

Sought

God provides salvation to those seeking Him.

MATTHEW 2:1-12

MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 2:2

STUDY Matthew 2:1-12, noting the different reactions to Jesus' birth. Reflect on what the reactions reveal about Jesus' identity. Use Explore the Text (pp. 45–49) to aid your study of the passage.

CREATE a teaching plan using the ideas on pages 50–52. Focus on helping the group recognize that from Jesus' birth, He identified with all kinds of people and came to redeem them all.

GATHER the following items:

- ☐ Extra Personal Study Guides (PSGs)

Make copies of:

- ☐ **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*)
- ☐ **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: Identifying the Wise Men*)

CONSULT the weekly Explore the Bible adult podcast to gain insights on the go about this week's study on Ministry Grid, Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, Lifeway's Digital Pass, or at goExploreTheBible.com/adults-training.

REINFORCE the session by following up with group members who need to be encouraged in their spiritual journeys. Especially focus on those who may need to commit to following Jesus. Offer to pray with them, reminding them of God's provision and love. Ask if there are opportunities for you or others to provide additional encouragement.

KEY DOCTRINE

God the Son

Christ is the eternal Son of God.
(See John 8:58.)

FIRST THOUGHTS

Some people are looking for help with a problem. Others may have exhausted all other options. Those who are intrigued by the story of Jesus may consider finding out more about Him. Over the centuries, many have sought Jesus because they admire His teachings or His moral example. However, Jesus provides more than moral teaching; He provides salvation to all who trust in Him.

(In PSG, p. 37) **What causes people to search for Jesus? To what lengths might a person go to find Him?**

BIBLE SKILL

Create a compare/contrast chart to study a passage.

On one side of a vertical line, record words and phrases that describe the response of Herod and the Jewish leaders to the news of Jesus' birth. On the other side, list words and phrases that denote the wise men's response to Jesus' birth. What factors impacted how each responded?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 1:1–2:12

Matthew began his Gospel by tracing Jesus' ancestry (1:1-17). He immediately introduced three important truths about Jesus. First, Jesus descended from Abraham, whom God called from Ur in Mesopotamia and led to Canaan (Gen. 12:1-3). Second, Jesus' ancestry included David, one of Israel's greatest kings (2 Sam. 7:1-29). Third, Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, who came to bring salvation to the world.

Matthew had a twofold purpose in presenting Jesus' ancestry as he did. First, Matthew demonstrated that Jesus hailed from a prestigious bloodline that included many kings (Matt. 1:7-11). Second, Matthew showed how Jesus came to redeem all kinds of people, regardless of their backgrounds. He did so by mentioning women whose lives impacted Israel's history. Rahab (1:5) was a prostitute from Jericho at the time Israel conquered the city under Joshua's leadership (Josh. 2:1). Ruth (Matt. 1:5) was a righteous woman but a Moabite by birth (Ruth 1:4). Bathsheba (1:6) was not specifically named, but became David's wife after David committed adultery with her and had her husband Uriah killed (2 Sam. 11-12). Jesus came from a royal bloodline, yet identified with people at every level and came to redeem them all.

Matthew's Gospel describes Jesus' birth and the wise men's subsequent visit (1:18-2:11). Mary and Joseph were engaged, but she was found to be pregnant before the couple married (1:18). When Joseph began to take steps to dissolve the relationship, the Lord intervened (1:19-21). He assured Joseph that Mary had conceived by the Holy Spirit's power, and instructed him to name the child *Jesus*, the Greek form of the Hebrew *Joshua*, which means "the Lord saves." The angel's words fulfilled the prophet Isaiah's words from over 700 years earlier (1:22-23; Isa. 7:14). Joseph followed the angel's instructions and took Mary as his wife (1:24-25).

A group of wise men arrived in Jerusalem seeking to worship the newborn King of the Jews (2:1-2). King Herod inquired of the chief priests and scribes where the Messiah would be born, and they told him the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, as Micah the prophet had prophesied (2:3-6; Mic. 5:2). Herod feigned an interest in worshiping the newborn King and instructed the wise men to bring him news when they found him (2:7-8). A star led the wise men to Bethlehem, where they found Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus (2:9-11). God then warned the wise men in a dream not to return to Herod, so they returned to their country by another route (2:12).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE ARRIVAL (MATT. 2:1-3)

Verses 1-3

Matthew 2 moved quickly to events that occurred *when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea*. At the time of Jesus' birth, Jewish people lived primarily in the region of Judaea to the south or Galilee to the north. The village of Bethlehem lay approximately five miles south of Jerusalem along the major north-south highway that extended north through Jerusalem and south as far as Beersheba. Normally, Bethlehem contained only a small population, but the census that brought Joseph and Mary there would have rendered the village quite crowded (Luke 2:1-5).

Herod the king, known to historians as Herod the Great, ruled from 37 to 4 BC. (Jesus' birth, according to our modern calendars, actually occurred in 6-5 BC.) Herod came from the province of Idumea south of the Dead Sea, and descended from the Edomites, the descendants of Esau. He claimed the title "King of the Jews," a title most Jews did not want a non-Jew to claim. Herod tried to win the Jews' favor by building them an extraordinary temple in Jerusalem, but many still did not trust him.

A delegation of **wise men** came *from the east to Jerusalem*. The word for *wise men* likely denotes eastern astrologers from Persia or Babylonia. (These regions roughly correspond to the territories of modern Iran and Iraq, respectively.) Some interpreters believe they arrived over a year after Jesus' birth (2:11,16). Church tradition suggests three wise men came, perhaps because they brought three gifts (2:11). However, the text does not indicate how many wise men came seeking the new King. Matthew's mention of them illustrates how the Lord intends His gospel to reach all peoples of all lands.

The wise men asked: **Where is he that is born King of the Jews?** The wise men sought the King of the Jews, but they were not looking for Herod, who claimed the title. They testified, **we have seen his star in the east**, a sign they had interpreted as indicating a king's birth. Further, this new king was more than an earthly king, because the wise men had **come to worship him**.

The wise men stopped at Herod's palace in Jerusalem to ask directions. Perhaps they thought the Jews' current king could direct them to the new King. Notice how eager the wise men were to worship this new King.

VERSES 1-3

¹ Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, ² Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. ³ When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

How important to you is worshiping the Lord Jesus? What sacrifices are you willing to make to worship Him?

The text does not reveal how the wise men knew the significance of the star they followed. Interpreters have suggested the star was actually a bright light caused by various bright planets aligning, but this is unlikely. The wise men would not have perceived a light at such a high altitude as moving ahead of them to lead them to Bethlehem (2:9). Rather, we should understand this star as a miracle God used to guide them to His Son's birthplace.

When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled. Toward the end of his reign, Herod became extremely paranoid and even killed several members of his own family whom he suspected of conspiring against him. The wise men's statement thus naturally brought him concern because he perceived their news as a threat. The concern quickly spread to **all Jerusalem**, because local citizens knew Herod would stop at nothing to maintain his throne.

The news of Jesus' birth troubled King Herod. Why do you think the name of Jesus brings some people concern even today?

VERSES 4-6

⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. ⁵ And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, ⁶ And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

THE DIRECTION (MATT. 2:4-8)

Verses 4-6

Herod knew the Old Testament prophets had spoken of the Messiah's coming. He quickly **gathered all the chief priests and scribes** and asked them where the Messiah would be born. The chief priests represented the most influential among those instructing the people regarding the Law of Moses. Scribes served a similar function; they learned the law, copied it, and instructed others in it. Herod knew these leaders would know the answer to his question.

The Jewish leaders affirmed **Bethlehem of Judaea** as the site of Messiah's birth. **The prophet** whom they cited was Micah. They quoted Micah 5:2. The reference to **Bethlehem, in the land of Juda**, distinguishes it from other villages by the same name. Micah's affirmation that Bethlehem was **not the least among the princes of Juda** was surprising, because Bethlehem was a small town. It did not compare to Jerusalem's more impressive stature. Nevertheless, God had big plans for this seemingly insignificant place. This little village would produce the Savior. Micah had affirmed, **out of thee shall come a Governor**. Some may have thought Micah described an earthly ruler, but Bethlehem's ultimate ruler would be a supernatural one.

Old Testament prophets often described bad leaders as worthless shepherds (Jer. 10:21; 23:2). In contrast, God said His Messiah would **rule** His **people Israel** and care for them as a good shepherd cared for his sheep (Isa. 40:11; John 10:14).

Matthew often used Old Testament passages to persuade his readers that Jesus was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, God's Anointed

One (1:23; 2:15,18; 3:3). As Messiah, Jesus is worthy of all our devotion and worship. How does your life reflect your commitment to Jesus? Are your devotion and worship apparent to everyone around you?

Verses 7-8

Herod ... privily called the wise men. The word *privily* further reveals Herod's improper motives. He desired to gain information he could use to do away with the child. Herod **enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.** That detail would provide him with a clue about the child's current age. Herod desired exactness and precision.

The Jewish historian Josephus, writing in the later first century AD, chronicled in detail King Herod's later years. The king possessed a jealous spirit and lived in constant fear someone would try to overthrow him. He even killed some of his trusted officials and family members because he suspected they were conspiring against him. Obviously, he perceived this child's birth as a threat to his royal status.

The wise men genuinely desired to find and to worship Jesus, but Herod desired only to kill him. People today also may have insincere motives for worshiping the Savior. Perhaps they attend Christmas services from a sense of duty, or perhaps they want others to see them in church. However, God sees through any false motives we might have. Jesus deserves all our worship simply because of who He is.

Herod pointed the wise men toward **Bethlehem**, with instructions to report back so he also could **go and worship him**. Herod hid from them his true intentions.

King Herod failed to understand the truth of the gospel. Jesus did not come to take over Herod's kingdom, though Jesus did come that Herod might understand the truth of God's salvation. Over the last 2,000 years, many have heralded Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Sadly, many others have tried to silence the gospel because they do not want to face their own sin and their need for a Savior.

THE DISCOVERY (MATT. 2:9-12)

Verses 9-10

When they had heard the king and received his instructions, the wise men **went on their way**. Perhaps they immediately headed south toward Bethlehem, knowing the journey was not long. As they journeyed, **lo, the star, which they saw in the east went before them**. The visibility of this star suggests sunset had already occurred. Because of the nearness of the two places, travelers could see Bethlehem's lights as they left Jerusalem. The wise men could have made the short journey within a few hours, even if they traveled slowly.

The star the wise men saw earlier as they began their travels continued to guide their journey. Matthew says the star *went before them*, a fact that suggests it must have been a special star at a much lower altitude. Again, we should understand this star as another miraculous feature of the Christmas story. Finally, the star **came and stood over where the young**

VERSES 7-8

⁷ Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

VERSES 9-10

⁹ When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

child was. The wise men must have felt confident, given all they had seen as they traveled. Now, they were on the verge of seeing the Messiah they sought.

The wise men **saw the star** and **rejoiced with exceeding great joy**. What a joyful moment they would have had when they observed the star had stopped over a particular home! Imagine their excitement as they pondered whom and what they might find there. Perhaps they waited to visit until the following morning, though we do not know for sure what time they arrived in Bethlehem.

The wise men's overwhelming joy at finding Jesus provides an example for believers today. When we stop to ponder our Lord's greatness, how could we not be overwhelmed with joy?

VERSE 11

¹¹ And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

Verse 11

Some interpreters have suggested that the mention of a **house** means Joseph and Mary had relocated after Jesus' birth. Other details suggest perhaps as much as two years had passed since Jesus' birth (see 2:16).

As the wise men entered, **they saw the young child with Mary his mother**. Perhaps Mary and Joseph had remained with family members in Bethlehem after Jesus' birth. Imagine their surprise as they greeted these important travelers! The wise men's coming confirmed to Mary and Joseph their son was truly God's Son. Their response to seeing Jesus also may have surprised those who saw them—they **fell down, and worshipped him**. Their worship of Jesus points to Jesus' deity. The Law of Moses prohibited the worship of anyone or anything but God. In fact, when Satan tempted Jesus to worship him, Jesus replied that God alone deserved worship (Luke 4:8; Deut. 6:13). At the same time, Jesus accepted worship from His followers (Matt. 14:33; 28:17). Only God's Son could properly accept such adoration. Joseph and Mary must have marveled at seeing the wise men bow before their child.

The wise men **opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts**—an act people coming before a king normally might do (1 Kings 10:1-2). **Gold, and frankincense, and myrrh** represented the finest the wise men had to offer and gifts that were fit for a king. Some Bible interpreters have seen these gifts as denoting certain characteristics of Christ's life—the gold symbolized His deity, frankincense symbolized His purity, and myrrh pointed to His death, since people used myrrh for embalming. Others have suggested these gifts simply represented the best the wise men had to offer the newborn king.

As the wise men entered the home where Jesus was, they recognized they stood in God's presence. They had journeyed a long way to see this miracle Child, and now that they did, they fell on their faces, and the gifts they brought demonstrated how special He was to them.

How will you respond to Jesus? Do you realize how worthy of our worship He is? We properly worship Him when we offer Him our lives—the best gift we have to offer. Faithfully giving our time, talents, and money to advance God's kingdom are appropriate actions to honor God's Son.

Verse 12

The wise men were **warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod**. Dreams play an important role elsewhere in Matthew 1–2. The Lord’s angel told Joseph in a dream of Mary’s conception (1:20). God warned Joseph by a dream to flee to Egypt to avoid Herod’s death decree for Bethlehem’s male children (2:13). When Herod died, God again came to Joseph in a dream, advising him he could return safely to Israel (2:19–20). Finally, a dream warned Joseph not to settle in Judaea, so he settled in Galilee to the north (2:22).

Matthew tells us the wise men **departed into their own country another way**. We do not know the exact route they pursued to avoid Herod. Three major north-south roads traversed ancient Palestine. One highway was located east of the Jordan River. The wise men may have traveled eastward from Bethlehem toward the Dead Sea, crossed the Jordan somewhere near Jericho, and then journeyed north along this highway. Another road lined the Mediterranean seacoast. Perhaps the delegation traveled west to this highway and then proceeded northward, cutting through Galilee. The third road out of Bethlehem connected many important Judaeian cities—Beersheba and Hebron to the south, and Jerusalem as it extended northward. The wise men certainly did not travel this route, for doing so would have risked an encounter with Herod.

Jesus can be found by those wanting to worship Him. How ironic and how tragic that the wise men came so far to worship the Christ child, when Jerusalem’s other wise men would not even travel five miles to investigate the wise men’s claims. As far as we know, no one bothered to get on a donkey and ride to Bethlehem to see if maybe, just maybe, the Messiah’s birth had occurred.

Today, many missionaries find people in other parts of the world ready to receive Jesus, while many churches in the United States remain nearly empty, even at Christmas. How will your Bible study group reach those in your community who do not know Jesus? Ask the Lord to reveal to you people He wants you to help make the discovery of eternal life through Jesus.

What represents the very best you can offer to Jesus? When you pray for those who do not know Jesus, whose faces does God put before you?

VERSE 12

¹² And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION

BEGIN: After the group has arrived, explain that during the holidays people may have experienced the need for information on a gift they received or maybe information on assembling a gift they purchased for a child. Many turn to the Internet, looking for how to help. Occasionally the information needed is immediately received. And yet, often people experience the opposite. A search for information can take people on a journey that includes visits to many sites. Maybe the information is eventually found or maybe it isn't ever discovered. Sometimes we have to go back to the beginning and ask, ***what was the motivating factor for delving into this search?*** Allow the group to speculate on the driving factors behind the search.

DISCUSS: ***What causes people to search for Jesus? To what lengths might a person go to find Him?*** (PSG, p. 37)

TRANSITION: *We are taking a break from our study in Ezekiel to focus attention on Jesus' birth. The wise men traveling from the east following a star adds significant truths to the coming of the Messiah.*

PRAY: After the group shares prayer concerns, thank God for sending His Son and blessing all who seek Him.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

INTRODUCE: Use information from Understand the Context: Matthew 1:1–2:12 (pp. 44–45) to set the stage for the session. Read the bulleted points below that summarize the text. Use these statements to introduce each segment of Matthew 2:1–12.

- Some people are seeking God and His salvation, while some are not (2:1–3).
- Some people misunderstand the truth of the gospel while others want to silence it (2:4–8).
- Jesus can be found by people wanting to worship Him (2:9–12).

TRANSITION: Highlight the first summary statement. (Some people are seeking God and His salvation, while some are not.)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 2:1–3**, instructing the group to identify those in the verses who are seeking God and those who are not.

TEAMS: Guide the group to review the material in the Personal Study Guide and a Bible dictionary to research (1) King Herod and (2) the wise men. Divide into four teams and assign each team one of the following: background, profession, personality, spiritual needs. Provide the respective group with **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: Identifying the Wise Men*). Allow time for research, and then invite each group to respond based on their assignment. Highlight the significant elements that contrast the differences between King Herod and the wise men.

HIGHLIGHT: Emphasize this week's memory verse (Matt. 2:2), listed on **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*).

DISCUSS: Lead the group in a discussion of the reason Jesus was such a threat to Herod and those in Jerusalem. ***Why might people today view Jesus as a threat?*** (PSG, p. 40)

TRANSITION: Call attention to the second summary statement. (Some people misunderstand the truth of the gospel while others want to silence it.)

READ: Read **Matthew 2:4-8**, instructing the group to identify two different types of kings.

DIFFERENTIATE: *The wise men said they were seeking the King of the Jews; Herod told the chief priests and scribes that he was looking for the Messiah.* Direct the group to scan the information in the Personal Study Guide (p. 41) and differentiate the use of those two terms as they relate to the motivation of Herod and the wise men to find Jesus.

EXPLAIN: Point out the immediate response of the chief priests and scribes pointing to Micah 5:2; the Scripture not only gave the location of Jesus' birthplace but also spoke to His identity. Summarize 2 Samuel 5:2 and Ezekiel 34 to explain God's use of shepherds in describing the identity of Jesus. Ask: ***What does Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy reveal about Him?*** (PSG, p. 42)

DISCUSS: ***With this knowledge of Jesus, Herod sent the wise men to find Him. How might a person use information found in the Bible to silence or discredit Jesus? How might knowing about Jesus get in the way of seeking Him?***

TRANSITION: Call attention to the third summary statement. (Jesus can be found by people wanting to worship Him.)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 2:9-12**, asking the group to identify the response of the wise men upon locating Jesus.

ASK: ***How would you describe the joy expressed as the wise men encountered Jesus? To what might you compare their experience?*** (PSG p. 43)

HIGHLIGHT: Throughout the Old Testament, God offered signs of the coming Messiah. The giving of gifts by the wise men fulfills words found in Psalm 72:10-11 and Isaiah 60:6. Read those passages to emphasize the detail of God's plan of providing the Savior for all people and guidance to God's followers in the act of giving as a part of worship.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

REVIEW: Review the bulleted statements under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 45). Encourage the group to modify or add to the statements.

SHARE: Highlight the third question set under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 45): ***Review the ways you celebrate Christmas. What could you adjust to make your celebrations more worshipful of Jesus?*** Encourage the group to be specific in their responses and challenge them to hold each other accountable in the days ahead.

PRAY: Conclude the group time with prayer, thanking God for providing salvation through Jesus and allowing believers to participate in sharing the good news to those seeking Him.

OPTIONS

Use these options to supplement and enhance the group plans on the previous pages.

MUSIC

Secure a recording of “Wise Men Still Seek Him,” by Paul Overstreet. State the summary statement of the study: God provides salvation to those seeking Him. Share the song with the group as a reminder of reaching lost people who need the Savior.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

Create a compare/contrast chart

Lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 44 of the PSG. Create a chart with two columns. Label one column *Herod* and the other *Wise Men*. In Herod’s column, record words and phrases that describe the response of Herod and the Jewish leaders to the news of Jesus’ birth. In the wise men’s column, list words and phrases that denote the wise men’s response to Jesus’ birth. As you list these, invite the group to identify factors that impacted how each responded.

RESEARCH

Map of Bethlehem and Jerusalem and a Bible dictionary

Secure a map for the group to get an idea of the location of Bethlehem in relation to Jerusalem. Using a Bible dictionary, provide information on the significance of Bethlehem throughout Old Testament times. Use the map to point out how close Bethlehem was to Jerusalem and how ironic it was that neither Herod nor the religious leaders would make the short trip to verify the wise men’s claim.

OBJECT LESSON

A light bulb or a picture of a light bulb over a person’s head

Place the group in teams of three. (One person can be a team.) Place the light bulb over your head or show the picture. Direct each team to develop a brief story based on someone experiencing a light bulb moment. As each team reports, guide the group in speculating on the source behind the experience: *When Jesus was born, the wise men had light bulb moments*. Lead the group in identifying those moments (a star, kneeling by a young child, giving gifts, going home a different way). Ask: ***What was the source of their light bulb moments?*** (holy experiences given by God)