

REDISCOVER THE BIRTH OF A KING

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By Pastor Stan
Matthew 2:1-12

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INTRO.

-- Intro. Song

-- There several companies that offer you the opportunity to name a star for or in honor of someone. They will even give you a certificate featuring the name you've given to the star and with your star circled in red on a star chart. I doubt that anyone recognizes any of this as legitimate except for the company that sells you the name.

-- When Jesus was born, however, He didn't simply have a star named for Him; He had a new star appear in honor of Him. The story of that star is in Matthew 2, and as we will see it's a star that is far from ordinary, both in its nature and its purpose.

(Read Matthew 2:1-12.)

I. THE STORY

A. THE WISE MEN (MAGI)

-- The word "Magi" in this passage is translated in some versions as "wise men." "Magi" is the word that is used in the Greek manuscript, and it was probably a technical term that referred to a special group of people in Persia (modern-day Iran). The Magi were a hybrid blend of astronomer and astrologer. They were part scholar and part priest. The Persians believed that the stars exerted great influence over human affairs. The Magi were the specialists who studied the stars, planets and constellations in order to discern and interpret the meaning of their movements, alignments and changes. The appearance of a new star was a rare event that would have been looked upon as a herald of something with enormous significance. When these Magi discover a new star has appeared in the sky, obviously in the direction of Judea, they interpret it as a sign of the birth of the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, who would reign as King of the Jews.

B. THEIR JOURNEY

-- The appearance of a new star is of such once-in-a-lifetime significance that the Magi decide to travel to Israel to find this newborn king whose birth has been announced by the heavens and to pay homage to him.

-- This is no little undertaking. It's a journey of 1,000 miles, requiring extensive and expensive preparations and involving months of arduous travel by camel caravan, over difficult terrain, including mountain ranges reaching up to 15,000 feet and vast stretches of desert. All along the way there would be in danger from wild animals and armed bandits.

-- Nevertheless, they decide to make the journey. When they finally arrive in Jerusalem, they immediately start inquiring about where to find the new heir to the throne, thinking that his birth must be common knowledge to the people of that city, much as the birth of William and Kate's baby would be to the people of London. Strangely, no one seems to know anything about the birth of such an heir and even the idea seems to be so disturbing that no one even wants to talk openly about it.

C. HEROD

-- The problem is that Judea already has a king - King Herod the Great, who has been ruling for 32 years. Although Herod was a vassal king appointed by Rome, he exercised real power in Judea, and he zealously protected that power. Indeed, Herod was insanely suspicious and paranoid about possible threats to his rule. Over the years he had executed many whom he believed to be enemies or rivals to his power, from countless religious leaders and court officials all the way to members of his own household, including

his wife and her mother and three of his sons.

-- When Herod gets the report that a delegation from Persia has arrived and is searching for a newborn king of the Jews, he is agitated. Never mind that by this time Herod is 70 years old and in failing health; he is as determined as ever to hold on to his power. Notice what Matthew says in verse three:

v. 3, "When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him."

The implication is that if Herod is disturbed, everyone is disturbed. It's like the sign that reads, "If Momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy."

-- Herod immediately summons the Persian Magi to the palace and detains them while he confers with the religious leaders about where the Messiah is supposed to be born. They reply that the prophet Micah had foretold that Bethlehem, a little village about five miles outside Jerusalem, would be the Messiah's birthplace.

-- Herod then sends for the Wise Men and has a private audience with them. After asking questions about their journey and about the star that prompted it, including the time when the star first appeared, Herod instructs them to make a thorough search in Bethlehem and then to return to the palace to let Herod himself know if they had found this future king, so that Herod also could go to pay homage to him.

D. FINDING JESUS

-- It must have been late in the day when the Magi finally left Herod's palace because when they get outside, there in the sky, the star that had started all this journey a year or two earlier reappears to them. They are thrilled to see it.

v. 10, "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed."

Literally, Matthew describes their reaction to the star this way: "...they rejoiced with a joy that was great, very much so."

-- But this time this mysterious star does something really strange. It starts to move. In fact, it travels ahead of them, leading them, towards Bethlehem. And like a celestial GPS device the star keeps on moving and directing them, and they keep on following it, until it comes to a stop and shines down on a particular house, as if to say, "You have arrived."

-- But it isn't a palace, this place where the star has led them to. Quite the opposite. It's a small, humble, ordinary house. And the occupants are just as ordinary, a poor carpenter named Joseph and his young wife named Mary. When the Magi enter the house, they find what to all appearances is an ordinary child of an ordinary couple, but the Magi proceed to do a most extraordinary thing - they bow down on the floor before this child and worship him and present to him gifts fit for a king - gold and expensive perfumes, frankincense and myrrh.

II. THE MEANING OF THE MAGI AND THE STAR

-- The Magi were right. The appearance of the new star in the sky above Israel held enormous significance. But the meaning and importance of the star was even greater than they had thought. There are, in fact, at least 4 purposes or meanings that Matthew has in telling us the story of the Magi and the amazing star that appeared to them.

A. JESUS IS, INDEED, THE PROMISED JEWISH MESSIAH.

-- Jesus is the One who fulfills all the OT prophecies about a coming Messiah. The Magi start their journey searching for a future king.

Cf., v. 2

-- But the king that they are seeking is unlike any other kings, and even Herod himself senses it. Notice what Herod says when he calls the religious scholars together.

Cf., v. 4

Herod asks where the "Christ" is to be born. The word "Christ" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word Messiah. Herod was called King, even King of the Jews, but no one ever referred to him as "Messiah." There are many kings, but there is only one Messiah. The word "Christ" or "Messiah" means anointed one. It's not a name but a title - God's anointed one, the ruler chosen by God to end all other rules and to establish the Kingdom of God.

-- When Herod asks the scholars about the Messiah's birthplace, they reply by quoting the prophet Micah.

Cf., v. 6

This is a quote from Micah 5:2, but it isn't all of the verse. They quote just the part of the verse that answers Herod's question about the Messiah's birthplace. The rest of the verse describes the Messiah's identity.

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

This king's existence didn't start with his conception in his mother's womb; this king has existed from eternity. The Gospel of John puts it this way:

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The king whose birth was announced to the Magi by the star was the eternal Son of God.

B. JESUS IS THE LORD AND SAVIOR OF ALL THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD.

-- Jesus is the Lord and Savior not for the Jews only but for all people everywhere.

-- It's interesting that Matthew, who is writing his gospel primarily for a Jewish audience, doesn't tell us about the Jewish shepherds coming to see Jesus but does tell us about Magi, 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 Jesus sending His disciples out to proclaim the good news of salvation to all 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 rises upon you. 2 See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. 3 Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

-- The star that appeared to the Magi announced the birth of one who was not only King of the Jews but who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He rules over heaven and earth, and His is the only name given among men whereby we must be saved.

C. GOD IS THE FIRST MISSIONARY.

-- What we see here in this story is that God takes the first steps to seek out worshippers for His Son. How did the Magi become seekers? God drew them. He reached out to them in their pagan darkness and spoke to them in the language they understood, the language of the stars. That's what happens to all of us who come to Christ. God first comes to us; God first seeks us and speaks to us where we are and then draws and directs us to Christ.

-- Consider, for example, the star in the story. What exactly was it? How did it do everything recorded about it? How did it appear, disappear, re-appear, move and lead the Wise Men to a specific house? There are a variety of theories: it was a conjunction of planets or perhaps a supernova, or a comet, or even possibly an angel. Matthew doesn't try to answer any of these questions posed by the star's unusual behavior. The implication in Matthew's account is clear: the star is the supernatural, miraculous intervention of God. The star is a tool used by the sovereign God to guide the Magi to Christ.

The story of the star shows us that nothing is more important than finding Christ. It's so important, in fact, that God will move heaven and earth to bring people 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 Him or to reject Him. The Magi accepted Him while Herod and the religious leaders rejected Him. Herod's rejection took the form of violent opposition while the religious leaders' rejection took the form of indifference.

The same is true for us here today. Each of us will either accept or reject Christ. There is no middle ground; Christ won't allow it. Jesus Himself says in Matthew 12:30.

Matthew 12:30 He who is not with me is against me.

-- American atheists are clearly rejecting Jesus. A group called American Atheists has paid to put up a billboard on New York City's Times Square. The billboard has a picture of Santa and a picture of Jesus. Below the picture of Santa is the caption "Keep the MERRY!" And below the picture of Jesus are the words "Dump the MYTH!"

Probably none of us would reject Jesus as openly as those sponsoring this ad, and none of us would reject Jesus as hostilely as Herod, but some of us could be tempted to be indifferent to Jesus, much as the religious leaders who paid no attention to the Magi's reports that the Messiah had been born. But indifference toward Jesus is just a more subtle form of rejection.

May God grant us to be like the Magi, to seek Christ, and having found Him, to bow down and worship Him.