

“THEY FOLLOWED A STAR”
Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 2:11-22, Matthew 2:1-15
January 1 & 2, 2022

“A minister once enlisted four children to help him preach his Christmas sermon on ‘The Star.’ He gave each child one of the four letters to hold up so he could make a point on each letter of the word ‘Star.’ When the children stepped forward and turned around, they were in reverse order. The congregation nearly fell out of their pews as they read: ‘RATS.’”¹

Depending upon the meaning of each letter, however, it doesn’t matter if it’s spelled ‘Star’ or ‘Rats,’ since **for me the letters stand for the Savior’s Tender Arrival for Redemption. Or, if it’s backwards, Redemption’s Arrival thru the Tender Savior. Either way, we see God reaching out to the people of this world to grant us mercy and grace for the forgiveness of our sins and the salvation of our souls.**

The prophecy of a Savior was written about all through the Old Testament Scriptures.

Isaiah 60 tells of the Lord bringing the Light of His glory into the city of Jerusalem, where “*nations will come to Your light, and kings to the brightness of Your dawn*” (60:3). It talks about the people gathering to come back to Israel, sons and daughters returning home (60:4). And it foretells that “*herds of camels will cover Your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord*” (60:6). But how would the people of different lands come to know about any prophecy for the people of Israel? What would give them a clue about what God was doing through a Savior?

You see, the Scriptures had been taken to distant countries by the people of Israel when they were exiled in various places. Daniel would have had some of the Scriptures with him when he went to Babylon as a captive to King Nebuchadnezzar. The Scriptures would have been taken to other occupying nations that attacked and ruled over various parts of the nations of Israel and Judah. The Hebrew Scriptures would have found their way into the hands of the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the

¹ (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 119)

Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, and even the Romans. The prophecies of a new King coming to rule over Israel would not have been a secret to those who had access to these Scriptures. Though many would have read them as a desperate yearning for salvation from a people oppressed by nations more powerful than they were, the hope of a Savior to come and set the people free from the occupation of foreign nations was nothing new. Any enslaved group would have had such a yearning.

When we look at the prophecies, **all of them fit within the Nativity accounts of Jesus**, the Light of God, coming to the earth as a baby; with Joseph and Mary returning to Bethlehem because of the census; and then of visitors from other nations coming to pay homage to the new King of kings with gold and incense. These Magi, or wise men, could very easily have had access to these Scriptures far away from the land of Israel. They could have recognized the prophecies as being not only from a desperate people, but from an Almighty God who could actually fulfill those prophecies in an astounding way and bring miraculous release to all of the captives, and all who were oppressed by sin.

In providing a Savior, **the Tender love of God was shown to all people of the earth**, for He does not desire that anyone should perish, separated eternally from Him because of sin. God desired for all of His creation to come to know Him and find The Way He was preparing for them to find redemption and Salvation from sin's penalty. So God provided a Savior to come out of the land of Israel to free us from our sins and bring us back into the presence of the Lord our God. Instead of giving us His wrath for the wages of our sins, God came to us, like one of us, in the Tender, long prophesied Christ-child born of Mary.

Since He came to us as a baby, Jesus was very vulnerable at that time, with no power or authority to protect Himself. His tender condition was completely dependent upon the devotion of Mary and Joseph, following the Lord God's instructions in order to keep Jesus safe. As a human, Jesus lived under the same physical restrictions that we have when we are young, so it was vital that others protect Him at this very early stage of His life. So God sent angels to warn Joseph about the dangers that were arising, and instructed him in the best way to keep Jesus safe. And Joseph obeyed.

But Jesus' Arrival was not kept from everyone. The angels had informed the shepherds of their Savior being born and laid tenderly in a manger in Bethlehem. They believed the message and went to see this new-born King. And when they returned, having seen Jesus, they proclaimed the great news to all the people they saw. Simeon and Anna told everyone in the Temple a month or so after Jesus' birth. Though many heard about the Savior's arrival into the world, there is little said about any response of the people. We don't hear about any great gathering at the stable by those in Bethlehem or Jerusalem on the night that Jesus was born. Not even in the following weeks. And the only fanfare at the Temple was Simeon and Anna telling everyone that the Messiah had come.

However that would not be the end of the proclamations of the Savior's birth. Our Gospel lesson today tells of a new group of people arriving to proclaim the glory of this event. Listen to Matthew 2:1-15. (READ Matthew 2:1-15).

The very time at which Jesus was born, God provided a sign for all the people of the world to become aware of His great work being done. He put a light in the heavens that shown down upon the Earth for everyone to see. **We're told in the Scriptures that a Star was in the heavens indicating the birth of the new king of the Jews.** There's no description of what this star was composed of, whether it was a conjunction of planets and stars aligning to produce a great light, or if it was a supernova (a star that exploded) giving off tremendous light for months, but only that a star appeared for anyone to see. Since God is the creator of the Universe, putting stars in the sky and calling them each by name, it would not be difficult for Him to celebrate the arrival of His Son onto the Earth with a brand new star. And only those who observed the stars on a regular basis would have known the difference, except that this star shown out more brightly than any of the others and seemed to make its way east, rather than going west like all the others.

The wise men saw this celestial sign and were given its meaning - that a new king of the Jews had been born. So they made plans to discover the One upon whom was to receive this glory. They traveled many months and many miles, maybe upwards to 1600 miles, across rivers, mountains, and

scorching deserts, to arrive in Jerusalem where they inquired about the new King's location. "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him" (Matthew 2:2).

So the arrival of the tender Savior had captured the attention of these astrologers, and it peaked their interest enough for them to journey away from their own homes to a place where they could see this thing that the Lord was doing. **God had reached out to all people, even to the Gentiles, to proclaim His mighty work of Salvation for the whole world.**

But let me ask you a question today: "What would get you so excited that you would pack up your things and go on a very long journey?" Would it be a conference attending to an interest you have? Would it be the marriage of a relative? Would it be the death of a loved one? Or, possibly, could it be the celebration of the birth of new child in your family? Would you take the whole family or would you go by yourself? And what things would you take with you so that you could be comfortable during your trip? Would you take a carry-on sized bag, or would it be a UHAUL trailer?

In his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew* [Zondervan, 1995], Philip Yancey tells about what is involved in the visits of some folks. He says, "Queen Elizabeth II visited the United States, and reporters delighted in spelling out the logistics involved: her four thousand pounds of luggage included two outfits for every occasion, a mourning outfit in case someone died, 40 pints of plasma, and white kid-leather toilet seat covers. She brought along her own hairdresser, two valets, and a host of other attendants. A brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can easily cost 20 million dollars."²

While the arrival of the tender Savior, Jesus, happened without much fanfare, the arrival of the wise men might not have been so inconspicuous. There certainly could have been a huge caravan of camels with all of the food and "necessities" needed for all those traveling along with them.

Yet, the Magi had one object to their search, the One proclaimed by the star who was the newborn King of the Jews. **This Savior would bridge the difference between Jew and Gentile, offering**

² (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2002] pg. 39)

Redemption to all people. The Apostle Paul puts it this way, “*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh the Law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility. He came to preach peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit*” (Ephesians 2:13-18).

The Savior’s Tender Arrival to the earth was to bring Redemption for all people of the world. He would come out of the tiny nation of Israel, oppressed, weak, occupied, yet vital to God’s purpose of bringing His mercy and grace to the world. The new-born King of the Jews would not be a military or governmental leader putting all the other countries of the world under His control, but rather, even greater than that, “*the chief cornerstone*” of God’s household given for us to build our lives upon that would bring us to eternal life with God.

That was the reason for the excitement the Magi had as they traveled to Bethlehem to see this child. **This Child was more than a king, but a Redeemer, come to set all people free from sin and eternal death.** Jesus came to the earth as our Savior to move our attention away from the things of this world and to give us hope as we live among the things of this world.

Much like the oppression of the Romans on Israel at the time of Jesus’ birth, we need hope and assurance that God still loves us and cares for us. We still need guidance and direction from our STAR to lead us back into a relationship with the Lord God Almighty. It’s so easy for us to become discouraged today because of all that is happening. If we take a serious look at what is going on today, our hearts would quickly lose all hope within us.

We, like the people of Israel in the days of Jesus’ birth, are overwhelmed by occupying forces that seek to reduce us to little more than pawns to be played and disposed of in this game of life. There

is little concern for the weak and the differently abled peoples of the world. There is little concern for doing what is good and right among the people. There is such great focus on getting all we can to enjoy for ourselves even at the expense of others as long as it meets our own personal desires. There is great reluctance to trust in God's Word in the Bible because it might show us to have something wrong in our lifestyle. There is so much division between people today because of so many reasons. There is enmity in our rulers and leaders. There is tremendous strife, even within the church. Our freedoms are being challenged and taken from us in effort to dominate our society. There is very little truth being told to us and lies are being spread and believed at almost every level of our culture. We are a desperate people.

So it is only right that we begin to look for God's Salvation, to see His Redemption clearly before us. The light of God's STAR announcing hope and peace and truth and love is needed now more than ever. We need more people who become aware of God's gift to us of a Savior's Tender Arrival for Redemption, so that they might also seek His presence and find His life within them. We need more people who are attuned to the things of the Lord God Almighty who can proclaim loudly to the world that hope has come to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. We need more people who are willing to sacrifice comfort and safety in order to make way the coming of the Lord.

Even in the face of potential danger and attack from those who seek to eliminate our hope for our Savior, we need to trust in God's guidance so that we might draw near to our King of kings and Lord of lords. The wise men followed the star that God provided trusting that they would find the new King of the Jews.

We are encouraged to do the same with our own lives. God has provided us with His STAR, the Savior's Tender Arrival for Redemption, so that we might take notice and find ourselves so caught up in Him that we trust in following that star, too. God invites us to become so excited about Jesus living in us that we also determine to seek Him with all that we are. And then we are invited to journey throughout our own life to find how Jesus is still bringing the light of God's redemption into the world. So many people have yet to see God's STAR, and we are invited to share Him with those around us.

Consider it a gift from God to us this Christmas to make a journey with Jesus. We will be following the examples of many wise people (today's magi) who trusted and followed and made a tremendous difference in the world for Jesus' sake.

“When William Carey, the ‘father of modern missions,’ first tried to convince fellow Baptists that the Great Commission required them (not just the early disciples) to go out into all the world and make disciples, he was met with fierce resistance. At one meeting, an older pastor interrupted Carey's impassioned pleas, saying, ‘Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine.’

“So anxious was the man to protect the sovereignty of God, he failed to appreciate one fact repeated time and again throughout the history of the church: When God pleases to do anything on earth, he uses your aid and mine; he uses people.

“Thankfully, William Carey would have none of this man's bad theology, and he ended up going to India as a missionary, and as a result, inspired hundreds and thousands of other 19th-century British and American Christians to do the same. Today, millions in China, Africa, and Latin America claim Jesus as their Lord because God used some person, missionary or friend, to bring them the good news of Jesus Christ.”³

God is calling each one of us to become the Magi of our day, seeing God's Light shown out in His STAR of Jesus, recognizing the need to seek the One given to us, and to worship Him and proclaim Him as our own King for the whole world to hear. As you have found our Lord Jesus in your own hearts, be willing to give of your all to seek Him and follow Him, for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Father, Thank You for giving us Your Son, Jesus, as the STAR of our own lives. He is our Savior who Tenderly Arrived in Bethlehem to bring Redemption to the whole world. So as we have believed in Him, and made our own journey to find our King Jesus, so may we be willing to

³ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2003] pg. 86)

worship Him with our whole heart and follow Him wherever He leads us, so that others might come to know Him, too. Our world need hope and life and peace and love today. You have called each of us to be wise in Your Word to bring Salvation to the world. Guide us and direct our lives as we seek to honor and worship You, for we pray this in Jesus' Name. AMEN.