

Join us in being on mission with God!

**OUR VISION**

To continually mature and grow as a united body of Jesus-imitators who live out God's greatest commandment to "Love" by exalting God and serving one another, and His greatest commission to "Go" by reaching into and shaping our local, regional, and global communities.

## "Living in the Light of Christmas"

*Matthew 2:11-12*

### Getting Started

*After an introductory time, discuss the following questions in your group or class.*

Christmas plays tend to compress the events surrounding the birth of Jesus into one simple event that you can put in a single scene. It's nice to combine the angels singing in the heavens, Joseph and Mary at the stable, the shepherds inquiring about the birth, and the wise men bringing their gifts.

The only problem with this reconstruction is that it is not historic. It combines pericopes (short sections of the Bible) into a larger account that does not do justice to each piece and gives some false impressions. Because the details in scripture are sometimes scarce, we also tend to embrace assumptions or other ideas that have been passed along through the centuries as true rather than speculation. This study will focus on the account of the wise men.

- Q: Identify some of the ideas, myths, or legends you have heard about the wise men who came to visit Jesus.

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### Thinking about the wise men

1. The word translated *magi* occurs six times in the New Testament. It occurs four times in Matthew 2:1-16. The other two times it refers a different individual completely. Read Luke 13:6-8 and describe the person mentioned here.

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2. The word *magus* is Babylonian in origin. One dictionary defines it as "a wise man and priest, who was expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various other occult arts."

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3. Back in his day as a captive, Daniel was regarded by many as a magus. Some believe that the prophecy that brought the wise men to Bethlehem was a fragment from Daniel in Daniel 2:44. What in that verse might be of interest so such men as these?

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**Matthew 2:11-12**

<sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.  
<sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

4. The word *magus* is Babylonian in origin. One dictionary defines it as “a wise man and priest, who was expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various other occult arts.”

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*Fausset’s Bible Dictionary* states, “The Magi were a sacerdotal [priestly] caste among the Medes, in connection with the Zoroastrian religion. “They waited upon the sacred fire, and performed ablutions [religious washings], and practiced observation of the stars.” Muller (Herzog Cyclopedia) says that the Median priests were not originally called Magi, but by the names found in the Zendavesta “Atharva,” guardians of the fire, and that the Chaldaeans first gave them the name Magi. Nebuchadnezzar gathered round him the religious teachers and wise men of the nations he conquered.

5. What does it say about the character of God that he would work in the minds and hearts of a group of non-Jewish priests to make them so curious that they would engage on a long journey to Israel in quest of a king?

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6. Why is it important for Jesus, even as an infant, to receive worship from people who have no links to Abraham and the Jewish people?

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7. How do you think Jews in the first century would have reacted to reading about this attention Jesus received from Gentiles? How do you think Gentiles would have reacted?

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8. Look at the question they ask in Matthew 2:2. What does this indicate about the probable time of their arrival in Jerusalem relative to the birth of Jesus?

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9. How long do you think it might have taken for the events of verses 3-6 to take place?

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10. The Bible tells us that three kinds of gifts were given to Jesus, not his parents. (Obviously, they were to use these gifts on Jesus behalf.) Why is it significant that Matthew states that the gifts were given to *him* and not to *them*?

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11. What false assumption do we sometimes make when we consider the number of gifts that were given to Jesus at this time?

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## Living in the Light of Christmas

12. Herod had contrived and bribed his way into an office in the Jewish nation. How do you think he responded to the question about one “born king of the Jews”? [Note: The Parthians, to whom the magi belonged, were no friends of Rome.]

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It is highly likely that the magi were part of the group that were the “king-makers” of the Parthians. They were powerful, politically connected, and very influential. Most likely, they arrived with a cavalry to protect them along the way, and dressed in all kinds of oriental pomp.

13. How does the nature of their arrival, as mentioned above, explain the response of Herod in verse 3?

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14. Do you think that the Magi were looking for a child or an adult? What would have been the implications if God had sent them to Israel about 27 years later?

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15. It is likely that there were a dozen or more magi in the traveling party rather than the three in Christmas plays. Add to that servants and cavalry, and the company that showed up in Jerusalem would be sizeable. What impression do you think they made upon their arrival? What would be equivalent to that kind of group of visitors today?

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16. The mention of people present at their arrival refers directly only to “the child with his mother Mary.” What is suggested by the fact that others are not included in this account?

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17. Matthew notes that the Magi came to the *house*. This is not the same word the Bible uses for *stable* or *inn*. What does that suggest about the situation of Mary and Joseph since the birth of Christ?

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18. Luke 2:21 tells us that Joseph and Mary settled in Nazareth after the presentation of Jesus in the temple on the eighth day. But it cannot mean that they settled in Nazareth *immediately after* the presentation on the eighth day. Why not? (See Matthew 2:13-22.)

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Reaching Up and Reaching Out

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The biblical accounts are compressed according to the purpose of the writer as directed by the Holy Spirit. Unless we compare them carefully, we may not understand the full sequence of things. The "flight to Egypt" was not central to Luke's account.

- 19. In verse 11, the first response of the magi was worship. Describe in your own words what this might have looked like. Take into account the status of these men, the kind of place Mary and Joseph might have been living in, and the unexpectedness of this event.

Two horizontal lines for writing the answer to question 19.

- 20. Biblical scholars have made much of the symbolic nature of the gifts given to Jesus. What do you know about them?

gold = \_\_\_\_\_

incense = \_\_\_\_\_

myrrh = \_\_\_\_\_

- 21. How did the gifts prove useful in light of God's command and Joseph's response in Matthew 2:14?

Two horizontal lines for writing the answer to question 21.

- 21. What does this suggest about how God equips us to do his will?

Two horizontal lines for writing the answer to question 21.

- 22. How did God communicate to the Magi in verse 12? Why was this directive important to the plan of God?

Two horizontal lines for writing the answer to question 22.

- 23. How did the magi show faith and trust in the God of the Jews in response to this revelation? What risks did they take in this course of action a long ways from their homeland?

Two horizontal lines for writing the answer to question 23.

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