

Wise Men Still Seek Jesus **Matthew 2:1-12**

What began your journey to Jesus? What was that moment, that person, that event, that song you heard, that testimony you heard, that tragedy or celebration that occurred which turned you toward Christ? People who meet Christ generally fall into two categories: those whom Christ just surprises one day, and those who start a journey that may take years to finish. Some people get seemingly ambushed by Jesus. One day it seems that Jesus simply shows up and says hello like the shepherds in the field watching their flocks by night. There they are hunkered down with their sheep hoping to get through the night, hoping some storm wouldn't blow in and wreck havoc or some predator would creep down and attack their sheep. Then suddenly the sky lights up, a multitude of angels appear, and the news is announced that a Savior has been born in Bethlehem. They instantly respond to the news and go into the little village to see what has happened. There's was virtually an instantaneous conversion as God unexpected, unsought, suddenly was in their face. A lot of people experience that. They are minding their own business when they meet somebody who tells them about Christ and feel strangely warmed and stirred by God. Right then and there they give their hearts to Jesus.

But for many it is not like that. Their journey to Christ is a spiritual search that may take months or years. These are the kind of people that the wise men represent. The wise men were not just hoping to get through the night; they couldn't wait for the night, because when the night came they looked at the stars. They scoured them and studied their configurations; they plotted them on charts. They studied sacred books - such as the Old Testament - to learn about prophecies. They were perhaps the priestly-political class of the Parthians who lived to the east of Palestine. They had a sacrificial system that somewhat resembled the one God gave to Israel, were involved in various occult practices, including sorcery and were specially noted for their ability to interpret dreams. But one thing it is important for you to know is that they were top to bottom, pouring out of their pores pagan. Yet they were honestly

in search of truth. They were on an extended arduous journey, for the king whose star they had seen. *What is interesting to me is the ways in which their journey parallels many of our journeys to faith:*

I. Wise Men Search for Christ (2:1-8)

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem,² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet :⁶ “‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’”⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”

1. They respond to the revelation they have received concerning Christ. (2:1-2)

1) *Now there is much that we do not know about the wise men.* We do not know how many there were, their names, their means of transportation to Palestine, or even the specific country from which they came. There may have been three (as there were three gifts) or there may have been 12 (as an older tradition states) or even more. It is likely that they came from Babylon, but they could've come from Arabia. We know they traveled hundreds of miles and would have brought an elaborate entourage. This was not an in clandestine operation but more like pageantry. It would have been a caravan of probably camels and servants and supplies to make this long journey.

2) *But the important thing is their purpose.* We are not told how God caused the Magi to know that the King of the Jews had been born - only that he gave them the sign of His star in the East. Perhaps the Magi connected Balaam's messianic prophecy of a star that would rise out of Judah with this Messianic Jewish King (Numbers 24:17: “A star

shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel. In Revelation Christ is called the “bright and morning star”). Perhaps this prophecy was passed down from Daniel who had been among the “*magos*” - the wise men of Babylon. What we know is: they had come to honor the King! That was their purpose!

3) *They have seen his star in the East and have come seeking him.* Again, we cannot absolutely be certain as to the precise identity of the star. The movement of the star suggests that it is not a natural phenomenon (e.g. a comet, supernova, or conjunction of planets), but was supernatural. It may have been a guiding angel that appeared as a star, some specially created heavenly phenomenon that had the brightness of the star, or the Shekinah glory of God - the radiant light of God’s presence (such as the pillar of fire by night above the tabernacle or the consuming fire on the mountaintop when Moses received the Law). But what is certain is that finally they are nearing the end of the long search for this King (Their trip alone was probably 40 days).

***This is much like many of us who have spent months and years in our journey from a skeptic to a saint.

Lee Stroebel - For most of my life I was an atheist. I thought the idea of an all-loving, all-powerful creator of the universe--I thought it was stupid. I mean, my background is in journalism and law. I tend to be a skeptical person. I was the legal editor of the Chicago Tribune. So I needed evidence before I'd believe anything. One day my wife came up to me--she'd been agnostic--and she said after a period of spiritual investigation she had decided to become a follower of Jesus Christ. And I thought, you know, this is the worst possible news I could get. I thought she was going to turn into some sexually repressed prude who was going to spend all her time serving the poor in skid row somewhere. I thought this was the end of our marriage. But in the ensuing months, I saw positive changes in her values, in her character, in the way she related to me and the children. It was winsome; and it was attractive; and it made me want to check things out. So I went to church one day, ah, mainly to see if I could get her out of this cult that she had gotten involved in. But I heard the message of Jesus articulated for the first time in a way that I could understand it. That forgiveness is a free gift,

and that Jesus Christ died for our sins, that we might spend eternity with Him. And I walked out saying--I was still an atheist--but also saying, "If this is true, this has huge implications for my life." And so I used my journalism training and legal training to begin an investigation into whether there was any credibility to Christianity or to any other world faith system for that matter. I did that for a year and nine months until November the 8th of 1991, and on that day I realized that, in light of the torrent of evidence flowing in the direction of the truth of Christianity, it would require more faith for me to maintain my atheism than to become a Christian. Because to be an atheist I would have to swim upstream against this torrent of evidence pointing toward the truth of Jesus Christ. And I couldn't do that. I was trained in journalism and law to respond to truth. And so on that day, I received Jesus Christ as my forgiver, and as my leader. And, just like with my wife, my life began to change. Over time my values, my character, the purpose of my life began to be transformed over time in a way that, as I look back, I can't imagine staying on the path I was on compared to the adventure and the fulfillment and the joy of following Jesus Christ.

2. They recognize the authority of Christ (2:1-2).

One can hardly imagine the scene as these wise men came to Jerusalem. Here they come with their entourage asking everybody in Jerusalem, "Where's this King? Where's this King who has been born King of the Jews? We have come to worship him! They had come seeking to fall down, prostrate themselves, and kiss the feet or the hem of the garment of the King who had been born. Despite their paganism, quasi-science, and superstition they had recognized God's voice when he spoke. 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 (Jeremiah 29:13).

3. They meet strong resistance to Christ (2:3-8)

1) There is the *fear of persecution* among the populace. It is quite possible that many would have wanted to believe that the Messiah King had arrived. But they all well knew that any question like the Magi's would result in more cruelty from the ailing King Herod, whose

paranoia had led him to murder his favorite wife and two sons. Their fear was not so much the toppling of Herod as of the violent reprisals which such a threat might be expected to evoke.

2) There is the *fear of losing position and power* for the arrival of this King of the Jews presents a threat to Herod the Great's throne and Israel's corrupt religious and political leadership in Jerusalem. It is quite likely that the Magi arrived with a large contingent of soldiers and servants, and because of their wealth, prestige, and power they would have had the appearance and demeanor of royalty. Further, they may have been a part of the ruling body in the Parthian-Persian Empire which at this time was much like the Roman Senate. These leaders were the kingmakers in an almost absolute way.

3) There is the *rejection of the truth*. When Herod gets agitated, the first group that he calls is the religious leaders, the authorities on the Law, and asks them the question the Magi are asking. Interestingly, they don't even have to say, "Give us a few weeks, and we will work on it." They know chapter and verse: "Oh yes, it's Bethlehem. The prophet said so long ago (Micah 5:2). We've studied this, we've preached it, we've done Bible studies on it, written articles on it." Note that the Magi are steeped in paganism but have a hunch. The religious leaders are steeped in truth. But what do they do with the truth? Absolutely nothing! It is remarkable that the chief priests and scribes apparently made no effort to check out Jesus birth as the Magi did. As one scholar notes, "It is strange how much the scribes knew, and what little use they made it."

4) There is *deception concerning receiving the truth*. Equally troubling is that Herod pretends to receive this Christ while all along intending to kill him. He mocks Christ with his hypocritical worship. In his secret meeting with the Magi, he simply wanted to know when the star had appeared so he could determine the age of the child King

II. Wise Men Find Christ (2:9-12)

⁹ *After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.* ¹⁰ *When they saw the star, they*

rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.¹¹ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

1. If you diligently seek Christ, you will find him. *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart* (Jeremiah 29:13). In our story God uses a star to lead the wise men to the home in which Jesus lived. They had been willing to endure a long, dangerous, and arduous journey in their search for the prophesied King. Theirs had been a sincere, all-encompassing devotion to finding the Christ. Now they will find him! The star which they had seen reappears and provides them with very specific, localized guidance to the home of the baby Jesus. The star may have hovered over Bethlehem or it may have identified the very house where Joseph and Mary lived.

2. Finding Jesus means finding joy. The text piles up superlatives to emphasize the extent of exhilaration they felt when they came to his house.

3. Finding Jesus means to bow and worship at his feet. It was customary and particularly important in the ancient East to bring gifts when approaching a superior (cf. Genesis 43:11; First Samuel 9:7-8; First Kings 10:2). It is clear that the wise men recognized that the baby Jesus was one to be honored and to be given homage. These men may not have understood Christ's divine nature, but their actions were unknowingly appropriate and wonderfully foreshadowed the worship of Jesus by all the Gentile nations in the future.

4. Finding Jesus involves sacrifice on our part. When one comes to Christ they receive Christ as Savior and Lord - as their King. This will involve an ongoing surrender of all that they have to Christ. Their expensive gifts reflected the great honor the Magi bestowed on the Christ Child. Their giving was not so much an addition to their worship as an element of it. The gifts were an expression of worship given out of the overflow of adoring and grateful hearts. The gifts probably financed Joseph and Mary's trip to Egypt (vv. 14-21). "Frankincense" is a gum obtained from the resin of certain trees that was particularly fragrant and

was used only for special occasions (in grain offerings in the temple, in certain royal processions, and sometimes at a wedding if it could be afforded) "Myrrh" was also a sap-like substance that came from a tree that grew in Arabia. People used it as a spice, and as a perfume, often for embalming as well as for other applications. Many commentators, ancient and modern, have seen symbolic significance in these three gifts. Some have said "gold" suggests royalty while others have seen deity. Some say "incense" represents deity, while others believe it better represents perfect humanity. Most expositors view "myrrh" as prefiguring Jesus' death and burial. It is unlikely that the Magi saw this significance, but Matthew may have intended his readers to see it. This act by Gentile leaders also prefigures the wealth that the Old Testament prophets said the Gentiles would one day present to Israel's Messiah (Ps.72:10-11, 15; Isa. 60:5, 11; 61:6; 66:20; Zeph. 3:10; Hag. 2:7-8). This will occur in the fullest sense at the Second Coming of Christ.

Conclusion

It is interesting that when we consider how evil Herod was, yet it is Herod who gives the best piece of advice in the story. *Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.* He's lying. He's not going to worship; he's going to go with a dagger hidden in his cloak. But that's good advice. If you are steeped in truth but it's been a while since you did something with it, then go and make a careful search. If you are steeped in some confusing ideas about Christ - if you are someone who is all twisted up in their theology, go and search diligently for Christ! Read and search the Gospels looking closely at Christ the Man, Christ the Servant, Christ the King, Christ the Son of God! And as God reveals his truth to you go and find others that they might worship him also. That's good advice, isn't it? He will certainly be worth the length of any journey, the tireless effort of many hours. He is the one that satisfies the hunger you might have about discovering the meaning of life. He is the one who lights and makes alive the truth that you know. He is the one worthy of all the gifts you might give him - whatever precious thing you've got. He is the one that if it calls for it, defy a King for his sake. That's what these men did. He is the one for whose sake it's worth

taking the long way home, which is what they do. They will inconvenience themselves however they must for the sake of Christ. Why? Because this is Christ the Lord. Unto you a Savior has been born, unto you a King has been given!