

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

Would you join me this morning by taking your Bibles and turning to Matthew's gospel, Matthew chapter two?

This morning I would like to speak to you on the topic of the providential appointment of the magi. Now, sadly, Christmas has become a season of materialism, of partying and frankly a season of utter hatred and disregard for the Lord Jesus Christ and those who belong to him. There are staggering distortions of what happened at Christmas. There are many lies. There is much ignorance. And fortunately we can turn to the Word of God to find the truth. And wherever we look upon the pages of holy writ, we are able to see recurring themes of God's redemptive purposes and his plan. They are like golden threads that are woven through the fabric of Scripture, threads that help us see God's plan of salvation.

As we look at Scripture on virtually every page we will see these various motifs. We will see the character and the attributes of God. We will learn of the horror of sin and God's judgment for disobedience. We will learn about the blessings for faith and obedience. We will learn about the Lord Jesus Christ the Savior, the Son of God whose righteousness and substitutionary death is man's only hope for forgiveness, for justification. We will read about the coming kingdom and glory when the Messiah king will first establish his earthly kingdom upon the earth and then that will bridge human history with the eternal state when we will find ourselves reigning in the glorious kingdom of God in heaven in the eternal state.

And this morning what we want to do is focus on a unique aspect of God's redemptive purpose, his redemptive plan. We are going to look at an historical event that occurred around the time of Jesus' birth and that event has to do with the providential appointment of the magi.

Now let me read the text to you first so that we know what God is communicating to us and then we will look at it more closely.

Notice in Matthew chapter two beginning in verse one:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, 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."

And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER, WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'"

Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him."

And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way.¹

Now we want to ask the question and answer the question: Who were these wise men? Where did they come from? Why didn't God choose the aristocracy of Jerusalem to come to the child, to the King? And what was this star that appeared and then disappeared and then appeared again? Why could only the magi see the star? Why couldn't Herod see it? Why couldn't the chief priests and scribes see it? Why couldn't the residents of Jerusalem see the star? Why did the magi rejoice exceedingly with great joy when the star reappeared and suddenly led them to the place where the child was? What was the significance of their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh? What does all this reveal about the infant Jesus?

Well, God will answer these questions and many more for all who are willing to hear.

We are going to examine this historical narrative in Matthew chapter two and other supporting passage of Scripture under three categories that will prove to be, I believe, very enlightening to every humble student of Scripture. We are going to look at it from the perspective of, number one, the providence of God; secondly, the light of grace; and, thirdly, the darkness of unbelief.

Now in order to understand this we need a lot of context. So let me give you some history that will help you see what God is really saying here.

First of all, as we look at this text, there are three principle characters. You have Herod. You have the chief priests and scribes and the magi.

¹ Matthew 2:1-12.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

Well, first of all, let's think about Herod. Herod, you must understand, was the Roman appointed king of the Jews. He was an Edomite. He was not a Jew and the Jews absolutely despised him and he knew it. Like all wicked, God hating rulers throughout history, Herod was a very gifted orator. He was charming. He was very charismatic. He was very talented. And both Herod, as well as his father Antipater, were characterized as being cunning, as being shrewd, as being very ambitious politicians. In fact, Josephus, the ancient historian said this of Herod. Quote, "Herod was capable, crafty and cruel."

He had an uncanny ability to turn defeat into victory and Rome very much admired him. He was a great builder. He built impressive towers honor Emperor Augustus. He was also a sports enthusiast. He presided over many of the games and he was also a notorious womanizer, an immoral man. He was ruled by his lusts. In fact, he had 10 wives. And his most famous wife was a woman named Mariamne I and she was a Jewess which in his mind and in that culture would really give him a legitimate right to reign over the Jews.

Well, he was also an insanely jealous and cruel man. He was paranoid of any threats against his reign and he distrusted almost everyone, especially the Jews that he knew considered him to be utterly loathsome.

History records numerous accounts of assassinations and murders. He would torture and execute anyone that he considered to be a threat. Think of him as the Saddam Hussein of his day or the portly little tyrant Kim Jong Il of North Korea. Think of him that way.

In fact, he killed his wife Mariamne and her mother Alexandra and as well as Mariamne's two sons. Nice guy, huh?

Moreover, five days before his death which was in approximately 4 AD he had another son killed. In fact, Emperor Augustus said, quote, "It is safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son," end quote.

He commanded that all noble families of Jerusalem be gathered up and killed as soon as he died, because he knew that no one would mourn for him. Now although his wish was not carried out, fortunately, it really demonstrates the diabolical wickedness of this fiendish megalomaniac.

Now I find it fascinating that in the providence of God this is the ruler that God allowed Satan to have in place at the birth of his Son. This is not by accident. This insanely jealous, demonically controlled butcher, a man that was willing to murder all little boys two and under to preserve his power. Now like all wicked rulers, Herod had his religious leaders that were his allies to help him control the masses. And these allies were the chief priests and scribes.

Now the chief priests were from the priestly line of Aaron, but most of them were Sadducees. They were liberal Jews that grossly distorted the law and the Scriptures to somehow support their own agendas. They had considerable political and religious

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

power. And the high priest was typically appointed by the king as a political appointment and sometimes that position was even purchased. And if the king did not like him, he would be removed.

The High priest would preside over the Sanhedrin which was 72 Jewish leaders, somewhat like our Senate and Supreme Court combined.

Well, there were also other categories of priests that performed various functions. Most of them were the Pharisees. These were the very legalistic Jews. And together they formed a priestly aristocracy that could be loosely labeled the chief priests. Bottom line, these guys were corrupt politicians who disguised themselves as great and noble men of God, much like the Islamic mullahs that we see around the world today.

Well, you also have the scribes and they were made up of both Sadducees and Pharisees. These were the scholars and the lawyers. Need I say anymore? They were highly skilled at twisting the law of political and personal gain.

So these were Herod's henchmen.

Now what about the magi? Were they really three kings for orient as the hymn tells us? Hardly. One Bible scholar, a man named Vincent say this. Quote, "Many absurd traditions and guesses respecting these visitors to our Lord's cradle have found their way into popular beliefs and Christian art. They were said to be kings and three in number. They were said to be representatives of the three families of Shem Ham and Japheth. And therefore one of them is pictured as an Ethiopian. Their names are given as Casper, Balthasar and Melchior. And their three skulls, amazingly enough, are said to have been found. They were found in the 12th century by bishop Reinald of Cologne. Today they are on exhibit in a priceless casket in a great cathedral in Europe," end quote.

Staggering gullibility, absolutely staggering. And what is more astonishing to me is that bishop Reinald recognized the identity of those three skulls after 1200 years.

Well, frankly, we know very little about the specifics of these wise men as it is translated in the King James version, these magi that are mentioned here in this account, but we can piece together from other passages of Scripture and other historical documents who they were. In fact, the book of Daniel sheds light on the identity of who these men were as well as other historians like Herodotus.

If you will notice in verse one they are called magi or, as I say in the King James version, wise men. And magi is really an untranslatable word, merely a name of a certain tribe of people and it is best translated magi and these were a priestly line of people from the ancient Medes. These were men that we know historically were very skilled in astronomy, the science, as well as astrology, the superstition that Satan uses to deceive. And what they would do is blend these two crafts together. In fact, we see that today, do

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

we not in the signs of the zodiac. We see it in the paper. People ask each other: What is your sign?

By the way, this is a practice the God condemns because it presumes to define one's personality make up and as well as offer great insight into the future. This is the sin, by the way, divination that the Old Testament talks about. Diviners and soothsayers or fortune tellers are detestable in the eyes of God according to Deuteronomy 18 and other passages.

Now basically the magi were skilled in the practice of divination and sorcery. So the word "magi" was eventually corrupted down through history into the word "magic." In fact, magician is really a synonym for sorcerer.

So these men were a priestly line of descendants from a tribe of people associated with the ancient Medes. These were a very ancient nomadic people whose origins can be traced back all the way to the days of Abraham when he lived in Ur of the Chaldees that we read in Genesis 12.

Now according to Herodotus, an ancient historian, the magi were a hereditary priesthood tribe. Just like you have the Levites from Israel which was one of the tribes that were set apart for priestly duties, so, too, the Medes set apart the Magi for the same.

Now we also find the magi having great political influence down through history in four major world empires. We see them in the writings of the Babylonian Empire. There in the North Arabian Gulf, the fertile crescent region east of Israel between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the land today which is known as Iraq. We also see them in Medo Persia which was a conglomerate empire that eventually overtook Babylon. Today it is known as Iran. We see them in the Grecian Empire with Alexander the Great who came in and took over the Medo Persian Empire. And then, of course, in the Roman Empire where they were greatly feared.

The magi really rose to power through their demonic, cultic, astrological abilities, through their sorceries, through their divination, through their astronomy. And they became the advisors of royalty of the eastern kings and, thus, sometimes they are called wise men.

Now it is fascinating in the Old Testament, for example, in Jeremiah 39 and verse three as well as verse 13 we read about Nergalsharezer, the rabmag which is the chief magi. And he was in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. So these were the official advisors to the kings. You read about this, as well, in Esther 1:13. And, of course, Satan wanted that as Nebuchadnezzar came in to conquer Judah.

Now you will recall in your Bible history, a young man, 15 years of age, a young Jewish boy that had dealings with the ancient magi. His name was Daniel. You will remember that Daniel was kidnapped from a royal family in Judah along with three of his friends

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

and they were all deported to Babylon to be brainwashed in the Babylonian culture. And they were also required to assist with all of the new Jewish prisoners that were taken into exile.

If we had time, we could go to Daniel two. You will read how Daniel rose to be a statesman within the court of Nebuchadnezzar. In fact, in verse 10 we read about the Chaldeans which was really another name of the magi. And in verse 27 it speaks of the magicians using that term, the magi. And we learn in chapter four in particular that they were unable to interpret the king's dream and in Daniel 2:24 Daniel pleaded with the king:

“Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon! Take me into the king's presence, and I will declare the interpretation to the king.”²

And, in Daniel five we read how Daniel interprets the dream and Nebuchadnezzar makes him master over the magi. Verse 11 we read that:

“...the king appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans, and diviners.”³

So being their new leader and Savior, Daniel had their undivided attention and undoubtedly he taught them about Jehovah God. He taught them about the Messiah that would one day come. He taught them about Old Testament prophecy as I am sure he did all of the godly saints left in the Diaspora.

Now the magi were so powerful in their day that no Persian was ever allowed to become king except under two conditions. Number one, they had to master the scientific and religious practices and disciplines of the magi. They had to master astronomy, math, agriculture, architecture, natural history and astrology. And, secondly, they could not be king unless they were approved and crowned by the magi.

All the judicial offices as well as kingly offices were controlled by the magi. The wisdom of the magi was called, quote, “The law of the Medes and the Persians.”

You read about that in Esther 1:19 and Daniel 6:15. And, of course, they specialized in dream interpretation. So, bottom line, what we need to know is that the magi were the king makers.

Now, beloved, think about this. Six hundred years before King Jesus was born, our sovereign God was orchestrating all of these events. He was setting the stage for what we learn here in Matthew two and he was using Daniel to accomplish this.

Now let me give you context of Matthew two. And as they would say, the plot thickens.

² Daniel 2:24.

³ Daniel 5:11.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

Rome was terrified of the eastern empire at this time. Across the vast Arabian desert loomed the great Parthian Empire, the land of the Medes and Persians and Babylon an equally evil empire. It worried them. They were violent enemies. In fact, historically we read that they fought in 63 BC, 55 BC and 40 BC. And where would they fight? Always along the coast of the Mediterranean and Syria and Jordan and Palestine. In fact, Israel was really no man's land between two great empires. So the Romans especially feared them and they despised the sorcerers, the astrologers, the magi.

In fact, Philo of Rome who was a Jewish philosopher from Alexandria said of them, quote, "They are vipers, they are scorpions and they are venomous creatures," end quote.

And in the providence of God at the time of Christ's birth, there was a ruling body in the eastern Parthian, Persian Empire called the magistony and they were totally composed of magi. What was their duty? To make kings. And at that time it just so happens that their king, who was Phraates IV was a real loser. In fact, he had been deposed. So it was during this time that they are actually looking for a new king, one that would help them conquer Rome.

So let's put all this in perspective as we marvel at how God providentially orchestrates the events of history to accomplish his purpose. We have an insanely jealous puppet king that the people despised and he suddenly discovers the Persian king makers entering into Jerusalem. And I would submit to you that they weren't on camels, three guys riding a camel or riding camels. Their customary mounts were white Persian steeds and many times they traveled with a large entourage, often as many as 1000 mounted cavalry. These king makers are not going to travel unescorted. And if you know anything about traveling across a wilderness, you know that you have to have a whole caravan to help you with all of your supplies.

So can you imagine this large group of Persian king makers escorted by cavalry coming into Jerusalem? Their pointed sorcery hats, their flowing robes, the great pomp and ceremony. And what are they 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."⁴

Now, folks, you have to have a sense of humor here when you understand what is going on. Superstitious Herod hears the word "star" ἀστὴρ (as-tare') in the Greek and it could be translated star. But it also means a shining forth of light. And he thinks, oh, no, falling star or comet and in that days that was always an omen that predicts that it is time to depose a king. So kings always lived in fear of these types of things. Plus he hears king of the Jews. Oh, my. This adds even more humor to the passage.

Notice the understatement in verse three.

⁴ Matthew 2:2.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

“And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled.”⁵

Now the word “troubled” there in the original language literally means to quake, to shake. You begin to quiver you are so afraid. It means to stir up, to throw into confusion. And it wasn’t just Herod. Notice it says:

“...and all Jerusalem with him.”⁶

Now what makes it even more funny is we know historically that most of Herod’s troops at this time were out on a mission and so he was quite vulnerable.

So what do wicked men do when they are threatened? Who do they turn to? Well, they angrily scheme against God and they consult with emissaries of Satan, religious deceivers and he has got them all around him, the chief priests and the scribes. Notice verse four.

And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet."⁷

And he quotes Micah 5:2.

In verse four the phrase “began to inquire” grammatically means that he is constantly asking this. He is on a search and destroy mission at this point. We have got to find this child. I am sure he had hourly briefings. He was in panic mode. Think Moammar Khadafy when the rebel forces were closing in on him, only without the sunglasses and platform shoes. This is what is going on with Herod.

So with all this context, let’s back up and look closely at what Matthew tells us here.

First of all we see the providence of God beginning in verse one.

“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold.”⁸

Again, my friends, think of this. Six hundred years before Jesus was born the sovereign grace of God reached into the hearts of the magi in Nebuchadnezzar’s court through his servant Daniel and I am sure that he offered them a message of forgiveness and hope that would come one day through the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us. The glorious presence of God would again be seen in this world. A light would shine in Judah. In fact, the prophet tells us in Numbers 24 verse 17 that:

⁵ Matthew 2:3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Matthew 2:4-5.

⁸ Matthew 2:1.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

“A star shall come forth from Jacob, And a scepter shall rise from Israel.”⁹

A star, a כוכב (ko-kawb’) in the Hebrew, a blazing forth of light.

Well, who is this? What does this refer to? Well, it refers to the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, the light of the world. In fact Jesus said himself in Revelation 22:16:

“I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.”¹⁰

In Genesis 49 verse 10 we have another prophecy it says:

“The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes, And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.”¹¹

Shiloh was a cryptogram or a secret code describing the Messiah, the one who is also called the lion from the tribe of Judah, Revelation 5:5.

And undoubtedly, these were the kinds of truths that Daniel would have explained to the magi over which he ruled. And now in the miracle of divine providence, 600 years later, the magi, the king makers see a blazing light shining forth. They see something supernatural.

Now what is it? Well, if you get your theology from Christmas cards you are going to know that there is three dudes riding some camels and there is this big star up there in the sky.

Well, I would ask you. Have you ever tried to follow a star? I challenge you to do that some day. In fact, the nearest star to the earth is the sun. I find it curious that Herod and others in Jerusalem couldn’t see the star in the east. In fact in verse seven it says they had to ask the magi where it appeared. It says:

“Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared.”¹²

The word “appeared” in the original language comes from a Greek word φαίνω (fah’-ee-no). It means to flash, to shine forth, to shine forth like lightning.

Where did you see that flashing forth, is what he is saying. You see, he is beginning to catch on that this was not merely a celestial body millions of miles away in the heavens.

⁹ Numbers 24:17.

¹⁰ Revelation 22:16.

¹¹ Genesis 49:10.

¹² Mathew 2:7.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

And I find it also curious. Why would the magi go west to Jerusalem if they see a star in the east? If they see a brilliant light in the east, why would they do that?

Well, I believe it is because they knew the meaning of what they saw. They remembered the prophet Daniel and they knew something of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah, the King of the Jews.

It is fascinating later in verse nine this blazing forth of supernatural light that they saw in the east suddenly reappears and leads them directly over the house where the Messiah was. Now I hardly think a star as we know it would do that.

I might add, as a footnote here, because many times we, again, derive our theology from what we see in people's yards and what we read in Christmas cards. But by the time the magi came to Jesus, he was three months maybe up to two years old. In fact, in verse 16 we read that Herod ascertained from the magi the child's age because he wanted to kill all the males two years and younger. So this is a very different scenario than what is often depicted in nativity scenes where you see three wise men hovering over an infant in a manger.

So what was going on here? What did they see?

Dear friends, I believe that what the magi saw was not a massive luminous sphere of plasma that is held together by gravity that shines due to thermonuclear fusion of hydrogen, in other words, a star. This was an *αστρη* (as-tare'), again, in the Greek, a brilliant blazing forth of light, a shining of some sort, but it wasn't just any star. Will you notice in the text it says that it was his star? It is a possessive genitive here. It is not just any shining. This is his shining. This is the glorious light of the King of kings.

So having seen the providence of God, now we marvel, secondly, at the light of grace. I am convinced, although I would never be dogmatic on this, that what they saw was the shekinah glory of the living God, a foretaste of the, quote, sign of the Son of man that will appear in the sky, end quote, that Jesus describes in Matthew 24 when all the lights of heaven are turned out and he returns again at his second coming.

This was a light of grace signally to sinful men that the light of the world had arrived, that the Lord Jesus Christ had come, the one who, according to 1 Peter 2:9 has called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

John 1:4. He is the light of men, the light that shines in the darkness.

This was the same blazing forth of light that was prophesied in Numbers 24:17, that star, that *כו* (בכוכב-kawb'), that blazing forth that shall come forth from Jacob and a scepter shall rise from Israel referring to a ruling king that will rise from Israel, with reference to the Messiah.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

Now you must understand all through Scripture we learn that God is spirit. He is immaterial. And often when he materialized himself, in other words, when he allowed man to gaze upon him, he reduced his attributes to visible brilliant dazzling light. And this was called the shekinah or, in other words, the presence of God, a manifestation of radiant, brilliant, resplendent, ineffable light. And we could well describe this as a star, an αστερη (as-tare').

Beloved, I believe that this was the effulgence of the glory of God, the only thing in existence that I would ever call awesome. God describes the glory of the shekinah throughout Scripture. May I remind you that it was what blazed forth in the burning bush with Moses and again on Mount Sinai you will recall when Moses begged God to allow him to see his glory. Show me your glory.

You will remember God hid him in the cleft of the rock and covered him and allowed him to see just a little bit of the back side of his glory.

It was the shekinah that led the covenant people through the wilderness. Remember, it was a pillar of cloud by day and a fire by night. It was this glorious light that covered over the ark of the covenant between the cherubim over the mercy seat atop the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies in the tabernacle and later in the temple.

In fact, in 1 Kings eight you will read where Solomon's temple becomes filled with the glory of the Lord to a point where the priests were even unable to minister. And then, over time, because of idolatry in Ezekiel chapter eight through 10 you see this beautiful, glorious light of the presence of God begin to leave the holy of holies and eventually depart over Jerusalem, up the Mount of Olives and disappear.

By the way, it will be that same track that the Lord will take when he comes again. He will come to they Mount of Olives and go in to the holy of holies.

And so, indeed, during that time Ichabod, the glory has departed. It was really the theme of that day because of their idolatry.

And then you will recall 500 years without anyone seeing the glorious presence of God, suddenly it appears again. Where does it appear? On a hillside in Bethlehem with the shepherds. They see the glory of God around them as the birth of the Savior was announced.

This was the same glory that blinded Saul who later became the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. We saw this glory on the mount of transfiguration when the Lord Jesus allowed his glory to manifest itself before Peter, James and John. You remember even his clothing gleamed with white, brilliant light.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

And, as I said earlier, this will be the sign of the Son of man when he returns in power and great glory. In fact, in Revelation 21:23 we read that it will be the lamp of the Lamb that will illumine the new Jerusalem.

And, dear friends, when he came the first time isn't it fascinating that only a selected few could see it? But when he returns again, the effulgence of his glorious presence will streak across the sky and the whole world will see is glory.

So here we see the miracle of divine providence orchestrating every detail of the events of this amazing scenario, revealing the light of his grace to draw sinful men to the Savior of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

So the grace of God draws these Persian king makers to Jesus, something, by the way, that was considered utterly reprehensible to the Jews when they later understood more of this, because in their mind God would never show his mercy upon a Gentile. And he would certainly never show his mercy upon pagan sorcerers or elite rulers especially from Persia.

Remember, Paul had to address this kind of religious exclusivism where Judaistic false teachers were literally teaching against even praying for Gentiles to be saved, especially the powerful and influential leaders, the politicians. And Paul warned them in 1 Timothy 2:4 that God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

So for the magi to come as well as any Gentile, is really a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 65 verse one.

There we read:

“I permitted Myself to be sought by those who did not ask for Me; I permitted Myself to be found by those who did not seek Me. I said, ‘Here am I, here am I,’ To a nation which did not call on My name.”¹³

It goes on and of Israel he says:

“I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, Who walk in the way which is not good, following their own thoughts, A people who continually provoke Me to My face...”¹⁴

A passage, by the way, which Paul quotes in Romans 10 verses 20 through 21 to describe the rebellion of his fellow Jews.

¹³ Isaiah 65:1.

¹⁴ Isaiah 65:2-3.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

Oh, my friends, think about this. Think of the power of sovereign grace that can pierce the darkest heart with the light of truth and draw undeserving sinners to the light of his grace so that they would say in verse two.

“Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.”¹⁵

Verse three.

“When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.”¹⁶

Again, he is thinking, what is going on here? Persian king makers? They come here to worship a newborn king of the Jews? Oh, no. They have seen some kind of a supernatural light that we cannot see. Could this be the promised Messiah?

Here we then see how some men respond to the light of grace.

Thirdly, we see it in the darkness of unbelief.

Now I am convinced that Herod knew of the promised Messiah that would come. He knew about this. And he rightly feared that perhaps that day had arrived when he hears all of this news.

Notice what he says in verse four.

And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER, WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'"¹⁷

Amazing, isn't it? That phrase, “ a ruler, who will shepherd my people Israel,” were the words the God spoke to David in 2 Samuel 5:2 when he originally enthroned him over the 12 tribes of Israel at Hebron.

So Herod and the religious elite of Israel, they knew what was going on, but they refused to humble themselves. They refused to be obedient and worship. And instead notice verse seven.

¹⁵ Matthew 2:2.

¹⁶ Matthew 2:3.

¹⁷ Matthew 2:4-6.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

“Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared.”¹⁸

Why secretly? Well, the answer is because he did not want anyone to know what he was up to, that he suspected that this may be the Messiah. He did not want anyone to know the nefarious nature of his plan, that he was going to do everything he could to destroy his divine rival. In fact, he needed to know the exact date of when they first saw this blazing forth of light so he could have some approximate idea of when the Christ child was born so he could eliminate all the children and hopefully eliminate him.

Could you imagine anything more arrogant, anything more rebellious? What a picture of man’s high treason against the most high God.

You see, sinful man simply cannot see the light of truth because of his rabid commitment to his own self interest and because of his unbelief. And all of that fuels the lies that he chooses to believe.

So Herod responds in anger and fear in verse eight and says:

“Go and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him.”¹⁹

Now obviously this is a disingenuous request betraying, once again, how self centered, how cruel Herod was, betraying his pride. You see, as Satan’s ape, Herod knew from the beginning that he was going to try and thwart the purposes of God. And Herod, frankly was a picture of most of the Jewish people who would also join him in days to come and their refusal to worship their Messiah.

Remember in Luke 19:14 they would say, “We do not want this man to reign over us.”

Now perhaps you are like that. Perhaps your heart is hardened with pride, with unbelief, you insist upon living for yourself. You are hearing even the light of the truth of the gospel of Christ today and you refuse to yield to it. And in anger and fear you shake your puny little fist in God’s face and you say, “I will not have this man reign over me.”

Such is the mark of a fool, a fool that will spend an eternity in hell to rage against the God that he has mocked and rebelled against. Oh, the tragedy of the darkness of unbelief.

What a contrast to the magi.

Notice what happened sometime later in verse nine.

¹⁸ Matthew 2:7.

¹⁹ Matthew 2:8.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

“And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them.”²⁰

I want you to notice that phrase, by the way,

“...which they had seen in the east...”²¹

It does not say that they followed from the east. You see, it was a signal. It was not a GPS. Do you understand the difference? It was a signal. But now it says that it went on before them denoting the closeness of its proximity to them. It goes on before them until it came and stood over where the child was.

Again, beloved, I find it fascinating that only a selected few were able to see that light. Who were they? Who were the few that could see the light? Well, the ones who in humility would humble themselves and seek forgiveness of sins, to seek to worship the king.

But the rest remained hardened in their unbelief and in their pride. They could not see the light. So, once again, the light of grace appears. It leads these men to the Savior.

In fact, eventually many Jews would see the light of Christ, of Jesus. That is even prophesied in Isaiah nine verse two that we read earlier this morning.

“The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them.”²²

So seeing the glory of God, can you imagine this? You are seeing this light. Naturally you are going to be filled with inexpressible joy. Notice verse 10.

“And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”²³

Now let's ponder that for a just a moment. Why would they do that? Why would they be so excited? Well, the answer is because they are seeing God working on their behalf. They are seeing God do something for them. They are seeing God leading them to the Messiah king, the only one who could save them from their sin and give them eternal life, the one who was once shrouded in his mysterious shekinah is now a babe in a manger, that glory is now contained in a human body.

Remember what John said or what Jesus said in John eight verse 12.

²⁰ Matthew 2:9.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Isaiah 9:2.

²³ Matthew 2:10.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

“I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life.”²⁴

And in verse 14 he says:

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”²⁵

Well, obviously the magi believed in the light of grace, the Lord Jesus Christ that pierced the darkness of their heart.

In verse 11 we read:

“And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him.”²⁶

They did not worship Mary. They worshipped him. This is a bone that sticks to the throat of many Roman Catholics who worship her. But the text says that they fell on their faces and worshipped him.

Beloved, the higher a man’s view of God, the lower will be his homage.

“...and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.”²⁷

They have got hearts now overflowing with gratitude. Gold, by the way, the most precious metal. It has always been a symbol of nobility and royalty. Frankincense is an extremely expensive incense with a fabulous fragrance. In fact, in ancient days it was stored in a special chamber in the temple and it was sprinkled on the grain offerings and it really symbolized the people’s passionate desire to offer the Lord sacrifices that were pleasing to him. They also offered him myrrh which was a very costly perfume. In fact, later on, that was what was mixed with wine as an anesthetic and offered to Jesus on the cross and it was also that which was mixed with other spices to prepare his body of burial.

My friends, what is your response to the light of the grace of Christ? Because even you this day, you have been brought to this place to hear these truths in the providence of God. It is not by accident that you are here. He has revealed to you the light of his saving grace. The question is: Will you believe? Will you humble yourself or will you harden your heart and perish in the darkness of unbelief?

²⁴ John 8:12.

²⁵ John 1:14.

²⁶ Matthew 2:11.

²⁷ Ibid.

The Providential Appointment of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2011

May I summarize in closing these marvelous truths that I put together poetically for you.

What love is this that seeks to save a sinner lost in sin? What God goes forth to save a man who has no thought of him? What mercy draws a wicked heart that hates the law of God and loves to wear the phony masks of a spiritual façade? What grace would reach into the dark of Satan's kingdom night? What God would condescend to man to exchange for him his life? What love pursued rebellious foes that mock his judgment sure and spurn a Savior's plea to help and sacrifice so pure? 'Tis Jesus, yea, the Son of God, the Savior meek and mild, the Lord of all who left his throne and came to us a child. 'Tis Jesus who persisted in the quest to save our souls, the faithful shepherd of the flock ever gathering to his fold. For this many thankful hearts proclaim the precious gospel news, as sheep once lost, we have now been found never more to lose. Oh, faithful prophet, priest and king, your love yet reaches still, until the triumph of your grace this earth with glory filled.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for this amazing story that demonstrates the power of your sovereign grace, that reveals to us the glory of the king that came and even though he came the first time in humility, we know that he is coming again in power and great glory. Lord, how we long for that day. I pray that you will take the truths of the gospel and cause them to penetrate even the most hardened heart here today that they might humbly bow as the magi did before the Lord Jesus Christ, their only hope of salvation. Lord, I pray that during this Christmas season we will ponder these great truths and allow them to ignite our souls with praise that others might hear how much we love, how much we delight in you and how we long to see you face to face. We pray all of this in the precious name of Jesus our Savior and for his glorious sake. Amen.

We pray you have been edified by this presentation. You have been listening to pastor, Bible teacher and author David Harrell. For more information or to order additional tapes or CDs of pastor Harrell's messages, please visit OliveTreeResources.org.

Transcript Explanation: Each transcript is a rough approximation of the message preached and may occasionally misstate certain portions of the sermon and even misspell certain words. It should in no way be considered an edited document ready for print. Moreover, as in any transcription of the spoken word, the full intention and passion of the speaker cannot be fully captured and will in no way reflect the same style of a written document.

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Olive Tree Resources.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Dr. David Harrell. © Olive Tree Resources. Website: olivetreeresources.org