

## Who Were the Wise Men - Matthew 2:1-12

One Christmas, mom decided that she was no longer going to remind her children to write their thank-you notes for the gifts they receive. As a result, their grandmother never received acknowledgments of the generous checks she had given the children.

The next year things were different, however. The grandmother told a friend triumphantly that "The children both came over to my house in person to thank me."

"How wonderful!" the friend exclaimed. "What do you think caused the change in behavior?"

"Oh, that's easy," the grandmother replied. "This year I didn't sign the checks."

- Sometimes the best way to say thank you is to do it in person
  - After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, He received a visit from men who came to thank Him and worship Him as Lord
    - Matthew describes that visit in Matt 2, describing them as magi
    - The magi came from "the east" because they had seen a star in the east
    - They knew the appearance of this star meant that the Messiah, the King of the Jews, had been born
    - So they traveled to Jerusalem to find Him and worship Him
  - This detail in the story of Jesus birth generates a number of misconceptions and leads us to a series of significant questions
    - For example, most of our nativity scenes portray the magi as attending the birth of Christ in the stable
    - But the text of Scripture says they came to Mary and the Child in a house, not a stable
    - Plus it would have taken them some time to follow the star, visit with Herod and eventually find Mary and Joseph
      - They mostly likely visited 2 years after the birth
    - Further, we are never told how many magi visited Jesus

- Many people have come to assume there were three because we're told they brought three kinds of gifts
- But it could have been a group of magi for each type of gift
- In fact, it would make sense to assume that a large group came to worship rather than merely three
- So on this Christmas Eve let's set the record straight on the magi and understand why their experience is recorded in the text of scripture
- Who are these magi and why did they come to Jerusalem?
  - The word refers to a particular kind of magician or sorcerer found in the eastern nation of Babylon
    - These men were astrologers living in the east in the region of Mesopotamia or modern Iraq
    - They served in the court of the leader of Babylon
      - They trace their existence all the way back to the time of Nebuchadnezzar and the book of Daniel
  - They tell Herod they saw a star in the eastern sky and recognized it as the sign that the Messiah had been born
    - So why would eastern astrologers want to worship the Jewish Messiah?
    - How did they even know to look for such a sign, much less recognize that this star meant the Messiah had been born?
- First, let's consider the details of the story carefully
  - According to v.9, the star started in the east and moved westward until it eventually settled over the house of Mary and Joseph
    - This is no ordinary star
    - In fact, this is no natural object
    - The only reasonable explanation for a bright light that moves this way and is focused on the Son of God would be the Shechinah glory of God

- This was the glory of God Himself, illuminating the sky to draw the wise men
- That explains how the magi found the Christ, but how did they know to follow the star and why did they have any interest in the Messiah?
  - Remember these men were magi, astrologers employed in Babylon to serve the Babylonian court
  - They were part of long history of sorcerers that included none other than Daniel and Ezra
- Daniel was a young Jewish nobleman who was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar in 600 BC
  - God gave Daniel the ability to interpret prophetic dreams for the king
    - At one point, Daniel wrote a prophetic book in Aramaic, the language of the Babylonian empire
      - The book included a prophecy that a Messiah would one day arrive for Israel and the world
      - Daniel gave the date of that arrival in Daniel 9:24-27
    - So nearly 600 years before the arrival of the Christ child, Daniel gave the astrologers in the Babylonian court the precise timing for the Messiah's arrival
  - Why would the astrologers care to remember Daniel's words or pay heed to them?
    - At one point in his service to the king, Daniel comes to the aid of all the astrologers
    - The king has a dream that no astrologer could interpret, and so the king threatened to kill all of the magi
    - Daniel comes to their rescue and interprets the dream given to the king
      - As a result Daniel becomes the head of the astrologers
      - As a result Daniel establishes worship of Jehovah within this court and directs them to anticipate the arrival of the Messiah in the appointed year

- So now we know why generations of astrologers from generation to generation would have known to watch for the Messiah's arrival
  - The Lord gave the magi the date for the arrival through Daniel
    - They anticipated the Lord's arrival and were ready to receive Him
  - But how did they know that the star was their sign to follow to Jesus?
    - The prophecy Daniel gave never said anything about a star
    - The answer to that riddle comes even earlier in OT history
- Daniel wasn't the first Biblical character to serve in the court of astrologers in Babylon
  - Another prophet - a decidedly less honorable man - served thousands of years before Daniel
    - A prophet named Balaam who lived in Mesopotamia is featured in an early episode in the history of Israel
  - While the nation wandered in the wilderness in a land named Moab, the king of Moab, Balaam, hired a magi from Babylon to curse the Israelites
    - The king knew that the sorcerers of Babylon had great spiritual power
    - So he paid Balaam to curse Israel in the hope of defeating them in battle
  - The Lord prevents Balaam from speaking evil against His chosen people
    - Instead, God forces Balaam to speak blessings upon Israel rather than curses, and the blessings Balaam speaks goes this way

**Num. 24:16** The oracle of him who hears the words of God,  
And knows the knowledge of the Most High,  
Who sees the vision of the Almighty,  
Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered.

**Num. 24:17** "I see him, but not now;  
I behold him, but not near;  
A star shall come forth from Jacob,  
A scepter shall rise from Israel,  
And shall crush through the forehead of Moab,  
And tear down all the sons of Sheth.

- The prophecy of Balaam says that a star will come forth from Jacob, meaning from the Jewish people
  - And this star (or scepter) will rise from Israel
    - The Babylonian magi were told by one of their own to watch for the rise of the King of the Jews to be announced by a star
    - This star or scepter would rise from Israel to mark the arrival of this King
  - So the court of magi were told both the date of the Messiah's arrival and the sign in the sky to watch for
    - So when the year arrived, the magi must have become especially attentive to the sky
    - And then when the Shechinah glory of God appeared in the east they knew what they were seeing
    - And as they followed, it led them to the young Christ child
- Is it amazing the way God works to reveal Himself to us over centuries and through the most unlikely of circumstances?
  - He can influence men from across history and even use the most ungodly nations to produce praise for His goodness and power
    - But at the center of all that God does is His word
    - The Magi knew to find the Messiah, to find God in the form of a baby, because they knew God's word
      - They knew the word God gave to Balaam
      - They knew the word God gave to Daniel
    - And then they made a decision to believe that word, to trust God's promises and to follow what they heard until they encountered the living Lord
      - And then they worshipped Him as God
  - That's our opportunity tonight and everyday
    - We can know the truth about God and about His Son, Jesus
    - And we can know it in the same way the Magi did

- Not through supernatural displays in the sky
  - That time has come and gone in God's plan
- Rather we can know it by reading and understanding God's word
  - We can read that:

[John 3:16](#) "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

[John 3:17](#) "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

- And

[Rom. 5:6](#) For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

[Rom. 5:7](#) (For rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person perhaps someone might possibly dare to die.)

[Rom. 5:8](#) But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[Rom. 5:9](#) Much more then, because we have now been declared righteous by his blood, we will be saved through him from God's wrath.

- And

[Rom. 10:9](#) that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;

[Rom. 10:10](#) for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

- These instructions are the word given to us by God Himself
  - He holds open an opportunity for each of us to enter into His presence upon our death in a future day, just as the magi entered into Christ's presence so many years ago
    - And like those men, we enter by obeying the call of God in His word
    - They heard about a star, and obeyed and worshipped
    - We have heard about the man Jesus...have you obey and followed and worshipped?