Introduction:

There was nothing usual or common about the birth and early childhood of Jesus Christ. Practically every event was unusual or uncommon, totally unexpected. There was the fact of His being God’s very own Son, of the virgin birth, of the announcement by angels, of being born in a stable, and on and on. The unexpected continues right on through the experience of the wise men. The wise men are a picture of those who seek Jesus. As they sought Him, events totally unexpected happened time and again. This is usually the case with those who seek Jesus. But God is faithful. If a person is truly seeking Jesus, God takes the unexpected events and works them out for good (Romans 8:28). God leads the person to Jesus regardless of circumstances and events, expected or unexpected.

Context:

Our text for study involves a mysterious star. This invites a consideration of the distinction between astronomy and astrology. In modern times, we make a clear-cut distinction between those two areas of inquiry. But the two were blended together in the ancient world. Astronomy is the scientific study of the sun, moon, stars, planets, etc.; astrology combines that study with the belief that the so-called gods orchestrate the appearance, positions, and movements of heavenly phenomena and, therefore, reveal information about divine plans for the future (omens). Astrology is practiced today in the form of horoscopes associated with the zodiac.

In the Old Testament, astrologers are mentioned most notably in the book of Daniel (Daniel 2:2, 10; 4:7; 5:7, 11; see also Isaiah 47:13). The people of Israel were warned about pagan occult practices; astrology, being a type of divination, was one of those (Deuteronomy 18:10–11; Jeremiah 10:2). And moving from consulting the stars to worshipping the stars was an all-too-easy step to take (Deuteronomy 1:19; 17:2–5; Jeremiah 8:2).

The ancient Greek translation of the book of Daniel designates such men as magoi, from which we derive our modern word magician. But words change meaning over time, and how ancient people viewed magoi is not to be equated with the contemporary role of a magician who uses sleight of hand to entertain audiences. Instead, this word describes men of wisdom; we surmise they were astrologer-scholars. This same Greek word magoi is behind the English transliteration “Magi” in Matthew 2:1, 7, 16. Magoi occurs also in Acts 13:6, 8, translated there as “sorcerer.”

Today’s Lesson:

Matthew 2:1-6 (NKJV)

1 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,
2 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."
3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.
4 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.'

Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ, was a small town about six miles south of Jerusalem. The word Bethlehem denotes “house of bread”—perhaps given to the place on account of its great fertility. It was also called Ephrata, a word supposed likewise to signify fertility, Ge. 35:19; Ru. 4:11; Ps. 132:6. It was called the city of David (Lu. 2:4), because it was the city of his nativity, 1 Sa. 16:1, 18. It was called Bethlehem of Judea, to distinguish it from a town of the same name in Galilee, Jos. 19:15. The soil of Bethlehem was noted for its fertility. Ancient travellers frequently spoke of its productions. The town is situated on an eminence, in the midst of hills and vales. At present it contains about two hundred houses, inhabited chiefly by Christians and Mohammedans, who live together in peace. About two hundred paces east of Bethlehem the place is still shown where our Saviour is supposed to have been born. There is a church and a convent there; and beneath the church a subterranean chapel, which is lighted by thirty-two lamps, which is said to be the place where was the stable in which Jesus was born, though no certain reliance is to be placed on the tradition which makes this the birthplace of the Saviour.

Judea, where our Saviour was born, was a province of the Roman Empire. It was taken about 63 years before his birth by Pompey, and placed under tribute. Herod received his appointment from the Romans, and had reigned at the time of the birth of Jesus thirty-four years. Though he was permitted to be called king, yet he was in all respects dependent on the Roman emperor. He was commonly called Herod the Great because he had distinguished himself in the wars with Antigonus and his other enemies, and because he had evinced great talents in governing and defending his country, in repairing the temple, and in building and ornamenting the cities of his kingdom. He was, however, as much distinguished for his cruelty and his crimes as he was for his greatness. At this time Augustus was Emperor of Rome. The world was at peace. A large part of the known nations of the earth was united under the Roman emperor. Intercourse between different nations was easy and safe. Similar laws prevailed. The use of the Greek language was general throughout the world. All these circumstances combined to render this a favourable time to introduce the gospel, and to spread it through the earth; and the providence of God was remarkable in preparing the nations in this manner for the easy and rapid spread of the Christian religion.

With this narrative, Matthew sets the scene for a major theme he will develop throughout the Gospel. It concerns those who acknowledge Jesus and worship Him. The ones you would anticipate as welcoming and worshiping Jesus as the Messiah, do not. It is those from whom one would least expect worship that Jesus receives homage.

Matthew sets this account of the Wise Men in a historical context—during the reign of Herod the king (Herod the Great, AD 47–4 BC). Because we know the date of Herod’s death, a key event in this story, we have a firm time marker—one that is somewhat surprising. If Jesus was born while Herod was still ruling, then Jesus was born before 4 BC.
Herod the Great was not popular with the Jews for several reasons.

1. He was not a pure Jew, but an Idumean. (Idumea lay to the south and southeast of Judea and the Dead Sea. Some associate Idumea with Edom and the Edomites, but this is only part of the Idumean heritage).

2. He had been appointed by the Roman government to rule over Israel.

3. He was a harsh ruler. Even the Roman Emperor, Augustus, acknowledged the ruthlessness of Herod.

It is difficult to identify the Wise Men with any degree of certainty. The word used to describe them here is magoi (Magoi could refer to magicians or a priestly caste from Persia). In all probability, they are a group of Persian priests familiar with reading the formations of the stars. When the Wise Men (not necessarily three wise men, since Matthew does not actually number them) see the star in the East and follow it, they come to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, anticipating something important. They recognize that a new king has been born.

Did they really understand the significance of this baby to Israel? We do not know all that this realization involved—only that it was significant enough to bring them to Jerusalem to inquire about the new king. Word of this disturbs Herod so much that he assembles the chief priests and asks where the Christ was to be born. Fascinating: Herod immediately identifies this new king with the messianic expectation of Israel. So do the chief priests, since they immediately cite the prophecy in Micah 5:2.

Matthew 2:7-12 (NKJV)

7 Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. 8 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."

9 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.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

11 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.

12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

Matthew’s use of this text is in keeping with the Jewish rabbinic practice of making an indirect theological emphasis by the giving of a narrative account. The fact that Herod and the chief priests immediately consider a messianic text in this situation is an indirect support for Matthew’s argument that Jesus is indeed the same Messiah that had been prophesied to be born in Bethlehem, a small town about five miles south of Jerusalem.

Herod had obtained the kingdom by great crimes, and by shedding much blood. He was therefore easily alarmed by any remarkable appearances; and the fact that this star appeared, and that it was regarded as proof that a King of the Jews was born, alarmed him. Besides, it was a common expectation that the Messiah was about to appear, and he feared that his reign was about to come to an end. He therefore began to inquire in what way he might
secure his own safety and the permanency of his government.

All Jerusalem. The people of Jerusalem, and particularly the friends of Herod. There were many in Jerusalem to whom the coming of the Messiah would be a matter of joy; but all of Herod's friends would doubtless be alarmed at his coming.

The chief priests. By the chief priests here are meant not only the high-priest and his deputy, but also the heads or chiefs of the twenty-four classes into which David had divided the sacerdotal families, 1 Ch. 23:6; 24; 2 Ch. 8:14; Ezr. 8:24.

Scribes. By the scribes, in the New Testament, are meant learned men; men skilled in the law, or the lawyers of the nation. They kept the records of the courts of justice, the registers of the synagogues, wrote articles of contract and sale, bills of divorce, &c. They were also called lawyers, Mat. 22:35, and doctors of the law, Lu. 5:17. They were called scribes, from the fact of their writing the public records. They were not, however, a religious sect, but might be either Pharisees or Sadducees. By the chief priests and scribes here mentioned is denoted the Sanhedrim or great council of the nation. This was composed of seventy-two men, who had the charge of the civil and religious affairs of the Jews. On this occasion Herod, in alarm, called them together, professedly to make inquiry respecting the birth of the Messiah.

Demanded of them. Inquired, or asked of them. As they were the learned men of the nation, and as it was their business to study and explain the Old Testament, they were presumed to know what the prophecies had declared on that point. His object was to ascertain from prophecy where he was born, that he might put him to death, and thus calm the anxieties of his own mind. He seems not to have had any doubt about the time when he would be born. He was satisfied that the time had come.

By the prophet. The Sanhedrim answered without hesitation. The question where he would be born had been settled by prophecy. This prophecy is found in Mi. 5:2. In that prophecy both the place of his birth and the character of the Messiah are so clearly set forth that there was no room to doubt. It will be observed that there is a considerable difference between the passage as quoted by the Sanhedrim and as it stands in Micah. The main point, however, is retained—the place of his birth. We are not concerned, therefore, in showing how these passages can be reconciled. Matthew, moreover, is not responsible for the correctness of the quotation. He affirms only that the chief priests and scribes gave this answer to Herod, and that Herod was satisfied. Admitting that they did not quote the passage correctly, it does not prove that Matthew has not reported their answer as they gave it, and this is all that he pretends to give.

Art not the least. In Micah, “though thou be little.” Though a small place so far as population is concerned, yet it shall not be small, or be the least in honour; for the Messiah shall be born there. His birth gave the place an honour which could not be conferred on the larger cities by all their numbers, their splendour, and their wealth. The birth of a distinguished personage was always supposed to give honour and importance to a city or country. Thus seven cities contended for the honour of giving birth to Homer; Stratford-upon-Avon is distinguished as the birthplace of Shakspeare; and Corsica as the birthplace of Napoleon.

A Governor. A ruler. This is one of the characters of the Messiah, who is the king of his people, Jn. 18:37. The word rule here means to rule as a shepherd does his flock,

Privily. Secretly, privately. He did this to ascertain the time when Jesus was born.
Diligently. Accurately, exactly. He took pains to learn the precise time when the star appeared. He did this because he naturally concluded that the star appeared just at the time of his birth, and he wished to know precisely how old the child was.

Go, and search diligently, &c. Herod took all possible means to obtain accurate information respecting the child, that he might be sure of destroying him. He not only ascertained the probable time of his birth, and the place where he would be born, but he sent the wise men that they might actually see him, and bring him word. All this might have looked suspicious if he had not clothed it with the appearance of religion. He said to them, therefore, that he did it that he might go and worship him also. From this we may learn, 1. That wicked men often cloak their evil designs under the appearance of religion. They attempt to deceive those who are really good, and to make them suppose that they have the same design. 2. Wicked men often attempt to make use of the pious to advance their evil purposes. Men like Herod will stop at nothing if they can carry their ends. They endeavour to deceive the simple, to allure the unsuspecting, and to beguile the weak, in order to accomplish their own purposes of wickedness. 3. The plans of wicked men are often well laid. Those plans occupy a long time. Such men make diligent inquiry, and all of it has the appearance of religion. But God sees the design; and though men are deceived, yet God cannot be, Pr. 15:3.

Warned of God. This was done, doubtless, because, if they had given Herod precise information where he was, it would have been easy for him to send forth and slay him. And from this we learn that God will watch over those whom he loves; that he knows how to foil the purposes of the wicked, and to deliver his own out of the hands of those who would destroy them.

The star—went before them. From this it appears that the star was a luminous meteor, perhaps at no great distance from the ground. It is not unlikely that they lost sight of it after they had commenced their journey from the East. It is probable that it appeared to them first in the direction of Jerusalem. They concluded that the expected King had been born, and immediately commenced their journey to Jerusalem. When they arrived there, it was important that they should be directed to the very place where he was, and the star again appeared. It was for this reason that they rejoiced. They felt assured that they were under a heavenly guidance, and would be conducted to the new-born King of the Jews. And this shows, 1. That the birth of Jesus was an event of great moment, worthy of the divine interposition in directing these men to find the place of his nativity. 2. God will guide those who are disposed to find the Saviour. Even if for a time the light should be withdrawn, yet it will again appear, and direct us in the way to the Redeemer. 3. Our being led to Christ should fill us with joy. He is the way, the truth, and the life; the Saviour, the friend, the all in all; there is no other way of life, and there is no peace to the soul till he is found. When we are guided to him, therefore, our hearts should overflow with joy and praise; and we should humbly and thankfully follow every direction that leads to the Son of God, Jn. 12:35, 36.