



**Date:** December 1 - 2, 2018  
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**Scripture:** Gold Represents King – The Three Wisemen

Well, I think we can say that it has started can't we? Now that the monthly calendar has flipped the page to December, we are on the annual run up to Christmas in our society. Thanksgiving is over in the US, so all the mass media advertising attention can focus squarely on December 25. Only twenty-three shopping days left, don't you know?

And my radio station of choice, has now begun the round the clock 24/7 Christmas music which is nice for about, three days, but all month? I never realized how many musicians have covered, Rudolph the Red Noise Reindeer. Christmas lights are going up. Anyone have their Christmas lights up? I did mine last Saturday, you know the day the monsoon hit London. Anyone have the house decorated? Yep. Check. Carolyn hung the stockings and garland around the fireplace. All the nativity scenes have been placed strategically around the house. By strategically, I mean everywhere, that I can accidentally knock them over.

What about a tree? Anyone get their Christmas tree yet? Me too. You know there used to be a time when we would gather the whole family together and set off on an excursion to the local Christmas tree farm. We would scour the lot in mind numbing temperatures. Painstakingly analyzing the shape, formation and the overall robustness of thirty or forty candidates before choosing the tree that was destined for the McIlwraith household that year.

This year, Carolyn sent me off by myself last Saturday. Again, it was during the monsoon. I drove a couple of kilometres to a church in town that was selling pre-cut trees. I eyed up a couple. Chose one. Had it trimmed and bagged. All pretty efficient. It took me twenty minutes max, door to door. I set it up at home but when a few of our children got wind

that we had bypassed the annual tradition of the family Christmas tree hunt, you'd have thought we had committed the unpardonable sin. Why did you get the tree without us? Don't decorate it until we're there? So, we held off until Friday when most of them could be with us to trim the tree and soothe over any hurt feelings.

It is amazing how these family traditions take root though isn't it. Have you noticed it? Christmas seems to be a time when tradition becomes especially important. This past Tuesday, we had a chance to spend some time with our daughter, son in law and little grandson in Waterloo. Sure enough they wanted us to go with them to get their first Christmas tree as a family. They bundled up three-week old Beau and off we went to the same Christmas tree farm we took our daughter Leah when she was a baby and all of our kids, for years. Due the frigid temperatures it was decided that Nana and Papa would stay with Beau in the warm gift store, while his mom and dad endured the elements and got the tree. I like that new tradition. I like it a lot.

We are not immune to tradition in the church, either. This season marks a long list of annuals, we seem to do every year. Our annual Dare to Give Campaign. Helping those in need through Mission Services. Our annual Lord Elgin school lunch happening this coming week. Such a special time. Our annual Christmas choir which is in full rehearsal mode for the weekend of December 15, 16. Our annual evening of Christmas music featuring local High School musicians on the evening of December 16. There is always a full house for that performance. We have our annual Family and Candlelight Christmas services on December 23, 24, with lots of great elements

already planned for each of those services. This weekend marks the start of our annual Christmas message series and the beginning of Advent as Jordan introduced during family life with today's theme of Hope. It's tradition. Tradition! All of this has got me thinking about gifts and gift giving. Where did we get that tradition from?

The exchanging of gifts is one of the core aspects of the modern Christmas celebration in our culture and by extension it also makes the Christmas season the most profitable time of year for retailers and businesses throughout the world. Some surveys suggest that the average Canadian will spend around \$1 500 on Christmas gifts this year. Total spending on all things related to Christmas adds billions of dollars to the economy each year.

I did some research on the origins of gift giving at Christmas. How did this frantic frenzy of "budget stretching, credit card maxing, mall lineups, parking lot nightmares" tradition begin? Although on line shopping through Amazon may have eliminated some of the chaos. But do you know how gift giving began?

Some historians say that our modern Christmas custom of gift giving was actually influenced by Rome before the time of Christ. Roman emperors compelled their most despised citizens to bring offerings and gifts during the ancient festival of Saturnalia held in December each year. Later, this ritual expanded to include gift-giving among the general population.

In the 4th century, the Church gave this custom a distinct Christian flavor by re-orienting gift-giving around the exploits of Saint Nicholas, a beloved Catholic bishop from whom we get today, Santa Claus.

Ironically, Gift giving was not part of the Christmas celebration in Canada, the US or Great Britain until the mid-19th century and only after the popularity of two literary classics written during this time. They were Clement C. Moore's poem, "Twas the Night Before Christmas" and Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol". These writings helped to launch gift giving and the commercialization of Christmas.

Whatever the origin, for many of us, gift giving is a large part of what we do at Christmas and the way

we give gifts is as unique and varied as there are families represented here today.

Some of you have family celebrations and gift exchanges weeks before Christmas. Others will open gifts on Christmas Eve or perhaps for most, you open them Christmas morning. Some have stockings. Some open your gifts one person at a time. Others just rip and tear! It's a free for all. Some of you have a dollar limits. Others do joke gifts. Some of you buy for everyone, others draw names. Some donate money that you would have spent on gifts to charity. It varies from each household and I have found that it also depends on our tradition. Each family has their own traditions or ways of doing things.

Now I know what some of you are thinking, but Paul. Hold on. You forgot a very important biblical event that may get to the very root of why we give gifts at Christmas. Come on Paul, you are a pastor, you're supposed to know these things. Gift giving began with the birth of Jesus. He was a gift from God to humanity and just after he was born, the Wise Men came to his manger and presented gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh to Mary and Joseph. That is why we give gifts at Christmas.

Although mentioned in only one of the four gospels account of Jesus' birth, the three Wise Men have been woven into the tapestry of our Christmas narrative especially in the church. Their story is important but over the years, we have strayed away from their original significance and created our own traditions.

If you have your bibles, let's look at the appearance of the Wise Men in the gospel of Matthew 2 and deconstruct it a bit to see what is really going on.

*Matthew 2:1*

*Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea,  
during the reign of King Herod.*

Let's just stop there. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. That is pretty common knowledge. That one hit all the newspapers but he was born during the reign of King Herod. Do you know anything about King Herod? There are actually several Herods mentioned in the New Testament. They were part of a ruling dynasty. The first of the Herods is often known as King "Herod the Great" and this is the

one mentioned in this text. The way Herod ruled the people was fuelled by paranoia. He had to balance the expectations of Rome, to whom he was ultimately accountable with the realization that the Jewish people would never really accept him as King. He was not their long awaited Messiah because he was only part Jewish and he was not from the house of David as was prophesied in Isaiah 11 in the Old Testament. His reign was thought to be somewhat tainted. So Herod's strategy was to rule with terror. He was ruthless. History tells us that he was an unusually violent even by the standards of the time. He killed many members of his court and his family just to ensure that his absolute power went unchallenged.

During the time of Jesus' birth, because of Herod's tyranny, the people were living in this dark shadow of uncertainty, oppression and fear and the hopelessness that that kind of atmosphere can perpetuate.

Have you ever experienced an environment like that? It is just dark. Maybe for some of you, it was the home in which you were raised. You had an angry and abusive mom or dad and were uncertain what each day would bring and it cast a shadow of hopelessness over your home and your childhood. Maybe it was a workplace. The boss' relentless demands and unpredictability just weighs heavily on everyone and it sets a dark tone. Maybe it was a teacher or professor or even a leader in the church, their style and leadership just creates a darkness that is hard to overcome.

This is the world in which Jesus was born. The Reign of Herod casting this long shadow over everything.

Look as the text continues.

*Matthew 2:1-2*

*Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."*

This is the introduction of the wise men. The term Magi is the precise Greek word used here but we

have seen them referred to in various places as Wise Men, Magi and even as Kings. All of these monikers would fit. The truth is, we don't know a lot about these Wise Men.

Tradition has it that they were men of high standing from Ancient Persia which today is the area of Iran. The term Magi means that they were probably astrologers with a skill in interpreting omens, signs and the stars. They were valued for their wisdom. They would have probably followed the patterns of the stars regularly and having noticed an unusually bright glow in the sky on the night that Jesus was born, they would have known that something special was happening.

But how would Persian Magi living over a thousand kilometers away from Bethlehem before the age of CNN, Twitter or Facebook know the meaning behind a star and its significance to the birth of the Jewish Messiah? Well, as Persians they almost certainly would have been exposed to the writings of the Old Testament Prophet Daniel. Remember, Daniel had been taken into exile from Israel centuries before, and eventually ended up as a high official in the Persian courts. In Daniel 9, a prophecy is given about the timeline of the birth of the Messiah. No doubt as educated men, these Magi would have read the writings of Daniel.

They also would have been aware of the writings of the pagan prophet named Balaam. Do you remember him from the Old Testament? Balaam's home was also close to Persia. So these Wise Men would have been familiar with his story.

In the Old Testament book of Numbers, Balaam prophesizes that,

*Numbers 24:17*

*A star will rise from Jacob; A scepter will emerge from Israel.*

This passage indicates that one day a star will signal the arrival of a significant new king in Israel. For centuries, astrologers would have searched the night skies for a brighter than normal light to indicate that the prophecy has come to pass. The Jewish Messiah had been born.

On the evening that these Magi spot this unusual star, they just knew they had to follow it. They

knew that it meant that finally, the Messiah has come. This was a huge event. Even greater than that Solar Eclipse we experienced in August. Even greater than Hailey's Comet making an appearance every 75 years or so. This one had taken hundreds of years to appear. Notice in the text they call it, his star.

But remember, the Wise Men were in Persia. They would have had to travel 1300-1500 Kilometres to Bethlehem to see Jesus. That would be the equivalent to the distance from London to Atlanta, Georgia. If you were to hop in your car after this service and drive 100 km an hour nonstop, no bathroom breaks and no gas fill ups, it would take you about 13 hours to drive to Atlanta from here.

Now it is important to recognize that the Wise Men did not have cars 2000 years ago or anything that could move anywhere near that speed. They likely travelled in a caravan which means they walked most of the way. The average person walks about 5 km an hour according to my step counter. At that pace, it would take the Wise Men about 280 hours to reach Bethlehem. That is 12 straight days of walking, 24/7, no rests. No breaks. Which would have been impossible for them. Due to the terrain and the intense Middle Eastern heat, they would have needed plenty of breaks to rest, sleep, eat and stay hydrated. This trip most likely took days, months or even a year to complete.

But, what about all those nativity scenes and Christmas cards that include the Three Wise Men at the stable on the night of Jesus' birth? They are right there with the sheep and the shepherds, Mary and Joseph and the angels. It makes for a very powerful and compelling image. A nice Christmas decoration but, it is not accurate. If you have one of those, you now have to blot them out or remove them. A common misconception is that the wise men visited Jesus at the stable on the night of his birth. They didn't. In fact, they probably didn't arrive until months or even a year later.

Did I just rain on your Christmas parade? Sorry. While I am at it let me just add that those snow globe nativity scenes. They aren't accurate either. Tough to find snow in the arid Middle East where Jesus was born.

Okay, so now that we have cleared that up, just picture the scene with me. The Wise Men set out following the star, after being on the road for months, they arrive in Israel's capital city, Jerusalem sometime after Jesus was born. Now remember, Jerusalem is the home of Herod, the reigning King of the Jews and the Wise Men start poking around and then in *Matthew 2:2*, it says that they asked,

*"Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."*

Can you imagine? When you come into a palace and ask, where is the new king? It is going to alarm the person that is actually sitting on the throne.

If you were to visit Buckingham Palace and be invited into a private audience with the Queen and you blurted out, where is the new queen? I heard about a new Queen. Elizabeth would be rather perplexed.

It would be like going into the office of a CEO of a business and asking, where is the new CEO? That would startle the one currently holding the position if she wasn't aware that she was being replaced. Or a hockey coach finding out his successor on the evening news when he didn't even know his job was in jeopardy.

This would be rather unsettling but that is exactly what happens to King Herod. In his presence, the Wise Men question, Where's the new King? How do you think this tyrannical, paranoid current King of the Jews will react? The one who was willing to do just about anything to ensure his hold on power was secure. The text says,

*Matthew 2:3*

*King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this,*

Underline that one. That may be one of the great understatements in all of the bible. He was deeply disturbed. He probably spit out his morning coffee as he seethed inside. When he got wind that the Wise Men were looking for the new King, he quickly gathered up his bevy of scholars and religious authorities.

Herod knew that the threat to his reign may come one day from the promised Messiah of the Jewish people but his limited understanding of the scriptures and prophecy left him at a bit of a disadvantage. Where was the Messiah supposed to be born?! He bellows to them. You can imagine how they must be feeling right? Terrified. They are going to have to break some news to Herod that he is not going to like. It was never a good day when you had to be the bearer of bad news to Herod.

In response to his query about the birth place of the Messiah, his scholars reply in quivering voices,

*Matthew 2:5-6*

*“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote:  
6 ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah,  
for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’”*

Where will he be born? In Bethlehem, they respond. Right down the street. Bethlehem was a suburb of Jerusalem. It would be like going from here to Byron. Herod takes all of this in and then goes into “damage control” mode. He calls the Wise Men together and gets all of the background information about the star and their journey and then he pushes them on their way, Go and find the young King and be sure to come back and tell me everything, especially where I can find him so I can go and worship him too!! Do we really expect that Herod’s desire was to go to the home of this child and bow down and worship him as the new king? Of course not. Herod wanted the Wise Men to do his grunt work. Track down the child so that he could then send his Hench men and have this child, Jesus killed. That’s just the way it went with Herod. Anything or anyone who threatened his reign was destroyed. Classic battle of good versus evil.

Now let’s just stop there.

You know the main theme of this message and this entire Christmas series is to be on gifts. Jesus, the gift from God to humanity and the deeper meaning of the gifts of the three Wise Men to Jesus when they finally arrive at his doorstep. And yet, here we

have spent 2/3’s of this message on Herod. Why is that?

Have you ever received the perfect gift? Just think about that for a moment. Unfortunately, I think we have skewed the word perfect by the way we use it today. Have you noticed, some people use the word perfect, a lot. The dictionary definition of perfect is: having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics; as good as it is possible to be.

In fact, Ed Sheeran’s song, Perfect, have you heard it? I think it gives a perfect example of what perfect really is when he describes finding the love of his life.

Perfect is not, when I order a coffee at the local coffee shop and it costs \$1.29 and I give the person working the cash a toonie and she says, perfect. No, that is not perfect. Perfect would have been if I had given her, \$1.29. Do you see that? Perfect is not when I call my local cable provider about an issue I am having with my bill and he asks for my name and I provide it and he says, perfect. No, that is not perfect. That is just me answering a question that I have been answering for almost 55 years. Perfect would be having my bill issue resolved. Do you see? We have sullied the term perfect in our culture by the way we use it so flippantly.

Now, with that out of the way, let me ask you again. Have you ever received the perfect gift? Have you ever given the perfect gift? Many of us wrack our brains this time of year, coming up with the perfect gift for that special someone in our life, don’t we? Remember, perfect is having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics; as good as it is possible to be. What is it that makes for a perfect gift? Isn’t it a combination of something that meets a real need, satisfies a longing or desire and when you open it, it makes you realize it is something you’ve always wanted? Now that is perfect.

Jesus, the Messiah, the Saviour of the world made his entrance into this world during a pretty dark and bleak time in history. Jerusalem under the reign of King Herod. For the most part, the people were oppressed, living in fear and without any real hope.

Jesus was God's perfect gift to humanity who arrived at just the right time, in just the right place for just the right reason and he remains the perfect gift today because I don't know whether you have noticed, there still seems to be a dark shadow of oppression falling across most of our world.

We still have tyrannical leaders, economic woes, violence, natural disasters, refugees, famine and poverty. There is still a battle raging between good and evil but through the gift of Jesus, we are guaranteed that God has won the eternal battle and we have hope when we put our faith and trust in him. Do you understand that? This is why we had to look at the significance of Jesus born during the time of Herod. It is important. Let's get back to the story in Matthew 2.

Now free from Herod, the Wise Men continue on their way.

*Matthew 2:9*

*After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was.*

As I said, Bethlehem is located about 10 kilometres south of Jerusalem. Now on the homestretch still following the star, it would have taken the Wise Men about 2-3 hours to walk the remaining distance but when they arrive at the doorstep of the home beneath the shining star,

*Matthew 2:10* says that,

*they were filled with joy!*

I can only imagine. The culmination of a month's long journey, walking through the heat and other weather systems. Battling through sandal blisters and assorted aches and pains. Having to find food, water and shelter along the way. Perhaps sleeping in shifts at night to fend off wild animals that encroached their camp. To finally, finally reach their destination. They were right where the star led them. At the doorstep of the Messiah. This was cause for great joy.

Anyone ever drive from some town or city in Ontario straight through to Florida? First time I ever did it was the March Break of my final year of high school. On a whim, me and three of my buddies drove my friend's dad's station wagon, destined for a week of sunshine. We only made three brief stops for gas, food and to use the bathroom. We didn't even stop to switch drivers. We just hopped over each other and keep going. Now kids out there, I don't recommend this practice. But I can tell you that I have never been so overjoyed as when I saw that Welcome to Florida sign and we pulled over to the tourist centre and had a refreshing glass of Florida orange juice. Twenty-four hours cooped up in about 50 cubic feet of space with four teenage boys. You do the math.

Remember for these Wise Men, the incredible joy they felt was not just because they endured a gruelling month's long trek through the desert and found it all to be worthwhile because Jesus was located beneath the star. Oh, that must have been incredibly satisfying for sure.

But for these Magi, these star gazers and astrologers, they had been searching the night sky over Persia for years. They knew that one day, A star that will rise from Jacob; that would signify that Israel has a new king. The long awaited Messiah of the world has been born. They did not want to miss it if it happened during their life time.

Have you ever waited a life time for something and then found it? Now that is joy! Maybe for you, it was the perfect mate. I have a four-week old grandson. I have pondered what it would be like to be a grandpa for a long time. When I hold him and look into his eyes, he already brings me so much joy. Maybe some of you can relate to that. Notice the wording in,

*Matthew 2:11*

*once they arrive at the home, they entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary.*

See, it is not a stable anymore and Jesus is not a baby. He is now a child in a home. Time has passed since his birth. But upon seeing this young child, with overwhelming joy in their hearts, they cannot help but bowed down and worshiped him.

They bow down and worship him, as the king. Remember these guys were Persian. They were Gentiles. Non-Jews. Yet they acknowledge the Kingship of Jesus. Perhaps foreshadowing that Jesus was not just a King for the Jewish people but he is a King for all humanity. As was their custom, the Wise Men brought gifts for the King.

*Matthew 2:11*

*Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

These weren't just any gifts. They were the perfect gifts. Having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics; as good as it is possible to be. They had Gold and Frankincense and Myrrh. Except for Gold, these gifts may mean very little to us. But they were deeply meaningful and symbolic in this day and they represented the impact that Jesus' life and death would have on the world. These were not just gifts the Wise Men picked up along the way, on a whim, like a gift certificate, I hope he likes it. No, these were God orchestrated and they pointed to something much bigger and grander for the life of this little boy. We will talk about each of the gifts significance in more detail in the weeks ahead but let me just give you a bit of a teaser as we conclude.

Gold. Gold is a precious metal and the gift of gold given by the Wise Men represented the Kingship of Christ.

Frankincense. Frankincense was treasured in this day for its aroma and healing qualities. It was used in the temple as part of the offerings. Due to its use in the temple, the gift of Frankincense by the Wise Men represented that Jesus is a great High Priest worthy of our praise and worship.

Myrrh. Myrrh was a spice used for embalming dead bodies in Jesus' day. What a strange gift to give to a young boy. The gift of Myrrh by the Wise Men represented their understanding that this young King's life would include suffering and affliction.

Gold. Frankincense and Myrrh. The gifts of the Wise Men to Jesus. And that's it. We are not told anything else about these Men. We don't know what became of these gifts and we don't know how

long they stayed with Jesus but the whole story ends in a rather ominous way.

*Matthew 2:12*

*When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.*

They did not return to Herod as he had asked. They did not tell him where Jesus was so that he could go and "worship" him. God sent them on a different path home because God knew Herod's heart. He had something much more sinister in mind than worshipping this young Messiah.

Not being able to locate Jesus, this brutal King had all the children in Bethlehem under the age of two killed, just to be sure he eliminated any threat to his kingship. Fortunately, Mary and Joseph had escaped with Jesus to Egypt just in time to avoid this genocide. It's a rather disturbing section of scripture but we can learn a lot from the actions of the Wise Men can't we? Here are five things I think we can learn:

They read and believed God's word. They knew the Prophecy of Daniel and Balaam and believed them.

They pursued Jesus. They felt the birth of the Messiah was worth a bit of sacrifice that included a long and difficult journey to find him.

They recognized the worth of Jesus. They gave the best they had to offer him, the perfect gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh.

They humbled themselves and bowed down and worship Jesus.

They obeyed God rather than man. When God told them to take another route home, they did, ignoring Herod's request to return to him.

I wonder if these five things can be said of us.

Do we read and believe God's word, the bible?

Do we pursue Jesus even when it means a little sacrifice?

Do we recognize the worth of Jesus and offer our best to him?

Do we humble ourselves and worship and praise him with our whole heart? Are we faithful to God above all else or do we listen to the voices of those around us?

Our world can be a pretty dark place sometimes but the story of the Wise Men reminds us that we can take heart. We do have hope. The Messiah, the Saviour of the world has come. His light has overtaken the darkness to give us a future and a hope that only comes by putting our faith and trust in the one who is, the perfect gift from God.

Amen? Amen.

## **Points to Ponder**

### **The Gift ~ Gold Represents King**

#### **The Three Wisemen**

**With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.**

1. Describe some of your family Christmas traditions. Specifically, what are your traditions around giving gifts?
2. Before hearing this message, what were some of your understandings about the story of the Wise Men and the birth of Jesus?
3. How would you compare the Jewish world during the rule of King Herod with our world today? What are the similarities and differences?
4. What does the concept of Hope mean to you? When do you feel the most hopeless? When do you feel the most hopeful? How does your faith in Jesus affect hope in your life?
5. Have you ever received the “perfect” gift? What made it so special to you? Have you ever chosen what you thought was the perfect gift for someone else? What prompted you to select that gift for that person?
6. If you were to select a perfect gift for you to give to Jesus, what would you select and why?

#### **Prayer and Action Item**

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray specifically that this Christmas, your eyes and heart are open in a new and profound way, to the perfect gift that Jesus is to your life.