

## How Wise Men Seek

**Matthew 2:1-2** 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, <sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

Writing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a French mathematician and philosopher named Blaise Pascal said, "If God exists, not seeking God must be the gravest error imaginable. If one decides to sincerely seek for God and doesn't find God, the lost effort is negligible in comparison to what is at risk in not seeking God in the first place."

Pascal was saying, if God does exist, not seeking Him must be the most colossal error you can make. It becomes not one of many errors or mistakes in your life; it is the fundamental error of your life. It is the error that birthed the rest of your errors, it is the turn you took that got you lost for the rest of your life. On the other hand, Pascal says, if you do seek and don't find, you really have not lost more than effort and time. But what you risk losing in not seeking God is incalculably larger.

Seeking God is a major theme in the Bible. Thirty-one times the Bible uses the phrase seek the Lord. It comes in many other forms: Seek God, seek His kingdom, seek my face. Paul preached that God had so providentially guided cultures <sup>27</sup> "so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; (Acts 17:27) But then in Romans 3:11, Paul writes, <sup>11</sup> There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. (Rom. 3:11)

Without grace, man does not seek God. But with grace, man can and will seek God. But the difference between a man-centred, selfish seeking, and a God-centred, grace-enabled seeking is a great one. To see an example of what truly seeking God looks like, we find a model in this wonderful account of the visit of the wise men to see the baby Messiah.

Part of the mystique of this passage is that Matthew just mentions these men in passing without telling us much about them. All he says is that they were wise men from the East. Wise men in the English translation is literally *magi* from the East. The *magi* were a class of men who studied a mixture of occult sciences: the stars, dreams, omens. In fact, this is the same word used in Acts 13 of the evil Elymas the *sorcerer*, and the words magic and magi have the same roots. In English, a wizard was sometimes called a mage. And don't be too alarmed, but Daniel was made chief of the magi under Nebuchadnezzar. They were dream interpreters, people who served as priests and counsellors for the Babylonian and Persian kings. They were not kings, but they were part of a powerful and influential priestly caste that mingled various branches of knowledge to advise the kings of the time. The ancient world did not have the division we have today of natural and supernatural – they were one. You studied the stars alongside studying the future. You studied the human body alongside studying dreams.

But Matthew doesn't tell us how many of them there were (there were three gifts, but the text doesn't say three men), the chances are a group of important magi travelling a great distance would have had something of an entourage.

Matthew doesn't give us their names (later tradition called them Melchior, Balthassar, and Caspar). He doesn't give us their country of origin. It was probably Persia, somewhere in the region of modern day Iran or Iraq. They may have been Nabateans. Some of the kings of Yemen had embraced Judaism

about this time, and it's possible they came from there. But they were probably men outside the faith of Israel.

That's all we know about them, and apparently, Matthew didn't want us to worry too much about their identity. Matthew's focus was on how they sought out Messiah. As we study this passage, we can identify three characteristics of a true seeking of God.

### **I. Their Seeking Was Diligent**

Now many months, and possibly up to two years before the birth of Christ, God placed something that would be noticed and understood by the Magi. He placed a star. It's possible that this was a purely supernatural event in the sky, something that God did at that time, in which case there is no way of knowing what it was or trying to link it to some kind of natural phenomenon. As natural phenomenon, many astronomers have tried many guesses at what the star of Bethlehem was: a comet, a supernova, or something of that sort.

One good guess is that in the period close to Christ's birth, there was a very unusual conjunction of Venus and Jupiter, in the constellation of Leo, which Babylonians associated with Israel. Other astronomers, including the great Kepler himself believed it was the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, which Mars joined. Whatever it was, for pagan astrologers, whose job was also to coronate and recognise kings, the event was extraordinary, and meant a great king had been born.

Perhaps the Magi had looked at Daniel's prophecy of the 69 weeks of years, and worked out that they were within 40 years of Messiah's presentation, and were looking for confirmation. Perhaps Daniel had given them some kind of oral tradition that had been handed down. But however they knew, they knew with enough certainty that this had to do with Israel, with the promised Messiah, and that they needed to make a long and expensive diplomatic visit to this King.

But what is of course interesting is what this means. Here you have the Gospel of Matthew, written mainly to Jews, filled with quotations from the Old Testament, and Matthew's first group of people that seek Him out as King are not Jews, but Gentiles. A pagan people, probably Zoroastrian. Zoroastrianism believes in a god who is good and powerful, and an opposing principle of evil and chaos. But it is these men, outside the fold of Israel, who are seeking and interested in Messiah.

You could just as easily have seen the Star from Israel. And even though looking to the stars for guidance was forbidden in Israel, a number of rabbinic writings make the claim that two years before Messiah would be born, a star would appear in the East. But it appears that Herod and Jerusalem needed some Gentiles to travel over 2000 kilometres to come and tell them who had been born on their doorstep.

Who is seeking God here? Who is making a concerted effort to know Him?

If they had travelled from Babylon, the journey, because of the way the caravan would follow the Euphrates river, would have been about 1600 kilometres. They're seeking. T.S. Eliot captures some of the inconvenience and pain of that journey.

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:

The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.'  
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.

Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

This is a rebuke to religious pride. Isn't it strange that those who have lived near the truth, who have been exposed to truth, take it for granted, while those far from it will seek it out eagerly. In a country like ours, almost everyone calls himself Christian. People are even offended if you say they are not. "What am I, some pagan heathen to you?" But those same religiously saturated people do not actually seek God. They seldom open a Bible. They have not sought assurance on whether they are in Christ. They have not prayed to know God. On the other hand, people in Syria, and North Korea, and China, will strive to know God. They will meet, even if it endangers their lives. If they could meet as openly and as freely as we do, they would be at church at every service.

God promises to be found by those who seek diligently. <sup>6</sup> But without faith *it is* impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that* He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Heb. 11:6)

I love those who love me, And those who seek me diligently will find me. (Prov. 8:17)

And you will seek Me and find *Me*, when you search for Me with all your heart. (Jer. 29:13)

Wise seeking of God is not half-hearted, fair-weather, convenient, comfortable, controlled. Those who sat in their palaces didn't find Christ. Those who left them and trekked across the desert did.

## II. Their Seeking Was Daring

<sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. (Matt. 2:2-3)

Now when they saw the star, they knew it had to do with Israel, so naturally they headed for the capital, where they could get more information. When they get there, they go to Herod, and ask him a very bold and daring question: "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?"

Now why would you ask a reigning king where the king has been born?

The answer is that Herod was a false king. He was not of the line of David, he was not even completely Jewish, but was an Edomite. He was a puppet king of the Romans, a ruthless tyrant, who ruled with terror and bloodshed. So when this diplomatic envoy from another nation arrives, and asks Herod, "Where is the born King of Israel?" they are dismissing him to his face, stating that they know he is the ruler, but he is not the true Ruler. He rules by political intrigue, not by divine right, not by birthright.

This may even be a calculated insult. Whatever it is, it is bold, it is risky, it has the attitude of seeking even in the face of opposition and danger.

Verse 3 gives you his response:

**Matthew 2:3-9** <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Why was he troubled? He was troubled because He was a tyrant, jealous for his power and throne, and a natural-born Son of David would displace him. Why was Jerusalem troubled? They were troubled because they knew what kind of man Herod was, and when they saw this foreign entourage arrive, and word spread that they were looking for the born Messiah, they would have feared the violence and backlash of Herod. As it turned out, it was not Jerusalem, but Bethlehem that would experience that evil.

Herod then convened a consulting group.

<sup>4</sup> And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> 'But you, Bethlehem, *in* the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.' " <sup>7</sup> Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

Herod, who did not know the Scriptures, calls the Sanhedrin, and every Bible scholar he can get his hands on, and asks them where the Messiah, the King of Israel is supposed to be born. The Gentiles have received broad truth from general revelation, but now Herod seeks out the specific truth from special revelation. And the prophecy of Micah 5:2 was understood by them back then, they way we understand it today: Messiah was to be born in the town of Bethlehem. Bethlehem is only nine kilometres from Jerusalem; about a two-hour walk. So why does Herod secretly call the Wise Men? Why doesn't he just go there himself?

Being a wicked, jealous ruler, he assumes that the family will flee if he arrives. So by allowing this big, colourful entourage from another country, bearing gifts to arrive, he hopes the family of Messiah will stay put. He hopes he can get some information as to the names of the parents, the place they are staying, so he can dispatch them all, with a targeted assassination.

These men did a very bold thing in approaching Herod. They were not going to be intimidated into retreating or turning back from seeking out the King.

A good question to ask is what it will take to stop you from seeking God. Jesus said some people, if any persecution arises because of the faith, they immediately fall away. He said for some it is riches, cares of this life and pleasures of this world that choke out seeking God. On the other hand, Paul said that in the life of a true believer, these things actually spur us to seek God more.

<sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." <sup>37</sup> Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. (Rom. 8:35-37)

<sup>9</sup> When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

Once again, the Star was seen. Of course, they did not need the Star to guide them the 9 kilometres to Bethlehem, it was simply that whatever they had been seeing for those months or years, now continued its display, and aligned over the direction of Bethlehem. Once they got there, Bethlehem, as a small town, would have fairly quickly told the men where someone had recently given birth.

When we study the life of the Lord Jesus, we see a pattern in His ministry of Him discouraging superficial seekers, showing them their shallow commitment, their superficial faith, their self-serving motives. And I believe He still does that. He brings trials and difficulties and pain, where you are forced to choose between seeking God with apparent loss to yourself, or seeking your own in some form of disobedience or denial.

### **III. Their Seeking Was Deliberate**

<sup>11</sup> And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

Let me just correct what I think is an error about the timing of this event. It's become popular today to say that the Wise Men must have arrived a very long time after the birth of Jesus. The reasons they give are three. First, they say the word Matthew uses here means young child, not baby. Second, they point out that this is in a house, not a stable. And third, Herod's decree to kill all children under two means this was a long time after the birth.

Personally, I don't find those arguments persuasive at all. First, the word Matthew uses, *paidion*, can be used for infants. In fact, Luke uses the term to describe the eight-day-old John the Baptist (Luke 1:59) and the one-month-old Jesus (Luke 2:27).

Second, we would expect that after the birth of Jesus, someone in Bethlehem would have housed them, especially because they were going to stay in the area to present Jesus in the Temple eight days after his birth. Those there to be registered for the taxes would have come and gone. The Magi weren't there that night of his birth, but the fact that they came to a house doesn't mean it was a year later.

Third, Herod's decree was based upon his asking the Magi when they saw the star, which was probably at least a year before they arrived. But the star didn't mark the day of Christ's birth, it guided the Magi to Israel. Undoubtedly, it appeared before Christ's birth, to get them to Bethlehem shortly after the birth. Herod miscalculated, and to make absolutely sure, he ordered the slaughter of every child under two in Bethlehem.

In fact, there is a good argument that they arrived in the first week, or perhaps in the second week. After all, remember that the shepherds have been telling everyone they knew about the birth. It's impossible to think that they could have been doing this for months or even a year, without Herod hearing about it. But when the wise men arrive, Herod is shocked to hear this news. Simeon and Anna's actions in the Temple eight days after Jesus' birth haven't reached Herod's ears.

Furthermore, once the presentation of Jesus in the Temple was complete, what reason would Joseph and Mary have had to stay in Bethlehem? They would have simply gone back to Nazareth. The fact

that they are still in Bethlehem means this is shortly after the birth.

But all this brings us to what these men did once they found the house in Bethlehem. What they did shows they were seeking in a deliberate way. They expected to find. And they did not expect to find anything less than a Person, a future King. We see that in their responses.

These extremely wealthy, a highly-placed Gentiles, upon finding the child in still rather humble circumstances in Bethlehem, fall down and worship. They rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

I don't think this is the response of someone who was just seeking to make a diplomatic visit. Why would these men, who had no personal stake in Israel, be so happy? It seems these men had found a delight to their souls they'd found nowhere else. They had found something deeper, more soul-refreshing, more satisfying than all their encounters with the spirit world in their pagan homeland.

Again, notice they fall down. The Magi are in the presence of a poor family with no outward signs of royalty. But they fall down. They adopt a posture of humility, saying, you are the Greater, we are the lesser. You are the ruler, we are followers.

They wish to express their adoration for His worth, and so they present Him with gifts worthy of a king. All three gifts are ordinary offerings and gifts given to a king. These magi probably did not have in mind its spiritual significance, but there certainly was.

Myrrh was used to preserve bodies when embalmed. It was a picture of Christ's past ministry – His death on the cross. It was a picture of Christ as the true prophet that Moses predicted would be the Messiah.

Frankincense was a sweet perfume used in incense. It pictures Christ as our High Priest now in heaven – interceding for us- His present ministry.

Gold was given to Kings. It showed Christ's Deity and predicted His future as the earth's King. The three gifts perfectly picture the true nature of Christ – which is Greek for Maschiach or Messiah – the Prophet, Priest and King.

In the millennium, He will also receive the gifts of gold and frankincense, but no myrrh, because the past ministry of death is now complete.

These men did not simply find Jesus and turn away, having satisfied their curiosity. God seeks not simply people who intellectually agree that Jesus is the Son of God.

**John 4:23** <sup>23</sup> "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.

Not mere enquirers. Not spiritual tourists. Not people playing with truth. Because that is man's spiritual home, his centre, his soul's rest and fulfilment, where the Son of God is our king.

These men could never have been the same. They were warned not to go back to Herod, and so they went back home by another way. They didn't return back the same way they had come. They were forever changed. T.S. Eliot captures this in his poem *The Journey of the Magi*, where the Magi describe their difficult journey, but reflecting back, one of the Magi asks this question:

“This: were we lead all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,

We had evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

Eliot imagines the Magi coming back converted, born again, having died to their old idolatrous life and people, and now seeing their own people as foreigners. They have come to know the true God and His Son, and their home is no longer their home. They find themselves now longing for their own death, when they would meet the God they now knew.

Here is Matthew rebuking the complacent, apathetic attitude that was in Israel. Here are Gentiles who found the Messiah.

He will still be found by those who seek Him. Yes, it is He that seeks us before we seek Him, yes it is He that gives us grace to seek Him, but when we do not seek Him, it is not Him saying “no” to us, but we who are saying “no” to Him.

Here is a promise held out both to those who claim Him as Father and those who do not: Seek and you will find. Those that seek me diligently find me.

If God exists, you could make no graver error than to not seek Him. If God exists, you could make no better use of your life than to seek Him. Not selfishly, not apathetically, not half-heartedly, but like these men did. But they found him because they sought Him diligently, they sought Him daringly, and they sought Him deliberately.