

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

HOW TO BE A WISE MAN (OR WOMAN)

Matthew 2:1-12

By

Steven J. Cole

December 24, 1995

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Special Christmas Message

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The eccentric billionaire, Howard Hughes, owned several casinos in Las Vegas. When he died, the public relations director for Hughes's company asked the casino managers for a minute of silence out of respect for Hughes. The message went out over the public address systems, and for a brief moment the noisy casinos fell silent. Housewives stood uncomfortably clutching their paper cups of coins at the slot machines. At the crap tables, stickmen cradled the dice in the crooks of their wooden wands. Then a pit boss looked at his watch, leaned forward, and whispered to the stickman, "Okay, roll the dice. He's had his minute." Some respect!

At the busy Christmas season, we're all prone to give that same shallow "respect" to our Lord. We get caught up in the rush of shopping, sending Christmas cards, decorating the house, and entertaining guests. In the midst of it all we rush off to church, sit through the service thinking of everything we still need to get done, and rush out the door to get on with our tasks. And the Lord got His "minute"! But as the Sovereign of the universe, He deserves more. He deserves to reign as your Lord and King, every minute of every day.

The magi or wise men in the Christmas story can teach us how to be wise men (and women). No one knows for sure who they were. Contrary to "We Three Kings of Orient Are," they were not kings and there may not have been three of them. It only says that they gave three types of gifts. They didn't show up at the manger on the night of Christ's birth, but at a house some months later. We don't know what country they came from or if they rode camels. The best guess is that they were from a prominent class of royal advisors in Persia who studied astronomy, astrology, science, and religious matters. In the book of Daniel the word is used of a class of men who interpreted dreams and divine messages to the king (Dan. 1:20; 2:27; 5:15).

Perhaps they had heard about the Messiah from the Jews scattered through their country since the captivity. They may have read the prophet Daniel, since he was a prominent leader in Babylon and Persia centuries before. Somehow they had a knowledge of the Jewish Messiah and, through this special star, God had revealed to them Messiah's birth. The star was probably a supernatural phenomenon (perhaps like the pillar of fire in the wilderness) which appeared in order to guide them, then disappeared, then appeared again to lead them to the very house where Jesus was. But no one knows for sure.

But we do know this for sure: The wise men responded to the light God gave them by seeking the Lord Jesus Christ. They were clear in their purpose: We "have come to worship Him" (2:2). Whether they were absolutely clear on His divine nature or not, we don't know. But their words and actions point to more than the homage one would pay to an earthly king. They gave no such worship to Herod. They must have at least known that this newborn King was the One Daniel described as "One like a Son of Man" to whom "was given dominion, glory and a kingdom that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:13-14). In spite of many obstacles, they sought this newborn King until they found Him; and finding Him, they worshiped Him. We should do no less.

When God seeks men (and women),
the wise respond by seeking His King.

1. God, not man, begins the seeking process.

We would be greatly mistaken, both factually and theologically, if we thought that these men were wise in and of themselves and that their wisdom was the reason they sought out the newborn King. Romans 3:11 plainly states, "There is none who seeks for God." In 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, Paul shows that no one comes to God because of his own wisdom, but rather that God chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, so that no man should boast before God. The factual reason these wise men sought out Jesus was that God took the initiative by revealing to

them some supernatural sign in the heavens which they connected with the birth of the Jewish Messiah. Theologically, Matthew is showing that though the Jews had the newborn Messiah right under their noses, due to their hardness of heart they missed Him. And, he is showing that this Messiah is not only King of the Jews, but also, as Daniel foretold, King of the nations.

We would also be mistaken if we concluded that God's using a sign in the heavens with these astrologers somehow validated the practice of astrology. The Bible soundly condemns the notion that the heavenly bodies have some power over human destinies. It is the sovereign God who spoke the universe into existence who has control over human destinies! The fact that He condescended to use a star to speak to these stargazers simply shows His abundant grace in that when God seeks the sinner, He always stoops to our level and meets us there. He shines His light on us in ways that we can understand and respond to. That's what the Christmas story is all about, that the eternal God took on human flesh so that He might "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).

Perhaps you're thinking, "Well, that's all well and good, that we do not and cannot seek God until He first seeks us. But what if He hasn't yet sought me? What am I supposed to do in the meantime--sit around and wait for a special star in the sky?"

But, the fact that you are right now hearing the gospel preached shows that God is seeking you! You may not have discerned it yet. It was a rare thing--just this once in all history--that God sought men through a miraculous sign in the sky. His far more common means is to seek lost people through the preaching of His Word. Since, then, you are hearing His Word preached, He is seeking you! The crucial question then becomes, "How are you responding to God's seeking?" The fool responds by saying in his heart that there is no God (Ps. 14:1). But, ...

2. Wise men (and women) respond to God's seeking them by seeking Jesus as their King.

God sought these wise men, but then they had to respond by seeking His King. It was not an easy process. Several things could have hindered them from seeking and finding the Savior:

- A. Wise men seek Jesus as King in spite of the difficulties of the process.

These men had to go on a long, difficult journey. In our day of jet travel, we can't identify with it, because it took them weeks or months. The magi were probably fairly well-to-do men, used to comfortable dwellings. They had to give up those usual comforts. There was no interstate highway, no cars, no Holiday Inns, not even a McDonald's! There were nights in the cold and the constant danger of robbers. And when they finally got to Jerusalem, they had trouble getting directions to the right place!

Why go through all this hassle? What was in it for them? Were they looking for some help to solve some of their personal problems? Maybe they could gain a position in the new King's court? No, they couldn't even talk with this King. He was probably between one and two-years-old when they arrived. It would be about 30 years before He began His public ministry. There wasn't really anything in this trip for the magi. They didn't say, "We have seen His star in the east and have come to get something from Him."

The point is, when God seeks you, you should do everything it takes to seek Him, whatever the hassles, whatever the difficulties, for one reason: He alone is the living God and it is worth all the troubles if you find Him! If you seek God with the attitude, "I'll follow Him if He makes my life go better," you're looking for Aladdin's Genie, not the living God. No doubt the wise men's lives got more difficult when they sought Jesus as King, and so may yours!

- B. Wise men seek Jesus as King in spite of the disinterest of others.

Can you imagine how these Gentile magi felt? They had traveled for weeks to worship the newborn King of the Jews. They arrived in the Jewish capital where the King would someday reign, expecting the city to be agog over His birth. They began asking, "Where is He? We saw His star in the east." The street vendor says, "I haven't heard of any king. But would you like to buy my wares?" They ask others, "Where's your newborn King?" but receive funny looks and shrugs of the shoulders. So they think, "We must be asking the wrong people." So they rush over to the temple pre-

cincts and ask the rabbis, "Where is your King?" But the rabbis don't know of any newborn king. They point them toward Herod's palace.

It would be as if someone from a foreign country had a dream of coming to the Grand Canyon. They finally save up the money and get to Flagstaff. They ask for directions to the Canyon. And people look at them as if they're crazy and say, "The Grand Canyon? Never heard of the place."

When Herod heard that there might be a newborn King of the Jews, he was *not* disinterested! He "was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him" (2:3). He was troubled because he was a suspicious tyrant who eliminated anyone who had a remote chance of challenging his rule. By the time he died, he had murdered his brother-in-law, mother-in-law, wife, and three sons, not to mention all the male babies in Bethlehem, plus a lot of other people. So you can see why when Herod got troubled, all Jerusalem got troubled with him!

But none of the religious leaders got troubled enough to follow the magi to Bethlehem. They could give the right biblical answers about Messiah's birthplace. But they weren't interested in taking a five mile walk from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to see their newborn King. They probably thought the magi were a bunch of fanatics to travel all that distance to see a baby. But in spite of the indifference of those who should have been most excited, the magi went alone to Bethlehem to worship the newborn King.

The disinterest of others can hinder you from seeking the Lord Jesus as your King. The worst kind of disinterest comes from the religious crowd who know about the King, but they have not submitted their lives to His rule. They find it an interesting academic exercise to study the Bible, but they don't allow it to confront their pride and selfishness. They think you're a fanatic if you seek Him no matter what the cost. It threatens their lukewarmness. But don't let their disinterest hinder you from seeking Him.

C. Wise men seek Jesus as King in spite of disappointments.

Again, put yourself in the magis' sandals. They advised the kings of Persia. They were used to living in royal settings. After seeing the star of this newborn King of the Jews, they started their

long journey. They must have had some expectations about what they would find when they got there. After all, not every king has a star announcing his birth! They went to Herod's palace, but the newborn King wasn't there. "Maybe He's in one of the king's vacation homes. He's probably surrounded with gold, waited on by many attendants. We can probably stay in one of the guest houses on the grounds."

But what did they find? "They came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother" (2:11). Mary and Joseph had moved into more permanent quarters than the stable where Jesus was born. But that was it--a common house in Bethlehem, common, working-class parents, and a common-looking child. No fancy robes, no attendants, no palace. Nothing that even hinted of royalty. And yet the wise men "fell down and worshiped Him" (not Mary!).

That took some faith! They had been to Herod's palace and seen the splendor there, but they had not bowed in worship. But here in this common setting, they find this couple and their child. He didn't perform any miracles. He didn't have a halo. Angels weren't hovering overhead. And yet they fell before Him in worship and presented Him with their treasures. If they were disappointed, they didn't let it keep them from bowing before Jesus as King.

If you seek Christ as your Savior and King, you will have some disappointments. You probably will not find King Jesus to be all that you expected. You expected Him to quickly solve all your problems, but in fact, you seem to have more problems than before! You expected an abundant life, and that didn't include suffering! But the one who learns from the magi will look beyond the disappointments and will bow before Jesus as their King with eyes of faith.

Wise men and women seek Jesus as their King in spite of difficulties, the disinterest of others, and disappointment.

D. Wise men seek Jesus as King in spite of their own dignity.

The magi were important men back home. They were the equivalent of cabinet members, with responsible positions in their

government. They had wealth and influence. And yet here they are bowing down on the dirt floor of a modest home in Bethlehem before a Jewish baby, proclaiming Him as their own Sovereign and King! Verse 10 tells us that when they saw the star as they left Jerusalem bound for Bethlehem, "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." Matthew piles up superlatives to let us know that these guys were excited! When they got to the house, they weren't hindered by their own dignity or pride from falling in worship before the Lord Jesus.

Proud Herod would never be found bowing in the dust, except before Caesar, and that only to get what he wanted from the despot. The scribes in Jerusalem knew nothing of the magis' abandon in worship. They bowed when it was proper, but only in the Temple, in front of others who could see their piety. The magi alone bowed unabashedly to worship the infant whom they confessed as their King, even though He was not acknowledged by His own people.

We no longer worship Him as the Babe of Bethlehem, but as the risen, sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, who is returning in might and majesty to reign forever. But our dignity, our pride, often hinders our bowing before Him as King. "What would others think if I got carried away and gave myself in abandon to Jesus? What would it do to my reputation? People might think I'm a religious fanatic!" Herod and the Jewish religious leaders kept their dignity but missed their King. The magi lost their dignity but gained Jesus as their King. Swallow your dignity and join the wise men on the dirt before Jesus as your King!

Conclusion

After the magi gave their gifts, "they departed for their own country" (2:12). They didn't set up a shrine and charge admission. They didn't write a book about their trip. They quietly returned home and went on with their lives. But they were different men now, men who by faith had seen the King and worshiped Him. That's what the Lord would have us do at Christmas: to respond to His initiative in sending His Son by seeking Jesus as our King. And, having found Him and worshiped Him, to return to our homes, our world, as different people, people who live under the sovereignty of the King.

There are three types of people in this story. There are those like *Herod* who hear of Jesus and are *hostile* toward Him. They want to eliminate Him from their lives because He threatens their running the show. Then there are those like the Jewish *priests and scribes* who know about Jesus. They can even quote Bible references about Him. But they're *indifferent* to Him. They don't go out of their way to seek Him. And then there are those like the *magi*. They responded to the light they had been given and overcame every hindrance until they found the Savior and fell at His feet in *worship*.

The third group were the wise men; those who sought Jesus as King. Maybe you're not in the third group, but you'd like to be. What should you do? William Law, an 18th century devotional writer, gives the answer: "When the first spark of a desire after God arrives in [your] soul, cherish it with all [your] care, give all [your] heart unto it... Follow it as gladly as the wise men of the East followed the star from heaven that appeared to them. It will do for [you] as the star did for them: it will lead [you] to the birth of Jesus, not in a stable at Bethlehem of Judea, but to the birth of Jesus in [your] own soul."

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important to affirm that God, not man, always begins the seeking process (see 1 Cor. 1:26-31)?
2. Does the wise men's seeking imply that there is some human effort involved in salvation? Consider Luke 13:24; Eph. 2:8-9.
3. What differences are there between the Jews who knew about Christ, but missed Him, and these Gentiles who found Him? Consider John 5:39-44; Rom. 9:30-10:4). How does this apply to us, who know about Christ?

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