



# Exceedingly Great Joy!

By

**Mark McGee**

## The Magi

I love words. Each one carries a world of meaning, especially as we join one word to another and another and another, until we've created a thought. That's what this GraceLife blog is about ... thoughts ... thoughts about God's amazing Grace. Words are what make the thoughts understandable and life changing.

One of the words that means so much to me, and millions of Christians around the world, is **joy**. Joy is at the heart of the Christian faith. Take the three wise men who traveled a long distance to see what the star would show them.

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” Matthew 2:10-11

The wise men knew the prophecies about the Messiah and they read the prophetic signs in the sky. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. Did you see that? They rejoiced with **exceedingly great joy!** They were so excited to see the star. They knew that the ancient prophecy was coming true at that very moment. It was no longer an old prophecy. It was happening during their lifetime. It was happening in front of them. They were going to be part of the prophecy!

It's amazing to me that these three learned men were astute enough to see in the alignment of stars in the sky that God was on the move. He was going to do what He told prophets centuries before that He was going to do. The Messiah, Israel's Savior and King, had been born! That caused the wise men to rejoice "with exceedingly great joy."

The story of the Magi (wise men) looking for the prophesied Messiah of Israel has captured the hearts and minds of millions of people for centuries.

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.' When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: '*But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.*'" Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have

found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.’ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.” Matthew 2:1-9

The wise men in the Greek language were called *majos* (plural is *majoi*) and *magus* in Latin. The Magi were members of an ancient and sacred caste dating back to at least the 6th century B.C. The Greeks, as well as other ancient people, wrote about the religious wisdom of the Magi. Some of them were responsible for the religious training of kings and emperors. They were also known as “king makers” because of their powers of wisdom and knowledge to influence the choice of kings. The Magi were also close advisors of the king during his reign. Their involvement in the supernatural gave rise eventually to the use of the word *magikos* (English – magic) to describe what the Magi did. The 5th century B.C. Greek historian Herodotus wrote about the Magi coming from Persia (modern Iran).

Many scholars believe the Magi of ancient Persia had been influenced by the Hebrews taken into captivity. There is some thought that the Hebrew prophet Daniel, who was a leader during the reign of the Babylonians and later the Persians in the 6th century B.C., may have influenced the Magi with the dominant spiritual wisdom and power that God had given him. Through Daniel or other means the Magi learned about the promised Messiah King of Israel. They shared their knowledge about the Messianic promise through the centuries so that the Magi of Jesus’ time knew to look for a specific star and

follow it to where they would meet the Messiah. They were “king makers” and knew they had an important role to play in the birth of the young King.

It’s interesting to note that the Magi of Persia knew more about the Messianic prophecy than the king of Israel at the time, Herod. The Magi told King Herod the time and place of Messiah’s birth. Herod said he wanted to worship the Messiah, but murder was in his heart. The Magi continued to follow the star until “it stood over where the young Child was.”

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.” Matthew 2:10

The three Magi were filled with great joy when they saw the star stand in the sky over the location of the Messiah. The words “exceedingly great joy” in the Greek are *charan megalen sphodra*.

The first word, *charan*, is a noun that translates as “joy, rejoicing, gladness.” If that wasn’t enough to describe how the Magi reacted to seeing the star, the author Matthew added the words *megalen sphodra*. *Megalen* is an adjective that describes the “joy” as being “great, glorious, wonderful.” *Sphodra* is an adverb that means “excessive, very much.”

This noun, adjective and adverb give us amazing insight into how the star standing over the location of the Messiah affected these wise “king makers” from Persia. They “rejoiced with exceedingly great joy!” It was most likely the greatest moment in their lives and they knew

what they were seeing with their own eyes was the culmination of centuries of prophecy. They had read about it in their ancient texts and been told specific details of the prophecy by elders of the Magi. They had been chosen by the God of Heaven to follow the star and see the Messiah with their own eyes!

## The Magi's Journey

The Magi, wise men from Persia, made a long journey following a star in the sky to find the promised Messiah King of Israel. They probably knew to look because of a Hebrew prophet named Daniel who was appointed by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to be the “chief of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers” during the 6th century B.C. (Daniel 5:11). Daniel prophesied the doom of Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar’s son King Belshazzar just hours before the Persian army killed the king and took over Babylon (Daniel 5:30-31). God blessed Daniel under the new leadership and he became one of three governors to rule with the new king. Daniel faced tough political enemies, but overcame adversity with God’s protection and ruled with both King Darius the Mede and King Cyrus the Persian.

The Magi knew well what Daniel had seen, done and written as the chief Magi of Babylon and Persia. God showed Daniel great visions of the future of the great world powers. One of those visions concerned 70 weeks that the angel Gabriel explained was 70 weeks of years to accomplish specific things in Israel’s life.

“Seventy weeks are determined For your people and for your holy city, To finish the transgression, To make an end of sins, To make reconciliation for iniquity, To bring in everlasting righteousness, To seal up vision and prophecy, And to anoint the Most Holy.” Daniel 9:24

What an amazing list of things God was going to do during the 70 weeks of years ( $70 \times 7 = 490$  years):

1. finish the transgression
2. make an end of sins
3. make a reconciliation for iniquity
4. bring in everlasting righteousness
5. to seal up vision and prophecy
6. anoint the Most Holy

All of these things would be accomplished under the rule of the Messiah of Israel:

“Know therefore and understand, *That* from the going forth of the command To restore and build Jerusalem Until Messiah the Prince, *There shall be* seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; The street shall be built again, and the wall, Even in troublesome times. And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; And the people of the prince who is to come Shall destroy the city and the sanctuary.” Daniel 9:25-26

The Magi had done the math and knew it was time for Messiah to appear. They studied the heavens, as astrologers (the earliest astronomers) would do in that situation, and saw the movement of a special star. They saw the signal in the sky that God was on the move and they followed the star to the place where they found the Messiah.

“... and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

Matthew 2:9-11

The special star “stood over where the young Child was” and the Magi rejoiced with “exceedingly great joy.” They were overwhelmed inside their hearts and minds to know they were eyewitnesses of Daniel’s ancient prophecy. They went into the house, saw the young Child with Mary His mother, then fell down and worshiped Him.

Doesn’t that seem a little strange? Why would three Magi from Persia, who had their own king and religion, fall down and worship the prophesied Messiah of Israel? They worshiped Jesus because they knew from Daniel’s prophecy that He was going to become the great ruler of all the world, not just one country.

## The Magi's Gifts

Christmas is right around the corner. The malls and shopping centers are filled with people searching for just the right gift for mom and dad, brother and sister, aunt and uncle, boyfriend and girlfriend. It's a time of giving and receiving. When did the idea for giving presents at Christmas begin? At the beginning.

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” Matthew 2:10-11

The Middle East, where Jesus was born, is steeped in history and tradition. Life began there. The great struggles of God's people happened in the hills, mountains and valleys of the Middle East. The Magi who came from Persia to find the prophesied Messiah who would become the ruler of the world were experts in the traditions of “king making.” Bringing gifts to the one who would be king was an important role they played in that tradition. The gifts they brought were not picked up at a local store as an afterthought. The Magi knew exactly what to give the Messiah Prince who would become King.

The first gift is often overlooked as we read this ancient story. They “fell down and worshiped Him.” Bowing down or falling prostrate before a person was the well-known gift of demonstrating great

respect for someone of a higher class or position. Putting the head down on the ground and placing the hands in front of the head was the idea of “kissing forward.” It was an act of great admiration. The Magi first gave Jesus the gift of respect and admiration for who He was and who they knew He would become. Jesus was sent by God and would become the ruler of Israel and the world!

King makers like the Magi would not arrive at a royal court without gifts. It would be rude and a show of great disrespect. If the Magi had fallen down and worshiped Jesus but not brought Him gifts, the visit would have been viewed as a great sham and farce. The Magi were experts in giving gifts at the royal court. They knew the great traditions of the Middle East and they knew what was expected for every situation. The gifts they brought to Messiah would fit the occasion perfectly.

“And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” Notice that what the Magi brought to Jesus were “treasures.” It is the Greek word *thesaurous* and means “a place of safe keeping.” They kept their gifts to Jesus in a special place that kept the gifts safe on the long journey from Persia. Those gifts would be protected at all cost. When they saw the Messiah, they opened their special treasure vault to retrieve the gifts. We do something similar to that when we wrap presents. The gift wrapped in special paper and with bows is our treasure to family and friend and to only be unwrapped upon the special occasion of giving the gift.

The Magi were renowned in the Middle East for their ability to foretell the future. It began with the Hebrew prophet Daniel, the chief Magi of the royal court of Babylon and Persia hundreds of years earlier. It was Daniel's prophecy that led the Magi to watch the sky for a sign that God was on the move to bring the promised Messiah into the world. The Magi knew exactly what gifts would be appropriate for this amazing event. Even though similar gifts were given to kings and princes who would become kings in the Middle East, each of the gifts the Magi brought Jesus also expressed a spiritual meaning.

The first gift presented to Jesus was **gold**. Gold represented the highest and most precious of metals and was the best gift to give a king. It demonstrated that the king held the highest position in the country and would be the wealthiest. It also spoke to bloodlines and the right of the king to rule. Gold was a pure metal and demonstrated the purity of kingship. It was a statement of the "value" the king had to his country. (Jesus was quite familiar with the value of gold. He had paved the streets of Heaven with it.) Jesus the Messiah had the highest value for both Israel and the Gentile nations. He had come to earth to become the King of Kings.

The second gift brought out of the boxes by the Magi was **frankincense**. Incense was very important in the Middle East. It had been used for centuries to cover the course smells of life. It was also used to improve people's thoughts and attitudes and was often used to treat depression. The best incenses were expensive to buy and frankincense was quite expensive. Its fragrance would attest to its

value. Incense was also used by priests as a method of worshiping God, intervening for the needs of people and sending prayers to Him. Jesus was also God's High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16) and would intervene for the needs of those who were His. Frankincense had a holy place in the plan of God for His people:

“And the LORD said to Moses: ‘Take sweet spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, and pure frankincense with *these* sweet spices; there shall be equal amounts of each. You shall make of these an incense, a compound according to the art of the perfumer, salted, pure, *and* holy. And you shall beat *some* of it very fine, and put some of it before the Testimony in the tabernacle of meeting where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. But *as for* the incense which you shall make, you shall not make any for yourselves, according to its composition. It shall be to you holy for the LORD. Whoever makes *any* like it, to smell it, he shall be cut off from his people.” Exodus 30:34-37

The third gift brought out of the treasure of the Magi was **myrrh**. Myrrh also has a strong smell and was used in the Middle East to cover the smell of a dead body. It was used in the preparation of a body for burial. Myrrh was bitter to the taste and thought to describe well the bitterness of death. Myrrh was also used by God in displaying His holiness and anointing humans for holy service.

“Moreover the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Also take for yourself quality spices—five hundred *shekels* of liquid myrrh,

half as much sweet-smelling cinnamon (two hundred and fifty *shekels*), two hundred and fifty *shekels* of sweet-smelling cane, five hundred *shekels* of cassia, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and a hin of olive oil. And you shall make from these a holy anointing oil, an ointment compounded according to the art of the perfumer. It shall be a holy anointing oil. With it you shall anoint the tabernacle of meeting and the ark of the Testimony; the table and all its utensils, the lampstand and its utensils, and the altar of incense; the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the laver and its base. You shall consecrate them, that they may be most holy; whatever touches them must be holy. And you shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that *they* may minister to Me as priests. And you shall speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘This shall be a holy anointing oil to Me throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on man’s flesh; nor shall you make *any other* like it, according to its composition. *It is* holy, *and* it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds *any* like it, or whoever puts *any* of it on an outsider, shall be cut off from his people.” Exodus 30:22-

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The Magi brought the perfect gifts to the prophesied Messiah King. Gold represented His purity and value as the One who would rule the world from His rightful position of King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Frankincense represented Christ’s role as the Most High Priest of God. Myrrh represented Messiah’s holiness and anointing for His

ultimate sacrifice of laying down His life to save people from their unholiness (sinfulness).

## The Magi's Story

I've heard people say that the story of the Magi bringing gifts to Jesus should not have been included in the Bible. Their reasoning is that the Magi were members of a false religion (Zoroastrianism) and God would have never used someone from a false religion to be involved with Israel's Messiah.

First, it's a little late to be second-guessing God about His Word. Even though many people are still arguing about what is and is not God's Word, the Holy Spirit (who inspired God's Word) put His stamp of approval on His Bible centuries ago.

Second, God has used members of false religions to do His will. Remember Egypt's pharaoh? He worshiped many false gods, but the True God of Heaven hardened pharaoh's heart so that Israel would see that their God was greater than all the gods of Egypt. Remember Balam? He was an Ammonite who intended to curse Israel, but God turned Balam's curses into blessings. Remember Nebuchadnezzar? He was a pagan king who worshiped idols, but God humbled Nebuchadnezzar and changed his heart to praise the True God of Heaven. God can and does use anyone He wants to for his purposes.

Third, the Magi had been deeply influenced by the Hebrew prophet Daniel. As we saw in our earlier studies, the armies of Babylon took Daniel and other young Israelites captive. King Nebuchadnezzar saw first-hand the power of God in Daniel's life: "And in all matters of wisdom *and* understanding about which the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians *and* astrologers who *were* in all his realm." (Daniel 1:20) Daniel became the chief Magi of the royal Babylonian court through the supernatural powers God gave him and was a trusted advisor to King Nebuchadnezzar from the end of the 7th century B.C. to the middle of the 6th century B.C. Daniel was also the chief Magi during the reign of other kings until his death. Writings about the Magi began in the 5th century B.C. Many scholars believe Daniel was the first chief Magi and passed along his wisdom to his students who taught their students and passed along the teachings of Daniel for hundreds of years.

The Magi who visited Jesus knew well the Hebrew prophecies about Israel's Messiah and brought the news to Israel's king:

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.' When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, 'In

Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: *But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.*” Matthew 2:1-6

Fourth, it's obvious from Scripture that God was personally involved in the Magi's mission:

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, ‘Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.’” When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, “*Out of Egypt I called My Son.*” Matthew 2:10-15

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Notice what God's Word says about the Magi: "Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way." God warned the Magi not to return to Jerusalem to tell Herod what they had found, so they returned to their country by another route.

God did use the Gentile Magi for His amazing purpose.

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