

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church  
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## THE JOY OF THE MAGI

Matthew 2:1-15

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There are four points to today's message:

- The Magi looked for Jesus, despite the odds.
- Herod felt threatened by Jesus.
- The Magi worshipped Jesus even though he was a baby.
- The story of Christ's birth continues.

## THE MAGI LOOKED FOR JESUS

**SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 2:1-3

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem<sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.*

**EXPLANATION:** Modern renditions of the Christmas story are riddled with mistakes, especially where it concerns the wise men, or magi. For example, despite the fact that we include the magi in most of our nativity stories, they did not arrive in Bethlehem until about two years after the birth of Jesus. In addition, we often picture three magi, but there is no specific number included in the Bible. We only know for certain that there was more than one, but there may have been many.

The word "magi" comes from the Greek word "magos" and means magician or sorcerer. These were some of the most educated men of their day, proficient in math, astronomy, medicine, chemistry (alchemy), and history. They also interpreted dreams, studied astrology, practiced paranormal arts, and served as trusted advisors to kings. The Bible says they were from the East, which would have been the areas of Media, Persia, Assyria, and Babylonia. In our time, these are areas encompassed

by modern-day Iran and Iraq. Given the distance from there to Judea, they probably traveled for months before arriving in Jerusalem.

What I find interesting is that the scripture deals with these guys kindly, whereas more than a dozen passages of scripture deal with sorcery and divination in the bluntest of unflattering terms.

As students of history, the magi probably read the prophecies about the birth of the Messiah and saw the unusually bright star as the omen of his birth. Upon this discovery, they stopped what they were doing and set off to find him. They set aside their personal studies and their professional duties in order to travel a great distance at great expense. Their journey would not have been easy or convenient, but that did not stop them. They wanted to meet, honor, and worship the newborn king.

Traveling the distance of a thousand miles in this day would have been treacherous. The sandstorms, mile after mile of no water or comfortable places to stop. It would have taken a lot of supplies and helpers for the magi to make the journey, similar to the wagon trains of the American old west.

**ILLUSTRATION:** Think about the odds of a star leading anyone to something specific. Stars have been used by navigators since the beginning of time. Ships navigated by stars and slaves who were escaping to freedom followed the north star. But navigating by the stars only leads in a general direction, not to something specific, not something very small, not to a baby.

The very idea of following a star they had read about in an old scroll or parchment would have been ludicrous to the average person. But there was something about this star that made them believe. My guess is that they had someone who had substantial knowledge of what we call the Old Testament, and their study of it led them to believe that this was indeed authentic and true.

But the odds of them finding a baby because a star led them was incredible. In fact, the odds of it leading them to a specific baby were -- astronomical (literally).

**APPLICATION:** The story of the magi begs us to question our own response to the Christmas story, and more importantly to Jesus. Sometimes we have to look for Jesus at work. Sometimes a situation might be so dire that we do not see Jesus.

Perhaps he seems veiled. But when we study the scriptures like the magi did, we will see that Jesus is at work all around us.

Like the magi, how often do we look for opportunities to extend ourselves for Jesus? When was the last time we sacrificed something for Him?

## **HEROD WAS THREATENED BY JESUS**

**SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 2:4-9

*When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah 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 shepherd my people Israel." <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 search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.*

**EXPLANATION:** For some reason, the magi seem to have missed the prophecies regarding Bethlehem as the birthplace of Christ, or maybe they thought that the newborn king and his family may have relocated since his birth. Either way, the magi stopped in Jerusalem to inquire about the king's whereabouts. To an outsider, it would seem only natural to look in the most prominent of Judean cities for a newborn king. Their arrival, however, was not celebrated. On the contrary, upon hearing the news, King Herod was greatly disturbed, and because King Herod was disturbed, so was the rest of Jerusalem.

King Herod was a Roman sympathizer who was put into power over the Jews to keep them in line. In an attempt to gain the approval of the Jewish people, he spent a lot of time, effort, and money on building projects including major renovations of the temple. He prided himself on being a "good" Jew and tried to obey Jewish laws such as not eating pork. On the other hand, he was known for his extreme jealousy, paranoia, and cruelty. He murdered wives, sons, and anyone else who threatened his power. Herod would hold on to his throne at all cost. He wasn't about to be

threatened by a baby king. As we know, he later had all male babies under two put to death. And it was during that time that Joseph took his family to Egypt.

But when the magi showed up announcing the birth of a Jewish King, everyone knew how King Herod would react—everyone, that is, except the magi. Herod discussed the prophecies with his own wise men, questioned the magi, and asked them to return when they found the baby. In the end, though, the same star that alerted the magi to Jesus's birth took them to the place where he stayed. They never needed King Herod's assistance after all.

**APPLICATION:** Have you ever felt threatened by Jesus? The words of Jesus are a threat to a lot of people. One of my friends was talking about how if we actually read the words of Jesus, then we see how inconvenient they are for most of us. We tend to turn Jesus into who we want Him to be instead of who he is.

- The Magi looked for Jesus, despite the odds
- Herod felt threatened by Jesus

## **THE MAGI WORSHIPPED JESUS EVEN THOUGH HE WAS A BABY**

**SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 2:10-11

*When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <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, frankincense and myrrh.*

**EXPLANATION:** The magi found Jesus with his parents in a house—not a manger. Joseph and Mary had settled down in Bethlehem. After the night of Jesus' birth, they found more permanent lodging. They went to the temple to have Jesus circumcised and to offer the appropriate sacrifices. Joseph fulfilled whatever obligation he had regarding the census, but the little family, for unknown reasons, decided not to go back to Nazareth—at least not yet. I imagine their lives were relatively routine for a while. Then one evening, the magi stopped by.

**ILLUSTRATION:** One evening, after attending Wednesday night worship, a mom asked her son what he'd learned about. The little boy told her that he had

learned about the wise men who visited Jesus. “Can you tell me what presents they gave Jesus?” she asked. He quickly named gold and frankincense, but he could not remember the third. “They brought Jesus something else,” the mom prompted. “Can you think of the third gift?” Finally, the younger brother shouted, “It was diapers!”

**ILLUSTRATION:** I want you to put on your imagination cap for a minute. If you have a child, I want you to go back to when he or she was a toddler. Recall where you lived. Recall what the place looked like. Recall who you were with. Recall what your child looked like as a two year old. Now, imagine getting a knock at the front door, and when you go to the door, there are foreigners that look like royalty, from a completely different cultural, with gifts for your baby!

**EXPLANATION:** Mary probably would have appreciated diapers, but the magi’s presents were suited for royalty. All three of the gifts foreshadowed the mission of Jesus.

- Gold—often used for jewelry or currency and the precious metal of kings.
- Frankincense— a white resin from Boswellia trees used as perfume or as incense, burned during worship at the temple by priests. The frankincense foreshadowed Jesus as a priest.
- Myrrh—taken from the resin of certain Arabic trees used as perfume, but also as medicine, in cosmetics, for purification and embalming, used to anoint prophets, and to prepare bodies for burial. Myrrh foreshadowed Jesus’ death.

All three of these gifts have traditionally symbolized Christ’s roles as king, priest, and prophet and to foretell his future sacrifice on our behalf. Whether the magi had any inclination of the symbolism is unclear since the gifts were practical and traditional gifts given to honor kings.

**APPLICATION:** We give gifts to one another at Christmas in the same way that the wise men gave gifts to Jesus, but sometimes I wonder if we are missing the point. The wise men gave their gifts as a form of worship. While it’s always nice to show our love and concern for others by giving them gifts, how often do we

consider what we can or should give Christ as a form of love, thanksgiving, and worship? Is there something we can lay at the feet of Jesus as a way to honor him?

- The Magi looked for Jesus, despite the odds
- Herod felt threatened by Jesus
- The Magi worshipped Jesus even though he was a baby

## **THE BIRTH OF CHRIST STORY CONTINUES**

**SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 2:12-15

*And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. <sup>13</sup> When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” <sup>14</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, <sup>15</sup> where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”*

**EXPLANATION:** God warned the magi not to return to Herod, and when they left, an angel directed Joseph to flee. The final scene in the Christmas story is not a little family tucked snugly away enjoying their infant son, but a poor carpenter, his wife, and toddler running from a madman. In reality, the birth of Christ was just one chapter in the greater story of Christ’s coming.

**ILLUSTRATION:** Isaac Watts was born in 1674 in South Hampton, England. He was the son of a pastor and was raised in a devoted family. Isaac, however, was unimpressed by the music that was sung in church. Even as a child, he was captivated by rhymes and poetry, and once when he got spanked for keeping his eyes open during prayer, he answered his father’s rebuke in rhyme. Later, when he complained once too often about the church hymns, his father told him to write something better, and Isaac Watts took the challenge to heart. He went on to not only become a pastor but also the author of 750 hymns, many of which we still sing today. But one particular song he wrote did not start out as a song at all. It was a poem based on Psalm 98, written about the second coming of Christ. A century after it was written, music teacher Lowell Mason discovered the poem and put it to

music. It has since become one of our most well-known and well-loved Christmas carols.

“Joy to the world! The Lord is come  
Let earth receive her King  
Let every heart prepare him room  
And heav’n and nature sing”

The magi traveled many miles to worship a king they did not yet know. They presented him with gifts to honor his royalty, and they rejoiced because they recognized what so many today still miss.

“He rules the world with truth and grace  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of his righteousness  
And wonders of his love”

**CONCLUSION:** The wise men looked for Jesus, and when they found him, they worshipped him with joy. How much more joyful should we be knowing the full extent of the story. We sing the words to *Joy to the World* in remembrance of Christ’s birth, but Isaac Watts wrote them as he looked forward to the day of Christ’s return.

The Christmas story began with the birth of Jesus, but it did not end with the magi’s visit or the flight to Egypt. The Christmas story is still taking place as the love of Christ is birthed in the hearts of men, women, and children who come to know him, love him, and live for him. It is a celebration of joy because we recognize that Jesus was not just born as a baby. He was born to be a Savior. We can be joyful because we know that He lived and died and was resurrected so that we might experience his love, mercy, and grace, and one day He will return again to claim the throne as earth’s rightful king.

Jesus brings Joy!

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I use the NIV translation of scripture because of its conversational nature. Feel free to go to Bible Gateway and copy and paste whichever translation you want to use. This transcript has been edited to an outline format that improves readability and therefore may not exactly follow the video edition.

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