

CHRISTMAS TIME

"NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENTS"

MATTHEW 2:1-12

This Week's Core Competency

Joy – I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances. John 15:11, *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

Christmas is an occasion for joy. As Gabriel said to the shepherds, "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior-yes, the Messiah, the Lord-has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!" (Lk 2:10-11 NLT). It's also an occasion for celebration. As Luke said about the shepherds, "The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them" (v. 20). Ironically, the holiday with all its contemporary accoutrements can diminish our joy and detract from our celebration of the glorious incarnation. That in itself is not good, but even worse, we'll miss an opportunity to become more joyful people.

John Ortberg writes, "You can become a joyful person. With God's help, it really is possible. The biblical writers would not command it if it were not so. But joyfulness is a learned skill. You must take responsibility for your joy. Not your friend, not your parent, not your spouse, not your kids,

People who want to pursue joy especially need to practice the discipline of celebration.

– John Ortberg

not your boss-your joy is your responsibility. For some of us, this does not come easily. You may be joy-impaired. You will have to fight for it. But it can be done.

"People who want to pursue joy especially need to practice the discipline of celebration. This is a primary reason that we see much emphasis placed on feast days in the Old Testament. Times of feasting were to be transforming experiences-just as times of meditating or fasting were. Celebration generally involves activities that bring pleasure-gathering with people we love, eating and drinking, singing and dancing. Spiritual celebration means doing them while reflecting on the wonderful God who has given us such wonderful gifts.

The words of Nehemiah express this spirit of celebration. Our word holiday comes from the practice of 'holy days.' We often think of 'discipline' as abstinence from pleasurable things, but Nehemiah commanded the people to set aside a time to revel in them as a discipline for personal transformation. 'Eating the fat'-in other translations called 'choice food'-can be every bit as much a discipline as fasting. We expect a prophet to tell us to eat locusts and brussel sprouts, or maybe nothing at all, but here we see Nehemiah handing out the equivalent of Twinkies and Fritos" (*The Life You've Always Wanted*, 71, 72). The incarnation is a license to celebrate; be careful you use it.

day 1

ENCOUNTER – read God’s word to put yourself in touch with him.

Matthew 2:1-12

1 After 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 in the east and have come to worship him."

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 Christ 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 be the shepherd of 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 make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east 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 and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Underline "Herod" and "the Magi" mentioned throughout.
- * Box the temporal connecting words "after," "during," "when," and "then" throughout.
- * Highlight the Old Testament quotation in v. 6.
- * Circle "star" in vv. 2, 7, 9, 10.
- * Box "to" in v. 2 and "so that" in v. 8 indicating purpose.
- * Bracket "king of the Jews" in v. 2, "Christ" in v. 4, "ruler" and "shepherd" in v. 6.
- * Draw a line from "worshiped" in v. 11 to "worship" in v. 2.

day 2

EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. Commentators think events in Matthew 2:1-12 happened "some time" after Jesus was born. What makes them think so?
2. Why do you suppose Matthew included the story of the Magi's visit in his Gospel?
3. Were you surprised to read that Herod was "disturbed" to hear about the birth of Jesus? Explain.
4. Why would "all Jerusalem" be disturbed?
5. Explain how the quotation from Micah 5:2 serves Matthew's purpose (cf. v. 1).
6. Herod had a secret meeting with the Magi. What was he up to?
7. Why did he want to know the exact time the star appeared (cf. v. 16)?
8. How could the star in the story be a real star; it led the Magi to Jesus' house and "stopped over" it?
9. Explain the significance of the Magi giving costly gifts to Jesus.
10. **Discussion:** Talk about the significance of the contrast drawn by Matthew between Herod and the Magi.

day 3 **EXAMINE** – an explanation of the message to better understand the meaning of the passage.

The story is familiar to many of us. Three wise men came from the east on foot bringing gifts to Jesus, the newborn messiah. Their names were Casper, Balthazar, and Melchior. One of them is often pictured as an Ethiopian because they were thought to represent the three sons of Noah. A twelfth-century bishop of Cologne actually claimed to have discovered their skulls. But is any of this true? Do these traditions reflect what the Bible actually says in the Gospels?

The only trustworthy information we have about the Magi is found in Matthew 2:1-12, which indicates that these familiar traditions are misleading. The passage does not say that there were three Magi, much less tell us their names. It doesn't tell us exactly where they came from—only that they saw his star "from the rising," which likely means "in the east" (NIV) or possibly "when it rose" (the NET Bible), which leaves us wondering whether they were from Arabia, Babylon, or Persia. Tradition places the three wise men beside the infant Jesus who is lying in a manger, but in fact they may not have arrived until sometime after Jesus was born. Based on details in the story some suggest that Jesus may have been one or two years old when the Magi visited him. They reason this way. The star (i.e., glory of the Lord) first appeared to the Magi when Jesus was born. However, by the time they arrived in Jerusalem following their long journey, the first family was living in a house in Bethlehem (v. 11). Furthermore, Herod apparently based his decision to kill all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and under (v. 16) on what he believed to be "the exact time the star appeared" (v. 7), suggesting that he suspected that Christ had been born sometime earlier. Obviously, our Christmas traditions have embellished the biblical narrative.

Magi (the Greek word *Magio* used for those who were experts in the stars) first appear in history in the seventh century B.C. as a tribe within the Median nation in eastern Mesopotamia. They were skilled in astronomy, astrology and in interpreting dreams, and are often associated with various occult practices, including sorcery. Because of their broad knowledge of science, agriculture, mathematics, history, and the occult, their religious and political influence grew until they became the

most prominent and powerful group of advisors in the Medo-Persian and Babylonian empires. In the book of Daniel Magi were among the highest-ranking officials in Babylon, and Daniel is found among them because of his outstanding wisdom (Da 2:24, 48).

The exile may explain how the Magi came to know about Messiah. When Judah was taken into captivity in the sixth century B.C., Daniel and the other exiles brought the law and their customs with them to Babylon and introduced them to the Babylonians. Seventy years later many Jews returned to Jerusalem, but others stayed behind. Messianic theology passed from that Jewish community to the Babylonians in general and to the wise men in Babylon in particular. However, even though the exiled Jewish community may have been the ultimate source of their messianic knowledge, the Magi referred to by Matthew lived centuries after the exile. There were probably more like God-fearing Gentiles such as Cornelius and Lydia (see Ac 10:1, 2; 16:14) whom we meet in the New Testament than the wise men of Daniel's day. Why did they set out to find the messiah? God may have appeared to them in a dream (Mt 2:12) or he may have appeared to them as he appeared to Abram when he was still in the land of the Chaldeans. Stephen tells us in his speech to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7:2 that the *God of glory* appeared to Abraham before he left Mesopotamia. The "star" that "stopped over the place where the child was" could hardly have been an actual star, comet, or conjunction of planets. Instead it was likely the glory of the Lord, a brightness that guided the wise men even as the pillar of fire guided the Israelites in the wilderness (see Ex 13:21).

The most significant fact to note about the Magi is that they were Gentile wise men who were seeking to find the messiah whose birth fulfilled prophecy. This is consistent with Matthew's desire to show that Jesus was the savior of both Jews and Gentiles, and that his kingdom would include both Jews and Gentiles. At the same time he contrasts the unbelief of the Jews with the belief of these Gentiles to encourage his readers to follow the example of the Magi rather than that of Herod and the Jewish religious leaders.

The Message of the Passage

Celebrate the incarnation through worship and adoration like the Magi, rather than disparage it like Herod.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James teaches in James 1:22. Reflect on 3 *living questions* to apply what you have learned this week.

- **Journal your answers to the following *living questions*:**

–How is God making himself known to you?

–How does God want to change you?

–How is God calling you to change your world?

notes STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v. 1 **After** "As chapter 2 opens, the narrative time frame has jumped ahead upwards of two years . . . Luke informs us that before the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea for the mandated census ordered by Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1-7). They most likely performed a wedding ceremony in Nazareth, after which they traveled to Bethlehem for the census, where the child was born. Luke does not mention any of the events found in Matthew 2 except to say that after the presentation of the child in the temple, 'when Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth' (Luke 2:39).

Most who try to harmonize the infancy accounts suggest that the events of Matthew 2 occur after the temple visit but before the permanent return to Nazareth to raise the child. Others suggest the trip to Nazareth in Luke 2:39 took place prior to the events of Matthew 2, proposing that after the family left the temple, they went to Nazareth for their personal belongings (Luke 2:29) since they had decided to raise the child in Bethlehem. Then, after taking up residence in Bethlehem, the events of Matthew 2:1-22 unfold. When they return from Egypt and discover the danger of continuing to live in Bethlehem, they return permanently to Nazareth" (Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, 92).

v. 1 **King Herod** I.e., Herod the Great who ruled Judea from 37-4 B.C. "Like most rulers of the day, he was ruthless, murdering his wife, his three sons, mother-in-law, uncle and many others—not to mention the babies in Bethlehem" (*NIV Study Bible*, note on Mt 2:1), which explains why Augustus said he would rather "be Herod's son than Herod's son" (Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC, 62). Herod's "reign was also noted for splendor, as seen in the many theaters, amphitheaters, monuments, pagan altars, fortresses and other building he erected or refurbished—including the greatest work of all, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, begun in 20 B.C. and finished 68 years after his death" (*NIV Study Bible*, note on Mt 2:1). Since Herod is still alive when the Magi arrive in Jerusalem as much as two years after Jesus was born, the dating of Jesus' birth is placed by most scholars at between 6 and 4 B.C.

v. 1 **Magi** Gentile astrologers who came to Jerusalem to worship "the one born king of the Jews," Jesus, suggesting that believing Gentiles will be included in Messiah's kingdom. "The Magi were not kings but a combination of wise men and priests probably from Persia. They combined astronomical observation with astrological speculation. They played both political and religious roles and were figures of some prominence in their land" (Blomberg, 62). "They apparently had been exposed to Old Testament prophecies from Jewish colonies situation in the east . . . there were significant Jewish centers of learning in Babylon at the time of the Magi. Gentile religious leaders in the east were regularly exposed to Hebrew Scriptures, prophecy, and teachers" (Wilkins, 93).

v. 2 **star** Probably not a natural astronomical phenomenon no matter how remarkable (cf. 2:9). More likely, this was a supernatural phenomenon, e.g., an angel (cf. 1:20, 24; 2:12, 13, 19, 22; Lk 1:11, 19, 26; 2:9) or the glory of the Lord (cf. Lk 2:9).

v. 2 **worship** Cf. v. 11. Their purpose implies Jesus' deity. "The most natural meaning of ['to worship him'] in the historical setting (with reference to a king) is 'to pay homage to him.' 'To worship him' may also be used in the looser sense, referring to the divinity claimed by ancient monarchs. But Matthew's readers know the real meaning of what the magi have come to do better than the magi themselves knew, namely 'worship' in its proper sense. That is, Jesus is the manifestation of God's presence (1:23), the son of God (2:15) in a unique sense, and thus one to be worshiped (Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary*, v. 33a, *Matthew 1-13*, 28).

v. 3 **disturbed** Better yet "alarmed" (cf. the NET Bible). "Herod knows he is not the rightful heir to the Davidic kingdom; he has usurped the throne by aligning himself with Rome. So with the Magi's announcement that they are seeking the one born king of the Jews, he probably perceives that invading forces from the east may perhaps join forces within Israel to oust him and place a king on the throne who is from the true line of the expected Messiah" (Wilkins, 97).

v. 4 **all Jerusalem** A figure of speech [*metonymy*] used to refer to the political and religious leaders there. "Verse 4 refers to the two key groups of religious leaders in Jerusalem. The 'chief priests' headed the twenty-four main orders of priests who lived in and around the city. The scribes ('teachers of the law') had inherited the ancient profession of copying Scripture, but they had evolved into a class of teachers well trained in interpreting and applying the Old Testament as well" (Blomberg, 63).

v. 11 **gold . . .** "The gifts used to honor the new king were typically associated with royalty. All three gifts honor the Christ child as King. Gold, then as now, was a precious metal prized for its beauty and value, an appropriate regal gift. Frankincense and myrrh were fragrant spices and perfumes equally appropriate for such adoration and worship . . . The Magi appear as Balaam's successors to witness the fulfillment of Num 24:17" (66).

Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

The nativity scene that sits on the mantle above my fireplace all December long is beautiful. In an effort to remind us to put Jesus first in the Christmas season, it is always the first decoration we put up. Every year when I open it, I marvel at its intricate design. While I know it looks nothing like that night in Bethlehem so many years ago, I love the extravagance of it. The Wise Men are adorned in the finest fabric and jewels. The gifts they carry are lined with precious stones. Even the camel is completely covered in silk and gold tassels. When I look at words in our text today like "overjoyed," "bowed down," "worshipped" and "opened their treasure," I can almost feel the joy the Magi experienced as they searched for and then found Jesus. Their worship was generous, maybe even sacrificial. As they fell to the ground on their knees before the young Jesus, their hearts must have been so full. That's the kind of joy in Jesus I want to experience at Christmas and all year long. It comes when I take my eyes off what I lack and focus on the invaluable gifts I have been given in Christ—forgiveness for my sin, fellowship with Him, the indwelling Holy Spirit, the hope of heaven . . . and so much more! May we be filled with joy at the feet of Jesus this Christmas!

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Read Mt 2:1-12

1. How did the Magi know a king had been born?
2. Why instruction did Herod give the Magi? Did they obey?
3. What did the Magi do when they saw Jesus?

What Do You Think

The chief priest and teachers didn't seem to care about the birth of Jesus. King Herod was angry about it. And the Magi left everything to find Him. How is your heart this Christmas? Indifferent? Angry? Seeking Him?

What R U Going To Do

It's the week before Christmas! Ask your parents to help you find a nativity coloring page online and print it out. Color it and give it to someone who needs the joy of Jesus this Christmas.

Core Comp

Joy - I am happy on the inside no matter what's happening on the outside.

Memory Verse

Ecclesiastes 3:11 - *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

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I memorized my verse _____, completed *Scrolls* _____, brought Bible _____, brought a friend _____.

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30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity 2 Corinthians 13:14

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace Ephesians 2:8-9

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible 2 Timothy 3:16-17

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God Psalm 121:1-2

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ John 1:12

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church Ephesians 4:15-16

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity John 3:16

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion Psalm 82:3-4

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity John 14:1-4

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship 1 Timothy 6:17-19

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship Psalm 95:1-7

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer Psalm 66:16-20

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study Hebrews 4:12

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness Matthew 6:33

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts Romans 12:4-6

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community Acts 2:44-47

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time Colossians 3:17

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith Ephesians

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life Romans 12:1

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy John 15:11

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace Philippians 4:6-7

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness Proverbs 3:3-4

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control Titus 2:11-13

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility Philippians 2:3, 4

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love 1 John 4:10-12

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience Proverbs 14:29

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness 1 Thess. 5:15

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness Philippians 4:5

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope Hebrews 6:19-20

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

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