

Christmas: The Prophecy Fulfilled
By Jason Huff
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Daniel 4:1-9; Matthew 2:1-12; Psalm 72

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is from Psalm 72. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “Of Solomon. Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness. He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor. He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations. He will be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth. In his days the righteous will flourish; prosperity will abound till the moon is no more. He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him. For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight. Long may he live! May gold from Sheba be given him. May people ever pray for him and bless him all day long. Let grain abound throughout the land; on the tops of the hills may it sway. Let its fruit flourish like Lebanon; let it thrive like the grass of the field. May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed. Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen. This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.”

What would you do if you crowned the wrong king – or queen? Steve Harvey, the host of the Miss Universe pageant, became infamous this week for crowning the runner-up by accident. Miss Colombia wasn't supposed to win, but she was crowned and celebrated – until Steve Harvey recognized his mistake and admitted that the winner was really supposed to be Miss Philippines. I have said awkward things from the pulpit before, I have made public mistakes that were embarrassing...but all those look pretty good now! I feel for Steve Harvey; it was obvious how easy it would have been under a moment's notice to misread the cue card. But it was a huge mistake, one that will be played endlessly on news channels and social media.

Over the past several weeks, we've read the prophecies about the coming Messiah – who He would be, how we would recognize Him at His birth. Those prophecies distinguished the true Christ from anyone else who might claim that title for themselves. Because what would happen if anyone other than the true Messiah was made king? What if there was a Steve Harvey of the ancient world?

This wasn't just a blind concern. In Acts 5, we learn of two people – Theudas and Judas the Galilean – who organized revolts against Rome. Both were killed and their disciples all scattered. The ancient historian Josephus names more false messiahs who came to nothing. There was a very real fear amongst the religious leaders that the people would choose a false messiah only to see their hopes dashed and their nation destroyed. That fear drove the Pharisees to question and reject Jesus. The fear wasn't unfounded – the Jewish revolt against Rome in 67 AD led to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD and the dismantling of the Jewish nation.

I mention all of this to get to the wise men, the magi. When these travelers arrive in Jerusalem to worship the new king of the Jews that had been born, they throw everything into chaos. Judah already has a king – Herod, the brilliant builder, the restorer of the temple to incredible glory, who bought the throne from Caesar and rules with such paranoia that he has his wife and several children killed who he thinks might kill him or depose him. Herod has no claim to the line of David; he just has enough money, talent, and insanity to pull it off.

To Herod, the magi and their entourage are like Steve Harvey, only worse. Because if what they are saying is true, not only might Herod lose his throne, he might lose his life. But these magi are foreigners, strangers seen with suspicion by the Jews, and so it's easier for Herod to play along and deal with what they find quietly, in secret, once the surprise has died down.

The magi caused a stir. Romans in Jerusalem were unwelcome but common; so were travelers between points of the Roman Empire. But travelers from the east – modern day Iran and Iraq, the former world order known as Babylon, the one-time exilers of the Jews from their homeland? Not so much. We don't know a lot about them, but we do have some strong clues.

The first clues come from Daniel 4. That hardly sounded like a Christmas passage, but it gives us essential background on who these magi were. No one is absolutely certain, but the best clues are found in the book of Daniel. Daniel served in the king's court in Babylon. He was one of the young Jewish men kidnapped from Israel and groomed to be a royal advisor. The Babylonians wanted to assimilate the Jews, to get them to forget about God, intermarry, and live as Babylonians. Daniel was a key part of that plan, someone who knew enough about Judaism to advise the king how to deal with the Jews and get them to bow to him rather than God. But Daniel is a big surprise. Not only will he face certain death in a lion's den rather than to forsake God, God gives him the power to understand the king's dreams and visions.

The Babylonian court was full of strange and mysterious people the king relied upon for insights into the universe. Daniel 4 mentions magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. Yet none of them had the insight that God gave to Daniel. Daniel lived over forty years as a respected senior court advisor, and so it's likely Daniel taught the astrologers and magicians about God. It would make sense that the astrologers handed down their knowledge through the generations about the coming Jewish king. Were the magi the descendants of those ancient astrologers? Most likely.

Were they kings? Possibly, or at very least, they were emissaries of kings, official representatives who had the authority and stature of the kings they served. To harm them was to harm the king; to honor them was to honor the king. They fulfilled Psalm 72, which predicted not only that distant eastern kings would give gifts to the Messiah, but even specific gifts. These gifts show that the magi represented the lords of faraway realms. No one besides a king had the resources to give the gifts they gave to Jesus and His family.

The visit of the magi fulfills God's promises made in Scripture. Prophetic assurances made to His people continue to come true. And the magi's visit makes us aware of our own relationship with God in a new way. Their story still speaks to us. Because while we can only guess at who they were exactly, what we do know about them and their journey teaches us about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

The first thing I saw this week in the magi is that *wandering is part of the disciple's life*. The magi traveled several hundred miles to get to Israel. That was the easy part. They go to Jerusalem because that's the capital; that's where a prince would be born. The star informed them of Jesus' birth, but not of His location, not at first. It was simply an astronomical event at that time, something they saw in the night sky. Then Herod sends them to Bethlehem. Pretty good instructions, it would seem, based on prophecy.

But where are Jesus and His family? Good question. We have no idea when the magi show up. Has Jesus just been born? Or is He nearly two years old? Both options are possible. What's fascinating is that Scripture doesn't say that the star leads them to Bethlehem. It says that the star leads them to the place where the child was. Had they already left? Were they living on the outskirts of Jerusalem in some small place Joseph had built for them until it was safe for them to travel? We just don't know. All we know is that the only way the magi can find Jesus is to follow where the star leads. They have to wander in order to complete their quest. And they've already wandered over 550 miles to reach Jerusalem, and they have an even longer trip home to avoid Jerusalem on the way back.

We don't like wandering without clear directions. We carry a GPS in our pockets so we can always know where we are and where we are going. We assume wandering is a waste of time. Our culture believes that if you aren't moving forward, you're moving backward. This is a big thing for us guys in particular. Send me to a store and I'm going for whatever items are on my list, no more, no less. I don't go to the store just to look around. But as the popular saying goes, "Not all who wander are lost."

This is more of a blessing than we realize in our spiritual lives. It gives us hope. Because most of us wander a great deal in our relationship with Christ. We don't feel like we're getting anywhere. Maybe it doesn't seem like our prayers are being answered quickly, or even being heard at all. We struggle to pray more often. Maybe we read the Bible and it doesn't make sense – or worse, it does make sense but it makes us feel worse. Maybe we've been Christians for a long time and familiar passages no longer give us the sense of peace they once did. Or maybe we're new Christians finding out that it's much harder than we thought to be kind, loving, and caring towards our neighbors, especially those who aren't like us. We're with Christ, but we're wandering.

But being busy is not always being productive. God is often most productive in our lives when we're not busy. He is productive in those moments when we don't feel we're getting anywhere. God grows patience in us by giving us situations where we must be patient. He grows love in us by surrounding us with those who are difficult even to like. He grows joy in us by placing us in situations where despair is a real alternative. When those things happen, we often feel aimless, wandering, struggling to do the right thing when life is not clear.

As we learned last week, God says to us through the prophecies and through the Christmas story, do not be discouraged. Do not give up hope on God when your life doesn't take the direction you expected. Just keep following Him. His path will take you to unexpected places, and you may feel lost. But if Jesus is both our guide and destination, if we walk with Him, even as we wander, we will always be where God wants us to be.

Wandering is part of the disciple's life, and that leads to another truth: *dedicating time to Christ is part of the disciple's life*. From Babylon and back again, the magi's trip took months of travel. They had to prepare to travel 1100 miles, bringing food, supplies, and animals for their entourage; they had to secure their gifts, which were costly enough to require discussions with kings. This was an expensive, time-consuming excursion.

Reaching their destination may have seemed anticlimactic. They worship. They present their gifts. Because of ancient Eastern hospitality, they stayed in town a few days. And then they are off again. They bow before an infant no one else recognized. But their reward was to be among the first to worship God come in the flesh to us.

Not everyone is called by God to spend years overseas as missionaries. Few of us feel led into full-time ministry. But discipleship is always time-consuming. It always takes time to build a relationship with anyone, whether it's your next-door neighbor or your child or God. Discipleship requires following after God. Following takes time. That time includes prayer, study, reading Scripture, serving, fellowshiping, listening. Not every moment of every day is spent in intense discipleship, but Christ-followers follow Christ in some way every day.

We think we don't have the time, but we do, and our days are better for it. Jesus requires us to be available for Him whenever He calls, but that happens in the course of our day-to-day lives. Getting up a few minutes earlier for Bible study is not a great sacrifice. Taking time to pray focuses us on what really matters and makes our days less full than they would otherwise seem. Serving helps our attitudes, showing us what blessings God has given to us.

Think of the magi. They met Jesus face-to-face. He wasn't old enough to say a word; He could teach them nothing. All that time spent. Yet the Lord of all creation received their worship. Their gifts would fuel His family's escape from the grip of Herod. Their sacrifice will never be forgotten; it is retold every year throughout the world. We have no idea how the time we spend in the pursuit of Jesus will play out, but when we feel we're spinning our wheels when other things are calling to us, know God honors the time we spend with Him.

Lastly, and most importantly, *disciples crown the right king and forsake the impostors*. Somewhere along the way, don't you think the magi thought to themselves, "Have we got this right?" I mean, I get nervous when my GPS says I'm supposed to turn in 800 feet. Is that this street or the next one or the one after that? These guys show up in the capital and nobody has a clue what they're talking about. And instead of sending a royal emissary from Jerusalem, Herod tells them, "Go and tell me what you find." I might have been the guy at the back of the caravan yelling at the senior magi, "Are you sure the star isn't for the new king of Egypt instead?" But because they followed God's signs, they wound up honoring the true king after all.

This is just as real an issue for us as it was for them. Because we come to God with our own expectations of who He's supposed to be, and who Jesus is supposed to be. They were supposed to find Him in Jerusalem, but He wasn't there. We look for a Jesus who isn't there, either. We want bits and pieces of Jesus, but not the real Jesus as He really is. Let's be honest: most of us like a side of Jesus that complements our point of view.

Some of us want a Jesus who forgives everyone and judges no one, who doesn't care what we do with our thoughts or bodies, who doesn't care what we think or believe, who would like us to be nice but really, more than anything else, wants us to be happy. That's not the real Jesus. Some of us want a Jesus who is a stickler for the rules just like we are and condemns those who don't live up to them as well as we do. That's not the real Jesus either. We want a Jesus who shares the same views as we do on guns and government and economics and taxes. But if we do that, we crown the wrong king.

The King of the universe who came to us in Bethlehem defies everyone's expectations. He heals one moment and people crowd around to get a better look. Next moment, His teachings offer life as they offend the sensibilities of His audience, especially those who think they don't need God's forgiveness, that they can earn salvation or deserve it. Jesus is hard to handle. We cannot put Him in a box; we cannot tell Him what to do; we cannot control Him. The Lion of Judah is not tame. But He is good.

The new year will be full of opportunities to crown the wrong king. To believe that a particular political candidate will save us. To trust in the things we own. To even fall for an incomplete Jesus that suits our own personality. But we also have the chance to give the true Lord of all the throne of our lives...to accept Him, both those things about Him that bless us and those things that make us nervous...to love Him with our whole heart and soul and mind...to worship Him alongside the magi and saints throughout the ages.

Wandering with Jesus, spending time with Him, and constantly checking that we haven't put a false God on the throne of our hearts. Sounds tough. But Christmas is a season of hope, a season that reminds us that God has already accomplished salvation, that He has already achieved forgiveness for our sins, that He is kind and merciful and gracious. As you allow Him to become more and more a part of your life, the wandering and time and heart checks will become more natural. The promise the old carol says is true: "Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in." Open your heart to Him this Christmas, and like the magi, you will find what you seek.