

Series on Matthew

Part 1

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You know, one of the great things about this season is the familiarity of it, the familiarity of the songs, the decorations, the festivities, but oftentimes it is the familiarity of it that can lead to us not really recognizing the specialness of it. In just a few moments, we're going to read a story out of Matthew 2 that's a very common story, it's what we know as the Christmas story. Many of you have read it maybe hundreds or thousands of times and so I'm going to ask you this morning to join with me in praying that a very familiar story would this day be fresh.

Let's pray together.

Lord, as we prepare to read and to hear and to study your word, Lord, many of us have read it so many times and we know the names of the characters, we know the places, Lord, we know almost everything about this story so, Lord, it is my simple prayer today that the familiarity of the story will not get in the way of the message of the story. Lord, if at all possible, make today maybe for the first time in a long time, may it be truly fresh to our ears and into our heart. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I would encourage you to open your Bibles to the Gospel of Matthew 2 to one of the two what we commonly know as Christmas narratives or Christmas stories in the Bible. The one in the Gospel of Luke typically surrounds what we know as the shepherds and the angels and in just a moment, we're going to read the story that involves a group of people known as the wise men or the Magi.

Now, when we think of the Christmas story, I don't know about you but there is a part of me that there is a small part of me that wishes at some level I had been there to see all the events. I wish I had been there on that hillside when the shepherds for the very first time heard those angels declare, "Glory to God in the highest!" The Bible says that the glory of the Lord shone all about them. I wish I could have seen what did that look like. Or maybe being in Bethlehem as a passerby, as a visitor, as one of those many who came to pay the taxes that was declared by Caesar Augustus. Maybe walking by, possibly even at the very inn that said to Mary and Joseph there was no room. Maybe to see what did that manger actually look like. How many of the animals actually arrived. When you begin to take the Christmas story and put all the pieces together, there is so much that I wish I could have seen, there is so much that I wish I could have heard. If I could have just been

a part of things. I've got good news for you, we are in good company today because we are about to read the story of a group of people who weren't there either. The wise men were not there the night that Jesus was born. I know we paint them into the pictures, I know we put them into the nativity set but what we're going to discover in just a moment is that when they came and found Jesus, they didn't come to a manger, they came to a house, and they didn't find a baby, they found a young child. In fact in just a moment, we are going to see that we don't exactly know who these people were. We don't even know how many there were. Now, we typically say there were three wise men. Why? Because there were three gifts. We don't know how many there were but we do know that they weren't there that night. We do know that they came from the east. We don't know how many there were. And also, and I know this is a personal ax to grind, why is it that we assume that if they are wise, they are tall? Have you ever thought of that in the nativity set? The wise men are always the tall stately ones who are there at the nativity scene. There is so much that we don't know about these individuals but what we're going to discover today is there are some valuable lessons from their lives and their intersection with Jesus that are valuable for our lives.

So beginning in verse 1 of chapter 2 in the book of Matthew, it says,

1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, 2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. 3 When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. 5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, 6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. 7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when you have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. 9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. 11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

As I mentioned before, these individuals that we know as the wise men, we don't know their exact number, we don't know their exact location, all we know is that it says very clearly that they came from the East. What are some of the lessons that we can learn from

these individuals, not only how they came, but how they interacted with Jesus and even the gifts that they gave.

I want to begin with this lesson that they were from a place of exile. Now, I know the Bible says that they came from the East but when you begin to look eastward from Jerusalem, when you begin to look at the gifts that were brought, when you begin to see all that is entailed here, there is one place that kind of rises to the forefront of the origin of these individuals, a place we know as Babylon. Now, history tells us and tradition tells us of all different stories and there are all kinds of conjectures and ideas and concepts, but let me be very clear with you this morning: nobody knows exactly who these guys were. Nobody knows exactly where they came from. And nobody knows exactly how many there were. So this morning, I want to embark on an adventure called "could it be?" Could it be? What I'm about to share with you, I believe, has strong biblical evidence but nothing, no opinion, no idea is set in stone.

So could it be that when it says that they came from the East, based on how they came, the length of the journey, and that gifts that they brought, could it be that they were from that ancient metropolis, that area known as Babylon? It was the center of culture, of finance, readily available to produce the type of individuals and the type of gifts that were brought. Now, when we say that they were from the Babylonian area, there are actually two groups of people that they could fall into. The first group is those that had heard the message long ago. You see, when we talk about Babylon, that's a very commonplace in the Old Testament. Why? Because the Lord said that the Israelites if they did not repent would end up there. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom was taken captive by the Assyrians and in 586 the southern kingdom was taken by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. For 70 years the Israelite people were there in Babylon.

I want you to think about those 70 years with me. Some of the most famous individuals and most famous parts of the Bible were given by God to his people while they were in Babylon. A man by the name of Daniel, you know him and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. We know about Nebuchadnezzar and the statue. We know about Darius and the lion's den. A famous queen such as Esther were in that area of the world. Men such as Nehemiah and Ezra, those individuals who would come back and rebuild Jerusalem, the wall and the temple. Some of the most famous individuals, the most famous stories that we have in the Old Testament, even the prophet Ezekiel, his entire ministry was during those 70 years in Babylon. So could it be that those writings, those prophecies, those teachings, had survived for literally centuries in the culture and in the community? Or could it be that when the Israelites made their way back from Babylon back to what we know as Jerusalem, even though the Bible records a very detailed census of the tribes and the numbers that went back, it also states that not everybody left. So it's very possible that these individuals who came from the East, that they either A. had been familiar with the teachings of the prophecies of the Old Testament, they had been familiar with the prophets themselves for hundreds of years, or B. it's even possible that these were a remnant of those Jewish individuals that were taken captive.

Why is this important to us? Because we understand that if these individuals were from the area known as Babylon, then that exile was absolutely 100% preventable. Here's what I mean by that: all throughout your Old Testament, particularly in the prophets, God told them both in the North and the South, "If you do not repent, if you do not return, if you do not stop your wicked ways, you're going to end up in captivity. You're going to end up in Babylon. You're going to end up in exile." The northern kingdom didn't listen and in 722, it fell. You would think that the southern kingdom would have listened. For those of you who have older siblings, the Lord comes to them and says, "Look at what happened to your older brother. Don't do what they did." What did they do? They did exactly what they did, they fell into the trap of thinking that they were strong enough. In our vernacular, they thought they were bulletproof. "There's no way we're going to go in captivity. It's not going to happen." But they did. So they are in Babylon for 70 years.

The exile was preventable but it was also a time of preparation. When you begin to read not only the book of Ezekiel but the lives of Daniel and Esther and Nehemiah and Ezra, you discover that the Lord did something in Babylon that he's been doing all since the book of Genesis. In the midst of our exile, in the midst of our rebellion, in the midst of the wrath of God, he is preparing us for victory. He's preparing us for a rescue. He was preparing them to be delivered.

One of the most famous passages from this tenure in the book of Daniel 9, in Daniel 9, it talks about these famous 70 weeks, this time where God will deliver his people. What's interesting though is most of our study about the book of Daniel 9 has to do with what we call eschatology, end times, Jesus coming back one day. Many of you may have heard of Daniel's 70th week, those seven years that Revelation 6 through 19 describe in vivid detail. Jeremiah 35 teaches us that Daniel 9 when it talks about these 70 weeks, these 490 days, that the representative not of 24 hour periods but of actual physical years. In other words, when Daniel says there will be 490 years, he divides it up into 7, 62 and 1, but what's most critical for us is that there are 483 years from the rebuilding of the temple when they left Babylon to come back, to the cutting off of the Messiah.

You may be wondering why is this so critical to Matthew 2? Have you ever wondered how do these guy know he was coming? I mean, think about it: how did they know? How did these "wise men," how did they know that his star was going to appear? How did they know that the time as we would use in kind of a farming sense, how did they know the harvest was right around the corner? Because the prophet Daniel told them and whether they were from Babylonian descent or Jewish descent, nonetheless they were from the East where the writings would have been made readily available and they read that Daniel said in 483 years the Messiah will be here.

You know, this is one of the reasons that many academicians dispute the validity of the book of Daniel. They say that his prophecies are too accurate. There is no way that he could have known the things that he knew. As you read through the book of Daniel, he names the names and the places of kings and countries that didn't exist in his day that would one day rise to power. Many people say there is no way he knew that in advance. Surely he wrote after the fact. But then several decades ago, we stumbled across a find

known as the Dead Sea Scrolls with a perfectly preserved copy of the book of Daniel from many days before the time of Christ. Why is this so significant? Because these men of the East, these "wise men," these magi, no matter what their direct genealogy, they had access to Daniel 9. They knew that he was coming and in the midst of exile, God was preparing them for deliverance. God was preparing them for salvation. God was preparing them for forgiveness.

Which leads to the second lesson: they demonstrate for us, they show us, they teach us what is it like to have an experience with Jesus. I mean, after all, they were in exile. After all, they were in a land far away. But what we see in their lives is they began a pursuit for Jesus. Notice it says very clearly here that they left, they departed, they went out. And if you begin to do a study of where they originated from or at least the general area, in the days in which, in the manner of which they would have traveled, possibly 6 to 12 months in length or greater. The amount of financial resources they would have had to give up to make this journey. The availability to leave their businesses, to leave their homes, to say this is important. They pursued Jesus and here's what I want to share with you, church, they found him. They found him. God is not in the practice of playing hide and seek. We oftentimes think, "Well, if I pursue the things of God, if I pursue Jesus, I might find it." These guys gave up their lives, they gave up their finances, they gave up their time, potentially gave up their family, and what did they discover? He was exactly where God said he would be. They didn't have to knock on all the doors in the street to find out where he was. All they had to do was go to Herod and then go to the house.

When we pursue, when we seek, we find. You know, Jesus taught us this in Matthew 7. Matthew 7:7 in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, here's what Jesus says, "If you knock, it will be opened. If you seek, you will find. If you as earthly parents know how to give gifts to your children, do you not know that your heavenly Father knows how to give gifts unto his children." Now, let me elaborate for just a moment. How many of you have received a knock on the door and you've acted like you weren't home until you found out who it is? You know you've done it. We've all done it. Notice Jesus said, "If you knock, it will be opened. If you seek, you will find." Something that's very important for us to learn. If we are interested in the things of God, if we want to know who Jesus is, I've got great news for you: you'll find him. You don't have to worry about him hiding out. You don't have to worry about ending up on the wrong street, wrong place, wrong this, wrong that. And you don't have to worry about knocking on the door and him saying, "Too bad, so sad, that was yesterday's appointments." When we knock, he opens. When we seek, we find.

Now, one of the best illustrations of this is found in Acts 10. There is a man by the name of Cornelius. Cornelius, the Bible says, was of the Roman Italian band. He was a military leader. He was a well-connected political figure in his day. The Bible also says he prayed often. He even gave his alms. In other words, he gave financially. He cared about the things of God. Well, there in Acts 10 as he is praying diligently in his home, the Lord comes to a man by the name of Simon Peter. He's on top of a roof. The Bible says he's in a trance. He has a vision where he sees a bunch of unclean animals representative of the Gentile people. He says, "God, I've never eaten anything unclean." God says, "Well, call

unclean what I have called clean. I need you to go to a man's house named Simon the tanner." So Peter goes to Simon's house. Cornelius goes to Simon's house and guess what? In that day in Acts 10, Cornelius and his entire group, they find Jesus. They hear the story. They believe and the Bible says the same Holy Spirit that fell in Acts 2 fell upon them. Why is that significant? Because what these wise men show us is that if you care and you are concerned and you desire the things of God, if you want to know who Jesus is, you don't have to search hard, you'll find him. These guys found him. He is there. He's not in secret. He's not in hiding. He's in the wide open.

We also discover something else about their experience with Jesus, we discover that they fell prostrate. When they came into the home, they didn't give him a fist bump, they didn't give him a high-five, they didn't say, "Hey, little guy, you want to go get a cup of coffee and watch the game?" What did they say? What we read says that they worshiped him. They fell down before him. We are pictured in Revelation 1 when the Apostle John sees Jesus in his glorified state, the Bible says he fell as if he were dead. When we realize who Jesus is, when we realize that he's the answer to our sin problem, when we realize he's the one who created us, formed us, lived for us, died for us, rose from the grave for us, it's more than fist bumps and high-fives. They fell prostrate before him. They worship him. They surrender to him.

Here's why that's important: these men based on the finances they had, based on the position they had, would have bowed down to no one. They were the ones who the world bowed down to. They were the ones who their community respected. They were the ones who people said, "Oh, I wish I could be like those guys." But in the presence of Jesus, the Bible says every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord. So their experience with Jesus was they pursued him, they found him, and then they responded appropriately. They bowed down. They had knowledge that they were the problem and that Jesus was the answer. These men most likely had never been told they had been wrong about anything but when they bowed before Jesus, they admitted that this young child prophesied by the Scriptures for thousands of years, was the only one who could forgive them and the only one that could reasonably be above them.

They were in a place of exile, they had an experience with Jesus, and finally there is this equipping. There is this interesting part of the story. Beginning in verse 11 it says when they will come into the home of the young child and with Mary his mother, they fell down, they worshiped him as we discussed, then they opened their treasures and they presented unto him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. When we speak of the equipping, they actually provided for Jesus things that went way beyond just that time and place. In fact, we see that the gifts they gave were very prophetic in their nature. They gave the gifts of gold, of frankincense, and myrrh.

These were not random happenstance gifts. There was a very distinct prophetic purpose. Why? Because gold was the gift for a king. Many of you have heard of the golden rule. Whoever has the gold, they are the ones who rule. So the gold was given. Why? Because that's representative of a king. They recognized this young child was the King of kings, he was the Lord of lords. Though he was in a young physical body, he was God in flesh

and one day he shall reign forevermore. One day he would sit upon the throne for all of eternity. They recognized here is the King.

When they gave the frankincense, an element used often times in the priestly oil, they were acknowledging his priestly function: one who could forgive sins, one who was able to be an intercessor between a holy God and an unholy man, the one who would be the Mediator, who would be our go-between.

The myrrh, when mixed with various other elements was a Middle Eastern concoction for what we know as embalming fluid. They pictured his death; that though he physically was a young child, he was born to die. He was born for the purpose of sacrificing himself for humanity. He was born to go to the cross. He was born to bear the sins. He was born to die.

Now, if you think about that, both king and priest and prophet, three functions that we see all throughout the Old Testament but never in one person. Beginning in Genesis, we find a man by the name of Melchizedek. Melchizedek was a king and he was a priest. We find a man by the name of David who was a prophet and a king. Samuel who was a priest and a prophet. But never do you find someone who is all three and so when they bring these very specific gifts and laid them at the feet of the young child, Jesus, hear me clearly: they knew what they were doing. This was not random. This was not happenstance. They were declaring that this was the king, this was the priest, and this was the prophet that we have been waiting for for thousands of years.

But, you know, their gifts were more than prophetic, they were very practical, and this is really where the aspect of equipping comes in. They did not know when they presented those gifts, they did not know that when they prepared to come possibly months or even years before, they did not know what was laying before them. Joseph and Mary did not know what was in the days ahead for the Bible says that soon thereafter the Lord gave Joseph a dream and said, "I need you to go into a foreign country. I need you to go to Egypt because Herod is about to try to eliminate all the young men in the community." The Bible says they went to Egypt for two years, then they returned to a place the Bible calls Nazareth where he would physically grow up as a young child into a man.

You know, these gifts were incredibly practical. Joseph, his earthly father, was a carpenter by trade. He worked with wood. He built benches and tables and chairs. The last time I checked, there's not a whole lot of trees in Egypt. How is Joseph going to make a living? How is he going to feed his family? How is he going to provide a home? The practicality of the gold. There was the financial resources. They could have a place to stay. They could have food to eat.

How was Mary? How was she going to interact in her community? How was she going to go to the marketplace? How was she going to purchase food? Frankincense. Not only the anointing oil of the priests but also was used in some cases specifically for women. Cases of a fragrance or of a perfume, it would be kind of a cultural bridge so that when she

would go into public, she would be seen as one of the ladies, one of the community. It was a very practical gift so that when she went to the marketplace, she was not rejected.

And then the myrrh. You see, the gold would benefit Joseph and his ability to provide. The frankincense would benefit Mary and her ability to go into the community and be the mom and wife God had called her to be. But the myrrh, you know, myrrh when mixed with certain elements was an embalming fluid but in and of itself had a great medicinal quality. It was one of those things that you could almost put it on anything and it would help. It was a virus, a sinus infection, a scrape or even as a young child, even if you had colic, whatever it may be, myrrh was one of those perfect elements. For those of you who have seen the movie "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," remember the dad and Windex? "Put Windex on anything. It will take care of it." The same thing was with myrrh. It didn't matter what illness or sickness befell them.

Now, I want you to think about that. So when these three gifts arrive, financial provision for the trip, cultural provision for the trip, and a full-blown pharmacy wrapped up all in one. Incredibly practical. But there's one more very strategic lesson I want you to learn today: the story of the wise men is your story too. We were in exile. It was perfectly preventable. We were in the garden of Eden, everything was going great until we decided we were smarter than God and we ate of the forbidden fruit. But as soon thereafter, God began to prepare us. He declared that the Messiah would come, that salvation would arise. You walk through the Old Testament, you walk through the Gospels, you walk through the letters of Paul, you show up to today in the 21st century and guess what? If you pursue Jesus – listen, church – you will find him. He is not one just to be acknowledged as a great teacher or a miracle worker but he is to be worshiped. He is to be bowed down before to recognize that he is the only one who can forgive us and save us.

But then there is the equipping. Once we recognize that we have the opportunity to make sure that the Jesus that we have worshiped, the Jesus that we believed in, has what he needs to go around the world. This is the season for giving. This is the time of the year where we give to each other and for those of you who are new to our church or new to our context at least as far as being Baptist, this is the time of year known as Lottie Moon. You've seen it around our campus. There are posters. There are cards in Sunday school classes where we come together and we give above and beyond what we normally do to give to missions, to give to those thousands of individuals who are all over the world. Now, as you'll see on that card around our campus, last year the average person gave about \$860 worth of gifts to the family. Forbes Magazine says this year we'll give about \$950 worth of gifts to our family. And the goal and the challenge we've laid forth is, is it possible for us as a church body to come together and to give to missions potentially what we would give to each other.

You know, when we give to missions, I want you to know it's very prophetic just like the gifts the wise men gave, for these individuals who the Lord has called to go all around the world, they declare wherever they are, even in places where the Bible is illegal and Jesus' name can't be spoken, they declare that he is still the coming King. They declare he is the

only one who can absolve sin. And they declare that he died and rose again for the sins of all. You see, when we give to missions, when we give above and beyond, we give very prophetically because there are people speaking the name of Jesus all over the world.

We also give very practically. Did you know that when you give to Lottie Moon, when you give to missions, you may not realize this but you're giving gold. You say, "I am?" Yes, because as those individuals serve overseas, they don't have to worry about a second job. They don't have to worry about how they're going to feed their families. In fact, unlike others who have to come back for periods of time and raise money, we provide it for them so that they can talk about Jesus 24/7. We are giving them contemporary gold.

We're also giving them frankincense. You say, "Well, how are we doing that?" We are able to provide homes in communities that look like the indigenous area. We are able to give them transportation and clothing and schooling or whatever it may be, so that the people that they have been called to reach, they can speak their language, they can walk in their neighborhoods and they can become one of them culturally.

We also provide myrrh. There are times of sickness, there are times of illness, there are times of bereavement where family members pass away and they are allowed to come home to celebrate their lives.

You see, this season of what we know as Christmas, when we give to missions, when we give to Lottie Moon, we're being a lot like the wise men. We are giving very prophetic, practical gifts to those who are going to go long ways away and tell people about Jesus. You see, the real lesson of the wise men is that their story is your story.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed as we come to this time of invitation. Maybe you're a first-time guest, maybe you been in this room over 100 times or somewhere in between, but maybe today spiritually your eyes were opened, maybe today you realized possibly for the very first time that much like the wise men, your need for Jesus. Maybe you've been in prayer in days past, maybe you've been pursuing at whatever levels and maybe today it all came together and you realized how important he is to you. If you're in that position today, I've got great news for you. You don't have to jump through any hoops. You don't have to check off any boxes. You don't have to cross t's or dot i's, you just need to have a serious conversation with God. You don't have to have this conversation out loud. You don't have to say it in the same words that I would say but maybe your prayer, maybe your conversation would go a little something like this. "Lord, today I recognize who Jesus is. I recognize how desperately I need him. Lord, I want you to know that I know that I'm the problem and that Jesus is the answer. I understand today that Jesus came because I have a sin problem. I understand today that Jesus lived because I have a sin problem. I understand today that Jesus went to the cross because I have a sin problem. And I understand today that Jesus rose from the dead because I understand I have a sin problem. Lord, I come today recognizing that Jesus is the only one who can take care of my sin problem so I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me, not based on my own merits but on the person of Jesus Christ alone. In the best way I know how, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed, our eyes still closed, maybe you are that person today, let me encourage you in just a moment after I pray over us, we're going to stand and we're going to sing, I'm going to encourage you just to step out and step forward. We'd love the privilege of celebrating with you. We'd love the opportunity to know what the Lord has done in your life this day. Or maybe you made that decision, maybe days, weeks, months or even years ago, maybe you never followed with believer's baptism. We'd love the opportunity to talk with you whether it's a part of our regular Sunday services or maybe our Christmas Eve services that are coming up. What a great opportunity to declare to the world who Jesus is in your life. Or maybe you're that person, that couple, that family, who the Lord has spoken to very clearly that this is your church home, this is where you're supposed to plant, this is where you're supposed to thrive spiritually. It could be one of those decisions, it could be a multitude of others, I just want you to be aware that after I pray and we stand and we sing, whatever the decision is, we want to encourage you this day just do what the Lord has called you to do and let him work out all the details.

Lord, as we come to this time of invitation, Lord, thank you for the example of these men from the East. Thank you that we know that if we pursue you we will always find you. Thank you that you never leave us in the dark, you never turn us away, you never say, "Wrong door, try some other time," but that you are always willing to forgive, you are always willing to be a part of our lives. So Lord, I pray whatever that looks like today, that we would simply respond appropriately. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me. Whatever decision, we'll be here at the front.