

# BEHOLD

ADVENT CURRICULUM

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# Behold

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## Behold the Promises: Prophecies Fulfilled (Matthew 1-2)

“Behold.” It might sound fancy, old-fashioned, or grandiose, but it is simply an invitation to come and see. Scripture is full of stories about people who tell the good news of what God is doing in the world. When those who were listening doubted, the speaker didn’t argue or provide further proof but instead invited the person to come and see for themselves. This Christmas, we are going to be doing just that. We will be looking at some of the stories of Christmas and seeing for ourselves what was accomplished in Bethlehem more than two thousand years ago. We will behold the gift that was given. We will behold the child that was born. We will behold the miracle of his birth. But we will start by beholding the promise. Everything that happened that first Christmas had been promised beforehand.

A central message of Scripture is to encourage us to put our hope and trust in God and not in the things of this world, like wealth, health, or power. One of the ways that God shows us that He is where we should be placing our trust is through fulfilling prophecies. Throughout Scripture, God tells His people to expect certain things to happen. He does this so that when it happens, we can have a renewed awareness that God is in control. But prophecies are more than just improbable occurrences that God predicts. They are windows into the very heart of God. They show us that God is in control and working things out towards His intended end. They show us important truths we tend to forget. Chief among them is that God keeps His promises.

This is the case with Christmas. The Gospel of Matthew mentions five prophecies fulfilled by the birth of Jesus. By looking closely at each of them, we will see how Jesus fulfills the promises God made to Israel about when, where, and how the Messiah would be born. We will also see how each prophecy gives people unique reasons to hope in a God.

### Virgin Birth – Hope for the Lonely (Matthew 1:22-23)

The first prophecy fulfilled by the birth of Jesus was that He would be born of a virgin. Such an event would be miraculous enough on its own. But since it was prophesied ahead of time, the miraculous nature of the event was even more compounded.

The fulfilled prophecy is founded in Isaiah 7:14, which says, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel.”

This is more than just an impossible event that God was able to do. Matthew and Isaiah both tell us that the point of this miracle was to show us that God is Immanuel, which translates as “God with Us.”

We like to point out that Christmas can be lonely for many people. The truth is that the holiday season makes us aware of the loneliness that we all experience at some point in our lives. This prophecy reminds us that Jesus is proof God cares for us and comes near. We can hope in God because He doesn’t leave us to fend for ourselves or wander alone. Jesus is the living embodiment of Hebrews 13:3: “For He Himself has said, **I will never leave you or abandon you.**” In Matthew 28:20, in the last words of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus himself tells his disciples, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

### **Born in Bethlehem – Hope for the Lowly (Matthew 2:5-6)**

Not only did God foretell through the prophets that Jesus would be born of a virgin, but he also told us where. Micah 5:2 tells us, “Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are small among the clans of Judah: one will come from you to be ruler over Israel for me.”

Again, this prophecy is intended to do more than amaze us at the improbability of the event and the prediction. Bethlehem was chosen instead of Jerusalem to show us something important about God and us.

We live in a world that tells us that we are worthless unless we have power, wealth, or both. That is why the wise men went to Jerusalem. The star told them that a king had been born, and they assumed the king would be born in a palace in the capital city. But God doesn't value the things that man values.

In 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, Paul writes, “<sup>27</sup> Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup> God has chosen what is insignificant in the world-what is viewed as nothing-to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, <sup>29</sup> so that no one may boast in His presence.”

Jesus himself is “the stone that the builder rejected (Mark 12:10).” Jesus also promises his followers that the meek and lowly are blessed and will “inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5).”

So many times, we walk around in this world feeling insignificant, like we don't matter. Jesus was born to seemingly insignificant people in Bethlehem, a seemingly insignificant town. This prophecy helps us hope that what the world calls insignificant is valuable to God.

### **Out of Egypt – Hope for the Lost (Matthew 2:13-15)**

When Herod found out the Wiseman had deceived him, he ordered all the babies in Bethlehem to be killed. Joseph was warned in a dream about this and fled to Egypt. This was done to fulfill a prophecy from Hosea 11:1: “And out of Egypt I called My son.”

This weird series of events demonstrates how God can make order appear out of chaos.

Such truth offers hope to those who are confused by the path they are walking. We all find ourselves at times bewildered by life and feeling a little bit lost. The fulfillment of this prophecy offers hope to us when we feel lost. When life looks confusing, off track, or impossible to make sense of, we can rest in the fact that God knows all the variables and is working everything out. The scribes were probably confused about how the Messiah could be born in Bethlehem and come from Egypt. In hindsight, it all made sense. So, too, for us, in retrospect, we will say to God, “Oh, so that's how it works out.” In the meantime, we have the opportunity to hope that what looks like a wandering and broken road that we are being made to walk is the most direct route to the destination that God has for us.

### **In the Midst of Suffering – Hope for the Afflicted (Matthew 2:18)**

One of the hardest prophecies to discuss occurs in the midst of Herod butchering the little children of Bethlehem in a vain attempt to kill the Messiah. Matthew says that this happened as a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15, which says, “This is what the Lord says: A voice was heard in Ramah, a lament with bitter weeping. Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children because they are no more.”

This prophecy provokes some uncomfortable questions. Does that mean God caused or allowed this to happen? Why did God warn Joseph but allow the other children to be killed?

It’s okay to ask these kinds of questions. No question should be off-limits. If we are going to grow our faith in God, we must be clear about what our obstacles to faith are. The problem of evil is a huge obstacle many people have to believing in God at all or in believing in the goodness of God.

It’s important to realize that God doesn’t promise us the absence of evil. He promises that He will defeat evil. Jesus told his disciples in John 16:33, “You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world.”

It is hard for us to comprehend, but God decided that the best of all possible worlds was not a world in which evil never existed but a world in which evil existed but was conquered. This prophecy might not give the whole answer to the problem of evil. But it does give us reason to hope in the midst of affliction that the evil of this world doesn’t catch God off guard. Evil doesn’t defeat God or derail His plan. He knew it would happen. He is undaunted by it. He gives grace in the midst of it. He is triumphing over it.

### **From Nazareth – Hope for the Unloved (Mathew 2:23)**

Born in Bethlehem to a virgin, then fleeing to Egypt away from suffering. It seems like an impossible story to invent, much less predict ahead of time. But Matthew doesn’t stop there. He gives one more prophecy. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fulfill prophecy by settling in Nazareth. Matthew 2:23 says, “to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: that he would be called a Nazarene.”

But where does that prophecy come from? This one is trickier to pin down. Notice there is no quote from the Old Testament in all capital letters. There is no footnote in your margin telling you the Old Testament reference. Matthew even uses the plural “prophets” instead of the singular “prophet,” which he used for the previous four prophecies.

So, what is Matthew talking about? One thought is that he is referring to Isaiah 11:1, which says, “Then a shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit.” The Hebrew word for “branch” is *neser*. That means Nazareth can be roughly translated as “Branch town.” Some people evidently thought that this was a subtle reference to where the Messiah would be from.

There must be more, though. If this were all there was, Matthew would have quoted the Isaiah passage like he had done with the other prophecies. It is more likely that people in Jesus's day were connection two ideas common in Jewish thinking. First, the Messiah would be despised. The Old Testament is full of references to this. A few of them include Psalm 22:6-8, 13, Isaiah 49:7, Isaiah 53:2-3, 8, and Daniel 9:26. Second, people in Judaea despised people from Nazareth. For example, In John 1:46, when Philip invites Nathaniel to come see Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel responds, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Even other Galileans despised people from Nazareth.

Once again, being from Nazareth is more than a prediction. It is a message of hope. We all go through times when we feel like an outcast or don't fit in and are the wrong kind of people. Jesus, being a Nazarene, offers us hope when we feel unloved. He became one of the most despised and unloved people in his day to demonstrate that no one is unloved by Him.

### **Conclusion**

These five prophecies are five improbable predictions that all point to the fact that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises God made to Israel. But more than that, these prophecies are messages of hope, giving us reason to trust God when we feel alone, insignificant, lost, afflicted, or unloved. Which one do you need to hear the most today?

### **Discussion Question:**

1. How would you define hope? What are some opposites of hope?
2. What are some things besides God that we put our hope in?
3. What does it mean that these prophecies are more than just predictions? How are they messages of hope? How does fulfilled prophecy help you hope more in God?
4. Which message of hope is most meaningful to you? Why?
5. How can we share these prophecies as messages of hope to other people?



## Behold the Miracle: Mary's Unexpected Christmas (Luke 1:26-38)

Christmas is not about having the perfect celebration. Christmas is about God interrupting our plans. God shows up and overturns many of the plans we have made. He does so for His glory and our good. He has a grander plan that is coming true, and He is inviting us to participate in it.

No greater example of this can be found than in the person of Mary. She goes from being a young girl from a small town who is getting ready to be married to being invited into a much larger plan, a plan that will “ruin” many plans that she has made. She goes from planning a wedding and preparing for a family to being the one who would bear the son of God. It sounds unbelievable and jarring.

I am sure you, too, have had your plans interrupted by crisis or catastrophe — the loss of a job, the unexpected diagnosis, the unanticipated accident. Something you didn't see coming makes you wonder what is going on and whether God is in control. Watch how Mary handles it. As we go through the story, notice how Mary reveals how to handle when God interrupts and changes the plans we have made.

### **An Unexpected Visitor (Luke 1:26-29)**

Mary is a young woman living in a small, insignificant town in a far corner of the Roman Empire. She is probably in her late teens and engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. Everything about this screams ordinary. This is the way things are supposed to go. One day, she is sitting in her house, minding her own business, maybe thumbing through bride magazines, planning her wedding, and thinking about her new life that is about to begin. The next thing she knows, a stranger is standing in her living room. One thing I have always found intriguing is that it says that the angel Gabriel was sent to Nazareth and that he “came in.” For some reason, I guess I always assumed that angels appear. They show up or materialize. They don't walk up. But Gabriel did. He walks in on Mary and greets her.

### **An Unexpected Plan (Luke 1:30-35)**

The angel tells Mary that she has found favor with God and that God will use her to bring the Messiah into the world. She has gone from a nobody-woman in a nobody town to a central player in God's plan. The child she will bear will sit on David's throne and rule over the house of Jacob. On the one hand, this is a huge blessing and opportunity. On the other hand, this is going to cause numerous headaches. She is engaged to Joseph. Now, she will become pregnant with a child that isn't his.

### **An Unexpected Proof (Luke 1:36-38)**

Mary is obviously bewildered and has questions. The angel offers proof that what he says will happen by pointing to another instance of God at work doing the impossible. Her relative, Elizabeth, was barren and thought to be too old to bear children. She is pregnant and in her sixth month.

If you look at what Mary did in this encounter, her actions can serve as a model of how to respond when God interrupts our plans. She is a perfect example of human obedience to God's plan. Here are some things this story shows us about how to deal with God changing your plans.

### **1. It's okay to be confused v29**

"But she was deeply troubled..."

Sometimes, when the unexpected happens, many people feel like the "Christian" thing to do is to be excited about what is happening. We feel like we have to have it all figured out and see how God is using what has happened. But that is not the case. Mary shows us that it is okay to be confused. An angel walks into her house and starts changing all the plans she has made for herself. Mary had an appropriate human response. She was confused, perplexed. She didn't understand.

*It's okay to be confused...*

*Because when we are confused, we realize we don't know; we realize our smallness.*

Being confused is humbling. It reveals we don't have all the answers. It shows we don't have everything figured out. And that is a good thing. God puts us into places where we are confused to show us that we are very small and need to learn we aren't as big as we think we are.

Paul says it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:7-9:

<sup>7</sup> Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair. <sup>9</sup> We are persecuted but not abandoned. We are struck down but not destroyed...

Notice what Paul says specifically in v8: perplexed, but not in despair. God sometimes puts us in positions of confusion so that we realize that we don't have it figured out, that we are weak, and that we don't know what we are doing. He doesn't do this to abandon us. He does it to show us that He is wise, strong and has it all figured out. As Paul says in v7 above, "We have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us."

### **2. It's okay to wrestle with it v29**

"She kept wondering..."

Sometimes, when the unexpected happens, perhaps we give ourselves time to be confused, but most people think they should shrug their shoulders, mumble something about how God knows best, and then keep plugging along. That is not the case at all. We are not only allowed to wrestle with what God is doing in our lives; I think we are supposed to.

By wrestling with it, I mean trying to figure it out, analyzing why you are upset, considering how it could be good, voicing your bewilderment, and chewing on it repeatedly. I am not talking about stewing on something or anxiously trying to figure out a way out, but thoughtfully mulling over what is going on and how this can be the work of a good God.

*It's okay to wrestle with it...*

*Because when we wrestle, God can change us.*

Wrestling means engaging with God and using our whole selves. When we wrestle with the thing, or ourselves, or with God, we are putting ourselves in motion, and it gives God an opportunity to move us, change us, and direct us down the path He has for us and wants us to see.

### **3. It's okay to ask questions v34**

"How can this be..."

For some reason, many people believe they aren't allowed to ask questions in church. Many people think that when God changes our plans, our job is to accept stoically whatever He sends down the pike. Nothing could be further from the truth. Scripture is filled with people asking God questions. God desires to interact with us. We pay lip service to this with phrases like "having a relationship with God," but functionally, our lives look more like we believe our job is to receive orders from God and do what we are told.

There is a common scene that repeats itself over and over. A person makes an appointment with a trusted friend, mentor, or pastor. After a few minutes of hemming and hawing, they finally say what is on their mind. "I think I am losing my faith." "Why?" the interlocutor responds. "Because..." and what follows is a serious question about an important issue that this person has. And this person feels like it's wrong to think it, much less ask it. They feel guilty that the question occurred to them. By the way, the question that generally follows is usually along the lines of "Sometimes I look at all the evil in the world and wonder if God really exists." If you have ever had this question or other hard questions, be encouraged by a couple of things. First, that is a great question, and you are allowed to ask it. Second, take courage that there are answers out there. In a culture where questions aren't encouraged, we sometimes don't realize how deep and strong the foundations of Christianity are. Third, you aren't losing your faith; you are gaining it. Don't run from the areas where you have doubts, questions, or uncertainty. Those are the areas where God is trying to mature your understanding and show you more of who He is.

*It's okay to ask questions...*

*Because when we ask questions, God can answer.*

We say God is personal and wants a relationship with us. But we live functionally like we don't expect it. Wrestling with hard things is an excellent way to interact with God. To voice questions, mull things over, and ask God for answers. Asking questions puts the ball back in God's court. Ask, keep asking, and see if God doesn't answer. The Bible is full of promises that if we call to God, He will answer. When we ask questions, we give Him the chance to do so.

#### **4. It's Important to Surrender v38**

“See, I am the Lord’s Servant...”

It’s okay to be confused. It’s okay to wrestle with it. It’s okay to ask questions. By the way, that is a good description of what it means to seek after God. If you have ever wondered what it means to “seek God,” these three words provide a pretty decent starting point. Something happens, and you need answers, so you seek God. You go looking for Him. Being confused, wrestling, and asking questions are all signs of going to God and wanting to know what He is up to.

Beyond these, though, is an attribute of Mary that is important to include. Mary didn’t just do the first three. She also surrendered to the will of God. v38 might be one of the most important verses in Scripture. “‘See, I am the Lord’s servant,’ said Mary. ‘May it happen to me as you have said’” Beyond all of her questions, confusion, and perplexity, there was a desire to humbly submit to what the Lord had called her to.

Without this last attribute, we can become arrogant or bitter when approaching God. God wants us to seek Him. But He wants to show us He is a good God that can be trusted with our lives, that He has a good plan, and that it’s for His glory and our God. It is not always going to make sense or be able to be explained in a way so as to answer all questions. So, we need to be able to trust and submit. Without this, we will always be waiting for surety to decide for ourselves. Or we will be waiting for all the answers before we decide to lay down our objections, our hurt, or our bitterness. God calls us to realize that He is bigger than us, wiser than us, and loves us. And therefore, He can be trusted even when we can’t understand what He is up to.

There is another scene in Scripture that reveals a similar attitude. A few chapters Later, in Luke 5:5, Peter (called Simon at the time) meets Jesus, who tells him after a hard night of fruitless fishing to try again in the place Jesus says. “‘Master,’ Simon replied, ‘we’ve worked hard all night and caught nothing. But if you say so, I’ll let down the nets.’”

“But if you say so” – What Jesus asked Peter to do didn’t make sense. Peter was a professional fisherman. He knew how to fish, and he had been doing it all night. But like Mary, the simple act of trust. Because you say so. That is the most important attribute Mary shows us in how to handle when God upsets our plans and hands us the unexpected. To trust and surrender, even when it doesn’t make sense, or we are scared, bewildered, or confused. Because we serve a Good God who loves us and is at work to bring all things to their appointed end.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Have you ever had God interrupt your life with something unexpected (either good or bad) that required you to radically reorganize your life? How did you handle it? How did you respond?
2. How do you deal with being confused with what God is doing? How do we wrestle with God and what He is doing?
3. Do you ever feel like there are certain questions you aren't allowed to ask? Where do you go to find answers?
4. What are some reasons we don't always surrender to the unexpected things that God sends our way?
5. How can we develop an attitude of trusting, loving submission to God's plan over our own?

## Behold the Child: The Shepherds and God's Triumph (Luke 2:8-14)

Have you ever felt like you didn't matter? Have you ever felt like you were stuck on the bottom rung of the vocational ladder and nothing was ever going to change? The opportunities and open doors others seem to find always elude you. You feel purposeless and marginalized. You feel unimportant in the overall scheme of things.

If there were a group of people in the ancient world who could relate, it would be shepherds. City dwellers have always idealized people who live in the country. The Ancients were no different. They imagined shepherds sitting under trees all day, playing songs on their lyres (ancient guitars), attempting to lure passing shepherdesses to join them and eating delicious food and drink before eventually drifting off to sleep in a lazy afternoon.

But truth be told. As any farmer will tell you, country life is hard. You will never work so hard to be poor. The same was true in Jesus's day. Cities were where the action, power, and money were. If you weren't there, you were nobody.

That is why it is so surprising that God chose a bunch of nobodies to be the first recipients of the news that Jesus was born. It was news that God had intervened in history and was in the process of overturning the current order of things.

Sometimes, we focus on the fact that the shepherds found Jesus. That is the conclusion of the story. But what was the significance of the child the shepherds were invited to behold? It's more than just window dressing on the story of Jesus' birth. It reveals the cosmic and eternal significance of what was happening in Bethlehem that morning.

The Story starts with:

### **Some Startled Shepherds (Luke 2:8-9)**

Near Bethlehem, on the night Jesus was born, Shepherds were out in the field, watching their flocks. These weren't just poor shepherds. They were probably the poorest of the poor. They didn't have a sheepfold to take their sheep to at night. Either these were hired night watchmen or else their own sheep, and they were too poor to pay someone else to watch their sheep at night. Either way, the guy who gets stuck pulling the graveyard shift is the lowest of the low. The only qualification is a pulse. These are the least important people in the region that night. They are probably trying to stay awake and keep their eyes on the sheep to ensure they don't wander off or get taken.

Suddenly, two things happened: an angel was standing before them, and the glory of the Lord was shining all around them. The first alone would be enough to freak you out. If you have ever been camping out in the woods, you know that sometimes the only thing more alarming than being alone is actually encountering someone. But not only does another person walk up, it's an angel...and when he arrives, the night turns into day.

The shepherds were perfectly justified in responding the way they did: they were terribly afraid.

But the messenger proceeds to make:

### **An Angelic Announcement (Luke 2:10-12)**

The angel tells them not to be afraid because their message is Good News that will cause Great Joy for everyone who hears it. All three of those phrases are important. It's not just okay news but news that will cause great joy. It's not just for some people but for all people.

The angel tells them of a savior who has been born in Bethlehem. And gives them a sign: you will find this savior, this anointed one, this Lord not in the palace but in a barn, not in a fancy crib but in a food trough.

And immediately, something else starts happening. The shepherds are invited to witness:

### **The Heavenly Triumph (Luke 2:13-14)**

More people appear. The text says that along with the angel, there is a multitude of heavenly hosts. Host is a word that has lost all meaning in our language. We imagine a choir in white robes singing Christmas hymns. But host has a more powerful meaning. It means Army. There is an Old Testament name of God: Yahweh Sabaoth, The Lord of Armies. This name of God is referenced in the second verse of "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;  
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:  
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;  
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.

To better understand what is happening, try changing "a multitude of heavenly hosts" to "a battalion of the heavenly army." These are heavenly soldiers. But what are they doing singing and shouting the praising of God? Well, it seems like they are being shown celebrating a "Triumph."

We use the word "triumph" to refer to a victory in battle. But the word actually refers to the tumultuous parade celebrating a victory. Having a special name for the parade might sound silly or secondary. But remember, there were no newspapers, photographs, or websites. The purpose of the parade, though, was to show and tell information about the victory that was won. Animals from the conquered provinces would be led through town. Parade floats full of actors would act out key events in the battle. Carts laden with spoils would be shown. And the victorious soldiers would march through the streets chanting songs and shouting praises, telling the mighty deeds they had been involved in.

That is what is happening here. The Angel announces the good news, and the shepherds get to witness a heavenly triumph being celebrated. They see and hear heavenly soldiers shouting about a great victory that has been won. A victory that has brought Glory to God and Peace to people who are on his side.

When it is all over, the shepherds leave their flocks and immediately go and confirm the story the angel had told them.

### God's Triumph Opens an Unseen Reality

So many times, we think we have all or at least most of the information. We see all the evil in the world. We fail to see anything resembling God's actions, so we sink into bitterness or despair. But there is an odd arrogance to our despair. We think we know everything. Despair is for those who think they know for certain all the facts and every outcome. We do not.

There is a freeing humility that comes from realizing that you don't need to know everything and don't need to have every answer. Most of us never get there without finding someone greater than ourselves to trust.

God's triumph showed the shepherd and us that God is working even when we don't see it. For a moment, the shepherds see what was going on in God's dimension while they were keeping watch over their sheep. A victory had been won in Bethlehem, and angel armies were celebrating.

A similar story happened in 2 Kings 6, with the prophet Elisha:

<sup>15</sup> When the servant of the man of God got up early and went out, he discovered an army with horses and chariots surrounding the city. So he asked Elisha, "Oh, my master, what are we to do?"<sup>16</sup> Elisha said, "Don't be afraid, for those who are with us outnumber those who are with them."<sup>17</sup> Then Elisha prayed, "LORD, please open his eyes and let him see." So the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he saw that the mountain was covered with horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Our eyes are veiled, and we don't see what is happening in God's dimension. If we did, we would see what the shepherds saw: proof of God doing great things and winning battles.

### God's Triumph Occurs in Unexpected Ways

Not only does the triumph reveal an unseen reality, but it also shows that God works in unexpected ways. The Lord chose to enter the world through a poor, unknown family in a poor, unknown town. Born in a barn and placed in a feed trough. The attendants weren't royalty or wealthy aristocrats. The first people to show up were the poorest of the poor shepherds.

All this points to a God who doesn't do things the way we expect. He does not value what we value. In fact, he has come to overturn our way of looking at things. Too many times, we try to bring our own value system into our following Jesus. God doesn't care about the things we care about. And similarly, frequently, we don't care about the things God cares about. God intentionally chooses the lowest people to show he has different values and can use anybody. Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians 1:

<sup>27</sup> Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup> God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, <sup>29</sup> so that no one <sup>[a]</sup> may boast in his presence.



### God's Triumph Offers an Unshakeable Peace.

The triumph the shepherds saw revealed an unseen reality and showed that God works in expected ways, but what has actually been accomplished that would benefit the shepherds? The heavenly armies were singing of two things: Glory and Peace.

Glory simply means renown or fame. When a general wins glory, he gains fame for his victories and accomplishments. That is something that generals get but usually doesn't benefit the soldiers too much. We are told to glorify God and give God glory. But why does he need or want glory for himself? God is complete in Himself. We don't add anything to God by praising him. Simply put, God's glory is for our benefit and for our neighbors. By giving God glory, we acknowledge we did not accomplish anything, and we deserve no praise. We proclaim that he is the source of whatever we have accomplished. Giving God glory benefits our neighbor because it allows us to show them what happens when you trust God with your life. Giving God glory makes your life a walking advertisement for what God has done. It is a constant invitation to others to trust God and see what he will do in their lives.

In addition to glory, God's triumph offers us peace. Luke 2 started with a reference to Caesar Augustus, who had claimed to bring peace through conquest and oppression. Here, the shepherds learn that God is bringing peace. And God's peace is different. It isn't enforced by weapons of war. In John 14:27, Jesus says: *"27 Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives."* God's peace is the resolution of conflict. It is the presence of God's love, justice, mercy, and grace. It gives life rest and freedom to all who experience it. And it rests on people that he is pleased with.

Would you characterize your life as full of peace? Does the peace of God sound pretty good to you? In Philippians 4:7, Paul says the peace of God "surpasses all understanding." Think of how much your life is characterized by conflict and battle. You war with your work, your schedule, your chores, your family, and yourself. There is a constant battle raging somewhere around or within you. Jesus came to bring peace. It's not like the world gives. And it is something that will satisfy you to your core.

### Discussion questions:

1. Who are the people that our world undervalues or overlooks?
2. How does this story turn the world's values on its head?
3. How does it help you to know there is an unseen reality where God is at work right now?
4. What kinds of conflict characterize your life?
5. What are some bad ways the world tries to give peace?

## Behold the Gift: Wise Men Still Seek Him (Matthew 2:1-12)

Few things are likely to create controversy in the fall than a discussion of when it is permissible to start decorating for Christmas. Some people wait until it gets cool. Others follow a progression: Halloween, Thanksgiving, and then Christmas. One thing few people even discuss is when the Christmas season ends. It seems like the same people who are determined to put their Christmas stuff up in September are also determined to put everything away on Dec 26.

The truth is, though, that the Christmas season doesn't end on Dec 25. That's when it used to start. Traditionally, Christmas started on Dec 25 and ran until Epiphany, a holiday that most Americans know little about, including the date, which is Jan 6. Remember that tedious Christmas carol, "The Twelve Days of Christmas"? Well, it didn't end on Christmas; it started then. Add 12 days to Dec 25, and you end up on Jan 6. People used to put their Christmas trees up on Dec 24 and celebrate through the Twelve Day holiday.

Why don't Americans typically celebrate Christmas this way? Well, sadly and cynically, Christmas has been overly commercialized. It's a holiday that involves giving presents and is conveniently located at the end of the tax year. Companies can close out the year in the black and avoid inventory tax. That is why the day after Thanksgiving is called Black Friday. Many companies haven't made any profit the whole year until then. There is no business incentive to stretch Christmas into the new year.

The purpose of this introduction is not to rant about the negative impact of business on the Christmas holiday but to provide an opening to talk about Epiphany. Epiphany is the day we celebrate the Magi's coming to visit baby Jesus. It is a story of wealthy, powerful, wise men who traveled a great distance to worship and honor a baby in a barn. They dared to seek. If we look closely at their story, perhaps we can learn to be just as courageous.

### **An Unexpected Arrival (Matthew 2:1-3)**

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, some visitors arrived who were looking for him. They are described as Magi from the East, and they seem to be astrologers because they are observing the stars. In addition, it is assumed that they are rich because of the gifts they brought. Interestingly, nowhere does it say that they are "kings" or that there are three of them. The position is assumed from the wealth. The number is assumed from the three gifts that were given.

- Magi from the East – People disagree about who the Magi were because by Jesus's day, the word "magi" could be used for any magician or even just a deceiver or swindler. But the likely meaning is that these were actual Magi, members of the priestly class of a religion from Persia called Zoroastrianism. Why on earth would priests from a different religion come to worship the King of the Jews? Well, it seems like Zoroastrianism initially emerged in Persia during the time of the Jewish Exile in Babylon. Whatever the religion later turned into, it seems like it was strongly influenced by and borrowed heavily from Judaism. That was probably why these members of the priestly class knew about the Jewish expectation of the Messiah and were looking for him as well.

- We saw His Star in the East. – What exactly did they see? Sometimes, we imagine a star leading them like a guide. But the truth is, we are not quite sure what exactly they saw. They saw some sort of astronomical phenomenon that signaled to them that a Jewish King had been born. But it evidently didn't tell them much else beyond that. They didn't know exactly where to go, so they headed to Israel and naturally went to the capital city, Jerusalem, to inquire about the royal birth at the palace.
- He was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him – The response to the Magi was alarm. Why was Herod upset at their arrival? First, he evidently hadn't had a son born to him recently. This meant that the Magi were looking for a potential rival to his power. Also, they said they were looking for "He who has been born king of the Jews." You see, Herod wasn't born a king. He had been appointed king by the authority of Rome. He wasn't even Jewish but Edomite. He was not the real king of the Jews, and everyone knew it. But he held onto power because of his alliance with the Romans. Now the Magi come saying that a new king has been born. No wonder he was worried and all Jerusalem with him. What turmoil would this new rival cause?

#### **An Unexpected Opportunity (Matthew 2: 4-8)**

- He asked where the Messiah was to be born – Herod assembles his own wise men, no doubt mad that they had missed this and wondering what was happening. He wants to know where the Messiah was to be born. These students of the word tell him that Micah 5:2 prophesies the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem, a city about 7 miles south of Jerusalem. Sometimes, we skip over the actual prophecy because we know the meaning. But God promises to send not just someone to exert power over the nation. He promises a shepherd who will live out Psalm 23 for the people.
- Go and Search – After Herod finds out where he goes back to the Magi and asks when they saw the star. He then sends them to Bethlehem to find the baby. He pretends that he wants to worship the baby too. But if that were so, why on earth doesn't Herod go with them? The Magi have been journeying probably for two years. They have traveled several hundred miles through land that was treacherous and among people who might be dangerous. Herod is seven miles from Bethlehem. Why doesn't he go? It's probably because he wants to plan on what to do if they find a baby. Of all the people who heard about the Magi, no one seems to go with them. They knew where the Messiah was to be born. They knew what the Messiah was supposed to be. Now they had word that the Messiah was here, and no one could be bothered to take an afternoon walk to see if it was true. They don't take the opportunity because they don't want it. They want to stay in power. They want to be the ruler and the shepherd. They refuse to be led; they refuse to bend the knee, so they don't go.

#### **An Unexpected Discovery (Matthew 2:9-11)**

- The star went on before them – Again, we aren't sure what they saw. Stars don't move. So it can't be that the star changed location. There have been some interesting suggestions about what it could have been. One is that they might have seen planets moving. Ancient astronomers didn't know that planets and stars were different things. The only difference they noticed was that stars were fixed in relationship to all the other stars but that planets moved. In fact, the name "planet" comes from the Greek word "planetes," which means wanderer. To the ancients, planets were just wandering stars. Perhaps they saw planets moving in a way that was meaningful to them. Another suggestion is that

perhaps they saw a comet. Whatever they saw, they recognized it as divine guidance, and it filled them with tremendous joy.

- Entering into the house...they worshipped – The reference to the house indicates that the Magi didn't arrive on Christmas night. The shepherds found Jesus in a stable. The Magi find Jesus in a house. Even then, it was probably small and modest. One wonders how crowded the room was. It must have been an odd sight. Great and powerful men, undoubtedly with an entourage, come to a small house in a poor town. They enter and fall on the floor before a mother and her baby. This is more than kneeling. This was more than a sign of respect. This was the sign of submission before a king. They also gave Him three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These three gifts also represent how they viewed Jesus. Some even consider the gifts prophetic. Gold is a gift for a king. Frankincense is used in worshiping a deity. Myrrh was a spice used in burial. These three gifts symbolize the three roles that Christ revealed himself to be: King, God, and Sacrifice.

### **An Unexpected Detour (Matthew 2:12)**

After seeing Jesus, they had evidently planned on returning to Herod because the route back to their own country went north from Bethlehem back through Jerusalem. But they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. So, they went home by another route. We aren't told what route they took or even what happened when they arrived. But it is important to realize that God led them to Jesus by means of the star. But that wasn't the end. He kept leading them even as they headed home. This time, He guided them by means of a dream instead of a star. Who knows how their lives changed based on what they experienced. We do know that they came following divine guidance and left under the same guidance.

### **Application: Wise Men Still Seek Him**

**Seeking Requires Longing** – It might sound like something not worth noting, but the first thing the wise men did was look. They saw a star because they were looking. They knew they were missing something, and they were searching for it. The same is true with us. We all have a sense that something is missing in our lives. We have a hole inside us. St. Augustine said it is a God-shaped hole. Nothing else will fit it. So, God calls us to seek Him. In fact, He created us to seek Him. Act 17:27 says God made us so that we "might seek God." Jesus promised in Matthew 7:8 that "the one who seeks finds." The one condition is that we must be wholehearted in our search. In Jeremiah 29:13, God says, "you will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart." The wise men were searching for God with their whole hearts. The proof is found in what they did when they saw the sign.

**Seeking Requires Risking** – The wise men took a long journey when they saw the sign. In modern times, long distances can be covered with relative ease and fantastic speed. Within a single day, we could travel to almost any place in the world. But this is an incredibly recent occurrence. For most people in human history, travel was slow, dangerous, and expensive. Most people stayed close to home. These wise men set out on a journey of almost a thousand miles. It probably took them two years, and that's just one way. Who knows how much it cost them. All along the way, they were easy prey for robbers. But they took the risk. Why? Because when you see the star that you have been searching and longing for, you risk everything to find the fulfillment. Jesus says we are supposed to seek His kingdom this way. In

Matthew 13:44, He says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in the field, that a man found and reburied. Then in his joy he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field.” Joy over finding what you were looking for, finding what satisfies your soul, will make you risk everything and sell everything in the hopes of obtaining that one thing.

**Seeking Requires Submitting** – Real searching is a sign of humility. It shows that you realize you lack something that someone else has. The culmination of humility is worship. That is what the wise men do when they find Jesus. These were the richest, smartest, most important people in the world. They came to a little town in a backwater province at the end of an empire. They go into a tiny house and lie down before a baby. They aren’t just honoring Him. They fell down before Him on the ground and worshiped him. They showed that they realized He was everything and they were nothing. Their worship overflowed with gifts. They opened their treasures and gave Him what they had brought. Real worship gives. Real worship sacrifices. It does so willingly because of the incalculable worth of the joy received. Willingness or eagerness to give is a chief attribute of sincere worship. Giving isn’t something demanded by the one worshipped. It is offered willingly by a person who acknowledges that what he has received is more valuable than what he has given.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How do the Magi compare with Herod? How are they similar? How are they different?
2. How does seeking start in longing? What do we long for? Where do we seek fulfillment for those longings?
3. How is seeking risky? What did the Magi risk? What are we called to risk?
4. Why does seeking require humility? How do worship and giving relate to this?
5. How are the three gifts the Magi give to Jesus symbolic and prophetic? What do they mean?

## –ABOUT THE AUTHOR–

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