

THREE WISE MEN AND ONE FOOL

Matthew 2:1-23

Intro: Of all of the stories told in the Bible, the stories in the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew are among the best known. It is not because they have been read by more people, but, as you know, it is because they are among the stories that have been read, or sung about, every year at Christmas. I don't know if that will continue to be true in the future, but it has been the case up until now.

Little children love to hear the Christmas story, and that is probably the point at which many people began to believe the Bible, which, in turn, has led to their salvation.

These stories have been told as true stories, and that is what they are! They give us events which actually happened. They have been recorded by men like Matthew who were directed by the Holy Spirit as to what they wrote, and how they wrote it. So these are not fairy tales; these are actual events about real people who lived many years ago.

However, the more we hear these stories, and the more we meditate on them, the more we realize that they contain important truths which the Lord obviously has given to His people for their encouragement. And in this particular case of the three wise men we can find encouragement by what is *not* told us about them, as well as what is told.

I. The three wise men.

In the first place we do not know for sure that there were three. Bible teachers have usually said “three,” as I have, because when they found the Lord Jesus, they presented to Him three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And so three sounds very reasonable to me..

But they are not named. We are not told where they lived, just that they came “from the east.” We are not told if it was from a nation next to Israel, or from a nation at some distance. We do know that they came to “Jerusalem” looking for a child who had recently been born as King of the Jews. Even more unusual was that they had been led by a star in heaven to come eventually to Bethlehem. Verse 9 of this chapter tells us that the star led them to the very place where they found “the young child.” This means that after the baby Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary must have

stayed in Bethlehem for at least a couple of years.

We don't know how they learned about the birth of Jesus, or Who He was to be. But the encouraging thing about all of this is that somewhere east of Israel God had been working in the hearts of these men, and they came to Israel, not only to see Jesus, but to worship Him. *And so this must mean that they came as men who already were trusting in the saving grace of God!* Who brought the message to them, we do not know. Nor do we know how many more there were in other parts of the world who had in some way been exposed to the Gospel message and were believing in the Savior. I think we can surely say that the wise men had to be Gentiles.

Now when we look at our world today, we are probably inclined to think that not many people in the world know about Christ, nor does it seem that there are many who are interested in learning about Him. But the first two verses of Matthew 2 would lead us to believe that just as no one in those days knew about these wise men, so it could very well be true that more is going on in our world today than we realize, and maybe it is much more. We hear many things about where the Gospel has gone, and that people are being saved, but I am willing to say tonight that this story justifies us in believing that the work of the Lord in the world is much greater, and much stronger, than any of us imagine. There is a lot of opposition to the Gospel in the world, but God is not dead, nor is He idle. I wonder if the Lord did not have this in mind when He said, as it is recorded for us in John 5:17, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." God is not going to let His promises fail, nor is He going to let His eternal purposes fail! Anyone who undertakes to oppose what God is going, had better beware! They are fighting a losing battle.

Why are they called "wise men," or Magi? A lot has been written about wise men in connection with the pagan religions of the world. They were supposed to be men who were able to commune with the false gods and receive messages from them. We know that all of that was false, and still is. I believe that these men were called "wise men" because in some way God had made Himself known to them. They had been saved, and became men who spread the message of salvation to their people. They were wise men as all believers should be, especially now that we have the entire Word of God. We need to be wise in knowing, loving, obeying, and proclaiming the eternal Word of the living God.

Verse 3 seems to indicate that the coming of the wise men stirred up a great deal of attention among the people of Jerusalem, including with King Herod. (Read verse 3.)

II. King Herod.

For Matthew to tell us that the King was “troubled” tells us a lot about the King. This means that he was greatly disturbed. It was all that he could think about, and it worried him so that he could not think of anything else.

So he called together the top officials of Israel and “demanded of them where Christ should be born. In verses 5 and 6 we have their answer. He was to be born in Bethlehem according to the OT prophet Malachi as he wrote in Malachi 5:2.

Next in verse 7 we learn that King Herod called the wise men and asked them what time the star appeared. We are not given their answer, but King Herod had no doubt about the star, nor of the information given to him by the Jewish leaders. He believed it all, and so he told the wise men in verse 8 what they were to do.

In verse 9 the wise men departed. The star continued to guide them until it came to the very place “where the young child was” with His mother Mary. Their joy is expressed in verse 10, But read the first part of verse 11 also. Of special importance is the fact that when they saw the child Jesus “they fell down and worshiped Him, not Him and His mother.

And then they gave Him gifts. The emphasis is upon Him, the Child. How well trained these wise men were at to whom they should worship. Their gifts were of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Much has been said about the significance of these gifts. It seems quite certain that Joseph and Mary had not seen such wealth before. Taking the meaning of this gift at what could have been the primary meaning, this was God’s way of providing for their material needs, and for the expense of their trip to Egypt and back.

The wise men were ready to return home, but God warned them not to return to Herod to tell him where the child Jesus and His family were. God knew that King Herod did not want to worship Jesus, but to kill Him. This is in verse 12. Here the wise men were warned and told what they

were not to do. After they left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph telling him what he was to do, and why. And even this became the occasion in which prophecy was fulfilled as we learn from Hosea 11:1.

But the emphasis on King Herod continues in the tragic story which follows beginning with verse 16 and going down through verse 18

If you have not already guessed who the fool is, it was King Herod. Driven by jealousy and fear and anger, he ordered the murder of all of the children in Bethlehem and its surroundings who were two years old and younger.

Why God did not intervene to stop the King, we cannot say. The fact is that He didn't stop him. It shows in a most tragic way the hatred of the world toward Christ and anything that has to do with the true and living God. There is no greater fool than the person, whether man or woman, who does not ask, Why did God send His Son into the world? King Herod is one of a great number of people who have actually been exposed to the Gospel, or to someone who knew the Gospel, but have not given the least thought that message might have some significance for them. Herod was only interested in winning the battle against this one Whom he considered to be a competitor for his position. But what he did was to seal his own judgment being charged with all of those precious children.

Solomon said long before King Herod was a king that:

6 A fool's lips enter into contention, and his mouth calleth for strokes.

7 A fool's mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul (Prov. 18:6-8).

On earth it seems that King Herod got away with his devilish scheme to get rid of Christ. But he did not! He only added to his own eternal judgment by doing what he did instead of asking what those strange wise men were so determined to find the Messiah.

King Herod was greatly troubled when he heard about the star and the child. Instead of seeking more information from the wise men who had come looking for the child, he was so blinded by his own proud, sinful heart, that he took action to have "the child" killed rather than learn from the wise men the truth which could have led to his salvation. What kind of peace do you think he had up to the day of his death?

And what can be said about King Herod being a fool, applied equally to the thousands who were in Jerusalem. And people are doing the same thing every day. People are content to live without God even though they know in their hearts that there is a God. The wise men came many miles to see the Christ child, and to worship Him. King Herod died in his foolishness even though the men who knew what he needed to know were standing before him, and he did not ask them to tell him what they knew.

III. After the death of Herod.

This begins with verse 19 and continues to the end of the chapter.

After Herod's death an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph telling him to return to Israel. Joseph obeyed, but when he heard the Herod's son, Archelaus, was king, he was afraid to go back to Bethlehem or Jerusalem, and so Joseph, Mary, and the Lord went to Nazareth, and that name was attached to the Lord even to the Cross where the sign identifying Him called Him, "Jesus of Nazareth."

Now when we come to the last reference to the OT in verse 23, you will search in vain to find this statement in the prophets. But Matthew did not link this with a particular prophet. In fact, you will notice if you look at verse 23 carefully that Matthew wrote that Joseph went to Nazareth that what the prophets (plural) predicted generally about the Lord was that He would always be identified with Nazareth. We find that this was true even to the superscription that was placed over our Lord on the Cross on which He died. It was the Apostle John who has told us about the title that was placed on our Lord's Cross, giving His Name and the supposed crime for which He was crucified. Let me read it to you. It is found in John 19:19-20:

19 And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS.

20 This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin.

We have no writing in the OT prophets calling Him "a Nazarene." But Lenski, a very reliable commentator on the NT says that what Matthew was saying is that the reputation of our Lord on earth was similar to the reputation of Nazareth. No person would boast that he would from Nazareth. Nazareth was despised by the Jews. It was a town that was

nothing, and actually less than nothing. It was a corrupt place, and looked down upon the Jewish people generally. Lenski says that our Lord and Nazareth had this in common: they were both insignificant from which no one expected anything. Saying that the prophets (plural) called our Lord a Nazarene meant that they both had the same kind of a reputation. People despised Nazareth; and our Lord was to be despised of men.

The prophets in speaking of the coming Messiah did not predict Him arriving as royalty, but as a man among men with nothing outwardly to indicate that He was the Son of God destined to be the King of kings and Lord of lords.

We have this statement in John 1:45-46 where it was not an honor, but rather a disgrace to have to say that you were from Nazareth. We read in John 1 how Nathanael felt about Nazareth:

45 Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

46 And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see.

The reproach and vilification that the prophets predicted that the Messiah would experience was illustrated by the fact that He was known as Jesus of Nazareth. If He had grown up in Bethlehem or Jerusalem, He would not have had that reproach.

So for the Lord to be known as a Nazarene, even though He was not born there, was a major part of the humiliation He suffered in becoming a Man in order that He might be our Savior.

Concl: As I close, let me comment on Matthew's tendency to quote from the OT. This is one reason Bible teachers have said that Matthew was written especially for the Jews. They would have known why He was called a Nazarene. In verses 5 and 6 he quoted from Micah 5:2. In verse 15, from Hosea 11:1. And in verses 17 and 18, from Jeremiah 31:15. Then a different kind of quotation in verse 23 supported by Psa. 22:6; Isa. 49:7; 53:3.

There are many examples in the OT of what Matthew was pointing out, but let me give you just one example which many of you will recognize: It is found in Isa 53:1-3:

1 Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?

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2 For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

3 He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

The Bible is its own authority. This type of quotation ties the OT and the NT together inseparably. God's Word does not change with the changes we see in culture. Cultures may differ, but the Word of God remains the same. God does not change, nor does His Word change. We need to take our stand on the unchanging character of God's Word. To hold any other position will lead us into trouble. Paul admonished Timothy to preach the Word because in no other way can the people of God be perfected and prepared to be effective and fruitful servants of our God.