

The amazement of the star

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- [0 : 00] Bibles, please, and turn with me to Matthew. We're going to turn to Matthew chapter 2, and we're going to read the first few verses, the first 12 or so verses.
- So beginning in Matthew chapter 2, verse 1, Now hear God's word. Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?
- For we saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.
- And assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, and you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judea, are by no means least among the rulers of Judea.
- For from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly, and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.
- [1 : 38] And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child. And when you have found him, bring me word that I too may come and worship him.
- After listening to the king, they went on their way, and behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.
- When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.
- Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.
- Well, we'll come back to that word together after we've stood and sung one more time. Well, every Christmas we come back to the same passages, and the danger is to think that because we've heard it before, there's nothing to hear anymore.
- [3 : 07] There's nothing to hear again. So if we can sort of think that, yes, we're familiar with this passage, but nevertheless, we need to hear it again and again.
- Now, when you come to explain that God loves a person, you begin to realize that there's an awful lot to explain. When you begin to explain that God loves you in particular, you then got to not only explain everything that that means, but you've got to be able to get through the necessary barriers that people have to even receiving the fact that God loves them.
- In fact, a lot of people may not even come to Jesus Christ or their initial barrier for not coming to Jesus Christ could be the sheer fact that they just can't get through this feeling that how could anyone love me?
- And so there's a barrier on people's side that can often stop them receiving what God has to tell them, but then at the same time, for us who've been loved by God for such a long time, that we forget what it first felt like to receive God's love.

And so there's a lot to explain. And so one of the places to start, especially for Christians, is why has God gone to the length that he does to show us that he loves us?

[4 : 29] I mean, he doesn't just go partway. He goes almost out of his way to show you and to demonstrate to you that he loves you. And there's only so much, I believe, that we could ever take in at any one time.

In other words, that God's love for us is so great and so wonderful, it's too difficult to take in all at once. And so coming back to the passage again year after year means that we get to take in more of the love that we know is there for us.

But at the same time, we recognize that just in the day that Jesus was born, as there is today, there's great opposition to being loved by God. You know, it's not that there's great opposition to God.

There is that as well. But there is actually great opposition to even being loved by God. I don't want to be loved by God.

And that is certainly a feeling that people have and one that needs to be overcome because what they're not wanting is the very thing that they need.

[5 : 39] And so the nativity, the advent, the first coming of Jesus, is none other than God coming into the flesh to love you, to love us.

In other words, God tends to fulfill most of his purposes through other people. You know, when God wants something done, he tends to use other people to do it. In fact, you only have to read the Old Testament to see that he creates people, he raises up people, judges kings, and so forth, and so on, to do things for him.

But when it actually comes down to the very fact of loving you, what does God do? Well, he decides to come himself and do it. He doesn't get somebody else to do it for him.

He decides to do it himself. And so Christmas is a demonstration of God loving you, and it starts with God coming in flesh.

That when he decides to love you, he decides to come and do it himself and to demonstrate to you just how much he loves you. And of course, to explain that, we have to explain an awful lot.

[6 : 48] And so God goes to great lengths to show us again and again just how much he loves us. And if you've been a Christian for a while, you're probably still baffled by the fact of why does God love you?

You know, it's just one of those things you never seem to be able to get over. And so even though we've heard this story this evening a number of times, it's good to revisit it.

It's good to revisit it for that one reason alone, to remind ourselves that God loves us. But tonight, I want us to do something entirely different. I don't want to acknowledge off the bat that God loves you, but I want us to do something this evening entirely different.

I want us to do something that you've no doubt noticed before and no doubt you'll notice again this evening, but it's just the sheer amazement of it all. And it's not that I don't want to focus on Jesus.

Jesus is the center of all of this. But what I would like to do this evening is pay particular attention to the star, this star of Bethlehem.

[7 : 54] We sort of acknowledge it as a passing acknowledgement and then we sort of move on to the other surrounding things. But what I would like to do this evening is to focus heavily or concentrated on the star in particular.

Now, what is it about this star that is just so wonderful and just so amazing? I'd like to pay reference, of course, to the Magi. That is the wise men as well.

I want to pay reference again to the fact that they bring gifts to Jesus, that they bow down and worship Jesus. I also want to acknowledge the fact that they have this dream not to return to Herod, but to go home another way.

But with all that said, I want you just this evening, if you can, just to focus on the amazement of this star, which verse 2 says is his star.

The star belongs to Jesus or is about Jesus. Now, we'll fail to notice just how strange Matthew chapter 2 verses 1 to 12 is simply because we're not a Jew.

[9 : 03] Matthew is a Jew, and Matthew knows that he's writing his account of the gospel to Jews who have rejected Jesus. So Matthew has in his mind all those Jews that have rejected Jesus, and he's putting an account of the gospel together in order that Jews who've rejected Jesus would read it so that they would reject Jesus no longer.

Now, every Jew would not find a problem with accepting Matthew chapter 1, with the genealogy, because that's familiar to them. All the people mentioned and the sons that they had and what happened next is familiar.

But to say to a Jew, how about this star and a bunch of Gentiles turning up with a bunch of presents and presenting them before Jesus? Well, if you wanted to convince Jews that this was true, that's a strange way to go about it.

You would think that Matthew would be a little bit more selective in what he said. But he tends to focus on the star. He focuses on these wise men from possibly from Babylon.

He focuses on the gift. He focuses on the fact that they worship Jesus and they're Gentiles. They're not Jews. And so if you thought that Matthew was, you know, going out of his way to put them off, you, you know, you think, well, that's a good way of doing it.

[10 : 25] But nevertheless, Matthew includes everything he knows to believe happened at the time that it happened. But for the Jews listening, it would have been a big deal for them to get their head around.

And that's many of the reasons why they miss Jesus coming, why they miss God coming in the flesh, because they were expecting something in particular and it didn't turn out the way that they thought it was going to.

And so Matthew doesn't say anything that makes it more difficult to believe. Really, he just says it as it is. It's just more difficult to believe for people who have ideas about that it should have been different.

But in many ways, that's the point. And it's the same for us now. That God has gone to great lengths to demonstrate to you that he loves you, but you might just be sat there thinking, well, why didn't he do it this way?

Why didn't he do it that way? In other words, you're not content with the story that you've been given. You're not content with the story that God has actually given you with the way that it happened.

[11 : 34] In other words, you're still reservedly and saying, well, if God really wanted to demonstrate it, why didn't he do it this way instead? Well, the trouble is God didn't do it that way.

He's done it this way. And there's something in here that he wants us to see and something to believe. But this is how it works. Every narrative, and a narrative is simply a story in scripture, works in the same way as Jesus telling kingdom parables in many ways.

So that the story here is of the star, is of wise men, is of gifts, and they come to worship Jesus. That's the story. And Jesus, when he tells parables of the kingdom, is trying to provoke something in you that should already be there.

So I'm going to try and illustrate this. Now, there's almost nothing more embarrassing than beginning to tell a joke and then halfway through telling the joke, you've forgotten the punchline.

And this has happened to me on numerous occasions, but everyone begins to laugh, and so I guess, you know, the thing was still funny in the end. But all of us understand that every joke needs a punchline.

[12 : 47] And a joke told well, a joke that is fully appreciated, is only ever appreciated, you will notice, by those who get it, by those who catch on.

And you've probably had those moments where I've had it loads of times. Perhaps it's just the fact that my jokes aren't funny. But I sit there and I tell a joke and they look at me as though, you know, like a cow staring at a new gate.

It's like there's just, there's just nothing funny about that. And, you know, I'm sort of sat there giggling my head off thinking this is just hilarious. In fact, I have one joke that I keep telling simply because it is so funny.

But I begin to realize that jokes are only ever appreciated by those if it begins to provoke laughter. And what the joke does is it tells whether or not you have a sense of humor.

The joke, when it provokes laughter in you, is determining in you at the very point of the joke being told whether or not you have a sense of humor.

[13 : 54] So jokes, apart from being able to make people laugh, jokes have this ability of being able to sift people out from those who have a sense of humor from those who don't have a sense of humor.

That's what a joke can do. It's able to tell the difference between two groups of people based on what their response is, laughter. And so a joke has this wonderful ability of being able to sift, be able to be very judgmental, to be able to get a very clear judgment based on whether or not the joke has found you with the sense of humor or not having the sense of humor.

And in exactly the same way, this narrative of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ is doing exactly the same thing in you as a joke, not to make you laugh, but it is sifting you at this very moment to see whether or not there is any sense in you to know that this is true.

As I tell you this story, as you read the story for yourself, the text is sifting you to see whether or not there is that sense in which you know that God has come to reign on earth.

And now everything has changed because God has come to reign on earth. That everyday experiences are different now because God has come to reign on earth in Jesus.

[15 : 23] And that is exactly what this story of the birth of Jesus does. And so the question is, do you get it? Do you get it? Have you caught on?

Have you got the punch line? Do you really feel the sense by which you know this to be true? Has the story provoked in you that feeling, that sense of, this is right, this is believable, this is true, this is something I trust and hold on to with my whole life?

See, stories in the same way as jokes, they have the ability to be able to sift the sense in you. Is that sense there? Well, if you believe it, then you will take hold of it.

And so Matthew includes all the stuff that he does, even the stuff that seems extremely hard to believe because he knows that this truth, which is the only truth, is the truth that will set you free.

It is the truth that gives you that sense that this is something to be believed, that this is something to be trusted in, that this is something that I must hold on to.

[16 : 47] Because Matthew knows that faith, all that your faith is, by the way, is a demonstration that you've accepted the truth. Faith, and living by faith, is you simply demonstrating day by day, after day, after day, morning, afternoon, and evening, that you have accepted the truth of what God has done for you in Christ Jesus.

That's what faith is. It is a demonstration of your trust in God. It is a demonstration of your acceptance of the story. It is a demonstration that you love God, and you know that God loves you.

That's what faith is. It is simply telling the world that you believe what God has told you. So what are we actually being told?

Well, as I said, instead of coming up with several points and several key points, I want us to focus this evening, in particular, on the star. Now, you'll notice in verse 1 that Jesus has already been born.

Okay? The story isn't about, you know, waiting for the birth to happen. Jesus has already been born, and so he's somewhere in Bethlehem lying in a manger. Okay?

[18 : 04] He's already been born. We assume he's lying in a manger. He's there somewhere, but he has already been born. Jesus has already come into the world, that God is already in the flesh, and he is already in the world.

And now, these wise men from the east come to Jerusalem, and they say, verse 2, where is he who has been born king of the Jews? Now, this must strike you as a very odd thing to say, because we wouldn't speak like that.

We wouldn't say something like that. In other words, if we were to phrase the question, we probably wouldn't phrase it in the same way. And so you need to stop and ask, well, how do you know that any king's been born?

Right? Isn't that what you want to ask? Somebody turns up and says, where's he who's been born king of the Jews? Don't you want to stop and ask, how did you know? How do you know that?

Right? Wise men from the east, they're not even from Jerusalem, they're from another place far away. How do you even know? And then they give the answer, verse 2, for we saw his star.

[19 : 12] Right, now I know how you know. But now I've got a few more questions to ask, and we'll get to that in a moment. But then they decide that having seen this star, that that star told them that Jesus Christ has been born.

And now, they realize that there is a response to be given to a king. And it continues to say in verse 2, that we may come and worship him. So, where is he who's been born king of the Jews?

Why do you want to know? Why do you want to know where this king is? Well, so that we can worship him. That's their concern. They want to know where he is because they know that they have a way in which they are to respond to this new king.

And how do you respond to the birth of King Jesus? Where is he? I want to worship him. And so, there are a few things here to notice that are just absolutely wonderful.

And the first is this. Their question is an odd question because we don't speak like this. They say, where is he who has been born king of the Jews? And that's quite an odd thing to say.

[20 : 24] And so, I'll try and illustrate. You might happen to know that down in England they have such a thing as a constitutional royal family. I want to put the emphasis on constitutional.

Okay? It is a constitutional royal family and not a heavenly real royal family. And yet, out of respect, we'll pay them respect as far as it lies within us to do so.

but down in England if they, within the royal family and they have, they have a son being born somewhere in the line. And it just so happens to be the case that as this son is born into the royal family and he's born in the right line, people say upon hearing this news, that'll be the what?

The future king. Okay? They look at the child, they see the pictures and the conversation amongst people who are interested in these things say this will be the future constitutional king of England.

But not so with Jesus. It tells us that he's not born to be king. It tells us that he is born king. They don't say where is he who's born to be king?

[21 : 34] They say where is he who is born king? In other words, now we begin to see why they respond the way that they do. See, the wise men understand that this isn't someone who's going to be king in the future, but this is someone who is king right now.

Where is he who is born king? And so Herod reacts the way that he does with lies and eventually murder, not so much towards a child who's going to be king, but towards a king, towards someone who has another throne.

And so the reason why Herod reacts the way that he does is because he sees the birth of a king as someone who will threaten his own throne over the place where he is.

is. And almost it's worth pointing out here that Herod is more concerned about hanging on to his own throne than he is about saving his own soul.

It's very similar to what Cian was saying this morning that people who live for the podium, they live for the throne. And Herod here is on the throne and the one thing that he doesn't want to lose in his whole life is not his whole life.

[23 : 03] He doesn't mind losing his whole life. The one thing he's more fearful of losing is his throne, is his status, is his place as the king. And so he is a man who's been, who's now been brought to lies and murder because he wants to hold on what he has rather than save his own soul.

And in many ways there's many people in this world and many people you'll probably know who want to hold on to their own podium, who want to hold on to their own throne, who want to hold on to their own rule and consider Jesus Christ to be a real threatening person to the way that they live their life.

That Jesus is actually going to threaten my standing in this world. Well it is if it's above God. If you're trying to be your own God then yes, Jesus will be a threat and Jesus will be a challenge.

But if you recognize that Jesus is God and you submit to him then you will save your life. You will spare your soul and you will not lose it.

But many, many people in this world just like Herod consider what they have in life is more important than their life. And that's a real challenge.

[24 : 28] That there could be people in this world perhaps even in here this evening who consider that what they have in life is more important than the life that they actually have.

And the life that they can have in Christ Jesus. they consider that what they have worth more than receiving a God who actually loves them.

And so the question that raises itself here almost by default is what is more important to you than your soul? For Herod it's his earthly throne.

But what is it for you? Well another wonderful thing to notice about this event is not that Jesus has been born king it's not that he's been born to be king but that he's born king but also that these wise men that are from the East how many there were I'm not entirely sure but they are from the East I don't know if I told you this but I was preaching over in Glasgow probably a year or so ago and someone from this church said I think I've told you this before it was not a wise thing but I thought I'd go ahead with it anyway it was sort of after the event I realised it wasn't wise and I went over to Glasgow and someone from this church says when you're over there in the church just say to them did they know that wise men came from the East?

So I said in the front of the church I've just got a bit of news from you from you from over there in Edinburgh and they told me they said did you know that wise men came from the East?

[26 : 12] Well the response that I got was not the happiest of affairs and so I realised at that point that it was not wise for me to open my big mouth and I should have kept it quiet but these wise men have come from the East where that East is it was probably Babylon and we'll see why in a moment how many there were we don't know but the thing that they do is that they follow this star and in verse 2 they don't just call it a star they call it his star and this is quite puzzling but wonderful because it means that as they saw this star in the sky they interpret from looking at this star that that star is not only a star but his star and this star is telling them interpreting to them that this is the birth of a new king the king of the Jews and I've often wondered what was it about this star that could say all of that

I mean I don't know if you go out at night time and you look up at the stars you don't come up with conclusions like that you're not able to draw that kind of interpretation from looking at most stars in the sky can you but for some reason these wise men from the east that looked up and saw this star were able to interpret it as this is the sign that a new king has been born but not only that this star was telling them what they must do next or in other words that this news this revelation meant that they were to respond in a particular way that not only has a new king has been born but the only fitting response to this king is to worship him the only fitting response is to travel all the way that they did and bow down and worship this king now the journey of the wise men would have taken bearing in mind let's say for instance they came from Babylon would have taken just about over a month or a better month they would have traveled at walking speed they would have traveled over about 550 to 600 miles and in just about a month's time they would have got to Jerusalem and so they would have obviously had to travel at night and during the day they probably just had to sit still that might have increased the number of time or they would have headed in the general direction we know that to be the case because of what verse 9 says that they probably arrived at Herod during the daytime and they go to Herod and they say where is he who's been born king of the Jews and Herod's like well you know

I don't know but let's go ahead and find where he is and then in verse 9 it says this that after listening to the king they went on their way and behold the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was and I think the only explanation for this is is that they went they got to Herod during the day and of course they asked their questions during daytime and they couldn't do anything else until night time because generally speaking stars don't come out until night and so when it arose again verse 9 I guess it rose simply because it became night time and so they got their way to the house where Jesus was I think it's a unique star and a particular star but I don't think it was necessarily a star that was apparent all day I think like most stars and all stars it was the type of star that was only apparent at night and verse 9 seems to give us that kind of push that if you're traveling for a month you have to travel during night and day but if you're following a star then there's only a period of time each day in which you know what direction to go in in verse 9 they're in Jerusalem but now they have to find their way to the house and it seems that they can only do it when the star arose again in other words when it got dark and it become apparent in the night sky and so they get to Bethlehem they see their king they present their gifts and they worship him in the book of numbers we have reference to the star appearing that shall come out of Jacob we then in Isaiah have reference to the gifts of gold and frankincense you know gifts that are generally given to royalty to kings then in Daniel we have reference to wise men the magi men who were present in Babylon so you know throughout the scripture we can sort of put the pieces together and say you know this fits together quite well but then we have something striking in verse 12 and that is

Herod is not full of any good intention whatsoever he actually doesn't want to worship the new king but wants to get rid of him and these magi these wise men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod and they departed and went home by another way and what I find striking about that again is they're Gentiles and it reminds me of Pilate's wife do you remember the story Pilate's wife sends word to Pilate and she says to him have nothing to do with him for he is a righteous man and how did she dreamt it she's been disturbed all night it seems by a dream and the only message she got from the dream to present to her husband Pilate was have nothing to do with him for he is a righteous man it's unexplainable it's unexplainable but nevertheless true and both the Gentiles at the beginning of the birth of Christ and a Gentile woman at the end or at the death of Christ were both warned in dreams about or God revealing to them truths that we know to be the case the magi not to go back to Herod and Pilate's wife saying have nothing to do with him for he is a righteous man remarkable just remarkable and so in conclusion what's the point to all of this or rather let's return to the point of all of this

I think the main thing to say is that when people come to Jesus it cannot always be explained I think many people find their life in Jesus by the fact that they never would have found their way to him by themselves suddenly we're with Jesus and it's wonderful and it's great but how on earth did we get here and it's just wonderful we can't explain it but we know it to be true we can't you know how did all these things work out that seem so disconnected bring me to Jesus and yet nevertheless here we are worshipping loving obeying reading and loving him entirely we know it to be true and we know it to be true because of the response that we gave and so that's the only thing that is left for us this evening how are we responding to King Jesus the saviour of the world who has come to forgive your sins you see when you've been a Christian for a while the danger is is that you treat Jesus like somebody else's baby you know what it's like we've you know had a

[33 : 59] I'll use my own baby to draw reference to this you have a new baby you bring him into the church or you're in the home and then you know people come around and say oh can I have a hold and you know they get their five and oh and you know they just milked and then you're left cleaning up the milk after they've gone and oh it's wonderful you know and all this and then they give them back and they say oh I must move on and it seems the danger is is that we can come to the story of the birth of the king of the world the saviour of the world and treat him like somebody else's baby where we handle it for a while and think oh this is wonderful this is lovely but here you go and then we just move on tonight and we go home and we do something else and we sort of lost the sense in which we ought to be totally inspired all inspired at the fact that this is God in the flesh who's come to seek and to save the lost God who's gone to great lengths to show us that he loves us but are we all inspired or have we lost the fact that you know we're just handing the baby back so whether or not this is the first time you've heard the story or this is the second time you've heard the story or this is the hundredth time you've heard the story has it provoked in you the truths to be embraced is your faith demonstrating your acceptance of the truth the acceptance of the story is your faith simply a demonstration that you believe this to be true and you're loving

God and you're following him because that's what faith is true faith is simply saying yes I believe it and I'm going to show it I haven't told you a joke this evening in which your sense of humor will determine whether or not you will laugh but I have told you a true story about Jesus born king who will save his people from their sins and so do you get it do you get it do you get it amen amen