

“THE JOURNEY TO CHRIST”

Matthew 12:1-12

Much of what we associate with the Wise Men is based on persistent tradition instead of Biblical fact. For example, were there really three Wise Men? We don't know. Three Wise Men are inferred from the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But then, twenty Wise Men could have brought the same three gifts. Still, most Christian art—paintings, bulletin covers, Sunday School material—depicts three Wise Men riding on three camels. In fact, one ancient Armenian tradition has ascribed the Wise Men names: Gaspar, Balthasar, and Melchior.

Were the Wise Men actually kings, as stated in the Christmas carol: “We three kings of Orient are”? We don't know. Some infer kings from Isaiah 60:3, “**Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.**” Others believe that only kings could have brought such expensive gifts to Jesus: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. At the time of Jesus, frankincense and myrrh were as valuable as gold.

Rather, in Matthew 2:1-12 the Wise Men are simply called MAGOI or MAGI; a word of Persian origin related to our English word “magic,” but having nothing to do with sleight of hand or pulling rabbits from hats. In antiquity, MAGI were often scholars in the field of astronomy. Luther referred to the Wise Men as professors.

Where did the Wise Men come from? We don't know exactly. According to Matthew 2:2, the Wise Men were “**from the east.**” But no specific location is given. The Persian word MAGI may suggest that the Wise Men were from Babylonia; a country to the east of Israel and renowned for its astronomers. If so, the Wise Men may have learned about the coming Messiah from the prophecies of Daniel, who centuries earlier had been a captive in Babylon. Daniel himself was counted as the wisest of all King Nebuchadnezzar's wise men. According to Daniel 2: “**Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men.**”

Likewise, what type of star led the Wise Men to Jesus? Again, we don't know. The Greek word used is ASTERA, related to our words astral, astronomy, and asteroid; and simply meaning a “star”. Yet, that this was no ordinary star is evident from its characteristics: how it appeared in the east, then disappeared, then reappeared; and most importantly, how this star stopped, hovering low enough for the Wise Men to identify the very house in which the toddler Jesus was staying.

We could wish for more information about the Wise Men. And yet, in the end, the Bible tells us all we really need to know. At its simplest, Matthew 2:1-12 is about individuals who were led to Jesus Christ from afar. And in that respect, their journey is

also our journey, and the journey of every person led to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2: **“Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.”** So, let’s look more closely at the journey of the Wise Men, that is, THE JOURNEY TO CHRIST.

First, the journey to Christ is the result of God’s faithfulness. The Wise Men journeyed to Bethlehem to see—in their own words, **“the One who has been born king of the Jews,”** Matthew 2:2. But what if Jesus had never been born? What if God, angered and wearied by humanity’s constant sinfulness and rebellion had suddenly changed His mind about sending a Savior? “All right. That’s it. I’ve had enough. These people are not worth My grace or My forgiveness, much less the life of My only begotten Son.”

God owed us nothing. Obviously, without the birth of Jesus, there would be no Christ, no Christmas, no Savior, no salvation, no forgiveness, no Gospel, no resurrection, and no eternal life. The Wise Men would not have made their journey to Christ, nor would we have made ours. So their journey and ours are first and foremost the result of God’s faithfulness in keeping His promises.

God is faithful. God keeps His promises. This is a constant refrain throughout the Scriptures. Can we say the same of our world, our acquaintances, our political leaders, or even ourselves? No. Human promises roll off human lips with relative ease: “I promise not to be late. I promise to try harder. I promise I will be there for you. I promise not to forget you. I promise I’ll never do that again—lose my temper, use that language, forget that anniversary.” And yet, despite our best intentions, our best promises still fail. Even that most sacred of human promises, the promise to “love and honor until death us do part,” fails on average in one out of every two marriages.

Yet, the Almighty’s promises never fail. Never. Did you realize that more than three hundred prophecies were fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ? A prophecy from God is also a promise of God. And not one of His promises or prophecies were forgotten, discarded, or broken. In fact, Jesus came not only to fulfill God’s promises of salvation, but also as the guarantee that God will fulfill every other promise God has made to us. This is what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 1: **“For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.”** Yes. Certain. Unfailing.

Do you know how many promises has made to you? He has promised to never leave you. Hebrews 13:5, **“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”** Have other people walked out on you? God won’t. In the same way, God has promised to love you eternally, meaning that even when circumstances go wrong in your life, God

is still loving you with that same determined, constant, purposeful love. Jeremiah 31:3, **“I have loved you with an everlasting love.”**

God has promised to deliver you in times of trouble. Psalm 50:15, **“Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor Me.”** Check if you’d like, but there is no find print in that promise. Use a magnifying glass or even a microscope, but you won’t find an asterisk with terms, conditions, limitations, or date of expiration. **“I will deliver you,”** said God.

God has promised to forgive you each time you turn to Him in repentance. Isaiah 1:18, **“‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.’”** God has promised that He will never let you be weighed down with more trouble than you can carry. 1 Corinthians 10:13, **“And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”**

God has promised to bring you safely through this life to the next. Philippians 1:6, **“Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”** These are all good and gracious promises God has made to you. And He will keep each one of them, because God is faithful.

Second, the journey to Christ is also the result of God’s grace. Grace means God’s undeserved favor. Grace means that God does all the doing and we do all the receiving. This was certainly true of the Wise Men. Every aspect of their journey to Christ was due to God’s grace. God provided the Savior. God created the miraculous star. God enabled the Wise Men to see and follow the star.

I’ve often wondered: Though not stated in Scripture, could the Wise Men have been the only ones who were able to see the star? After all, Herod, the chief priests, and the scribes, were seemingly unaware of the star; and in the record of Matthew 2:1-12, they never even mention the star. They never say to the Wise Men: “Oh, yeah. We saw that star, too. It’s the strangest thing, isn’t it?”

God not only enabled the Wise Men to see the star, but also to recognize it as Christ’s star. **“We saw His star in the east,”** they said. The Wise Men did not learn this on their own; they learned it from the Holy Spirit. The Wise Men did not find Christ on their own; God led them to Christ. The Wise Men did not escape Herod on their own; God protected and delivered them. **“And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route,”** Matthew 2:12.

That the Wise Men were almost certainly Gentiles is also a testament to God’s grace. In leading Gentiles to the Savior, God was demonstrating that Jesus Christ came to be the Savior of all: both Jews and Gentiles. And this, of course, is the same message

the Christmas Angel proclaimed on the First Christmas: **“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord,”** Luke 2:10-11.

Our journey to Christ is no less a miracle of God’s grace. It doesn’t matter who we are. It doesn’t matter what we’ve done; what we own; where we live; where we’ve been; how long we’ve been away. It doesn’t matter if we’re wealthy or poor, sick or healthy, socially connected or socially inept, college graduates or graduates of the School of Hard Knocks. It doesn’t matter if we’re young or old, male or female, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, or any other ethnic group. It doesn’t matter if we’re from Babylonia in Iraq or Lemmon in South Dakota; if we ride a camel or drive a Ford. Jesus Christ was born, suffered, died, and rose again for all of us. This He did in pure grace, without any merit or worthiness in us.

God’s grace is the great equalizer. There are no differences between human beings where differences count. As Paul wrote in Romans 3:22-23, **“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”** And of this grace we will soon sing in the Nunc Dimittis, following the Lord’s Supper: “O Lord, now let Your servant depart in heavenly peace; for I have seen the glory of Your redeeming GRACE: A light to lead the Gentiles unto Your holy hill; the glory of Your people, Your chosen Israel.”

Third, the journey to Christ is the result of faith created by the word of God. How did the Wise Men recognize the star in the east as Christ’s star? How did they know to follow the star, and that the star would lead them to the Savior of the world? They may have been acquainted with various Old Testament prophecies, such as the one from Numbers 24:17, **“A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.”** Or God may have communicated to the Wise Men directly, as He did when warning them not to return to King Herod. In any case, God led the Wise Men to Jesus through that miraculous star and His miraculous word.

But imagine what the Wise Men saw when they finally reached Christ: not a palace, but a simple house in the sleepy little town of Bethlehem; not luxuries, but the barest necessities; not a throng of attendants, but only the child’s mother; not a crown, but a crude cradle; not an ostentatious display of power, but a display of complete humility—a little child, who at this time was likely less than two years old.

Yet, did the Wise Men look at each other with incredulousness? Did they recheck the position of the star or the address of the house? Did they say to each other, “This can’t be the right place;” and of Jesus, “This can’t be the right king?” No. They believed. **“On coming to the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him,”** Matthew 2:11.

Notice: When traveling on their own, apparently without the star or in spite of the star; when traveling on human instincts and logical assumptions, the Wise Men went to the wrong place, Jerusalem; and to the wrong king, Herod. But when following God's star and God's word—that prophecy from Micah, **“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for Me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times,”** Micah 5:2—the Wise Men went to the right place, Bethlehem; and to the right King, Jesus Christ. And through that same word of God, they recognized Jesus for who He was; not simply the son of Mary, but the Son of the living God. Is there a lesson here for us? Of course.

God leads us to Jesus Christ in the very same way; namely, through the light of His word. Through that same word, God creates the faith within us to embrace Jesus as our Lord and Savior. As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:15, **“From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you WISE for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”** Following God word is really what made the Wise Men wise. And as Paul told Timothy, knowing the holy Scriptures is what makes us wise men and wise women, too.

Wisdom in God's eyes has nothing to do with educational degrees, human ideas and philosophies, or academic achievements. In God's eyes, true wisdom is knowing who Jesus Christ is and what Jesus Christ has done. And this knowledge is only imparted by the Holy Spirit through the holy Scriptures. As Paul told the Corinthians: **“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him—but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit,”** 1 Corinthians 2:9-10.

This, dear friends, is why we place such an emphasis on God's word in our congregation. This is why our worship services—liturgies, prayers, pre-service meditations, responsive readings, Scripture readings, sermons—are filled with God's word, not man's; teaching, not entertainment. The journey to Christ is only made possible through the Bible. And it is our sincerest desire; even more so, it is God's sincerest desire, that all people make that journey.

In his second epistle, Simon Peter liked the faith created by God's word to a rising star. I wonder if he was thinking about the journey of the Wise Men? He wrote: **“And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the MORNING STAR rises in your hearts, Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit,”** 2 Peter 1:19-20.

Fourth and finally, the journey to Christ never leaves the journeyer unchanged. When the Wise Men reached Jesus, they not only bowed down and worshiped Him. They “**opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route,**” Matthew 2:11-12. Do these final two verses of the text apply to us? Of course. Reduced to their essentials, the verses suggest *giving thanks* and *changing ways*. They gave gifts. They changed routes.

When we truly embrace the miracle of Christmas, “God with us and one of us;” when we fully understand the price Jesus Christ paid to redeem us—“This is My body; this is My blood;” will we not also, like the Wise Men, want to thank Jesus with our gifts and lives and words and behavior? Will we not also want to change our ways? Yes. It cannot be otherwise; not if we have followed the star to Bethlehem and the Savior to the cross.

THE JOURNEY TO CHRIST. A journey resulting from God’s faithfulness. A journey filled with God’s grace. A journey made by faith. A journey that forever changes lives. And so we sing with the hymnist:

“As with gladness men of old,
Did the guiding star behold;
As with joy they hailed its light,
Leading onward, beaming bright.
So, most gracious Lord, may we
Evermore be led by Thee.” LH 127:1