

The Mystery of the Magi – Part 2

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Matthew

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As we continue that thought from the book of Isaiah that his ways are so much higher than ours, let's begin with a word of prayer.

Heavenly Father, may that be the theme of this study. Lord, your word says that your ways and your thoughts are higher and they are different than ours and, Lord, we confess tonight that we are guilty as often charged that we come to your word with our preferences, our prejudices, or whatever it is that we somehow have been taught by tradition or whatever it may be and, God, today I pray that somehow as only you can do, as you did with the Apostle Paul in Acts 9, take the scales away, may we not see tonight's passage through the lens of personal experience, preference, denominational affiliation or anything else. May your word, as the prophet Isaiah spoke as well, may it not return void when we see it, read it, study it, and live it out the way you wrote it, not the way we want to see it. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Tonight, let me encourage you to open your Bibles to the gospel of Matthew 2. If you've not been with us in our journey through the gospel of Matthew, just a little recap. We are walking through the first book of the New Testament and, yes, it is the first of the four gospels, yes, it contains an account of the life, the ministry, the death, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but this is going to be a very slow journey through the gospel of Matthew and the reason it's going to be slow and steady is because it's more than Matthew, it's more than just the chronology and the study of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, because of where it is positioned, because of how the Lord utilizes it and inspired it, Matthew opens up the totality of scriptures. In fact, allow me to share with you in advance: next week when we gather, there's a very strategic passage that you cannot understand it unless you grasp the prophetic passages that were being fulfilled. We don't have the privilege of taking Matthew and addressing it in isolation. We don't have the privilege of just plucking it out of scripture and looking at in and of its own. Yes, it tells the story of Jesus Christ but yet it connects us to the Old Testament, it foreshadows and prophesies even the end of days what we know as the book of Revelation, and I'm convinced if we can get Matthew then we can get all of it. So rather than seeing this just as a study of the gospel of Matthew, maybe see this as a study of the totality of scripture using Matthew as our palette.

Tonight, we're going to be reading chapter 2, verses 1 through 12, and some of you may say, "Well, that's the passage we read last week." Did I mention it was going to be a slow steady pace? Last week, we looked at these famous wise men, the magi, who they were, where they came from, the time that they arrived, the gifts that they gave. Today, we're going to look at an issue that is one of those things that we just tend to gloss over. You know, those men would not have arrived on the scene had it not been for the star. They would have not known where to go, the house to enter, if it had not been for this "famous star." And before you think, "Well, this is an easy one. Five minute Bible study, invitation, and roll out." There is more to this passage than you might ever believe.

Beginning in verse 1 of chapter 2 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 ye 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.

Two little introductory points before we get into the message tonight. First and foremost, remember that the scene that we just read is not the scene of the famous Christmas story. This is not the night of the birth of the Messiah, notice it says the young child. And even though Mary and Joseph and the Christ child stayed in the community known as Bethlehem where their family was from, particularly Joseph's family, it was not the evening of, the week of, the month of, mostly likely several months, if not a year, had passed from the birth of the Christ child until this event. The second thing I want you to notice in particular tonight when we deal with this issue of the star, is that Herod never saw it. Think about that for a moment. Herod never laid eyes on the star. He had to trust

these men who he had never met to follow its lead. That's going to come very important later in the message.

So tonight we begin the place that the star appeared, and when we talk about the place, I want to deal with a subject matter that you may or may not be familiar with, it's called the law of first mention. Anytime that a subject matter comes up in scripture, the first time that it is mentioned gives us a guide, gives us a directive for how to see that subject matter, that issue, whatever it may be, throughout the course of the biblical text.

Now we know that the concept of a star is first mentioned in the book of Genesis 1 where it says that the Lord created the greater light to rule the day, the lesser light the night, and one of my favorite statements in the Bible, "and the stars also," almost as if an afterthought to the Lord created the vast majority of what we see on a clear night. But in this passage particularly, the first time that the star is mentioned is in verse 2 where it says here that they said, "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." Verse 7, it says, "Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared." When we speak of the "first mention," we know from the book of Genesis that that which is labeled classified or even called a star exists because God initiates its existence, okay? Not by happenstance. Not by chance. God purposefully placed stars in existence.

Secondly, it says what time the star appeared. Not initiated, appeared. Now that seems like an obvious overemphasis but there are a lot of things in the world that exist that have not appeared unto you. Something can be in existence and not appear because you have not received sight of, acknowledgment of, or proximity of. When you read the language of verse 2 and 7 in this passage, you get the idea that literally in a moment, in a night, at an exact time, that which would lead them to the Christ child appeared in their life. It was not a "slow progressive revealing or unveiling." In other words, the night before it was not there. This night it was. Which leads to the movement. This is the part that is fascinating of the study. Notice what it said in describing how they followed the star: it went before them. In other words, you're not dealing with something that remained stationary. If it remained stationary, the language would have been utilize of we went to the place where it was. That's not what it says. The Bible says the star went before them.

So when we speak of the famous star of the Christmas story, we're dealing with that which appeared and had not been in appearance previously, and we're dealing with that which moved and they followed. Now as a simple biblical example, this happened in the book of Exodus when the Israelites made their way out of Egypt across the Red Sea eventually to the Promised Land, a little 40 year stint in the wilderness, but nonetheless remember that when the Israelites were moving, there was a cloud and a pillar of fire. Now again, the same thing, notice that there was not a fire in the distance that they had to catch up to. The fire moved and they followed. The cloud moved and followed, the same language that spoke of the cloud and the fire in the Old Testament is speaking of the star. You see, most of our preconception of this story is that there was a stationary object that these magi made their way to somehow find presence underneath of. That's not what the Bible says. The Bible says it went before them.

So we're going to talk about the possibilities tonight. Now this is one of those Bible studies where we've got to pull our Baptist hat off, all right? Now some of you have heard me joke about this but I'm going to say it again: just because it's Bible doesn't mean it's Baptist, and just because it's Baptist doesn't mean it's Bible. Our goal should not be to be the best Baptist we can be, our goal should be the best biblicist we can be. When it comes to addressing the issue of the famous star, there are only two options, shall I say, mainly two options here. There is the option of astronomy and there is the option of the angelic, and what we're going to do tonight is unpack those two options leading us eventually to this appearance or the presence of the star.

So let's deal with that which most of us have heard for the majority of our lives, that there in the eastern sky 2,000 years ago there were these men of great wisdom, these men that we studied last week that had access to the biblical text, particularly the book of Daniel, who, as we have "been told and taught" throughout the years, they spent the late evening toward the prophetic fulfillment of that famous passage staring, waiting, hoping and praying for that "celestial being" in the sky. So when we claim that the "star" is an astronomical phenomena, we are simply saying that it is a coalition of stars, planets, comets or combinations thereof.

Now tonight we are not going to do a two hour lecture of all of the potential cosmological options and opportunities that this approach takes but I am going to summarize for you a brief paragraph from astronomy.com. Again, this is not a theological source, this is not a biblical source, this is a scientific source, all right? I want you to hear what it says and I want you to remember last week when we dealt with the birth of Jesus Christ versus the visit of the magi with the dating of the years and such, because what it's about to say fits in the chronological window but I want you to notice the conclusion. It says, "On the morning of August 12 in 3 B.C., Jupiter and Venus would've sat just 1/10th a degree apart in the dawn sky. That's one-fifth the diameter of the Full Moon." That wasn't the end of the show either, "Venus and Jupiter continued their dance over most of the next year before finally appearing to merge into a single star in June." The truth is none of these events match up perfectly with the description of how things played out in the book of Matthew. The context is also off. Listen to this, "Ancient people knew their planets well, so it would be weird to call a conjunction of multiple planets a 'star.'"

Now I want you to hear what that is saying and then I want you to hear what it is not saying. It is saying that the birth of Jesus Christ chronologically lines up with this astronomical event that took place as described, but notice that even the scientific community says as excited as one might become about this because, after all, it begins in August, it ends in June, it's appearing, there's some movement in the sky, notice it says it doesn't fulfill the passage of Matthew. Now before you throw the proverbial stones through the glass windows of the scientific community, let's give them some credit here. They looked at the sky, looked at the scripture and said, "It doesn't work." Now there's nothing wrong with that, okay, because notice it says that in those days even those with a propensity to watch the sky would never call a collection of planets a "star."

So you and I tonight have a distinct biblical issue that the scientific community is telling us that as much as we would love to take all this data and all these projections and such and kind of squeeze them into the Bible, that it's not that easy to squeeze. So let me address three very important concerns. The first one is this: the issue of consistency. Notice what we read in Matthew 2, the star wasn't in appearance, then it appeared to the wise men in the east. When they make their way to Herod, we get the idea that it is no longer a consistency to be seen, then it appears and goes and stands over the Christ child's residence. So rather than this scientific approach that speaks of an astronomical event that is somewhat navigating the sky, the biblical passage says it appeared, it was not appearing, it appeared again. So the issue is it's not a consistent constant sight that is before them.

The second issue is the configuration. Now again this is from astronomy.com, there's a lot of different theories that are out there, documentaries and such, but allow me just to go to the middle to the end part of this where the wise men make their way to the Christ child. Let's just presume for the sake of argument that the "astronomical approach" is proper, okay, that it is a celestial star in the sky much like we have been taught most of our lives. Here's the issue with that, that when they're with Herod they're in the city of Jerusalem. When they go to see the Christ child it's in Bethlehem. If you've ever been to that part of the world, it's about a 5-6 mile journey. That's it. Do you know how difficult it is even for ships and planes and the military to triangulate positions on planet earth via the stars thousands of miles apart much less 5 miles apart? Now think about that. I know some of you have got some good eyesight but can you imagine from "light years away" how marginal the movement would be to triangulate from 5 miles down the road. In fact, I would say through the "proverbial naked eye" it would be very difficult at best to see movement to get you five miles down the road.

It's difficult which leads to the third one, I call it the contraptions. Do you realize the equipment these guys would have had to bring with them to do this? You think about it. If you and I were to just theoretically tonight just imagine that you stay up for the entirety of the game, whatever that ends up being, you decide to stay up all night and let's just say for the sake of illustration that we are going to take a midnight journey through Lee County, Alabama just for fun. We're going to go five miles down the road and we're going to use as our only navigational tool the moon. It's pretty big and bright, isn't it? I mean, it is, and we're going to find where we need to go based on the moon. Now here's the problem: according to what we just read, it wasn't that bright and it moved. Think about it. Not only would the distance be so small but think about what you would have to possess to actually see that incremental of a difference. And do you know what the Bible says? The Bible says they brought gold, frankincense, myrrh, and an entire laboratory of telescopes. That's not what it says. In fact, do you find it odd that at no point in this passage did they ever speak of any equipment utilized to monitor the skies?

Now I've had the privilege in days past to be a part of viewing what we might call the heavens through some mighty fine and incredible telescopes and it is incredible. Once you get the lighting right, once you get the glass configured right, what we can see, the distance we can see but if you've ever been to one of these incredible places with a

telescope, you cannot fit it in a backpack. In fact, even some of the nice telescopes today that you and I can acquire to put in our backyard to see into the heavens, can you imagine trekking that half way around the Middle East on a journey? In other words, even though the Lord is able, capable and might even be willing to utilize what we know as a "physical star collection or such in the sky," from a very honest objectional view, it just looks a little suspect.

So tonight, let's take off our traditional nativity set hats and look at it from a potential other perspective. Is it possible that when the Bible says the star appeared, is it possible when the Bible says that the star moved, is it possible that I was actually an angelic being? Now before you refute that, let me remind you this is the Christmas story. There was a young lady by the name of Mary who was told that she would bear the Christ child, in her emotional response and in her youth, the Lord needed to confirm to her what he was doing. Who or what did he send to her to confirm it? An angel. Her betrothed husband Joseph, who we discussed a couple of weeks ago, was shared the news that this young lady who he had been pledged to for many years was not carrying the child of "another man" but of God himself, and how did God come and confirm with him that it was true? An angel. And when the Christ child was born, the shepherds on the hillside to hear the news for the very first time, how was it that the Lord showed up and confirmed, this is not a rumor on social media, this is real? How did he confirm it? An angel. Do you find it odd that with every other person in the Christmas story we've got no problem saying an angel showed up but when it comes to the wise men, that was a rock in the sky? It actually makes consistent sense that if he spoke to Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, he might utilize the same means to speak to these men as well.

So tonight I just want to walk through some things. We're going to go through a variety of passages. We're going to go back in the book of Numbers, we're going to go to the book of Revelation, and just look at the possibility of this.

Let's deal with the fact that it's personal. Go back to Matthew 2:2. I want you to hear what is spoken of regarding the star. "Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east." That's personal. They are stating that this star, this entity, is not just one of many, it is his. It reminds me of the book of Colossians when it talks about Jesus Christ shedding his blood for us, it says he went to his cross. Why? Because his cross was different than every other cross. This star was different than every other star.

When we go back to the book of Numbers, we have this incredible prophetic statement. It's found in Numbers 24:17. This is one of the great prophecies of the coming Messiah. We often speak of the 48 prophecies in the Old Testament of the life, the ministry, the death, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I know there's more than 48 but we classify them. This is one of those in verse 17. Numbers 24, "I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a," what? "Star." That's what the Bible says, "there shall be a star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel." You know, that's the prophecy about Jesus Christ and interesting that he is referred to as a star. Now I realize the Bible uses metaphors through scripture. Jesus says that he is a door, he is a way, and

there's a lot of different examples there, but I find it interesting that in a prophetic statement about whom Jesus Christ will be, not only is he called a star out of Jacob but then when you get to Matthew 2:2, it says "his star."

So let's talk about the persons here. Now we're going to go to the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. We're going to go to chapter 1 of the book of Revelation and I want you to see that the Bible actually interprets itself not just on this subject matter but all subject matters. Revelation 1, I'm sure many of you are familiar with it. The Apostle John is on the island of Patmos for the persecution, the testimony of Jesus Christ. He is given a perspective, a view of Jesus that he has never seen before. Obviously there will be these great visions. I want you to notice what it says in Revelation 1:16. This is the view that John gets of Jesus. "And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength." So it says there in the hands of Jesus there are seven stars.

Now go down to verse 20, "The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches." Isn't that interesting? You have a very clear passage in scripture four verses apart that utilizes the term "star" to refer to angelic beings. It says those stars are the angels of the seven churches.

We just read in Numbers 24:17, it talks about the star of Jacob. Revelation 22:16, Jesus Christ is called the bright and morning, you guessed it, star. Now lest you think I've gone down the proverbial rabbit trail, can we have some fun tonight? As we speak, there is a significant sporting event taking place. We know it as Super Bowl LVI. For those of you who do not know, the Super Bowl is being played in Los Angeles. You do realize that the name of that city, it means "city of angels," and what do we call famous people that live in Los Angeles? We call them stars. Now not one of us would ever think they're giant rocks. We have even in our culture this disposition to utilize as like representation the name of a star or the title of a star and a personification and/or a person. When somebody is famous in their respective fields, we say they have become a star. It's the term that we utilize.

While you're in Revelation 1, I want to go back to the very beginning of the passage of chapter 1 because there's a little statement that's made here that we tend to gloss over when we study Revelation but it makes a lot of sense for tonight. It says in verse 1, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass," listen to this part, "he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John." Do you find that intriguing that throughout scripture we have this correlation between stars and angels, we have this unique personification, his star, his angel, bright and morning star. The language that we see throughout scripture tends to navigate us toward a "potential or possibility of one and the same."

Now let's go back to Matthew 2 and I want us to see what happens when these wise men who are in Jerusalem take a five mile journey down the road guided only by the star that is his, that hadn't appeared for a while. Verse 9, it says in Matthew 2, "When they had

heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them," listen to this next statement, "till it came and stood over where the young child was." Now hopefully tonight you don't think I'm "reading too much into this," but I've never once said that a star stood in the east but I know a lot of people that have stood a lot of places. We use that language to describe and delineate that which has personification. They stand.

Now I understand and I know that there are a lot of different discussions that could take place about the movement of such and being right over the house. I get all that but understand we're dealing with a star that appears and doesn't appear and appears again. We're dealing with one that they can see the movement, they follow it, they don't go and meet it. We have multiple occurrences in scripture of angels being called stars and even Jesus Christ himself being called a star. We have the personalization of him and his. And finally in verse 9 it says it stood over the house.

Now I know I tease a lot about nativity sets. You know my joke that if you want to be biblical, put the wise men in the garage and bring them out two years later. I know that but have you noticed and maybe you haven't, there are nativity sets out there that have an angel over that famous manger scene and what do we typically say? "Oh, those are the angels that spoke to the shepherds." The problem is that doesn't match the Bible. Do you remember what happened to those angels when they spoke to the shepherds? The Bible says they went back into heaven. The Bible doesn't say they went with them to Bethlehem. They left.

So I think it's interesting that whether it be on nativity sets or even "Christmas trees," what do we sometimes use as a topper? We use an angel and a star. It's commonplace not because it's something that we like, it's because it's there in scripture which leads to the big concern. If the concern of the astronomical aspect or the movements and the triangulations and such, what's the big concern here? Quite simply it is completely contrary to most of our traditions regarding Christmas. One of the struggles that we have with Christmas is that we tend to see it through the eyes of our upbringing, we tend to see it through the lens of our culture that is around us, and rarely do we see it as the Bible says it because we know the story so well. Now I'm not going to ask for a raising of hands but how many of you tonight for the very first time saw the statement "his star"? Or maybe for the first time you realized it stood? You see, there's words being utilized in this passage that allow us to at least at minimum open the door for the possibility.

So tonight, we find ourselves at somewhat of a crossroads. We know there was a star. We know it led the wise men to the place where they needed to be, the Christ child. We know they arrived properly with the gifts. And at the end of the day, none of us are going to stand before God one day at the gate of heaven and he say, "Jeff, before I let you into heaven there is one question that you must answer properly: when the star appeared in Matthew 2, was it a collection of celestial beings or was it an angel? You're on the clock." That's not going to be the question so understand tonight's discussion doesn't change who Jesus is, it doesn't change what led him to become our sin, it doesn't alter the reality of eternity being heaven or hell, but here's what it does do: it completely changes and

impacts how we see the totality of scripture because in Genesis 1 there is a star that is mentioned and in Revelation 22, the last chapter, there's a star that is mentioned. And so you and I have to be very diligent as we navigate scripture that there are times where the Lord is simply speaking of a "heavenly rock," and there are times in scripture he's actually speaking of an angelic visitation. The wisdom and the discernment comes in is when we're addressing specific passages what is being "clearly spoken."

I want to conclude with the simple presence of the star. Verse 7 and we've read it several times, it just appeared, just showed up. Again, let me go back to the illustration I utilized earlier: when Mary was struggling with bearing a child at her status of life, stage of life, and the significance of what was about to happen, an angel appeared. When Joseph was dealing, "What do I do with the Old Testament law and how do I take care of this young girl who I love so dearly?" An angel appeared. When the shepherds were just minding their business, the flock by night, there were angels that appeared. Doesn't it just make sense that these men who studied and read the prophecy of Daniel so diligently through the years, an angel appeared, went before them, and stood over the house where the Christ child was?

So many times in the Bible God utilizes an angelic visitation to make sure that either, A, we go the right way or, B, we don't go the wrong way, and very few times he actually uses a "rock in the heavens." This story is way too important to get it wrong and let me end where I started. Herod never saw it. Don't you think that if this had been the non-angelic idea, that those guys could have said, "Herod, tonight why don't we gather up and we'll show you because it's right there." But they couldn't because it appeared, took them, disappeared and reappeared to show them the Christ child. Again, nothing tonight changes who Jesus is, what our sin has the capacity of or what eternity, but it does impact how we study scripture from beginning to end and I have a funny feeling that as you walk through the scriptures this day forward, anytime you see the word "star" you might take a step back and look at what's happening in the totality of the story.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Even though tonight we have studied a subject matter that for most of us appeared so simple and trite at the beginning and now seems not so much and tonight in spite of all of the ideas and concepts, it doesn't change the fact that Jesus Christ still came to seek and to save that which was lost, the fact that he would be willing to do what he did to accomplish that which we could not take care of ourselves is miraculous in the least, and maybe tonight's the night either here in person or online that you need to place your faith, your hope, your trust, your eternity in the hands of Jesus. Maybe tonight that's already taken place but you've never followed through in believer's baptism, maybe tonight you say, "I got all that taken care of," but you haven't become a part of this family of faith, or maybe you're just struggling with something and need to be prayed with or prayed for. This is one of those times, this is one of those nights where we focus on whatever the Lord has spoken to us irrespectively of anything else that's in the world.

Lord Jesus, tonight as we come to this time of decision, thank you, thank you that you are so concerned with our relationship with you that you were willing to visit a young lady, a

young man, shepherds on a hillside, men in the east, and even communicate the truth to a tyrant of a man named Herod, that God today thousands of years later you would speak to our heart as well. Thank you, God, that you so care and love and are concerned for us that you would give us such specifics that oftentimes we neglect in our own lives. God, may we relish that and if necessary tonight may we render a decision on behalf. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.