

The Making of HIStory: God Uses the Wise

DECEMBER 25, 2022

PREPARATION

▶ STUDY

Spend the week studying Matthew 2:1-23. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools to enhance your preparation.

▶ PRAY

Pray for our pastors and this week's message, the upcoming group time, your group members and their openness to God's Word.

▶ LANDING POINT

God uses those who seek after Him to play a role in His great story.

GROUP DISCUSSION

▶ **CONFIDENTIALITY** | What's said in the group stays in the group.

▶ **NO CROSS-TALK** | Be considerate of others as they share. Refrain from side conversations and texting during group time.

▶ **NO FIXING** | We are not in the group to fix each other. Jesus does that part.

▶ **SHARING** | Be sensitive to the amount of time you share. Don't talk too much or too little. Every person brings something valuable to the group.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

A ROLE TO PLAY

Like any great story, the story of Jesus's birth includes admirable heroes, detestable villains, and intriguing supporting characters who played a role in moving the story forward. There were also events and obstacles to overcome that added suspense and tension to the drama that unfolded as the Son of God entered our world.

This week we are going to look at a group of supporting characters who played an important role in God's extraordinary salvation story. The Magi (or "wise men") were not Jewish, and they were likely "adept in any of a number of secret arts, including dream interpretation, mediation of divine messages, astrology, fortune-telling, magic, and divination." Hardly the kind of characters you would expect to seek after the one, true God of the Jews. And yet these men came from a long distance to honor and worship a child believed to be the king of the Jews, the long-awaited answer to prophecy.

God can use anyone for His purposes in His extraordinary salvation story. This week we're going to look at the Magi from the story of Jesus's birth and discuss how God uses those who seek Him to play a role in His great story.

Q: *Share about an unlikely person God has used in your life to shape your faith.*

DEEPER DIVE

THE SIGN OF A STAR

One of the greatest phenomena surrounding the birth of Jesus was the star that guided the Magi to where Jesus was. In the ancient Near East, the movement of planets, stars, comets, meteors, etc. was often recognized as a divine sign. Being from the East and adept at reading signs and understanding prophecies among religions, these Magi likely would have connected the star they saw with a prophecy from the Old Testament by Balaam, another Gentile diviner.

I see him, but not now;

I behold him, but not near.

A star will come out of Jacob;

a scepter will rise out of Israel.

He will crush the foreheads of Moab,

the skulls of all the people of Sheth.

Numbers 24:17

Let's take a closer look at the role the Magi played in Jesus's story; we want to see that their seeking after God shows us personally how to honor and worship the true Savior-King.

Q: *Have a few volunteers read Matthew 2:1-23 aloud. Where do you see God's sovereign control over the events that take place in this passage?*

Q: *What are the prophecies mentioned by Matthew in this passage? What makes them significant to the Jews? How do they point to Jesus?*

Q: *Share about a time when God worked through the events of your life to reveal something of Himself to you.*

REFLECTION AND NEXT STEPS

HOW DO THE MAGI APPLY TO US?

What do we learn from the Magi and how does it apply to us today? Three important applications from this week's story help us to see Jesus and the way God works.

1. *A heart that seeks after Jesus is one that honors and worships Him.* The Magi traveled a long distance and risked their lives to see Jesus. To what lengths are you willing to go with your life to honor and worship Jesus?
2. *Nothing can thwart God from accomplishing His purposes.* Herod tried and failed. Where is God working to accomplish His purposes? How could you join Him in His work?
3. *No matter who you are or where you have come from, you have a role to play in God's extraordinary salvation story.* God's story continues today, and He is working through His people, the Church, to bring people to honor and worship Jesus as the Savior-King. Who are the people you can help lead to Jesus?

Q: *What are some ways you could personally increase your honor and worship of Jesus?*

Q: *Where around you do you see God working, and how might you join Him in His work?*

Q: *Who is someone you have been praying for to know Jesus personally? How could you utilize this Christmas season to engage with them and share more about Jesus with them?*

Q: *How can the group be praying for you this week?*

COMMENTARY

When was Jesus Born?

"How long after Jesus' birth these events take place is unknown. The birth itself is probably to be dated around the year 6 b.c. A comparison of vv. 7 and 16 suggests that perhaps one to two years have elapsed since Jesus' birth. Verse 11 describes Joseph and Mary now living in a house, so they obviously have left their temporary lodgings described in Luke 2:7. From other historical materials we know that Herod died in 4 b.c. (The calendrical confusion was caused by the switch from a Roman to a Christian calendar in the sixth century a.d., based on the faulty calculations of Dionysius Exiguus, who did not have accurate information about the time of Herod's death.) Jesus' birth itself almost certainly did not occur on December 25. This date became attached to the celebration of Christmas later because it coincided with a Roman holiday known as Saturnalia, when Christians had time off work to worship. Perhaps Jesus was born in the spring when shepherds would have been watching their flocks by night because lambs might be born (Luke 2:8)."

More on the Star and the Journey of the Magi

"The wise men would likely have been familiar with OT prophecy through interaction with Jews in Babylon, and they may have remembered Balaam's prophecy that "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Num. 24:17). This was understood by Jews to point to a messianic deliverer (e.g., Dead Sea Scrolls, Damascus Document 7.18–21; Testimonia 9–13). The movement of the star (Matt. 2:9) suggests that it is not a natural phenomenon (e.g., a comet, supernova, or conjunction of planets) but was supernatural, perhaps a guiding angel that appeared as a star, or perhaps some specially created heavenly phenomenon that had the brightness of a star.

The wise men likely traveled with a large number of attendants and guards for the long journey, which would have taken several weeks. For example, if they had come from Babylon by the main trade route of about 800 miles (1,288 km),

averaging 20 miles (32 km) per day, the trip would have taken about 40 days.”

The Gifts of the Magi

“Gifts fit for a king but not necessarily having additional symbolism. There may, however, be an allusion to Isa 60, with its picture of foreigners, including kings, streaming to Jerusalem along with their great wealth (including gold) in the age to come. Frankincense (an aromatic resin) and myrrh (a similar fragrant spice) appear in Song 3:6 as desired spices sold by traveling merchants. We are not told how many Magi came; the tradition that there were three probably arose from the mention of three gifts.”

ENDNOTES:

1. Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 679.
2. Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 61–62.
3. Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1822.
4. D. A. Carson, “The Gospels and Acts,” in *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 1702.