

THE WISDOM OF THE WISE MEN

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Matthew 2:1-12. In a few days now on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning depending on your family tradition we will open gifts. That is if we took the time to get any. Some of you may be later in getting your Christmas shopping done than others. Others of you may join with me in the Christmas Eve rush.

The practice of giving gifts comes from God himself who gave us at Christmas time his Son. The practice of giving gifts also derives from these wise men who give to the Lord quality gifts and thoughtful gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh – expressing their attitudes of kingship and priesthood and death.

Myrrh an embalming ointment given to a baby. Strange gifts. But meaningful, thoughtful, quality.

The historical existence of these wise men challenge has been raised to from time to time. I noticed in the *LA Times* a week ago the religion editor made a comment on a leading evangelical scholar, Dr. Gundry. Dr Gundry recently has published a commentary on Matthew in which he talks about the wise men and interprets the story in a somewhat different way. He is a person I greatly respect. But I differ with him in his assessment of this story. He indicates that Matthew is more of a theologian than a historian when it comes to this particular account. That Matthew is not so much writing history as he is constructing theology. And that what Matthew has done has become intrigued by the Old Testament verse in Numbers 24 when Balaam prophesies that a star will arise out of Jacob. Therefore Matthew takes this verse to be transposed here to an incident in which rather than reporting the visits of the shepherds, the common folk, Matthew transfuses the story of the shepherds and changes it into the story of wise men showing the universal appeal of Jesus to people, that the story is a theological story and not an historical story. An that the early church would have surely understood this just as contemporary churches know when they listen to preachers when a preacher is telling a story and when a preacher is telling a truth. The theology therefore of the story is the universalness of Jesus and his right to be worshipped.

My problem with that particular viewpoint is once you demythologize a story, that is once you take a story such as this and say that the gospel writers are not writing history, they are writing theology. It is an artful invention to communicate a point. Then the slide begins and all stories become open before the claim that they are theology rather than history. And ultimately the resurrection itself become simply the viewpoint of the early church divorced from historical reality.

I know Dr. Gundry is not saying that. But I'm concerned about that slide. That once we take an incident that the gospel simply presents to us as straight out historical narrative which necessitates the death of babies. Once we dispense with that and say that it's an invention of a writer we're on thin ice when it comes to the scripture.

That's not to say that we know everything about the wise men, by the way. There's a lot of things we don't know about these people. We don't even know how many there were. We assume that there were three because all of our Christmas cards and posters tell us there were

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three. And every Christmas pageant you've ever seen has had three. But the scripture doesn't tell us there were three. We assume that because there were three gifts given. But two people could have given three gifts. Or four or six for all that matters. We're not sure where they were from specifically. Matthew says that they were from the east. But the east is anything east from Jerusalem. It could have been Arabia. It could have been as far away as ancient Persia, not modern Iran, which would seem to accord well with the idea that in ancient Persia there were indeed many astrologers which these men were. We'll talk about that shortly.

We not only do not know how many they were or where specifically they came from. We don't know how old Jesus was when they came. We do know that he was no longer in a manger. Matthew tells us he was in a house. We guess that he was under two years of age because Herod had all the babies that were two years of age and under killed. But anybody who knows anything about Herod from history knows that he was a very suspicious soul and had three of his own sons murdered because he feared they would take over his throne. So Jesus could have been a month old and he could, as paranoid as he was, simply ordered everybody killed up to two years of age because he didn't want to take any chances. We're not sure how old Jesus was when the wise men came.

We're not specifically sure perhaps of the nature of the star that guided them. In fact, there's been some discussion of this. Some think it may have been a bright shooting star that flamed across the sky. Other think of it perhaps as a comet. An object which moves in a regular orbit around the sun which become intensely bright at various times. Haley's comet for example, every 77 years appears to human view. And it would have appeared in 11 B.C. but that was a little early.

Some have said that since the wise men were astrologers. They looked into the heavens and saw a unique planetary grouping and that became "the stars." Since the ancients thought of planets as stars. And indeed the Christian astronomer, Johan Kepler, was noting the course of the heaven, studying in 1604. He noticed that as 1603 had come to a close that Jupiter and Saturn two of the slower moving planets were in conjunction with one another. Then as 1604 proceeded that Mars came alongside and a triple alignment with Jupiter and Saturn. While he was looking into the heavens on October 10th, 1604 Kepler saw this triple alignment as well as a bright nova, a star that momentarily burns with tremendous intensity appear in the alignment. This set Kepler to thinking about the Christmas star. So he suggested the triple alignment of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn and came to the conclusion that this happens every 805 years and that it had happened in 6 B.C. which would have been right about the time of the birth of Christ. Somewhere between 6 ad 4 B.C. would have taken place.

Of course you know that the Lord wasn't born in zero B.C.. Post century calendars got it all goofed up and he was actually born several years before he was born! Kepler's guess was that it was perhaps in this unique alignment of planetary object that the wise men initially had their impulse to go find out what it was that had happened. That something had happened in the house of the Hebrews.

A number of years ago we went as a family o the Griffith park planetarium. Sometime at Christmas they have a Christmas show in which they project onto the dome the alignment of the heavens at the time of the birth of Christ. Of course, in the presentation they were attempting to explain what the Christmas star might have been. They went through this theory of Kepler,'s which I just talked about as the possible clue of what the wise men had followed.

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When we came out of the program, Evangeline who then was about 5 or 6 years of age, I looked over to her and she was crying, very upset; I wondered what could possibly be wrong. I said, "Honey, what's wrong?" She said, "The Bible says there was a star. I believe it was a special star." I said to her – all of a sudden it was like the Holy Spirit said, "I think you're right. It says in Matthew that the star stood over the place where he was." Maybe it was the alignment of the planets that got them moving if they were in Persia. But we do know that there was some special spotlight kind of a star that highlighted even the house that he was. This is Matthew's story.

Just that little background, we don't get a lot of spiritual riches out of that do we. It's just good information. What can we apply from this story? That's what I'm looking for. There are three great truths that this event of the wise men teach us.

First, they could not remain where they were with the knowledge they had. Granted it was a knowledge given to them while looking at the heavens and granted that most likely they were astrologers – Magi – and we get as Christians a little bit nervous about this because we know that the Bible speaks against astrology. Yet here are people looking into the heavens and seeing a sign and they're astrologers. What do we do with this?

We say that God who is the God of all men, the God of all women, looks with hunger upon the human race to see where there are people who might search after him. And even within their religious systems, he will draw them if their heart is willing to be drawn. That's precisely what happens. Because whatever information they were using, after a while runs out. And by the time they've got to the capital of the Jews, Jerusalem they don't know where he is and it's the scripture, Micah, that informs them where he would be born. Then when they find Jesus they are led by stars no longer.

A faithful guide communicated to them within their system in terms which they could understand and brought them to the scriptures and brought them to Christ. God can save people even in astrology. The wise men are examples of that.

But they acted upon that knowledge. They didn't just say, looking up in the heavens, we think something's going on but let's not do anything about it. They got on their camels or whatever they got on and they made that trek across desert in order to find him. They took time and they took pains to seek out where he would be. How different they are from the theological experts. Herod has had his religious advisors called scribes. These were people who were skilled in understanding what we know to be the Old Testament. God's word to his people Israel. When they were asked where is he that is going to be born they weren't relying on information from a star. They relied on information from the scripture. They knew where it was. Micah 5:2. "Thou Bethlehem of Judea, the smallest among the towns of Ephrathah of thee will come a ruler." They knew that scripture. But they didn't act upon it. They had the information but they sat there. They never came and worshipped. They never came and gave gifts. The wise men acted.

You may be able to give mental and intellectual assent to a whole set of doctrinal creeds. But if you're not acting upon what you know you have not yet really begun to worship him.

Have you acted upon the information that God has given you about Jesus? Have you at this Christmas time committed your life to him? If you are a believer have you become the kind of

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believer who has gone into a state of retirement in regard to your faith and are sort of sitting in a chair until Jesus comes? Or have you felt his message and his heartbeat and what he's saying to you about involvement in his work and in his world and with people and his church. Are you willing and are you ready to act upon knowledge which you have?

The great significance of the wise men is they acted.

A second beautiful truth about the wise men is that they did not lose sight of the goal even when they lost sight of the star.

They lost sight of the star. By the time they got to Jerusalem, they were in doubt. They didn't know where it was. The star which they had seen earlier which had appeared to them while they were in the east had at least told them to get to the place where the Jewish people were. But they somewhere along that journey had lost sight of it. It no longer had appeared to them. But they kept going.

I think of that in reference to just life and how God appears to us. That there appears to be special moments in our life where above all other moments we feel and sense the presence of the Lord. Then there appear to be after that long desert expanse through which we trek when there is no revelation, no voice, no special comfort, no special presence. That is often a confusing time for a person, a time to say, I know God spoke to me then but where is he now? Should I keep going?

The beauty about these wise men is that even though they lost sight of the star, they did not lose track of their goal. They were on their way to meet him.

When we began to take up this whole business of relocation several years ago, we sensed especially the Lord's will in this. We were guided by a real witness from him. But I would be lying if I said to you that there haven't been moment in these last couple of years when I have wondered, Did God really speak? I looked at what was yet to be done and the task seemed so enormous and the resources seemed so small. I kept reminding myself of that favorite sermon of mine "How do be a failure. Look at the size of the job. Look at the little bit that you have. And leave the Lord out of the picture. And you'll be a failure every time." The feeding of the 5000. I remind myself of that and have had moments to say, Lord is this really?

Yes! Keep going! No stars, just keep going.

I encourage you, some of you at this Christmas time, and Christmas is a tough time of year for a lot of people. It's a time that if we have painful memories or if there are places of absence at our tables on Christmas, we feel it keenly.

I would encourage you that along with the wise men, if you have lost the star, that you not lose sight of the goal. Paul says "Forgetting the things which are behind, I press on for the upward call of the goal that is in Christ Jesus, my Lord."

We are really fellow travelers with the wise men. We like they haven't seen him either. But on the basis of his appearance, on the basis of the scripture, we too are following after him until we with the wise men shall come one day to see him face to face and fall before him and offer him gifts. This may be a lonely time in your life. This may be a difficult time. This may be a time

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when your family or your marriage is in great stress. And the Lord is saying in the midst of not having some revelation, some special sensitivity of his presence, Keep going. Keep going. Don't lose sight of the goal even if you've lost sight of the star.

Third thing about these wise men that is really significant is that they did not search any more once they had found him.

The search was over when they met Jesus. G. Campbell Morgan the great preacher of an earlier generation said that Christmas impacted the world in three ways Christ's coming is to be contrasted with what sin did to people. Sin distanced us from God. Created a gulf between us and God. Separated from him. Sins made us ignorant of God so we really didn't know who God is and what he has in mind for us. And sin made us unlike God so that in character and in lifestyle we become something other than what God wants. But when Jesus came he reversed all these things. If sin distances us, Jesus brings us to God.

If through sin we have become ignorant of God it is in Jesus who brings us knowledge of God. And he himself says, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." If sin has made us unlike God, Jesus through his life and teaching gives us the opportunity in our moral and ethical life and in our character and the whole matter of eternal life to be like God. To live, to have God's nature dwelling in us. Christ makes that difference for us. And the search is over when we find Jesus. There's no reality in going to holistic psychology apart from Christ or philosophy or materialism or Islam or whatever it might be. We have found him whom we know as life eternal.

When the wise men saw the star, Matthew said, they were overjoyed. I'm struck by how many times that word "joy" occurs in reference to the Christmas event. Elizabeth has her child leap in her womb for joy when she greets Mary. Mary says to Elizabeth, My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior. The angels say to the shepherd, I bring you good news of great joy. The shepherds with joy, glorified and praised God as did Simeon and Anna. When we have found Jesus we are overjoyed.

Our sins are forgiven. There is a God in heaven who loves us and we know that. The gift of eternal life is given us. Overjoyed.

When our search for the Lord is ended we lay our gifts at his feet. We give him our lives and everything we have. Even as did the wise men.

In my first Christmas pastoring this church, I think eleven years ago, after the first full year of serving, we had kind of small Christmas eve service. Small because there weren't many people at that moment to attend it. We had kind of formal time where we asked everybody to bring Jesus a gift. After all, it was his birthday. Let's give him a gift. Be imaginative and think of something you can give Jesus. And remember Jesus isn't here physically to receive it so you'll have to be imaginative and be symbolic.

The service came and everybody came and laid something under a tree. Those who wanted to share what it is they had brought. Some actually had made a gift of finances to the Lord for the work of his church. Others had written little notes to the Lord. Basically saying they were going to do better this year. Others said, Lord there's an area of my life where you haven't been made Lord up until now. But now I'm going to own you as Lord. Be Lord of my life. So they gave that area into the Lord. Very touching. Very meaningful.

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I remember one person standing up to read an area of their life which they had not given to the Lord and tears filled them and us as we heard that proclamation of commitment to the Lord.

One of the things I think was the neatest and most special about that time was a little five or six year old girl she had made something herself. It was a little sheet of paper, which had been folded to look like a Christmas card. She had cut out of red construction paper a heart and glued that onto the paper her words were "Jesus, I give you my heart."

I thought, that's the best Christmas gift of all. Because once we find him that is the response of our life to give him ourselves.

Christina Rosetti said it so well in this poem, "What can I give him poor as I am? If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what can I give him? I'll give him my heart."

Our Father, we close this mornings service by praising and adoring you for sending Jesus to be our savior. We especially, in these moments of prayer remember the example of these wise men. Perhaps, Lord, there are some here who are not acting upon knowledge they have of you. Today you're saying to them, It's time that you get off the parking lot. It's time you left your stationary position of doing nothing with what you know about me. It's time you became involved and act upon knowledge you have. Lord, take that word and for those to whom it is meant, drive it as a deep wedge into our lives so that we will nor be passive in the areas that you have called us to be active. Save us from a Christianity, which simply sits on the bench. Lord, there are others in here who at this Christmas time who are going through great amount of stress and loss and pain. And terrible agony. They have lost sight of the star. But they haven't lost sight of following you. Comfort them Lord, at this time of life when the skies are dark to them. Let them know again in their heart that you will surely bring them through and that you will complete every purpose you have for them. May they keep walking with you, Lord. In the moments when they do not understand why it is that the star has gone out. And let us all, Lord, not search any more now that we have found you. But let us have peace and contentment in your knowing that you have come, the light of our world, the light of our life. We praise you and adore you. Through Christ the Lord we give tanks. Amen.