

The Wise Men

In this lesson I'd like to spend some time talking about Christmas. The Christmas story is one of the most fascinating stories in the Bible and has all sorts of interesting characters and unusual events. It's also one of the most important stories in the Bible! Without Christmas there would be no Calvary, no resurrection, and no atonement.

Christmas might also be one of the most misunderstood stories in the Bible. There are all sorts of misconceptions about it. For example, many people believe that angels sang at the birth of Christ. There are even songs about it, such as "Hark, the Herald Angel Sings". However, the truth is that the angels did *not* sing to the shepherds on that fateful night in Bethlehem. The book of Luke is clear about this:

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

The angels *said* "Glory to God". They didn't sing it! Even though it's commonly believed that an angelic choir burst out into song on that fateful night, that's *not* what happened.

There's also the matter of the date of Christ's birth. Christmas is celebrated on December 25 but it's extremely unlikely that Christ was actually born on that day. 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 the shepherds and their sheep were *outside*. Even in Israel it gets cold in the winter! If Christ was born in the winter then the shepherds wouldn't have been outside with their sheep; instead they would have had their sheep corralled indoors where it was warm. It's more likely that Christ was born in the spring (probably sometime near the end of April), and the reason the shepherds were outside watching their sheep was because the young lambs were being born.

After all, Christ is the Lamb of God. He was sacrificed for us on the day of Passover – the very day when the sacrificial lambs were also sacrificed. Wouldn't it make sense if He was also born at the same time the sacrificial lambs were being born? Jesus was born in Bethlehem – and that has deep significance because that's the place where the sacrificial lambs were born! The lambs which were taken to the temple and sacrificed for the sins of the people were born *in Bethlehem*. Since Christ is the Lamb of God, it made sense for Him to be born in the same city where the sacrificial lambs were born. It wouldn't surprise me at all if He was born at the same time the sacrificial lambs were being born.

Why do we celebrate Christmas on December 25? It's 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 – or celebrate the birth of Christ. It wasn't until the 4th century AD that people began celebrating Christmas on December 25. Today some 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, the writings we have from the 4th century don't 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 man 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. Tertullian then assumed that Christ was conceived the same day that He was crucified (which is a strange assumption to make). If Jesus 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*. This means that since the 2nd century church decided that Christ was conceived on March 25th (even though there's no Biblical basis for that), they concluded He must have been born on December 25th. That's why we celebrate Christmas in winter instead of in the spring.

All of that aside, what I actually want to talk about in this lesson are the wise men. They are some of the most fascinating and mysterious people in the Bible. I think they're also some of the least understood. The wise men have an amazing backstory that many people aren't aware of. In this lesson I'd like to share with you the real story of the wise men from the East.

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

Matthew 2:1-2: “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, 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 tell us how many wise men went to Jerusalem. The reason people assume there were three 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 were present.

There's also the fact the wise men probably didn't travel by themselves. Since they had a long journey to make they most likely would have taken an entire caravan with them. This means they probably had camels, and servants, and luggage, and all sorts of things that they needed to survive the long trip. I don't think these men traveled across the world all by themselves.

So who were the wise men who came from the East? Fortunately this question is easy to answer. Today we refer to the wise men as Persians, but that's not completely accurate. By the time Christ was born the Persian empire had been replaced by the Parthian Empire. That empire was an *enormous* nation that was due east of Israel and took up a great deal of 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. That means Parthia was about *a thousand* times larger than Judah – and it wasn't under Roman control. The Parthians 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 a long time to travel from Parthia to Israel. 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 either had to do it on foot, or on an animal of some sort (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 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, assemble a caravan, and make the long trek across the world. There's evidence later in this passage (which we'll get to) which indicates this journey probably took around a year to make.

That means the wise men were *not* present on the night of Christ's birth. There's simply no way they could have arrived there that night – it 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 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?

The answer to this question lies in the fact that these wise men were from the Parthian Empire. That 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 began 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.

Daniel was the greatest wise man that the Babylonian Empire ever had. Nebuchadnezzar was so impressed with him that he put Daniel in charge of all the other wise men – and Darius did the same thing 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 it's very likely you would have been familiar with the writings of 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 most likely been diligently studied by future generations of wise men. His works may even have been 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 was going to do, but he also talked about *when the Messiah would come*. This is what the angel Gabriel told Daniel:

Daniel 9:25-26: “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. 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. 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.

This means God revealed to Daniel *exactly when Jesus was going to die*. This gave prophecy students a good idea about 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 20 to 40 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 within 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 give a clear picture of the work of the coming Messiah. Look at what Isaiah said in just this one famous passage:

Isaiah 9:6-7: “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. 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? He would be *the mighty God*. That meant He was going to be deity! Where would the Messiah reign? 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 then it's entirely possible that his successors – the wise men of the Parthian Empire – would have been aware of this and studied the same works that he did. This means 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 see this knowledge demonstrated in the gifts that the wise men brought. The wise men brought gold, which was a gift fit for a king, and they brought frankincense, which was incense that people offered to a deity.

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 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? Once again, perhaps they were familiar with the prophecies of Isaiah:

Isaiah 53:7-8: “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. 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 seem to have known that the Messiah 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. Anyone who was a student of prophecy could have known these things in advance because God revealed them to mankind through His prophets. It seems that the wise men knew all of this important information about the Messiah *because they were paying attention*.

That explains a lot, doesn't it? The 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. When they saw His star appear right when they were expecting it, they knew what was going on.

So naturally they traveled to Jerusalem to worship this new king. After all, surely the Jews would have known that their own Messiah had been born, right? How could Christ's own people have missed such a momentous event? 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, they 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 then appointed Herod Antipater as procurator over Judah. In 42 BC Antipater was murdered, which left his son Herod the Great in charge.

When Herod Antipater died the Parthians invaded Judah to restore the Jewish rulers (who were their allies) back to power. They succeeded in putting Antigonus on the throne. Herod then 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. The Parthians had restored the rightful Jewish ruler to the throne and Herod then came and stolen that throne. His title “King of the Jews” was enforced by Roman authority. The Jews didn't support Herod and didn't 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. 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 granted the title of “King of the Jews” by the Roman senate, but the Parthians were talking about someone who had been *born* with that title. On top of all that was the fact that in Parthia *the wise men were the ones who chose the rulers*.

That's 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 wasn't Herod! The last time the Parthians came to town they put the Jewish king Antigonus on the throne, and that led to three years of war. The Parthians were a very people empire and they had succeeded in dethroning Herod before. Herod was convinced that he was in trouble.

That's why Herod took these three wise men so seriously. Did you ever wonder why Herod agreed to see them? Why did he care about what these people were doing? It all goes back to who they were. These wise men weren't 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. He had to be kind to them and agree to help them because the last thing he wanted was another war with the Parthians. The last time they invaded he was defeated, and he only recovered his throne 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 one day 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 who they were looking for. The king 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 possible the wise men themselves told him who they were looking for.) He asked the chief priests where the Messiah was going to be born. The chief priests knew the answer:

Matthew 2:5-6: “And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, 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 the Messiah had already been born. Even though the prophecies of Daniel had revealed roughly when the Messiah would be born, the chief priests *still* missed it!

Why did they miss it? The reason is simple: the wise men were watching for the appearance of the Messiah *and the chief priests were not*. Now, keep in mind that the priests should have known that the Messiah had already appeared. 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.”

What was this star? That's an excellent question. Some people think that it might have been a comet, but no comets were reported during that time and no known comet's cycle would have caused it to appear at the time when Christ was born. Others have suggested that it might have been a time when multiple planets lined up with each other. However, planetary conjunctions happen on a regular basis and they don't look like a star. The ancient world knew that planets weren't the same thing as stars and they would have recognized a planetary alignment. Others have suggested that the star might have been a supernova, but there are no known historical records of a supernova occurring at that time.

The biggest problem with all of these theories is that the star *moved*. We're told in verse 9 that the star went before the wise men and led them to a specific house. That's something that stars, comets, and supernova simply *do not do!* You're 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, Exodus 13:21 tells us that during the time of the exodus God used a pillar of fire to guide Israel by night.) In my opinion the most likely explanation for this mysterious star is that it was a special light sent by God to guide the wise men. Why would God do this? Well, these wise men were some of the only people *in the entire world* who had taken the Messianic 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 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 that we need to comment on. First, Herod had no intention of actually going to worship the child. This is the same Herod who spent years murdering his own family members to remove any perceived 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 might have been upset with someone who deliberately started *another* war with the Parthians.) What Herod wanted to do was 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 vastly 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*. 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.

It's astonishing that the priests were so hard-hearted that they refused to travel even five miles to go see their 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 didn't care about the Messiah. It seems that 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 doesn't seem to be the case. Many churches don't even preach about the return of Christ anymore; instead they condemn that entire topic as being “divisive” and a “distraction”. Many Christians even 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 *don't want Jesus to come back anytime soon*. I've learned that when I teach on prophecy and show people that Christ could come back in the near future, people often respond with panic. Many Christians do *not* want Christ to return and interrupt their lives. Instead they want Him to stay away – just like the priests in this story.

The attitude of the religious leaders of Christ's day isn't very 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 many people in the modern church are also uninterested in the prospect of that same Messiah returning. Things haven't changed very much at all.

In fact, there are a number of parallels between the first coming of Jesus Christ and His return. God used His prophets to tell Israel when and where the Messiah would be born, but the religious leaders still missed it. God has likewise given signs and warnings that we're approaching the end of the church age, but the modern church isn't watching 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 time is nearly over!

It's true that some churches still teach prophecy, and some Christians are eagerly watching for the Lord's return. Yet those people are the exception, not the rule. If Christ were to return today I suspect that 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 2:9-10: “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.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.”

The passage doesn't actually say that the wise men went to Bethlehem. Herod did send them to Bethlehem, but the passage tells us that as soon as the wise men left the king they saw the star again and it led them to the place where the Messiah was located. However, the passage *doesn't tell us the name of that place!* People often assume it's Bethlehem because that's where Jesus was born, but Mary and Joseph were only in Bethlehem so they could be counted for tax purposes. Bethlehem wasn't their home, and there was no reason for them to stay there once they had been counted. It's 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 didn't walk into a stable and see an infant 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: they fell down and worshiped Him. They gave the Messiah the honor that He was due – the same honor that He *should* have received from the religious leaders of Judah. It's deeply sad that Gentile wise men traveled a great distance across the world to worship the Messiah and give

Him gifts, and yet the priests refused to travel *five miles* to pay Him a visit.

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

By contrast, what did the priests 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 a distant country*. That should tell you something about the hardness of Israel's heart. Their rejection of the Messiah didn't start at His ministry; instead He was rejected *from birth*.

The wise men then returned home – but they didn't go back to Herod. God was the one who guided them to see the Messiah, and He 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. He warned the wise men, who then avoided Jerusalem and went back home on a different path so Herod wouldn't know where the child was located. The Lord then appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to flee the country:

Matthew 2:13-15: “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. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: 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 didn't come as a surprise to God. Instead it was the fulfillment of prophecy. God knew what Herod was going to do long before he was even born. The Lord commanded Joseph to flee to Egypt because that place 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 wouldn't succeed.

When Herod saw that the wise men had tricked him, he did what he always did whenever he thought his power was being 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's not surprising that the man who murdered his own family and children was also willing to murder the children of others. Herod did whatever it took to stay on the throne, including mass murder. Since the wise men apparently told him that the star had appeared around two years ago, Herod had all the children who were 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 a fulfillment of prophecy. God warned Jeremiah about this centuries earlier:

Matthew 2:17-18: “Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, 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.”

The prophecy that Matthew is quoting can be found in Jeremiah 31:15.

Herod's appalling atrocity failed to kill the Messiah because God was watching over him. The Messiah survived and accomplished the will of God. Jesus came into this world and died for our sins on the cross 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 into this world the first time, the world wasn't happy to see Him. The kings of the world didn't welcome Him with open arms. Instead they plotted against Him and did their 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 attempt to murder the Messiah? Absolutely not. None of them spoke up on His behalf. None of them were willing to make the five-mile trip to Bethlehem (where they thought He was located) to see Him. The chief priests and scribes didn't start hating the Messiah when He began His ministry; no, their hatred of Him started at His birth. They didn't have a problem with Herod's attempt to assassinate the Messiah. It seems the priests and Herod were on the same page and wanted the same things.

The priests and scribes didn't want to bow down and worship the Messiah. They had no intention of giving Him the

honor He was due – but Gentiles from a foreign land had a very 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 it 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 demonstrated their faith by the actions they took.

The question each of us needs to ask ourselves is this: where do we stand? One day this same Messiah will return. Are you looking forward to His return or are you dreading it? Are you hoping that He'll stay away so that He won't interfere with your life (because 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 so you can be watching for it? Or are you like the priests and scribes of old, who were indifferent to His return? Do you care about His return, or are you indifferent to it?

Jesus is indeed 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 again 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?