



Parkway Fellowship

Savoring the Christmas Fruitcake • Gifts, Gifts, and More Gifts • Matthew 2:1-12 • 12/09/2018

Main Point

The significance of the gifts the Magi brought to Jesus help us focus on the true meaning of Christmas.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What is your least favorite Christmas gift you've ever received?

In contrast, what is the best Christmas gift you've ever been given?

How is your level of excitement over a gift proportionate to the value of (or the sentiment behind) the gift itself?

Why do your reactions to gifts, whether good or bad, matter?

Today we will look at the biblical account of the wise men who came from the East and followed the star of David to see the newborn Jesus. These men came bearing extravagant gifts to a baby born of extremely humble means.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| Ask a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 2:1-6.

What do you know about the wise men?

The wise men were a caste of men specializing in astrology, medicine, and natural science. 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 prominence in their land. We can assume based on their profession that the wise men weren't Jews. But because of their knowledge of the Old Testament prophecies and their interest in the star, they sought out the newborn Messiah. When we see Christmas decorations depicting Jesus' birth, many show the wise men at the manger scene. Although biblical scholars concur that the arrival of the wise men came when Jesus was an infant, they were probably not present at His birth.

Since the wise men were pagan astrologers, why would they leave everything in order to follow the star?

What do you know about King Herod?

Herod the Great was a half-Jew, half-Idumean who, through accommodation to the Romans, ascended to power as client-ruler of Israel in 37 B.C. As King Herod grew older, he became increasingly paranoid about threats against his person and throne. He had numerous people put to death because he feared plots to overthrow him. After frequent disputes with Caesar Augustus, the emperor uttered his famous pun that he would rather be Herod's pig (hys) than his son (huios). King Herod's paranoia provides proper context to his reaction to the wise men's pursuit of the King of the Jews: "When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" (v. 3). Herod's paranoia and unpredictable behavior led to the worry of his people.

| Ask a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 2:7-12.

Having been given the location of the birthplace of the King of the Jews, the wise men continued their journey. What the magi recognized as divine guidance filled them with joy (v. 10). Upon seeing Jesus, they did what they set out to do—they prostrated themselves before Him and "worshiped Him" (v. 2, 11). The wise men were in awe of Jesus.

Note the responses of the wise men upon seeing Jesus. How was their reaction to Jesus both similar and different to the response Christians make to Christ?

How did God use pagan wisdom to lead them to ultimate wisdom—His Son?

In drawing the wise men to Christ, what did God reveal about His plan for the Gentiles (non-Jews)?

God often chooses to reveal Himself to pagans, at times even in the midst of their religious practices, to lead them on to the full truth found only in Christ. The wise men were the first Gentiles to worship Jesus. They

believed He was the Messiah, something many Jews, God's chosen people, failed to realize. From Jesus' infancy, God made it evident that His Son came to save the world, not just the Jews.

Look at verse 11. What three gifts do the wise men give Jesus? What is the significance of these gifts?

Gold (signifying Jesus' royalty), then and now, was a precious metal prized for its beauty and value, an appropriate regal gift. Frankincense (signifying diety) and myrrh (signifying death) were fragrant spices and perfumes equally appropriate for such adoration and worship.

In your journey toward Jesus, how are you like the wise men? How are you unlike them?

How we respond to the information we have about Jesus determines what impact our relationship with Him will have on our lives. Just like Herod and the wise men, we're presented with information about the Messiah. How we respond determines how our relationship with Christ will impact our lives. We can pursue an intellectual faith only, one that consists of studying facts about Christ but never letting that knowledge change us. We can let that knowledge make us insecure and cause us to wonder what we'll have to give up to follow Christ. Or, like the wise men, we can risk everything for Christ and choose to worship Him—and do so with overflowing joy.

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What gifts can you give to Jesus to worship Him today?

How do the wise men's actions model both humility and awe in worship for us?

What is the relationship for you personally between hearing from God and giving gifts to God? In this week's message, we learned "I can hear from God after I give to God." Why is this true?

Pray

Thank God for the opportunity to worship Him freely because of what Jesus did on your behalf. Ask God, like He did with the wise men, to help you leave everything behind in your pursuit of Him and His glory, daily giving Him the gift of your humble love and service.

Commentary

| Matthew 2:1-12

2:1-6. The mention of Jesus' birthplace, Bethlehem of Judea, is significant in this passage especially because of the prophecy it fulfilled (see 2:4-6). Matthew is building his case. Jesus is the fulfillment of all the prophetic intentions of the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. All the details apply, including his birthplace.

The King Herod in this passage, one of many Herods, is Herod the Great, mentioned here and in Luke 1:5. His father, Antipater II, was a Jew of Idumaeen descent (Edomite, related through Esau to Jacob) who gained influence under the Roman Empire. He was influential in his son Herod's rise to power, in a succession of positions over Galilee and ultimately Judea, where Herod ruled from 37–4 B.C. (Herod's death in 4 B.C. is one of the main reasons we know Jesus was born somewhat earlier than the traditional A.D. 1; see 2:19.) During this time Herod was given the title "king of the Jews" by the Roman senate. This partly explains his fear and aggressive murderous actions when he heard from the magi that another king of the Jews had been born (2:2).

These magi from the east (2:1) were likely from Babylon and were culturally influential students of the stars, not evil magicians of some sort. Their interest must have been aroused by the unusual star they observed. We do not know their number, but their entourage was probably substantial to make such a lengthy cross-continent trip and to cause such a noticeable stir in Jerusalem (2:3). How they came to connect the birth of the king of the Jews with the strange star is a matter of conjecture. Some scholars believe they may have been responding, in an amazing display of faith, to a scrap of Scripture brought to their people centuries before through Balaam (Num. 24:17), who was a Mesopotamian himself.

The important point here is that God brought the birth of the king to the attention of these Gentiles, who probably journeyed many months (possibly one to two years) from Mesopotamia to Jerusalem. Matthew included this information to alert his Jewish readers to several realities: (1) the event of Jesus' birth had worldwide impact; (2) the Messiah was coming through Israel as a gift from God to all nations of the world, not just to the Jews; and (3) in contrast to the indifference of Jewish chief priests and scribes who should have anticipated the king's birth (2:4), these Gentiles were overwhelmed with joy!

The quote in 2:6 comes from Micah 5:2. Micah prophesied around the time of the Northern Kingdom's fall in 722 B.C. Through this man, the Lord used the lesson of the Northern Kingdom's fall to confront Judah's own covenant disobedience. He warned of Judah's future judgment, but he also gave cause for hope, foretelling his restoration of the remnant. It is in this context of hope that the words quoted by Matthew are written in Micah.

2:7-12. Herod called the magi into his chambers alone to try to determine when this new king, Jesus, was born. Because both the magi and Herod seemed to identify the appearance of the star with the birthdate of the Messiah, Jesus must have been at least a year old when the magi arrived. (This fact changes the traditional image of the magi visiting the young family in the stable where Jesus was born. Certainly the shepherds found him there, but Joseph would have found his family a home to live in by the time the magi arrived.)

Herod wanted to use the magi to determine the exact location of this new king. This was a self-serving strategy, not a generous desire to aid the magi in their quest. Herod had no desire to worship the new king. His goal was to locate him and eliminate this bud of growing messianic hope that he viewed as potential competition.

The magi likely followed this star very much as a sailor follows the stars to get to his destination. The text does, however, give every indication that this star was a supernatural phenomenon.

When the magi found where Jesus and his family were living, they were overjoyed. Their destination was not just a place—but a person—Jesus. Their response was the same response that Matthew wanted for his readers; they worshiped him. The gifts they gave to Jesus—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—were the most common mediums of exchange in that day. The gold and two forms of incense made it possible for the magi to cross through many different lands on their way to Bethlehem, much like people today use travelers checks when they are traveling. These gifts would come in handy later for Jesus' family as they traveled themselves (2:13-15).

The magi chose not to go back to Herod as he had instructed. Instead they went a different way. For foreigners to disobey a king in that day was risky. But the magi, by faith, followed the warning they had received in a dream. They clearly were more awed by God than by Herod.