

## **A JOURNEY TO CHRISTMAS: THE STORY OF THE WISE MEN**

Matthew 2:1-12, Numbers 24:15-17, Micah 5:2

Rev. Philip Parker  
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If you and I were to take a trip during this Christmas season, one of the places we might want to visit is Cologne, Germany, especially the cathedral in that city. It would be aglow with religious fervor at this time of year for it is the home of the "Shrine of the Three Kings," otherwise known as "The Tomb of the Three Magi." Within this Gothic cathedral, the largest in northern Europe, resides the remains of three men, housed in a beautifully decorated golden casket. For centuries, Christian pilgrims from all of the world have journeyed to this site to honor these men whom they believe were the very ones who bowed before the Christ child and bestowed upon Him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The authenticity of these skeletal remains will never be known for sure, but they are quite old, dating all the way back to the Fourth Century AD. Who were they? How did they know that the Christ child had been born? Where did they come from? How many were there, just three or maybe more? And most importantly, what can we learn from these Wise Men that will make our journey to Christmas more meaningful? These are but a few of the questions which arise when we examine the Scriptural account of the Wise Men in the gospel of Matthew, as well as investigating the day and times in which these men lived. This morning let's see if we can find some answers to at least a few of these questions.

The Wise Men go by many names. Sometimes they are called Kings and sometimes Magi. Personally, I think the term "Wise Men" suits them best, because that's what they were. They were repositories of wisdom, the most learned individuals of the ancient world in terms of history, religion, politics and science, at least as science was known back then. As such they served as advisers to kings with the kind of royal authority that elevated them above just about everyone else. In the eyes of some they were almost like potentates. They were also referred to as magi, a fancy word for magician. But it was more than just pulling rabbits out of hats. They were the kind of people who knew the secrets of the universe, especially the movements of the stars and planets. In the ancient world everyone believed that stars and planets determined not only the seasons of the year, when to plant and when to harvest, but the affairs of mankind, especially the royal affairs of mankind. Lastly in terms of history and religion they were walking encyclopedias. Many of them were followers of Zoroastrianism, a Persian religion that was in many ways similar to the religion of the Jewish people.

Speaking of the Jewish people and these visitors from the East, I believe that there were three of them who came in search of the King of the Jews. There could have been more, but since there were three gifts, three seems about the right number to me. Of course, they did not come alone. There were a whole host of servants traveling with them—caring for the animals, setting up and taking down the camp and most important of all, providing protection. Bandits and thieves were plentiful back then. Arriving in Jerusalem, it was not just three men, but an entire caravan that entered the city. I also

believe these Wise Men had come a long ways, all the way from what we would call today, modern Iran. That's quite a journey, about a thousand miles, especially if you're riding a camel. So let's meet these men and find out a little more about them and the journey they took to find the Christ child.

We're not given their names in the Scriptures. Tradition says they were named Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. What we do know is that what got their attention was a new star rising in the East. I think I can hear them now. "Melchior, Balthasar, come here. I see something in the heavens that I have never seen before." Caspar was pointing up into the evening sky. "Do you see it?" "Yes, we see it Caspar, but what does it mean?" Melchior and Balthasar replied. "The only way to find out is to consult our charts and historical records," Caspar said. After a careful inquiry, they came to this conclusion. The quadrant of the sky where the star had first appeared was dedicated to the Jewish people. In response, Melchior said, "See if there is anything within their writings that speaks about stars and kings. This star is obviously the star of a new king. Just look at its position in the heavens."

After diligent research, Balthasar finally found the passage of Scripture that he had vaguely remembered. His study of the Jewish people and their writings had yielded favorable results. Unrolling an ancient manuscript he stated, "In the book of Numbers, written by their greatest patriarch, Moses, there is a story about a man named Balaam. In many ways he was like us, a spiritual adviser to royalty. Summoned by the king of Moab, he was commissioned by that king to pronounce curses on the Israelites. Instead, each time he spoke he offered a blessing instead of a curse. Listen to what he said when he spoke for the fourth time, 'I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel' (Numbers 24:17). We always thought this prophecy referred to their greatest ruler, David, but there is no record of a star appearing at his birth.

"Clearly," Melchior stated. "The time has come for a journey. We must go to the land of Judah and seek out this new king who has been born. Perhaps He is the fulfillment not only of what Balaam prophesied, but of our own prophecies as well. As you will remember, according to our religious beliefs, we too are looking for a savior, one who will deliver us from our sins and lead us in the ways of righteousness." That very night they began to make preparations for their trek to Jerusalem, the capital of Judea. Their arrival, months later, caused a great stir and almost immediately they were ushered into the presence of Herod, the Roman puppet, who ruled over the land. After conferring with him and his religious leaders they were introduced to a second passage of Scripture which they had overlooked. Found in the book of Micah, one of the minor prophets in the Old Testament, it read, "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).

Now they knew the place where this Savior, this ruler of Israel, had been born. They hurried on their way to find Him. Stopping at a well, a short distance just outside of town, one of the Wise Men made a marvelous discovery. Reflected in the waters of that

well was a star, the very one that had appeared to them months earlier. "Look," said Balthasar, "The star has returned." Indeed it had and this time like a lantern in the sky it led them to a tiny little hovel on the outskirts of Bethlehem. Carefully inquiring so as not to cause alarm, they were introduced to a young mother and a little toddler named Jesus. Realizing that their quest had been fulfilled, the three Wise Men told Mary about their journey and why they had come to her home. Then solemnly bowing before the inquisitive infant, they offered Him gifts, a gift suitable for a king, a chest filled with gold, a gift suitable for a priest, frankincense for worship and a gift suitable for a burial, myrrh, a perfume used for embalming. Perhaps these Wise Men knew more about this child than anyone would have ever guessed. They had found a king, who as a priest, would lead humanity back to God, even at the cost of His own life.

Bidding farewell to a startled and anxious mother who at first thought that these strangers might steal her Son, they quietly returned to their animals and made camp outside the town, still marveling at the star that glowed so radiantly over the little town of Bethlehem. The next morning they huddled by their campfire as they reflected on the events of the past evening. One of them, Caspar said, "I had the strangest dream last night. An angel warned me not to go back to Herod." Melchior replied, "It wasn't a dream, but an uneasy feeling that kept me awake for hours." Then it's settled," said Balthasar. "Herod is a dangerous man. We've all heard what he's done to those whom he considers to be a threat. For the sake of the child and his parents, I think we should return home by another route." "Agreed," Caspar and Melchior chimed in. And so it was that the three Wise Men departed secretly for their own homeland, taking with them the memory of a most remarkable journey.

Now what does this account convey to us on our journey to Christmas? There are two things, both found in the book of Psalms, chapter 19. First, God speaks to us through His creation. Chapter 19 begins with these words, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament reveals His handiwork." It goes on to say that although the heavens are silent, they nevertheless speak in a voice that everyone can understand. Their very presence is a testimony to the One who created them. Not only Jewish people, but people everywhere can be drawn to the Lord and the way in which He moves and works in our world. Such was the case with the Wise Men. They saw a new star in the heavens and it drew them to the Christ Child in Bethlehem. The same is true for you and me.

Years ago I met a man who had served in the United States Navy. He had been stationed on a carrier off the coast of North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. He was an agnostic. He didn't really believe in God or want to have anything to do with Him. During basic training there were chapel services that everyone was supposed to attend. He would hide in a closet to keep from going. One night he was up on the flight deck all by himself. Looking up at the stars overhead, he was overwhelmed by their brilliance. Almost without realizing it, he said to himself, "Somebody had to create you. You didn't get up there all by yourselves." That experience marked the beginning of his journey back to God. And he is not alone. Down through the centuries countless thousands, perhaps

millions of people, have been drawn to the Lord through His creation. Perhaps, like the Wise Men you too have been led to the Savior in the same way.

Second, God speaks to us through His Word. Yes, the Wise Men saw a new star and decided that it announced the birth of a king. But whose king and where was he to be found? Without the Scriptures they would never have known that He was to be born among the Jewish people in a forgotten little town in Judea. That's why Psalm 19 declares that the Lord speaks to us not only through His creation, but also through His Word, the Bible. While the creation offers a general awareness of His divinity, the Bible clearly and unambiguously tells us who God is and it informs us as to how He desires for us to live with Him and with one another. Psalm 19:7 declares, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple."

Speaking of the simple, a young man barely out of his teens, finally found a job at a hotel in Charlotte, North Carolina. It was during the Great Depression and jobs were hard to find, especially for a young man who knew almost nothing about life. His salary was an attic room and leftovers in the hotel restaurant. At least he thought to himself, "It's room and board." A single light bulb illuminated the room as he arrived after his first day at work. On the nightstand beside his bed there was a book. It had been placed there by the Gideons. With nothing else to do, he opened it and began to read. For the first time in his life he discovered what it means to be a Christian. Kneeling beside the bed on that very night, he gave his heart and life to Jesus Christ. Years later when they tore down the old hotel, he asked if he could have the brass room number of where he had met the Lord. He placed it in his office, the pastor's study at the First Baptist Church of that same city, Charlotte, North Carolina.

Three Wise Men left their native land and journeyed across rivers and deserts in search of the Christ Child. Although your journey to Christmas may not take nearly as long or be nearly as difficult as what they experienced, may it nevertheless conclude on bended knee in humble adoration. As has so often been stated, "Wise men still seek Him."