

We Saw His Star

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[0 : 00] Matthew 2, and we'll be reading verses 1-12. So thankful that we have this word of God preserved for us.

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, saying, Where is he who was born king of the Jews?

For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him.

And assembling all of the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least of the rulers of Judah.

For from you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.

[1 : 12] 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.

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.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.

Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Kids, do your parents ever have you go get the mail for them? Go out to the mailbox and get whatever is there and bring it into the house.

[2 : 17] I won't ask you to raise your hands, but I'm guessing maybe for you kids, you kind of like doing that. You kind of enjoy going and getting the mail and seeing what's in there.

Maybe something found in the mail that's addressed for you. For us adults, I won't also ask us to raise our hands. How much we enjoy going to get the mail, oftentimes what do we find?

Junk mail we don't need. Bills that we don't want. That's the kind of normal daily routine of getting the mail. Except at this time of year. This time of year, I enjoy going out to get the mail.

In fact, sometimes I steal that little chore from my kids because I'm ready to get Christmas cards. We enjoy receiving Christmas cards. Our family has a tradition where we'll put them up around the door frame of our sliding glass door.

And we'll keep them up until about the new year. And then around that time, we'll take them down, put a hole punch in them, put a three-ring binder clip, and then put them with our Christmas decor to pull out again next year.

[3 : 23] Now, this is a few weeks after Christmas that we do this. By that time, the mail's not so exciting anymore. We're back to the mundane of getting the bills and the junk mail, as we often do throughout the year.

But sometimes, we get a wonderful surprise. Maybe a week or two into the new year. A late-arriving Christmas card. I won't talk about why that may come.

It catches us off guard. Our minds are off of Christmas. We're not expecting cards anymore. But here it is. And we're glad for its arrival. We see something somewhat similar happening in Matthew 2 this morning.

Some late arrivals to celebrate the birth of Christ. And so they are rather unexpected arrivals at that who come bearing gifts.

The wise men from the East. Now, as many of us are aware, nativity scenes nowadays are not all that accurate. They usually include an angel in it, when in reality, the angel appeared to the shepherds in the field.

[4 : 33] That's one thing in our nativities. But another more glaring inclusion is that of the wise men. They weren't there with the shepherds visiting baby Jesus soon after his birth while he was lying there in the manger.

You know, the shepherds, or the wise men, were something of late arrivals. Some scholars believe perhaps even a year or so, maybe more. Could be days.

Could be months. But he's no longer in the manger. We know that much from our text. And if you continued reading in the Gospel according to Matthew, you know that Herod's wicked plan was to kill all children two years old and under.

So there seems to have also been some time that had passed. So it was probably a rather shocking encounter for Mary and Joseph when they opened the door to that home and they find these three wise men at their doorstep.

So how is it that those wise men end up at Mary and Joseph's door? Well, we're going to see that this morning. This perfectly providential visit from the wise men.

[5 : 39] And so we'll see how they arrive at their door first by looking at two prophecies. Two prophecies that are fulfilled this morning. And then we'll look and we'll see two very different responses to those prophecies fulfilled.

So first, let's consider the prophecies. And one will be from the Old Testament book of Numbers and the other from the Old Testament book of Micah. I'll begin reading again as we look at our first prophecy here in Matthew 2, verse 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, 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. Now, the birth account of Christ in the book of Matthew is rather interesting because the actual birth of Jesus is kind of skipped over.

There's almost no detail given in Matthew's account to the actual birth story, unlike Luke. If you were to look at the gospel according to Luke, you would see he spilled lots of ink describing that night of Christ's birth.

[6 : 56] From the arrival of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, to their inability to find a room in the inn, to those shepherds visiting baby Jesus while he's still lying in the manger.

Matthew, though, leaves all of that out. You see, Matthew has a different focus in his account, and we'll see that this morning. So, Matthew says very little about the birth of Jesus.

It's almost kind of a passing comment at the end of chapter 1. But then we come to chapter 2, and some time has passed. We see that Matthew sets the stage.

This is after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. And we see that this was in the days of Herod the king. Now, who is Herod?

Well, there are several different Herods found in the New Testament. There's the Herod who killed John the Baptist. That's not this Herod. That's this Herod's son. There's the Herod who put James to death and had Peter imprisoned in the days of the early church.

[8 : 00] The Herod who received the worship of the people, and God struck him dead. That's also not this Herod. That's this Herod's grandson. And we could talk about a few other Herods.

But who's this one? Well, this is the Herod who ruled over Israel and Judea from 37 BC to 4 BC. This is the Herod who restored the temple and greatly expanded it.

The temple during Jesus' earthly ministry was grand. It was impressive. And it was because of the work this Herod did on it. He was known as Herod I, or even more audaciously as Herod the Great.

Now, Matthew calls him Herod the king. But in reality, Herod was more of a governor than anything. He was appointed by Rome.

He was under the authority of Rome. Caesar Augustus. Oh, that, that was the emperor at that time. Emperor of the whole Roman Empire.

[9 : 04] Herod, he ruled a small region, a very small region of Caesar's grand, vast empire. The region of Israel and Judah. And he ruled from Jerusalem.

Now, before Mary and Joseph had those visitors at their door, Herod had some visitors at his. These wise men, they came to Jerusalem from the east, Matthew says.

They likely, though we can't say definitively, but likely came from Persia. And they were prominent men. Men of great stature and influence. I mean, Herod's not just going to welcome anybody into his courtroom to speak to him.

These wise men were important men from the east. But they weren't politicians. Not like Herod. No, these wise men, they would have lived up to their name in part as seekers of wisdom.

They would have been interested in many areas of false religion, pagan practices like magic, astronomy, astrology, and dream interpretation.

[10 : 12] The group may have even included some priests who worked in the temples of false gods. Now, you might be thinking, so how did these guys end up here in Jerusalem on a mission to find the Christ?

Well, because these wise men took an interest in sacred writings, including the Old Testament scriptures. Here are these pagans. And they were knowledgeable to some degree of prophecy that we have in our Bibles.

Now, how did they come into contact with the Old Testament scriptures? Well, if you remember in the Old Testament, when God sent his people into exile, where did he send the people of Judah?

He sent them to Babylon. And there the Jews would be for many years. Some of them remained there after the exile ended. And so they perhaps interacted with such wise men.

Daniel would give us indication that they did. So these men knew Old Testament prophecy. Well, at the same time, they are interested in the heavenly bodies.

[11 : 15] They are studying the movements and the patterns of the stars in the sky at night. So they take notice of this particular star.

It catches their attention. Because it's a very unique star. A star that they had obviously not seen before. And this star, as we'll see, it moved.

Now, in reality, I've learned, no expert here, all stars move, but very slowly, so slowly that the human eye can't perceive it. But this star was different.

The wise men could see very clearly, this star is on the move. It guided them. Now, we aren't told explicitly that it guided them to Jerusalem, though it seems reasonable to conclude that it did.

But it most certainly guided them to Bethlehem, to the very house where Jesus lived. At minimum, the star pointed them to Jerusalem. So this star is unique.

[12:14] From this astrological perspective, it caught the attention of these stargazers from the east. But also, from a prophetic standpoint, it caught their attention.

Remember, they're familiar with Old Testament scriptures. And clearly, they had connected something from the Old Testament scriptures to this star. Because they came to Herod, and what did they say to him in Jerusalem?

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. See how they associated the star with the king of the Jews?

They're calling it his star. It's not just any star. It's the star of the king of the Jews. So what Old Testament prophecy could these pagan wise men have been thinking of?

Probably the prophecy recorded in Numbers. Numbers 24:17. And it's not a prophecy that's delivered by perhaps someone you'd expect. It's not delivered by Moses.

[13:20] It's not delivered by Elijah, or Samuel, or Isaiah, or any other Old Testament Israelite prophet. It's a prophecy spoken by a pagan, a man named Balaam.

The wise men were certainly unexpected visitors of King Herod in Jerusalem. And Balaam, for his part, was an unexpected spokesman for God here in Numbers.

Balaam had been hired by the king of Moab. This king's name was Balak. A little bit confusing. Balak and Balaam. Balak, king of Moab. Balaam, this man who gives the prophecy.

So Balak wanted Balaam to do one thing. Curse the Israelites. Because Israel was defeating nation after nation in battle.

They were having military success. And the surrounding nations were hearing about this success. And they're growing more and more afraid. Including the nation of Moab.

[14:22] So what does the Moabite king do? He hires this man of divination. This soothsayer. You could say this pagan, wise man from the east.

And Balaam had one job to do. Curse Israel. But he couldn't. Try as he might. All that Balaam could do each time that he spoke was actually the reverse.

To bless Israel instead. Because that's what God would have him to do. And he could only do what God told him to do. Reminding us that God is sovereign over all.

A pagan prophet who worshipped and served false gods. A pagan prophet hired to curse God's people. He can do nothing outside of God's control.

So three times Balaam set out to curse the Israelites. Three times he blessed them instead. Now of course this would have greatly angered and did greatly anger his employer.

[15:22] I hired you for this purpose. And you're not only failing in this purpose. You're literally doing the opposite for me. So Balak sent Balaam away after the third blessing.

But before leaving, Balaam said, I got one more thing that I have to say. And this time it wasn't a blessing that he delivered. It was this prophecy. A prophecy of Israel's future triumph over the nations that opposed Israel's God.

So beginning in verse 15, listen to just the introduction of the prophecy. The oracle of Balaam, the son of Beor. The oracle of the man whose eye is opened.

The oracle of him who hears the words of God and knows the knowledge of the Most High. Who sees the vision of the Almighty falling down with his eyes uncovered.

So that's just the introduction. He hasn't given us the prophecy. Now he does. Beginning in verse 17. I see him. But not now. I behold him.

[16:24] But not near. A star shall come out of Jacob. And a scepter shall rise out of Israel. It shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.

Edom shall be dispossessed. Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed. Israel is doing valiantly. And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of cities.

That prophecy begins in a very cryptic way, doesn't it? Balaam says, I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. We should naturally ask, who, Balaam?

Who are you talking about here that you see far off, in the distance, in the future? Well, Balaam answers that question in the very next line. A star shall come out of Jacob.

And a scepter shall rise out of Israel. Balaam is talking about a king. In ancient times, it was believed that stars heralded the birth of important figures like kings.

[17:30] And so, drawing on something of that even, here is this star, speaking of the true king, who would come out of Jacob. This scepter from Israel.

A scepter, clearly a symbol of kingship. A king would wield the scepter in his hand. It was a sign of his power, his royal authority over the land.

So, the star coming out of Jacob. This scepter rising out of Israel. It was this clear reference to not just a deliverer from Israel, but a king. And the wise men who arrived there at Herod's doorstep in Jerusalem, they understood this.

They've seen this physical star over the land of Israel, and they've put two and two together now. The figurative star has arrived. So, they made a journey. And this was a long journey.

This was not a popping over to Jerusalem. No, it was a long journey. It wasn't like their curiosity was piqued, so they came over for a quick word with Herod.

[18:33] Now, they came from Persia, likely. That's hundreds of miles. 800 or so miles away. If you're moving at a good clip, 20 miles a day, that's 40 days.

And there were many days that scholars would say they could maybe get six miles because of the terrain. But it was worth it for these wise men. They've come. They are looking for this king of the Jews who had been born.

They've seen his star. And it's led them to Herod's doorstep. But that's only one of the two prophecies fulfilled here in Matthew 2. Let's read on and see the second prophecy.

And this prophecy now comes from the book of Micah. So, beginning in Matthew 2, verse 3. So, we know the wise men were familiar with Old Testament Scripture, with Old Testament prophecy.

But again, we can't forget, they weren't Old Testament scholars from Jerusalem. They were pagan men, likely from Babylon. They weren't experts in the Old Testament.

[20:07] So, while they knew some Old Testament prophecy, they didn't know all Old Testament prophecy. They needed help. We know that this king will come from Judah. We know that much.

But Judah is still a pretty large area of land. There's lots of people who live in the region of Judah. In Jerusalem alone, there were tens of thousands of people.

Which maybe doesn't sound like much to us today. But in ancient times, it would have been hard to find a child in the midst of that many people, let alone the whole region. So, the wise men are trying to narrow down their search area.

And they've come to Herod asking, Can you help us? Does Herod have any more insight from the Old Testament as to where exactly this king was to be born? Can he pinpoint it for us?

Well, Herod himself couldn't. That's not surprising. But he knows who can help. The chief priests and the scribes. These were the key religious leaders of the people.

[21:07] The priests oversaw all the activities of the temple. The scribes oversaw the copying of the scriptures. The preserving of God's word. If anyone would know, it's these guys.

And they do. The king was to be born in Bethlehem. Notice now, the way the king is described. As a ruler. But what would this ruler do?

He would shepherd God's people. Here is this mighty king who is coming. Mighty from the Old Testament prophecy of numbers. But he would rule his people with loving compassion and care.

Watching over them. Guarding them. Protecting him. Like a shepherd watching over his sheep. It's fitting, isn't it? That shepherds were actually the first visitors to our shepherd king.

So they narrowed down the search quite a bit. From all of Judah to one very small town. The town of Bethlehem. From hundreds of thousands of people to maybe a few hundred.

[22:15] And of course, they're not just looking for anybody. They're looking for a child. This boy that was born. Now the search is more manageable. It's been narrowed down to perhaps a few children in the town.

Ten or so. And on top of that, Bethlehem wasn't very far away. We're talking five or six miles. So now, after traveling 800, the wise men are ready for what would be a walk in the park.

So they head out to the small town of Bethlehem. But just as Micah the prophet says, it's not an insignificant town. By no means is it least.

King David. He had been born there. And now, as Micah says, another king would come. A ruler who would shepherd God's people. So we've seen the two prophecies.

Let's now look at the two responses. We're beginning with the response of King Herod. Matthew 2, verse 7. Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.

[23:21] 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, I think we all know, you read on in the story, and Herod did not have good intentions. The fact that he brought them to him secretly gives us an indicator.

Something is amiss. King Herod was threatened by this news that the wise men from the east brought. A child had been born, just as the Old Testament prophets said would happen.

And this child was to be king of the Jews. But he himself, Herod, wasn't he king of the Jews? And he wasn't going to hand over his crown to another?

It makes sense then that when these wise men show up at his doorstep, Herod's initial response is to be troubled. We see that back in verse 3. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

[24:22] Now, when Matthew says all Jerusalem, it likely doesn't mean all the people of the city shared in the same experience of trouble as him. Like the ordinary townsfolk were there with King Herod.

Like the baker and the fishermen of the town had gathered to hear from the wise men. No, all Jerusalem here would probably be the men of high-ranking positions in Herod's government. These are Herod's right-hand men.

They too, troubled by this news. Because like Herod, another king was a threat to them. So what did jealous Herod do?

He schemed. He came up with a plan to maintain his power and his prominence. I'm going to ask the wise men to find the child. Have them report back to me so that I can go to that child too.

Now he tells the wise men that he wants to worship. We know from the rest of the story that Herod's plan was never to worship. His plan was to execute. He wanted to find the child, not to crown him, but to kill him.

[25 : 26] And that was absolutely King Herod's MO. He was known to be a violent, agitated, easily angered man. Some might even say that he was paranoid.

Constantly looking over his shoulder, thinking that someone was out to get him and to steal his throne. How do we know this about him? Because he had a long list of people that he had offed.

Nearly half the Sanhedrin at one time. 300 court officers. His own wife, her mother, and three of his sons. So yeah, you could say he was a bit paranoid.

And to add to his paranoia and his jealousy, the wise men identified this child as the king of the Jews. That would have been a piercing statement for Herod.

Because here is Herod ruling and reigning in the Jewish province. And yet, Herod was not ethnically Jewish. And everybody knew that.

[26 : 28] He was of Idumine descent. That's to say that he traced his lineage back to Edom. That's where his parents were from. Not from Israel. Now history says that his family embraced Judaism.

But that's as Jewish as he got. His family were converts, but not ethnically Jewish. So yes, he was installed as king of the Jews.

But everyone knew that he was something of a poser. Except maybe the wise men. When they arrived, perhaps they didn't know this.

In fact, they probably came to Herod thinking the palace of Jerusalem would be a great place to start our search for this child. This child who has been born.

This king of the Jews. Because whoever is ruling and reigning here in Jerusalem, he very well may be the father of this baby who has been born. But of course, that wasn't the case.

[27 : 26] When they met Herod, they didn't meet the father of this child. They met the foe of this child. Consider then how Herod received that news. Not just hearing that a rival had been born, but here is this long prophesied rival.

One that was promised to come. Promised by God in his very word. I mean, it was shown to Herod. He had those chief priests and those scribes come in.

Here's the prophecy that says the Christ, this king of the Jews, is to be born in Bethlehem. So you can imagine Herod squirming on his throne.

The sweat forming on his brow. Fear mixed with hatred. Filling his heart as the wise men shared of their great quest. And as the religious leaders shared of God's great promise.

But Herod, in his pride, in his self-promotion, decided, I can put an end to this. I can put an end to this child. I can put an end to this plan of God.

[28 : 31] I can ultimately thwart God. So he devised that wicked plan. And deceiving the wise men, he sent them on their way with this newfound knowledge that yes, the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem.

That little town just a few miles away. And Herod would wait for their return with his heart set on murder because he was not ready to humble himself to another.

I love that line in Joy to the World that says, Let every heart prepare him room. Herod did just the opposite. Herod locked the door to his heart, threw away the key, and said, This Christ, this King, is unwelcome here.

Is he unwelcome in your heart? Is your heart different than King Herod's this morning? Now you might not be thinking murderous thoughts.

You might not be thinking much at all of a baby born in a manger 2,000 years ago. But of course, this baby is not any ordinary baby.

[29 : 43] This baby is the King of glory. He is the Lord of all. And he's no sweet little baby now. He's the man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom, who died in the place of sinners, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

This man, God in the flesh, now rules and reigns from heaven, and he will return himself. As Acts 17 says, God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

So are you ready for this appointed man to judge you on the appointed day? He demands nothing less than your life, your allegiance, your all.

Will you humble yourself, turn from your sins in repentance and trust in Christ? Or will you harden your heart like Herod, seeing this baby as only a threat to the throne of your heart?

That's the first response that we see to the prophecies concerning the Christ, King Herod's jealousy. Now we see the second response from the wise men themselves.

[31 : 06] And it's not jealousy. It's joy. We see the joy of the wise men beginning in verse 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.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.

Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

So from the doorstep of King Herod to now the doorstep of Mary and Joseph, here are the wise men, guided by the star once more in a very, very specific way.

Not just pointing them to the land of Judah, but now the star had guided them, come to rest over the very place that the Lord Jesus could be found. The house where he was.

[32 : 12] And what was the wise men's response? They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. It's like Matthew is just layering on the joy here for emphasis.

They didn't just rejoice. They didn't just rejoice exceedingly. They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. Matthew is saying, just to be clear, they were really, really joyful.

Perhaps to the point of David dancing in the streets with joy. Here is the Messiah. We found the Christ. Now again, these wise men, they were unannounced.

They were unexpected. They were late arrivals to the celebration of Christ's birth. Late from a human perspective, though. Not from God's.

They came in His perfect timing. So here they are. Unexpected, yes, but not unprepared. They came bearing treasures. Gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

[33:18] Gifts that were fit for a king. But not just any king. Because look at what the wise men did when they gave their gifts. They didn't just bow down before Christ or honor Him and respect Him as just a king.

No. They worshipped Him. And that is a perfectly appropriate gesture. Now the wise men from the East, they dabbled in all kinds of pagan practices and false religions.

It is doubtful that they fully understood who Jesus was. But we do. We know who this child was that the wise men were worshipping.

He was not one of many gods. He was not merely the king of the Jews. He was not merely the king who would succeed Herod. He was no regional ruler.

He was no puppet king installed by Rome. Here before the wise men was the king of kings and the Lord of lords. The king of heaven.

[34:26] The one true God. God who became a man. Who took on flesh. Who dwelt among us. As John 1 says, we have seen His glory.

Glory as of the only Son from the Father full of grace and truth. This is who we worship. This is our God. Emmanuel.

God with us. Born that man no more may die. Born to raise us from the earth. Born to give us second birth. This is our God.

This is our King. This is our Savior who would save us from our sins. Christ. So Christian, rejoice this Christmas.

In fact, rejoice exceedingly with great joy because we remember the marvelous reality that our Savior was born, Christ the Lord.

[35:21] the wise men, the wise men, they sought Jesus, the King of the Jews, and they found Him just as God purposed that they would, though they didn't know entirely who this King was.

Some 30 years later, as Jesus hung on the cross, suffering the wrath of God, dying for our sins, as Jesus hung on that cross, there was a sign that was nailed above Him.

And that sign read, This is Jesus, King of the Jews. And the Roman soldiers that had hung Him on that cross, they had also mocked Him.

And they had mocked Him saying, Hail, King of the Jews. And all of that happened just as God had purposed that it would.

Though those Romans also did not know exactly who this King was. But by God's grace, we do. This is our King.

[36:28] Our King who suffered and died and rose again. He's risen and reigning in heaven. And one day, our righteous King will return. And of the increase of His government and of peace, there will be no end.

His dominion will be an everlasting dominion. He shall reign as King, Jeremiah says, and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

For all of us who are in Christ, this is your Savior. Born a humble baby, but coming again as the all-sovereign King.

Are you ready for that day when He returns? What a day that will be. And in that day, in a perfect way, we will rejoice exceedingly with great joy and we'll do that for all of eternity.

Let's pray together. Our God, we do give You glory this morning that You would send Your Son, God the Son, that He would take on flesh and dwell among us.

[37:40] Father, what a glorious reality it is that the King of Heaven would come to earth, that He would live a righteous life, that He would commit no sin.

There would be no sin found in His mouth even as they mocked Him, as they ridiculed Him, as they said, Hail, King of the Jews. Here was our righteous King who went to the cross for our sins.

We thank You, Father, that He has risen, that He's now with You in Heaven. And we rejoice then in this Christmas season that here was this baby who was born and that baby who lived and died lives again and He will never die.

He intercedes for us even now. We rejoice in His birth. Father, we give You the praise for Him. Make us to be a people who rejoice exceedingly with great joy in this season.

And we pray all of this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen.