

The Faith of the Wise Men

Lesson for December 31, 2023

Unit I: Profiles in Faith

Adult Topic: Taking Risks and Reaping Rewards

Background Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Printed Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Key verse: “and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:2, NIV)

Hudson Taylor, the great man of faith who founded the China Inland Mission, integrated faith and risk. He said, "Unless there is an element of risk in our exploits for God, there is no need for faith."

Paul Borthwick, *Leading the Way*, Navpress, 1989, p. 153.

In this week’s lesson, the Magi took a risk in following a star.

Key Terms

1. **Behold** (verse 1, KJV) – 'Behold' is used 1,298 times in the King James version of the Bible. It is derived from the Greek word *eido*, which has the literal translation of be sure to see or don't miss this.
2. **Inquired** (verse 4) – Asked, learned, or understood; investigate; look into.
3. **Magi/Wise men** (verses 2, 7) – Name for an important courtly astrologer, seers, etc. To people of New Testament days, that would probably have been from Persia, modern-day Iran. The wise men saw some sort of unusual star (possibly a conjunction of planets) that indicated to them that a new king of the Jews was born; and so they traveled to Jerusalem, the Jewish capital, where they expected to see this baby. They almost certainly arrived in a great caravan with many servants. Scripture mentions three gifts (Matthew 2:11), but it does not say how many wise men there were, nor does it say they came riding on camels—it may have been horses. Their arrival caused quite a stir in Jerusalem, especially as they were asking about the birth of a king.
4. **Star** (verse 2) – This could not have been a supernova or a conjunction of planets, as some modern theories suggest, because of the way the star moved and settled over one place (verse 9). It is more likely a supernatural reality similar to the Shekinah that guided the Israelites in the days of Moses (Exodus 16:21).
5. **Troubled** (verse 3) – Beset by problems or conflict. Stirred up; agitated.
6. **Worship** (verse 2) – To do reverence; adore; show reverence and adoration for.

Lesson Background

The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah-King who fulfills Old Testament prophecies and brings about the kingdom of heaven through his teachings, miracles, and ultimately, his death and resurrection.

Through his narrative, Matthew emphasizes the importance of faith, repentance, and obedience to God's will — constituting the righteousness of God. He provides a comprehensive guide for Christian living that emphasizes the love of God, love of others, and the call to discipleship with its corresponding cost. Overall, Matthew's Gospel aims to reveal the divine nature of Jesus and his coming as the King of the Jews to be the Savior of all (Jew and Gentile) who respond in faith and repentance. Jesus commissions His disciples to bring the good news of salvation to the world and make disciples of all the nations.

The events in Matthew 2 highlight the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, the recognition of Jesus as the promised Messiah, and the opposition and threat posed by earthly rulers. The narrative sets the stage for the ministry of Jesus and introduces themes of worship, obedience to divine guidance, and the cosmic significance of Jesus' birth.

The chapter opens with the visit of the Magi, wise men from the East, who saw a star signifying the birth of the King of the Jews. They travel to Jerusalem, inquiring about the newborn king. King Herod becomes troubled by this news and gathers the chief priests and scribes to inquire where the Messiah is to be born. They point to Micah's prophecy (Micah 5:2), indicating Bethlehem.

Lesson in Depth

I. Seeking the King (Matthew 2:1-8)

The Wise Men, also called Magi, were eastern experts in sacred texts and astrologers who were likely from the former Persian Empire. They were probably men who were able to interpret dreams and understand prophecy, as well as being able to discern the heavens. They knew the Messiah was prophesied. They knew that His star would appear in the east. They knew this star proclaimed the promised Messiah, and being wise, they came to worship Him. They were also apparently familiar with Jewish traditions about the Messiah and came to Jerusalem as men who did not know the Lord but were interested in prophecies about the Savior King of the Jews. These men were probably wealthy and influential, which is why they sought direction directly from King Herod to properly identify the Messiah and worship Him. Contrary to the belief of many, there were not a specific number of wise men.

They may have assumed that the prophesied king of the Jews would be easily found at the palace in the capital of Jerusalem. They were likely surprised to find out that the King of Judea did not know where the new king of the Jews was to be found. The king and his subjects were surprised that there was another king of the Jews they hadn't heard about! This was the ultimate threat to King Herod. Influential foreigners knew about a Jewish prophesy that he was not aware of and had come to worship a newborn that was meant to take the throne of Judea from King Herod.

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled: Herod was constantly on guard against threats to his rule, especially from his own family. Herod, who wanted to be accepted by the Jews whom he ruled, was not a Jew at all but an Edomite, and Rome recognized him as a vassal king over Judea. The Jews tempered their great hatred of him with admiration for his building projects, such as the magnificent improvements made to the second temple.

He was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him: The fact that all Jerusalem was troubled with Herod is significant. This was due either to the fact that the people of Jerusalem rightly feared what sort of paranoid outburst might come from Herod upon hearing of a rival king being born, or because of the size and dignity of this caravan from the East. This trouble is again testimony to the greatness of Jesus, even as a young child.

Herod moves to get more information and form a response to this news. This was Good News—Gospel for the world—but was taken as bad news for Herod and the elite. He gathers together the religious leaders in Jerusalem and inquires of them. The question he asks was reasonable and shows something about the culture. An expert in religious texts in that society could be expected to know where the Messiah would be born. The average person would not be able to recall that kind of information from casual study. It is both telling and can be criticized that the king of Judea did not know that information but had just finished rebuilding the most important place in the Jewish faith. He had centered his faith in outward appearances rather than inward devotion.

These men that he gathered were the rabbis, the religious leaders of that day; the men who knew the law and knew of the promise of Messiah.

Chief priests: would especially include those who once held the office of High Priest; Herod changed the High Priest often because it was largely a political appointment.

Scribes: “The ‘teachers of the law,’ or ‘scribes’ as other English versions call them, were experts in the Old Testament and in its copious oral tradition. Their work was not so much copying out Old Testament manuscripts (as the word ‘scribes’ suggests) as teaching the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, it was prophesied that Christ would be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah. The religious leaders inform him that the Messiah was supposed be born in Bethlehem. How do they know? They knew because they had meticulously studied the Scriptures and knew of the verse from Micah 5:2 (quoted in Matthew 2:6) that revealed the Ruler/Shepherd would come from Bethlehem. But they also knew it because the Messiah had to be from the line of David, and David was raised in Bethlehem. Sadly, these experts had the right information but seem personally uninterested in meeting the Messiah for themselves.

Then Herod goes and speaks privately with the Wise Men. He did not want his plan foiled or his ignorance exposed to any outsiders. He gathers more information about when the star they had followed arose. Then he tells them to go find the Messiah and let him know where he is. Herod was clearly trying to use the Wise Men to get to the newborn Savior. Herod was a liar. He had no intention of worshipping Him. He wanted to kill Him. He was afraid of Him whom he saw as a potential threat to his throne. He wanted to eliminate Him so he could stay in power. This powerful man was intimidated and willing to murder an innocent baby in order to maintain his position.

“Mark that the wise men never promised to return to Herod; they probably guessed that all this eager zeal was not quite so pure as it seemed to be, and their silence did not mean consent.”
(Spurgeon)

II. **Worshipping the King** (Matthew 2:9-12)

The Magi followed the star from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. The star led them right to the house where Mary was staying with her baby Jesus.

Into the house: By the time the wise men arrived, Mary and Joseph were situated in a house, not a stable (Luke 2:7). We notice that Jesus here is called a **young Child**, likely being between 6 and 18 months old.

They rejoiced to see the star rest over a particular place where they knew they would find the Savior. Their hope was rewarded as they saw the child with his mother, and they were able to worship Him as they desired. They not only brought gestures of honor, but they also brought very expensive gifts. These wealthy and influential men bowed to worship the Son of a poor girl from an unpopular village who was pregnant before she was married.

Again, we do not know how many wise men were there, but three gifts are described: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Frankincense and myrrh were both powerful perfumes that were costly in Jesus' day.

The **“gold”** recognized Jesus as God. Gold spiritually means purity of God. How useful this gold was to Joseph in the following months! It helped him to defray the cost of the journey into Egypt and back, and to maintain his precious charges there. The Heavenly Father knew what those needs would be, and met them by anticipation.

“Frankincense” accompanied the lamb offering in the temple sacrifice and the for anointing kings. The frankincense recognized Jesus as the perfect Lamb sacrifice.

“Myrrh” was more commonly used for burials. The myrrh also recognized Jesus as the groom of the bride of Christ. Myrrh was used as the sweet aloe for the wedding bed.

The Magi honored the Savior King who was born to die for the sins of the world. They were influential outsiders who were some of the first people to recognize, humble themselves, and worship the King of Israel. They represented—from the very beginning of the Gospel—that Jesus Christ was not simply Savior of the Jews, but the Savior of the world. They could have gone from that place and followed Herod’s directions, which would have led to an attack on Jesus by Herod. But God was at work in the lives of these non-Jews. These religious outsiders, who did not have the background to follow God as the Jews did, were able to hear God clearly because they had humbled themselves to listen. The Lord warned them in a dream not to return to Herod and so they went back to their own country another way, disobeying King Herod to protect the King of Kings.

We see here three different responses to Jesus; one may say that all people respond in one of these three ways.

- **Herod** displayed an open hatred and hostility toward Jesus.
- The **chief priests and the scribes** were indifferent toward Jesus, all the while retaining their religious respectability.
- The **wise men** sought out Jesus and worshipped Him – even at great cost.

We should learn from the wisdom of these wise men:

- They were not satisfied with looking at the star and admiring it; they *did* something about the star and set out and followed it.
- They persevered in their search and in following after the star.
- They were not discouraged in the search by clergy and doubtful religious leaders.
- They rejoiced at the star.
- When they arrived at the destination the star led them to, they entered in.
- When they entered in, they worshipped.
- They sensed an urgency to worship Him *now* and not wait until later.
- When they worshipped, it was to give something – not empty-handed adoration.

We see a wonderful pattern: “Those who look for Jesus will see him: those who truly see him will worship him: those who worship him will consecrate their substance to him.” (Spurgeon)

Being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way: Their worship is also manifested in obedience. They are obedient to the heavenly dream and leave without serving as Herod’s informants.

Lesson Summary

Matthew 2:1-12 tells the story of the Magi, also known as the Wise Men or Three Kings, who traveled from the East to Jerusalem in search of the newborn King of the Jews. Though this is a very familiar story, here are some lessons that can be gleaned from this passage:

1. **Seeking God with a sincere heart:** The Magi's journey symbolizes a sincere quest for the divine. It teaches us the importance of seeking God with a genuine and open heart, demonstrating that those who earnestly seek Him will find Him.
2. **Recognition of the divine in unexpected places:** The Magi found the newborn King in humble circumstances, not in a grand palace. This reminds us to be open to recognizing the divine in unexpected places and to value substance over appearances.
3. **The significance of worship:** The Wise Men came to worship the newborn King, recognizing His divine nature. This teaches us the importance of worshiping God, acknowledging His greatness, and giving Him the reverence He deserves.
4. **The fulfillment of prophecies:** The events surrounding the birth of Jesus fulfill Old Testament prophecies. This emphasizes the continuity and fulfillment of God's promises, highlighting the importance of understanding and recognizing the fulfillment of prophecies in our lives.
5. **The value of giving:** The Magi brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This teaches us the value of giving to God and others. It emphasizes the idea that true worship involves giving of ourselves, our resources, and our talents.
6. **The danger of pride and jealousy:** King Herod's reaction to the news of a newborn King reveals the danger of pride and jealousy. It serves as a warning against letting personal ambitions and pride obstruct our relationship with God and His purposes.
7. **Guidance through divine intervention:** The Magi were guided by a star, which led them to Jesus. This underscores the idea that God provides guidance to those who seek Him. It encourages us to trust in divine guidance in our own lives.
8. **Obedience to divine warnings:** The Magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they obeyed. This teaches us the importance of heeding divine warnings and being obedient to God's guidance, even when it goes against our initial plans.

These lessons from Matthew 2:1-12 provide spiritual insights and principles that are relevant to our lives, encouraging us to seek God sincerely, worship Him, give generously, recognize divine guidance, and remain obedient to His leading.