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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes

## INTRODUCTION

This is the second message in the new series "Parables and Miracles—Experience the Timeless Principles and the Transforming Power of Jesus." Today we're going to examine "The Miracle of the Magi."

Last week I mentioned the Miracle on the Hudson, when US Airways Flight 1549 ditched in the Hudson River. I said we can't be certain whether it was a true miracle from God or simply the skill and training of the pilot and crew. I got a funny email from one of you this past week in which I was told that it really WAS a miracle for three reasons. (1) All 155 people on board survived; (2) With the passengers standing on the wing, it looked like they were walking on water. But the main reason why this was a miracle was (3) Nobody claimed that the crash was George Bush's fault!

We're in for a great treat as we study over 80 real miracles and parables in the gospel according to Matthew. Let's jump into our text to learn about the parable of the magi in Matthew 2:1-12:

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 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.' When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 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. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written: "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."' Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 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.' 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. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route."

These first few miracles in Matthew weren't performed by Jesus, they are miracles of God surrounding His incarnation and birth. We're going to examine this miracle, but we're also going to discuss the *meaning* of the miracle for us. Remember, there's a parable in every miracle and a miracle in every parable. Let's examine three aspects of this miracle:

### 1. THE MYSTERY OF THE MAGI: Who were those guys?

There are some popular misconceptions about these magi. First, most people assume there were three magi, because of the song, "We Three Kings," and because they gave three gifts. But we're never told how many there were. There could have been two, three, or twenty three. It probably

took an entire caravan to carry supplies as these brave men embarked on a journey of almost 1,000 miles. That's like traveling on camel from Tyler to Salt Lake City. They traveled across some of the most inhospitable terrain on the planet.

Also, many people wrongly assume the wise men appeared the night Jesus was born. Actually, they arrived several weeks or months after Jesus' birth because the word used for "child" is a different word than "newborn infant." It also says clearly Mary and the child were in a house by now, not a stable. Since, it's February, you don't have to go home and fix your Nativity set!

The King James Version translated "magi" as "wise men." Some women think the term "wise men" is an oxymoron like "jumbo shrimp" or "rap music" or "humble Texan." Some clever women have even pointed out that if the magi had been women, things would have been a lot better. For instance, They would have asked for directions sooner; they would have arrived on time; they would have helped Mary deliver the baby; they would have cleaned up the stable; they would have brought practical gifts like Pampers, baby-wipes, and formula; they would have left a casserole; and after leaving, they would have whispered, "The baby doesn't look a bit like Joseph!"

So who were these magi? Most scholars believe they were the most educated, intelligent men of the ancient world. They were most likely from Persia or Babylon, which is modern day Iraq and Iran. If you draw a line directly East from Israel, you end up in Babylon. We get our English word "magic" from "magi" but don't picture these men as illusionists or men involved in the occult. The word comes from the Arabic *magoi*, which means an educated, respected, religious scholar. The historian Herodotus wrote that the *magoi* were ancient Persians who had discovered the secrets of nature and medicine. They were scientists rather than magicians.

Dr. John McArthur wrote about these men: "Because of their combined knowledge of science, agriculture, mathematics, history, and astrology, they became the most prominent and powerful group of advisors in the Medo-Persian and subsequently the Babylonian Empire." (*The Gospel According to Matthew* p. 27)

The point I'm making is that these men weren't dummies. They qualified for Mensa—they were the most intelligent men of their age, and they devoted a lot of time, money, and energy to find the Messiah and worship Him. It really IS true that wise men still seek Him.

## **2. THE MEANING OF THE PROPHECIES: How did they know about Jesus?**

The Magi knew the Jewish King would be born in Israel, but they didn't know exactly where, so that's why they had an audience with King Herod. Herod was immediately jealous of any rival to his throne, so he wanted to find this new king as well—but not to worship Him, but to kill Him, but that's next week's lesson. Herod quickly summoned the Jewish priests to study the prophets to find the answer to the Magi's question. There were actually TWO Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled—not only WHERE the Messiah would be born, but WHEN He would be born.

### **(1) The magi knew WHEN the King would be born. (Daniel 9:25-26)**

How did the Magi know when to start looking for a Jewish King? It's important to remember Daniel and many other Israelites lived in exile in Babylon 500 years earlier. Another clue they were from Babylon is the word "magi," which is found fourteen times in Daniel.

In Daniel 9, the angel Gabriel delivered a miraculous prophecy to Daniel. Gabriel was the same angel whom five hundred years later would appear to Mary to announce the birth of the Messiah. Gabriel told Daniel exactly *when* the Messiah would be born. This wasn't some weird dream or vision, it was a direct, clear message delivered from God to Daniel through Gabriel. To simplify it, Gabriel predicted that from the time the announcement was given to rebuild Jerusalem, until the Messiah would be "cut off" (that is crucified), there would be exactly 483 years. History tells us that in 444 B.C. the Persian Emperor, Cyrus, issued an edict allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem. From that date until 33 A.D. was EXACTLY 483 years (using the Jewish calendar). That is one of the most amazing prophecies in the entire Bible. I don't have time to go into the precise details, but if you want to read an entire message I delivered on this, visit the Old Testament section of our message archive at [www.gabc.org/ot](http://www.gabc.org/ot) and simply scroll down to Daniel 9 to a message entitled, "The 70 Sevens—God's Countdown."

So what does that have to do with the Magi in Matthew 2? Most scholars believe generations of Magi had been studying Daniel's prophecy and were counting the years waiting for the time when it would be fulfilled.

You may wonder why more people haven't figured this out and said, "Wow, the Bible is true, and this prophecy PROVES Jesus really is the Messiah!" In fact, throughout the centuries, many scholars, even Jewish rabbis, have studied Daniel 9 and come to believe Jesus is the Messiah. Ray Stedman wrote: "It is interesting to note that in the seventeenth century a very learned Jew published a book in which he set forth the claims of Jesus Christ to be the Jewish Messiah. In the preface to the book he told how he himself had been converted by listening to a debate between a knowledgeable Jew and a Christian convert from Judaism over the meaning of this passage in Daniel 9. The moderator of the debate was a learned rabbi, Simon Luzatto, and as the Christian pressed the claims of this passage home it became so clear that the passage was pointing to Jesus Christ that the Rabbi Luzatto closed the debate with these words: 'Let us shut up our books, for if we go on examining the prophecy we shall all become Christians.'" That's the first prophecy.

## **(2) The Jewish priests knew WHERE the King would be born. (Micah 5:2)**

So, the Magi knew when, they just didn't know where. They had access to Daniel's prophecy, but not to Micah's. If they had read Micah's prophecy, they would have bypassed Jerusalem and proceeded straight to Bethlehem. When Herod consulted the Jewish priests, it didn't take them long to report it was prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, which was a small village about seven miles south of Jerusalem. When the Magi learned the answer to their question, they set out on the short road to Bethlehem.

## **3. THE MIRACLE OF THE LIGHT—How did they find Jesus?**

When the magi left Persia, they didn't have a MapQuest printout of how to get to Israel. They

couldn't program the destination into a GPS and have some female voice say, "Right turn at the Jordan River." They had something better. God sent them a light in the sky to guide them. The Bible calls it a star, but that's what most people call every light in the sky except the sun and moon. There has been endless speculation trying to explain the nature of this light. Some say that it was the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn which astronomers calculate happened around 7 B.C. Others say it was a comet, or a supernova, an exploding star. But I think the scriptural evidence refutes all of these natural explanations. They saw the star at times, and then it's apparent they didn't see it when they stopped in Jerusalem, and then they saw it again and were overjoyed. The language says the star moved ahead of them and then stopped over the house where Jesus was. This would preclude the possibility of it being an actual star.

I believe that this was simply a unique light God provided for this special occasion. It wouldn't be the first time God did this. In the Old Testament, God provided a pillar of fire to guide the Israelites through the darkness at night. When you're traveling in the desert, you travel mostly at night. This was a supernatural light God used to announce the supernatural presence of His Son. I see a perfect symmetry here, because at the death of Christ, God sent a supernatural darkness. When Jesus hung on the cross, it became completely dark from noon until 3 p.m. This wasn't a thunderstorm or an eclipse; it was a thick darkness that represented God, who is Light, turning His face away from the sight of His precious Son becoming sin. At the birth of Jesus, I believe God was smiling just like any proud father. But rather than passing out cigars, He provided a supernatural light to guide these men to Jesus!

When the magi saw the light again, the Bible says they were overjoyed! When you see the light, you'll have the same reaction. The birth of Jesus was indeed a time of miracles, but what does it all mean to us? As I consider the miracle of the Magi, I see at least four important life lessons that apply to our lives.

### **(1) The wisest people honestly seek God**

God gave us an important invitation through the prophet Jeremiah. He said, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:13) We've already established these men were part of the most academically and intellectually advanced brotherhood in the ancient world. Today, many people who consider themselves intellectually or academically superior scoff at the claims of the Bible. Many academics consider themselves atheists. I like what that great theologian Jerry Clower used to say, "Some people have been educated beyond their intelligence!"

When I meet someone who claims to be an atheist or an agnostic I usually ask them with my tongue-in-cheek, "Are you an HONEST atheist or a DISHONEST atheist?" They say, "What's the difference?" I reply, "Well a dishonest atheist says, 'There's no God, my mind is made up, and I'm not open to any evidence. But an honest atheist says, 'I don't believe in God now, but I am open and searching for the truth about whether there really is a God or not.'"

I recently heard Dr. Charley Gordon speak at Grace Community High School. Dr. Gordon has researched and discovered the similarities in nature are actually the fingerprints of God. He has posted a great website called, "Designed on Purpose." ([www.designedonpurpose.com](http://www.designedonpurpose.com)) Dr.

Gordon is one of the most respected neurosurgeons in America. He has a brilliant, scientific mind, just like these magi, and yet he is convinced there is abundant evidence we are not simply the result of a random combination of atoms and molecules—this universe was designed on purpose by a Intelligent Designer. History is filled with true intellectuals who honestly sought for God and found Him to be real and personal.

One of my heroes, C.S. Lewis was a world-renowned academic who was an atheist for a time. But he came to believe God exists and that claims of the New Testament about Jesus are true. One of my favorite quotes by him is: "Christianity, if false, is of no importance; and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important." Have you honestly sought to find God's truth?

## **(2) God reveals His plans for anyone to discover**

The Bible is God's Word in which He outlines not only what *has* happened, but also what *will* happen. There is a special blessing promised to those who read and study it. The Bible says, "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it." (Revelation 1:3) That is true specifically for the book of Revelation, but it's also true generally of the entire Bible. God hasn't hidden His plans, they are right here in the Bible for anyone to discover.

These magi read God's Word given through Daniel, and they figured out the Messiah would be born at a certain time. Anyone else with access to Daniel's prophecy could have known the same thing, but as far as we know, these were the only ones who figured it out. Contrast them with the Jewish priests who had ALL the prophets to study, and even though they knew the Messiah would be born only seven miles away, they didn't seek to worship Him. That reminds me of people who have the word of God available to them, but they never take it seriously enough to do something about. That's why James says, "Do not merely listen to the word...DO what it says." (James 1:22)

Some people look at all the evil and crime in the world, and they worry about what is eventually going to happen. Don't worry. God has already revealed His future plan for us, and, in the end, we win!

## **(3) If you follow God's light, you'll always find Jesus**

The light in the desert sky led them to Jesus, because He is the light of the world. The Bible says, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it ... the true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world." (John 1:4-5, 9) These magi didn't merely seek Jesus as the answer to a puzzle they had discovered in the writings of Daniel. When they arrived they didn't just pose for pictures and head back to Persia. No, they sought the Messiah for one simple reason: to WORSHIP Him.

They show us what worship is by what they did. First, they bowed before Jesus—they acknowledged they were in the presence of Someone far greater, far more powerful, and far more important than they were. What amazing faith it required for them to worship a child!

Bishop J.C. Ryle wrote: "We read of no greater faith than this in all the Bible. It is a faith that deserves to be placed side by side with that of the penitent thief. The thief saw one dying the death of a criminal and yet prayed to Him and called Him 'Lord.' The wise men saw a newborn babe on the lap of a poor woman, and yet they worshiped Him and confessed that He was the Christ."

Second they worshiped Him by giving Jesus gifts. What amazing insight they displayed in the choice of their gifts. We all know the trio of gifts were gold, incense, and myrrh. The gold was a gift for a King. The incense was used in the worship at the temple; it was a gift for a Priest. Myrrh was an embalming gel. They fully understood Daniel's prophecy that the Messiah would be "cut off." They knew He came to die. What amazing gifts! He is our King. He is our High Priest, and He is the Lamb of God who came to die for us to take away our sin!

Many of you listening to me are already followers of Jesus. Like the magi, you sought the Lord with your whole heart. You opened God's Word and discovered His plan. You have followed the light and discovered Jesus to be all you need and more. There are many wise men and wise women and wise young people among us. But you may be wondering if God has a Word for you from this miracle. Here's your message:

#### **(4) God can use you as His light to direct people to Jesus**

God no longer places lights in the sky to guide people to Jesus. Instead He places us in the pathway of people to guide them to Jesus. When you guide someone to Jesus, you're one of God's stars! That's exactly what we read in God's Word, "Those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars for ever and ever." (Daniel 12:3) God wants to use you in a starring role to guide your friends and family to Jesus.

What are stars? I was watching "*The Lion King*" with my granddaughter, Lizzie, a few nights ago. It came to that funny scene when Simba, Timon, and Pumbaa are lying on their backs looking at the night sky. Simba asks what the stars are, and Timon confidently answers, "They're just fireflies that got stuck in that big bluish-black thing up there." Pumbaa says, "Oh, and all this time I thought they were big balls of gas burning millions of miles away." Timon says, "Pumbaa, with you, everything is about gas!"

Stars are burning balls of gas in space, just like our sun. Modern astronomers can tell us what stars are, but they often have no clue *why* they are there. One reason God placed the stars is to guide us. For centuries, stars have guided travelers across the land and sea. Although the evening sky rotates each evening, two points remain relatively the same—the North Star in the Northern Hemisphere, and the Southern Cross south of the equator. Stars have always been used to guide people.

God wants you to live like a star—and I don't mean like a rock star or a sports star—He wants you to live as a spiritual star who guides others to Him. We've all had stars who guided us to Jesus. Over 40 years ago, God used my mother and my dad as stars to guide me to Jesus. I'm eternally grateful for their starring role in my salvation. Why don't you stop right now and thank God for that individual or those people who played a starring role in guiding you to Jesus?

Who do you know in your personal universe who needs to be guided to Jesus? Will you shine for Christ to be the light they need? The famous adventurer and writer, Jack London once wrote: "I would rather be ashes than dust! I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry rot. I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet."

Is that your desire? Do you have a burning, passionate desire to guide people to Jesus?

Maybe you're here today and you've never discovered Jesus to be your King, your Priest, and your Savior. God placed me here today to burn brightly and shine like a star so you can be guided to Jesus. Will you be a wise man? Will you be a wise woman? Will you be a wise young person? Will you seek Jesus with your whole heart, and worship Him? When you do, you will experience the miracle of the magi—you'll find the same flood of joy they experienced on that night 2,000 years ago.

## OUTLINE

1. THE MYSTERY OF THE MAGI: Who were those guys?
2. THE MEANING OF THE PROPHECIES: How did they know about Jesus?
  - (1) The magi knew when the King would be born. (Daniel 9:25-26)
  - (2) The Jewish priests knew where the King would be born. (Micah 5:2)
3. THE MIRACLE OF THE LIGHT—How did they find Jesus?

## LIFE LESSONS

- (1) The wisest people honestly seek God  
"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." *Jeremiah 29:13*
- (2) God reveals His plans for anyone to discover  
"Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it." *Revelation 1:3*
- (3) If you follow God's light, you'll always find Jesus  
"In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it ... the true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world." *John 1:4-5, 9*
- (4) God can use you as His light to direct people to Jesus  
"Those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars for ever and ever." *Daniel 12:3*