

Searching for the King

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[0 : 00] Well, today I'd like us to turn back to the passage which John read for us.

We can read again the first couple of verses, but we'll be thinking in many ways about the whole of this chapter really, and I suppose in many ways the first part which focuses on the wise men.

Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of head of 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?

This account is that of the wise men who came to see Jesus as a child. It's one of the most famous accounts in the Bible and one that's maybe familiar to many of us.

Before we go into the story in more detail, we should probably start by saying that not everything we may be associated with the story of the wise men is maybe completely accurate.

[1 : 07] Often we have the image of baby Jesus in the stable, in the manger, and the wise men coming to meet him. That's not actually what happened because they came probably a little bit later on.

In verse 11 of the chapter, there's a mention of a house and the two-year-old limit that was placed on Herod's decree would imply that Jesus would have been probably much closer to two years old at this stage.

We should probably also say that we actually have no idea whether or not there were three wise men. We don't actually know. The idea of three tends to come from the fact that there was three gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

There could have been two. There could have been 20. We don't actually know. But the number of wise men doesn't matter too much. The thing I want us to focus on is the fact that they were wise.

So who were they? Well the word that's used to describe them in the original language is the word magi, Magi. Some of your Bible translations might say that.

[2 : 14] It might say magi came from the east. These were men who were particularly associated with Babylon, which was an ancient empire located in what to us is modern day Iraq.

And these people performed various duties. So they interpreted dreams. They functioned as religious priests. They were sometimes physicians.

And as in the case here, they seem to have studied the stars in some kind of astrological way. And they were a group of people who would have been respected in terms of their knowledge and understanding.

So this is maybe a bit of a silly illustration, but I imagine them to be the kind of experts that we see today getting pulled in on the news. So we turn on the news and there's some story and they'll pull in some expert who'll say something about something.

So if you can imagine the Babylon news at 10 from 2000 years ago, they're pulled in the magi. What do you think of Boris Johnson?

[3 : 19] They were clearly people who were respected in terms of their knowledge. They were wise. The question that I want to ask is what made them wise?

And the answer to that question is extremely important. Sometimes we can think that someone who is wise is somebody who knows it all.

So people who have been taught a lot, people who have got a big capacity for remembering information, people who have a wide range of experiences, it's easy to think they're the wise ones, the people who know it all.

And for that reason, we're often scared to reveal our ignorance because it'll show us up if we don't know stuff.

The truth is, that's not what makes someone wise at all. What made these wise men wise was not that they knew it all.

[4 : 17] It was that they were willing to inquire. And that's the great adventure that we have recorded for us here. These wise men, they saw something and they thought, what is that?

What does it mean? Let's go and find out. And it's a great reminder that wisdom is not knowing it all. Wisdom is being ready to go and learn.

Two of the people that I admire most in my life are my father and my father-in-law. My father was a GP, my father-in-law is an engineer, and they were both hugely respected in terms of their jobs.

But one of the fascinating things about both of them is that whenever they approached a patient or a project, they didn't waltz in saying, oh, I know what needs to happen here.

Whenever they approached something, the first thing that they would do is ask a million questions. They were inquiring and searching and seeking to gather knowledge.

[5 : 20] And the reason they both achieved so much in their lives is not because they knew it all. It's because they were willing to inquire. That's exactly what we see in these wise men.

They were wise, but they come with questions, not answers. They're inquiring, not teaching. They've come to search for truth. And their example is setting every one of us here a great challenge.

As we sit here today with our Bibles open before us and with our lives lying ahead of us, the crucial question we have to ask ourselves is, am I willing to search for answers?

And that's really the difference between wisdom and folly. It's not that a wise person knows a lot and a foolish person doesn't. The difference is that a wise person is ready to search for truth.

The foolish person can't really be bothered when it comes to the truth about Jesus Christ.

[6 : 30] Which one are you? So these wise men embark on a great adventure to find answers. So if you want to search for something, if you want to find something out, what do you need to do?

Well, the answer is that you need to follow the clues. You need to pursue the lines of inquiry. And that's exactly what we see in this passage.

The wise men followed three important lines of inquiry. And I want us to just look at these three together briefly today. So the first clue they followed was the star.

Their adventure began when they saw a star arise. So we have before us, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, in the days of Herod the King, 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. As we said, these wise men were magi. They studied the stars, among other things.

[7 : 38] So they would have known if something unusual appeared in their observations every night. Something different had taken place. I suppose two questions of detail arise here. Question one is, what was this star? And the answer to that is we're not entirely sure. It could have been a purely supernatural phenomenon, a light that appeared in the sky sent by God at that very moment.

Perhaps even some sort of angel, maybe we don't know. Or it could have been an asteroid or some other orbiting body that appeared at this time.

And various people have looked back at the orbits and the time scales and have presented various suggestions as to what this might have been. If that's the case, it's something that God had sent many, many years earlier in order to arrive at this moment.

To be honest, I'm not entirely sure which one it is. And I'm quite comfortable with either explanation. The key point is that they saw something. And what they saw moved them to the extent that they felt they had to travel west.

[8 : 49] The other question is, how did they know about the potential Jewish king? Remember, these are foreigners based probably in Babylon. How would they have known about a Jewish king and why would that have been important to them?

Well, again, we don't know for sure. But it's probably very likely that their knowledge and awareness of a promised king had its roots in the fact that 500 years earlier, the Israelites, the Jewish people, had been deported from Jerusalem and the surrounding area and taken to Babylon.

That's back in the days of Daniel and Ezekiel, big figures in the Old Testament. In fact, Daniel was made chief overall of the Magi of Babylon.

So it's very likely that some knowledge and awareness of this coming king would have come through that influence. Whatever the explanation, when these men saw the star, they connected its appearing with a coming king and they thought, we need to go and find out more.

And so they followed the first clue, the star. And I want to just to mention what I think are two really important points in relation to this before we go on to the next clue.

[10 : 10] First thing I want us to notice here is that here in this passage, we have an account of the physical created world pointing to the fact that Jesus has come.

It's as though the universe itself is seeing look. And that's a great reminder that the Bible doesn't just treat the universe as the stage on which God plays out the drama of His saving work.

The universe is not just the stage. The universe has its own part in that story. The Bible doesn't just tell the story of God.

It doesn't just tell humanity's story. The Bible also tells the universe's story. And the story of the universe is the same as our story. God created it good.

But when humanity rebelled against God and sinned, it wasn't just humanity that became broken. The universe became broken as well. And as a result of that, the universe needs rescuing and restoring.

[11 : 08] That's why we look at the world and we see so much that's broken and hostile and uninhabitable.

And that's why in the future, when Jesus returns, the created universe is not going to be destroyed. It's going to be regenerated. That means heaven's not going to be some kind of floaty existence in the clouds.

It will be a beautifully restored universe, a new heavens and a new earth. And I think the great anticipation of that restoration is reflected in the fact that when Jesus, the Savior, was born, the universe is saying, look, here he is.

And it's reminding us of the fact that when it comes to the coming of Jesus Christ, we're not simply saying that that's an important moment in history. We're saying that that is actually the very center point of history.

It's the whole point of history. Everything centers on Jesus. And His first coming, His second coming, these are all, these are what history is all about, all of space, time and history centers upon Him.

[12 : 23] That's described brilliantly for us in Colossians chapter one. In speaking about Jesus, it says, for by Him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through Him and for Him.

He is before all things and in Him all things hold together. This star is pointing us to the fact that Jesus is Lord of all creation.

And that of course is why when this child Jesus grew up, He was able to command wind and waves and they obeyed Him. And all of that's a great reminder that whether you're a total skeptic or whether you're a committed follower of Jesus or whether you're somewhere in between, whoever you are, I think it is absolutely guaranteed that your view of Jesus is going to be far, far too small.

Everything centers on Him. The second important thing I want us to notice about this whole incident is that here in this passage, we have the stars telling us something.

Now that's been a subject of interest to humanity for a long, long time. People have looked to the stars as a source of answers. Many ancient religions did that, but it's something that's still very much alive and well today.

[13 : 53] I remember when I was a child, you'd get up in the morning and you'd turn the telly on and this is long before the wonderful days now where you could pick whatever programs you wanted.

Back in our day, we didn't have that luxury. And I remember watching TV AM. Can you remember TV AM? So that's before, I don't even know what it is now.

Good morning Britain is it now? Before Good Morning Britain was GMTV and way, way, way back before that was TV AM. And about 20 past seven, 25 past seven, you would get cartoons coming on TV AM.

I think it was things like Mask and Captain Planet and stuff like that. I don't know if anyone can remember that. People in your mid to late 30s will remember that maybe.

And so you had to wait and you had to endure all the kind of boring grown up stuff before the cartoon came on because you couldn't go to iPlayer or anything like that because none of these things existed. You had to sit through what was on the program.

[14 : 52] And one of the things that you had to endure was Russell Grant, the astrologer, who would come on and talk about all this kind of stuff and we had to sit through this whilst we waited for the cartoons.

And that's something that still goes on today. People who look to the stars to find answers. And there's a huge business and a huge interest in all of that.

At one level as Christians, we wouldn't endorse that. The idea that the stars are going to tell you about your career or your relationships. It's not something that we would be comfortable with.

But having said that, we are not totally opposed to the idea that the stars can tell you something. Now, what I mean by that is the fact that the Bible says that if you look at the stars, it's going to tell you something.

Not in the sense that they're kind of sort of demigods that can talk to us, but in the sense that if you look at the stars, you are going to learn important things. And in particular, there are two incredibly important things that we are going to learn as we look at the stars.

[15 : 56] The first is that if you look at the stars, you are going to learn about God's glory. Sam 19 expresses that brilliantly. The heavens declare the glory of God. The sky above proclaims his handiwork day to day, pours out speech and night to night reveals knowledge.

So every night as the stars glisten across the night sky, as the vast galaxies stretch out above us, as we try to grasp the unsearchable magnitude of space, when we look at that, we get a glimpse of the glory of God.

Now, the fascinating thing is that for the person who lived in Bible times way, way, way long ago, when they looked up at the stars, they thought, well, that declares the glory of God, but they didn't really know what they were looking at.

They just knew that something of God's glory was being declared to them. For us, the discoveries of physics and astronomy have added so much amazing detail to this truth.

So we look up at the stars and we know that we're not just seeing millions upon millions of twinkling lights. We know that we are seeing even more. So we are seeing colossal burning balls of fire, echoing the Bible's imagery of God as a holy, pure, consuming fire.

[17 : 20] We see the astonishing order of the planets and solar systems and galaxies orbiting in this fascinating system, teaching us about the God who puts things in order and sustains the universe.

We look up to the heavens and we see mind blowing gravitational strength pointing us to the almighty God who is strong and powerful. We see distances, billions of light years, so big that we can't even remotely get our head rounded.

And we are being told about the God who is infinite and immeasurable. We see astounding images produced by Hubble and other telescopes of colors, flares, lights, flames, constellations, and in it all we get a greater glimpse of the glory of God.

All of that discovery is amazing for us as Christians because everything we see is showing us more and more about the glory of God. The stars are telling us something amazing when we look at them.

But the second way that the stars speak to us, not just showing us the glory of God, there's another thing that the stars says which I think is even more astonishing. If you look up at the stars at night, if you had a nice clear night, not that you can really get that in the city, but if you can go out where there's no street lights and see just immeasurable numbers of stars above us, the one thing that's really clear is that it's impossible to number them.

[18 : 50] It's just billions. But that vast number of stars is being used by God to tell us something very important. It's telling us about the number of people that God intends to save.

It was all the way back near the start of the Bible, God made a promise to a man called Abraham. It was through this man's family that God's plan of salvation would be achieved, and everyone who trusts in Jesus is brought into that family line and made heirs to that same promise of salvation.

And when God made that promise to Abraham, he said this, he took him outside and he said, look towards heaven and number the stars if you are able to number them.

Then he said to them, so shall your offspring be, and Abraham believed the Lord, and God counted it to him as righteousness.

It's telling us that God's plan to save people is not just for a tiny select few. God's plan is to save a vast number. And for us as a church, that should give us so much confidence and encouragement to go out with the gospel in terms of mission work.

[20 : 05] And for you as an individual, the amazing thing is that that means that there is room for you too. It's an amazing reminder of how inclusive the gospel message is.

It's a call to everyone. It's a message for the masses. It's an invitation to all humanity. But ever think that God does not have room for you.

The stars themselves are telling us about how many people God wants to save. And maybe it should be no surprise to us that when the promised Savior finally came, it was one of the stars that was being used to make the announcement.

So the wise men followed the star. The universe was pointing them to the coming to God's plan of salvation. And the universe is pointing us to it as well.

So I guess we have to ask the question, when you look up at the stars, what are they saying to you? Are they saying, we stars, we are vast, and you are utterly tiny.

[21 : 15] We are mind-blowingly big. You are a pointless little speck. What are the stars saying to you? We are here to display the glory of God, the God who knows you, the God who loves you, and the God who is promising to save you.

For us as Christians, it's amazing what the stars are saying. But the star alone wasn't enough for these wise men.

In order to find the truth, they needed more. That brings us to our second clue, and that's the Scriptures. When the wise men arrived at Jerusalem, they needed to find out more information.

So they were asking people, where is he who's born, King of the Jews? They must have asked quite a few people because the whole of Jerusalem was alarmed, especially the King. When King Herod heard this, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him, and assembling all the chief priests and 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 Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

[22 : 33] Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared, and he sent them to Bethlehem saying, go and search diligently for the child, and when you found him bring me word that I too may come and worship him.

In order for them to find out where to go, the wise men needed more information, and that information came from Scripture. We don't know if Herod actually showed them the Scriptures himself, or whether he just explained to them what it was that the scribes and teachers had told him.

Either way, the result was that the wise men were sent to Bethlehem because that was where the Scriptures were pointing. These Scriptures had promised that a king was going to come.

That king would be a descendant of Israel's greatest king, King David, and to reinforce that, it would be in David's hometown of Bethlehem that the promised king would be born.

This king is the one who would come, and he is the one who would be savior to God's people, and who would establish God's kingdom forever.

[23 : 40] The star in creation and the promises in Scripture are working together to point these men in the right direction. If you think about it in their search for truth, the wise men got general information from the creation.

They'd been sent roughly in the right direction by the star, but now they got special details from God's Word. That is such an important lesson for us.

The universe around us can point us in the right direction. The creation testifies to the reality of God, but in order for us to have a full and real relationship with God, we need more.

We need the details that the Bible provides, because the Bible tells us who God really is. The Bible tells us why the world and humanity are broken. The Bible tells us about God's plan to save us.

The Bible tells us what Jesus has done. The Bible tells us how we need to respond, and the Bible tells us of all the amazing blessings and privileges that are ours if we respond in faith and put our trust in Jesus.

[24 : 48] In other words, it's the Bible that is telling us the truth. The truth about God, the truth about us, the truth about life, and the truth about death.

So if we are searching for truth today, the only place that we're going to find the details that we need is in the Bible.

But you might be very well thinking, well, Thomas, that sounds great, but how do we know the Bible's right, and how can we trust it?

Well, one of the reasons that you can trust the Bible is because all the predictions that the Bible has made are coming true.

And that's one of the great emphasis that Matthew makes in this passage. He's emphasizing the fact that the prophecies of the Old Testament, the clues that these Old Scriptures contained are now all falling into place.

[25 : 52] The promised king would be born in Bethlehem, and that's exactly what happened. As John read for us later on, Matthew says how other prophecies about the children of Bethlehem and about Jesus being in Egypt, all of these are being fulfilled.

The wise men followed the clues of the Old Testament prophecies to see their fulfillment. But what the wise men probably didn't know was that they themselves were fulfilling prophecy too.

So now look at these verses from Isaiah, which is a prophecy way back in the Old Testament, probably about 730 or years before the wise men came to Bethlehem.

It says, all nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around and see. They all gather together. They come to you. Your son shall come from afar, and your daughter shall be carried on the hip.

Then you shall see and be radiant. Your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you. The blessings shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall come to you. The young camels of Midian and Ephah, all those from Sheba shall come.

[27 : 00] They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news to the praises of the Lord. The wise men themselves fulfilled this prophecy as they came bearing gifts.

And their journey from a foreign land points to the fact that God's original promise to Abraham was a promise for all nations. It's all falling into place. The promised king has come.

The prophecies are being fulfilled, and all the nations of the world are being blessed. And all of that should reinforce our confidence in the Bible.

Some people think the Bible is irrelevant. Maybe once it was useful, it's out of date now. Some people think the Bible is interesting. It's maybe got a few things to teach us.

Some people think the Bible is helpful. There's a lot to learn from it. We don't think any of those things. We think that the Bible is infallible.

[28 : 08] And as the infallible, authoritative word of God, it is the key to discovering the truth. And after 2,000 years of generation after generation of people trying to prove the Bible wrong, it is still today standing as strong as ever.

And this Bible testifies to the fact that Jesus is the king. It was the Bible that showed the wise men the truth about where they needed to go.

And the Bible is saying exactly the same thing to us. If you want to know the truth, then you need to listen to what the Bible is saying.

So the wise men followed the clues. They followed the star. Then they followed the scriptures. But there's one final source of information that they followed.

It's not completely obvious from the passage, but I think it is immensely important. The third clue is that the wise men followed their hearts.

[29 : 23] They came to Jerusalem. They were instructed to go to Bethlehem. And then something remarkable happened. After listening to the king, they went in their way and behold, the star that they'd 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 to the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother. And they fell down and worshiped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh.

And been warned in a dream not to return to Herod. They departed to their own country by another way. Now, the English translation that's in bold there, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

That's in very strong terms. But even then, I think that's a big understatement. Because literally the original Greek that the New Testament was written in, it says that they rejoiced with mega joy very, very much.

In other words, they were just bursting with joy. Now, I know that it doesn't actually mention their hearts in that verse.

[30 : 29] But the place where an explosion of joy takes place, well, where is it? It's in your heart. And all of that means that this quest for truth that the wise men went on was not just another intellectual exercise for them.

They weren't often a magi research trip where they would go and then report back and give a paper to their colleagues. They weren't looking just to find out the latest development in Middle Eastern astronomy.

They weren't just going to learn more information. They were on a quest to find the truth. And ultimately, the quest for truth is not about what we know in our heads.

It is surely about what we know in our hearts. It must have been a massive undertaking for these men to leave Babylon. But that desire to find answers, that need to know the truth, that determination to find the king showed that this is something that they really cared about.

Ultimately, they weren't looking for something that would just fill their heads with more knowledge. They were looking for something that would make their hearts burst with joy.

[31 : 42] So when they set off for Bethlehem, when they saw the star again which confirmed to them that they were on the right track, they were utterly overjoyed. And when they finally found this young toddler, they didn't care about the fact that he would have been in a very ordinary house with very ordinary looking parents.

They fell down and worshiped him and presented him with gifts for a king. And I don't think for one minute they then thought, oh well, great, that's our research project complete.

We can go back to work in Babylon. I think they went back to Babylon changed forever. And as we see, they made sure that their return travel plans were altered to make sure that this king would be kept safe.

And all of this is teaching us, well I think it's maybe teaching us the most important lesson that we can ever learn in life.

Because when it comes to discovering the truth, we need to follow the same clues that the wise men followed. We need to follow the universe, pointing us to a glorious creator.

[32 : 55] I find it, I was an engineer before I became a minister so I like to see how things fit together. Not just as a minister, as an engineer, I find it utterly impossible to believe that the universe could come from nothing.

From an engineer's point of view, that is just the most unbelievable thing I could imagine. The universe is pointing us to a creator.

But we need more than that. So we need to follow the Bible. It's telling us the detailed truth about who God is and about what he requires of us.

But we still need more than that. It's not enough to just learn Bible knowledge and theological truth. You could memorize the whole Bible and still not be saved.

Because you also need to follow your heart. Now when I say that, I don't mean follow your heart in a kind of Disney movie sense.

[33 : 59] You know we can watch films like these films and they'll sort of say follow your heart, be who you want to be and we'll all live happily ever after. I don't mean it in that way. You can't be whoever you want to be and bypass everything that the Bible says.

We can't make up our own truth. And nor do I mean that to be a Christian you have to be joyful forever, happy all the time.

That's not what being a Christian is like. What I mean is that if you are to really discover the truth about Jesus, then it is not going to be simply something that you know in your mind.

It is something that has to be absolutely real in your heart. Now I wish I could describe that.

I don't think I can fully, but the Bible speaks of it. On the day when Jesus rose from the dead, two men walked with him and after they had finished speaking to him, they said to each other, did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures.

[35 : 13] History speaks of it. So John Wesley, a famous preacher in the 18th century said that when he came to faith in Jesus his heart was strangely warmed.

And I can speak of it and so can every Christian in here because when you come to faith in Jesus there's a something in your heart, a completeness, a fullness, a peace, a joy, a thrill that is the final confirmation that you've found the truth.

Now that is not always there to the same degree. It doesn't mean that we don't ever have doubts or struggles. Every Christian does, but what it does mean is that the quest for truth is over.

The search is finished. The question has been answered because when you find Jesus, one thing for sure is that you don't need to search anymore.

As Paul says later on in the New Testament, for God who said, let light shine out of darkness has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

[36 : 43] So these wise men went searching for the king and to find him they followed the clues.

And I guess the question we have to ask is, will you follow them too? Will you listen to what the clues are saying?

So what is the universe saying to you? Is it saying you're just a tiny speck in a massive machine that will end up as nothing?

Or is the universe saying to you there has got to be something more? What's the Bible saying to you? Is it an old book from an old world with nothing to tell you?

Or is it a living word that's prodding you, challenging you, and calling you?

[37 : 43] And what's your heart saying to you? Is it saying harden up and don't think about this?

Or is it saying I need answers, I need the truth, I think I need Jesus?

Let's pray. Father we thank you for the way in which all of space, time, history and scripture is pointing us to Jesus.

And we pray that for every one of us here that our hearts would be pointing us to him as well. And we thank you, we thank you so much that when we find you we don't need to search anymore.

Amen.