

January 4: Responding to the Gift of Jesus

WEEKLY READING - MATTHEW 1-2 • TODAY'S PASSAGE - MATTHEW 2:1-12 •

MAIN POINT

How we respond to the information we have about Jesus determines the impact He has on our lives.

BACKGROUND

After Matthew 1 describes Jesus' birth, Matthew 2 recounts the manifold human response to it, including Herod's murderous hostility. When God thwarts Herod, it shows that the wrath of human kings cannot thwart the purposes of God the King.

Skeptics doubt that a star with supernatural origin could have led anyone to Jesus. They dismiss the story as legend, citing parallels to pagan myths in which stars guided heroes to their destination. In ancient literature, astrological phenomena also accompanied the birth or death of notable kings, including both Julius Caesar (death) and Augustus Caesar (birth). Skeptics therefore propose that Matthew fabricated this episode or perhaps adapted a legend. If Matthew's sources misled him, he was deceived. If he invented this episode, he was a deceiver. But why would Matthew concoct a story of worshiping astrologers for a predominantly Jewish audience? Roughly like gambling today, astrology was a plague, denounced by prophets and ethicists alike. But if God chose to summon Gentiles by speaking their language, then Matthew could put that fact to use, since it matched his themes.

Magi, or "wise men," were royal counselors. At best, they were learned and prudent. At worst, they were charlatans, sycophants, and brutes (cf. Dan. 2:1-10; Acts 8:9-24).⁴⁸ Whatever their character, the line between astrology and astronomy was thin, if only because stargazing was respectable. Scripture both prohibits and mocks astrology (Jer. 8:2; 19:13; Isa. 47:13-15), yet God reversed expectations and spoke to stargazers in language they understood, thereby calling Gentiles to Jesus.

Popular Christian images of the magi clash with Matthew's account. The magi were counselors, not kings, and while they bore three gifts, their number (unstated) was large enough to cause a stir in Jerusalem (Matt. 2:3). Contrary to nativity scenes, they found Jesus in a house, not a manger (v. 11).

Matthew 2 introduces themes that later chapters will develop. First, while pagans worship Jesus, Israel's political leaders seek his death while her religious leaders despise him (8:5-13; 12:24; 26:3-5). Second, Jesus fulfills the promise that the nations would come to the light of the Messiah (Isa. 60:3). Third, Matthew 2 demonstrates God's providential and supernatural care for his Son in the face of groundless hostility.

CHRIST CONNECTION

The Old Testament concludes with the Israelites return from Babylonian exile, seeking to rebuild the kingdom with the promise of a coming Messiah. When the wise men enter the scene, Matthew is echoing what the angel of the Lord said to the shepherds in Luke 2:10, 11: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be *for all the people*. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." The kingdom of heaven is wide enough to accept Jews and

Gentiles, rich and poor, the seemingly righteousness and knowingly unrighteous. This King is for “you”—you lowly Jewish shepherds, you wealthy Gentile pilgrims.

The wise men were Gentiles, no doubt about it. They were either from Arabia, Persia, or Babylon. Origen of Alexandria believes they were from Babylon. We know from the book of Daniel that the Chaldeans or Babylonians had “wise men” (Daniel 2:12-14, 24, 27, 48; 4:6, 18; 5:6-8, 15), and when you factor in the theological significance attached to Babylon, Matthew is possibly saying that the flood of Gentiles entering into the people of God has begun, as the prophets predicted (Isaiah 2:2, 3; cf. Isaiah 60:1-5; Micah 4:1, 2). The return of God's people from the Babylonian exile is certainly over if the Babylonians themselves are bowing before Jesus, the king of Israel (and the universe)!

THE FLOW

- 15 minutes - Conversation and relationship-building
 - 5 minutes - Create interest (icebreaker, activity, or quote)
 - 10 minutes - Year of Prayer guided prayer time
 - 40 minutes - Study and apply the Bible
 - 5 minutes - prayer requests
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INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What is the best Christmas gift you received this year?

Have you ever had to show a level of excitement for a gift that wasn't quite what you really felt?

Why do your reactions to gifts, whether good or bad, matter?

Share information from BACKGROUND and CHRIST CONNECTION to help group members understand the context

Transition/Say - Today, we will look at the biblical account of the wise men who came from the East and followed the star of David to see the newborn Jesus. These men came bearing extravagant gifts to a baby born of extremely humble means. When we see Christmas decorations depicting Jesus' birth, many show the wise men at the manger scene. Although biblical scholars concur that the arrival of the wise men came when Jesus was an infant, they were probably not present at His birth. Either way, the way in which they responded is what matters. They responded to Jesus with worship. How we respond to Jesus makes an eternal impact.

YEAR OF PRAYER - GROUP PRAYER

PRAY THE FOLLOWING PRAYERS TOGETHER AS A GROUP. HAVE A TIME FOR PEOPLE TO OFFER THEIR PRAYERS OUT LOUD WITH THE ENTIRE GROUP OR PUT PEOPLE INTO GROUPS OF 3-4 TO PRAY TOGETHER.

Pause and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your time of prayer.

"Father God, as in every time that we gather, we do so to hallow Your name—to honor Your name to bring glory to Your name. We acknowledge that You are Elohim (The Strong Creator God) –You are Jehovah (The Relational God) – You are Adonai (Master over All). We praise you for being our Elohim, our Jehovah and our Adonai"

If you have words of Worship or Adoration, lift those to the Father now. (pause)

We thank you for these additional names of the One True God—for allowing us a greater understanding of Your Character and Your Attributes. We Love you Lord

As we are still in the Father's presence, ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart and reveal to you any unconfessed sin. In the quiet of this moment confess and repent of that sin, knowing that the Lord is faithful to forgive your sin and restore you to a right relationship with Him. (Pause)

Read Hebrews 8:12. This verse reminds us that God will be merciful toward our iniquities and remember our sins no more.

Father God, we want to express words of thanksgiving for your ongoing goodness to us. We can all pray in agreement that your faithfulness to us is never ending. Thank you for the realization of Your promise when You said You would never leave us or forsake us.

Share your prayers of Thanksgiving now. (pause)

Group leader close in prayer

I ask, Father, that You guide us in using our time wisely. You tell us to number our days. Help us make every day matter, may it count for Your kingdom purposes. You've given each of us 1440 minutes in each new day. May we begin each day by giving it back to you, allowing you to guide our steps. We love You and desire to be pleasing in Your sight, as Your children. All that we have prayed, has been prayed in faith, believing and in agreement. We ask these things in the mighty name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

STUDY AND DISCUSS

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says and means.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 2:1-6.

What do you know about the wise men?

The wise men were a caste of men specializing in astrology, medicine, and natural science. The magi were not kings, but a combination of wise men and priests probably from Persia. They combined astronomical observation with astrological speculation. They played both political and religious roles and were figures of prominence in their land. The Greek word "magos" (where we get "magi") is the same word used in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, in Daniel 2:2, when the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar gathered men skilled in religious and magical arts to interpret his strange dreams. Although we know little about the wise men in Matthew 2, we can assume based on their profession that they weren't Jews. But because of their knowledge of the Old Testament prophecies and their interest in the star, they sought out the newborn Messiah.

If the wise men were pagan astrologers, why would they leave everything in order to follow the star?

What do you know about King Herod? Why would he have been troubled by the birth of Jesus?

Herod the Great was a half-Jew, half-Idumean who, through accommodation to the Romans, ascended to power as client-ruler of Israel in 37 B.C. Although he was known as a great builder of public works and a shrewd diplomat in his dealings with both Romans and Jews, he laid oppressive taxes on and conscripted labor from the Israelites. As King Herod grew older, he became increasingly paranoid about threats against his person and throne. He had numerous people put to death because he feared plots to overthrow him. After frequent disputes with Caesar Augustus, the emperor uttered his famous pun that he would rather be Herod's pig (hys) than his son (huios). King Herod's paranoia provides proper context to his reaction to the wise men's pursuit of the King of the Jews: "When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" (v. 3). Herod's paranoia and unpredictable behavior led to the worry of his people.

What is the significance that all Jerusalem was troubled along with Herod? What does this response show about their spiritual state?

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 2:7-12.

Having been given the location of the birthplace of the King of the Jews, the wise men continued their journey. What the magi recognized as divine guidance filled them with joy (v. 10). Upon seeing Jesus, they did what they set out to do—they prostrated themselves before Him and "worshiped Him" (v. 2, 11). The wise men were in awe of Jesus.

Both Herod and the wise men had essentially the same facts about the star and the Messiah. Why is intellectual information not enough to cause us to embrace Christ? What else is needed?

How did God use pagan wisdom to lead the wise men to ultimate wisdom—His Son?

In drawing the wise men to Christ, what did God reveal about His plan for the Gentiles (non-Jews)?

God often chooses to reveal Himself to pagans, at times even in the midst of their religious practices, to lead them on to the full truth found only in Christ. The wise men were the first Gentiles to worship Jesus. They believed He was the Messiah, something many Jews, God's chosen people, failed to realize. From Jesus' infancy, God made it evident that His Son came to save the world, not just the Jews.

What does it tell you about the nature of God and His gospel that pagans were invited to worship His Son?

Look at verse 11. What three gifts did the wise men give Jesus? What was the significance of these gifts?

The gifts used to honor Jesus were associated with royalty. Because Matthew had not yet introduced the theme of Jesus' death, it is not likely that he was implying it here, even though myrrh was a spice often used in embalming. (Additionally, unbeknownst to her, Mary used myrrh to anoint Jesus for His burial in Matthew 26:7.) Gold, then and now, was a precious metal prized for its beauty and value, an appropriate regal gift. Frankincense and myrrh were fragrant spices and perfumes equally appropriate for such adoration and worship. Similar visits of magi to royalty are described in other Greco-Roman literature of the time, but more significant here is the Jewish background.

In your journey toward Jesus, how have you been like the wise men? How are you unlike them?

How we respond to the information we have about Jesus determines what impact He will have on our lives. Just like Herod and the wise men, we're presented with information about the Messiah. How we respond determines how Christ will impact our lives. We can pursue an intellectual faith only, one

that consists of studying facts about Christ but never letting that knowledge change us. We can let that knowledge make us insecure and cause us to wonder what we'll have to give up to follow Christ. Or, like the wise men, we can risk everything for Christ and choose to worship Him with overflowing joy.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

For the wise men, God used a star to point them to the Messiah. What kinds of events does God use to point others to His Son today?

What have you had to leave to find Jesus?

Jesus' birth shattered religious and cultural barriers. How does He still do this today?

What is the response/adjustment you need to make this week out a heart of praise for King Jesus?

OPTIONAL GROUP ACTIVITY

ACTIVITY: "THREE RESPONSES TO JESUS"

Goal

To explore how different people respond to Jesus and to help participants articulate where they see themselves—and one another—reflected in the story.

Step 1: Fast Group Reading (2 minutes)

Ask for three volunteers. Assign each one a role:

- Narrator
- The Magi
- Herod & religious leaders

Have them read Matthew 2:1-12 aloud, each reading only their assigned roles. This naturally highlights contrast and gets everyone listening actively.

Step 2: Small-Group Sorting Question (3 minutes)

Ask participants to turn to a neighbor or form groups of 3.

Give them this task: "Rank the three responses—Magi, Herod, religious leaders—from most understandable to most troubling. Be ready to explain why." Encourage disagreement and discussion.

Step 3: Whole-Group Discussion (4 minutes)

Bring everyone back together and guide a short conversation using 2–3 of these questions (choose based on time):

- Why do you think God revealed Jesus to outsiders?
- The religious leaders knew Scripture but didn't go to Bethlehem—what keeps people from acting on what they already know?
- What do you think Herod was most afraid of losing?

The Magi brought gifts, what can we sacrifice as we worship?

As people respond, gently connect answers back to the text.

Step 4: Action Question (1 minute)

End with a question for the full group: "If this story were written about us this week, which group would we most resemble—and what would it look like to take one step closer to the Magi's response?"

Allow 2–3 brief responses.

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 2:1-12

2:1-6. The mention of Jesus' birthplace, Bethlehem of Judea, is significant in this passage especially because of the prophecy it fulfilled (see 2:4-6). Matthew is building his case. Jesus is the fulfillment of all the prophetic intentions of the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. All the details apply, including his birthplace.

The King Herod in this passage, one of many Herods, is Herod the Great, mentioned here and in Luke 1:5. His father, Antipater II, was a Jew of Idumaeans descent (Edomite, related through Esau to Jacob) who gained influence under the Roman Empire. He was influential in his son Herod's rise to power, in a succession of positions over Galilee and ultimately Judea, where Herod ruled from 37–4 B.C. (Herod's death in 4 B.C. is one of the main reasons we know Jesus was born somewhat earlier than the traditional A.D. 1; see 2:19.) During this time Herod was given the title "king of the Jews" by the Roman senate. This partly explains his fear and aggressive murderous actions when he heard from the magi that another king of the Jews had been born (2:2).

These magi from the east (2:1) were likely from Babylon and were culturally influential students of the stars, not evil magicians of some sort. Their interest must have been aroused by the unusual star they observed. We do not know their number, but their entourage was probably substantial to make such a lengthy cross-continent trip and to cause such a noticeable stir in Jerusalem (2:3). How they came to connect the birth of the king of the Jews with the strange star is a matter of conjecture. Some scholars believe they may have been responding, in an amazing display of faith, to a scrap of Scripture brought to their people centuries before through Balaam (Num. 24:17), who was a Mesopotamian himself.

The important point here is that God brought the birth of the king to the attention of these Gentiles, who probably journeyed many months (possibly one to two years) from Mesopotamia to Jerusalem. Matthew included this information to alert his Jewish readers to several realities: (1) the event of Jesus' birth had worldwide impact; (2) the Messiah was coming through Israel as a gift from God to all nations of the world, not just to the Jews; and (3) in contrast to the indifference of Jewish chief priests and scribes who should have anticipated the king's birth (2:4), these Gentiles were overwhelmed with joy!

The quote in 2:6 comes from Micah 5:2. Micah prophesied around the time of the Northern Kingdom's fall in 722 B.C. Through this man, the Lord used the lesson of the Northern Kingdom's fall to confront Judah's own covenant disobedience. He warned of Judah's future judgment, but he also gave cause for hope, foretelling his restoration of the remnant. It is in this context of hope that the words quoted by Matthew are written in Micah.

2:7-12. Herod called the magi into his chambers alone to try to determine when this new king, Jesus, was born. Because both the magi and Herod seemed to identify the appearance of the star with the birthdate of the Messiah, Jesus must have been at least a year old when the magi arrived. (This fact changes the traditional image of the magi visiting the young family in the stable where Jesus was born. Certainly the shepherds found him there, but Joseph would have found his family a home to live in by the time the magi arrived.)

Herod wanted to use the magi to determine the exact location of this new king. This was a self-serving strategy, not a generous desire to aid the magi in their quest. Herod had no desire to worship the new king. His goal was to locate him and eliminate this bud of growing messianic hope that he viewed as potential competition.

The magi likely followed this star very much as a sailor follows the stars to get to his destination. The text does, however, give every indication that this star was a supernatural phenomenon.

When the magi found where Jesus and his family were living, they were overjoyed. Their destination was not just a place—but a person—Jesus. Their response was the same response that Matthew wanted for his readers; they worshiped him. The gifts they gave to Jesus—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—were the most common mediums of exchange in that day. The gold and two forms of incense made it possible for the magi to cross through many different lands on their way to Bethlehem, much like people today use travelers checks when they are traveling. These gifts would come in handy later for Jesus' family as they traveled themselves (2:13-15).

The magi chose not to go back to Herod as he had instructed. Instead they went a different way. For foreigners to disobey a king in that day was risky. But the magi, by faith, followed the warning they had received in a dream. They clearly were more awed by God than by Herod.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Prayer Requests of Group Members (be sure to share these with the group and check in on relevant requests)

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Those we are Asking God to Save

Friends -

Family -

Co-workers -

Others -