

Did you know that according to a recent survey, 90% of Americans say Christmas is their favorite holiday, but only 20% say they enjoy Christmas shopping! I'd be one of them.

This reminds me of two men who were next-door neighbors who decided to go sailing while their wives went Christmas shopping. While they were out in the boat, a terrible storm arose. The sea became so choppy they had a difficult time keeping the boat under control and before they knew it, they hit a sandbar grounding the boat. Afraid of being stranded, they jumped out of the boat and began to push w/ all their might to get the boat back into the water. As they struggled, they were beaten and waterlogged by the swelling, crashing waves. At the very point of fear and exhaustion, w/ a smile on his face, one of the men said, "This sure beats Christmas shopping, doesn't it?"

**Who here enjoys Christmas shopping?** Personally, I'd just about rather have someone beat me than to go Christmas shopping. How I hate trying to figure out what to get people. Now if you tell me what you want or need, I'll be Joey on the spot. And I'll enjoy watching you open your gift. But oh the drudgery of trying to figure out the perfect gift – *this reminds me of a story I heard about Bubba and Christmas...*

Jimbo was talking to Bubba about Christmas and asked, “Whatcha gettin’ yor wife for Christmas?” Bubba said, “She wants a diamond necklace or a new 4-wheel drive Jeep. So I get her a 2-carat diamond necklace.” Jimbo said, “That had to be purdy expensive? How did you decide da necklace?” Bubba said, “Cuz you can’t buy no fake Jeep!”

I’m thankful there’s nothing fake about God’s gift. The gift of Jesus is the most indescribable gift we could ever receive.

*Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.* 2 Cr. 9:15

When it comes to gifts and the Christmas story, it’s hard not to think about the Wise Men who traveled from afar to bring gifts to honor the newborn King. All we know about them is found in **Matthew 2** – leaving inquiring minds to wonder:

- Who are these men and where did they come from?
- What is the star they saw that led them to Bethlehem?
- How did they know this baby was the King of the Jews?

B/c of these unanswered questions, there are a number of legends about these men. Over the centuries, they’ve given the names Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. They’ve been venerated as saints. If you go to the Cathedral in Cologne, Germany, you’ll find relics alleged to be the remains of the Wise Men. *All we know of them comes from Mt. 2.*

## I The MISSION of the Magi

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him.”* Matthew 2:1-2

Right away we discover these men are from a distant eastern land (likely Babylon) and therefore not likely Jewish, but Gentiles. We also know they're called “Magi” referring to a special class of priests in the Persian Empire and they've come in search of a newborn King..

From history, we know the Magi existed 100's of yrs. before the Christ. They had their own religion, priesthood, and writings. In fact, it appears from the book of Daniel that they existed in his day and that Daniel might've been appointed head over the Magi by King Darius. But the *Magi* were more than priests; they were the professors and philosophers of their day. They were brilliant scholars trained in medicine, history, religion, prophecy, and astronomy, and astrology.

**You might be wondering, what's the difference b/w astronomy/astrology.** Astronomy is the science of the study of the stars. Astrology is the belief there's a connection b/w the position of the stars and human destiny. The Magi were experts in both who claimed to be able to divine the future.

In our day, astrology deservedly gets a bad rap. But in this time, astrology was connected w/ man's search for God. The ancients studied the skies to find the answers to life's great questions – Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?

## II The MYSTERY of the Star

Why did the Wise Men travel so far from home in search for this new King? From Persia to Bethlehem was a treacherous journey of several 100 miles. *The answer – they came to see the baby born king of the Jews.*

Verse 2 adds an interesting detail that has baffled and intrigued scholars/astronomers for years – *We have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him.*

What was “his star?” What did they see and how did they know it was his star and how did they connect it w/ Israel?

It helps to remember that the Magi were students of the sky – meaning they wouldn't have been confounded by anything unusual that suddenly appeared in the heavens.

It also helps to know that in those days it wasn't uncommon to associate the birth of a great ruler w/ unusual heavenly phenomenon. The star (whatever it was) would've made perfect sense to them and would've fit what they believed.

**But what was the star?** Frankly, we don't know. The Greek word (*aster*) is a general term referring to any bright object in the sky such as a star, planet or even a comet.

Over the years there have been (4) main theories:

**Halley's Comet** – Unfortunately the nearest appearance was in 11 B.C., which is too early for the birth of Christ.

**Supernova** – an exploding star that filled the sky w/ a brilliant flash of light; but there are no astronomical records of a supernova in the years surrounding the birth of Jesus.

**Conjunction of Planets** (most popular theory) theory suggests that in 7 B.C. Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn aligned in a rare conjunction that occurs once every 125 yrs. Another possibility is a conjunction of Jupiter and Venus in 2 B.C. **This is the possibility suggested by the “Star of Wonder” presentation at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago.**

**Supernatural Light.** This theory suggests the “star” wasn't a natural phenomenon, but rather was a light placed by God in the atmosphere especially for the Magi to see. Those who hold this view point to the *Shekinah* glory of God in the O.T. At certain points in history God revealed himself as a bright light to guide his people – like the pillar of fire w/ which God led Israel in the wilderness.

The truth is – we don't know for sure what the “star” was, but what we do know is that this light directed the Magi to Bethlehem to find Jesus. **But there had to be more.**

I think the Persians had some understanding of the Messiah from the 500 yrs. the Persians spent w/ the Jews. In this time, it appears Daniel was rather influential likely sharing w/ the Persians about the Jewish expectation of a Messiah. It's even possible they knew from the prophecy of the “70 weeks” in Daniel 9 the approximate time of the Messiah's appearing. So when they saw the star, they knew the time had come.

### III The MISCHIEF of Herod

Herod, known as “the Great” was the first of many Herod's mentioned in the N.T. He assumed his role as a favor granted to his father by Julius Caesar. Sometime around 40 BC, after successfully quelling a Jewish uprising, Herod was declared by Octavian and Antony to be the *king of the Jews*. A title he came to cherish.

Herod was a cunning leader and capable warrior. In an attempt to win over the Jews, Herod married a Jewish Hasmonean woman to make him more acceptable to the Jewish people – and had the Temple rebuilt – to no avail. He was also a vicious, maniacal, paranoid narcissist – who went on random killing sprees just to make a point. He brutally had his wife and sons killed before his death.

History reports that b/c he knew no one would mourn his death he had several citizens arrested to be executed on the day of his death to guarantee the people would mourn.

*When King Herod heard this he was **disturbed**, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, that I too may go and worship him."*

Herod's reaction is fascinating – Mt.2:3 says – *When Herod heard the news, he was **disturbed**, and all Jerusalem w/ him.*

**disturbed** – to shake violently. Herod was all shook up.

So when the Magi showed up looking to honor the newborn King of the Jews – Herod wasn't too happy. Nonetheless, he turned to his scribes/priests for advice. He asks: *Where is this child to be born?* The scribes didn't have to look it up. They already know the answer. 700 yrs. earlier the prophet Micah had predicted the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem.

Of course, Herod had no intention of going to worship this newborn king – he wanted to eliminate the threat to his rule.

In fact, we learn that after Herod realized he'd been outwitted by the Magi, he became so furious he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity under the age of 2, in accordance w/ the timing of the Magi.

We all know what happens next. Herod asks the Magi to go to Bethlehem as his representatives, find out where the baby is, and report back to him so he can go and worship him. But they never return under the leading of the H.S. **Instead the worshipped the Savior and went on their way.**

Let me paraphrase the words of one Bible commentator: Although we read that the Magi met Herod, we do not read that they worshipped him. But when they found this tiny baby, not yet two months old, rocking in his mother's arms, these great men fell on their faces before him. To this baby they gave the honor due a king. **What Herod craved, the baby received.** Why? B/c only the child was worthy!

#### IV The MAJESTY of Their Worship

*On coming to the house, they saw the child w/ his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him w/ gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Matthew 2:11*



Now we come to the one detail for which the Magi are most remembered – *then they opened their treasures and presented him w/ gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.*

The gifts in themselves are expensive and represent a worthy tribute. But beyond that, there's an ancient tradition that sees these gifts as symbolic of who this child would become.

The early church fathers believed gold was a gift worthy of a king – it honored Jesus as the King of kings/Lord of lords.

Frankincense was believed to be a fragrance used by the priests in the temple to worship the Lord – representing Jesus' deity and His role as our great high priest.

Myrrh – a perfume made from the leaves of the cistus rose was often mixed w/ vinegar to anoint and prepare a body for burial – it was a gift to honor His future sacrifice as our Savior and Passover lamb.

- Gold points to his majesty – He is KING
- Frankincense points to his deity – He is PRIEST
- Myrrh points to his humanity – He is our SAVIOR

V The MESSAGE of the Moment

A If the Wise Men can find Jesus – so can you.

Think of how many barriers they had to cross to get to Jesus. There was a distance barrier a cultural barrier, a language barrier, a race barrier, a religious barrier – not to mention a hostile king. It wasn't easy for them to find Jesus, but they did. **And if they found him, then so can you.**

**B If God can use a star to reach these pagan astrologers – He can use anything to reach anybody.**

Sometimes we despair of seeing others come to Christ b/c nothing we say seems to have the slightest effect on them. This story ought to give us hope. Our God is infinitely creative in the things he can use to break through to people who seem to be far from him. He can use a star, a book, a tract, a television show, a song – or anything he desires.

**C If the Wise Men offered Jesus gifts fit for a king – then so should we.**

***Did you know the greatest indicator of followship is giving?*** People who have Jesus in the right place in their life don't struggle w/ giving. Why? B/c they long to honor the One who first loved them. They realize His commission to tithe and bring an offering is indicative of obedient followship.

**What does God ultimately want you to bring to Him as a gift fit for Him? You! He wants your life. He wants your affection to know Him and to honor Him w/ your life.**

***Is this not the central meaning of the Christmas story?*** This year and every year, throughout the year, we're invited to return to Bethlehem to witness a baby lying in a manger who is our Prince, our King, our Savior – our Messiah.

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant girl. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter's shop w/ His dad until He was 30, and then worked for His Heavenly Father for 3 yrs. as an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never traveled more than 200 miles from the place where He was born. He never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself. While He was a young man, the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to His enemies and went thru the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross b/w (2) thieves. While He was dying, His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth – His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave thru the kindness of a friend. Over 20 centuries have come and gone, and He is still the central figure of the human race and the leader of mankind's progress. I'm far w/in the mark when I say that all the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, and all of the kings that have ever reigned, all put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as much as that One Solitary Life.