



By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
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Let's Begin

Christmas is a special time when we learn lessons from some of the most colorful characters in the Bible. We are reminded of the true meaning of Christmas. Their responses to the birth of Christ digs deep down within our souls and plants healthy seeds of truth which grow in us faith and love for the Lord Jesus.

For example, Luke records the shepherds busily watching over their sheep at night (Luke 2:8-20). Suddenly, they received a heavenly revelation concerning the Messiah who was to come. Shepherds were working men. On the other hand, our study today leads us to the wise men, aristocrats from a faraway eastern land. Christ came to save all whether the working class or the rich and famous.

As we begin our study of the wise men's worship, let's follow the outline below:

- I. The Truth Which They Sought (vv. 1-6)**
- II. The Thrill Which They Caught (vv. 7-10)**
- III. The Treasures Which They Brought (vv. 11-12)**

I. The Truth Which They Sought (vv. 1-6)

Matthew records the visit of the wise men from the east. He writes, "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard *these things*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, *in* the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel" (vv. 1-6).

The term translated "wise men" is the Greek term *magos*, which means "magician, sorcerer, wise man" (cp. Acts 13:6-8; Dan. 1:20; 2:2, 12). The men about whom Matthew writes were learned astrologers from the east, a highly respected group of academics in the first century. Kings routinely sought their counsel.

We know neither the exact eastern place from whence they originated nor the number of wise men. Some attempt to portray the number as three, corresponding to the three gifts they bore (v. 11). No reason exists, however, to limit the number of wise men to three. Each of the three gifts could have been duplicated by an entire caravan of wise men. What Matthew clearly communicates to us is, they came seeking Jesus, a lesson we all need to hear.

Indeed the wise men asked the first question in the New Testament, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" (v. 2). This question should be first in every person's heart as well. No more significant question may be asked than to inquire after the Lord Jesus Christ.

As the wise men searched for Jesus, Matthew reveals several insights. First, they were *motivated* by a star (vv. 1-2). Magi were life-long star students,

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Reflection Connection

Seeking after the Lord Jesus invariably takes us to places where we feel uncomfortable. Think of an experience suitable to share with the group when following the Lord put you in an awkward place.

the ancient equivalent of modern astronomers. They scanned the skies with well trained eyes as they looked for changes in the heavens. They monitored every movement. And, their persistence paid off nicely. They noticed a different star, an odd star which drew them away from their homeland (cp. Num. 24:17). Note: a person who genuinely follows Jesus will always end up in places where he or she is uncomfortable and alone. Faith demands we look to Jesus in times like these.

The fact remains, God broke into their world, their field of interest and led them to Jesus. He always does. We may assuredly know God is at work in a person's life when the person begins to seek Jesus Christ. He breaks through the thickest barriers and knocks down the sturdiest walls. And, if we follow the star God gives, it will always lead us to Jesus.

Second, not only were the wise men motivated by a star, they were also aggravated by a scoundrel (v. 3). Herod had heard about the wise men's claims and became severely troubled. News of their journey filled him with frenzy. Concerning Herod there was never a more wicked man than he. And one particular thing lit his fuse every single time—*competition which threatened his position*. Herod murdered his wife, mother-in-law, and his own son out of sheer fear for his political position. Power has a tendency to corrupt our basic longings for decency.

In addition, "all Jerusalem" was troubled along with Herod (v. 3). Imagine the influence Herod's character had on thousands of other people. We do not behave in a vacuum. Some people wrongly think as long as others do not observe them, what harm could their action be. For instance, we often hear someone suggest that while he or she does not drink alcohol publicly, a glass of wine at home at the dinner table means nothing to anyone else. All one has to do is point to the tragic failures of the home and the destruction caused by alcohol. Again, moral choices invariably affect other people. Herod's actions poisoned virtually the entire population of Jerusalem.

Third, the wise men were *educated* by a Scripture (vv. 4-6). The "chief priests and scribes" were called together to examine the facts. They unanimously offered one verse, "And thou Bethlehem, *in* the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel" (v. 6; cp. Mi. 5:2, 2 Sam. 5:2). The men Herod pulled together knew their Bibles. Often people know what the Word of God clearly says, but will not seek to obey the Word of God. The very men who quoted the passages to Herod would not navigate a five-mile hike to Bethlehem to see if the Messiah was really born.

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Additionally, there remains a latent danger that we may become too familiar with the Bible. When such familiarity descends, we take truth for granted. In short, truth loses all impact upon our lives for it operates only at merely a fuzzy sub-conscious level. Scripture was in the head but not the heart, so to speak (cp. Rom. 10:9).

What Matthew gives us in one full sweep reveals much: the wise men were *seeking* Jesus; Herod was *opposing* Jesus; and the scribes were *ignoring* Jesus. These three categories of respondents to the Gospel of Christ are still alive and active among us today! Our prayer is that we will, as the wise men, remain seekers of the Lord Jesus. The wise men really are wise.

II. The Thrill Which They Caught (vv. 7-10)

Thrilling things were going on in Bethlehem. Their hearts must have quickened with each step the wise men took toward the little city about five miles away. Anticipation heightened! Not because of Bethlehem of course. Rather because the “young child” would be there (Matthew mentions “young child” three times). The wise men believed the Scriptures. Imagine it! Pagans from the east acting upon the Word of God while Jewish scribes ignored it.

As they journeyed to see the “young child,” three questions arise. *First, who is he?* Interestingly, Jesus asked this question later in Matthew’s Gospel (22:42). According to what we know, the “young child” was the son of David (Matt. 1:1), the son of Mary (Mark 6:3), and the Son of God (Matt. 27:54). He was not only the Messiah of prophesy as David’s son, but also the Christ of history as Mary’s son. More importantly, He was the Christ of eternity as God’s Son—the second Person of the Holy Trinity born in human flesh.

A second question naturally arises: *from whence did he come?* According to Matthew, He came from heaven (1:23). Finally, *what did He come to do?* One answer presents itself: He came to save us from our sin (1:21; Luke 19:20). Answers to these three questions should grip our hearts and challenge our faith.

III. The Treasures Which They Brought (vv. 11-12)

Perhaps more than any other place in Scripture, we have the origin of giving gifts at Christmas rooted in the wise men’s practice. Matthew writes, “And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh” (v. 11).

Admittedly, there is a paradox in this passage. While the wise men brought gifts to Christ, we give our gifts to one another. While giving gifts to one another is fully acceptable because of the love we possess for one another, we are reminded even in gift-giving who remains the central figure of the Christmas season—Jesus Christ.

The wise men brought three gifts: *gold, frankincense, and myrrh*. Each gift has symbolic importance. *Gold*, for example, is a gift for kings and royalty. How fitting is this gift for Jesus. He came to reign over us! He is the King, and because

Reflection Connection

Does the identity of Jesus excite your heart? Explain. Do you think your life reveals your excitement about being a follower of Christ?

Reflection Connection

Examine your own Christmas-giving traditions. Is the focus more on what you “get” than what you “give”? How can you make sure that your gift-giving does not eclipse the central Person of Christmas, Jesus Christ?



of Calvary, God has made Him Lord (Acts 2:36). The Apostle Paul wrote, “every knee shall bow” before Him (Phil. 2:10). Is it true personally? Is Christ your King? No Christmas can be authentic unless Jesus Christ is your personal King.

The second gift given by the wise men to the “young child” was *frankincense*. Frankincense was fit for priests. It was carried into the Temple and burned as incense on the altars. Jesus came down from heaven, lived among us, understands us, and represents us. In fact, Scripture teaches He is “touched with the feelings of our infirmities” (Heb. 4:15). More so, He died because of us. His death itself is the mediation offering for the sins of the people.

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Golden Greek Nugget

Matthew records the wise men’s response as they approached the little child: “...they... fell down, and worshipped him” (v. 11). The Greek word translated “fell down” is *piptô*, and means “to be thrust down from a higher to a lower place.” The Greek word for “worshipped” is *proskyneô*, which means to “bow low,” or “bow down.” Coupling the two words Matthew records, we have the image of the wise men reverently but boldly thrusting themselves down before the Christ child as an act of sheer worship.

Finally, *myrrh* is the gift for a prophet. He spoke the truth and died because of it. Myrrh’s latent powers to preserve are seen in its use as an embalming substance. Christ died for us, lives for us, and preserves us.

After giving their gifts to the “young child,” the wise men experienced another revelation from heaven, “And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way” (v. 12). Herod’s promise to come and “worship” the child they sought was only a trick (v. 8). He planned to kill the child as soon as he discovered his whereabouts (cp. vv. 16-18).

Wrap Up

In this study, we’ve examined the quest of pagans for the Lord Jesus Christ. We observed the obstacles they faced in finding Him. Yet, we also are inspired because they never gave up. They followed the light God graciously gave and ended up finding Jesus. The same goes for us. We too will find Jesus if we but follow the light God graciously and miraculously gives.

