

## **“Wise Men Still Seek Him”**

Matthew 2:1-12

Though he had no children of his own, 37 year old John Henry Hopkins enjoyed the childlike spirit of the Christmas season he saw in observing his nephews and nieces. He was a brilliant scholar with a law degree who also went to seminary to serve in the Episcopal church. He was also a writer for a local newspaper. In 1857, he wanted to do something special for his brother's children at Christmas and he decided to give them a present that would be both entertaining as well as educational. So Hopkins sat down at his desk, took a pen in hand, and began to write a tribute to the wise men from the East who are described here in Matthew 2. He tried to imagine what it might have been like to be one of the wise men. And though it was largely a work of imagination, the song that he came up with as a gift to his nieces and nephews is now sung far and wide every Christmas.

*We three kings of Orient are  
Bearing gifts we traverse afar,  
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,  
Following yonder star.  
Star of wonder, star of light,  
Star with royal beauty bright,  
Westward leading, still proceeding,  
Guide us to thy perfect light.*

When you take into consideration both Luke's as well as Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus Christ, we find every social class represented. The shepherds represent the poor, those who may be overlooked by the rest of society. Yet Jesus was born for the lower class. Mary and Joseph represent the middle class, those who are not among the most poor, but are certainly not among the

wealthiest either. Jesus was born for the middle class. The wise men mentioned here in Matthew 2 are well-to-do men from the east. Technically, they were not 'kings.' And technically, the text nowhere says that there were three. (I heard that there were really four, but one was turned away because he brought a fruitcake.) Seriously, they represent the upper class, the wealthy among society. Jesus was born for the upper class.

It all illustrates that Jesus is Savior of all people, no matter what class they are in. In a day where social classes and racial ethnicities are being pitted against one another, this is good news. In the passage, we find at the birth of Christ:

- wise men who were searching
- opposition that was satanic
- gifts that were symbolic

But what I want to emphasize is that the wise men are not Jews, but Gentiles. And in that sense they represent the nations of the world who will all one day come and worship the Lord Jesus.

**Psalm 86:8-10—“There is none like You, O Lord, nor are there any works like Yours. All the nations You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, and shall glorify Your name.”**

As the King of Kings, Jesus is Lord of the nations. And at the appointed time, the nations of the world will bow before Him and honor His name. Philippians 2:10 says, “At the name of Jesus every knee will bow—of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” And what we see represented in

the wise men from the east here in Matthew 2 prefigures that future promise. Notice with me first of all:

### **1 – The TRUTH the wise men were seeking (2:1-2)**

*“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, 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.’”*

#### **Their identity** (v. 1a)

The wise men are a standard feature in the nativity story. They adorn our nativity sets and appear on our Christmas cards. Yet there is not really a whole lot that we know about them. We are not told anything in particular about what nation they were from, or what nationality they were for that matter. The text refers to ‘wise men from the east.’

**“Wise Men”** — *literally the ‘magos’ which refers to those who have wisdom through investigation and interpretation of the movements of heavenly bodies*

It was a term used in reference to oriental philosophers and advisers. Verse 1 says that they came from the east, or from the Persian territory in what was once Babylon and now modern day Iraq and Iran.

**A.T. Robertson** — *“Here in Matthew the idea seems to be rather that of astrologers. Babylon was the home of astrology, but we only know that the men were from the east whether Arabia, Babylon, Persia, or elsewhere.”*

Only one other book in the Bible mentions the Magi and associates them with a position of governmental influence. The book of Daniel refers to ‘wise men’ and

suggests that they were among the highest ranking officials in all of the Babylonian empire, and even later in the Medo-Persian empire.

**Daniel 2:48—“The king promoted Daniel and gave him many great gifts; and he made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief administrator over all the wise men of Babylon.”**

Daniel, because of the godly man that he was, came to be highly respected by the Magi or wise men of Babylon. He even became their chief administrator. And from what we know about Daniel, it is clear that he was outspoken in his faith. Daniel had famously interpreted the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar in which a stone, cut out without human hands, struck the image at its feet and destroyed it. And Daniel had received the vision of One like a Son of Man receiving an everlasting kingdom from the Most High, one that will never pass away.

For all we know, it could very well be that because of his witness, the eastern magi came to learn much about the character and purposes of the God of Israel.

Your witness for Jesus matters more than you think it does! People are watching you, listening to you, observing you.

**Their interest** (v. 1b-2a)

While their identity may be somewhat of a mystery, the fact that they are interested in finding the King of the Jews is quite evident. Their interest is seen through the questions that they ask. They are interested in the whereabouts of the One who had been born King of the Jews, for they had seen His star in the east. It is the very first question asked in the New Testament, and it is a very good question. In fact, it ought to be the very first question that every person

should ask, “Where is the King? How can I find the King?” In all the stuff of life, how can I keep Jesus foremost?

**Isaiah 55:6—“Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near.”**

Just what was it that had peaked their interest? It was the appearance of a star. You may remember from a few years ago what was called the great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, what many have called the ‘Christmas star.’ It was the closest that the two planets had been in more than 800 years, which caused them to be very bright in the night sky just after sunset. While it certainly is remarkable, I am not convinced that it is what happened here. I am of the belief that what these magi saw in the east was a supernatural occurrence. It was fulfillment of prophecy:

**Numbers 24:17—“A Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel.”**

This coming King who was spoken of in Numbers would be associated with the appearance of a star, and the text goes on to describe how this King would have dominion and will deliver His people from the grip of the enemy. The nations of the world bow before Him. The psalmist writes about it in many of the psalms. The prophet Isaiah had something to say about this:

**Isaiah 60:1-6—“Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; but the Lord will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you. The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see: they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and**

**your daughters shall be nursed at your side. Then you shall see and become radiant, and your heart shall swell with joy; because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the Gentiles shall come to you. The multitude of camels shall cover your land, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and incense, and they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord.”**

Isaiah’s prophecy foretold that the Gentiles would one day come to the light of God’s people, and that these Gentiles would bring riches and gifts for the purpose of worship. So God’s global agenda is seen in the Magi’s arrival. Here is one who is born to be King, one who is destined to receive the kingdom. He will be the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham to bring blessing to the nations.

#### **Their intention** (v. 2b)

The wise men reveal their intention for traveling all the way to Jerusalem—they had come to worship. And it is yet one more fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.

*“For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”*

Every person is a worshiper at heart. Nowhere will you find a human being who does not worship. By our very design, you and I have been wired to worship. And apart from faith in Jesus Christ, humanity is in total darkness and worships idols. As things stand now, the nations are in darkness and worship the things they make with their own hands. Satan tries to keep the nations in that darkness. But the gospel is good news for the nations of the world, wonderful news for every man, woman, boy, and girl!

**Matthew 4:16—“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”**

The fact that these Magi have come to worship the new King testifies to Christ's deity. They understand through God's revelation that Christ was no ordinary baby, but was One who was uniquely deserving of worship. He is God in the flesh, deity wrapped in humanity. Therefore, the only appropriate response to Christ is worship and submission and obedience. Jesus puts the whole world in a corner by virtue of who He is. There is no neutrality, there is no riding the fence when it comes to Jesus. The truth of who Jesus is demands that a decision be made. Notice secondly:

## **2—The TROUBLE the wise men encountered (2:3-8)**

*“When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 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.’ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 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.’”*

The journey of these wise men brings them to Jerusalem and to the palace of King Herod. A star had brought them from the east all the way to Judea, and once they arrive, they go to the most logical place where a king would be found. They had not reckoned with the fact that the new king whose kingdom had been

foretold by Israel's prophets was also the Suffering Servant prophesied in the book of Isaiah. And so they come to the conclusion that the end of their journey is the palace in Jerusalem. However, the king they find there is not the infant King, but an illegitimate king who had assumed the throne for himself.

#### Herod's concern (v. 3)

*"When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him."*

**"Troubled"** — word is *'tarasso'* and means to be agitated or stirred up (used of the pool of Bethesda in John 5:7)

Unlike the wise men, not everyone is as enthusiastic about worshiping Christ and giving their allegiance to Him as the King. There perhaps has never been a more wicked man than Herod the Great. Both the New Testament as well as secular history reveals much about him. He was a great builder who built many exquisite buildings in his day, yet he was also a very insecure man who was always suspicious of someone who might compete for his throne. However, the throne wasn't even his. Herod was an Idumean or a descendant of Esau. He was a usurper, a Roman puppet king who had no legitimate claim to the Davidic throne.

History tells us that his insecurity led him to have his own wife killed. He had his mother-in-law killed. He even had his sons killed. The Jewish historian Josephus stated that Herod was so concerned no one would mourn his death that he commanded a large group of distinguished men to come, and he gave an order that they be killed at the time of his death so that displays of grief that he craved for himself would take place.

Now, when you come to the palace and ask, "Where is the new king?" Rest assured that it is going to upset the one who is sitting on the throne. To hear that



someone who is born King of the Jews was troublesome news to him for he had bought that title from Rome for himself. Jesus was a threat to Herod because Herod grasped what was at stake in the birth of Jesus. If what the wise men were saying was true, it meant that Israel's true and rightful King had been born and Herod himself could be deposed. Herod only had two options—surrender or resist. Under his rule Jerusalem was dominated by a culture of fear. So you can imagine how upset the city would be as visitors from the east arrive asking about a new king.

Jesus is a real threat to anyone and everyone who wants to reserve the right to run his or her own life. If Jesus is King, it means you are not. If He is to be enthroned, self must be dethroned. Just like Herod, many do not welcome the news that the real King has come, because it means that they have to vacate the throne. If you want to be king, yet someone else comes along saying that he is the king, then one of you has to give in. Two kings cannot occupy the same throne. Only one can sit in the place of absolute rule and it is not me. Jesus said:

**Luke 6:46—“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?”**

**Luke 14:33—“So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”**

As Lord, he calls for an allegiance that is so supreme that it makes all other commitments look weak by comparison. It is a claim of absolute authority that is binding on my life, a summons to unconditional surrender. There are no hidden corners of the heart that are off limits to Him. And yet such a claim of lordship triggers a resistance within us. Deep in the human heart is an impulse that says, “No one can tell me what to do.” It is ingrained in us from birth.

### Herod's counselors (v. 4-6)

*“And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born...”*

Pay attention to the fact that Herod's men know what the Scriptures said. In fact, they even quote Micah 5:2 which predicted Christ's birth in Bethlehem. Prophecy could not have been any clearer. Israel's true King was to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. The wise men have traveled hundreds of miles because they know the King has been born, yet those who lived only six miles away were numb and indifferent to it all. It must have been a real head scratcher for these wise men. How could these religious scholars who had such access to information about Christ have no interest in finding Him? It would be amazing if it were not all too familiar—able people, with access to the Bible, but indifferent to what it actually said. A small band of pagans put Jerusalem's scholars to open shame.

Let me tell you, the church is full of people who know what the Bible says, but they are indifferent. They've grown cold and calloused in their hearts. If Herod represents those who are antagonistic to the lordship of Jesus, these chief priests represent those who are apathetic to Him. They know what Scripture says about Him, but the weight of it has not gripped their hearts. Unlike the wise men, their lives are not motivated by the truth of who Jesus is. It had become 'second-hand' truth to them. They have a shallow and superficial attachment to religion.

Sadly, where there is abundance of truth, you will also find a boredom with truth. When the truth of Christ becomes commonplace and familiar, our spiritual fires need to be stoked and revival is necessary. It is not enough to simply know the

truth from a factual standpoint. It is not enough that I can recount all the characters of the Christmas story. It is not enough that I may know all the right things to say. A person's heart and life must be changed and gripped by truth. Herod's concern, Herod's counsellors, then notice:

### **Herod's craftiness** (v. 7-8)

*"Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 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.'"*

Herod sends the wise men on to Bethlehem, but if he and his counselors were truly interested in worshiping Christ, they would have accompanied the wise men on the six mile trip there. Herod had no intention of bowing to the King but only of preserving his own little kingdom.

**Matthew 15:8—“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.”**

Actions speak louder than words! Jesus said that not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord' to Him will enter the kingdom, but only the one who does the will of the Father who is in heaven. Then notice in the last place:

### **3—The TREASURES the wise men present (2:9-12)**

*"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. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 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. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.”*

After a brief detour in Jerusalem, the wise men eventually make it to Bethlehem where Joseph and Mary had been all along. The birth of Jesus had already taken place, and the little family is in a borrowed house. It was a strange scene for these men who were used to seeing royalty born in the lap of luxury. Here was the King of Kings, but there was no fanfare or red carpet rolled out for Him. Even the scholars who knew what the Bible said about Him weren't there.

**Sinclair Ferguson** — *“Knowing the Bible is not the same thing as entering the kingdom of God...The humility of God left these religious men cold. Humility always does that to the proud and self-sufficient. They are not drawn to humble places, or humble babies, far less a humble Savior. Yet all this is in keeping with the character of God.”*

These 'kings' from the east are given a lesson about true royalty from heaven's perspective. They are privileged to witness firsthand what the apostle would later write about:

**Philippians 2:5-8**—**“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bond-servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself...”**

Everything about the Lord's life is borrowed. He made His entrance into our world through a borrowed womb. He had been laid in a borrowed manger. The wise men now find Him in a borrowed house. More than thirty years later, He will be crucified to a borrowed cross and laid in a borrowed tomb. Wrapped in

borrowed clothes at His birth, and He is wrapped in borrowed clothes at His death. And the idea behind it all is that though He is a King, He is willing and has come to suffer in the place of others.

The Bible says that these wise men brought gifts with them to present to the King. Don't you find it a bit ironic that the only gifts that were given on the first Christmas were given to Jesus alone? Notice what the Magi present to Jesus as a gift—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The stanzas of the hymn 'We Three Kings' drive home a point about each of the gifts. For instance, the second stanza says:

*Born a king on Bethlehem's plain  
**Gold** I bring to crown Him again,  
King forever, ceasing never,  
Over us all to reign.*

**Gold is a gift fit for a king** (v. 11a)

In our lost condition, just like Herod, a man likes to think that he reserves the right to run his own life. He wants to live and do however he pleases. In the words of Invictus, "It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate—I am the captain of my soul." In his rebellious heart, he thinks of no one but himself and his own sinful inclinations. The gift of gold is a gift fit for a King, and here it reveals that Jesus has come to **rule** us. Is He ruling and reigning over your heart presently? That is the number one issue.

In the third stanza, the song says:

***Frankincense** to offer have I;  
Incense owns a Deity nigh;*

*Prayer and praising, voices raising,  
Worshipping God on high.*

**Frankincense is a gift fit for a priest** (v. 11b)

In the Old Testament, frankincense was a fragrance that was used in grain offerings in the temple. Before the offering was given in worship, it was applied to ensure a sweet smelling aroma. Origen, the church father, said that frankincense was the incense of deity. It was stored in a special chamber in front of the Temple and was sprinkled on offerings as a symbol of the people's desire to please the Lord. The gift of frankincense reveals that Jesus has come to **represent** us.

**Hebrews 4:15—“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”**

We have a sympathetic Priest in heaven who understands and cares. He knows what it is like to hurt. He knows what it is like to be human. He knows what it means to suffer and be destitute. This brings great confidence to our lives.

The fourth stanza says:

***Myrrh** is mine, its bitter perfume  
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;  
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,  
Sealed in the stone cold tomb.*

**Myrrh is a gift fit for a sacrifice** (v. 11c)

Of all three gifts presented to Jesus, this gift would have been the most perplexing. Myrrh was an antiseptic that was used to embalm the dead. When

mixed with wine, it was also an anesthetic. It was a fragrance that would often be applied to a body before burial.

This would have been a strange gift indeed to give a baby! Imagine someone coming to your infant child's birthday with funeral flowers as a gift. Strange indeed, but it is not so strange when you consider the purpose for which Christ came. The fragrance of death surrounded His life. He was born to die for the sins of the world. There's the shadow of Calvary's cross falls upon the scene of Bethlehem's stable. Our salvation required His perfect life be offered up in our place. And His sacrifice will not be in vain. Listen to what the apostle John wrote when given a vision of the title deed of the earth that belongs to the Lamb:

**Revelation 5:6-10—“And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain... And He went and took the scroll from the right hand of Him who was seated on the throne...And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are You to take the scroll and to open its seals, for You were slain, and by Your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.’”**

The gift of myrrh reveals that Jesus has come to redeem us. He died to save us from our sin, but a dead Savior could not save anyone if He remained dead. Christ was raised to life again! The last stanza of the song says:

*Glorious now behold Him arise;  
King and God and sacrifice;  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah,  
Sounds throughout the earth and skies!*

Thank God for the final stanza of the gospel, for without it, there would be no hope for you and me. Jesus is alive and well and is coming again! He rules and reigns as King, and we will rule and reign with Him.

What does all of this mean for us? Two things before I finish:

- **The nations of the world are the inheritance of Jesus**

God's ultimate purpose in redemption involves redeeming for Himself worshipers from every nation. He promised Abraham that through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. God longs for and He is deserving of the worship of nations. Again, the psalmist:

**Psalm 2:7-9—“I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to Me, ‘You are My Son; today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will made the nations Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”**

**Psalm 86:9—“All the nations You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, and shall glorify Your name.”**

The Bible presents us with the story of a God who is on mission, and He will not stop until the bride of Jesus Christ is complete, made up of every ethnic group, who will one day gather around the throne of the Lamb.

- **The nations of the world are the mission field of the church**

The church has a purpose, and every individual Christian is included. That purpose is to be a missionary vehicle to the nations of the world. It is not so much that God has a mission for His church in the world but that God has a church for His mission in the world. Missions were not made for the church.



Rather, the church was made for missions. You and I are God's missionary people. There are two passages in Scripture that unmistakably make this point—John 20:21 and Matthew 28:18-20.

**John 20:21 — “As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you.”**

Just as God the Father sent Jesus on a ministry of mercy to the world, so God the Son sends His disciples out as His ministers of mercy to the world. Without exception, every last one of us who know the Lord Jesus has been sent as His ambassadors into the world. I've quoted it before, but Spurgeon said that every Christian is either a missionary or an imposter.

**Matthew 28:18-20 — “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”**

He tells His disciples what to do, where to do it, and how to do it. He brackets His command with promises of His power and presence. He has the authority to send us into the world on mission. And this is a world-wide task with profound implications for our lives. He wants to use you, no matter your age or vocation or background. A simple reading of the book of Acts reveals that the church grows through the witness of ordinary men and women just like us.

Verse 12 says, “And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.” In other words, they came to Jesus one way, but they left another. Isn't that what He does best? A genuine encounter with Him leads to a changed direction in life. What a stark contrast we find in these verses when we look at the lives of the wise men versus the lives of

Herod and his scholars. The difference is seen in the way they each respond to Christ the King. Herod and his men lived their lives without Christ, for power and the accumulation of wealth, and that's no way to live and it is certainly no way to die. Wise men still seek the King, while fools ignore Him. Friends, the question, "Who is King?" demands an answer. We all have a choice to make. What might yours be?