Matthew 2:1-2

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[0:00] Now, I invite you to turn in God's Word to the passage that we read together, Matthew chapter 2, and we'll read again the first two verses.

Matthew chapter 2. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, may John, or wise men from the east, came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?
We saw a star in the east and have come to worship him. And so on, the story continues. Well, who were these wise men?
Why did they leave the comforts of home? For the kind of journey they must have had. Described vividly by T.S. Eliot in his poem, The Journey of the Magi.
A cold coming we had of it. Just the worst time of the year for a journey, and such a long journey.
[1:24] The night fires going out, and the lack of shelters, and the cities hostile, and the towns unfriendly, and the villages dirty and charging high prices.

A hard time we had of it. And what kind of connection can we today make with them?
Can they help us to know what Christmas is all about? I'd like to look with you, first of all, at the men.
And then we'll look at the star. And then the gifts. And finally, we'll consider the challenges.
So, the men. We don't know for sure where they came from. Some commentators suggest that it was from Yemen, especially since it is known that all three of the gifts were produced and exported from there.
[2:38] But by far the strongest tradition sees them as coming from Persia, modern-day Iran, where scholars known as Magi, sometimes they were rich and politically powerful.

They're referred to by, for example, Herodotus, the famous Greek historian, as learned priests and scribes.
They may have been part astrologers, part astronomers, which would explain both their interest in the stars and the fact of God's directing them to Bethlehem by a star.
Of course, we're not surprised that legend has got busy tacking names onto them, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, and also elevating them to the status of kings.
We three kings of Orient are bearing gifts we traverse afar. However, we actually know very little about them.
[3:59] But don't you think that that very fact concentrates our attention on the purpose of their journey?

We have come to worship Him. That's it. Forget the trappings of legend. Strip away the paraphernalia of Christmas, the reindeer and the trees and the snow and the tinsel and the turkey and the crackers, for all that we enjoy that legitimately in our families.
Let's turn to the one born as king, not just of the Jews, but king of kings and lord of lords, and bow down and worship Him.
So there are the men. But then there's the star. And once again, there's plenty speculation. For example, some commentators have spoken of Halley's Comet shooting brilliantly across the sky, though that would have been some years previously, or perhaps some various conjunctions of planets.
The truth is that we don't know whether God made use of a natural phenomenon or not. We don't know if the star led directly all the way, though it definitely did from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.
[5:39] The important fact is that God used this means to lead these men to Christ, and that He confirmed it by His Word.

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The chief priests and teachers of the law may very well have been a bunch of self-serving hypocrites, but they knew their Bibles.
Listen again to verse 5. Where is the Christ to be born? Where is the Christ to be born? Asks Herod. In Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, For this is what the prophet has written.
But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.
And it's not at all surprising that the wise men were ready to believe God's Word since from the time of the captivity, the Jewish captivity, their scribes lived in Babylon, which was later conquered by the Persian Empire, and their prophet Daniel.
[6:59] He had written of the coming Messiah and God's purposes of blessing for the world through Him and through the writings of their prophets.

The Jewish scribes, we know, were meticulous in preserving the chronicles of their people's history and what their prophets had said.
And you remember what Paul says in Romans chapter 3 at verse 2, that to them, the Jewish people, to them were entrusted the oracles of God, or as our NIV translation here has it, the very words of God.
And don't we ourselves today here, don't we owe these scribes a huge debt of gratitude 2,000 years after the wise men would have been privileged to scrutinize their inspired writings.
But the tragedy in our society is that so much else is mingled with the Word, that God's truth is often blurred, and that Jesus whom the wise men worshiped is obscured and set aside.
[8:32] But you and I here today, let's not give in to the legends and to the traditions of our own day. Let's come back to Jesus as Savior and Lord ourselves, and let's do everything we can to point our friends and our neighbors, our workmates, our colleagues to Him, King Jesus.

So we've got the men, we've got the star, let's look now for a little at the gifts. Before we look at the gifts one by one, it is very worthwhile noting that as they came with their gifts, the center of their attention was Jesus, the infant King.
Notice how in every reference in this short passage to Jesus, the child is mentioned first before his mother.
Verse 11, on coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary. Verse 13, when they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.
Get up, he said, take the child and his mother. Verse 14, so he got up, took the child and his mother. Verse 20, get up, the angel said, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel.
[10:16] And then verse 21, Joseph does exactly that. He got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. Mary was and is blessed among women, but never, never to any degree that would focus attention on her and not on her divine son.

But let's go on to look at the gifts. And as we consider them, we find that they're hugely symbolic.
In the words of one of the earliest church fathers, Origen, these men brought gold as to a king, myrrh as to one who was mortal, and incense as to God.
So, let's take the gold. Often called the king of metals. You find gold constantly mentioned in the Bible in connection with royalty.
Think of Nebuchadnezzar described in Daniel's vision as a head of gold. or in King Solomon's temple, gold and silver were as abundant as the stones in the street.
[11:54] In Psalm 21, we read, the king rejoices in your strength. You placed a crown of pure gold upon his head.

So, in the light of these references, and many, many more, we can see that the wise men's gift of gold assures us that we're not just looking at a cuddly baby in its cot, but at the sovereign Lord of all, clothed with authority, before whom and his laws you and I need to submit and obey.
And we're also solemnly reminded that one day he will sit as king on his heavenly throne when all the nations, including all of us here today, will be gathered before him and hear his infallible judgment.
There's an incident in the life of the famous Lord Nelson, and he was very celebrated for his courteous treatment of defeated foes.
On one occasion, he was receiving an enemy admiral on the deck of his ship, and the admiral, knowing this reputation of Lord Nelson, he advanced with outstretched hand.

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[13:37] But Nelson stopped him with the words, first your sword, then your hand. And so, we must come before Christ the King first as repentant sinners, only then receiving his gracious forgiveness.

So, there's gold, and then there's certainly in the old translations, frankincense or incense. In the Bible, the almost exclusive reference to the use of incense is as perfume offered to the Lord in connection with the temple sacrifices.
in Exodus chapter 31, or 30 it is, chapter 30, the people are warned that this specially prepared incense is not for yourselves, it is holy, set apart to the Lord.
What happened was that burning coals were taken from the altar of burnt offering and placed on the altar of incense, which was a golden altar standing in the holy place immediately in front of the most holy place, known as the holy of holies.
And when the priest would take incense and scatter it or sprinkle it on the coals, fragrant smoke rose heavenwards, symbolizing the prayers and thanksgiving of both people and priests.
[15:39] Think of Psalm 141, near the beginning of the psalm it says, may my prayer be set before you as incense.

Or think of the scene when Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was serving as a priest in the temple. And we're told in Luke's gospel, when the time of the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside, the incense and the prayers going together.
And there's an even more impressive scene in the picture given in Revelation chapter 8, where we read that another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar.
He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand.
So then, in Old Testament times, in New Testament times, in heaven itself, when eternity transcends time, it was only to God that incense could be offered.
[17:11] It was only to God that prayer could be directed. And here, in that lowly cattle shed, wise men from the East offered incense as an act of worship to a helpless babe in his mother's arms.

Loud and clear, they're proclaiming through their incense, this baby is God. The children reminded us of that near the beginning of their presentation this morning.
This baby is God. The eternal word has become flesh and dwells among us. And friends, unless that's true, the nativity is just a pretty story.
But it's not. It's God manifest in the flesh, who, in the words of an ancient theologian, remained what he was when he became what he was not.
And this is well expressed in many, though sadly not in all, but in many of the carols that we've been hearing over and over again during this Christmas period.
[18:40] And isn't it hypocrisy to sing them if at the same time we reject the central reality of the person on whom they focus?

Think of them, I could quote many of them, but think, for example, O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord, God of God, light of light, lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb, or mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die, or veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity.
Here in Bonacord, we've got no altars, no incense, no smells and bells, but with the sure promise of King Jesus here among us today.
And the question that the incense puts to us is this, is our worship fragrant and well pleasing to King Jesus today.
So, there was gold, there was frankincense, and also myrrh. Now, this was anointment from a sweet-smelling tree.
[20:12] The commentator William Hendrickson, he sums up its uses in this way, perfume. It was a perfume used by and in the interests of mortal man to make his life more pleasant, his pain less dreadful, and his burial less repulsive.

It was used in weddings. Think of Psalm 45, where the bride is perfumed with aloes, myrrh, and cassia.
But it was especially associated with death. You remember at the crucifixion that the soldiers offered Jesus wine mixed with myrrh in order to dull the pain, but he refused it.
And then at his burial, we read that his body was anointed by Joseph and Nicodemus with a mixture of myrrh and aloes.

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The fact was that only as man could the eternal Son of God die. But it's not just that he became mortal.
[21:36] We're pointed to the purpose of his death. He bore our sins in his own body on the tree. And without the atonement, the incarnation is meaningless.

And as these men offered their myrrh, bowing down in worship, they were acknowledging that, however dimly they may have understood it at the time.
I mentioned at the beginning a poem by T.S. Eliot, The Journey of the Magi. And at the end of the poem, he imagines one of the wise men musing in his old age, back there in Persia perhaps.
All this, said the man in his old age, all this was a long time ago, I remember, and I would do it again.
But were we led all that way for birth or death, we returned to our places, these kingdoms, but no longer at ease here in the old dispensation with an alien people clutching their gods.
[23:00] I should be glad of another death. And there was another death on the cross of Calvary. The Magi never saw it.

They maybe weren't still alive 33 years later when Jesus was crucified, though news of remarkable happenings may well have filtered through to their distant kingdom.
But, you know, if Paul could say in Romans chapter 4, if Paul could say confidently that Abraham, who lived 2,000 years before the Magi, roughly the same amount of time since we're living here after them, God said, if Abraham, who never saw the birth, the death, or the resurrection of the Son of God, nonetheless believed in the God who gives life to the dead, and against all hope he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised, then I believe we may be sure that these men who believed God's revelation, that the infant before them was a promised Messiah, remember how we read that they were overjoyed, this was what God had promised, the Savior of the world, that they would have trusted in him as their Lord and Savior till their dying day.
His death their death, his life, their life, entering with him a kingdom that cannot be shaken.
So then we've seen the men, we've seen the star, we've seen the gifts, but let's draw to a close as we consider the challenges, challenges for us from this old story of the birth of Jesus.
[25:24] I think that as you look at the story, you'll see that there was a challenge from the wise men and there was a challenge to the wise men.

And the challenge from the wise men brings us face to face with another leading character in this story, Herod, king of the Jews.
At this time, he only had a few months left to live and he was leaving behind him a bloodstained trail of cruel murders, of his rivals for power, and even of members of his own family.
The emperor Augustus in Rome once famously remarked, making a pun on the two Greek words for pig and son, son, S-O-N.
He said that he would rather be Herod's pig than his son. But now, amazingly, a door of hope was opened before Herod, the savior of the world.
[26:48] The true king of the Jews was to be born in his jurisdiction, and he, Herod, was one of the first to be told and given the opportunity of seeing him and bowing down in submission before him.

And not only that, God's inspired writings and their divinely appointed interpreters were actually there in his capital city.
They could and they did give all the information he needed. And there were the wise men from the east saying to him, to Herod, come, come with us and worship the promised king.
him. But sadly, we all know what Herod did. He chose the way of death, not only in the massacre of the innocents, as it's called, but the eternal death of his own soul.
And that, friends, is the heart of the Christmas message. In Jesus, there is hope, there is life, there is joy.
[28:11] And the challenge from the wise men is to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, at the same time warning us of the danger of following the way of Herod.

Having heard God's messengers, perhaps for many a long year, it was true of Herod, could it be true of some of us here, having known God's word and the gospel it presents, yet to turn away and lose what is offered forever.

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So, there's the challenge from the wise men, but there was also, I think, a challenge to the wise men. They might have been tempted to stay on and find out more about this infant king, but God said, no, go back home, by the way I tell you.
Take the good news to your own people. Bring them far greater gifts than gold, frankincense, and myrrh. For us, of course, they fade into the mists of history.
But can we ever know how many inhabitants of Persia were led to rejoice in God's salvation through these wise men?
[29:46] Or how many hearts, think of this, how many hearts in that land were found, prepared by the Holy Spirit, to receive the gospel decades later, when the followers of the risen Jesus went into all the world, preaching the gospel to every creature, including the inhabitants of the land from which the Magi had come.

God's opinion. Now, if the tradition is correct, I don't know if it is, it's the strongest tradition, but if it's correct that the wise men came from Persia, Iran, then you here in Bonacord have met and heard a present-day countryman of theirs, who 34 years ago bowed the knee to King Jesus and knew that God was calling him to take the good news of salvation to his fellow countrymen in Iran.
And he too has had to face the murderous hostility of the nation's rulers who would love to follow Herod's example in eliminating Christ and his church.
But like the wise men, he has been shown by God the way to go and been protected on it in order to point his fellow men and women in Iran and beyond to Jesus as Savior and Lord.
And I think it's a marvelous thing that I'm not mentioning his name. You understand why. It's a marvelous thing that you've had him here and you support his ministry by your prayers and by your gifts.
[31:56] Isn't that an interesting link with the wise men of long ago? Well, you and I have been spared such persecution for our faith.

But the challenge and the command are the same, whether to the shepherds or to the wise men or to a later new follower of Jesus, that man who, naked and chained, dwelt among the tombs until Jesus' freedom.
And then came this word to him as to the others. Return home to your family or to your neighborhood, to your city, and ultimately to the whole world and tell how much God has done for you.
So the man went away and told all over the town how much Jesus had done for him. May God help us to do the same.
Let's pray. We thank you, O Lord, our God, that this old book before us is always new.
[33:13] It has to be because it's the living word of the living God. And so we thank you that what we have read today of those men who obeyed the call of God and who worshiped, with what little knowledge they had, worshiped the babe as king and savior.

We thank you that that comes home to us as well. And we pray that all of us here today would worship and serve joyfully that same Jesus.
Continue your blessing, we pray, in the outreach with your word this evening and throughout the coming days. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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