

A STAR WAS BORN

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Matthew 2:1-12

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INTRO.

-- Christmas is truly a time of miracles. God performed a number of miraculous feats to make Christmas a reality, and during the past several weeks we've looked at some of those.

-- Today, we conclude this series with a miracle, one that occurred after the birth of Jesus: the appearance of a strange and mysterious star to the Wise Men.

This past week the planets Saturn and Jupiter aligned in way that they appeared as a bright star in the southern sky. It was a phenomenon that last occurred 800 years ago. Many reports referred to the conjunction as "the Christmas star." How likely is it that the star that led the Wise Men was a conjunction of planets, or was it something very different, and if so, what? Today, I want to look at what the biblical account can reveal to us about the nature and significance of the star.

<p class="chapter-1">**Matthew 2:1-12** 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, 2 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." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 6 "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." 7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 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." 9 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. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 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. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

I. The Story

A. The Wise Men (Magi)

-- The Wise Men (the Greek word used here is Magi) were probably a special group of Persians, modern-day Iranians, who were part astronomer and part astrologer - part scholar and part pagan priest. The Persians believed that the stars exerted great influence over human affairs. The Magi studied the stars, planets and constellations to discern and interpret the meaning of their movements, alignments and changes.

-- The Magi in Matthew's account saw a new star appear. Possibly because of the star's location in the eastern sky, these Magi interpreted it as a sign of the birth of the long-awaited Jewish King, also known as the Messiah.

B. Their Journey

-- Amazingly, these Magi decided to travel to the land of the Jews to give homage to this new king. It was no simple decision. The journey from Persia to Judea was nearly 1,000 miles and would have required expensive preparations and then months of arduous travel by a camel caravan over rough terrain. They had to cross mountain ranges reaching up to 15,000 feet high and to journey through vast stretches of

desert. All along the way there would have been dangers from wild animals and armed bandits.

Nevertheless, they made the journey and arrived in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, and started inquiring about where they could find the new heir to Jewish throne.

C. King Herod

-- The problem was that Judea already had a king - King Herod the Great, who had been ruling for 32 years. Although he was a vassal king appointed by the Romans, Herod zealously protected his power. Indeed, he was insanely suspicious and paranoid about threats to his rule. Over the years he had executed not only countless religious leaders and court officials but also members of his own household, including his own wife and her mother and three of his sons.

When he got the news that a delegation from Persia had arrived in search of a newborn king of the Jews, even though Herod was about 70 years old and in failing health, he was upset. Matthew says he was "troubled and all Jerusalem with him." In other words, if Herod was troubled, everyone was troubled. It's like the sign that reads, "If Momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy."

Herod summoned and delayed the Wise Men while he conferred with the religious leaders about where the Messiah was supposed to be born. They replied that the prophet Micah had foretold that Bethlehem, a little village about 5 miles outside of Jerusalem, would be the Messiah's birthplace.

Herod sent for the Wise Men, asked when the star first appeared, and told them that they should search in Bethlehem and after finding the future king they should return to let Herod know who he is.

D. Finding Jesus

-- It must have been late in the day when the Magi left Herod's palace because when they went outside the star that had started this search a year or two earlier reappeared in the sky. The Magi were ecstatic. Literally, Matthew says, "They rejoiced with a joy that was great, very much so."

But this time something really strange happened - the star started to move and traveled ahead of the Magi, leading them in the direction of Bethlehem. And the star kept on moving, directing them like a celestial GPS, until it stopped and shone down on a particular house, as if to say, "You have arrived at your destination."

It wasn't a palace but an ordinary house - the house where Mary and Joseph and their child were living. When the Magi entered, they found an ordinary-looking toddler, but they proceeded to do a most extraordinary thing - they bowed down on the floor before the child and worshiped Him and presented to Him gifts fit for a king - gold and expensive perfumes, frankincense and myrrh.

II. The Meaning of the Miraculous Star

-- As I've said before in this series, God doesn't perform miracles without a purpose. Whenever God performs a miracle, there is always a purpose or meaning in it. We can find at least 4 purposes or meanings in the story of the Magi and the miraculous star that appeared to them.

A. Jesus is the promised Messiah.

1. The first thing that we see in this story of the star is that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Jesus is the fulfillment of the OT prophecies of a Savior who will establish an eternal Kingdom of righteousness. When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, what were they seeking - a king. But this prophesied king would be unlike any other king. Even Herod somehow sensed it.

Cf., **v. 4**, and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

2. Herod didn't ask where the next king would be born; he asked where "the Christ" would be born. The word "Christ" is the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew word Messiah. Herod was called king - King of the Jews. But no one ever called Herod "Messiah." There are many kings, but there is only one Messiah. The words "Christ" and "Messiah" mean the same thing - anointed one. It's not so much a name as a title - God's anointed One, the ruler chosen by God the Father to end all other rules and to establish the Kingdom of God.

3. When Herod asked the scholars where the Messiah would be born, they replied by quoting the prophet Micah.

v. 6, "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."

-- This is a quotation from Micah 5:2, but it isn't all of that verse, just the part that told where the Messiah would be born. If Herod had asked who the Messiah was, the scholars could have quoted

the rest of the verse.

Micah 5:2c "...whose goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity."

-- This king's existence didn't start with His birth in Bethlehem or with the conception in His mother's womb. This king has existed from eternity. As John puts it in the Gospel:

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

B. Jesus is the Lord and Savior of all the nations of the world.

-- Jesus is not Lord and Savior of the Jews alone but of all people everywhere. It's interesting and significant that Matthew, who was writing his gospel for a primarily Jewish audience, wasn't the one who told about Jewish shepherds coming to see Jesus but about Magi, unclean Gentile astrologers from the pagan land of Persia. The first to worship Jesus in Matthew's Gospel aren't Jews but Gentiles. Matthew's Gospel begins with Gentiles coming from another nation to honor Jesus, and it ends with Christ's commission to go to proclaim the good news of salvation to all the nations.

-- Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is the Savior for all nations and peoples, that He is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

Isaiah 60:1-3 Arise shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. 3 And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

C. God is the first missionary.

-- Another truth revealed to us in this story of the star is that God is the first missionary. God is the One who takes the first steps to seek out worshippers for His Son, and the Father will move heaven and earth to bring people to Christ.

How did the Magi become seekers? God drew them. He reached out to them in their darkness and spoke to them in their language - the language of the stars. That's what God does with us as well. He comes to us where we are, and then He sovereignly directs the affairs of our lives to bring us to Christ.

Consider, for example, the star in this story. What exactly was it? How did it do everything recorded about it - appear, disappear, re-appear, move, lead the Wise Men to a specific house? There are many theories: it was a conjunction of planets (like the recent conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn), or it was a supernova, or a comet, or an angel, or something else. Interestingly, Matthew doesn't try to explain the star's strange nature or to answer any of the questions posed by the star because that's not important. The implication in Matthew's account is clearly that the star was a supernatural intervention of God; the star was the tool used by the sovereign God to guide the Magi to Christ.

D. Jesus must be accepted or rejected.

-- As we see in this story, there are just two responses that people can have to Jesus - to accept or to reject Him. The Magi accepted Him while Herod and the religious leaders rejected Him. Herod rejected Jesus with hostile opposition. The religious leaders, who obviously knew why Herod asked the question, weren't interested in going with the Magi to search for Jesus. They didn't oppose Jesus (not yet, anyhow); they were just indifferent to Him.

-- The same is true for us today. Each of us will either accept or reject Jesus. Few of us will be like Herod and reject Jesus with hostility. Most of us who reject Him will be more like the indifferent religious scholars. But rejection through indifference is still rejection.

May God grant for us to be like the Magi - to come with them to bow before and worship the newborn king, the savior of the world.

CONCLUSION

Each week during this year's Christmas series I've close with a story from Karen Kingsbury's little book *A Treasury of Christmas Miracles: True Stories of God's Presence*. Today's story is about Evan and Susie Conover and their little daughter, Noel, who was born deaf. Noel was the only deaf child in their small town, and her deafness kept other children from accepting and making friends with her. One day, Noel told her mother that she wanted a friend who was also deaf, and her mother said that she would pray for God to give her daughter a special friend. About 2 months before Christmas, Noel came to her parents with a picture of a white Persian kitty like the kitty in one of Noel's favorite storybooks. Noel signed

excitedly that she wanted a kitty just like that and pleaded with her parents to get her one. Even though Persian cats were very expensive, Evan and Susie decided they would try to find one. Every day they looked in the ads but never found anyone who had Persian kittens. Then, 2 days before Christmas, there it was — an ad for white Persian kittens for \$200. Susie called the number. The woman who answered said that she had just one white Persian kitten left, and she would sell the kitty to them for \$50 instead of the normal \$200. Susie was puzzled and said she didn't understand. The woman replied that there was a problem with the kitty. The reason the woman hadn't been able to sell the kitty was that it was deaf. Susie replied that they would come right away to look at the kitty.

As soon as Noel saw the kitty, she ran to cuddle it and signed its name, "Snowball." Noel's mother knelt down and signed to her daughter that the kitty was a girl and that it was deaf. Noel's face lit up and she signed back, "Oh, Mommy, she's my kitten! Let's take her home. Please."

From that time on Noel and Snowball were inseparable. One day Susie saw her daughter signing to the kitty, "You're the best Christmas present ever."

"You love her, don't you?" Susie signed to her daughter.

"Yes, Mommy," Noel signed back. "She and I are both special because we're both deaf."

Then Noel picked up the kitty and cuddled her and signed, "Thank you for praying, Mommy. God answered your prayers and gave me a friend who is deaf like me, and at Christmastime."

Susie smiled and signed, "Yes, Noel. God heard our prayers. Your kitty is the best Christmas present of all."

God may not always perform miracles for us. But He is always at work supernaturally to accomplish His plans and purposes in our lives.