



Title: Christmas Hope
Theme: The Hope of the Wise Men

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.’ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied, ‘for this is what the prophet has written:’ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find Him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him.’ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.” (Matthew 2:1-11)

Hope

Hope as it is used in the Word of God has a much different meaning than the word hope used in this world. Children hope they will get a certain type of Christmas gift.

Some people hope they will graduate from high school and go on to college or hope they can find that certain job or career that will make them the amount of money they want to earn or that fame they hope to gain. Others hope that they can do whatever will bring satisfaction for themselves and to others. Others hope that they can beat their cancer this year, be with loved ones just one more year, one more Christmas.

The word hope as the world sees it is a tool to keep you going when you lose your health or job and even when you lose someone you love. Hope is a word that can spark life inside your heart and tell you tomorrow, next week, next month or next year you will reach your goals. It is an anchor word that points to the future.

The problem with the world's view on hope is it is all based on uncertainty. Hope in all the things I have just mentioned is good, but there is no guarantee you will graduate from high school, go to college, or get that job or career that will bring fame and riches or fulfillment. Hope from this world's perspective gives no guarantee that you are going to enjoy good health tomorrow, no guarantee you will be with family next week, next year or next Christmas. In fact all the hopes I have mentioned so far are, in reality, only wishes.

I would propose to you that hope promised in the Word of God is a unique hope that is far beyond a wish, it is an absolute certainty. It is the kind of hope found in the life of the Magi.

Just what is this hope and how do we express a life that says, "My hope is in Christ?"

There is much that the Holy Spirit of Christ wants you to grasp this Christmas season as we take time to look at the Biblical accounts of the lives of those who were physically involved in the life of Christ that first Christmas. Our text says, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea... Magi from the east came to Jerusalem..." (Matthew 2:1)

Who were these "Magi?"

Who were these "Magi?" Some translations say, "wise men." Although the Bible does not say much about these worshipers of Christ, extra-Biblical evidence found through Christian historians offers us clues that shed some light about these men who were around about the time of Christ. These men were "Magi" (*magos*) who could very likely have been Persian priests. By the time of Christ's birth these Persian priests became almost exactly what the Levites were in Israel. They became teachers and instructors of the Persian kings and at this time period they were good men, who sought truth and great wisdom. These wise men were skilled in philosophy, medicine, and natural science. They were able to combine secular and religious aspects of knowledge and understanding. (William Barclay; The Complete Word Study Dictionary; Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament; Dictionary of Biblical Languages; Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains: Tyndale reference library)

The wise men's interest in the Messiah may have arisen from contact with Jewish travelers in the east and from knowledge of the Old Testament. (The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia) What we do know is that the Prophet Daniel had been taken to Babylon as a prisoner of war and as the results of his faithfulness to the Lord, God raised him and his friends to high political positions. The Bible says, "Then the king [Nebuchadnezzar] placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men.

Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court." (Daniel 4:48-49) We do know that Daniel was also raised to a place of political influence under the King of Persia after the Persians conquered Babylon. (Daniel 6:1-3)

The point is this, a Godly man like Daniel and his friends was used by God in a place of captivity for 70 plus years to influence kings and other political positions and God still uses the life of Daniel and his friends to give guidance to the lives of Bible readers today. It is very possible that Godly influences had carried on down throughout the Eastern world and their lives along with the Old Testament teachings had a guiding affect on the Magi. It is the Bible that says, "so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:11) This is why in the Great Commission we are told to "[teach] them to obey everything [Jesus has] commanded [us]..." (Matthew 28:20) and the charge to the soldier of Christ is to "Preach the Word..." (2 Timothy 4:2) The Word of God and its effects on how we live will affect all who see our lives.

Let the Holy Spirit place this truth in your spiritual hearts this Christmas season. The Magi may be regarded as the representation of the Gentile world. Their homage from the East sets the heartbeat for all who want to be worshipers of Christ. You can be a kingdom seeker who desires to worship the King of kings and the life you live for the Lord will have an affect on someone for generations to come. (The Life and Times of Jesus)

The Word of God can lead you to fear or believe in the Christ of Christmas

Another truth worth grasping this Christmas season is that the Word of God can lead you to fear or believe in the Christ of Christmas. When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem they asked, "...Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." (Matthew 2:2)

These brilliant men were serious scholars and it would not surprise me if they were led to look for the Lord because of God meeting them right where they were in what they believed and how they sought out truth. They were interested in astrology and they studied everything they could find about the stars. There were is no doubt they were very much aware of the Jewish nation and most likely at some time got their hands on some Hebrew writings. If they had they would have read Numbers 24:17, "...A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel..." (Numbers 24:17)

This message was spoken by Balaam who came from the Eastern Mountains. (Numbers 23:7) It is also interesting that many Jews around the time of Christ had moved into the Eastern areas taking with them their sacred writings along with their hope of a king whom would once again make Israel free from bondage. A Roman historian (Suetonius) writing of this time period wrote, "An ancient and settled persuasion prevailed throughout the East that the Fates had decreed someone to proceed from Judea who should attain a universal empire." A second Roman historian (Tacitus) wrote, "Many were persuaded that it was contained in the ancient books of their priest that at that very time the East should prevail, and that someone should proceed from Judah and possess the dominion."

Two of the most respected Jewish historians in the world (Josephus and Phelio) wrote about the time period of Christ being born and they make mention in their writings of the expectation of the people looking for a king to arise who would set them free. (Barnes Notes)

With the number of Hebrew writings being carried into the East and the common knowledge of the Jews expecting their forthcoming king, it was no real surprise that someone would begin to ask questions. As always when Bible prophecy begins to be fulfilled and God begins a new work people become disturbed. The Bible says, "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him." (Matthew 2:3)

Any child of God who has illumination of having Christ born within their spiritual hearts had come to that time in their lives that the Word of God disturbed them. All Christians who walk in the hope of Christmas have been in that same battle as King Herod and those in Jerusalem. There is a battle for the throne of the heart. Those who fight to keep on that throne will find themselves like Herod, doing everything possible to keep Jesus from His rightful place. If you do not know the story, Herod sent his soldiers out to kill the babes in Bethlehem and its vicinity in effort to keep Jesus off his throne. Anyone who wants to keep the Lord Jesus Christ off the throne of their heart becomes very disturbed with the truths of Christ and fear what is spoken or done in Christ name.

Those who have the hope of Christmas joyfully surrender the throne room of their hearts over to the Lordship of Christ by inviting Jesus to be born within them by the power of the Holy Spirit of Christ.

The diligent seeking of the wise men led them to more guiding of God's Word and what is even more interesting is that it was God's enemy who helped seek out the place where the Magi could find the Christ child. Even in the midst of the Lord's enemies God can get directions to those who truly seek him.

Through seeking counsel from men who knew the Old Testament, King Herod found insight on where to find the child who was to be born as God's Messiah,

the Christ. He was as much aware of the Biblical promise as most Jews were at the time of Jesus' early childhood.

The Bible says, "When he [Herod] had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written: But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He [Herod] sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.' After they had heard... king [Herod], they went on their way," (Matthew 2:4-9)

Symbolically, Herod represents that which stands against the will of God and that which opposes the works of God. Herod did not ask the chief priest and teachers where this so called king of the Jews was to be born. In every accurate translation of the Bible we read of King Herod asking where is the "Christ" or the "Messiah" to be born. Herod was a tool of Satan being an adversary to the workings of God in this time of history. Satan often works through man's wicked heart to accomplish his evil plans.

In the New Testament we read that the devil can take man captive to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:26) The Hebrew word for "Satan" (*satan*) means to act as an adversary, one who hinders or opposes God and His people. (Who's Who in the Bible; The Complete Word Study of the Old Testament)

At a time when David was giving in to his sinful flesh, Israel needed chastised as well. We read, "Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel. So David said to Joab and the commanders of the troops, 'Go and count the Israelites from Beersheba to Dan...' But Joab replied, 'May the LORD multiply his troops a hundred times over. My lord the king, are they not all my lord's subjects? Why does my lord want to do this? Why should he bring guilt on Israel?'" (1 Chronicles 21:1-3)

What the Holy Spirit wants you to grasp this Christmas season is that in the midst of your adversaries, if you are seeking to live a life of worship to Christ, the Lord can give you direction and that direction can be trusted as long as it is in line with the truths of the whole of Scripture. You will find enemies in the midst of raising your children, in your work place, in political affairs of this nation and in the church structure. In the midst of adversaries there is always guidance in the written Word of God.

Obedience to the counsel of God's Word, when need be, leads to supernatural leading which brings joy. The Bible says, "After they had heard... king [Herod], they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed." (Matthew 2:9-10)

This was a supernatural star and it was God's leading that took them to the place where Jesus lived with His parents. (Thru the Bible; The Expositors Bible Commentary; Matthew Henry Commentary; The Bible Exposition Commentary) The star first appeared to them while they were in the East and caused them to start searching for answers. It most likely disappeared and they took the usual method in seeking answers. The Wise Men were in Jerusalem, no doubt thinking this would be the place for a king of the Jews to be born, decided to enquire as anyone with any common sense would to find direction.

Let the Holy Spirit place this truth within your heart, extraordinary helps are not to be expected where ordinary means have already been provided. For example, Christians do not need a visit from an angel or supernatural experience to get involved in a local church when God has already provided in His Word that Christians are to be about the Great Commission and they are to exercise their gifts for edifying the Body of Christ. Simple obedience to what God has spoken to Christians in the written Word will bring supernatural direction when it is needed.

The Wise Men had received direction and it would not be a surprise to me that Herod shared with them what the chief priest said about the prophet Micah's teaching, out of Bethlehem a ruler would arise for the people of Israel. (Micah 5:2) I am fully persuaded that those Magi had in their minds and heart to make a direct trip to Bethlehem. It would not be wrong to think that they were wondering where they should go upon their arrival.

It was at this time God intervened again with regard to the proclamation of the birth of Christ to a world in great need. The star most likely was gone for a season and was back, because the Bible says the Magi were overjoyed when they saw the star and it led them to the place where the child was. (Matthew 2:9)

Let the Holy Spirit place this truth within your heart. When Christians have done their duty in seeking Him with all their hearts, God will give divine intervention and lead them to that place where He wants them to be and they will be overjoyed in the faithfulness of God. Just as sure as the Magi had confirmation that the Lord was with them Christians can experience the joy of the Lord with them.

Just as the Magi had a sure hope they were going to fulfill their mission, Christians have the same sure hope the Lord is with them on their missions. They are illuminated with the truth that was placed in the psalmist who wrote, "...let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice." (Psalm 105:3) The Lord has this promise for those who express their hope in Him, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you." (Psalm 32:8) That Christmas truth is worth grasping and clinging to.

True hope leads to practical sacrificial worship

The last truth to grasp this Christmas season in regard to the hope of the Magi is that true hope leads to practical sacrificial worship. “On coming to the house, they saw the child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.” (Matthew 2:11) God through these Magi is showing the attitude of the heart He longs to see in those who approach Christ.

All who have hope in Christ will fall before Him in their hearts, they adore Him and submit to His authority. The worship offered by the Magi gives us the three stages of becoming a joyful Christian. One is vision, a heart seeking after God’s Messiah. Two is submission to what the Word of the Lord tells Christians to do. Three is consecration, giving all that God has given to Christians for the work of God in their lives. Christians who have true hope give property and service unto the Lord.

All three of these gifts honor Christ and it would do us good to try to understand the purpose of these gifts and then invite the Holy Spirit to burn these truths deep into our minds and illuminate them into our hearts. Christian Historian and Bible teacher William Barclay gives some ideas that are worth our consideration.

Gold is the gift for a king – Seneca tells us that in Parthia it was a custom that no one entered into the king’s presence without a gift. Gold at that time period was considered to be a metal of kings. Jesus is the King of kings who serves and reigns through sacrificial love and full authority over everything in heaven and earth. Christians must meet His terms for service.

The story of Admiral Nelson is worth considering as we strive to understand how to approach Jesus with a gift worth giving. Admiral Nelson was known for his kindness, compassion and courtesy. After one of his naval victories, the defeated admiral, knowing of Admiral Nelson’s reputation made his way across the deck of the ship and reached out his hand to shake Admiral Nelson’s hand. Admiral Nelson kept his hand in his pocket and said, “Your sword first, then your hand.”

Before they approach Christ, Christians need to lay down their weapons of the flesh, their love for the world and their ears for the lies of the devil before they may join hands with Christ. This is the greatest gift Christians can offer Christ.

Frankincense is the gift for a priest – It was in the Temple worship and at the Temple sacrifices that the sweet perfume of frankincense was used. The function of a priest is to open the way to God for man through the sacrifice being offered. The Latin word for priest (*pontifex*) means bridge builder.

This is what Christ did for us. His sacrificial death on the cross built a bridge so repentant mankind can have a way for getting back to God, have fellowship with God, know God's will, and be empowered for service to the King of kings.

Myrrh is the gift for one who is to die – Myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead. Jesus came to reveal God to man and He came to die. Holman Hunt has a famous picture of Jesus. It shows Jesus at the door of the carpenter shop in Nazareth. He is still only a boy and had come to the door to stretch out his arms so to give them a break from working over a bench. In this picture He stands at the doorway with arms outstretched and on the wall behind him, the setting sun throws his shadow in the form of a cross. In the back ground there stands Mary, and as she sees the shadow there is concern on her face of the coming tragedy that awaits the sinless Christ, all because of the wickedness of man's heart.

Jesus came from the abode of God, walked this sin trodden earth to face death and then enjoyed victory over that sin. That first Christmas God gave the greatest Christmas gift, Christ gave of Himself and the Holy Spirit beckons all to come and bow as the Wise Men did.

Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for the one who was to give His life foretold that Jesus was the King of kings, the perfect High Priest and in the end the Supreme Savior of men.

Christians have the sure hope expressed by the Wise Men that enables them to seek the Lord. God guiding the Magi to where Christ lived is a sure hope that God can bring all who seek Jesus to a place in their lives where they can enjoy worshipping the Lord.

This is only enjoyed if a person is willing to go the distance, seek the counsel of God's Word and pay the homage that is due to Christ.

This Christmas are you expressing Christmas hope? Can you be seen as a Gentile worshiper who has gone the distance to worship Jesus Christ as king of your heart and life? Do you search the Scriptures to find the truths of life, are you ready to respond to what the Lord reveals to you about Christ? Do you offer to the King of kings your greatest gift, your heart? Is your life an aroma pleasing to God? Have you died to the flesh, the lures of the world and can you discern the lies of the devil as the Wise Men did?

This year find your place in the Christmas story and proclaim the truths of Christmas for all to hear!

Let us pray!