

THE WISE MEN: KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE PRIZE

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Matthew 2:1-11

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INTRO.

I. WISE MEN MYTHS

-- Probably no part of the Christmas story has accumulated more legends, traditions and myths than that of the Wise Men.

A. THERE WERE THREE.

For example, how many Wise Men were there? The reality is that we don't know - all that we know is that there was more than one. We often refer to them as "The Three Wise Men," but the Bible never says how many there were. The number three probably arose from the fact that there were three gifts that they presented to Jesus.

B. THEY WERE KINGS.

Another legend is that the Wise Men were "kings." They're even enshrined as kings in a Christmas hymn: "we three kings of Orient are…." Technically, however, they weren't kings at all. The word that Matthew uses for them is "magi," which probably refers to an elite class of men from Persia (modern-day Iran) who were a hybrid blend of priests, astronomers, astrologers, and political advisers. They were held in high esteem because of their wide range of knowledge and especially their study of the stars, which were believed to influence human events.

C. THEY ARRIVED AT THE STABLE.

Typically, the Magi are pictured as part of the Nativity scene, at the stable along with the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth. But Matthew says that when the Wise Men arrived, Mary and Joseph were living in a house, and the word that Matthew uses to refer to Jesus isn't the word for a newborn but for a small child. Jesus was probably what we'd call a toddler, about 1-2 years old (since Herod later on ordered the execution of all males 2 years old and under).

II. THE WISE MEN'S JOURNEY

-- But what is accurate is about the Wise Men is also what is most significant: the fact that they undertook a difficult journey in order to find and worship Jesus.

A. THE STAR

-- In the course of their observation and study of the stars, the Magi discovered a new star in the direction of Israel. Since a large number of Jews had lived in Persia from the time of the Babylonian Exile, the Magi were likely familiar with the prophecy of a great Jewish king. At any rate, they interpreted the appearance of the star as a sign that the prophecy of the Hebrew Scriptures had been fulfilled and that the long-awaited Messiah had been born. Any person so significant that God would herald his birth with a new star had to be duly honored; so they decided to travel to Israel to find him.

B. THE JOURNEY

-- It was an arduous journey that would have required a great deal of commitment and perseverance. They would have had to travel more than 1,000 miles in a journey that would have taken 4-6 months and would have involved traveling through stretches of desert and over mountain ranges as high as 15,000 feet. All along the way they would have been in danger from wild animals and armed thieves. Despite all the

sacrifices of time and money and comfort, they persevered through it all.

III. THE WISE MEN'S PURPOSE

A. THEIR PURPOSE

-- The Wise Men had a very definite purpose in making this journey, a purpose that they announced when they arrived in Jerusalem and inquired about where they could find the newborn king:

v. 2b, "...we have come to worship him."

-- And when they finally found Jesus, that's exactly what they did.

v. 11, "...they bowed down and worshipped him."

B. THE RESPONSES TO JESUS

-- There are actually three different responses to Jesus' birth in the Christmas story here in Matthew.

1. The Hostility of Herod.

-- Herod responded with extreme hostility and active opposition. Hostility and opposition to the Gospel story of the birth of Jesus to be our Savior still happen in the world today. Every year atheist organizations take out ads in newspapers, on busses and on billboards along highways attacking Christmas and the Gospel. A billboard that was along a New Jersey highway last year showed a silhouette of the Wise Men on camels approaching the Nativity stable and read, "You know it's a myth. This season, celebrate reason."

2. The Indifference of the Religious Leaders

-- The religious leaders knew all about the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. When Herod called them together to find out where the Messiah would be born, the religious leaders knew the answer immediately - in Bethlehem. But they didn't join with the Magi in going to Bethlehem to search for Jesus. When the Messiah came, they didn't pay any attention. It serves as a warning to all of us here today. Knowing the Bible or being in church doesn't insure that our hearts are seeking him. We can know the Bible and come to church but still be indifferent to Christ in how we live our lives.

3. The Worship of the Magi

-- The third response, the one made by the Magi, is the only proper response to Jesus - to worship Him.

-- It's interesting that in the Christmas story God sends 2 groups to find His Son: the shepherds and the Magi. They were two very different groups, almost at the opposite ends of the social spectrum: The shepherds were Jews who were uneducated with little status influence. The Magi were Gentiles who were educated and possessed both wealth and influence. But God worked sovereignly and providentially to bring both groups to Jesus to demonstrate His desire for people from all nations and social standings to come and find and worship the Son.

(Scene from The Nativity Story)