12-29-19

Matthew 2:1-12

This account of the magi is one more display of God’s sovereignty and His supernatural protection of His Son. From this particular point in time, we can see glimpses of the past and glimpses of the future. There is fulfillment of prophecy and even prophecies of what is coming.

Matthew tells us that “Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea”. This is important because there was another Bethlehem in Galilee. Matthew was writing his account of the Gospel with the Jews in mind. That is why he points out so much Old Testament prophecy that is fulfilled in everything that pertained to Jesus. It was well understood that the Messiah was to be descended from David, and Bethlehem of Judea was where David was born. In mentioning the town of Bethlehem, the minds of the Jews would immediately turn to David.

While Luke had let us know that the birth of Christ took place during the reign of Caesar Augustus, Matthew tells us that it was while Herod was king. This is the man who was known as “Herod the Great”. He was considered ‘great’ because of all his building projects. He built many palaces, public buildings, and towns. He also had rebuilt the post-exilic Jewish temple into a huge and beautiful complex.

Herod was an Edomite; he was descended from Esau, the son of Isaac and the twin brother of Jacob. He did descend from Abraham, but he was not of the line of promise that passed through Jacob. Herod was placed as king over the area that had been Israel by the Romans. He was the first of what would become the Herodian dynasty which lasted about four generations. Although Herod was his actual name, it later became a title that was applied to some of his descendants. For example, the man who had John the Baptist beheaded and whom Jesus stood before during his trial was called Herod; but that was his title, his real name was Antipas.

Herod the Great was never known for being pleasant, but during the last years of his reign, he became terribly paranoid. This condition caused him to kill three of his own sons, his favorite wife, and about a hundred of his government and military advisors. He left orders that upon his death, three hundred of the prominent people of Judea were to be killed, so that there would be actual mourning when he died. This order was not carried out.

It is in this type of atmosphere that the “magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ‘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.’ Magi is a name describing those who studied the stars and natural science. They would have also been well read regarding any surrounding cultures. The Bible tells us they were from the east; it doesn’t get any more specific than that. Apparently, that’s all we need to know. Most guess that they came from the greater area of Babylon where they would have had access to Jewish writings from the Jewish exile there. Still, this is only a guess.

More important is the question, ‘What information are the Magi referring to?’ Well, it turns out that it has a very interesting source in the Bible. It refers back to the book of Numbers and to the account of Balaam. You may remember Balaam as the fellow who had a conversation with his donkey.

The story of Balaam is in Numbers 22-24 and he is mentioned again historically in Joshua 13:22. When Israel had finished their wondering in the desert, they camped along the boarder of Moab. The king of Moab sent for the sorcerer Balaam to curse the nation of Israel. Interestingly, Balaam was also from the east. God intervened with Balaam and commanded him to say nothing other than what the LORD told him to say. Balaam ended up blessing Israel instead of cursing them four times. Numbers 24:17 reads in part:

A star shall come forth from Jacob,  
A scepter shall rise from Israel

From this little piece of prophecy, spoken by the LORD through a pagan gentile; these pagan, gentile magi were willing to travel perhaps a thousand miles to worship a new King. In their study of the stars, they had observed a new one over the nation of Israel, and took it as fulfillment of this prophecy. They were willing to travel this distance, probably on camels, enduring the hardships of the long road, in order to worship Jesus.

There is certainly a lesson here for all of us. All Christians ought to face this question: What amount of effort are we willing to go to in order to worship Jesus? Compare what we go through to get to church on Sunday with what the Magi went through. They didn’t even know who Jesus was. We know who He is, that He has suffered and died for us, that He lives within us, and that He loves us with unsurpassed love. I don’t say these things to make anyone feel guilty; guilt is a poor motivator. I bring these things up that we may be motivated by love for Jesus and have a deep desire to worship Him.

The Magi apparently made the reasonable assumption (from a human standpoint) that the King of the Jews would be born in Jerusalem. The way to get any information at this period in time was to walk into a place and just start asking. Surely they believed that if they had figured out the prophecy, Jerusalem would be alive with news of their new King. Alas, these very intelligent men were wrong on both counts. First, you can’t figure out what God is doing to do based on human thought; secondly, the people weren’t too interested in the star, even with the account of the shepherds.

But the news of these strange and important men, along with their question, reached the ears of Herod. We are told in verse 3, “When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” Herod was upset because the news of a truly Jewish king was a threat to his power as a king. All of Jerusalem was troubled because when Herod was troubled, people tended to die.

We can see in this account that the term ‘king’ was equivalent to Messiah, especially because the birth had been announced supernaturally by the rising of the star. So, Herod called for the chief priests and the scribes to determine the location of the Messiah’s birth. They knew the answer; in Bethlehem of Judea. Then they backed up their answer with prophecy. The first three lines come from the prophet Micah 5:2, while the fourth line, who will shepherd My people Israel, comes from 2 Samuel 5:2.

Even though Herod was nuts, he was still very shrewd. Once he had obtained this information, he called for the magi. He did so secretly and gathered information from them about when the star was first seen. Once he has this information, he told the magi, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me so that I too may come and worship Him.” Now, we know that Herod had no intention of worshiping Jesus; it was his plan to kill Him. But the magi apparently took Herod at his word and having been told that the King would be in Bethlehem, happily went on their way.

Perhaps they hadn’t seen the star for a while, but once they began their trip to Bethlehem it reappeared and led them to the house where Jesus was. God was kind to them and rewarded their diligence with this conformation. Verse 10 describes how happy they were to see the star. The language is strong that they rejoiced and had great joy. They felt that good news of great joy that the angel had announced to the shepherds.

Let’s stop a moment and consider the different reactions to the news of the birth of the Christ. Because we know the whole story, we know that Herod’s reaction was hostility; murderous hostility. This is the reaction that Jesus would face from many in Israel. In fact, the nation ended up rejecting their Messiah. This is the same reaction that is taking place in much of the world today: hostility to Jesus and toward anyone who is associated with Him. The hostility is unreasonable and total and is driven by satan; but it fits with the rebellious human heart.

The second reaction was apathy. Here were the ones that were to shepherd Israel, the ones who knew the Bible, the ones who claimed to be awaiting the Messiah and even knew where He would be born. Yet, they could not be troubled to travel the five or six miles to Bethlehem to seek Him out. They would continue with their rituals, offering sacrifices, clinging to the power they had. These spoke of their devotion to God but their hearts were far from Him. We also know that eventually their own apathy would turn into open hostility. Whoever is not for Jesus is against Him.

Apathy also describes much of the world today. It is seen in the secular world where each person is concerned about only themselves. Worse, we see it in the churches. So many simply going to church as a ritual, getting it over with until the next time they have to come back. Whole churches turning from the word of God and making the Bible fit more comfortably with human depravity. Just like the religious leaders of Jesus’ time, these also will become hostile when faced with their own apathy.

The third reaction was seen in the shepherds after the announcement by the angel and by the magi who took it upon themselves to seek out Jesus. All these went to some trouble to actually go and see Christ and were thrilled when they got to do so. The hardships were nothing to them; they wanted to worship the Lord. There are people in the world like this today. No amount of hardship, even risking their lives, will stop them from worshiping Christ.

It is amazing to see who responded positively to Jesus: the lowliest of the Jewish people and Gentiles. In this we see what is to come. Overall, the nation of Israel, who had received all the promises of God, rejected their Saviour, and they are paying the price of that to this day. The religious leaders called the blood of Jesus upon themselves and their children; they actually rejected God Himself when they stated that they had no king but Caesar. Because of this, we also see the doors open wide to the Gentiles with many joyfully responding to Jesus and the salvation He offers.

Matthew wrote primarily to the Jews; but he makes it clear to them that the promise Abraham received concerning the Gentiles is in effect. The LORD had promised Abraham that “all the nations” would be blessed through him. Matthew shows this coming to pass in the genealogy at the beginning of his Gospel account when he includes some Gentile women. He shows it here with the Gentile magi coming to worship Christ. He shows it at the end of his account when he records Jesus’ words telling the disciples to spread the good news to all the nations.

Once more, this account ought to hold up a mirror so that we can look at ourselves. Where are we in this list of reactions? Are we hostile, apathetic, or joyful? Jesus left the glory of heaven and close communion with His Father in order to offer us restoration with God. What He faced was primarily hostility and apathy, and this is what He still faces today. As John wrote in his account of the Gospel: He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. Let each of us receive our Saviour with joy; let each of us look forward to worshiping Jesus, paying Him homage and offering Him the praise He deserves. We show our love for Him by obeying His commands and worshiping Him from our hearts.

The magi entered the house and they saw Jesus and His mother. These grown men immediately fell down and worshiped this little Child, not His mother. Then they gave Him gifts. These gifts were valuable and would have been normal and appropriate gifts for a king. Again, we see God’s provision for His Son; these gifts would have financed their trip to Egypt.

Once more, in verse 12, God sovereignly and supernaturally intervenes to protect His Son. The magi received a message in a dream. Notice that this is the first time this has happened to them. Up until now, they had depended on prophecy and followed the star in faith. They were obedient to the command of God and traveled back home without reporting back to king Herod. God is high above all the kings of the earth.

As we read in Psalm 2:2-4.

The kings of the earth take their stand  
And the rulers take counsel together  
Against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying,  
“Let us tear their fetters apart  
And cast away their cords from us!”

He who sits in the heavens laughs,  
The Lord scoffs at them.

Prayer

LORD, we admit that our hearts are dark and rebellious toward You. As believers in Jesus our Saviour, we are covered with His righteousness, that we may stand before You. May Your Holy Spirit fill our hearts to overflowing in the desire to worship our God and Saviour. To desire to worship with fellow Christians in unity together; and to continue that worship in our daily lives.

Lord, please give us that drive to bring the Gospel to a hostile and apathetic world, that some would turn to You and be saved. All this to show Your glory and honor You. Strengthen us that we may be used by You to build Your Kingdom.

You are Almighty God. Jesus, You are one with the Father and the Holy Spirit; You are the one and only Saviour. Your love for us is unsurpassed; it is beyond our imagination. We look forward to the coming of Your Kingdom where You will reign over the whole earth and all nations will bow before You. Until that time, use us in good works, preserve us from evil, and give us perseverance.

We thank You for all these things in the name of Jesus our Lord

Amen