

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF VILLA RICA, PCA

The Christmas Star

By

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Matthew 2:1-12

You cannot hear the Christmas story without hearing about the wise men from the east, for they are a part of the story. Have you ever thought about why God included them in the account of the birth of Christ? After all, they were not Jewish, and if there is one thing that is quite noticeable in the life of Christ on this earth it is that he was Jewish and that he considered his earthly ministry to be primarily directed to the Jewish people.

When the Canaanite woman came to him begging for deliverance for her demon possessed daughter and his disciples urged him to send her away **But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Matt. 15:24**

He did honor her request and healed her daughter but that did not change the thrust of his ministry.

Why, then, did Gentile wise men from the east get in on the birth of Christ? What special significance attaches to their coming bringing gifts to the newborn king of the Jews?

Incidentally, we do not know precisely how many wise men there were. The number three has been assumed from the fact that three gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh were presented to Christ, but this does not necessarily limit the number to three. Nor are these men named. They have been given the mythical names: Melchior, Belthasar, and Casper and they have been called kings. But all of that is pure legend and without any substantiation either from scripture or secular history. The only thing we know for certain is that they saw a star and that by some means, unexplained, had ascertained that it was the star that signified the birth of a Messianic King who was to be born in the land of Judea.

We really do not know what persuaded and convinced them that a certain star they had seen in their own country was the star that pointed them to one born king of the Jews, one who was worthy of their worship. We do know that God had revealed to them enough light to cause them to make the journey to Jerusalem and ask

²"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." Matt. 2:2

The wise men seeking the Savior confirm Old Testament prophecies. God spoke through Isaiah:

⁶ He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Isa. 49:6

God is saying that it is too small a thing that his salvation should be only for Israel out of all the peoples of the earth. Not only will the preserved of Israel whom God purposed to save, men from all nations will come to the Jewish Messiah, and they will come bringing gold and frankincense proclaiming the praise of the LORD. The magi were messengers of hope sounding forth the praises of God for his salvation.

Worldwide evangelization was always God's intent. He is not a Savior for the Jews only but for people of all tribes, tongues and nations. The wise men coming from afar bringing their worship and their gifts of gold, incense and myrrh signal that God's announced purpose has now unfolded in the birth of the Christ child.

Somehow, we do not know exactly how, the Lord had shown these men that a star they had seen was a sign of the birth of the king of the Jews, and that this king was no ordinary king but one destined to rule the nations. They knew from their astrological observations that a star they had seen signified the birth of this king. The only thing they did not know was where he had been born. They came all the way from their own country to worship him.

Please notice at this point that the wise men assumed that the knowledge they had would be pretty generally known in the land of the Jews, so they go to the capital of Jewry, to Jerusalem to find out where they might go to

worship this king. They didn't go to worship Herod who had been king of the Jews for 35 years. No. The king they came seeking was unique. He was divine and therefore entitled to their worship.

The wise men apparently began asking questions when they got to Jerusalem. They did not at first go to Herod the king but to others. Word got to Herod that some strangers from a foreign land had come inquiring about the whereabouts of a newborn king of the Jews. They wanted to find him so that they might worship him.

Herod the king was disturbed at this news and the scripture says all Jerusalem with him. Herod summoned the chief priests and scribes and inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They had the sacred writings and Micah the prophet had prophesied that he would be born in Bethlehem. So they told Herod what the Bible said.

When Herod learned this he secretly called for the magi to come and meet with him. He asked them what time the star had appeared to them. He was intensely interested in their search, but not for the right reason. In his heart he knew he would have to eliminate this newborn king. He tolerated no rivals, not even newborn rivals. He was absolutely paranoid about his position as king. He had murdered every suspected pretender to his throne, including his own wife Marianne and his two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus.

The populace of Judea knew of his morbid distrust of anyone who might aspire to the throne and of his bloodthirsty rage against any supposed rival.

Herod was an Edomite. Augustus and Antonius made him king over Judea. A true king of the Jews would threaten his rule and reign. Being the suspicious and conniving and cruel person that he was, he immediately thought of how a baby named king of the Jews would impact upon his reign and rule. People knew from long and sad experience that there was no limit to the wrath and vengefulness of a thoroughly alarmed Herod. They dreaded to think what atrocities might be in store for anyone suspected of cooperating with the Magi or of getting involved in a search for a potential rival to Herod. No wonder that all Jerusalem was troubled when they heard from these magi that a king of the Jews had been born whom they desired to go and worship.

Craftily, Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem to find the child. He pretended that he too wanted to come and worship him, but that was not his intent. His intent was to make them his scouts and locators. As soon as they came back with the information he would have the baby killed.

We can understand why the city was troubled. The leaders of the people who served Herod and served in the temple were satisfied with the status quo. A new king would upset the status quo. It would change the present accommodation the leaders and populace had made with the Romans and Herod.

They had politics then even as we do today, and it would be politically incorrect to seek a new king, much less bow down and worship him. This would surely upset the politics of the day. So people were troubled along with Herod when they heard that these magi had seen the star of the birth of the king of the Jews and that they had come to worship him.

Isn't that the very same reason that so few will seek Christ and convert to him in our own day? The sinners of this world have made peace with Satan and the present world system. There is no desire to have a new king to come and reign over them. It only stirs up trouble, or so they think. Men do not want Jesus Christ to be Lord of their lives because they believe it will radically alter their lives. Sin must be repented of and be put away. They understand and grasp that fact. Righteousness is to be the new order of the day. Men shun the gospel because they do not want to change. They like things as they are. And they not only resist coming to Christ themselves but also react strongly when anyone else seeks to find him in order to worship him. Doing so begins a new life of faith to follow him., not just for a day or two but forever. It is a conversion from what was before to a new way of life, a new life in Christ.

When Christian in Pilgrim's Progress started out on his pilgrimage his wife and children cried after him to return, so much so that he had to put his fingers in his ears and keep on going. His neighbors came out to see him run and as he ran some mocked, others threatened, and some cried after him to return and some, one named Obstinate and another named Pliable, resolved to fetch him back by force.

Men today exhibit the same apprehension that Jerusalem exhibited when the wise men arrived in town. They don't want to get labeled as a Bible-believing Christ-worshipping fundamentalist. They don't want to alienate any friends or neighbors or business associates. They don't want to jeopardize their position or their influence with the sinners of this world.

There is a price to pay when we convert to Jesus Christ. The powers that be do not want to have men following a different king. Persecution and even death may be the price of worshipping Christ.

In the days of the Roman Emperor Nero, there lived and served him a band of soldiers known as the *Emperor's Wrestlers*. Fine, stalwart men they were, picked from the best and the bravest of the land, recruited from the great athletes of the Roman amphitheater.

In the great amphitheater they upheld the arms of the emperor against all challengers. Before each contest they stood before the emperor's throne. Then through the courts of Rome rang the cry: "We, the wrestlers, wrestling for thee, O Emperor, to win for thee the victory and from thee, the victor's crown."

When the great Roman army was sent to fight in Gaul, no soldiers were braver or more loyal than this band of wrestlers led by their centurion Vespasian. But news reached Nero that many Roman soldiers had accepted the Christian faith. Therefore, this decree was dispatched to the centurion Vespasian; "**If there be any among your soldiers who cling to the faith of the Christian, they must die!**"

The decree was received in the dead of winter. The soldiers were camped on the shore of a frozen inland lake. It was with sinking heart that Vespasian, the centurion, read the emperor's message.

Vespasian called the soldiers together and asked: "Are there any among you who cling to the faith of the Christian? If so, let him step forward!" Forty wrestlers instantly stepped forward two paces, respectfully saluted, and stood at attention. Vespasian paused. He had not expected so many, nor such select ones. "Until sundown I shall await your answer," said Vespasian. Sundown came. Again the question was asked. Again the forty wrestlers stepped forward.

Vespasian pleaded with them long and earnestly without prevailing upon a single man to deny his Lord. Finally he said, "The decree of the emperor must be obeyed, but I am not willing that your comrades should shed your blood. I order you to march out upon the lake of ice, and I shall leave you there to the mercy of the elements."

The forty wrestlers were stripped and then, falling into columns of four, marched toward the center of the lake of ice. As they marched they broke into the chant of the arena: "Forty wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ, to win for Thee the victory and from Thee, the victor's crown!"

Through the night Vespasian stood by his campfire and watched. As he waited through the long night, there came to him fainter and fainter the wrestlers' song.

As morning drew near one figure, overcome by exposure, crept quietly toward the fire; in the extremity of his suffering he had renounced his Lord.

Faintly but clearly from the darkness came the song: "Thirty-nine wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ, to win for Thee the victory and from Thee, the victor's crown!"

Vespasian looked at the figure drawing close to the fire. Perhaps he saw eternal light shining there toward the center of the lake. Who can say? But off came his helmet and clothing, and he sprang upon the ice, crying, "Forty wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ, to win for Thee the victory and from Thee, the victor's crown!"

The wise men were not deterred from following the light they had received. They were willing to make a long journey to find Christ and to worship him. They did not allow themselves to grow discouraged by the ignorance and disinterest of the Jews of Jerusalem toward their own Messiah King. They would not give up even when the way seemed long and hard and the light from the star was not always bright and clear before their eyes. Their search had directed them to the scriptures, which told them the very place to go and search for Christ. They would not give up until they finally found him in Bethlehem in a house with his mother.

It still works today that same way. Persistence pays off. Even Herod told them to make a careful search. In this he spoke well. A careful, persistent search will discover to any true seeker the Christ of God.

When they saw him they knew this was He. They fell down and worshiped him and gave him their gifts. What a precious thing it is to see the light of Christ in this sin-darkened world. His light should draw all men to him. Apart from him here is no light of life, only darkness, despair, hopelessness and death.

As I say, the wise men are the forerunners of a multitude of Gentiles who have gone seeking the light of Christ. How very wise indeed, for in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Their lives were transformed by their finding him, and so will yours be. What a happy moment when a soul finds the true meaning of life and the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life the prize.

But each must make this a personal pilgrimage. Each must seek in order to find. Each must exercise his own faith in the king of the Jews as Savior and Lord.

The gifts they brought were gladly laid at his feet. They had longed for this moment and wanted to show their fealty and love and worship in this way. They had yielded up their hearts and minds and souls in worship and their gifts were but tokens of the faith they had in Christ.

Can you say this morning that your search has ended, that you have persistently and single-mindedly sought the one born under the star, the king of the Jews and King of kings and the Lord of lords? He is waiting for you to confess your need of him and to bow down before him in worship, as did the wise men of that first Christmas. I invite you today, this very moment, to make him your Savior and your King.

HYMN #208 "O Come, All Ye Faithful"

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