



Parkway Fellowship

The Hallpark Channel Presents: • Light the Way to Christmas • Matthew 2:1-12 •
12/15/2019

MAIN POINT

God wants you to find Jesus this Christmas.

INTRODUCTION

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

What is your least favorite Christmas gift you've ever received?

What is the best Christmas gift you've ever been given?

Why do your reactions to gifts, whether good or bad, matter?

Today we will look at the biblical account of the wise men who came from the East and followed the star of David to see the newborn Jesus. God made it clear to these men that He wanted them to find Jesus. They brought with them extravagant gifts to give the Christ child, a baby born of extremely humble means.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| Ask a volunteer to read Matthew 2:1-6.

What do you know about the wise men?

The wise men were a caste of men specializing in astrology, medicine, and natural science. The magi were not kings, but a combination of wise men and priests probably from Persia. They combined astronomical observation with astrological speculation. They played both political and religious roles and were figures of prominence in their land. The Greek word

“magos” (where we get “magi”) is the same word used in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, in Daniel 2:2, when the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar gathered men skilled in religious and magical arts to interpret his strange dreams. Although we know little about the wise men in Matthew 2, we can assume based on their profession that they weren’t Jews. But because of their knowledge of the Old Testament prophecies and their interest in the star, they sought out the newborn Messiah.

Since the wise men were pagan astrologers, why would they leave everything in order to follow the star?

What do you know about King Herod?

Herod the Great was a half-Jew, half-Idumean who, through accommodation to the Romans, ascended to power as client-ruler of Israel in 37 B.C. Although he was known as a great builder of public works and a shrewd diplomat in his dealings with both Romans and Jews, he laid oppressive taxes on and conscripted labor from the Israelites. As King Herod grew older, he became increasingly paranoid about threats against his person and throne. He had numerous people put to death because he feared plots to overthrow him. After frequent disputes with Caesar Augustus, the emperor uttered his famous pun that he would rather be Herod’s pig (hys) than his son (huios). King Herod’s paranoia provides proper context to his reaction to the wise men’s pursuit of the King of the Jews: “When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him” (v. 3). Herod’s paranoia and unpredictable behavior led to the worry of his people.

In this week’s message, we learned that God uses hard times to reveal Himself. Considering the experience of the wise men, what does it require of you to learn what God wants to reveal?

When or how have you experienced this in your own life?

| Ask a volunteer to read Matthew 2:7-12.

Having been given the location of the birthplace of the King of the Jews, the wise men continued their journey. What the magi recognized as divine guidance filled them with joy (v. 10). Upon seeing Jesus, they did what they set out to do—they prostrated themselves before Him and “worshiped Him” (v. 2, 11). The wise men were in awe of Jesus.

How was the reaction of the wise men to Jesus both similar and different to the response people today make when they first come to Christ?

What does it teach you about God that He used pagan wisdom to lead the wise

men to His Son? What does it tell you about the nature of God and His gospel that pagans were invited to worship His Son?

God often chooses to reveal Himself to pagans, at times even in the midst of their religious practices, to lead them on to the full truth found only in Christ. The wise men were the first Gentiles to worship Jesus. They believed He was the Messiah, something many Jews, God's chosen people, failed to realize. From Jesus' infancy, God made it evident that His Son came to save the world, not just the Jews.

Was it necessary or even practical for the wise men to bring such gifts to this baby born in a manger? Why did they?

The gifts used to honor Jesus were associated with royalty. Because Matthew has not yet introduced the theme of Jesus' death, it is not likely that he is implying it here, even though myrrh was a spice often used in embalming. (Additionally, unbeknownst to her, Mary used myrrh to anoint Jesus for His burial in Matthew 26:7.) Gold, then and now, was a precious metal prized for its beauty and value, an appropriate regal gift. Frankincense and myrrh were fragrant spices and perfumes equally appropriate for such adoration and worship. Similar visits of magi to royalty are described in other Greco-Roman literature of the time, but more significant here is the Jewish background.

We learned in this week's message that God chases after us even through our fears. What fears in your life has God used (or is God using now) to draw you closer to the knowledge of His Son?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How we respond to the information we have about Jesus determines what impact our relationship with Him will have on our lives. Just like Herod and the wise men, we're presented with information about the Messiah. How we respond determines how our relationship with Christ will impact our lives. We can pursue an intellectual faith only, one that consists of studying facts about Christ but never letting that knowledge change us. We can let that knowledge make us insecure and cause us to wonder what we'll have to give up to follow Christ. Or, like the wise men, we can risk everything for Christ and choose to worship Him—and do so with overflowing joy.

What does it mean to you that God wants you to find Jesus this Christmas? In what situation does He want you to find Him?

What needs to change in your life this week for you to look for Jesus so that you might find Him in that situation? Is there anything you might need to leave behind?

As a group, how are we doing at looking to find Jesus? How can we do better?

PRAYER

Ask God to make it normative for you to seek after Jesus with your whole heart. Ask God, like He did with the wise men, to help you leave everything behind in your pursuit of Him and His glory. Thank God for the opportunity to worship Him freely because of what Jesus did on your behalf.

COMMENTARY

| Matthew 2:1-12

2:1-6. The mention of Jesus' birthplace, Bethlehem of Judea, is significant in this passage especially because of the prophecy it fulfilled (see 2:4-6). Matthew is building his case. Jesus is the fulfillment of all the prophetic intentions of the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. All the details apply, including his birthplace.

The King Herod in this passage, one of many Herods, is Herod the Great, mentioned here and in Luke 1:5. His father, Antipater II, was a Jew of Idumaeen descent (Edomite, related through Esau to Jacob) who gained influence under the Roman Empire. He was influential in his son Herod's rise to power, in a succession of positions over Galilee and ultimately Judea, where Herod ruled from 37–4 B.C. (Herod's death in 4 B.C. is one of the main reasons we know Jesus was born somewhat earlier than the traditional A.D. 1; see 2:19.) During this time Herod was given the title "king of the Jews" by the Roman senate. This partly explains his fear and aggressive murderous actions when he heard from the magi that another king of the Jews had been born (2:2).

These magi from the east (2:1) were likely from Babylon and were culturally influential students of the stars, not evil magicians of some sort. Their interest must have been aroused by the unusual star they observed. We do not know their number, but their entourage was probably substantial to make such a lengthy cross-continent trip and to cause such a noticeable stir in Jerusalem (2:3). How they came to connect the birth of the king of the Jews with the strange star is a matter of conjecture. Some scholars believe they may have been responding, in an amazing display of faith, to a scrap of Scripture brought to their people centuries before through Balaam (Num. 24:17), who was a Mesopotamian himself.

The important point here is that God brought the birth of the king to the attention of these Gentiles, who probably journeyed many months (possibly one to two years) from Mesopotamia to Jerusalem. Matthew included this information to alert his Jewish readers to several realities: (1) the event of Jesus' birth had worldwide impact; (2) the Messiah was coming through Israel as a gift from God to all nations of the world, not just to the Jews; and (3) in contrast to the indifference of Jewish chief priests and scribes who should have anticipated the king's birth (2:4), these Gentiles were overwhelmed with joy!

The quote in 2:6 comes from Micah 5:2. Micah prophesied around the time of the Northern Kingdom's fall in 722 B.C. Through this man, the Lord used the lesson of the Northern Kingdom's fall to confront Judah's own covenant disobedience. He warned of Judah's future judgment, but he also gave cause for hope, foretelling his restoration of the remnant. It is in this context of hope that the words quoted by Matthew are written in Micah.

2:7-12. Herod called the magi into his chambers alone to try to determine when this new king, Jesus, was born. Because both the magi and Herod seemed to identify the appearance of the star with the birthdate of the Messiah, Jesus must have been at least a year old when the magi arrived. (This fact changes the traditional image of the magi visiting the young family in the stable where Jesus was born. Certainly the shepherds found him there, but Joseph would have found his family a home to live in by the time the magi arrived.)

Herod wanted to use the magi to determine the exact location of this new king. This was a self-serving strategy, not a generous desire to aid the magi in their quest. Herod had no desire to worship the new king. His goal was to locate him and eliminate this bud of growing messianic hope that he viewed as potential competition.

The magi likely followed this star very much as a sailor follows the stars to get to his destination. The text does, however, give every indication that this star was a supernatural phenomenon.

When the magi found where Jesus and his family were living, they were overjoyed. Their destination was not just a place—but a person—Jesus. Their response was the same response that Matthew wanted for his readers; they worshiped him. The gifts they gave to Jesus—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—were the most common mediums of exchange in that day. The gold and two forms of incense made it possible for the magi to cross through many different lands on their way to Bethlehem, much like people today use travelers checks when they are traveling. These gifts would come in handy later for Jesus' family as they traveled themselves (2:13-15).

The magi chose not to go back to Herod as he had instructed. Instead they went a different

way. For foreigners to disobey a king in that day was risky. But the magi, by faith, followed the warning they had received in a dream. They clearly were more awed by God than by Herod.