

*Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who is born King of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east, and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he asked them where the Christ would be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is written through the prophet, 'You Bethlehem, land of Judah, are in no way least among the princes of Judah: for out of you shall come a governor, who shall shepherd my people, Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called the wise men, and learned from them exactly what time the star appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and search diligently for the young child. When you have found him, bring me word, so that I also may come and worship him." They, having heard the king, went their way; and behold, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, until it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. They came into the house and saw the young child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Opening their treasures, they offered to him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Being warned in a dream that they shouldn't return to Herod, they went back to their own country another way. (WEB)*

When I was a young boy, my grandpa traded for an old Winchester 10-gauge shotgun. A quick look at the internet says that it was patented in 1901, so it was already quite old at that time. Any 10-gauge was unusual back then, but this one was REALLY unusual because it was a lever action—just like the rifles the cowboys carried in western movies. It was PERFECT. The finish on the metal was like new and so was the wood. I thought it was amazing. It turns out that his nephew had one also—but it was a basket-case and all messed up. The funny thing was that his was an earlier model—an 1897 model, I think, and they said it was worth ten times as much, even though it wasn't nearly as good.

When I was a teenager, we owned a gas station. One day a girl came in and bought two dollars' worth of gas with silver dollars. One was an 1887 and one an 1888. My dad gave them to my brother and me. Since I was older, I insisted that I get the older one. Turns out the 1888 was much more rare and worth three or four times as much as the one I got. As far as I can tell, it still is more valuable than mine. I don't know if he has his but I still have mine. See?

The way we value some things over others and what we value in general (and what we don't) can come from many sources. If you are shopping for a brand-new or a new-to-you car, you may buy a Consumer Reports magazine to see how different models hold up in the real world. That may help you decide which one to value over others. Maybe your personal experiences will help you decide. My dad, for some reason has always loved Chrysler products and hated Chevrolet. Probably because he had a bad experience along the way (or a good one).

Vonna LOVES old houses—especially Victorian-styled ones with high ceilings and all the things that come with that style. She values them highly—and would LOVE to own one. My experiences with frayed wiring, old tile plumbing, and ancient heating systems—along with the constant repairs—keeps me from seeing much value in an old house.

She sees the beauty and I see the headaches—the ones I would have to fix.

On the other hand, I would value an old worn-out classic car MUCH more than she would. She would see the headaches and I would see the hidden beauty.

We get our value systems from our family to some degree—genetics and environment you might say. If your family valued neatness, your house may be spotless—or at least you may feel guilty (even now) that it isn't. If your family valued relationships—you may place more value on friends and relatives than others do.

Our value systems are also influenced by society. It is shameful, but western society tends to not value age and the wisdom that comes from living a long life. Because of that, there is always a danger that a whole generation of wisdom will be lost.

Our value systems are also influenced by our religion—at least they are supposed to be. In its best light religion can be a great guide for our value system.

If we read scripture for ourselves and if we listen to that still small voice of the Holy Spirit, Christianity is a great source of values. If we open our hearts and lives to the working of God and if we let him guide us through his word, we will find a wonderful system of values to live our lives by—values that are real and right.

Today we are looking at the story of the Magi. You might think I am clinging to our celebration of Christmas as long as I possibly can (and you would be right—I LOVE Christmas). Still, since it appears that the wise men were not present at Jesus' birth, but came along later (even a year or more later) then it is appropriate that we use this time to take a look at them.

Even if they were not there for the birth, they did greatly value the event we call Christmas and if they were TRULY wise, then maybe it would be good and right to follow the example they set for the rest of us. Let's look at their actions and see what their value system was—what THEY valued and how they valued it. Let's look at how they might be wise examples for you and me.

First, a bit of background on those we call the wise men. These Magi were probably from the area we now know as Iraq. Ancient Persia was home to a religion with an elaborate system of astrology and astronomy.

The Greek word Magi is a bit misleading. Magi normally refers to a sorcerer or magician. But that is not what they were. Maybe “wise men” really is a better name for them. These men—be they three or four or more—were probably priests and maybe doctors of that learning system—kind of like a PhD. These were the men who knew the planets and stars. They were learned men in every discipline.

In their government, no man was considered fit to be king unless he was first a Magi. It was their astrological expertise that told them of Jesus' birth. We might say that it was their wisdom that caused them to travel to Jerusalem and to Bethlehem.

How were they wise and how can they be wise examples for us? I'm glad you asked that...

First of all, they were wise because they recognized and acknowledged—and gave meaning to—that which they didn't understand. In their studying of the skies, they saw something they didn't expect. They then acknowledged that this was a special event and they attached meaning to it. In all the earth, how many people must have looked into the sky at that same time and failed to notice anything different? How many more noticed something was different but failed to even care? How many noticed but discounted it as nothing?

The workings of God are all around us. God DOES interact with you and with me individually. God does work in his creation. He has the power and the authority and the will to do so. Miracles and special appointments with God. Feelings from his heart to ours—tugging at our hearts and spirits and minds.

God is there and he is NOT silent. But how many of us are too busy running and going and can't seem to stop long enough to feel or see? How many of are just talking too loud to hear? Talking to ourselves. Talking to each other. Talking about our accomplishments and what we are going to do. Even in our prayers—talking and talking and talking instead of listening.

Maybe we don't see or hear because we are expecting a major event—a call from God on the old red phone. Maybe we are waiting for God to act in some magnificent, irresistible way in our hearts and minds and souls—but maybe God has chosen a still small voice instead as he did with Elijah in the cave, when God was not in the great fire or the mighty earthquake or in the terrible wind, but was in the voice of silence or nothingness.

God didn't send these wise men an explosion in the sky or an unexpected eclipse or anything spectacular like that. If that was what they were expecting—they would probably have missed this new star.

But being wise, they knew that God works in unexpected ways—in the ways God chooses (because God chooses to choose them) :)

Second, not only did they notice this event. They acknowledged it and attached meaning to it. Can you imagine them out at night in their homeland and there were not 3 there were 8 or even 10 or 15 who saw the star?

Maybe some of those would have said, “it is nothing, let's go home and sleep—forget it!” “I see this kind of thing all the time—it means nothing.”

One might have even said, “sure, it has to do with a king, anyone can see that, but it is not OUR king and it is none of our business, let it go.”

Another might have said, “that's no miracle and it isn't about any king—I don't believe in that stuff. Just a natural occurrence.”

Others might have acknowledged that this was a special and strange occurrence but didn't want to buy the trouble it would probably bring. "Better forget you saw that, boys, I'm telling you..."

What if Moses had done that with the burning bush in Exodus 3? Maybe the Hebrews would STILL be slaves in Egypt.

But these wise ones—be they 3 or 4 or more—noticed the workings of God and they acknowledged and they attached meaning to what they saw.

Third, once they had attached meaning, once they had a solid understanding that something special had happened and was happening, they acted on what they saw—like Jed Clampet, they stacked and packed everything on that old model A truck and headed out—with Granny's rocking chair tied on top. Well maybe not like that. Actually it was much more of an adventure than driving from Bug Tussel to California..

Travel has changed—now we just hop on a plane and fly. Even if we drive, it isn't the same as it used to be. When I drove to Arkansas last Fall, I think I took \$20 and a couple of bottles of water. Between the stores and the good highways and ATM machines, I had all I needed to make an 800 mile trip—and to make it in under 15 hours.

In the old days, they had to take two or three spare tires and extra water for the radiator and other stuff. Before that, it was slow going—on horses and mules and wagons and carts.

Or camels. The trip they took was quite a commitment. Travel was difficult and dangerous. It was expensive. Everything they needed—even the money to re-supply—had to be carried with them. Water and food and spare animals. Guards and weapons. They literally didn't know if it would take weeks or months or years. We believe it took years.

They made this commitment on very limited knowledge. When they perceived that God was working, they committed to finding out more.

The dust would have gotten everywhere—and you couldn't have taken a shower every evening to get rid of it. No real bed. No TV news—and even worse, no weather report. No ACC basketball. No air conditioner (or heater). Get up, eat, break camp, mount up, travel, travel, travel, rest and eat, travel, travel, travel, stop, set up camp, eat, sleep—then do it all over again.

They didn't know where they were going, but they did the best they could with that they observed and what they knew. Child of a king? Once the star led them toward Judea, it had to be Jerusalem. Child of a king? Obviously it had to be Herod, so that is where they went. BUT when they had more and better information, they acted on that and they went to Bethlehem.

Their trip to see Herod says they were seeking one thing—that they thought they understood what the star meant—but God was certainly about to reveal more and better and greater than they ever imagined. When they arrived at Bethlehem, they found God himself.

Fourth, being wise men, they fell down and worshiped him. The circumstances, the place, the star, the dream—maybe even the person of Jesus the baby...SOMETHING caused them to fall down and worship Jesus. They lavished him with honor and with presents.

Then they outfoxed the old fox Herod. Instead of doing what Herod wanted, they listened to the voice of God and they returned home another way. Having set out to find a new king, these wise men found God himself and I assume that they returned home changed forever.

OK—let me quickly point out how you and I can be as wise as these men.

1. Be sensitive to God. God's acting and God's speaking and leading in our lives. He may not come through thunder and lightning. He may not be in the wind or fire or earthquake. In fact, I can safely say that he will probably come personally and quietly. That still-small-voice of the Spirit we talk about. Through the words of a child. Through the love of a friend or a spouse. Through the scripture you read. Always watch for the hand of God and hear his leading—where it is and as it is, not as we expect it to be.

2. When we have heard God—acknowledge his hand and his presence. Isaiah 6:8 says, *“I heard the Lord’s voice, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am. Send me!”*

3. Also in the spirit of that Bible verse, once we have heard and acknowledged, we are to follow the Magi's wise example and act. Act with our hearts and souls and our bodies. Commit, commit, commit. Even if our knowledge is limited and we don't know what the end will be. They didn't and yet they acted.

4. As we act, know and expect that God will guide. As we are in the process of acting—of doing what we know to do—God will continue to reveal and guide and direct. If we find that God reveals more clearly and completely along the way, we have to be wise enough to alter our course. We may need to be willing to go to Bethlehem instead of Jerusalem.

5. Once we have come face to face with God—we must fall on our faces and worship. When God reveals his will and himself to us, if we are wise we will understand what a gift that really is. Nothing that we can give back, not gold, nor frankincense, nor myrrh is enough. Our gift back to God must be our hearts, our souls—our lives. Even then, we cannot repay fully.

Christians, are we as committed as those who were from a foreign place and practiced a foreign religion—who worshiped a different God? Have we committed and acted as powerfully as they did? No danger, no discomfort, no journey, no expense was too much for them. Or are we spiritually soft and lazy—even unaware that we have come face-to-face with the one true God?

What a gift we have been given. The star guided the Magi to Jesus. You and I have this book to show us the way to him. If we are wise enough to seek him—and to continue to seek him moment to moment.

