

The Quest of the Magi

Matthew 2:1-12

Introduction

In January, 1997 – 2 swiss men set out on a quest to do something no one had ever yet accomplished - - be the first to circle the globe in a hot air balloon

Others had tried – to be sure – but were not successful

Their balloon was called the Breitling Orbiter – came complete with solar panels for power and a pressurized cabin – allowing them to fly at higher altitudes. Their plan was to fly high enough to enter the jet stream and circle the globe at around 200 mph. Cost of the journey \$1.5M

However – due to a technical glitch – their cabin filled up with a noxious kerosene odor – and they had to abandon ship somewhere over the Mediterranean.

Not to be deterred – one of the men tried again

In March, 1999 – the 3rd Breitling Orbiter was launched - - - [containing Swiss balloonist – Bertrand Piccard and a British Balloonist – Brian Jones] the Orbiter sailed over the Continents of Europe, Africa, Asia, then the Pacific Ocean, Central America, then the Atlantic

This time - they achieved one of aviation's most elusive goals - - - to circle the globe – and did so in 20 days

The Breitling Crew received a \$1M prize from the Anheuser Brewing Company – as well as the Budweiser Cup

A Quest is defined as a long or arduous search for something

In literature – it is defined as a journey toward a specific mission or goal

George Tulloch was on a quest – to salvage as much of the wreck of the Titanic as possible. He led five expeditions to the site where the Titanic rests on the ocean floor during his time as President of the RMS Titanic Inc. – a salvage venture firm

In fact – on one expedition – the search team located a section of the hull that had broken off and was by itself. They named it 'the big piece' – weighing approximately 20 tons. It was their desire to raise this piece to the surface and put on display

They were close in their first attempt – they got the piece to the surface - - but a storm blew in and broke the ropes - - - sending the 'big piece' back to the bottom of that Atlantic – 2 ½ miles down. That was in 1996.

Two years later – Tulloch returned and rescued the piece – today it sits in the Luxor Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas as part of a Titanic exhibit

This morning – I'd like to take us back to one of the great quests in Scripture – that of the wise men – or magi - - - as recorded in Matthew's Gospel

Their quest - - - to see the newborn king of Israel

It was a journey – that had its share of its hazards

They travel not by hot air balloon or by ship – but by camels / donkeys

The distance traveled was lengthy - - and by most estimates took at the minimum 40 days - - - if not longer

They had no compass or radar - - - but were tracking the movements of a star

In the end – we find the wise men reaching their quest

I. Wise Men Seeking Jesus - vv. 1-2

We come to Matthew's treatment of events around the birth of Christ

This is an amazing picture – the greatest birth ever to occur has taken place in Israel – birth of the Messiah – God's own Son - - - it has gone largely unnoticed by the Jews – except for a few shepherds on a hillside [Anna / Simeon in the temple]

But here – we have this contingent from the east – important wise men – who have travelled a great distance to find this baby

Tradition says there were 3 – because of the 3 gifts listed – but it may have been a larger group

It was enough to attract the attention of Herod – and to trouble him

They were not kings as one of the Christmas Carols suggests - 'We three kings of Orient are'

They were magi - - who often served as counselors to the kings

Daniel – was of this stripe – a wise counselor to the king

In terms of religious faith - - - we see them here as sincere seekers after God - - or gentile God-fearers - - - [sort of like Cornelius in the book of Acts]

They remind us that Jesus did not come into the world only for Jews - - - these are Gentiles and Jesus came for them as well – people like you and I

The early church arose in Jerusalem from a handful of Jewish disciples - - - but eventually spread across the Roman Empire - - - and at some point the church became comprised of more Gentiles than Jews

These magi – likely from Babylon or Persia - - God has gotten their attention – and they have set out on a road trip – they are on a quest - - to see the newborn King - - - they are following a star – and it has brought them so far to Jerusalem

They are now almost at their goal - - - they are in Jerusalem and asking questions / asking directions

Matthew 2:2 - 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him.'

The wise men are examples of faith – they were wise to seek after Jesus

They were not following a crowd

Very few others took notice of the baby Jesus – some shepherds – the angelic host

Everyone else is busy with other matters - - - but these Magi have a sense that this is important – and pursue it

Sinful man is not often a seeker after God

He might seek other things – like fame or fortune / money / wealth / possessions / political power / pleasure / status / comfort / control over life / prizes / rewards

The Word of God comes to us and says, ‘What do you seek?’

And it gives us the right answer

Hebrews 11:6 - 'But without faith it is impossible to please Him; for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.' [kjv]

We should be those who seek Him

The entire bible comes to us with a message that says seeking God is a worthwhile pursuit

***** 'Wise men still seek Him'**

Roberta Hoopes passed away here recently - - - and when the family was cleaning out the house – getting ready to sell - - - J. C. their son handed me a stack of old church bulletins from our church - - - about 4 or 5 years' worth - - - they contained Roberta's sermon notes that she had taken each Sunday - - - at church

Every single one of them had detailed notes - - thoughts – reflecting the meaning of the passage of Scripture

I was somewhat stunned – and struck with two realities

One was the solemn responsibility of preaching

Paul told Timothy

I Timothy 4:16 - 'Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.'

Second thought – 'what a testimony to her faith'

What was Roberta after? What was she seeking?

The bulletins tell you what kind of journey she was on – what she was seeking

We can't join the Magi in following a star to see the baby Jesus - but we can study God's Word and follow where that leads us

We cannot bring baby gifts to lay before the baby Jesus – like gold, frankincense, and myrrh - - - but we can present our lives unto God a living sacrifice

Romans 12:1, 2 - 'I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.'

That's our worship today

That's how we honor the Lord today

Forsake sin / don't be conformed to the world – let your values be shaped by the Word of God – put your life on the altar before God and say – 'God – I belong to you – you tell me how to live'

Instead of following a star – we are following His Word

We are all traveler's seeking something

Jon Krakauer had as a goal in life to climb to the top of Mt. Everest. – He set out with a climbing team of fellow traveler's - - - but they met mishap after mishap - - 12 of them died in the attempt. Krakauer finally made it to the top

Krakauer: 'I'd been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for many months. But now that I was finally here, actually standing on the summit of Mt. Everest, I just couldn't summon the energy to care . . . I snapped four quick photos . . . then turned and headed down. My watch read 1:17 pm. All told, I'd spent less than five minutes on the roof of the world.'

He says – 'I achieved my quest – but big whoop' - - - earthly thrills and achievements can only go so far

The soul has a greater thirst

Psalm 42:1, 2 - 'As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for thee O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God . . .'

While the magi are seeking Jesus -- - Herod will want to kill Him

II. Herod's Evil Designs - vv. 3-4

Matthew takes us to Herod's reaction to this news

This was not welcome news to Herod!

The arrival of some foreign magi – bearing gifts for a newborn king - - - is troubling

Herod's first response is to feel threatened

Herod had no legitimate rights to any throne in Israel - - He was a kind of puppet king installed by Rome - - He was an Edomite – descendant of Esau

Now comes Jesus – descendant of David – of Abraham / Isaac / Jacob

By this time – Herod has already murdered his wife and at least two of his sons - - - in his paranoid fears to protect his throne

v. 8 – Herod says he wants to worship this child too!

But – that is not what he is really after

In fact – the story of the Magi – includes a dark chapter - - - the slaughter of the innocents - - - where Herod will kill the baby boys in Bethlehem – 2 years and under [Matt. 2:16]

Herod will eventually cast a wide net in desperation - - trying to snuff out the life of the Christ-child

He revealed his own wicked and sinful heart

Balloonists were shocked in 1995 when two Americans taking part in the James Gordon Bennett annual balloon race drifted from Poland into Belarus, where they were shot down and killed by a Belarusian helicopter.

They weren't doing anything harmful – just sailing along in their balloon

Since then, long-duration balloonists have tried hard to get overflight permission from all countries over which they might fly, but have not always succeeded. China and Russia are the most uncooperative.

Why do such things occur?

It's the darkness of the human heart in sin

When Adam and Eve turned away from God – they never envisioned the awful consequences sin would bring to our world

The only remedy to the sinfulness of humanity is bound up with this little baby

He must grow up – He will one day complete the purpose of His coming - - - by making atonement – in the laying down of His life on the cross

III. Religious People Indifferent to Jesus - vv. 5-6

While the Magi travel the course of many miles to find the Christ-child - - - the religious leaders will ignore the event - - - won't bother traveling 5 or 6 miles to Bethlehem to check things out

The Scribes are consulted

'Hey – you bible guys - - - where does it say the Messiah is to be born?'

That's easy – Bethlehem

It's almost like bible jeopardy - - - 'the name of Moses' wife'

They can answer that - - - 'What is Zipporah?'

Birth place of Messiah?

Micah 5:2 - 'But as for you, Bethlehem Ephratha, too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.'

The scribes knew the Scriptures well enough to state that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem

But their hearts are revealed in that they don't bother to go see Jesus for themselves
[indifferent?]

John Walvoord: 'It is strange how much the scribes knew and how little use
they made of it.' [Matthew, p. 22]

Having the Word of God was a privilege given to the Jews

Paul once referred to this

Romans 3:1-4 - 'Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the advantage of
circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted
with the oracles of God. What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief
will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be! Rather, let God
be found true, though every man be found a liar . . .'

They were entrusted with the oracles of God – the Word

Our OT Bible comes to us thru the Jews – Moses – Jew / David / Isaiah / Jeremiah / etc.

Carl Sagan once said – humanity is like an orphan abandoned on earth's doorstep with no
note attached explaining who we are or where we came from

In reality – there is a note! - - - The Bible – God gave it to the Jews – by extension to all

It tells us who we are / where we came from / what is wrong with us / sin / God's program of
redemption

The Scribes form a contrast to the zealous pursuit of the Gentile wise men

We might want to say to them – 'Wait a minute – you have a Bible – you know these things!'

'So what!'

We are busy with our lives

We have business to attend to

They are not kindred spirits with those of the magi - - - who only had a star to follow - - - but
responded obediently

IV. The Worship of the Child - vv. 7-12

Herod calls the magi in – tells them to find the baby and let him know – so he can worship as
well

Herod was deceitful

It was just an act

He wants to kill the baby Jesus

God will not allow that to happen

God allows evil plots to hatch - - and for His plans to look like they are in jeopardy - - but He always intervenes to make sure His Word is fulfilled

Psalm 2:2 -6

Psalm 2:10-12

Kings and rulers can take their stand against God and His King - - - but God just laughs – He is not threatened - - - He is not worried about puny Herod

Those who fight against God – always find themselves on the losing side eventually

Job 42:2 - 'I know that Thou canst do all things and that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted.'

Herod cannot thwart God – nobody can

The wise men – being warned by God in a dream to not return to Herod – will leave the country without betraying their great find

The magi make their way to Mary and the baby Jesus - - who may perhaps even be around a year old at this time

They present several gifts to the newborn king

The gifts of the magi – likely helped fund Mary and Joseph's trip to Egypt

Mary and Joseph were not wealthy - - - the gold would certainly come in handy for whatever actions they had to take to leave Israel

The magi do not return to Herod

The plan of redemption is safe and moves forward

Conclusion

The wise men leave us with a model of seeking after God

Isaiah 55:6 - 'Seek the Lord while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near.'

Spurgeon: 'Beloved friends, if wise men of old came to Jesus and worshipped, should not we also come . . . These wise men came naturally, traversing the desert; let us come spiritually, leaving our sins. These were guided by the sight of a star; let us be guided by faith . . . by the teaching of His Word, and all those blessed lights which the Lord uses to conduct men to Himself.'

Let us imitate the wise men

Let's be seekers after God

Let's respond to the light given us in God's Word

Let's trust in the Savior