The sky is filled with stars. In the pure air of ancient times, you could see them sparkling from horizon to horizon. But one evening there appeared a star of special distinction. It shines forever in our hearts as the star of Bethlehem.

What was it about that single point of light in the West African firmament? What compelled the magi to put aside all they were doing to undertake a long and dangerous journey, following one shimmering star across the landscape?

Angels and shepherds are one matter, but a star— that enlarges the borders of our discussion, doesn’t it? For now we have entered the realm of science. Stars are the special province of astronomers, who can give us all the facts and figures. Scientists might be quick to tell us that stars don’t “move,” relatively speaking; that they surely don’t linger above particular towns; and that they are governed by the laws of physics rather than those of faith.

But science tells only a small part of any story. “In our world,” says a child in one of the Narnia tales, “a star is a huge ball of flaming gas.” His wiser friend replies, “Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is, but only what it is made of.”

So there is more to this celestial body than its vital statistics. What can we know about the star of Bethlehem?

For one thing, it shines only in the second chapter of Matthew; it makes no other biblical appearances. The scene is Jerusalem. Our friends the wise men are seen there one day, asking questions concerning Jewish political affairs. The visitors themselves, of course, are non-Jews. They have brought their question to Jerusalem because they know it to be the religious and political capital of Judea.

“Where is the new born king of the Jews?” ask Eastern visitors. “We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him” (Matthew 2:2). The question surely raises many eyebrows in a Roman-occupied city in the hustle and the bustle of daily business. Jewish
king? Such an idea nearly laughable in the presence of Caesar’s armies. Perhaps these tourists have arrived several centuries too late.

Yet the wise men adopt a more cosmic view. They are astrologers, seeking to understand human events by reading the constellations. It is their habit to compare the skies to prophetic literature, including the Jewish scriptures. Those scrolls speak of a “King of the Jews” whose coming will be heralded by a star.

The magi possess a copy of those scrolls. Among the most ancient of writings is found this tantalizing reference:

*I see him, but not here and now.*
*I perceive him, but far in the distant future.*
*A star will rise from Jacob;*
*a scepter will emerge from Israel*

*Numbers 24:7*

In those days, those who trafficked in classical prophecies knew that stars and kings were intertwined by destiny. A scepter was a symbol of royalty. So for the wise men, there was nothing ambiguous to these words. They called for a great king, announced with the silent fanfare of a brilliant light. And if such a king was foretold more than one thousand years earlier, her was worth traveling to see.

That explains the prophecy. But again, why this particular star in a sky filled with them? We have wondered for centuries. Modern science promotes that a number of candidates for the special light that the wise men saw. Halley’s Comet, for example, made a visit during that era. Jupiter and Saturn were aligned to create a bright “star” in 7 B.C. Jupiter was seen as carrying a special royal status. Another theory concerns the fact that the constellation Aries was associated with Judea and the lands ruled by Herod—and that Jupiter and the moon were aligned in a brilliant evening display in spring of 6 B.C.

Is it possible, then, that the wise men got themselves excited over a perfectly ordinary astronomical event? If so, does that invalidate the importance of the star of Bethlehem? Not at all! Remember the wise words from Narnia: A star is more than a ball of flaming gas. The constellations are governed not only by the laws of physics but by the one who oversees those laws at every moment. The star may have been a light that appeared for one brief, shining moment in the skies of Matthew 2. It may have been a special incarnation of lights and planets that we still enjoy. It may even have been one more angel—a messenger from God inviting visitors from a distant land to see the Nativity. Whatever it was, it led the magi directly to the presence of the Christ child, where they worshipped and presented their gifts.
Perhaps the solution to the star is more wonderful for us an unsolved mystery; a Christmas gift not to be unwrapped until that eternal day when night skies are no more, and when all our questions will be answered. What matters so much more is the meaning of the star, for its light breaks through the pages of the gospel, calling us to come and worship. It is still a star of night that captivates us with its silent beauty and the wonderful announcement that it brings with a twinkle.

We love the star of Bethlehem because it shines bright enough that people of other faiths and other lands might join us at the manger. It shone for Jews, Greeks, Romans, Arabians, and anyone else who might look to Bethlehem. It dominated the night sky, reminding us that our faith is great enough for the world to enjoy.

This star, our star, broke through the galaxies to remind us that the intimate story of the Nativity—as close and warm as mother and child—is written on the widest of canvases. The tiny Child is the Lord of Creation. The star leads us to the light of His presence. And once we are there, even a star seems dim by comparison.