



The Three Seekers

Matthew 2:1-11

This Christmas morning, we're going to take a look at some of the most fascinating Christmas Characters - the Magi, or Wise Men.

According to recent survey, 90% of Americans say Christmas is their favorite holiday, but only 20% say they enjoy Christmas shopping! (Emerging Trends, 1997). Well, today that part's over - except after-Christmas returns and sales!

We don't know if the wise men had a hard time shopping but we do know they found three pretty cool gifts.

By the way, we don't really know if there were 3 Wise Men -- someone has suggested that there were actually 4- but the fourth guy's gift was fruitcake and he wasn't allowed on the trip!

We're introduced to these mysterious men in Matthew 2:1-2: *"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?'"*

Right away we discover something interesting. The Wise Men show up in Jerusalem after the birth of Jesus. That runs contrary to many of our nativity scenes that show the shepherds and the Wise Men arriving in Bethlehem at the same time. The shepherds were there the night Jesus was born. The Wise Men came sometime later - maybe a few days, maybe a year or two.

One of the things that intrigues me about this story is the incredible **wrong turn** these guys took as they neared the end of their trip. Instead of following the star to Bethlehem, they stopped off in Jerusalem to ask Herod for directions. Someone has suggested that this is why

the wise men are so famous - they're the only men in history known to stop and ask for directions!

Who were these Magi or Wise Men? They originated from Persia, the area we now call Iraq. They were trained in medicine, history, religion, prophecy and astronomy. They were also trained in what we would call astrology. Back then, astrology was connected with people's search for God. The ancients studied the skies in order to find answers to the great questions of life-- Questions like: "Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?"

While they were not kings themselves (there goes the Christmas Carol "We Three Kings"), it would not be far from the truth to call them *kingmakers*. Our modern word "magistrate" is a direct descendant of the word magi.

What possibly could have motivated them to make a treacherous 800-1,000-mile journey across the desert? There's only one answer to that question -- they came to see a new King. This is fascinating. They knew a baby had been born but they didn't know where. They knew he was a King but didn't know His name. So they come to Jerusalem--the capital city--seeking help.

Actually (in spite of my joke) it makes sense that they went to Jerusalem because they wanted to welcome the "King of the Jews." They guessed that this newborn king was the son of King Herod. They assume that everyone must know about this baby. But a great surprise awaits them.

I. STAR OF WONDER

Verse 2 adds a detail that has baffled and intrigued Bible scholars and astronomers for 2,000 years: *"We have seen his star in the east, and have come to worship him."*

What was this "star in the east?" There are many theories.

Whatever the bright star was, it certainly got the attention of the Wise Men. Remember that the Wise Men were students of the sky. It also helps to know

that in those days it was not uncommon to associate the birth of a great ruler with unusual heavenly phenomena. The sudden appearance of a bright star would make perfect sense to them and would in fact fit what they already believed. Without question, this bright light was the supernatural work of God. You might say that if God wanted to get a message to these guys, He picked the perfect way.

II. NO CONE HEADS

Most of our pictures of the Magi show three guys, dressed to look like cone-heads, riding three camels across the desert. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no way these important men traveled 1,000 miles across the desert by themselves. That just doesn't make sense. In those days, the only way you could travel in the desert was in a large CARAVAN. You know, those long ones with the two sliding doors...

The Magi would have swept into Jerusalem with a total party that could have amounted to more than 100 people. No wonder all of Jerusalem was buzzing.

When Herod finds out that they have come to worship a new King, he turns to the scribes and religious leaders for advice in verse 4: *“Where is this child to be born?”* The scribes don't have to look it up. They already know the answer. 700 years earlier the prophet Micah in Micah 5:2 had predicted the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem. That was common knowledge in Israel. It's hard to believe that Herod didn't know it.

If you add what the scribes knew to what the Wise Men figured out, you can conclude that the signs of Jesus' coming were clear enough for anyone to see. Here's something to remember: God always speaks loud enough for a willing ear to hear.

The Wise Men heard and did something; the religious scholars knew and did nothing.

As the Magi set out for Bethlehem, which was only five miles south of Jerusalem, the star they saw in the east suddenly reappears.

III. THE KING IN THE CRADLE

Verse 11a tells us that *“on coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.”*

IV. THEY BROUGHT GIFTS TO JESUS

And then in v. 11b, we come to the last detail, the one for which the Magi are most remembered in verse 11: *“Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts [of gold, frankincense and myrrh.]”*

By the way, the tradition of giving gifts at Christmas time did not originate with Santa Claus. It started with God giving Jesus, then the Wise Men. Back then, bringing gifts was particularly important when approaching a superior. The gifts they bring are expensive and represent a worthy tribute -- and there's more to them than meets the eye.

[Get help from children to unwrap the gifts]

1. [Pick a Number] - GOLD

GOLD is one of the rarest and most expensive metals. It represented the wealth and power of a king. Gold pointed to Jesus' majesty . . . for he is king.

2. [Pick a Number] - FRANKINCENSE

FRANKINCENSE, or incense as we call it, was used in the temple worship of God. It's burning and the smell it made, symbolizes prayers being sent up to God to hear.

Frankincense pointed to Jesus' deity . . . for he is God. How did they know? (I believe it had to do with Daniel - who many years before was in the Persian empire, and God gave him prophetic information about the “Anointed One”).

3. [Pick a Number] - MYRRH

MYRRH --a kind of perfume made from the leaves of a rose. It was used in beauty treatments, but when mixed with vinegar it became an anesthetic.

After a person died, myrrh was used to anoint the body and prepare it for burial. **Myrrh pointed to his humanity** . . . for he was destined to suffer and die.

There is a lot of “myrrh” in this gift. John 19:39 tells us that after Jesus died, his body was wrapped in linen along with 75 pounds of myrrh and other spices. The gift of myrrh then, pictures his suffering and death.

Did the Magi understand all this? No, probably not. But God arranged it so that their gifts to the

King in the cradle would point us to who Jesus really is and why He came.

V. CONCLUSION FROM THE WISE GUYS

Now, what can we learn from these wise guys? What possible relevance can they have to our lives in the 21st Century? Let me give you some *Life Lessons*:

1. These men met God in the midst of their work. God can and will communicate to you as you are faithful to what He has called you to do. You don't need to check out of life in order to get to know God. He will meet you right where you are. These astrologers were doing their jobs when God ambushed them. God can do the same in your life. (The Shepherds were in the field, Joseph and Mary were just doing life)...

2. They found their way by consulting Scripture. When they started out they followed the bright star. When they got lost, they went to the Word of God to find out where the Messiah was to be born. Have you lost your way recently? Are you just going in circles? Instead of trying to figure everything out on your own, or even consulting a friend, why not look to God's Word for direction?

3. They gave themselves in worship first. Before they gave what they had in their hands, they first gave their hearts to Jesus. They bowed down and worshipped and then they opened their treasures. Friend, God wants your life before He wants your gifts. Have you ever surrendered yourself and submitted yourself to the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ? If not, do it today!

4. They gave the gifts they had.

- The **Gold** represents money and wealth- have you turned over ownership of everything you have to Jesus?
- **Frankincense** was a symbol for prayer to God. Are you bringing your hopes and dreams to God in prayer on a regular basis?
- **Myrrh** stands for suffering and sadness. Have you given all your pain and heartache to Jesus this Christmas?

These gifts served as a validation of their worship. It reminds me that we can't worship God without making a sacrifice.

1. If the Wise Men can find Jesus, then so can you.

Think of how many barriers they had to cross to get to Him. There was a culture barrier, a distance barrier, a language barrier, a racial barrier, a religious barrier, not to speak of a hostile king and indifferent religious leaders. It wasn't easy for them to find Jesus, but they did. If they found Him, then so can you.

Friend, what's your response this Christmas? No matter where you're at, God loves you more than you can ever know.

You see, Christmas is really a "celebration of an invasion." It's when God sent His Son Jesus to earth to identify with us, and then to die as our sin-substitute on the Cross. It's His Christmas gift to us.

Do you know who the *real seeker* is in the Christmas story? It's God Himself.

RIDDLE: Once there were three frogs on a log. One of them decides to jump off. How many are left? Two? No. There's still three because all the one did was decide to jump - but he never made the leap!

Are you still on the log this morning? If so, it's time to jump off so that you can bow down to the One who can change your life. I'd like everyone to stand right now. If you are ready to jump off the log this morning by putting your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, I'm going to ask you to do what the Wise Men did - TAKE ACTION

I read that a guy got a Christmas gift 49 years ago and still hadn't opened yet.

Can you imagine if you gave me a gift for Christmas and I put it under my Christmas tree and six months later you come over to my house and that gift is still sitting over in the corner. You think, "That tells you how much I mean to him!"

Yet, some of you have never unwrapped the gift that God sent for you. You never have accepted God's gift, Jesus Christ, and in Him Joy, *hope and happiness*. So I invite you this Christmas unwrap the gift God's given you and receive Him into your life. It's real simple. All you do is ask Him.

Prayer: "Dear God, this Christmas I want Your gift of Jesus Christ, in my life. I open my life to Jesus Christ. As much as I know how, confessing I am a sinner, I ask You to come and put Your spirit of love in my life and make me the person You want me to be. Amen."