

# “Wise Men Still Seek Him” // Matthew 2:1–12 // *Christmas With the Summit 2021*<sup>1</sup>

[[Bumper Video](#): Bryan Loritts, “The Very First Christmas Gift”]

Well, **Merry Christmas to all of you.** These are some of my favorite services of the year, and I know we have a lot of guests with us. In fact, I’ll just go out on a limb here and say that maybe for a few of you, you got pressured into being here; you got the Christmas card played on you: “You have to go on Christmas, honey. It’s for the family.” I heard about a convo that took place between a man and wife earlier today: She was getting ready; she thought he was. So she comes downstairs when it’s time to go and he’s sitting there in his shorts and slippers, and says, “Why aren’t you ready? We need to go.” He said, “I don’t want to go.” She said, “Why not?” He said, “For 3 reasons: “1. Nobody at that place is friendly to me. 2. Everyone is suspicious of me. And 3. I just don’t like it.” And she said, “Uh, first, that’s not true. People are friendly. #2. The suspicion is mainly in your head. And #3. You’re the pastor. You have to go.” So, that was my wife and I this morning, and I’m just glad we all made it.

Well, like Pastor Bryan indicated, we’re going to take a quick peak at one of the most recognizable, most iconic stories of Christmas: the coming of the Magi, the Wise Men, to see Jesus. Honestly, this might be my favorite part of the Christmas story. I think of it as “the seeker’s moment” in the story--it’s for all those of you who simultaneously feel drawn to the Christmas story but also find yourself with so many questions--Like, *Is it true? And, if so, what difference does it make?*

The story of the wise men begins in Matthew 2 v 1 **Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;**

Now, as Bryan said, we don’t know much about these wise men.<sup>2</sup> We don’t know what their names were. We don’t know how many there were. Most people assume it was 3, probably because they gave 3 gifts, but the story never says there were 3. In fact, there’s plenty of reasons to believe the group was much larger than 3. For one, bands of magi in those days typically traveled in schools of at least a dozen, plus their families and servants, which would make it a group of 50 or more. Furthermore, in vs. 3 Matthew tells us that the presence of these Wise Men “troubled” the whole city. Three guys moseying in on camels aren’t going to get the attention of an entire city, but a band of 50 traveling foreigners would have.

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<sup>1</sup> Works Consulted: Tim Keller, sermon on Matthew 2:1–8; David Platt, “The Magi and the Messiah,” sermon preached on Matthew 2:1–12; Joby Martin, “Behold Our King,” sermon preached on Dec 22, 2019; Bryan Loritts, “Christ, The Triumphant King,” sermon preached December 26, 2016. John Mark Comer, “Origin Story,” Matthew 1:18–25.

<sup>2</sup> There is an ancient tradition that these 3 guys were named “Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar,” but there’s no verification for that.

**So, it's probably safe to assume this was a large group. And I know that messes up your nativity scene, because you don't have room for 50 wise men, so let me mess it up even further:** there is no way the wise men could even have been present at the manger scene. Matthew tells us that they *started* their "journey from afar" when Jesus was born, and that journey would have taken several months--which means if you want to be accurate, put them across the room to show that on the night Jesus was born they began traveling.<sup>3</sup>

You're like, "I'm not doing that with my manger scene." That's fine. If I come to your house, I won't judge you; I promise. I heard about some parents in our church who were really concerned about their little boy, he was in the 3rd grad and was always getting in trouble at school, and 2021 had been particularly bad. Well, every year he wrote a letter to Santa telling Santa what gifts he wanted and why he deserved them, so the parents saw this as an opportunity to make him reflect on his behavior--and this year they raised the stakes on him. They told him that instead of writing to Santa, he was going to write a letter to JESUS telling him what he wanted and why he deserved it. So, the little boy sat down to write the letter, and wrote, "Dear Jesus, I've been good for six months now." Then he thought for a minute and crossed out "six" and wrote "three." He reflected again for a second, crossed out "three months" and wrote "two weeks." (The parents are like, "Oh, it's working!") But then the little boy stood up unexpectedly, walked over to the little nativity scene, picked up the image of Mary, came back to the table and wrote, "Dear Jesus, if ever you want to see your mother again..." (So, some of you are like, "I got enough problems in my house without you telling me there's too many wise men at my manger scene." Again, that's fine. I won't judge you. It's my job just to tell you.

Let's get back to Matthew 2. Vs. **4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet (Micah):**

**6 "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."** Notice: the star didn't get them all the way there. It got them as far as Jerusalem, but from there, they had to consult the Scriptures to find their way to Jesus.

**7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."** (Now, kids: Does Herod really want to worship him? No. He's PRETENDING worship while INTENDING murder.)

Historians tell us Herod, who was the puppet king of Israel at the time, was PARANOID about losing his power—like, psychotically paranoid. For example,

- When Herod was first inaugurated as king, he invited all his family's enemies to a festival as a show of peace. But then, when he got them all there, he surprise-ambushed them and had them all killed.

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<sup>3</sup> Plus, we learn in a few verses that when King Herod learns about all this, he issues an order to kill all the little boys in the region 2 years old and under, which indicates that's about how old he assumes Jesus is. So, I know that messes up the cute little scene with the shepherds and wise men all there with the sheep and cattle, but if you want to be accurate, take the wise men pieces out of the manger scene. In fact,

- A few years into his reign, Herod had his wife killed because he thought she was conspiring against him. And then shortly after that, he had all 3 of his sons killed for the same reason. The Roman Emperor Augustus said, "It's better to be one of Herod's sows than one of his sons." It's safer. (Listen, when a Roman Caesar is like, "Dude, you're cruel!", you've reached a whole new level)
- Herod was known to dress up like a commoner and go into the city to see what people were saying about him and if he heard people talking negatively about him, he'd send out his goon squads later to murder them.<sup>4</sup>

Herod's paranoid about losing power; and now you have someone born who potentially has a claim on the throne, so Herod wants this kid killed.

9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they *rejoiced exceedingly with great joy*. 11 And going into the house (See? The wise men went into a 'HOUSE'; not a shepherd's stall. By this point Mary, Joseph and Jesus are in a little house), they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and **worshiped** him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh (Gold was a symbol of royalty; myrrh was an expensive ointment used for burial. Some of you are like, "What is frankincense?" Maybe you've heard about the 3 kids that were playing the wise men in the church play. The first child brings his gift to the Christ child, puts it down, and says, "I... bring you GOLD." The second child sets his gift down and says, "I... bring you MYRRH." The third kid comes up, looking a little confused, sets his gift down and says, "Uh, Frank sent this." No, frankincense was an incense used in ritual sacrifice and myrrh. They gave these gifts to Jesus, 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

**I told you that I think of this as the seeker's moment in the Christmas story**, and here's what it shows you about seeking and finding Jesus.

First, **A. God uses all kinds of things to draw people to himself.** Listen: stars are not typically the way that God reveals himself to people. In fact, astrology is specifically condemned in the Bible.<sup>5</sup> So, why then does God lead these professional astrologers through a special star? Well, there is a fascinating detail in this story that is easy to overlook. Remember that it said that these wise men are from the East, from the direction of Persia? Persia was where Israel had been sent into exile 500 years before, and if you remember from our study Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar had placed Daniel and several other young Hebrew captives into "the school of the wise men." At first, these guys were like Daniel's mortal enemies, but eventually Daniel won a bunch of them over. Well, undoubtedly, Daniel would have shared with them the writings of Moses, which would have been passed down to future generations of wise men. Those writings are filled with prophecies about the coming Messiah. One of them, in fact, reads like this: **"...a star will come out of Jacob, and a scepter (the symbol of a king) shall**

<sup>4</sup> Probably the craziest thing—when he was on his deathbed, Herod ordered that dozens of other noblemen be executed at the moment of his death, because he wanted the land to mourn his passing, and he knew no one was likely to do it because just he died

<sup>5</sup><https://www.academic-bible.com/en/online-bibles/septuagint-1xx/read-the-bible-text/bibel/text/lesen/stelle/27/20001/29999/ch/f2183af4cc37d21b5f9be968f1b758a8/>

**rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:17)** Now, almost every Jewish biblical scholar at the time would have said that “star” was not meant to be read literally; it meant “a leader like a bright shining star” would come out of Israel. But the wise men read that verse literally. So, when they see a strange star appear over Israel and say, “That must be it.”

**What you and I can see from that is that God is active everywhere among all peoples putting signs into their lives to point them to him.** In fact, I’m bold enough to say that if some of you look at your lives right now, you’ll see that he’s been putting signs into your life.

- Maybe it’s been through a string of coincidences that are starting to feel not random. Maybe this invitation to come this weekend is part of that--it just seems like God is trying to get your attention.
- Maybe it’s through some blessing that God put into your life, something good that makes you find yourself looking toward heaven, wanting someone to thank.
- Or maybe it’s through some difficult chapter that you’ve talked through this year. Maybe life has completely fallen apart for you: You got a bad report from the doctor. Or a loved one did. You’ve lost your job. Your marriage is breaking up. I know all kinds of men who come into a place like this because their marriage fell apart and that finally got your attention. C.S. Lewis used to say, ‘God whispers to us in our pleasures and screams at us in our pain.’
  - For some of you in pain right now, or your life feels like chaos, I want to tell you that God is not mad at you; he’s trying to get your attention. He’s not trying to pay you back for some sin; he’s trying, in love, to bring you back to himself.
- Maybe it’s been in your study of biology or science or psychology that you have sensed something greater, something beyond the physical, calling to you. I was listening to Elon Musk the other day--he’s not a Christian, I’m not sure he even believes in God--but he said, “The universe is the answer; now we have to figure out what questions we should be asking.”<sup>6</sup> And I thought, “That’s a modern day version of a star. The universe itself is calling, “Come look! Come see what’s behind all this.”

JRR Tolkien, who wrote LOTR, said that the reason so many of the characters in his stories came from nature—trees and animals and so forth—was to show that God commandeers every element of the universe to accomplish his purposes. He’s using all kinds of things to draw you this weekend.

Maybe you have a general sense that things just aren’t right in your life--something is missing. I don’t know what it is but I’m bold enough to believe that God has been drawing a bunch of you for some time and you sitting here is the culmination of that process. That invitation was not random at all. God is seeking you. **(And, btw, if you’re a Christian, I’d ask you to pray right now for people around you, that they would listen to the God who is seeking them. It’s happening right now around you.)**

So, first, God uses all kinds of things to draw people to himself. Second: **B: The stars, by themselves, are never enough.** Like I showed you, the star got them looking in the right direction, but the Scriptures had to complete the journey. The stars in your life can point you in the direction of God, but only the Scriptures can bring you to him. This book, friend--THIS is the gateway to God.

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<sup>6</sup> The Joe Rogan Experience podcast, #1609. Feb 11, 2021.

Which leads me to an invitation. And I want to say this in a non-snarky, non-judgmental way. Every Christmas and Easter we see a lot of people migrate into church. Sometimes we joke about them as CEO Christians... They know God should be a part of their lives. And some, while they are here, have a powerful, emotional experience. But that's where it stops. This should be an invitation for you to search the Scriptures, because it's in the Scriptures that you find God.

Every week at TSC consists of someone--me or somebody else--opening this book and talking about what God says. That's it. People don't gather here to hear story hour or "life lessons from uncle J.D." We don't talk much politics. I try to keep most of my opinions out of this pulpit: Sure, I'll slip in a few things about who the greatest actor of our generation is, or who the best sports teams are. But that's about it. We basically just open this book and let it speak to us.

Come and join us. This is the only place you'll find him.

Let me wrap this story up by giving you **4 possible responses** you can have to the stars in your life:

## 1. Hostility

This was Herod's response. He tries to kill Jesus, to eliminate him. Jesus represents a rival claim to the throne. Now, we tend to write off Herod as a murderous lunatic. But on one level, what he did made sense. You can't have 2 kings on one throne governing the same people. It's impossible. One has to be eliminated.

**Listen: In the same way, you can't have 2 kings in one heart ruling the same person.** It's impossible. One has to be eliminated. So, the question is, "Who governs *you*?" When I was growing up my Sunday School teacher used to say: "In every heart there is a throne and a cross. If Jesus is the throne, you must be on the cross. But if you are on the throne, Jesus must be on the cross." Which is it for you? Who is in charge of your life?<sup>7</sup> You see, you have either surrendered to him as Lord, and thus crucified any will you have outside of his will--everything is submitted to him now. You've "died" to your own will and agenda. Or, you have rejected Jesus' claim, and kept yourself on the throne, which means the only option is to crucify him. You say, "Well, that's a little harsh. I'm not sure I'm in either category; maybe I haven't fully surrendered myself to him, but I'm not crucifying him. I mean, I believe in him; I come to church; I'm a pretty good moral person." But see, that's not an option. When Jesus comes into your life, he comes as King, as absolute Lord. You either surrender to him, fully, or you reject that claim. Like we say: **He's either Lord of all, or not Lord at all.**<sup>8</sup> You're either with Herod or the Wise Men. Which is it?

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<sup>7</sup> Bryan Loritts, "Christ: The Triumphant King," Matthew 2:13-23

<sup>8</sup> And, by the way, don't think that once you've accepted Christ, that battle in your heart is forever over. The spirit of Herod stays in us until we die, always fighting against surrender to God. Listen to how theologian Dale Bruner expresses it: "Herod is not dead; Herod lives on even in us, the people of God. Through our exaggerated ambitions, our pretensions, our self-centeredness; our greed for position... our cruelty and insensitivity toward others--these are the spirit of Herod in us and must be fought against by us until the Last Judgment. There are two kings at war in the world and in all of us: Herod (self) and Christ." He comes into your life as Lord, or not at all.

*So, response 1: Hostility. Response 2:*

## **2. Indifference**

Maybe the most perplexing thing to me in this story is why nobody else from Herod's court went with these wise men to check out what was going on in Bethlehem—Matthew says that *ALL* of Jerusalem had noticed the wise men coming in and were troubled by it. The biblical scholars had to pull out the biblical scrolls to figure out where this star was pointing to. But nobody went with these wise men to check out what was going on?

Now, you say, but there were lots of Messiah claims in those days. And sure, it was like every 5-6 years somebody would claim the Messiah had come. But this one seemed different, with the Scriptures and the foreign wise men--Why not go and at least have a look?

Here's what I think: It just felt like too much of an inconvenience. Everybody was busy and this just didn't seem like that pressing of a question. I mean, yeah, they would have been curious about the Messiah, but not enough to really inconvenience their lives and go look. They weren't desperate.

Friend, the only requirement for seeking God is a sense of need. To come to Jesus, all you need is need. Jesus said, "It's not the healthy who seek a doctor, it's those who know they are sick."

Jesus has hidden himself so that only those who are desperate to know him ever will. I have a friend who had made it to the top of his career field, which gave him access to just about everything money and fame could buy. He became a Christian about two years ago because he said he came to a point where he realized that none of the things he'd accomplished, none of the money he'd obtained, did him any good if he died and lost his soul in eternity.

For a long time in my life I was pretty laid back about whether I knew God. I was like, "Yeah, I go to church. I'm a pretty good person. And God probably grades on the curve." It wasn't until I became desperate to know--is Jesus true, and am I right with God, that I really found him. It wasn't until that question became an obsession that I found God.

It's not the healthy who seek a doctor; it's those who know they are desperately sick. The only requirement to seek Jesus is a sense of your need, and it's a need that most people in that day, and this day, are totally blind to. God said to Israel in Deuteronomy: "You will seek me and you will find me *when* you seek me and find me with all your heart and soul." Half-hearted searching will never find him. Is this God come to earth? If so, seek him with all your heart and soul.

*Response 1: hostility. Response 2: Indifference. Response 3:*

## **3. 4X Joy**

[10] When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. You can sort of see it here in English, but Matthew uses 4 Greek words for joy: rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

Literally, in Greek when they saw the star, they had “joy joy joy joy.” The NIV lamely translates that as “they were overjoyed.” Talk about understatement. Matthew’s statement is way over the top. He’s writing like a middle schooler here: joy, joy, joy, joy. They went out of their minds.

Think with me for a moment: What caused their joy? Jesus gave THEM no gifts; he performed no miracles for them; he gave them no guarantees of future prosperity. Their joy came simply by seeing *HIM*.

You see, somehow they understood, before almost anybody else, who this baby actually was. This was God, whose presence was being restored to humanity. Think about that for a moment if you will. Have you ever stopped to think just what exactly the gospel message is? It’s that God created us, the human race, the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, special, in his image. We look out at the galaxies and see that we are teeny, tiny beings on a tiny planet in a teeny little solar system in the backwoods of a medium sized galaxy in the vast expanse of the universe. Yet God created us in his image, sons and daughters, to be his companions, his co-rulers. Of all the things in the vast creation, he cares about us! In fact, Psalm 8 says, he created all of the other stuff for us.

But we messed that up by rebelling against God. We decided we knew better than him; we didn’t want to do things God’s way; we wanted to do them our way. We didn’t want to live for him; we wanted to live for ourselves. It is a rebellion in which every single one of us has participated, in our own way. Each of us has made choices that we knew weren’t right simply because “well, that’s what I want to do,” or because we were convinced our way was better than God’s. That’s what the Bible calls “sin.” Don’t think of sin as only horrendous acts of injustice or moral compromise. It is that, of course, but at its core it is simply self-will. I want to be in charge of me, not God.

## VAMP

That sin however, didn’t deliver for us on what it promised. It left us broken, condemned before God; abandoned. It made us God’s enemies. In our hearts, we’re all HERODS. And God could have left us there--in that rebellious, abandoned state. BUT maybe the greatest mystery in the Bible is that HE DIDN’T WANT TO. God so loved the world, John 3:16 says, that he gave his only Son to earth to redeem us from THAT sin. God’s own son would pay the penalty for our rebellion by suffering on a cross, in shame, so that we could be forgiven and reconciled to him.

**And standing there in that crowded room, these wise men realized that this child was that Son.** This son was the one Daniel told them about: the scepter and star rising out of Israel; the seed promised to Adam and Eve that would crush the head of the serpent; the lamb promised to Abraham who would die on the altar so that his children could go free; the coming King promised to David that would restore peace on earth; the Suffering

Savior that Isaiah saw who would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities; the resurrected Sun of Righteousness that Malachi saw who would rise for his people with healing in his wings.

This was the ONE that all the OT prophets had spoken of, and these magisterial wise men--men of power and wealth and authority, who had been educated in the finest schools in the land--got down on their knees in front of a poor little helpless child and (Vs. 11) **worshiped** him. In the Bible, you see, you are only ever allowed to worship *God*. These wise men are perhaps the first to recognize Jesus' full divinity. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate deity! And they worship him, and then rejoice with joy joy joy joy joy.

Somehow, they recognized--the Holy Spirit had to have opened their eyes--who this little child was. You can see that in the presents they gave to him. Gold is the precious metal of a King. They knew Jesus would be a King. Frankincense, an incense used in ritual sacrifice. They foresaw that Jesus would offer himself as a sacrifice of atonement for our sin; and myrrh, an expensive ointment used in burial. They recognized that this was a King who was born to die--born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.

Do you realize, if it's true, that very little else matters in life, but whether or not you know this God? If you know him, everything is going to be ok. Because you have a God who cares enough to come to earth for you; who has promised to supply you in life and take care of you in death. Who, while you live, promises to be your Shepherd. He says through all your days you will never lack; he'll make you lie down in green pastures and lead you beside the still waters. He'll prepare a table before you in the presence of your enemies and make your cup overflow. Goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life. He promised he'll be working in all things, even the bad ones, for your good. Even when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death you won't need to be afraid, because he'll be with you, he says. "Because I am the resurrection and the life," he says, "whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live."

And if this is all true, it means that not only can your sins be forgiven and that you can be reconciled to God, it means the power of his resurrection is available to you *right now*. *Born to raise the sons of earth; born to give them second birth*. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead can help free you from addiction and self-destructive habits. The same power that raised Christ from the dead can raise your broken marriage from the dead. He comes into your life to make all things new.

That means you can leave today with that 4x joy: Joy joy joy joy.

*Hostility; indifference; 4x joy*. One last one:

#### 4. A Resolve to Keep Seeking

Maybe you're drawn by all this, but you're not totally there yet. You know you're being drawn, and something is going on, but you're just not ready to cross that line of faith yet. Here's what I want to say: Keep seeking. As with the wise men, that star can only take you so far; the Scriptures have to complete your journey. What if your decision this weekend was simply to come back after Christmas? To come each weekend and just study



the Word with us. In the meantime, start reading the New Testament. Go on our website and listen to old messages.

And then come gather each week after the New Year around the word of God. That's all we are; we're not a perfect people--far from it; we're just a group who gathers each week around the word of God because we believe that in this word is life. Come join us. Come join us.

Now, some of you are ready, and it's time to receive him as Savior, and I want to give you an opportunity to do that. Every head bowed...

**Text READY to 33933**