. 1- 8

Clearly they were not Jewish. Clearly they didn't know Jewish culture or tradition. But that didn't stop them. They knew that a baby King had been born to the Jews and they needed to pay their respects. Their problem was that they expected everyone else to be excited too.

v.I- After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem

Matthew treats the actual birth of Jesus very briefly at the end of chapter I, “until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.” There, that’s it. No manger, no shepherds, no angel choir. Instead, he brings up a part of the story that Luke doesn’t mention, the visit of the magi. Exactly when this was, we do not know. The details of the story lead us to believe it was some time later, but they are still in Bethlehem. From Luke, we know they took Jesus to Jerusalem some 8 days after He was born, so it was likely after that, but how long we do not know.

The relevant detail to Matthew was that Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod. Now there are several generations of King Herod. This one is certainly Herod the Great, called that not because he was actually great, but that he was very powerful and wielded his power against his enemies. He was known to have his enemies put to death, even two of his sons. You did not cross King Herod. You cross him, you lose your head.

It was into this setting that magi came from the east into Jerusalem. The English term “magi” is the same word in the Greek text. It is the same root from which we get magic and magician. These were not good and godly people. These were men who practiced magic arts, astrology, all sorts of divination. We say, “wisemen,” but what if we substituted “witch doctors,” or “palm readers,” or “psychics.” Jews were forbidden from being involved with such things. But that was the identity of these men. They practiced the magic arts.

And they came from the east. At the end of the story, we are led to believe they came from far away. So, what is the significance of this detail “from the east?” I suspect it relates to the fact that there is desert in the east. They came from the desert. They came from far away, a place that is not fertile, but deserted. Now this does not mean they were desert nomads, but rather emphasizes the point that they were far from God. When Adam got kicked out

of the garden, God sent him east, to the desert. I see the same thought here. These men represented ignorant people far from God.

<sup>2</sup> and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

Can't you just picture this scene? They did not come asking IF a king had been born, but where he was. In other words, they came to the logical place where kings would be born (Jerusalem, the capitol) and simply asked the locals where He was. Surely they would all know. Surely the birth of a king would be the buzz of the whole city, or even country. But as you have figured out, no one knew. So they had to keep asking. And consequently, the buzz was not the news of the birth, but the question from these dignitaries from far away.

Notice as well that they were clear with their intentions. They came to bow the knee to this newborn king. They were coming to pay their respects. They meant this king no harm. These “holy men” from another culture were coming to worship the One who was simply born as king. Meanwhile the Jews were oblivious, and when they found out, set out to kill Him.

This all begs the question, “How did these men get this information of the birth of the king of the Jews?” Was it from an angel? a dream? their astrology? other magic arts? We are not told. We are left to wonder, to surmise. I suspect the means is not told lest we too turn to such magic arts. The point here is not to lift up magic arts but to highlight God's call on people who were far from Him, engaged in activities that were offensive to Him. And yet He called them. And they came. And they came by faith unseen among God's own people. That is the point.

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

Word has gotten back to the king. And what do we know about the king? He is known to kill his potential rivals. So he was disturbed. And when a king like this is disturbed, the whole town is disturbed. No one wants to see Herod the Great on a rampage.

<sup>4</sup>When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup>"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

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

So, Herod brings together his equivalent of the magi, his own set of spiritual men, authorities representing the educators and the preachers of the Jewish faith. If there was anyone who would know what was going on, it would be this group.

Now, again contemplate the scene. Here we have the elite Jewish leaders in the land. They have the truth. They know the truth. They are assembled in one spot. And then we have this group of men representing wisdom apart from God. Who do we think we be on top of things? Who should be the fools? And yet it is the opposite. The fools are filled with faith, just asking, "Where is He?" The wise know where He should be but have no clue that He is actually there. In

other words I don't see them joining a parade to Bethlehem. They are simply dead orthodoxy. They intellectually know the truth, but they don't have a relationship with the God of that truth.

They correctly quote the book of Micah, with additional bits from elsewhere. The Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. This king of the Jews is not associated with the place of the kings, Jerusalem, but with the first of kings, David. He would be born in the city of David. They all knew it.

<sup>7</sup>Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

Here we clearly see the conniving, vindictive paranoid man that Herod was. He wants to know when the star appeared, so he could know how old the babies were that needed to be killed. He lies to the magi, deceiving them that he too wanted to worship this king. He had no intention of doing so. Simply put, he was not above using these well intended foreign dignitaries as spies. He was the king and could withstand no rivals.

And then we have the magi. They were well intended. They were honorable. They were filled with faith. They went in search of One they had not known. They didn't know His name, His family, the prophecies about His role as Messiah. All they knew is that this One had been born and they needed to come and worship. What faith!

II. The magi found and worshipped and obeyed the One they had been seeking all along. vv. 9-12

When they found Him they worshipped, they honored, they gave, they obeyed Him rather than the vengeful king. In short, they were everything the Jews were not. They received their king.

<sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

I take from this that they didn't have escorts, they didn't have people following them. They had made their stop at the logical place to find a king, and now that they had the next piece of information, they went there. Did you catch that? The text makes it seem as if they are the only people going. Jerusalem was all abuzz with the question, but they did nothing with the answer, it was only on their way that this star reappeared and led them to the next place, Bethlehem. They needed the star to find Bethlehem. In other words, it was God's plan that they stop in Bethlehem. But again, they simply rejoiced that the star reappeared.

Now, many have tried to line up celestial events with the appearance of the star, but they miss the point entirely. Yes, these were men who studied the stars, trusted the stars to guide them. But this star was especially sent to guide them to Bethlehem. I doubt it was a comet, or some alignment of the planets. It was a special star sent by the Creator of the stars to point seekers to His Son. Period.

<sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

When they found the One whom they sought, they did as they said they would do: they bowed down before Him in adoration. Now, again some speculate as to whether or not their faith was real, or whether they were simply doing what you do when in the presence of a king. Clearly the bringing of gifts is often tied to visiting a king. Bowing is normal in the presence of a king. But this misses the point entirely. The point here is that they did out of ignorance what the locals should have done with all their knowledge. The Jews were not worshipping, but the Gentiles were. The Jewish wise men were not there, but the pagan wise men were bowing before an infant king, giving things to Him which were precious. What does this say about the future of the kingdom of this King? Who were the ones likely to find Him, to follow Him? How far would His kingdom spread? What would those who should know think of those who crashed their party? How would He be received by His own?

Again, that is the point. And remember that these men didn't just "happen" to stumble on some information. It was God's unseen hand that guided them there. It was His plan that they come to worship. It was His plan that they stop in Jerusalem and ask the question they did. It was God's plan that Herod respond as he did. God was making His point. The coming of the Jewish Messiah was good news for people like us! Our people were there in Bethlehem. The magi represented us.

<sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

I love this postscript to the story. They were now in danger. The One whom they worshipped was in danger. All would have to flee Bethlehem. All baby boys were in danger. And so, God took care of His own, and used a dream to warn the wise men. They didn't have to go back through Jerusalem. They didn't have to report back to Herod. Yes, Herod would have viewed that as

betrayal punishable by death. But that's okay, because God had a plan. They returned to their home, their home country, perhaps their old line of work. But they returned different men, for they had met their Savior. They were now wise men for a new King. They were now Christ followers.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) We will identify with, rejoice with the magi, knowing they were meant to represent us. They began their journey far from God, doing things despicable to God.

2) We will follow God wherever He leads us.

3) We will not expect the religious leaders to understand.

4) We will worship Christ, the newborn King.

5) We will see Him as deserving of that which is most precious to us, our gold frankincense and myrrh.