

The Wise Men

Today I'd like to spend some time talking about Christmas. You see, the Christmas story is one of the most fascinating stories in the Bible, and has all sorts of interesting characters and unusual events. Most importantly, it's one of the most pivotal stories in the Bible. Without Christmas there would be no Calvary, no resurrection, and no atonement.

It's also one of the most misunderstood stories in the Bible. People have all sorts of misconceptions about it. For example, pretty much everyone believes that angels sang at the birth of Christ. We even sing songs about it – like “Hark, the Herald Angel Sings”. However, the truth is that angels don't actually do very much singing, and they did *not* sing to the shepherds on that fateful night in Bethlehem. The book of Luke is clear about this:

Luke 2:13: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,
14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

The angels *said* “Glory to God”; they did not sing it. No angelic singing was done that night. Even though it's commonly believed that an angelic choir burst out into song, that didn't actually happen.

There's also the matter of the date of Christ's birth. As we all know, we celebrate Christmas on December 25. Celebrating it at any other time is simply unimaginable, and yet it's extremely *unlikely* that Christ was actually born on that day. You see, the book of Luke tells us that on that fateful day the shepherds were watching their flocks by night:

Luke 2:8: “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field,
keeping watch over their flock by night.”

This means that the shepherds and their sheep were *outside*. As you know, it gets pretty cold in the winter. If Christ was born in the wintertime then the shepherds wouldn't have been outside with their sheep; instead they would have had their sheep corralled indoors somewhere, where it was warm. It's far more likely that Christ was born in the spring (probably sometime near the end of April), and the reason the shepherds were outside watching over their sheep was because it was lambing season and the young lambs were being born.

After all, think about it. Christ was the Lamb of God. He was crucified and killed on the day of Passover – the very day when the sacrificial lambs were killed. Wouldn't it make sense if He was also born at the same time the sacrificial lambs were born? After all, He was born in Bethlehem – and that has deep significance. You see, Bethlehem was the place where the sacrificial lambs were born. The lambs that were taken to the Temple and sacrificed for the sins of the people were born *in Bethlehem*. Since Christ was the Lamb of God, it made a lot of sense for Him to be born in the city of the sacrificial lambs. It also made sense for Him to be born at the same time the sacrificial lambs were born.

So why do we celebrate Christmas on December 25? It's certainly not because the Bible says that Jesus was born on that date; in fact, the Bible doesn't give us a date at all. The early church didn't record the date of His birth either. In fact, the early church actually didn't celebrate the birth of Christ. It wasn't until the 4th century AD that people began to celebrate Christmas on December 25. Today people assume that the reason December 25 was picked was because that's when the pagans celebrated

Saturnalia, and Christmas is just a “Christianized” pagan holiday. However, none of the writings from the 4th century give that as the reason for picking that date, or even show any interest in borrowing celebrations from the pagans.

The actual reason December 25th was picked is kind of strange. Around 200 AD, people began trying to figure out when Christ was born (even though they wouldn't begin celebrating that event for another century or two). A guy named Tertullian of Carthage examined the calendar to find out when Passover took place the year Christ died, and decided that Passover fell on March 25. He then assumed that Christ was conceived the same day that He was crucified. If He was conceived on March 25, then He must have been born nine months later – on December 25. Even Augustine mentioned this line of reasoning in his book *On the Trinity*. In other words, since the 2nd century Church decided that Christ was conceived on March 25th (even though there was no Biblical basis for that whatsoever), they concluded that He must have been born on December 25th. And that is why we celebrate Christmas in the dead of winter instead of in the spring.

But I'm actually here this morning to talk to you about the wise men. The wise men are some of the most fascinating and mysterious characters in the Bible. They are also some of the least understood. There is actually an amazing backstory to these men that few people are aware of. Today I'd like to share with you the real story of the wise men from the East.

The only gospel that records the tale of the wise men is Matthew. We find the account in Matthew chapter 2. This is how the story begins:

Matthew 2:1: “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,
2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.”

The first thing I'd like to point out is that the passage doesn't actually tell us how many wise men came to Jerusalem. The reason we assume there were three of them is because they gave three gifts, but that's a silly reason to come to that conclusion. After all, it's entirely possible for one person to give three gifts, or for twenty people to pool their resources and give three gifts. The truth is we have no idea how many wise men there actually were.

There's also the fact that the wise men probably did not travel alone. They had a long journey to make, and so they would have taken an entire caravan. They probably had camels, and servants, and luggage, and all sorts of things that they needed to survive the trip. These men did not journey across the world all by themselves.

So who were these wise men who came from the east? This question is actually easy to answer. Today we refer to the wise men as Persians, but technically that's not accurate. By the time Christ was born the Persian empire had been replaced by the Parthian Empire. The Parthian empire was an *enormous* empire that was due east of Israel and took up pretty much all the territory to the east.

Parthia was *huge*. The tiny nation of Judah occupied about 1300 square miles. The Parthian Empire occupied *a million* square miles. In other words, Parthia was about a *thousand* times larger than Judah – and they were not under Roman control. They were a powerful and influential nation.

When the Bible tells us that the wise men came from the east, it's saying that the wise men came from Parthia. However, in the ancient world it would have taken quite some time to travel from Parthia to Israel. Remember, in the days of Christ you couldn't just hop on a private jet and fly into Jerusalem. If you were going to travel across the world you were either going to do it on foot, or on camel (and let's face it: camels don't move very fast). That journey was going to take time – probably a lot of time.

Matthew tells us that the wise men saw the star in the east (meaning they were in the east when

they saw the star), and they then made their way to Jerusalem. This journey did *not* happen in a single evening. The wise men would have had to put their affairs in order, and put together a caravan, and make the long trek across the country. Evidence later in this passage (which we'll get to) indicates that this journey probably took them at least a year to make.

That means that the wise men were *not* there on the night of Christ's birth. There's simply no possible way they could have arrived there that night – it just takes too long to travel from Parthia to Bethlehem! I realize that most manger scenes have wise men in them, but the wise men never made it to the manger. You just couldn't move that fast in the ancient world.

There's another question that we need to address: how did these wise men even know about Christ at all? After all, these were *Gentiles*, not Jews. These foreigners made a very long trip to see this Jew and worship Him. Why did they do that? How could they have even know about Him at all?

The answer to this question lies in the fact that these wise men were from the Parthian Empire. The Parthian Empire was a descendant of the Persian Empire. In the Old Testament there was a wise man named Daniel who worked for several different administrations. When his career started he worked for King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire. After Nebuchadnezzar's death, Babylon was conquered by the Medes and the Persians (yes, *those* Persians) and Darius took over the kingdom.

Now, Daniel was the greatest wise man that the Babylonian Empire ever saw. Nebuchadnezzar was so impressed with him that he put Daniel in charge of all the other wise men – and Darius did the same thing. Nebuchadnezzar called him the “master of the magicians” and said he had the “spirit of the holy gods” in him (Daniel 4:8-9). Daniel was held in tremendous esteem. Not only was he wise, but he was also a prophet. In fact, the book of Daniel contains prophecies that foretell the major world events *and world empires* from the time of Daniel to the time of Christ.

If you were a Parthian wise man then you would have been very familiar with Daniel. After all, he was the greatest wise man in their Empire's history. Daniel's writings contained critical information foretelling *the rise and fall of world empires* – and Daniel was *always* right. His writings would have been diligently studied by future generations of wise men. I'm sure his works were required reading, especially since the Parthian empire came from the very same empire that Daniel used to work for.

Do you know what you would find if you studied the writings of Daniel? You would find Jesus. Not only did Daniel talk about what the Messiah would do, but he also talked about *when the Messiah would come*. This is what the angel Gabriel told Daniel:

Daniel 9:25: “Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times.

26 And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined.”

In order to understand this prophecy you have to realize that the word “week” actually means a period of seven years. Gabriel said that it would be “7 weeks” (or 49 years) and “62 weeks” (or 434 years), starting from the commandment to rebuild Jerusalem. It took 49 years to rebuild Jerusalem (starting in 445 BC, when the edict was issued), and 434 years after the rebuilding was complete the Messiah was crucified. A generation later, in 70 AD, the Romans came and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple – exactly as Gabriel foretold.

In other words, God told Daniel *exactly when Jesus was going to die*. This gave prophecy

students a very good idea as to when the Messiah would be born. After all, Jesus would almost certainly die as an adult, which means He would have to be born around twenty to forty years before His death. Israel couldn't know the exact year of His birth, but they *could* know when to start looking for Him. The Messiah would have to be born in a pretty narrow range of years.

There's another thing you need to know about Daniel: he was a student of prophecy himself. Daniel 9:2 tells us that he was familiar with the work of Jeremiah, who lived a generation before he did. I have no doubt that Daniel was also familiar with Isaiah. The prophecies of Isaiah gave a very clear picture of the work of the coming Messiah. Look at what Isaiah said in just this one famous passage:

Isaiah 9:6: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

7 Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this."

Who would the Messiah be? Why, He would be *the mighty God*. That meant He was going to be deity. Where would the Messiah reign? Why, He would reign on the throne of David – which meant He would be the king of the Jews.

If Daniel studied the works of Isaiah, I have no doubt that his successors – the wise men of the Parthian Empire – would have been aware of this and studied the same works that he did. That meant they would have known that the Messiah was deity (which explains why they came to worship Him) and that the Messiah would reign as the King of the Jews. We can also see this knowledge in the gifts that they brought. As we all know, the wise men brought gold, which was a gift fit for a king, and they brought frankincense, which was incense one offered to a god.

But they also brought myrrh. Do you know what myrrh was used for? It was used to prepare the dead for burial. John 19:39 tells us that Nicodemus (yes, *that* Nicodemus) brought myrrh and used it to prepare the crucified body of Christ for burial. Not only did these wise men know that this Jesus was both God and king, but they also knew why He came.

How could they possibly have known that? Because of the prophecies of Isaiah:

Isaiah 53:7: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

8 He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? For he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken."

The Parthian wise men knew that He came to die – and if they were familiar with Isaiah (which Daniel no doubt was) then they would have known *why* Jesus came to die as well. The reason they knew these things was because they were students of prophecy. All of these things were foretold. The wise men knew all this important information about the Messiah *because they were paying attention*.

That explains a lot, doesn't it? These Parthian wise men knew in advance when the Messiah would come. They knew He was a God, they knew He was going to reign over the Jews, and they knew

He came to die. So when they saw His star – right when they would have expected it to appear – they knew what was going on.

So naturally, they came to Jerusalem (the capitol of Judah) to worship this new king. After all, surely the Jews would have known that their Messiah had been born, right? How could Christ's own people have missed such a momentous event? After all, mankind had been waiting for *thousands of years* for the birth of Christ, and now He was here. Surely the young Christ was in a castle somewhere. Surely the Jews received Him with gladness and rejoicing. Since the Gentiles were aware of His coming, how could the Jews have missed it?

Yet, we know that the Jews actually *did* miss it. The book of John tells us that Christ came unto His own, and His own received Him not. The Gentile wise men recognized His appearance *because they were watching for Him*, but His own people were caught off-guard.

In fact, the Jews were more than off-guard. When the wise men showed up, Herod and all of Jerusalem was greatly upset:

Matthew 2:3: “When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.”

Why were they so upset? Well, to understand that, you need to know how Herod obtained the title “King of the Jews” in the first place.

In 48 BC, Herod Antipater (Herod the Great's father) made an alliance with Julius Caesar and gave him some much-needed military assistance. With that assistance Caesar was able to defeat Pompey, who had declared war against him. As an act of gratitude, Caesar appointed Herod Antipater as procurator over Judah. In 42 BC Antipater was murdered, which left his son Herod the Great in charge.

When Herod Antipas died, the Parthians invaded Judah in order to restore the Jewish rulers (who were their allies) back to power. They actually succeeded in putting Antigonus on the throne. Herod fled for his life and asked Rome to help him. In 40 BC the Roman senate gave Herod the title “King of the Jews”, and in 37 BC Herod returned to Judah and, with the help of the Romans, took Jerusalem back over.

However, the Jews hated him. After all, the Parthians had restored the rightful Jewish ruler to the throne, and Herod had come and stolen that throne. His title “King of the Jews” was enforced by Roman authority. The Jews did not support Herod and did not believe he had a legitimate claim to the throne. Herod became extremely paranoid and spent decades murdering anyone who he thought might be a potential threat. In fact, Herod murdered his wife, two of his sons, his wife's brother, his wife's grandfather, and his wife's mother. Herod was afraid of anyone who might be a threat to his power.

So when a group of Parthian wise men came into town and asked about someone who had been *born* King of the Jews, that spelled trouble for Herod. After all, the Parthians had managed to remove Herod from power once before, and it took the might of Rome to get his throne back. Herod had been given the title of “King of the Jews”, but it was granted to him by the Roman senate. Now the Parthians were talking about someone who had been *born* with the rightful title. On top of all that was the fact that in Parthia, *the wise men were the ones who chose the rulers*.

This is why Herod and all of Jerusalem were troubled. The Parthians were saying that *someone else* had the right to sit on the throne of Judah, and that person was not Herod. The last time the Parthians came to town and put the Jewish king Antigonus on the throne, it had led to three years of war. The Parthians were a powerful people, and they had succeeded in dethroning Herod before. Herod was convinced that he was in trouble.

That is why Herod took these three wise men so seriously. Did you ever wonder why Herod

agreed to see them at all? Why would Herod even care about what these people were doing? It all goes back to who they were. These were not three unknown monks from a monastery somewhere; they were powerful officials from the court of the Parthians.

Now, Herod didn't have a lot of good options here. He had to be kind to them and agree to help them. After all, the last thing he wanted was another war with the Parthians. The last time they invaded he lost, and he only got his throne back with the help of Rome. If he lost his throne again *to those very same people*, Rome might decide that Herod was an incompetent fool and replace him with someone else. The Parthian Empire was a thousand times larger than his own kingdom, and he knew it. Herod had to treat these men with respect. If he just killed them, he might wake up to find Parthian soldiers breaking down his door. This was a very delicate situation. If he wanted to avoid starting a war with Parthia he had to at least pretend to be agreeable.

Amazingly, Herod actually knew what they were looking for. The king immediately asked the religious leaders of his day about the coming of the Messiah:

Matthew 2:4: “And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.”

Herod knew that these wise men were looking for the Messiah. (It's quite possible that the wise men themselves told him who they were looking for.) He then asked the chief priests where the Messiah was going to be born. The chief priests had the answer:

Matthew 2:5: “And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.”

The chief priests *actually knew* that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem – but they still missed it. The Gentile wise men saw the star in the east and knew what it meant, but the chief priests had no idea that the Messiah had been born. Even though the prophecies of Daniel had foretold roughly when the Messiah would be born, the chief priests *still* missed it.

Why did they miss it? The reason is very simple: the wise men were watching for the appearance of the Messiah, and the chief priests were not. Now, the priests were told the news. They should have known the Messiah had appeared. After all, when Christ was born the shepherds told the story far and wide (Luke 2:17). The chief priests should have been watching for the Messiah to come, but they weren't. When the news came out of Bethlehem that angels had announced His birth, the chief priests should have noticed – but they didn't. Since the chief priests *knew* that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, that really should have tipped them off – but it didn't. The priests simply weren't interested in the coming of the Messiah. They may have appeared to be outwardly religious and holy, but in reality their hearts were very far from God.

Herod wanted to know how long it had been since the star appeared:

Matthew 2:7: “Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.”

So what was this star? That is an excellent question, and there are a number of different theories. Some people think that it might have been a comet; however, no comets were reported during that period of history, and no known comet's cycle would have caused it to appear at the time when

Christ was born. Others have suggested that the star might have been a time when multiple planets lined up with each other. However, planetary conjunctions happen on a regular basis, and they do not look like a star. The ancient world knew that planets were not the same thing as stars, and they would have recognized a planetary alignment as being just a planetary alignment. Other scholars have suggested that the star might have been a supernova (an exploding star), but once again there are no known historical records of a supernova occurring at that time.

The biggest problem with all of the naturalistic theories is that the star *moved*. We are told in verse 9 that the star went before the wise men and led them to a specific house. Now, that is something that stars, comets, and supernova simply *do not do*. You are never going to find a star that guides you down a road and comes to rest over a specific house. That sounds a lot like a supernatural light.

It's worth noting that the wise men were apparently the only ones who saw this light. If this light had been visible to everyone then Herod wouldn't have had to ask the wise men when the star appeared, because *everyone* would have known about it. We also need to remember that God has a history of using supernatural lights to guide His people. (For example, during the period of the exodus God used a pillar of fire to guide Israel by night.) The most likely explanation for this mysterious star is that it was a special light sent by God in order to guide the wise men. After all, they were some of the only people *in the entire world* who had taken the prophecies seriously and who were watching for the appearance of His Son. They very much wanted to come and worship the Messiah – and God made sure that they reached Him.

Herod then sent the wise men on their way:

Matthew 2:8: “And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.”

There are two things here that we need to comment on. First, Herod had no intention of actually going to worship the child. This is the same Herod who had spent years murdering his own family members in order to remove threats to his ill-gotten power. Herod believed that this new King of the Jews was a threat to his rule, and he wanted to find this Messiah and kill him.

However, Herod had to be careful. He couldn't just kill the Parthian wise men, because killing members of the Parthian high court would have probably led to war. The Parthians would have taken a very dim view of the man who killed their own leadership, and Herod would have found himself in a lot of trouble. (Even Rome would have taken a dim view of a man who deliberately started a war with the Parthians.) What Herod wanted to do was go along with the wise men, pretend everything was fine, and find out where the child was. He could then murder the child when their backs were turned. That would eliminate the threat without inviting a war against a much larger adversary.

The second thing I'd like to point out is that the wise men went to Bethlehem *alone*. How many of the chief priests and Pharisees went with them? *Not a single one*. Now, the Scriptures had already told Israel roughly when Christ would be born, and the chief priests knew that these wise men had traveled a long distance specifically to see the Messiah. The priests even knew that the Messiah was supposed to be born in Bethlehem.

Yet *not a single priest* decided to go with the wise men to see if there was any truth to the prophecies! *None* of them were curious about whether the long-awaited Messiah had been born. None of the religious leaders of Christ's day cared *anything* about the coming of the Messiah. Jesus really did come unto His own, and yet His own received Him not. The Gentile wise men traveled a great distance to come and worship the Messiah, but not *one* priest was willing to make the *five mile* journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to see Him. Even if you walked you could easily make the trip in a single day.

The whole reason the sacrificial lambs were raised in Bethlehem was because Bethlehem was so close to Jerusalem and the Temple.

Think of it: the priests would not travel even five miles to go see the Messiah. Jesus spoke the truth when He said that these religious officials honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him. These priests did *not* want to see Jesus. They did not care about the Messiah. They only people they cared about were themselves. They wanted the common people to think that they were righteous and holy and good, but their hearts were far from God.

It's easy to think that we would never act that way if we had been there, but I have my doubts about that. You see, the truth is that Christ is coming again. The Church *should* be excited about the return of its Savior, but that is simply not the case. Most churches don't even preach about the Second Coming anymore; they think that topic is "divisive" and a "distraction". Many Christians dread the thought of Jesus coming back because that would interrupt their lives and prevent them from doing all the things they had planned. They actually *want* Jesus to stay away as long as possible so He doesn't interfere with what they have going on. A lot of people in the modern Church simply *do not want Jesus to come back*. I find it interesting that when I teach on prophecy and show people that Christ actually could come back in the near future, people respond with panic. These Christians do *not* want Christ to come back and interrupt their lives. They believe that the return of Christ would be an utter disaster, and they want Him to stay away – just like the chief priests of old.

The attitude of the religious leaders of Christ's day is not really all that different from the attitude of the religious leaders of our own day. The priests of old had no interest in the coming of the Messiah, and today many people in the Church are openly hostile to the prospect of the return of that same Messiah. Things haven't really changed very much at all.

This is a bit off-topic, but there are many similarities between the First and Second Coming. God gave all kinds of warnings that the Messiah was about to be born in Bethlehem, but the priests and scribes still missed it. God has likewise given us all kinds of warnings that we are approaching the end of the Church Age, but the Church is simply not looking for the return of the Messiah. If Jesus came back today the Church would be caught completely off-guard – even though any student of prophecy could have told you that we were coming near the end of the Church Age. The ancient priests and scribes weren't interested in the coming of the Messiah, and the modern Church is equally uninterested in the return of that same Messiah.

It's true that there are some churches that still teach prophecy, and there are some Christians who eagerly await the Lord's return. Yet those churches and people are the exception, not the rule. If Christ were to return today He would find all sorts of angry people who would denounce Him for daring to come back and interrupt their lives. Very few people would welcome His return – just as very few people welcomed Him at His first coming.

Getting back to the story, the wise men followed the star:

Matthew 2:9: "When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw 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 exceeding great joy."

It's worth nothing that the passage doesn't actually say that the wise men went to Bethlehem. Herod did send them to Bethlehem, but what verse 9 actually says is that as soon as the wise men left the king they saw the star again, and that star led them to the place where the Messiah was. However, the passage *doesn't actually tell us the name of that place*. People commonly assume that it's Bethlehem because that is where Jesus was born, but remember that Mary and Joseph were only in

Bethlehem so that they could be counted for tax purposes. Bethlehem was not their home (if it was then they wouldn't have had to journey there!), and there was no reason for them to stay there once they had been counted. It's entirely possible that when the wise men visited them they were living in Nazareth or some other city. We simply don't know.

What we do know is that the star led them directly to the Messiah:

Matthew 2:11: "And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh."

Notice that the wise men entered into *the house* where the young child was! They did not walk into a stable and see the young child lying in a manger. Since it had probably been at least a year since the child had been born, that makes sense: Mary and Joseph had returned home, and the wise men found them safe and sound in their own house.

When the wise men finally found the Messiah they did what they had been wanting to do for a long time: they fell down and worshiped Him. They gave the Messiah the honor that He was due – the honor that He *should* have received from the religious leaders of Judah. It is deeply sad that the Gentile wise men traveled a great distance across the world to worship the Messiah and give Him gifts, and yet the priests and scribes could not travel *five miles* to pay Him a visit.

We have already talked about the gifts that the wise men gave, and how they indicated that the wise men knew exactly who the Messiah was and what He came to do. The wise men gave a gift of gold, which recognized His kingship; they gave a gift of frankincense, which recognized His deity; and they gave a gift of myrrh, which recognized His coming sacrifice. The gifts that they gave were incredibly thoughtful. They truly were wise men, weren't they? The actions of these men reveal that they had remarkable intelligence and understanding.

By contrast, what did the priests and scribes give the Messiah? *Nothing whatsoever*. They couldn't even be bothered to pay Him a visit! The only people who gave the Lord any gifts to celebrate His coming were *Gentiles from another country*. That should tell you something about the hardness of Israel's heart. Their rejection of the Messiah didn't start at His ministry; as you can see, He was rejected *from birth*.

The wise men then returned home – but they did not return to Herod. God was the one who had guided them to see the Messiah, and the Lord then guided them back home:

Matthew 2:12: "And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way."

God knew that Herod wanted to kill the Messiah and He warned the wise men. The wise men then avoided Jerusalem and went back home on a different path, so Herod would not know where the child was. God then appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to flee the country:

Matthew 2:13: "And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

14 When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed

into Egypt:

15 And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.”

Herod's evil scheme did not come as a surprise to God; in fact, it was actually the fulfillment of prophecy. God knew what Herod was going to do long before Herod was even born. The Lord commanded Joseph to flee to Egypt because Egypt was out of Herod's reach. The child would be safe there – and thanks to the expensive gifts of the wise men, Joseph and Mary would be able to afford to live there and set up a home. God had prepared everything. Herod would try to kill the one who was born King of the Jews, but he would not succeed.

When Herod saw that the wise men had tricked him, he did what he always did when his power was threatened. He resorted to murder:

Matthew 2:16: “Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.”

It should come as no surprise that a man who was willing to murder his own family and children would also be willing to murder the children of others. Herod was willing to do whatever it took to stay on the throne, and if that meant mass murder then so be it. Since the wise men had told him that the star had appeared around two years ago, Herod had all the children two years old or younger killed. He didn't know which child was the Messiah, so he took the appalling route of *killing all the children, just to be safe*.

This horrible massacre was also a fulfillment of prophecy. God had warned Jeremiah about this centuries earlier:

Matthew 2:17: “Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying,

18 In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.”

For the record, the prophecy that Matthew is quoting can be found in Jeremiah 31:15.

Herod's appalling atrocity failed. He was unable to kill the Messiah because God was watching over him. The Messiah survived and accomplished the will of God. Jesus came and died for our sins so that we might be forgiven. All those who repent of their sins and believe in Him will not perish, but will have everlasting life.

When Christ came the first time the world was not happy to see Him. The kings of the world did not welcome Him with open arms; instead they plotted against Him and did their very best to murder Him. They hated Christ so much that they actually killed anyone who *might* be Him!

Did the religious leaders object to this blatant attempt to murder the Messiah? Absolutely not. None of them spoke up for the Messiah. None of them were even willing to make the five-mile trip to Bethlehem (where they thought He was) to see him. The chief priests and scribes did not begin hating the Messiah when He began His ministry; no, their hatred of Him started at His birth. They did not have a problem with Herod's attempt to assassinate the Messiah. The priests and Herod were on the

same page and wanted the same things.

The priests and scribes did not want to bow down and worship the Messiah and give Him the honor He was due – but Gentiles from a foreign land had a different attitude. The wise men of the Parthian empire were powerful and respected. No one expected them to make the long journey to Judah to worship a Jewish king, but they did anyway. It was Gentiles who came and recognized the birth of Christ. It was Gentiles who worshiped Him, who accepted Him as the true King of the Jews, and who gave Him gifts that accurately reflected who He was and what He came to do. These Gentiles truly were wise men. They had a heart for God, and they proved their faith by the actions that they took.

The question each of us needs to ask ourselves is this: where do we stand? One day this Messiah will come back. Are you looking forward to His return, or are you dreading it? Are you hoping that He will stay away so that He won't interfere with your life (because, let's face it, your life is *way* more important than anything Jesus has going on), or do you eagerly await the return of the One you deeply love and have passionately served?

Do you care about the return of this Messiah? Have you studied the prophecies and done everything in your power to learn about His coming? Or are you like the priests and scribes of old, who were utterly indifferent to His return? Is it possible that you don't really care about His return at all?

Jesus is coming again. He promised to come back, and He always keeps His promises. When He came the first time His own people missed it. When He comes the second time, will *you* miss it? Will you be caught off-guard and unprepared, or will you be ready? Who are you like: the wise men, or the priests?