

We Three Kings

Week 4

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*Three Kings came riding from far away,
Melchior and Gaspar and Baltasar;
Three Wise Men out of the East were they,
And they travelled by night and they slept by day,
For their guide was a beautiful, wonderful star.*

*The star was so beautiful, large and clear,
That all the other stars of the sky
Became a white mist in the atmosphere,
And by this they knew that the coming was near
Of the Prince foretold in the prophecy.*

*Three caskets they bore on their saddle-bows,
Three caskets of gold with golden keys;
Their robes were of crimson silk with rows
Of bells and pomegranates and furbelows,
Their turbans like blossoming almond-trees...(to be continued tomorrow)
From "The Three Kings" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, (1905)*

My family has two nativity scenes that we set out at Christmas. One is beautiful and expensive enough that it took me years to collect all the pieces. But that's not the family favorite. Everyone loves the cute, colorful one designed for children. It has all the familiar figures: Mary and Joseph, shepherds and sheep, three wise men holding gifts, a donkey and an angel with wings. The most beloved figure has always been the smiling, infant Jesus. Though the figure is shaped more like a tube of lipstick than a baby, it was the perfect shape for my sweet toddlers to grip in their chubby fists and carry around. My kids are much older now, but they still insist that we set up *their* nativity every year.

As much as I love our nativity sets and have tried to use them as a reminder that ultimately, Christmas is about worshipping Jesus, they capture only one part of the story of Jesus' birth. We love to ponder this beautiful, idyllic scene when "all is calm, all is bright," but some of the events surrounding Christ's birth were more dramatic. Because God's plan unfolded precisely as he designed, we sometimes forget the intense struggle that surrounded Christ's birth.

Jesus came to bring a revolution unlike anything the world has ever known. True revolution smashes existing norms and can bring conflict and even danger. This week we'll consider the exotic visitors that paid the Messiah a visit and the powers that threatened the infant's life. We're going to explore the story of Magi who traveled a long distance from a foreign nation in search of the new king and the existing king who tried to stop the revolution before it could

begin.

Day 1 | Magi from the east

Sometimes they're called "Magi" and other times "kings" or "wise men." Speculation has created the legends that surround them. Because they bring three gifts, it became common to tell the story of the *three* kings, although we don't know their exact number. Centuries after Christ's birth, names were given to the Magi: Melchior, Gaspar and Baltasar. Yet, the biblical text tells us very little about these mysterious visitors who came to pay homage to the infant king of the Jews.

Today we'll look at the two verses Matthew gives to introduce them.

Matthew 2:1–2

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² 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 is the only Gospel that records the Magi's journey to see Jesus. For hundreds of years scholars have wondered about these visitors. They came from the east, possibly Persia or Babylon. From the Old Testament books of Daniel and Esther and the writings of the ancient Roman historian, Herodotus, we know that Magi were advisors who served their kings by interpreting dreams and omens, and by looking for signs in the heavens. The Magi credit the appearance of a special star with prompting their visit to Jerusalem.

We can only speculate that their astronomical observations and perhaps the prompting of the Holy Spirit led a contingent of these men to journey westward in search of the new Jewish king. People have also speculated about what the "his star" could have been. Could it have been a comet whose approach from the outer rim of our solar system was noticed by the Magi? Or was it the explosion of a distant supernova whose light traveled millions of light-years to reach their watching eyes? Or was it something else altogether? We can't say for sure. Yet we do know that Creator of heaven and earth can orchestrate the heavens to serve his purposes. God desired these foreign dignitaries to honor and bring gifts to his Son.

In his Gospel, Luke focuses on the local shepherds who celebrate Jesus' birth — ordinary Jewish men who are given the honor of seeing the Messiah. Matthew tells the story of foreign, royal visitors from a pagan land who are compelled to find the newborn King. Led by a star, Magi come to Jerusalem to worship Christ at his birth. Scripture foretold that the nations would be drawn to Israel and its Messiah. For example, Isaiah 60:3 says "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." Matthew gives his readers another sign that Jesus is the prophesied Messiah and Savior.

Jesus' time on earth begins with a visit from the nations, and ends with him sending his disciples out into the world. Before his ascension into heaven, Jesus gives his disciples a new mission: to go and share the good news of his salvation. The Savior did not just come for the Jews, but for everyone who will put their trust in him. The King was inaugurating his kingdom and with it a radical message of hope, love, peace and joy.

Notice that the Magi don't come just to find the King; they traveled a great distance to worship him. This royal contingent from a foreign land was ready to humble themselves in front of an infant. Somehow, they knew he was no ordinary, earthly King.

Though our nativity scenes feature an infant Jesus because we are celebrating his birth, we should always remember that we are worshipping a King. He is the ruler and Lord of all people, and has given us the privilege of inviting them to come and experience his just and loving rule.

At Christmas time, with so much to distract us, it's easy to lose the reason we celebrate at all. But, this season gives us the opportunity to talk about the birth of the newborn King. How can you help focus your family's attention on Jesus? What about others that you know? But first, how can you center him in your own heart? Take some time to praise and worship him now.

Day 2 | Prophecy Fulfilled

(Continued from yesterday)

*... "Of the child that is born," said Baltasar,
"Good people, I pray you, tell us the news;
For we in the East have seen his star,
And have ridden fast, and have ridden far,
To find and worship the King of the Jews."*

*And the people answered, "You ask in vain;
We know of no King but Herod the Great!"
They thought the Wise Men were men insane,
As they spurred their horses across the plain,
Like riders in haste, who cannot wait.*

*And when they came to Jerusalem,
Herod the Great, who had heard this thing,
Sent for the Wise Men and questioned them;
And said, "Go down unto Bethlehem,
And bring me tidings of this new king." (to be continued)*

From "The Three Kings" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, (1905)

In this week of our Advent celebration, we're focusing on the Wise Men, or Magi.

Yesterday, we tracked the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem. Their appearance caused quite a stir. A caravan of foreign dignitaries searching for a new king terrified the one who was on the throne. Herod would crush anyone who threatened his power. Yet, though he was violent, Herod was also a cagey politician and wanted to use the Magi to locate this threat. At first, he tried to deceive them.

Matthew 2:3–8

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ 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. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ “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.”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

At the time of Christ’s birth, the Romans were ruling Israel (called Judaea during this time period.) The Romans allowed some local control of their conquered lands, and appointed rulers who would be loyal to Caesar. Herod had been appointed “king of the Jews” even though he was not in the line of David and was in fact only half-Jewish. Herod’s mother was Jewish, but his father was Idumean, meaning that his line descended from the Edomites who were ancient enemies to the Jews. Though he tried to endear himself to the Jewish people by expanding and restoring the temple to its former glory, most of the Jewish people despised him for his heritage and his cooperation with the Romans.

Though he was a shrewd politician, his position as ruler was under constant threat from others who wanted his power. Herod became paranoid and vicious as he got older. Because he questioned their loyalty and was concerned they were plotting against him, Herod was responsible for the deaths of numerous wives, sons, and others who were close to him. The Magi were likely unaware that by even mentioning the possibility of a new king, they were putting the child’s life in danger.

It was common for kings during this time to take omens seriously. Herod had no problem believing that the Magi had indeed seen a sign that pointed to the Messiah’s arrival. He was upset and agitated by the news that a true son of David could challenge his claim to the throne. He turns to the “chief priests and teachers of the law” to investigate. They inform him that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, a small town not too far from Jerusalem. Herod calculates the probable age of the child, and then he sends the Magi on their way, but insists that they come back and report to him what they find. Lying about his intentions, Herod claims he wishes to worship the child too.

If Herod had been a true worshipper of God, he would have rejoiced in the news that the Messiah had come. Instead, he was threatened. If the high priests and teachers of the law had loved the God they purported to know and serve, they would have accompanied the Magi to welcome and worship the Messiah. Instead they remain indifferent. It is the foreign Magi, who were perhaps ignorant of Scripture who act most like the people of God. They continue on their journey to find the true King of the Jews.

Throughout the centuries since Jesus’ birth, people around the world have reacted to Jesus in the same ways. Some are threatened by a king who has a legitimate claim on their lives. Some, even those who have gone to church and been taught the Bible are indifferent to Jesus’ coming. But sometimes it’s the most unlikely people who have the most sincere and faithful response to the call of God. They want to know Jesus.

Check your own heart. Do you sometimes bristle at God’s authority? Rebellion against God’s rule is

an ancient sin that tempts us even though we have so much evidence for God's love in what he accomplished at Christmas.

Do you take your knowledge of Jesus for granted? Sometimes those of us who've grown up in the church are tempted to do so. As you've moved through this Advent season, are you allowing yourself to be awed by the glory and wonder of God and his amazing plan to save us?

Take some time to pray over these temptations. Also, this Christmas, let's give people the opportunity to respond to Jesus for themselves. We may be surprised by the response of some who are excited to know and worship him.

Day 3| Gifts for the King

(Continued from yesterday)

*So they rode away; and the star stood still,
The only one in the grey of morn;
Yes, it stopped—it stood still of its own free will,
Right over Bethlehem on the hill,
The city of David, where Christ was born.*

*And the Three Kings rode through the gate and the guard,
Through the silent street, till their horses turned
And neighed as they entered the great inn-yard;
But the windows were closed, and the doors were barred,
And only a light in the stable burned.*

*And cradled there in the scented hay,
In the air made sweet by the breath of kine,
The little child in the manger lay,
The child, that would be king one day
Of a kingdom not human, but divine.*

*His mother Mary of Nazareth
Sat watching beside his place of rest,
Watching the even flow of his breath,
For the joy of life and the terror of death
Were mingled together in her breast.*

*They laid their offerings at his feet:
The gold was their tribute to a King,
The frankincense, with its odor sweet,
Was for the Priest, the Paraclete,
The myrrh for the body's burying.*

*And the mother wondered and bowed her head,
And sat as still as a statue of stone,
Her heart was troubled yet comforted,*

*Remembering what the Angel had said
Of an endless reign and of David's throne. (to be continued...)
From "The Three Kings" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1905*

The first Bible verse my oldest daughter learned is Matthew 2:10. I'm sure her teacher picked it because it was short, but she loved the verse because it reminded her of Christmas, and that we should be excited about Jesus all year long. She was only three when she memorized "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed."

There is a lot packed in those few words. The Greek phrase that is translated "overjoyed" literally says: "rejoiced with an exceedingly great joy." That's a lot of joy!

We're continuing our journey with the Magi this week. Imagine their excitement, when, after a long journey over tough terrain, they had finally found the one they'd come so far to see.

Matthew 2:9–12

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Most of us imagine the approach of the Magi resembling Longfellow's poem above. Our nativity scenes show us the Magi and shepherds worshiping Jesus side by side, but scholars think that the Magi's arrival would have been sometime after the night of Jesus's birth. He may have been anywhere from a few months old to two years of age.

The Magi worship Jesus. Grown men bow down before a child. They offer him costly gifts fit for a king. Once again Matthew wants his readers to know that not only was Jesus' birth supernatural, but all signs point to his being the true Messiah of Israel.

We find gold valuable today, so we have no trouble seeing it as an appropriate gift for a king. Frankincense was a rare and costly incense. Myrrh was expensive anointing oil. All would be seen as worthy offerings to a king or to a deity. Some believe the gifts had symbolic meanings and associate the gold with Christ as King, frankincense with his priestly function, and myrrh as prefiguring his death and embalming. More recent scholars disagree, but those associations have found their way into our Christmas stories, as Longfellow's poem demonstrates.

The gifts don't have to have symbolic meaning to be significant. Not only did these Magi travel a great distance to see Jesus, they treat him as both god and king. They gave extravagant gifts to a child of infinite worth.

Presents have become a big part of Christmas. From the beginning of November to Christmas Eve, advertisers use every means at their disposal to lure us into buying more and more. There is nothing wrong with giving and receiving gifts. There is such joy and anticipation in watching someone you love unwrap a present that you've given them. Many of us feel especially loved and

appreciated when we receive a thoughtful gift. But our generosity to one another would be impossible without the gifts given to us by God who gives us life and breath and everything else.

We cannot out-give God because everything is already his. But we can honor him by offering our time, talents, resources and money to his kingdom causes. And at Christmas we can honor him by giving him our worship for the amazing gift of his Son. How can you worship him today?

Day 4 | Violent Opposition

(Continued from yesterday)

*Then the Kings rode out of the city gate,
With a clatter of hoofs in proud array;
But they went not back to Herod the Great,
For they knew his malice and feared his hate,
And returned to their homes by another way.*

From "The Three Kings" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, (1905)

We're wrapping up our journey with the Magi, today.

In focusing on the beauty of Christmas, we sometimes forget about the violent opposition to Christ's birth. Certainly, Herod wanted to destroy any threat to his power. He'd proven that many times before. But behind Herod's paranoid rage was an even more sinister foe — the evil one, Satan, who always stands in opposition to God's plans.

Matthew 2:13–16

¹³ *When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."*

¹⁴ *So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."*

¹⁶ *When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.*

The devious king is furious that he was outsmarted by the Magi. In an act so evil and horrid that it is hard to imagine, he orders the slaughter of innocent children in an attempt to secure his claim to the throne.

The children who were killed as a result of Herod's fury were casualties in a cosmic battle that will rage until Jesus claims the final victory. The incarnation sets the stage for a final showdown where God will not only be the victor, but will claim victory for all those who have put their trust in Christ. Yet our victory comes with a price.

Jesus would escape the clutches of Herod. He would grow to teach, heal, and proclaim the

Kingdom of God. But one day he would be handed over to Herod's son to be questioned before he was tried and executed by Rome — at the people's request. The angels would not be allowed to intervene that time, because the final part of God's plan for Jesus had to be fulfilled. Yet neither the rulers of Jesus' day nor the spiritual powers who rage against God could defeat the Savior, Messiah, and Lord. He would defeat sin and death on the cross and leave behind an empty tomb when he was raised from the dead. His victory over evil ensures ours, and one day we will experience it in full.

This Christmas remember that “when the Christ-child gasped his first breath, the hinge of history swung in a new direction, and hell shuddered. The assault on its gates had begun.”¹ If you are suffering this Christmas, remember the victory you have in Christ. No matter what you are facing, God is in control and your ultimate salvation is secure. Let Paul's words to the church at Rome reassure you, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39).

Stop for a moment and prayerfully contemplate the victory that Christ purchased for you on the cross and praise him for it. As you engage with the Father in prayer, ask for the kind of confidence Paul demonstrates in Romans 8. Ask for reassurance for any of your worries, anxieties or fears

Day 5 | Reflect, Connect, Respond

This week we followed the star along with the Magi to worship Jesus. Spend some time with your Father today. Reflect on the gift of Jesus.

Reflect

Matthew sets up a contrast between the Magi, Herod, and the religious leaders. Explain how each respond to the news of the Messiah's arrival.

Connect

If you ask kids what they want for Christmas, young children might talk about dolls or Legos. Teens may want something trendy or electronic. Some, moved by conscience and compassion, might ask for good health for a loved one, or for peace on earth.

This week we journeyed with the Magi to give gifts to the newborn King. They brought their best, but nothing can compare to what they received in return. The gift God gives to us at Christmas is so much bigger than anything our limited imaginations would ever conjure. What

¹ Mike Cospers, “Christmas: The Hinge of History,” The Gospel Coalition (blog), December 17, 2010, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/christmas-the-hinge-of-history/>.

humanity received on the very first Christmas day is literally without equal. It is the greatest gift in history.

God protected this gift. He sent a star to lead the magi and dreams to guide Joseph. Jesus would grow and thrive and prepare to become the Savior the world needed. The revolution that would change the very order of the cosmos would happen because our great God desired fellowship with his creation. The plans of God cannot be thwarted. Human power structures may believe they're in control, but in God's perfect timing, his will becomes reality.

God desired relationship with people he'd created in his own image and with whom he wanted to share his love. Our Father has gone to extraordinary lengths to provide a way for us to come home and rest in him. At Christmas, we rejoice that God became a child so that sinners could receive an incomparable gift from the King.

How can you find joy in God's greatest gift today?

Respond

What is your next step?

How are you motivated by the story of the Magi to worship and give to Christ?

How should Christ's defeat of death and evil impact the way we live today?