

THE RECEPTION OF THE KING

Matthew 2

Our emotions respond instantly to the recital of the matchless and deathless story of the birth of Christ. This story is of continual interest and constant blessing to those of us who know and love Him. His birth has meant more to the world than that of any other person. Some seven hundred years before the Saviour was born, the prophet Micah had foretold that He would be born in Bethlehem in Judea.

Just prior to the birth of the Lord Jesus, Joseph and Mary were in Nazareth, some sixty miles north of Bethlehem. In order that they might be at the proper place at the right time, God caused Caesar Augustus to issue a decree that all the world over which he had control should be enrolled, everyone in his own city, with a view to taxation and perhaps military service. In response to this decree Joseph and Mary made their way to Bethlehem. When not even an improvised corner could be found in the inn to shelter and protect the expectant mother, Joseph and Mary were permitted to stay in the stable. There she gave birth to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ was born during the reign of Herod the Great, who was the puppet king of Palestine under Roman control from 40 B.C. until his death on April 1, 4 B.C. It appears that He was born during the closing months of Herod the Great's reign.

I. The Visit of the Wise Men. Matthew 2:1-12.

1. The seekers.

Matthew does not mention either the nationality or the occupations of these wise men. Evidently they were the representatives of all that was best in the old civilization of the world. They were men of rank, wealth, and influence. As to how many of them there were we are not told. It is sheer conjecture to insist on three. We have no authority for saying that there were only three of them. Perhaps the number three was deduced from the fact that three kinds of offerings were mentioned. After all, we should not get our knowledge of the Bible from Christmas cards. That these men were kings, one of them from Greece, another from India and the third from Egypt, are statements which belong in the realm of fiction. In reality nothing is known of these wise men apart from the few brief statements here recorded by Matthew. Out of the mystery of their past they step upon the stage for only one short scene and then disappear forever. However, the part they play is important and the lessons they teach are full of meaning.

Some time after Jesus Christ was born the wise men learned of His birth through divine revelation. As has been true of many others, the revelation from God came to them while they were pursuing the ordinary duties of their vocations. Their earnestness of purpose was revealed by their long and dangerous journey from their far-off homes in the East to the city of Jerusalem in search of a heavenly King.

2. The sign.

These men were familiar with the Jewish Scriptures and knew that the Messiah was to come. They were looking for His coming with keen interest and great anticipation. Pleased with their attitude, God gave these men a special sign to lead them to the Lord Jesus. It was that of a star -- "There shall come a Star out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17). When they beheld this particular star, they concluded that this prophecy had been fulfilled, so they proceeded to go to Jerusalem.

"His star in the east" was their guide. God never lacks the means to guide earnest inquirers. Led by a star, they could not look at the road or anything around them as they journeyed, but were ever looking upward.

3. The search.

These men were a long distance from Christ when the first impulse to go to Him awoke in their hearts. Having been told of the birth of Christ, they left their homes and their friends and set out on a long and wearisome journey to Jerusalem in quest of Him Who had been born King of the Jews. Their minds were not taken up with gaiety and frivolity, but they were earnest men in search of the Christ Child, not in order to criticize or to argue, as intellectuals often do, but for the purpose of worshipping Him and presenting their gifts to Him.

The arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem startled the people of the city and alarmed Herod. It seems that the wicked King was the only one who was stirred to action or concerned enough to aid them in their search. He called a meeting of the chief priests and scribes, and sought from them the answer to the inquiry of the visitors from the East, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" They knew exactly because they were familiar with the Old Testament prophecies. Without hesitation they referred him to Micah 5:2, which reads as follows: "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel."

How strange that the heart of a king, whose name struck terror into the people of Judea, should quail with alarm and fear. Just think of a king being in trouble about the One Who had come to bless him and the world. Knowing that his throne had been reared on falsehood, injustice and bloodshed, and lacking faith in the rectitude of his position and being without confidence in his security, it is not surprising that Herod the Great determined in his heart to destroy the infant King, Jesus.

Herod carefully questioned the wise men, then sent them from rich and gay Jerusalem to the obscure and poor town of Bethlehem to search for the One Who had been reported as having been born there. He told them to investigate there and then to report their findings to him, hypocritically promising that he, too, would go there and worship Him also. Actually, his intention was the very opposite. Whereas the wise men were searching for Christ Jesus to do Him homage and to offer their gifts to Him, Herod was trying to find Him in order that he might put Him to death. But, it is truly wonderful that the devices of wicked men can never thwart the ultimate purposes of God. Evidently the wise men suspected his malign intention, because as soon as they heard the instructions of the King, they went on their way.

4. The success.

As the wise men left the presence of Herod, the star which they had seen in the East again appeared to them, and led them to the very spot where the Lord Jesus was. The reappearance of the star gave them fresh evidence of true and safe guidance, and they rejoiced exceedingly. As those searchers followed the light which they had, they received additional light. It is well for us to remember that this is always the method by which God is pleased to lead His people. As they use the light they have, He gives them more light.

When the wise men at last arrived in Bethlehem, Mary and the Babe were no longer in the stable, but in a house. Upon their entrance into the house, they saw the Child and His mother, Mary. They were filled with joy when at last they stood in the presence of the young Child. They were sure that He was the One for Whom they were searching. They rejoiced with exceeding great joy for at last they had found the King Whom they had come to worship.

Recognizing the Christ, they acknowledged His deity by falling down and worshipping Him. Observe, now, that they did not worship Mary, but the Child Jesus. After they had worshiped Him in Whom the living God had become incarnate, they opened their treasures and offered to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and Myrrh. They simply

brought and gave to Christ the very best they had, which is exactly what all of us should do. Influenced by warnings from God through a dream, they did not return to and report to Herod, as he had anticipated they would do, but instead they went to their homes by another route.

II. The Flight Into Egypt. Matthew 2:13-18.

It is not surprising to find the power of evil rearing its head to strike and get rid of the infant Jesus, Who was destined to be the Saviour of men. But it is interesting to see the hand of God, Who is never indifferent, providentially protecting the life of the Christchild.

In accordance with the divine warning, Joseph took Mary and Jesus and fled into Egypt. This flight was occasioned by the cruel jealousy of Herod, whose hatred was stirred into a rage by the failure of the wise men to report to Him. Having murdered his own sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, for fear that they might usurp his throne, it is not surprising that Herod sent forth a heartless command to massacre and slaughter all male children two years of age and under. These actions clearly depict his character. Since Bethlehem was a small village, the victims would not have been numerous, perhaps not exceeding twenty, but the killing of that number of innocent people was a small item in the record of cruel and wicked Herod.

III. The Return To Palestine. Matthew 2:19-23.

Joseph and Mary obeyed God's orders to remain in Egypt until they received further instructions. They remained in that place of refuge until word came that Herod had died. How long this was, we do not know. Then, in due time, the prophecy of Hosea 11:1 was fulfilled. In it we read, "When Israel was a child, than I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt." God instructed Joseph not to settle in Judea, since there was not security there, but to turn aside "into the parts of Galilee." "He came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth" where the Lord Jesus grew to manhood and at the proper time was publicly manifested as the Messiah.