

The Magi

SPEAKER Matt Ryniker

DATE Sunday, December 22, 2024

PASSAGES Matthew 2; Daniel 2; Isaiah 9; Psalm 19; Romans 10

MESSAGE Begins at 1:02:09 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Men from east of Jerusalem — almost certainly pagan stargazers — read the night sky, followed it to a house in Bethlehem, and worshiped a child they had never met. God spoke to them through a star and then through a dream, and asked no one's permission to do it. The nations were never an afterthought in the plan of salvation, and the God who spoke then is not retired.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ The Greek word behind “Magi” in Matthew 2 is the same word used for the stargazing class Nebuchadnezzar summoned in Daniel 2. These are not kings and they are probably not Jews.
- ◆ Daniel saved that entire class of men from execution, then spent decades as a prophet in their city — which sits east of Jerusalem. A memory of a coming, unending kingdom had somewhere to live.
- ◆ Watching the night sky is not exclusively pagan. Psalm 19 says the heavens declare the glory of God, and Paul quotes it in Romans 10 as testimony that has already gone out to the ends of the earth.
- ◆ Modern horoscope astrology is a different thing, and Matt rejected it plainly: a cosmic machine that sorts billions of people by birthday and cannot say what good and evil are.
- ◆ Scripture is the canon — the measuring rod. Anything anyone claims God said gets measured by what he has certainly said.
- ◆ But the ultimate authority is God himself, not the written word about him — which is exactly why he is still free to speak.

- ◆ Herod's reaction is the tell: pagans came to worship the King of the Jews, and the king of the Jews was disturbed by it.
- ◆ God speaks to whomever he wants, however he wants — and today, to anyone not yet his, the word is come.

► 1:02:09

Matt opened a Christmas Sunday message by talking about the Sistine Chapel, which he has never visited. Twelve prophet figures run from the doorway to the altar. Five are Old Testament prophets. Five are sibyls — pagan oracles, Greek and Persian and Libyan — and the medieval church put them on a church ceiling because the literature attributed to them seemed to anticipate the birth of a king from Abraham's line. "Some of them are so explicitly Christian you're like, oh my gosh, what is going on here." He was careful: he is not calling that scripture, and Christians may well have embellished it. But it raises the question the whole message turns on.

Can God speak to pagans?

► 1:05:48

Numbers has a test case. Moab hires Balaam, a pagan prophet, to curse Israel, and he cannot manage it — he keeps blessing them instead, telling the delegation that whatever the Lord says is what he will have to say. That is not the same as loyalty. By [Numbers 25](#) and [31](#) Balaam has found another way to earn his fee, coaching the nations Israel was meant to displace to intermarry strategically. He was never a double agent. God simply spoke through him.

Which is where the Nicene Creed's line about the Spirit — that he "has spoken through the prophets" — meets the word *canon*, a measuring rod. "Let's say you're reading C.S. Lewis by the fire and you're like, wow, he must have been inspired by God to write this," Matt said. You would still measure it by scripture. Whether or not God spoke to the sibyls, that is the rule.

Who the Magi actually were

► 1:08:35

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’”

MATTHEW 2:1-2 ✍ (NIV)

Pull it off the mantelpiece and away from the nativity set and it is genuinely strange. They say they have come to worship — a word that can mean kneeling in homage or the real thing. “From the east” is not a location, it is a direction, and there is a great deal of territory east of Jerusalem.

► 1:09:57

The word itself is the thread. *Magoi* shows up in the Greek of [Daniel 2:2](#), where a sleepless Nebuchadnezzar summons magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and Chaldeans. The Hebrew behind “enchanters” can mean astronomer, stargazer. Then comes the impossible demand: tell me the dream *and* its meaning, or be torn limb from limb and have your houses leveled. “How about that,” Matt said. “You show up to work, that’s your assignment.”

► 1:13:58

Daniel — an exile from Judah, and a prophet — is swept into the same death sentence, and goes to God. He describes the composite statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay, and then the interpretation:

“And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever.”

DANIEL 2:44 ✍

The magician class of Babylon kept their necks that day, and Matt’s guess is that they never forgot who saved them. Daniel rose in rank and stayed for decades.

What Daniel would have carried with him

► 1:15:54

Daniel came after Isaiah, and probably had a copy of him in exile:

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.”

ISAIAH 9:6-7 ↗; SEE ALSO ISAIAH 9:2-4 ↗

Set the two side by side. A prophet holding a promise of a child whose government never ends hands a Babylonian king a vision of a kingdom that smashes every other kingdom and stands forever. The promises cohere — and they were deposited, by an exile, in a library and a living memory in a city that happens to lie east of Jerusalem.

Is there a good way to look up?

► 1:18:19

Nearly everyone in the ancient world watched the sky — Mari’s cuneiform tablets are full of it, and even synagogues had zodiac imagery in the floors. Matt granted the obvious objection first. Horoscope astrology, where your birthday assigns your temperament and your luck, gets less plausible with every billion people added to the planet, and it collapses good and evil into a machine. Reject it.

Then Romans, where Paul asks whether the nations have really heard, and answers himself: “Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world” — which is a quotation, and not from Isaiah.

► 1:20:09

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

PSALM 19:1-4 ↗

“Their voice” is the Hebrew word for a line, and what follows a line across the night sky in the ancient world is a celestial body. Caring what the heavens say is not a Babylonian import. It is in our own tradition, and Paul treats it as witness God has already given to people who have neither the scriptures nor a synagogue nearby.

► 1:21:27

So put yourself in the east. The Jews say God speaks through the sky. Daniel lived among us not so long ago, brought our own king word of a coming kingdom without end, and carried Isaiah's promise of a child. When his star appears, of course we go — and of course Jerusalem will be thrilled to see us, because they are waiting for him too.

Jerusalem was not thrilled

► 1:22:32

“When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.” Matt noted the pattern: the city is in an uproar at the triumphal entry too. Disturbing Jerusalem is a habit Jesus has had since birth. The chief priests and teachers answer the question from Micah, quoted in Matthew 2:6 — Bethlehem, and out of it a ruler who will shepherd Israel, the same tribe of Judah whose scepter Jacob said would not depart (Genesis 49:10). Herod then meets the Magi secretly, pins down when the star appeared, and sends them off with instructions to report back so that he too may come and worship. He never goes looking himself.

► 1:24:56

“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, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”

MATTHEW 2:11–12 ↗ (NIV)

They followed a star to a baby they had just met and worshiped him, trusting God was leading them — and he was. Then a dream. “At this point I’m not even sure if they’re pagan, because they’re worshiping Jesus.” Herod, meanwhile, is caught off guard and, Matt thinks, hates it.

Everyone in the story — Herod, the Magi, Matthew himself — assumes this is a legitimate way God might speak. And what it establishes is that the Gentile nations were in the scope of salvation from the start, not bolted on later by disciples: the promise to Abraham was always that all nations would be blessed in his seed (Galatians 3:8).

“He didn’t feel the need to get permission from Herod first, or the chief scribes, or the priests. Hey guys, do you mind if I do this real quick?”

Does he still speak?

► 1:29:15

Matt thought that would be the easy question and then read from his own journal instead of arguing it. If you are a Christian at all, you already know the answer: his sheep know his voice, the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and no one comes unless the Father draws him. The live question is how restricted he is in what he can say, and when, and how.

► 1:29:58

Two entries, both from 2006. In the first he was working at a community college, reading about Elijah's boldness between appointments, and felt convicted — not condemned. A colleague was in a boot after foot surgery. He asked whether he could practice praying for healing, which he admits was a clunky way to put it. First attempt: they both felt relaxed. Second and third: she felt blood rush to her foot, a tingling, and said it felt weird, which he took as a reason to keep going. Later she came back and told him the pain had eased. He wrote it down the same day and had her read and sign it to confirm it was accurate. God lifted already-written words off the page and aimed them at a Tuesday.

► 1:32:47

The second is a different kind. Outside a Starbucks with his friend Chris, talking with four teenage girls, Chris said he thought God had told him one of them had had a nightmare two days before and that God wanted to give her peace. She confirmed it. He then asked whether her neck hurt. It did. She was healed and she received Christ, and Matt cannot remember which came first. They could have simply told her about Jesus — that was the whole errand. But knowing that God knew about her nightmares took a wall down.

Under scripture, and still free

► 1:35:03

The guardrail Matt keeps is firm. Nothing he ever feels God has put on his heart outranks scripture; he submits it. If a stargazer turns up claiming God told him there were multiple Christs, the answer is no, because that is not what scripture says. But the ultimate authority is God himself and not the written word about him — which is precisely why he remains free to speak.

And what is scripture's own story? A living God who wants every tribe to know him relationally, not a retired one who launched a mission and left us to finish it. If the invitation is relationship, then his Spirit testifying to their spirit, his sheep knowing his voice, is not a first-generation arrangement.

► 1:35:45

Can Jesus speak to pagans? To persecutors of the church — Paul was one? To his own enemies? Directly, or through you, or indirectly through you? “Everything I know about God through the Bible is that he feels permission to do however he pleases.”

He closed where the Magi ended up, on their knees. God spoke to them. He spoke to and through Balaam. Maybe he spoke through the sibyls. What matters more on a Sunday before Christmas is that he is speaking now — and to anyone not yet his, the thing he is most likely saying is to lay your sins and burdens down at the cross and come. Today is the day of salvation.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- [Numbers 22](#)
- [Numbers 25](#)
- [Numbers 31](#)
- [Matthew 2:1–2](#)
- [Daniel 2:2](#)
- [Daniel 2:44](#)
- [Isaiah 9:2–4](#)
- [Isaiah 9:6–7](#)
- [Romans 10:18](#)
- [Psalm 19:1–4](#)
- [Matthew 21:10](#)
- [Micah 5:2](#)
- [Matthew 2:6](#)
- [Genesis 49:10](#)
- [Matthew 2:11–12](#)
- [Galatians 3:8](#)
- [John 10:27](#)
- [Romans 8:16](#)
- [John 6:44](#)
- [2 Corinthians 6:2](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Before this message, who did you picture when you heard “wise men”? What changes if they were pagan astronomers with a long memory of a prophet named Daniel?
2. Daniel's faithfulness in a hostile court may have planted something that bore fruit centuries after he died. Where are you being asked to be faithful without seeing the outcome?
3. Matt rejected horoscope astrology and still insisted the heavens declare God's glory. Where do you draw that line, and what makes the difference?
4. He says nothing he senses from God outranks scripture, but that God himself outranks the written word. How do you hold both of those at once without losing one?
5. Herod heard the news and was disturbed; the Magi heard it and traveled. What is God saying to you right now, and what would responding look like this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MCWPMkYGY&t=3729s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.