



# ***The Awkward Gifts of Christmas***

[Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Last in a 3-part series titled: *Awkward Family Christmas*

Pastor Matt Friend – December 16 & 19, 2021

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## **– OUTLINE –**

### ***Four Takeaways:***

- #1 – Seek Jesus while He may be found.
- #2 – Share the gospel with someone who's not yet a believer.
- #3 – See Christmas as a global thing, not just an American thing.
- #4 – Serve someone in need this Christmas.



# ***The Awkward Gifts of Christmas***

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– NOTES –

## ***Introduction:***

Today we're looking at the three Christmas gifts given by the Magi, or the wise men (as they are often called).

Matthew loved this true story. He actually gave the Magi more words in his Gospel than he gave Jesus' birth narrative. Yet, it's easy to see why. Their story is our story. We're all travelers and sojourners in search of something. We all need direction. Thankfully, the story of the wise men shows us which way to go!

## ***Text:***

[Matthew 2:1-12 \(NIV\)](#)

Understanding the Text

The Gospel of Matthew was written by Matthew, the tax collector, who became one of Jesus' twelve apostles. Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection as a continuation of the whole Biblical story of God and Israel. The theme of Matthew is to prove that Jesus is the fulfillment of that true story, specifically that He is the Messiah from the line of David.

God inspired this text in the Holy Scriptures to further validate Jesus as King of kings. It sets up Matthew's theme that Jesus is the promised King of the line of David who will bring salvation to His people. Matthew shows us that Jesus is no mere human, but is God in the flesh, Immanuel... "God with us!"

Being fully God, Jesus can control stars as a baby, receive gifts



from the nations of the world, and receive worship from far-off travelers. If you're ever playing Christmas trivia and someone asks, "Who wrapped the first Christmas present?" you can respond: "Mary did!"

### *Matthew 2:1...*

It's likely that 1-2 years have passed since the events of Matthew chapter 1. We'll examine why later.

Bethlehem is still a relatively small town today (about half the size of Charleston, WV); however, it was even smaller in Jesus' day. It's situated about 6 miles south of Jerusalem. For the sake of illustration, if the city of Charleston represents Jerusalem, our church campus could represent Bethlehem (roughly 6 miles south). Bethlehem was an important city in Jewish history, being the birthplace of King David.

Who was King Herod? Understanding this man is important to understanding the whole story. He's the villain, the antagonist, the personified "Satan" of the Christmas story.

- Herod I (or Herod the Great) was appointed governor of the Jews in and around modern-day Israel by the Roman emperor, and he governed for over 30 years before Jesus was born.
- The year of Jesus' birth was likely the year of Herod's death, or perhaps one year later. There's ancient speculation that God struck him dead shortly for his crimes against humanity.
- Herod's legacy isn't all bad. He did many good things for Israel. He restored the temple in Jerusalem, building new walls around it including the western "Wailing Wall" where one can still stand and pray today. Herod built theaters, cities, palaces, and fortresses. If you've visited Israel, you've likely seen Caesarea Maritima (by the Sea). This coastal city was built by Harold, along with the hippodrome.
- Herod was a shrewd political survivor. When civil war broke out in Rome between Mark Antony (with Cleopatra VII, queen



of Egypt) and his enemy Octavian, Herod first sided with Mark Antony. However, when Octavian defeated Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BC, Herod immediately switched sides, convincing Octavian (Caesar Augustus) of his loyalty.

- It was common knowledge that Herod murdered two of his wives and three of his sons because they dared to question his authority or posed as a threat. Caesar Augustus wrote about Herod, “It is safer to be Herod’s hog than his son.”
- Herod would later murder all boys (under the age of 2) in Bethlehem in an attempt to murder young Jesus.

Who were the Magi from the east? Who were these wise men?

- We don’t know what specific country they were from, but we do know that well-educated religious leaders from the middle east (Persia) and the far east (China) were all known as *Magi* at this time in history.
- These were religious leaders who were experts in the mysteries of “the great beyond.” Their practices included astrology, dream interpretation, the study of sacred writings, the pursuit of wisdom, and magic.
- It’s helpful to remember that the ancient world made very little distinction between superstition and science. Some served as chemists, mathematicians, philosophers, doctors, and legal authorities. (Our words “magician” and “magistrate” both descend from Magi.)
- Magi are also mentioned in the Old Testament. [Jeremiah 39:3](#) refers to “Nergalsarezer the Rabmag” (Rabmag meaning *chief magi*) in Nebuchadnezzar’s court. In the book of Daniel, “magi” is used 9 times, and “wise men” is used 13 times.
- No one knows for sure how these Magi knew to come to Israel to find the Messiah, but it’s likely (and the theory that I find most plausible) that they were acting on knowledge and training passed down from Daniel himself 500 years earlier, back when he was the chief of the Magi in Nebuchadnezzar’s court. You can read in Daniel 2 about how Daniel came to become



- one of the most famous Magi (v. 48) in Babylon by interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream. It seems evident that whatever truth they learned from Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego... It filtered into their teachings, and much of it survived until the time of Christ.
- Not only did God give Daniel revelations, so did the angels (Daniel 9). They gave Daniel specific interpretations of how certain Scriptures would be fulfilled—Scriptures like the prophecy given by Balaam in Numbers 24:17, “A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.” God gave Daniel some kind of special knowledge about a King and kingdom “that shall never be destroyed” (2:44). Unfortunately, Daniel himself did not live to see all of God's promises fulfilled. Instead, it seems that he left a legacy in Babylon of studying the Holy Scriptures.
  - Daniel certainly would've passed down these detailed interpretations to other Magi. They continually passed them down until 500 years later they were still waiting on their fulfillment. Perhaps the Magi gleaned God's prophetic timeline from Daniel's own words, or perhaps they received a divine dream just as they would after visiting the Christ child (2:12). Either way, the Magi knew to look for a “star” in the heavens to mark the coming of the Savior.

A couple important myths to dispel about the Magi:

- There were only three: Nowhere does the Bible say there were only three. (They brought three gifts, but it never says only three Magi visited.) There could've been three; however, the oldest middle eastern Christian traditions number the Magi at 12. It's possible there were even more than that. Only God knows.
- They rode camels: The ancient Greek historian Herodotus records that the Magi were a religious cast of the Parthian Empire which ruled where modern-day Iraq and Iran are today. During the time of Christ's birth, they were known for their powerful horse cavalries. Though camels would've been in



their entourage, these noble Magi most likely rode Nisean or Arabian horses. The oldest paintings and carvings depict the Magi on horses, not camels.

### *Matthew 2:2...*

In verse two, when the Magi arrive in Jerusalem, one of them speaks up and asks, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

Talk about an awkward case of asking for directions! This would’ve been an odd question for most of the townspeople of Jerusalem; however, Herod took it as a threat to his authority when their question got back to him.

What was the “star” that they saw? The Scriptures don’t define it for us. Whatever it was, it led them from their homeland to Jerusalem, and later to Jesus’ house in Nazareth. Here are two possible explanations...

- Physical Explanation: One theory is that it was an actual constellation of stars, a comet, a supernova, or a conjunction of planets (that glowed with the appearance of a star). Every Christmas the planetariums and astronomers offer explanations of the Christmas star. Some say it must have been the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 6 BC.
- Spiritual Explanation: The theory I espouse is that this was a spiritual, supernatural experience—perhaps a guiding angel that appeared as a star, or some heavenly phenomenon that had the brightness of a star. I’m all for science (and have a greater appreciation of science the older I get), but we don’t need to explain everything scientifically to prove that it actually happened. There’s no scientific explanation for the creation of the universe, Jesus’ virgin birth and incarnation, or His resurrection. It is sufficient to say, “God did it,” saving our questions for heaven. This story drips with the supernatural, so I tend to believe it was a supernatural light with the



appearance of a star. No one knows for sure and Scripture doesn't say. Yet, I tend to think the biblical phenomenon it most closely resembles is God's shekinah glory, seen in the tabernacle and temple of the Old Testament ([Exodus 13:21](#)). This spiritual explanation also fits the bright light that shone on the shepherds when they learned of Christ's birth ([Luke 2:9](#)). Perhaps what the Magi saw was a similar manifestation of God's glory, which appeared to them like a star. We'll see in verse 9 that the star moves, which also leads me to think it was a spiritual phenomenon.

### *Matthew 2:3...*

When King Herod, the villain, heard they were looking for the King of the Jews, imagine what came out of his mouth, "King of the Jews? Why, that's my title!" The arrival of this true King of the Jews was a threat to Herod the Great's throne and to Israel's corrupt religious and political leadership based in Jerusalem.

Herod was disturbed emotionally, while the city of Jerusalem was disturbed physically. The Magi's question didn't bother the city at large as it did Herod, but their presence (the size of their entourage, and their unique appearance) stirred up the whole town.

Imagine the scene... These men probably arrived in Jerusalem with a great deal of pomp and show. Their typical costume could have included tall, cone-shaped hats like those we associate with wizards today. They would have been riding not on camels, but more likely on Persian steeds or Arabian horses. They might even have been traveling with a small army since their journey took them into foreign territory.

If you're a Disney fan, you've probably seen the live action version of *Aladdin* (starring Will Smith). There's a scene when "Prince Ali" parades into the palace gates to court the princess. The Magi probably paraded into Israel with similar pomp and circumstance, complete with soldiers, government offi-



cial, and servants. It would've been much safer for them to travel that way as a group over a thousand or more miles on an international highway infested with bandits. They paraded into Jerusalem, stirred up the whole town, and immediately earned an audience with Herod.

#### *Matthew 2:4...*

Herod calls time-out on his discussion with the Magi and calls a quick huddle with all the religious leaders in Jerusalem. These were the people who oversaw the temple activities (chief priests) and those who interpreted the Old Testament law (scribes and teachers of the law). "We're looking for the Anointed One," Herod said. "The Promised One, the King of the Jews sent from God to free Israel." The religious leaders respond to Herod in verses 5-6.

#### *Matthew 2:5-6...*

In short, the religious leaders quoted two Old Testament verses to Herod, [Micah 5:2](#) and [2 Samuel 5:2](#), though Matthew has taken some liberties to summarize both verses for us.

Actually, the citation of Micah 5:2 is the center and emphasis of this entire true story, as retold by Matthew. "But you, Bethlehem... though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Quoting Micah 5:2 fits with the main point of Matthew's gospel. Jesus is "God with us," the fulfillment of the Old Testament, and specifically of the line of David. He was even born where David was born!

That's what the religious leaders tell Herod. At this point, I imagine the Magi seated out in the hall while Herod finishes the secret religious meeting in his office. When he's finished with the religious leaders, he dismisses them and calls the Magi back into his office.



### Matthew 2:7-8...

After hearing that the Messiah is born in Bethlehem, Herod tries to get the Magi to go to Bethlehem, probably sending spies on ahead to watch where they go in Bethlehem.

Do you think Herod intends to find this Christ child and worship Him? Not a chance! This is the same man who killed two wives and three sons because they were a threat to his authority. He wouldn't think twice about killing a baby from a peasant family he doesn't know.

### Matthew 2:9-10...

The fact that the star rose, went ahead of them, and stopped over a particular house is another reason why I don't believe this was a natural phenomenon. This, again, seems to be something supernatural—perhaps a glowing angel like the shepherds saw sometime earlier in Luke 2.

Notice an important detail of verses 9-10:

- Matthew never tells us where the Magi went, where the Christ-child was, or even where the star was.
- More specifically, he never tells us that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were still in Bethlehem.
- He never says that the Magi went to Bethlehem.
- He never tells us that the Magi followed Herod's orders to go to Bethlehem.
- Herod *assumes* the Messiah baby is still in Bethlehem, and he *thinks* the Magi are going to Bethlehem; nevertheless, many scholars believe that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are back up in their hometown of Nazareth by this time. (I agree with this view.)

Why should we view young Jesus in Nazareth and not Bethlehem at this point in the story?



- The next verse (v. 11) says they were no longer at the manger; instead, they were in their house. We learn from Luke 2 that Mary and Joseph only came to Bethlehem temporarily for tax and census purposes (which explains why they tried to rent a room in the local inn). Joseph's family was from Bethlehem, so Roman law required him to come to Bethlehem for the census and to pay his taxes. (There was no Turbo Tax back then.)
- Luke tells us (in [Luke 2:22-40](#)) that Mary and Joseph went to the temple 40 days later to fulfill the required child dedication under Old Testament law ([Leviticus 12:1-6](#)). After they fulfilled their child dedication, Luke 2:39 says, "When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth."

At first glance, one might think, "Well, maybe the Magi visited Mary, Joseph, and Jesus in Bethlehem during those first 40 days before they went up to the Jerusalem temple? Surely the townspeople didn't make them sleep in a barn after that first night! Maybe they rented a house for 40 days until they could go to the Jerusalem Temple for dedication? Maybe it was during that time that the Magi visited them at a house in Bethlehem?"

All of that sounds good, but there are two problems with that logic:

- Matthew 2:13-15 tells us that Joseph and Mary left *that same night*—the night that the Magi left—to flee to Egypt so Jesus wouldn't be killed by Herod's soldiers. Herod, still thinking that the baby lived in Bethlehem, had all the toddler boys in Bethlehem (two years old and younger) killed just to make sure he killed the Messiah (Matthew 2:16-18). News traveled fast in Israel. Even though Mary and Joseph lived in a different town—the village of Nazareth—they weren't taking any chances, so they fled to Egypt from Nazareth until Herod died.
- The second problem with that logic is that when Mary and Joseph dedicated Jesus in the temple, all they could afford was the peasant sacrifice offering of two birds ([Luke 2:22-24](#); [Leviticus](#)



[12:8](#)). They couldn't even afford a lamb. This certainly doesn't sound like a couple who has been recently given expensive gifts such as gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Why didn't Matthew just say that? Why didn't Matthew simply say, "The Magi visited Jesus in Nazareth?" Because it wasn't relevant to his story. We have the Gospel of Luke to fill in those gaps. Again, Matthew was inspired to write a letter connecting Jesus to King David, and Bethlehem is the village where both were born. Matthew didn't speak incorrectly (for there are no errors in the Bible); he simply left out a detail he didn't feel was important.

So, it is my belief that the true story of the Magi happened in Nazareth, not Bethlehem. According to Luke 2:8-20, the shepherds made it to the manger on that first night in Bethlehem; however, not the Magi who would meet the chosen family in Nazareth months or even a year or two later. We can ask Jesus for sure when we get to heaven. 😊

### *Matthew 2:11...*

The fact that the Magi bowed down and worshiped Jesus fits with the point Matthew is trying to make. Jesus is God in the flesh. He was virgin conceived, virgin born, and worthy to be worshiped. It seems that God, in His grace, opened their eyes to something His own people did not see—that Jesus was God. From this response, it's possible that the Magi were converted and thus became the earliest Gentile believers in Christ.

As for the gold, frankincense, and myrrh... Again, the number of gifts contributed to the tradition that there were three wise men, but the actual number of Magi is unknown. We do know there were three gifts:

- Gold = Symbolizes Jesus' kingliness. It was the most precious metal known to man at that time and was a common symbol of royalty. Gold was a gift fit for a king.



- Frankincense = Symbolizes Jesus' divinity, the fact that He is God. It's an expensive fragrance. In the Old Testament, it was the only incense permitted on the altar, sprinkled on the sacrifice offerings that went up to God ([Exodus 30:9, 34-38](#); [Leviticus 2:2](#)).
- Myrrh = Symbolizes Jesus' upcoming death. Of all the gifts, this was the most unusual to give to a baby. Who in their right mind brings embalming fluid to a baby shower? That's what myrrh was: a fluid used to prepare bodies for burial ([John 19:39](#)). Sometimes the Romans would mix it with wine to have an anesthetic effect, which is why they would later offer Jesus wine mixed with myrrh when He was dying on the cross ([Mark 15:23](#)). It was the fragrance of death, symbolizing the death Jesus would later die to pay for our sins.

Did the Magi foresee the significance of their gifts? Possibly. We don't know. Either way, God guided them.

The kind of gifts seem odd to us, but these were expensive gifts that could've been sold to support Joseph, Mary, and Jesus in their emergency refugee flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). Without these gifts, escape from Herod may not have been possible for this peasant family.

*Matthew 2:12...*

The clandestine departure of the Magi seems even more likely from the village of Nazareth than from Bethlehem.

### **Four Takeaways:**

- #1 – Seek Jesus while He may be found.
- #2 – Share the gospel with someone who's not yet a believer.
- #3 – See Christmas as a global thing, not just an American thing.
- #4 – Serve someone in need this Christmas.