

A Lifelong Journey

Matthew 2:1-12

I love stories and who growing up didn't want to be some legendary hero like Robin Hood shooting our plastic bow and arrows with rubber suction tips. Others played Tarzan swinging from some rope attached to the swing set belting out his call of the wild beckoning the pet dog to come to his aid.

We enjoy stories, myths and legends and it seems that as they are retold new and greater feats of heroism are added for dramatic affect. According to the dictionary a myth or legend is a traditional story usually concerning some being or hero or event with or without determinable facts or a natural explanation. Sometimes it's a real person with real events that over time gets spun into a myth with embellishments. Santa Claus is one such legend. There was a real St. Nicholas who gave gifts, but the facts of his life were turned into the legend we have today of a sleigh and reindeer, and dropping down chimneys. We enjoy the legend and pass it on to each new generation.

You can google myths and come up with an assortment of them including where and when they originated.

Robin Hood and the Silver Arrow

The Peddler of Swaffham

The Mysterious Treasure of the Unlucky Pirate

The Mischievous Piper

The Spider and the Christmas Tree

Theseus and the Minotaur

Even within the context of Scripture legends and myths have surfaced. Our passage today is one that is shrouded in mystery and from it legends have been told. Turn with me to Matthew 2:1-12 and let's consider the account of the wise men who visited Bethlehem.

There are certain facts that we know for sure based on the text of Scripture. Other popular beliefs have

been added to the facts of the story for drama. It seems as though we like to fill in the blanks on certain unknown details.

Now, I don't want you to go home after today and discard your wise men from your nativity scenes because they are just as much a part of the Christmas story and the birth of Christ as are the angels and the shepherds and the manger.

Although much is uncertain about these visitors this much we know to be true about them and true for us today – *Wise men still seek Christ*.

Consider with me first their wisdom.

I. THE WISDOM OF THE WISE MEN

There are a number of myths about these guys that stem from speculation. Quite frankly we don't know for sure much about them.

Some believe they represent the three lines of Noah's sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth whose descendants migrated throughout the world. That's why one appears to be darker skinned and purportedly from Ethiopia. Consequently they have been given names – Caspar, Balthazar, and Melchior. Many believe it was just three Magi because of the number of gifts. The reality is that there could have been dozens of Magi.

It's even believed, if you want to pay money to see them, that their skulls were found by Bishop Reinald of Cologne back in the 12th century and they are in a Cathedral located in that city. It's believed that when he dug them up, their eyes were fixed toward Bethlehem.

Others believe that they were kings and that's why sing the popular Christmas hymn – We Three Kings of Orient. These scholars believe because of the types of gifts they brought that they must be royalty and so they are adorned with royal attire and crowns in our manger scenes.

And then there is the pet peeve of some that these Wise men that traveled from an unknown starting point arrived on the exact night Jesus was born arriving about the same time as the shepherds.

There is some conjecture surrounding their origin. Here's what I can say for sure. They were from the East and they were Gentile not Jews. We can say that because when they come to Jerusalem they asked where they can find "the king of the Jews". They wouldn't have addressed Him that way if they were Jews themselves. What we can say for sure is that while they used the title king of the Jews it was specifically referring to the Messiah. Herod connected the dots for us in verse 4.

When we look back in history and through Scripture we find Magi or wise men back in the book of Daniel. What we learn from history is that this group was considered to be priest/scientists. They were in high ranking positions in government with great influence in society. They were well educated and given the gifts they brought and the distance of travel they were financially well off not just because of the gifts they gave but because of the funding required to make such a lengthy journey.

It is believed that they were members of an Eastern priestly group, descendants of a tribe of people originally associated with the Medes and some believe their descendants go all the way back to Ur of the Chaldees where Abraham lived.

They were skilled in astronomy and astrology which blended science and superstition. As a group they were involved in many occult practices including sorcery and the interpretation of dreams, which we find in Daniel's day. The Greek word magoi or magi is where we get our term magic and magician. In a culture that believed in many gods, they were monotheistic believing in just one god following Zoroastrianism from the days of Darius the King during the time of Daniel. Darius made Zoroastrianism, which had a lot to do with

astrology, the state religion of Persia.

Because of their great knowledge in science, agriculture, math, history and the occult they were a great influence in the Babylonian and Medo-Persian empires.

In Jeremiah 39 a man is named who is on the court of Nebuchadnezzar. Their group had been elevated to the position of advisors to the king.

Daniel 2:10; 4:7

What we also need to understand about this group is the influence Judaism had on them. We read in Daniel 2:48 "Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men."

Daniel's position and the godly character he portrayed throughout his life would have impacted this group and influenced them with Scripture.

In regard to their priestly role, in many respects they were similar to Judaism. I said they were monotheistic. Fire was their main element of worship. They believed that fire was given by God. They had a sacrificial system.

Instead of the Urim and Thummim used by the Levitical priests to discern wisdom from God these wise men carried divining rods.

All of that to say that Daniel was put in a position of being able to greatly influence this group with knowledge of the Old Testament. Daniel was totally devoted to God and so we have every reason to believe that he used his position to teach and influence their knowledge of history and religion wisdom from God's Word.

When Cyrus came along as king, he encouraged many Jews to return to Jerusalem but many stayed in Babylon, continuing to practice their faith.

And while we read in Daniel 6 about a trap set by regional governors against Daniel, it is strongly believed that it was a plot hatched by jealous magi.

Over time factions began to splinter as to what they believed and practiced. Some followed more of the magic incorporated in their beliefs, others followed Zoroastrianism and some continued to be influenced by Judaism and particularly the prophecies around the Messiah. It's this group that showed up on the door step of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Because of their wisdom they had a lot of influence for centuries even into the time of Christ. Let's move on and talk about the way of the wise men.

II. THE WAY OF THE WISE MEN

For just a few moments I want to talk about the way of the wise men. We talked about their heritage. Let's talk about their home. What we don't know is the exact location of where they originated, but we can make some educated guesses.

We read in verse 2 that they "saw His star in the east." That simply means that as they were searching the heavens for clues knowing that this king would come west of them they were looking in that direction in the heavens.

The second thing we know is by the definition of the term used to describe them that they were from the east. Some put them in Arabia, most put them in the region of Babylon.

This passage gives us another clue about the approximate location of their home. We find it in verse 16, which isn't part of our text but it does give a clue. It says that King Herod sent troops to Bethlehem and murdered any boy two years old and younger. That was the approximate time the magi indicated they noticed the star of the newborn king. This tells us they traveled a considerable distance.

But the fact remains we don't know exactly where they came from, so we can only make some speculation. But we do know they were smart and they had traveled a long way.

And let me add one more thing before we move on. We don't know exactly where they came from and neither do we know when they arrived. Did the star appear on the same night of His birth or did it begin to shine months or even up to two years earlier? Was it the radiance of the angelic host that appeared on that night that alerted the Magi of His birth? Did they begin their journey the night He was born or before His birth? Did they have everything in order so as soon as they found what they were looking for they could start off or did it take weeks even months of preparation?

When my Dad moved Uncle Johnnie from Camp to California at the recommendation of his doctor, Dad had to get a number of permits from the States he would be traveling through with the Camp's semi. The Magi didn't need any permits.

Again, those are questions we can't answer. What we do know is this:
They were looking.
They saw what they were looking for.
They set out on their journey.

Next, let's consider the wonder of the wise men.

III. THE WONDER OF THE WISE MEN

Back in our text notice again verses 1-2.

As I think over this passage I find something quite interesting. You have to wonder if they had any segments of Scripture in which to refer to or were they going by things that been taught and passed on, by Daniel and others. It seems reasonable to think that if they looked at an understood what portions they studied they wouldn't have needed to stop in Jerusalem to inquire about where He was.

It also seems reasonable to believe that they had dedicated their lives to the search of this king's sign in the heavens. It wasn't just a passing fad or hobby. I believe that they had committed a life time of searching the Scriptures and the skies to determine the when, the where, and the who.

Through modern science and technology many have attempted to go back in time based on the pattern of how the sky looks at various times of the year to determine what the sky looked like on the night of Jesus' birth and the configuration of stars and planets to understand what the wise men might have seen from which they might conclude this is the sign of the Messiah's birth. Some have concluded that it was a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter or Saturn, Mars and Jupiter or even with Venus where their alignment caused a particularly bright light in the sky.

Some include Jupiter in this conjunction because that planet is considered to be the king of planets, so it makes sense that this planet would be the one to be a sign for a king. They cite Numbers 24:17 as the possible passage the Magi may have referred to that prophetically spoke of a star. It's Balaam's prophecy in which he says "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."

They say the star speaks not only about David who would rise to become king but that it also is a prophetic reference about the Messiah who would be the king.

A conjunction was believed to have some religious meaning by ancient astronomers. But the Bible says this was one star not several.

Some astronomers believe it could have been a supernova which had exploded making that star brighter than any other star in the sky at that time for several months.

Some believe it was a comet which in ancient days was believed to be a sign or omen from heaven of some change in the world about to take place.

We can't even say for sure if the word star is literal or figurative. To them it may have appeared as a literal star, but the word can also refer to a bright light or radiance. That's why it's possible that the light wasn't a star at all, but could have just as easily been the shekinah glory or radiance that came from the angels who appeared on the hill side the night Jesus was born. Literal stars don't appear, disappear and then reappear later on as this one seems to have done. We also read that the star went before them. Because of the rotation of the earth stars rise in the east, but they saw this star in the west. When Scripture says "we saw His star in the east" that can also be understood to mean "at its rising."

It is just as possible that God gave them a supernatural sign to follow, one that wasn't noticed or understood by anyone else since it had obviously gone unnoticed by Herod and others in Jerusalem.

Consider also that when they arrived in Jerusalem and found out from Herod after asking the religious leaders that the baby was to be born in Bethlehem that the star appeared to travel in a northwest trajectory because Bethlehem was northwest of Jerusalem.

I find it interesting that this spectacular night sign had gone unnoticed by Herod because he had to ask when it appeared. But then maybe it's not hard to understand that he wouldn't have paid any attention even if it was visible, because he certainly was not looking for the Messiah, the newborn king. Otherwise he would have taken action much earlier.

Certainly the heavens declare the glory of God and so why not use the heavens as the means by which the news of the birth of His Son into our world should be used to make that announcement.

But their wonder wasn't only in finding and following some compelling light to the vicinity of Jesus' birth. There is also wonder in their asking. The word "ask" in the NIV or "saying" in the KJV is a present participle meaning they continued to ask around. They assumed that everyone should know about this incredible news. They went to the bagel shop and the market and all over. They were in the capital city, the place they expected to find the Messiah and it seemed that no one they asked knew anything about a newborn king so they kept asking around. Eventually news of this inquiry reached King Herod. That is the wonder of the Magi.

This passage also shows us the worship of the wise men.

IV. THE WORSHIP OF THE WISE MEN

A. They Came With Bowed Heads

The intent of their trip wasn't just to find the newborn king, but to worship Him. We find that in verse 2 and then again in verse 11. They boldly and publicly announced their intent to those they asked about where the newborn king of the Jews was at.

Worship is that sense of devotion and adoration stemming from reverence. We are reminded that Jesus is worthy of worship. Two weeks ago we considered the deity of Jesus, that He is co-equal with the Father and is eternal. He is worthy of all praise and honor and glory and blessing.

The real tragedy of Christmas is that people still try to celebrate Christmas without seeking Christ or giving Him the honor and worship He deserves. Many aren't even looking for the Messiah even though He is quite obvious. Others have heard about Him but aren't looking.

J. Vernon McGee said once that people know more about the Christmas story from greeting cards than they do from the Bible. They blend fact with fiction.

No wonder people don't find Him, they aren't looking for Him.

A couple weeks ago there was an interview on Fox News that I thought bordered on the absurd. They interviewed a guy from the American Atheists Organization. Adapting the slogan president elect Donald Trump used during his campaign "Make America Great Again" this guy purchased a number of billboards with the message "Make Christmas Great Again...skip church". Some find it offensive and maybe so, but I find it ridiculous. Why would an atheist who doesn't believe in Christ want to use a term like Christmas in their slogan since Christmas is a direct reference to Christ? He says Christmas is about family gatherings, singing carols and exchanging gifts. He doesn't get that there is no Christmas without Christ. Christmas is already great because of Christ.

The wise men understood who this king was and they sought Him.

They came with bowed heads. Worship implies a posture that bows to a superior. And that's what it says in verse 11 "they bowed down and worshipped Him." This was genuine worship.

They came willingly over many miles and months to worship the baby Jesus. Yet there are many who intentionally choose not to worship Him, or out of ignorance or even out of indifference. But there is coming a day when every knee will bow before Him because all will recognize Him as the one worthy of praise.

They came with bowed heads.

They came with bowed hearts.

B. They Came With Bowed Hearts

To worship the King in a fitting manner requires a heart change. They sought the king to worship Him. I believe they understood the significance of

this child because of how Herod asks the religious leaders regarding the Christ, the Messiah.

Jeremiah 29:13 “‘You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the Lord.”

There’s was not a half-hearted, meager search. It required years of discipline and study. They committed untold financial resources in this endeavor. Imagine the sacrifices that they made. Think of the late nights studying the skies, looking, charting, comparing, reading and then going. They had determination. They had devotion. They had discipline. They had desire.

Here was a group of Gentiles seeking the Savior of the world in order to worship Him. Servants of God can be found in places where we might least expect. We expect them to come from churches and seminaries and Bible Colleges, but here in the middle of a pagan land, men came seeking after the King of the Jews. God knows who they are and He honors their faith by helping them find Him. But it must be with a sincere heart, a yielded heart.

We also see in the lives of the wise men that it’s not always those who have the most religious privilege who give Christ the most honor. You would have thought that would have come from the religious leaders but instead it was a bunch of outsiders who sought Christ.

John MacArthur rightly states *“Though having had limited spiritual light, they immediately recognized God’s light when it shown on them. They had genuinely seeking hearts, hearts that the Lord promises will never fail to find Him.”*

They came with bowed heads.
They came with bowed hearts.
They came with bowed hands.

C. They Came With Bowed Hands

We find that in verse 11 by the gifts they brought. True worship always leads to service of some kind whether in giving of possessions or in giving of time. They came bearing gifts, but not just any gift, they came with the best – gold, incense and myrrh.

We don’t really know why these gifts were mentioned specifically, there could have been other gifts as well. Some claim gold speaks of His deity and that incense speaks of the fragrance of His life, and myrrh, used in embalming, speaks to His death. They cite Isaiah 60:6 which speaks of Christ’s future kingdom and the gifts brought include gold and incense leaving out myrrh because He won’t require a spice that refers to death.

Whatever the case we know this much, these gifts were an expression of their worship. They weren’t given to somehow earn favor, but merely to express adoration. Christ deserves our best worship, the worship of our heads, the worship of our hearts, and the worship of our hands.

But all this joy at finding the king of the Jews comes with a sad note. In verse 12 we see the warning to the wise men.

V. THE WARNING TO THE WISE MEN

If in the example of the wise men we see utter devotion, we see in contrast through King Herod utter deception. We see his quandary, his quote, and then his quest.

A. The Quandary – vs. 3-5

While King Herod had some bright moments in his career he was a ruthless man. He was appointed over Palestine by Rome in 40 B.C. and became king in 37 B.C. He had to overthrow the Parthians. The Parthians were from the East, the same location where the wise men were from. He ruled with an

iron fist. He was not Jewish, but was from the line of Esau, an Edomite. His wife, Mariamne was Jewish. He was not the rightful king to sit on the throne of Jerusalem, but by marrying a Jewish woman he thought he could win the favor of the Jews. He later had her murdered, as well as three sons and an uncle. When he neared the time of his death, he had many leading citizens in Jerusalem arrested for no reason at all and ordered them to be killed the moment he died so that there would be mourning in Jerusalem.

We read in verse 3 that when he heard the news about the wise men asking the location of the newborn king of the Jews he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him. When the wise men arrived in Jerusalem there was probably a considerable number of travelers in this caravan. It included all the wise men and their attendants and soldiers. Remember that this group was from the same region of those ousted out of power some 35 years earlier. So when they rode into town Herod feared there would be an attempt to retake the land or that they were there on a scouting trip since word may have reached that region that his health was failing.

A more probable explanation is that on hearing the news of a possible new king born who could rightly lay claims to the throne made people nervous so they were afraid of the maniacal tirade they may have to endure at the hands of the king.

B. The Quote – v. 6

His deceitful plot is played out after he asked the religious leaders the birthplace. Notice that they know the location, but make no effort themselves to go and seek for Him to worship. That shows how indifferent they were to the coming of the Messiah. They could care less. We saw that last week when we considered from John 1 that He came to His own people and the rejected Him.

C. The Quest – vs.7, 13, 16-17

Herod secretly called the wise men and gave them the location asking them to return and inform him of the baby's home. We find the reason in verse 16 when Herod goes on a murderous rampage. Not content to kill just one child, he has all baby boys 2 years old or younger to be killed. Needless to say the wise men were warned not to return to Herod.

Let me draw some conclusions as we end our message. This passage shows us the great love God has for Gentiles by having Gentiles search for Him.

This passage shows us the desire required to search for Him with all our heart.

This passage shows us the need to give the best we have as an expression of worship through our heads, hearts, and hands.

This passage shows us that the religious can be just as distant and indifferent from really finding and worshipping Christ as someone who is not religious.

St. Augustine writes *“the religious leaders were like mile markers, they pointed the way for travelers, but remained motionless themselves.”*

Let me end with a word from Scripture and then the words of a hymn.

Isaiah 55:6-7 “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call on Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him, and to our God, for He will freely pardon.”

Perhaps the best carol to summarize the journey of the wise men is in the words of this hymn:

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant;
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem!
Come and behold Him – born the King of angels!
O come, let us adore Him!
O come, let us adore Him!
O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!

It is true: *Wise men still seek Him!*

This Christmas will you worship Him with bowed heads, bowed hearts, and bowed hands?