

The Original Christmas Choir

Luke 2:4-20

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for December 3, 2023

Stephen Davey

In one scene in the Christmas story, God used two very unexpected types of messengers to announce the birth of His Son. The first set of messengers came from the glories of heaven, the other set from the lowliest places on earth. By using these two groups, God communicates to us today that we too—regardless of our status—can bring the message of God’s redemption plan to those around us.

In the early 1830s, a portrait painter was becoming well known for his talent and skill; he was excited about being able to fully support his wife and young family at last.

His name was Henry Morse, and on one lengthy trip away, while he was painting portraits of some well-known people, he and his wife wrote letters to each other. They wrote often, to keep the flow of information steady, especially any news of her due date and the birth of their next child.

Back then, mail was terribly slow. If you can imagine it, just 175 years ago, mail was still traveling by Pony Express. When Abraham Lincoln won his election in 1861, it took nearly a month for the news to reach the west coast.

Well, for Henry Morse, letters from his wife stopped arriving; weeks went by without a word. Finally, he received a letter from his father telling him that his wife, soon after delivering their baby, had suffered a heart attack and had passed away.

The news was so late in arriving that Henry was not able to return home in time, even for his wife’s funeral.

That planted a seed in his mind: there had to be a way to communicate faster. He stopped painting and began experimenting with electric impulses and created a code that translated the impulses into Latin letters.

On May 24, 1844, from inside the old Supreme Court Building in Washington, DC, Samuel Morse demonstrated his new invention by sending a message to his associate in Baltimore, Maryland.

That first telegram was only four words, “What hath God wrought.”

In other words, “Look at what God has done!”

I have heard that human history up to the point of the telegraph was nicknamed “The Great Hush.”

Well, the Great Hush was about to end. Messages now could travel through electric wires at nearly the speed of light, thanks to Henry Morse.

Well, between the Old Testament and the New Testament, there were no messages from heaven for 400 years.

You could call it “The Hush of Heaven.” But that was all about to change. God is about to deliver a message to planet earth—it isn’t a telegram.

You could call it an angel-gram. He’s going to send it by angels who can travel faster than we can imagine; their message is never lost in transmission; everyone who receives an angel-gram gets the message.

Frankly, we can’t imagine the unseen world of angels. If you literally multiply the prophet Daniel’s accounting of angels around the throne of God, Daniel is listening in as 100 million angels worship God (***Daniel 7:10***).

Well, this 400-year hush of heaven is about to end as God sends a choir of angels to deliver the news. You could call them the original Christmas choir.

Luke is the only Gospel writer to give us this event. Let’s take an even closer look at this event, recorded in ***chapter 2***.

As you’re turning, you may know enough of the narrative to know that Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem and, because of the imperial decree to pay taxes in your hometown, Bethlehem was overrun with people.

For Joseph and Mary, this was inconvenient and costly, if not dangerous to travel when Mary was so close to giving birth. But they are making the best out of the worst of conditions.

Verse 7 informs us that when they arrive, they find shelter in a Bethlehem stable, more than likely a shallow cave which was commonly used in that region to provide shelter for the animals of travelers.

What we do know is that Mary goes into labor. We also know that there are no doctors, no nurses, no midwife, no one to help this frightened teenage girl who is now experiencing contractions.

Back in their hometown of Nazareth, under normal conditions, if everything had gone according to plan—and it obviously hadn't—the birth of a son would have launched a village wide-celebration.

But instead, here they are, virtually alone; they've swaddled their baby with strips of cloth; Mary is evidently so exhausted, and Joseph too, that they've placed Jesus in a manger **(verse 7)**; when our children were first born, Marsha and I took turns holding them for several hours; not Mary and Joseph, they put Jesus into a feeding trough—a little ledge cut along the wall of the cave, which was typical in that day.

They're tired, anxious, and alone; there is not one friend or family member to celebrate with them or congratulate them.

It was the custom during this time for the father to hire musicians and singers to bring music into this scene as they celebrate the birth of their baby boy.

And there are no musicians in sight.

But then again, God the Father has arranged something Himself—a choir is warming up nearby.

Now verse 8:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Luke 2:8-11

The Son of God has just been born and shepherds are the first to find out.

You would think that such an important message like this would have been telegraphed by angel-gram:

- into the temple precinct.
- or to the home of the High Priest.

- or at least to the Sanhedrin—the Supreme court of Israel—who could verify that content of the message.

Let me tell you, one of the first things that amazes me here is who God ignored.

If you were assigned the public relations challenge of announcing the birth of God the Son, you would begin by making a list of everyone who ought to know.

But God seems to be ignoring everybody who should be on that list!

He bypasses the educated, the religious, the politically powerful, the wealthy, the power-players of the world.

He didn't announce it to the Jewish Supreme Court: the Sanhedrin. He didn't announce it to the High Priest in Jerusalem. He didn't have somebody send a memo to Caesar Augustus and the Roman Senate.

The astounding thing is who God ignored in this message. But it's equally shocking who God told.

The most unlikely people to be given this kind of news **were some shepherds camping out in the field that night, watching over their flocks.**

For generations, shepherds were just as despised as tax collectors and lepers. They were outcasts.

They weren't able to keep all the religious regulations, like washing their hands before eating out there on the hillsides or not touching blood or a dead animal, which was a part of their job description as they delivered lambs and fought off the wolves.

Shepherds were considered perpetually dirty, literally unclean.

According to the Mishna—codified Jewish scribal law—shepherds couldn't worship in the temple. They were permanently banned.

And besides, they worked on the Sabbath, the sheep had this bad habit of never taking Saturday off so neither could the shepherds.

They were disqualified from worship, and *they* are the ones to whom God sends the message; they will be the first to hear the news of the Savior's birth.

But these aren't just any shepherds. These shepherds are camped out in the fields where Boaz used to work, the fields where he spotted a Gentile widow named Ruth, where he demonstrated the grace of God in choosing her—of all people, a former Gentile idolater—to be his bride.

In these same fields, their great-grandson, a shepherd boy named David, used to run around practicing his slingshot as he shepherded the family flock.

Now, in this same field, shepherds are the first to hear the news that Jesus was born.

Someone who would call Himself the Good Shepherd; whom the Apostle Peter would call our **Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4)**. In **Hebrews 13:20** Jesus is called the **Great Shepherd**.

I find it interesting that the title “shepherd” happens to be the title God selected for the men who will lead and feed the Lord’s church.

Of all the titles God could have chosen, He chose the title shepherds, translated pastors in **Ephesians 4:11**, from which we get our word pastures; pastors are to pasture the flock, to feed the flock, to lead them to green pasture.

It’s ironic to me that the term for those who lead the church in worship is the same term for men who were never able to worship in the temple.

Let me make one more observation here; **verse 8** informs us that the shepherds are in the vicinity of Bethlehem (**verse 4 & verse 8**). Bethlehem is only 6 miles south of Jerusalem; it was on the rural outskirts of the city.

Jerusalem of course, would swell with several million Jews during Passover as they came with their lambs to sacrifice in celebration of their former deliverance from Egypt.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian records for us that during the lifetime of Jesus, around 250,000 lambs would be killed and eaten in Jerusalem’s annual Passover feast.

Where would they get all those sheep from? Well, many people raised their own, but the temple also raised sheep and other animals which it sold to worshippers. In fact, it was big business for the temple.

A rule is recorded in the Mishna—that Jewish book of law I mentioned earlier—that sheep found between Jerusalem and Bethlehem were qualified for temple sacrifices.

More than likely, these shepherds are on the temple payroll; they’re working for the priests, watching over thousands of lambs and sheep, destined for the sacrificial altar in Jerusalem.

So get this irony: God is announcing the birth of the final sacrificial lamb to shepherds who are watching over sacrificial lambs. God is announcing to men who are unclean that the Savior has been born who can cleanse them. God is announcing to people out of fellowship with the worship system of Israel that a baby has been born who will bring them into fellowship with God.

And that's just **verse 8**. **Verse 9** is where the fireworks start.

Luke writes:

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

Luke 2:9

I guess so! For nearly 500 years, no angel has been seen by anybody on earth and suddenly the sky lights up!

Now verse 10:

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Luke 2:10-11

This angel delivers quite a divinely appointed telegram that's loaded with information.

In fact, he reveals three titles for the newborn baby boy.

The first title is the word **Savior**.

This was a politically combustible term because this word Savior (*soter*) was known all over the Roman empire. And that's because it was the title adopted already by the Emperor Caesar Augustus; He claimed to be the *soter*, the Savior of the World. The Gentiles especially would perk up their ears at this title especially.

The next title the angel reveals is the title **Christ**, a Savior who is Christ (*Christos*, the anointed One).

This would have perked up the ears of the Jewish world. This was the title specifically designated for the Messianic office. Only the Messiah could claim the title "Christ."

So, with these two titles, the Gentiles and the Jews will be astonished by this message from the Shepherds.

But this last title summarizes everything in one breathtaking claim.

This Savior, this Christ, is also **the Lord**.

The name Lord is from *Kurios*; it happens to be the Greek counterpart to the Hebrew term Yahweh. In fact, throughout the Greek translation of the Old Testament, more than 6,000

times, *kurios* is the translation of Yahweh, Yehovah or Jehovah, as we would say it in English.

Lord means Jehovah/God. These lyrics included the astonishing truths that the Savior, who had come to save them—Christ who had come as the Messiah—was deity in the flesh.

So, you could read this announcement this way:

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the anointed Messiah, none other than Jehovah in the flesh.

Savior, Christ, Lord. The true gospel demands all three titles.

A Jehovah's Witness can't agree with this angelic choir; a Mormon can't agree to this; a Muslim can't agree; a Hindu or Buddhist won't agree with this announcement.

They might agree that:

- Jesus was an anointed prophet.
- that Jesus was one of many sons of God.
- that Jesus is one of many Saviors.

But they do *not* believe that Jesus is:

- the anointed Messiah.
- Jehovah in the flesh.
- eternal deity now equally human.
- God incarnate.
- the only true and living Lord.

The Apostle Paul declared in **Romans 10:9** that in order to be saved you must **confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.**

This isn't a statement of your submission to His mastery; this is a statement that you believe He is deity. He is Jehovah-God—the only Lord of eternity.

One day, when you see the face of Jesus, you will be looking into the face of Jehovah.

Now let's move ahead to verse 13:

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying ...

Luke 2:13

Before we rush to verse 14, you might wonder if angels were singing. It says here that they were saying.

That's **going to** mess up a bunch of Christmas hymns.

Were the angels singing or not? Here in verse 13, it says that the heavenly host was praising God and saying, the Greek word praising is the verb aineo (αἰνεῖω), **which is** rarely found in the Greek New Testament.

However, it's often used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the verb hallel which refers to praising God, primarily through singing. The hallels were put to music throughout Israel's history.

Aineo in the New Testament is interchangeable with hallel in the Old Testament.

Both words typically refer to praising God through song.

So, you could amplify verse 13 correctly to read:

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God with these lyrics ...

And now verse 14, in poetic form—musical form—gives us the lyrics to their anthem:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.”

Luke 2:14

What a choir this must've been, as many as 100 million literally filling the sky; what singing this must have been.

This original Christmas choir literally explodes the heavens with their song of grace and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- Job chapter 38 tells us that angels watched as God the Son spoke the universe into existence, and as they watched, they sang (Job 38:7).
- The Book of Revelation tells us that at the end of human history, we will sing to the Lamb one day in **h**eaven and the angels will join us (Revelation 19:5).

And now here, in between the creation of the world, and the final glory of heaven, you have this angelic choir. **A**t this most significant moment in world history, **the** angelic choir fills the sky with singing.

Luke writes here in verse 15:

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

Luke 2:15-16

The verb translated "found their way" means to discover after searching.

And they're not just looking for a newborn baby, no doubt other babies were born during these difficult days of travel, no, they're looking for: a baby so impoverished, belonging to parents so poor and alone, without friends or family or accommodations, a baby lying in a feed trough; that is the unusual sign, **and it will be** impossible to miss.

Well, they finally discover Jesus and his parents in verse 17:

And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:17-20

By the way, did you notice that now the shepherds are glorifying and praising God? They're singing what the angels had sung to them earlier. They were evidently fast learners.

Has it ever occurred to you that angels haven't sung in the skies since this event here?

It's been 2,000 years now. God could send more angels couldn't He? Why not every Christmas season?

I would. Every Christmas season I would completely drown out, "Here Comes Santa Claus" with a 100 million angel choir. Why doesn't He?

Well, we know the angels will sing again in the future; but for now, God has chosen to use ordinary, simple, faltering, forgiven, children of God.

We're His choir now; we're His choir for now. We're still singing the lyrics today of this original Christmas choir.

And by the way, you're listening to just another shepherd today, from a long line of shepherds, repeating the news to you today: that for you, Jesus is and Jesus must be: your Savior, your Messiah, your Lord.

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Messages From Heaven

Luke 2:22-32

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for December 10, 2023

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An oft-neglected part of the Christmas story is the personal sacrifices made by Joseph and Mary in the weeks following Jesus' birth. The rituals associated with a new child were a logistical and financial burden, and these young parents had to sacrifice and endure hardship to present Jesus to Israel in the right way. But in obedience to God, Mary and Joseph remained faithful, and we can learn much from their example.

Many years ago, I shared with this assembly about a difficult time that took place some 30 years ago.

It ended up being a rather long ordeal with a prank caller on the phone. The telephone would ring in our home—back then the phone hung in the kitchen, remember those days? You were state of the art if you had an extension phone cord about 50 feet long; you could talk in every room of the house. If you got tangled up in that chord, you could go missing for days!

The phone would ring, but nothing was ever said by this prank caller. They simply called our home, but as soon as we picked up the phone and said, "Hello," they'd pause for a moment and then hang up.

It began with a call every other day or so—usually around supper time, and with four young children, it was not a pleasant interruption. But then the calls increased to several times a day. When I was at the church office we rented back in those days, Marsha would pick up the phone and say "Hello" and they'd pause, and hang up, once or twice a day—it began to be unnerving.

Then calls began at night, sometimes the phone would ring at 2 or 3 in the morning. I felt it was my responsibility to answer every time; it could be some kind of pastoral emergency. Keep in mind this was before cell phones and caller ID.

After several months of this, I finally talked to the police about it and they said there was nothing they could do unless we set up call tracing on our phone, and then every prank call that came in, we were to log it with the Annoyance Call Center.

So, for months we logged the calls and reported them, but they were always traced to a grocery store or a gas stations or phone booth. Some of you don't know what a phone booth is; they were tall rectangular booths with a pay phone and a thick phone book inside—and you don't know what a phone book is either!

Finally, after a year of logging calls, the Call Center reached out and said they had traced a call to a home address; they knew who they were and where they lived.

They asked me: Do you want to pursue prosecution? I didn't want prosecution; I wanted an execution—something slow like starvation.

We finally decided to just have the police go over to their home. We knew them too, they were disgruntled, former church members and the police told them to stop, which they did, but not before accusing me of being the one who had been calling them; fortunately the evidence proved otherwise.

I thought about that frustrating year as I dug back into Israel's history prior to the birth of Christ.

For hundreds of years, during what we referred to as “the Hush of Heaven”—400 years of silence from God— there was no prophet, no message, no word.

During this period, Israel has suffered through a number of prank callers, so to speak, false alarms, false Messiahs!

Each false Messiah wasn't just annoying, it was nationally and personally devastating. Another Messiah-wannabe turned out to be just another prank call.

Well, they're about to receive some messages from heaven that will confirm the identity of the true Messiah.

In our last study, we listened in as the silence of heaven was shattered by 100 million angels, at least, who lit up the sky chanting in song that the Savior had just been born.

And the most unlikely people received this message from heaven! Spiritual outcasts because they couldn't keep all the ceremonial rules and regulations, the washing of hands and Sabbath observances, shepherds were considered dirty inside and out.

No wonder: they were at work 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. They were ceremonially unclean; they were banned from the temple precinct where they could worship God.

Well, God brought the worship service to them—this original Christmas choir.

After the angels disappeared, the shepherds found baby Jesus and they told Mary and Joseph what they'd seen and heard.

Now after the manger scene, the average Christian is left to believe that the most significant scenes from this original Christmas drama are over.

The typical Christmas play ends somewhere around **Luke chapter 2 and verse 20, which reads:**

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:20

And with that the Christmas play curtains close.

But it *wasn't* over after the shepherds left; it wasn't over; in fact, it was just beginning.

Some incredibly significant events take place that are nothing less than validation from heaven—confirmation—that this wasn't just another wanna-be Messiah.

Let's watch what happens as another message effectively arrives from heaven.

Let's go to the next verse, **verse 21 of Luke chapter 2:**

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Luke 2:21

Three ceremonial observances now take place, according to Old Testament law.

The ceremony of identification.

Eight days after Mary delivered Jesus, every Jewish baby boy would be circumcised, that is, if the baby's parents cared at all about God's commands.

Circumcision brought the boy into the national life of the Hebrew people and identified him with Abraham's household.

This covenant sign was commanded in Genesis 17 and had Jesus not been circumcised, he would not have been identified as Israel's Messiah, even though both His parents were descendants of Abraham.

Circumcision was considered so sacred a duty that it could be carried out on the Sabbath day.

A Jewish leader or doctor would perform the simple cutting away of the foreskin, a sign of fallen flesh and sinful humanity; it also acknowledged the need for a Redeemer.

And the painful cry of Jesus, the son of God, pierces the air and echoes all around; this was effectively the Lord's first moment of suffering at the hand of fallen humanity.

These were among his first tears after having taken on human flesh. In a very real way, the suffering of Christ began at His birth.

And don't overlook ongoing suffering experienced by Joseph and Mary; by this point they're ostracized, confused and alone.

The fact that they show up for this is nothing less than a statement of faith in the word of God. Written in between the lines of these verses is a revelation of their commitment; it's easy to overlook their faith and trust in God as they effectively surrender to God's will.

They had traveled to Bethlehem under a cloud of suspicion; life had become a whirlwind for them, their lives were surrendered to the will of God and the will of God was hard.

It had taken an angel to convince Joseph that Mary hadn't been unfaithful, that he wasn't to abandon her.

But that meant all the normal traditions were abandoned. There will never be a wedding ceremony for Joseph and Mary. There will never be a family festival where the entire village would be invited to the marriage celebration.

To take Mary to be his wife after she was found to be pregnant during their betrothal period was to effectively announce to everyone that he was the guy. And if he wasn't the guy, to marry her would effectively announce to everyone that he's lost his mind.

Those were the only two options for them; and this baby lying in a manger adds the exclamation point to their guilt.

There will be no way to live this down.

During His ministry 30 years later, the Jewish leaders dig up the dirty rumors and throw back into Jesus' face the accusation, in John 8:41: ***"We were not born from sexual immorality, like you!"***

In other words, "We know how you got your start, don't lecture us."

Now evidently, between **verses 21 and 22**, Joseph and Mary moved from the stable into humble quarters somewhere in Bethlehem while Joseph might have taken on a few odd jobs with his tools and calloused hands.

They won't be here for long; it won't be long before they are running for their lives to hide out in Egypt from King Herod—but that's another sermon.

Here's the significant thing taking place in this scene: even though they will never be viewed by the Jewish community as credible, godly, obedient sons and daughters of Abraham, they are still following the word of God in having their son identify with the people of God.

As you watch them here, ask yourself the question: what does it take to keep you from obeying the word of God and identifying as a follower of Jesus?

- Will you obey God on that campus and invite ridicule?
- Will you stop your career from progressing because you won't misrepresent the truth?
- Will you identify with the church and the Lord even if it causes people at your job or in your family to think you've gone off the deep end?
- What does it take for you to say, "If this is what God is going to allow into my life, I'm going to sit this one out."

Joseph and Mary are obeying the message from God even though it leads to ostracism and loneliness and misunderstanding and accusation and ridicule.

Here they come—on the 8th day, right on time—bringing forward their baby boy and sending a message to their world that even if everyone believes Jesus is illegitimate, *this family* is going to identify with the people of God and the word of God and the will of God.

Now at this ceremony, Luke tells us here ***in verse 21, look at it again:***

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Luke 2:21

During this ceremony of identification with the covenant, the parents would announce the name they had chosen for their son. Only in this case, Joseph and Mary didn't have to spend any time coming up with a name they liked.

The angel had delivered to them both this name. In other words, Jesus was the name chosen for Him from eternity past. And for a very good reason.

The name Jesus is the Greek counterpart to the Hebrew name Joshua. It means “Jehovah is salvation,” or, in shorter terms, “deliverer/savior.”

I can't help but wonder who officiated at this ceremony and heard the announcement of His name.

I wonder if the rabbi held back from laughing, or maybe he just shook his head at the audacity of this peasant couple without any references, without any connections, without any attending family members. Did they actually believe their child was going to deliver anybody?

We know from history that Jesus was a common name; there were a lot of little boys running around this region who had been named Jesus—the Greek counterpart for Joshua, the great commander and deliverer of Israel.

Everybody in Israel was longing for a redeemer, they were looking for a strong deliverer but this rabbi must have thought to himself, “From the looks of this family, it certainly isn't going to be Him!”

So, with that, Joseph and Mary leave, holding their 8-day-old son still whimpering with pain; and they went back to their undisclosed home somewhere in Bethlehem.

But get this: they had carefully followed the word of God; they had observed the ceremony of identification.

The ceremony of redemption.

This one is much more public and dramatic.

Now verse 22:

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”).

Luke 2:22-23

In other words, God had a claim on every firstborn baby boy. He was to be holy, that word means “separated unto God.”

If the male child was from the tribe of Levi, he could be drafted into service as a priest. The priests were the government, they were the senators and representatives, so to speak.

So, this ceremony acknowledged that the first-born son belonged to God and had to be bought back from God through a redemption tax of 5 shekels (Numbers 15).

Now since Christ was born into the tribe of Judah, He was not required to serve in the priestly system, but He still belonged, so to speak, to God. So, Joseph and Mary would need to pay a redemption tax to symbolically buy Him back from God.

This was called the Redemption of the Firstborn.

William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 24

Get the irony of this scene:

- They are buying Jesus back from God when Jesus had come to buy a people for God.
- They were redeeming the Redeemer.
- They were paying the price for the One who had come to pay the ultimate price.

Don't miss the fact that Joseph and Mary's commitment to God's word only added to their poverty.

They've already paid the census tax in Bethlehem according to the decree of Caesar; they've paid the rabbi for outpatient surgery; and now they're paying 5 shekels, which is several day's wages.

Let me tell you, the will of God was tiring, uncomfortable, uneasy, lonely, and expensive.

But from the clues we're given here, cost was never the issue. Obedience was.

You need to know that they were *not* required by law to bring Jesus to Jerusalem for this ceremony. They could have paid the 5 shekels to a local priest and saved all the wear and tear from more travel and difficulty.

But they want to go to Jerusalem; they want to go to the temple to present Jesus to the priest and pay the redemption tax.

Why?

Because they realized that even though they were redeeming Jesus from priestly service, they were presenting Him to the Lord.

Notice again the last phrase of verse 22:

They brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

What sweet irony here! They didn't understand everything that was going on, but almost in childlike faith:

- they are bringing the Lord of the Temple to the Temple of the Lord. (Pentecost, p. 65)
- the Divine object of true worship has just arrived at the House of worship.
- they are presenting God the Son to God the Father.
- the one who would rip down that veil between mankind and the Holy of Holies was at that moment in the temple court.
- nobody understood it yet, but every ritual and every sacrifice and every symbol there on those temple grounds illustrated and pointed to that little baby.
- And there He was; He had come.

So far, Mary and Joseph have carefully followed all the law required and even more so. They have attended the ceremony of identification and the ceremony of redemption.

There's one more ceremony required by the law.

The ceremony of purification.

According to the law, Mary was unclean following the birth of Jesus.

After 40 days, she would be required to bring two sacrifices to the priest. A turtledove would atone for her defilement having delivered a child and the issuing of blood. Another turtledove would reestablish her communion with God and the right to worship in the temple.

Now according to Leviticus chapter 12, Mary was to bring to the priest either a lamb or two birds for these sacrifices.

If she and her husband didn't have the money for a lamb, she would be allowed to bring two pigeons, or two turtledoves.

The fact that Mary brought turtledoves instead of a lamb indicated her poverty.

She would have been ushered over to the gate nearest the Sanctuary just beyond the court of Women; Mary would have presented this pair of turtledoves to the priest.

So, get this picture of it:

- She's standing there in the court of women watching the smoke of her sacrifice *ascend to heaven*, holding in her arms the final sacrifice who will *take us to heaven*.
- she can't afford to buy a lamb but the final Lamb is in her arms.

At the conclusion of this ceremony, Mary and Joseph no doubt planned to just slip away and leave unnoticed, but God had other plans.

There's a message from heaven that's about to be announced, validating that this was not some Messiah-want-to-be. This was no prank call; this was the real message that needed to be heard.

Luke tells us here in **verse 25** that a man was there by the name of Simeon, he's described as a righteous and devout man; he'd spent his life looking for the Messiah, called here, "the consolation of Israel."

Verse 26 informs us that the Spirit of God had promised him that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah.

Evidently, he's been waiting for decades; the implication here is that he's now an old man.

So, you can imagine that for years, Simeon would come over to the temple looking at all the babies, wondering, "Is this the One? They look like they're carrying a newborn over there! I must meet them! I wonder if he's the Messiah?"

Edited from R. Kent Hughes, Luke: Volume 1 (Crossway, 1998), p. 95

And for years, he went home disappointed.

But then he meets Joseph and Mary. The Spirit of God prompts him that this newborn is indeed the Messiah!

Verse 28 tells us:

He took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

Luke 2:28-32

In other words, this baby was the One—the One who would live up to His name: Deliverer, Savior!

Anna, Luke tells us, is a prophetess, and she now comes up and begins to tell everyone on the temple grounds that Jesus is the promised Redeemer.

These are staggering announcements; heaven is delivering incredible messages.

So, get this scene here: Joseph, Mary, Anna, a crowd of curious people, and Simeon—who probably doesn't want to let go of Jesus—are all standing here. Simeon is holding the baby in his arms as tears no doubt ran down his cheeks.

And all the while the priests probably don't miss a beat; they continue with their duties as they should; sacrifices continue to be made, but here, in the middle of it all, is Jesus.

The Savior has arrived to buy us out of the kingdom of darkness and bring us into the kingdom of light and everlasting life.

Do you know Him? Who is He to you? Listen to the message from heaven. He is the *real* Messiah. Jesus the Redeemer has come!

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“Meeting the Magi”

Matthew 2:1-12

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for December 17, 2023

Stephen Davey

You probably have some misconceptions about the nativity scene as it concerns the wise men. How many were there? How old was Jesus when they arrived? Maybe you don't know how they found out about the coming Messiah. Stephen Davey takes us behind the scenes of the account of the wise men from Matthew 2. As he does so, Stephen reminds us that the reactions to Jesus when he was a toddler in Bethlehem are the same responses to Jesus that people still have today. Which response is yours?

Without a doubt, one of the things I love about this season is the music.

Obviously, the music about Christ's incarnation could be sung year-round, but there's nothing wrong with reserving it for special times. It's a good idea to save things for special seasons.

Now, there are well-meaning believers who think we shouldn't celebrate at all, given the pagan origins of many of the things related to Christmas.

That's certainly true. The Romans decorated their temples with mistletoe; they believed mistletoe had magical powers to bring peace into your life.

By the 5th century, all of these trappings had become a part of the church's celebration of Christmas.

The Puritans tried to rule out any and all celebration of Christmas. They passed a law in 1644 that made Christmas Day an official working day. It became illegal to make plum pudding or mince pie in December, that would be proof you were celebrating Christmas.

So can the Christian observe Christmas Day, or the Christmas season, or Easter Sunday for that matter?

The Apostle Paul wrote in **Romans 14:**

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord.

Romans 14:5-6a

In other words, in this New Testament dispensation, no day is any more special than another day and that includes the Sabbath.

But if you choose to make one day special—like December 25^t or one season special—make sure you observe it in honor of the Lord. In other words, use it for the glory of God.

Two weeks ago, I interviewed a couple in our new members class—a couple from India with Hindu families. They had come to faith in Christ years earlier and now live and work here in the Triangle. He's the captain of his cricket team, which has grown exponentially in this area. He and his wife invited all their teammates and families to their home to take them through the elements of the Christmas tree and the ornaments and the star, and they tied it all to the gospel of Christ.

This is a wonderful season to highlight the incarnation of our Savior.

And by the way, if you decide not to observe something because it has pagan origins, you'd better not study too much history.

In fact, in a few weeks, don't refer to the month of January, named after Janus, the god of change and new beginnings.

And don't drive a car manufactured by Mazda, that company name came from the Persian conquering god named Ahura Mazda—their supreme god.

And you might want to take the fish symbol off your bumper, that was the symbol of the womb of several pagan goddesses.

In China, the great mother goddess Kwan-yin was often portrayed in the likeness of a fish.

In Egypt, Isis the mother goddess was the Great Fish of the Abyss.

Her symbol could be a fish when drawn sideways or drawn vertically to represent her womb.

The early Christians borrowed this pagan symbol and gave it a new meaning; in fact, they used it to mark their secret meeting places. Because the symbol was so common, nobody noticed.

In Greece, the fish goddess, Aphrodite Salacia, was worshipped by her followers on Friday. So, on Friday, they ate fish in her honor.

So don't eat fish on Friday.

In fact, don't even say the name Friday, that's the name of another goddess. And Friday was her special day designated for feasting. So, stay away from that too—your pizza parties on Friday need to stop.

Don't wear clothing or shoes from Nike because Nike was the Greek goddess of victory; you don't want to acknowledge her.

So just imagine: you're trying to avoid any connection with paganism, but you're wearing your Nike pullover, driving your Mazda, a fish symbol on your bumper, it's Friday, you're at Burger King picking up a fish combo, and you're on your way home to hang some mistletoe!

You're in deep trouble. Or maybe we're missing the point.

Christmas time is a wonderful opportunity for us to exalt Jesus Christ in our community and we take full advantage of it.

The fact that we observe Christmas isn't the issue. *Why* we observe it is.

So much of the Original Christmas Drama is lost in the church, not because of pagan traditions, but because of poor exposition of Scripture related to this original scene.

So, we've been exploring what actually happened, as described in Scripture. And what happens next, for our edification today, is picked up in the Gospel by Matthew, so turn there to one of the most misunderstood scenes in the typical Christmas play.

Turn to Matthew, chapter 2 and now verse 1:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Matthew 2:1-3

I'll bet they were!

And of all the things they could have said to upset Herod and the Jewish people, for different reasons, it would have been this question, ***"Where is He who has been born, king of the Jews?"***.

You'll notice he did *not* ask, "Where is He who *will be* born one day?" but, "**Where is he who has been born?**" In other words, "It's already happened; there's nothing you can do to stop it!"

But here's the shocking part of what they asked: they were asking for the whereabouts of the "**King of the Jews**!"

If you had been standing there, you would have seen Herod's face flush crimson red.

This was the man known as Herod the Great!

He had finally gained the favor of the Roman emperor, and the Roman senate had agreed to grant him his life-long wish to carry the title, "King of the Jews."

He was the King of the Jews.

Herod was an Edomite, that is, he was a descendant of a long line that began with their forefather Esau.

You might remember that Esau and Jacob were twin brothers. And when it came time to bless the oldest twin, which would have been Esau, Jacob deceived his blind father Isaac into giving the blessing to him instead.

And a portion of that blessing, going all the way back to **Genesis chapter 27**, went like this in **verse 29**:

"Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you."

Genesis 27:29a

Jacob received that blessing and Esau resented it. And so did his descendants for the next 1900 years.

But now, 1900 years later, Herod gets his wish. The Roman senate bestows on him the title, "King of the Jews."

It's as if Herod is saying, "The birthright has returned to Esau where it belongs. The descendants of Jacob will now bow down to the descendant of Esau; the Jews will bow down to me!"

In his final 2 years of life, Herod's paranoia of being overthrown became so terrible that he murdered three of his sons; he will soon order all the young boys to be killed in Bethlehem to try and kill this King of the Jews.

Herod was *an* antichrist, and there is a demonic battle taking place behind the scenes.

Now it was during these last 2 years of his reign when this group of wise men showed up unannounced and asked, **“Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?”**

The wise men had no idea that this question just lit the fuse for an explosion that will soon affect everyone.

And that’s because it isn’t just anybody asking this question, go back to **verse 1 again in the latter part:**

Behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem.

Matthew 2:1b

Your translation might call them magi, which comes directly from the Greek term for them; the word *magi* gives us our words magic, magician, but more closely aligned with the word magi is the word magistrate.

The magi were high ranking statesman in the kingdom of Babylon, and then the Medes and Persian kingdoms.

Herodotus, the ancient Greek Historian, tells us that the magi were trained in the arts and sciences. They were the university professors and the political power-players all rolled up into one.

They were also priests of the Persian religion, which was still in full force when Jesus was born.

Their national religion was called Zoroastrianism. I know that sounds like they worshipped Zorro and wore black capes.

Actually, they wore white robes and tall hats.

Their primary temple had an altar with fire that was never allowed to burn out; it had been supposedly lit by their chief god, whose name was Mazda—the name of that car you’re going to sell this week.

No Persian prince ever became king without having been tutored by the magi, and only when the magi determined the heir to the throne to be ready would the prince be crowned king.

The magi were called the Kingmakers, and Herod knew it!

And here they are!

By the way, **Matthew** doesn’t tell us how many magi were in this group. Early church tradition said there were 12, but the church later changed the number to 3.

We don't know why; it was probably because the church couldn't fit 12 wise men into the Christmas play.

But I would agree with a larger number simply because of their assignment.

This would have been a large caravan, traveling some 2,000 miles over mountain ranges and through valleys, traveling with servants to cook and set up their tents at night, shepherds who would be tending their herds that will be their provision for the journey, and a large contingent of soldiers would have accompanied them on this mission to not only protect them but to protect the gold and other costly gifts from bandits along the way.

So, rewrite the Sunday school picture you might have in your mind. These aren't three guys riding their camels into Jerusalem with some gift boxes in their baggage.

It had taken them months to plan their journey, and many more months to complete their journey.

The question is, why would they take all this time and trouble to travel to Jerusalem and even more, why would they be interested in a Jewish Messiah?

To begin to answer those questions, you have to travel back 600 years, to the time when the Jewish people were conquered and many of them were deported to this Kingdom of Babylon.

Among the deported Jews were several Jewish teenagers who graduated at the top of their class from the university of Babylon.

They had impressed their Magi professors so much that they were appointed to top political positions in the kingdom of Babylon.

You know several of them by the new Babylonian names they were given: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

The valedictorian among these Jewish young people was renamed Belteshazzar, we prefer to ignore that Babylonian name and call him by his Hebrew name, Daniel.

Daniel becomes the leading wise man, the leader of the Magi. Later on, Darius the Persian King who conquered Babylon, retains Daniel as second in command.

For decades, Daniel is evidently having a group Bible study in his apartment.

And after 70 years of godly influence by the life and teaching of Daniel, many of the magi come to faith in Israel's Messiah.

And we know that because 600 years later, spiritual descendants of Daniel show up in Jerusalem saying, again, ***note what Matthew records in verse 2:***

“For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship Him.”

Matthew 2:2b

Not to promote His political ambitions, not to introduce Him, not even to crown Him, but to worship Him!

These magi were already believers, ready to worship the Savior.

So here is this entourage of wise men, representing a long line of believing magi that stretched all the way back to Daniel.

But there’s still another question here: why would a star prompt their journey now? How would they have connected some cosmic light with the birth of the Messiah?

I’m so glad you asked that, so close to Christmas!

Daniel had at his disposal the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Daniel would have personally known the prophet Ezekiel who was prophesying in Babylon; Daniel had access to the prophecies of Isaiah.

Listen to one verse that Daniel evidently taught his Magi coworkers from **Numbers 24:16:**

“The oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, ... I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.”

Numbers 24:16-17a

Here in this Old Testament passage, the Messiah is called a rising star who will reign in the land of Israel.

Another passage Daniel evidently taught in his home Bible study group was from **Isaiah’s prophecy in chapter 60:**

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Isaiah 60:1-3

These are the same prophetic images of the Messiah’s star, rising in brightness, in the land of Israel.

Now I've read interesting articles and speculations from well-meaning people about some special astral alignment that occurred at Jesus' birth; the problem with that view is that it doesn't fit the narrative of Scripture.

You need to understand that the magi weren't led to Jerusalem by just any star.

The Greek word for star (*aster*) can be translated simply as 'brilliance' or 'radiance.'

- This was the light that guided the people of Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness (**Exodus 13:21**).
- This was the brilliant light that knocked Saul of Tarsus to the ground and blinded him for days (**Acts 9:3**).
- This was the vision of John the Apostle as he saw the light of Christ's face shining like the sun (**Revelation 1:16**).

These Persian magi were being led by the light of God's shekinah glory; it was miraculous; in fact, the narrative implies that they were the only ones who saw it.

And don't miss the fact that the light led them to Jerusalem, not Bethlehem, where Jesus was. Did the GPS system go down? No, this was the divine plan: the announcement would be made to the nation Israel that their Messiah has been born.

So, they arrive and ask Herod, ***"Where is this one, born king of the Jews?"***

Now notice verse 4:

And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, [Herod] inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

Matthew 2:4-6

The Jewish leaders knew the address of the newborn Messiah, but they didn't care enough to travel 5 miles from Jerusalem to check it out.

They had memorized the prophecy of Micah; they just quoted it to King Herod; they knew the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Listen, they knew the Scriptures, but they missed the Savior.

There are a lot of people today who can tell you the story of Christmas, but they've never traveled to the cross of Christ and claimed Him as Savior.

Well, these wise men eventually leave Herod's palace and head to Bethlehem.

Let's move down to verse 9:

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

Matthew 2:9-10

So, once they leave Herod's palace and head to Bethlehem, this star, this shining brilliant light, suddenly appears again. Somehow it turned off and now it turned back on again.

And we're told here that it **came to rest over the place**, verse 11 says, **the house where the child was**.

The light literally hovered, rested, stayed above this house.

This word means "to stand." This same word is used in **Matthew 13 and verse 2:**

And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach.

Matthew 13:2

This wasn't some star somewhere in the sky sending starlight down toward the town of Bethlehem; this was more like a spotlight hovering over—illuminating—just this one house in the neighborhood.

Their journey of 2,000 miles would have taken months to travel, with several weeks or even months to prepare beforehand, which is why when they finally arrived in Bethlehem, they never went to a stable.

Verse 11 says:

And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.

Matthew 2:11a

They didn't come to a stable, they entered a house. I know this is going to mess up a lot of Christmas cards. I'm not trying to hurt Hallmark, but three wise men never knelt down next to a cow and a sheep.

We're told here that the magi **saw the child**; not a *brephos*, the Greek word for baby; but *paidion*, the typical Greek word for child.

So, by the time the magi had arrived, Jesus would have been a year or more old, a little toddler walking around that house.

We're told here that the Magi fell down, in true oriental fashion, and worshipped Jesus.

So, imagine this scene: unannounced to Mary—unexpected—Joseph is evidently at work, Mary is perhaps sweeping the floor, Jesus is playing with his favorite toy.

This entourage shows up and stops traffic; everyone crowds around as they kneel before Jesus, who's probably hiding behind Mary's skirt—wide-eyed—as He receives worship from the Kingmakers of the Persian empire.

And they brought gifts, **verse 11 says**:

Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Matthew 2:11b

They gave Him gold.

Seneca, the Roman philosopher who lived during the days of Christ, wrote that in Persia no one ever approached the king without a gift of gold.

The wise men are declaring that Jesus is royalty.

They gave Him frankincense.

That was a substance from the Boswellia tree, used by the Old Testament priests in their ceremonies of intercession.

This is frankincense for our High Priest!

They gave Him myrrh.

This was a rather strange gift for a child.

It was a sweet substance that came from a small thorn tree. Gum from the tree's sap was mixed with wine to form a narcotic, pain eliminating beverage. This will be the drink offered to Christ on the cross and He will refuse to deaden the pain (Mark 15:23).

Myrrh was also formed into a sticky, sweet smelling substance they would use to wrap a corpse—wrapping strips of linen around the body, kept in place by this sticky substance.

So, the Magi gave myrrh to the One who would die and be wrapped with it in a tomb.

- Gold for the King.
- Frankincense for our great High Priest.
- Myrrh for our suffering Savior who will die to redeem His bride from every nation on planet earth.

In these few verses you can see three responses to this announcement in the original Christmas drama.

Cultures change, but the responses of mankind do not change.

You have anger and defiance from Herod; he wanted nothing to do with a rival to the throne of his own heart and life.

You have apathy and disregard from religious people who knew some Scripture, but didn't want a Savior.

But then there are those who claim Jesus as their Messiah.

So to this day: there are those who hate Him, as Herod did; there are those who ignore Him, as the religious leaders did; but there are those who worship Him, who join the entourage of the Magi and together we praise Him as our King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

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Blood, Sweat and Tears

Matthew 2:13-23

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for December 24, 2023

Stephen Davey

If you attend church during Christmas or see a nativity display, you may be struck by the cleanness and glow and aura of the displays. The manger is always smooth and clean, the straw and hay are clean and tidy, the animals are respectfully looking on quietly while Jesus is swaddled in perfectly white linen. But that's not the real Christmas story. The real story involves the tears of Mary, the sweat of Joseph, and blood running in the streets of Bethlehem.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to go down into the underground bunker under the streets of London where Winston Churchill and his military staff directed the war effort during World War II. It had just been opened to the public and you could tour through the rooms and offices along the narrow hallways.

Everyone's desk and paperwork had been left just as they were at the end of the war. As a visual reminder, nothing had been moved. I saw the desk where Churchill worked; there was the same telephone from which he called President Roosevelt to beg for help.

I saw the maps that showed the movements of the allies and the table on which markers identified the location of ships and troops.

At the worst moment in the war, when it seemed almost hopeless for Great Britain to survive the German onslaught, Churchill delivered these words to his people from the House of Commons:

“We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence in the air; we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be; we shall never surrender . . . I have nothing to offer you but blood, toil, tears and sweat.”

Quotes taken from James Montgomery Boice: [Nehemiah, Learning to Lead](#) Revell Company, p. 52 & “Churchill, Sir Winston Leonard Spencer.” Microsoft (R) Encarta. Copyright (c) 1994 Microsoft Corporation. Copyright (c) 1994 Funk & Wagnall's Corporation.

I have nothing to offer you but blood, sweat and tears.

Maybe it's about time we readvertised Christianity. Maybe it's time to witness to people and then tell them that if they follow Christ, it'll be nothing but blood sweat and tears.

The television is loaded with false teachers who promise that the narrow path guarantees an easy path.

No wonder people today, especially in America, who decide to give Jesus a try don't last very long because they thought they'd order from a catalog of blessings and instead they're given a sword and a shield and a helmet.

I believe a large part of the misconception about Christianity is tied to these first Christmas scenes and the arrival of God the Son.

The conflict between heaven and hell didn't begin at the cross; blood, sweat and tears came with His first infant cry.

If you're new to us today, we've been digging deeper into this original Christmas passage.

In the opening lines of ***Matthew's Gospel and chapter 2, where I invite you to return***, the Magi—the wise men, the Persian king-makers—arrive in Jerusalem.

They are the spiritual descendants of their revered leader: Daniel, who centuries earlier had left a spiritual legacy that included the coming of the Messiah.

The magi arrive with the shocking question in verse 2:

“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews ... we have come to worship him.”

Matthew 2:2

No prince could ascend the Persian throne without the Magi's blessing, but they have come, not to crown Him but to worship Him. In other words, this King is *divine*.

And they've journeyed 2,000 miles one-way to worship Him.

Now, Matthew fills in the puzzle pieces that inform us that Joseph and Mary had decided to stay in Bethlehem after Jesus was born. And you can understand why. They've left behind a scandal and rumors of immorality with Mary's pregnancy.

They've found a home to live in; it could have been a little hut Joseph built with his own hands, on borrowed land, as Old Testament law allowed; we're not told.

What we *are* told is that the Magi arrive and enter the house and ***verse 11 tells us:***

And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts ...”

Matthew 2:11

We left off there in our study last Lord’s Day.

Now as we re-enter this scene, the Magi were supposed to return and give Herod the street address of the boy; Herod said he wanted to go and worship him as well, which was a lie.

Verse 12 informs us that the Magi are warned by God not to return to Herod.

In our last study, I mentioned that Herod had been awarded by the Roman senate the title, “King of the Jews”; he guarded that title jealously.

Herod had begun his reign 40 years before the birth of Christ, so by now he’s an old man, afflicted, historians tell us, with venereal diseases and for the most part already partially insane.

In his final two years of his life, the same time-period when the Magi arrived, Herod will kill three of his sons whom he considered rivals; he will kill one of his wives and her brother for their popularity among the people.

On one occasion a faithful soldier reported to Herod, and I quote: “The army hates your cruelty, and many officers curse you.”

This soldier thought this would gain him a promotion, but Herod ordered him tortured until he gave the names of the traitors, which he did, but ended up still dying. Herod then rounded up all the accused and had them executed while he, historians recorded, watched with rage, screaming at them to die.

John Phillips, [Exploring the Gospels: Matthew](#) (Loizeaux, 1999), p. 44

The Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, who had appointed Herod as King over this region once remarked that he would rather be Herod’s swine than one of Herod’s sons.

ibid, p. 40

So, you can imagine the wise men, they had no idea what they had just ignited.

But don’t miss the irony here that evidently the only man in Jerusalem who took the wise men seriously was King Herod. Nobody else seemed to care to check it out.

Now what happens next in Matthew chapter 2 is only more blood, sweat and tears. And it comes with the fulfillment of three Old Testament prophecies.

The first one begins here in verse 13:

Now when [the Magi] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy Him.”

Matthew 2:13

Once Herod realized the Magi had tricked him and left to travel back home on some other interstate, Herod would have assumed that that they had warned Mary and Joseph.

R.C.H. Lenski, [The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel](#) (Augsburg Publishing, 1964), p. 80

So here we are, in the middle of the night, and another angel shows up here in **verse 13**:
“Joseph, get up. Herod’s soldiers are about to gallop the five miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to find Jesus and kill him.”

So hurry ... get up ... you don’t have time to pack; grab whatever you can carry or wear, and run!

Mary no doubt asked Joseph in their panic:

“Where did you say that angel told us to run?”

“He said to run to Egypt, beyond Herod’s jurisdiction.”

“How long are we gonna stay there?”

“The angel didn’t say, he just said he’d tell us when we can come home.”

“Where are we gonna stay in Egypt?”

“The angel didn’t say; Mary, we gotta run!”

Let me tell you, the original Christmas scene was not a cozy manger scene and a peaceful life in Bethlehem.

From the very moment of Mary’s conception, and the misunderstanding that it brought to the difficult journey to Bethlehem, then childbirth without a midwife—a child birthed in a muddy cave into the calloused hands of a carpenter—then a meager existence for a year and a half while they try to refashion their lives amid the suspicions of Jewish community. Then this entourage of Magi arrives outside their little home with Persian soldiers guarding the treasures, servants, and flocks for provisions over the course of their 4,000-mile round trip journey.

But this has a negative effect as well. They have identified Joseph and Mary and Jesus now Herod will find out where they live.

And sure enough, the text implies that within 24 hours, spies have given him the address.

Herod immediately sends his soldiers galloping to Bethlehem, he knows Mary and Joseph will try to run, so the order is to kill every Jewish little boy, two years old and under in that region.

Let me tell you, beloved, from the very beginning, the birth of Jesus signals an intensifying war; it's nothing less than blood, sweat and tears.

Matthew writes here in verse 14:

And [Joseph] rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Matthew 2:14-15

How in the world do you get Jesus into Egypt, of all places? How do you get Joseph and Mary to travel 55 miles away to a country like Egypt?

Here's how: the kingdom of Herod isn't in charge; the Kingdom of Heaven is. And that hasn't changed to this day. God uses this pagan murderer to help fulfill the prophecies of God's Word and God's will.

But don't miss the challenges this all meant for Joseph and Mary. This means more difficulty and more change and more confusion and more unanswered questions.

Get up in the middle of the night and run for your life, no planning, no packing, and they're going to be in another country for a year or more.

Have you ever gone on a family trip that lasted a year? Probably not, two weeks was enough before you thought of killing each other!

But when you traveled for two weeks, how much did you plan? How much did you pack?

My wife and I have traveled to a number of foreign countries, like Minnesota and Michigan! We've been to France, Austria, England, Switzerland, Germany. Listen, talk about thinking through plans:

- Money? Got it!
- Passports? Got 'em!

- Tickets? Got ‘em!
- Itinerary? Got it!
- Carry ons, yep!
- Check ins, yep!
- Chewing gum to help your ears pop during the flight, yes.
- Hotel Reservations? Yep.
- Contact information? Yes.

Listen, you know when you’re leaving, and you know where you’ll be staying! That’s how the will of God is supposed to work.

That’s the way God would want it, we convince ourselves!

Just slip into this original scene: Joseph is awakened in the middle of the night and told to run with no map, no planning, no packing.

In **verse 13**, the word for **flee** in your English Bible is from the Greek word *pheugo* (φευγω) which means to seek safety in flight. *Pheugo* is the same Greek word that gives us our word “fugitive.”

Ritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, [Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament](#) (Regency, 1976), p. 4

In other words, “Joseph, take Mary and Jesus and run! You’re now wanted criminals. Throw together whatever you can carry and run. Herod wants to kill Jesus; his soldiers are mounting up.

You must run for your lives! And from Bethlehem to the border of Egypt was 75 miles away.

And they ran! Can you imagine the sheer terror of it all?

Couldn’t God protect Joseph and his little family right where they were?

Couldn’t he have deposed Herod and put someone more sympathetic on the throne?

Couldn’t God have blinded the soldiers?

He could have, but He didn’t.

His will for them was blood, sweat and tears.

So, they fled; Herod's soldiers arrived and the killing began as the kingdom of darkness raged against the newborn King of light.

The church in the medieval period of Western civilization couldn't imagine that this kind of difficulty could possibly be the will of God.

So apocryphal writings compiled legends and myths to smooth everything out.

One legend recorded that when Joseph and Mary and Jesus needed a place to sleep on their journey, they sought refuge in a cave. But it was cold, and the ground was covered with frost. A little spider recognized Jesus and then spun a web across the entrance of the cave so thick that it hung like a curtain and the cave grew warm.

Edited from William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 1* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 35

Another legend says that trees bent down to yield their fruit; another legend says that they were unable to sleep one night, so an angel came and played music on a violin, and they fell fast asleep.

If anything, Joseph and Mary would've had trouble sleeping because they were wondering why?

Here's why: the prophets had said that God's Son would come out of Egypt; Jesus is going to become the picture of Israel's calling from that same country; Israel was spoken of in the Old Testament as the **son of God (Hosea 11:1)**.

You might remember, if you're older in the faith, there had been another deliverer whose name was Moses.

Pharaoh had also ordered the killing of all Jewish male babies. Moses was hidden away until he grew up to become a deliverer.

Both Jesus and Moses came out of Egypt, and they both led their people out of bondage. But in **Hebrews chapter 13**, Jesus is called the greater Moses.

And that's because the deliverance of Moses was temporary; the deliverance of Jesus is eternal.

Now if you look back at **verse 16**, the second prophecy is about to be fulfilled tragically.

We're told here:

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by

the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

Matthew 2:16-18

Rachel's weeping during Israel's exile was a prophetic foreshadowing of the mothers in Bethlehem who would weep over the death of their baby boys.

Herod was nothing less than a first century antichrist, in the hands of Satan, attempting to destroy the seed of the woman, the virgin born Messiah.

Not long after the funerals are over in Bethlehem, Herod dies.

Now we have one more prophecy to fulfill in this original scene.

Verse 19:

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead."

Matthew 2:19-20

Here we go again! In the middle of the night an angel tells Joseph to "Get up." I wonder if Joseph went to sleep wondering if he'd make it through the night.

The difference here in this verse is the lack of urgency. There's no need to panic, or run, or hide.

Verse 21:

And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.

Matthew 2:21-22a

This is not good news. Herod's dead, but Archelaus is worse than his father; in fact, he starts his reign by killing 3,000 Jews in the Temple during Passover.

So, Joseph doesn't want to move back to Bethlehem, that was only five miles from Jerusalem.

We're told here that God gives him another dream and tells him to move into the district of Galilee (**verse 22**).

Now notice verse 23:

And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Matthew 2:23

Nazareth was 55 miles from Jerusalem. It was an out of the way, unnoticed, insignificant village, one of the Lord's disciples will later say, "Nothing good ever came out of Nazareth." Nobody is going to look for a king over there.

Archeologists have excavated Nazareth, dating back to the time of Christ and not one piece of fine jewelry was found; not one piece of fine, glazed pottery of that generation was found; just common, ordinary clay.

These original scenes were as challenging and difficult as you can imagine.

It started with the shattering of marriage plans and a normal home-life, painful rumors and then an outdoor shelter for a birthplace, more uncertain months in Bethlehem, then on the run as fugitives into Egypt, months of staying undercover, then back to Israel, to a poor village where they will live for nearly 30 years in total obscurity.

But what character here; what obedience; what surrender to God; what perseverance.

One author I read said that as he traveled in England, he saw in a graveyard the tombstone of an old soldier who had lost his property and his then his life in battle defending King Charles. His tombstone read: He served King Charles with constant, dangerous and expensive loyalty.

Bruce Larson, [The Communicator's Commentary](#) (Word Books, 1983), p. 59

That's Joseph and Mary, and it will be Jesus as well.

Let me offer three thoughts in closing that can be gleaned from these original scenes.

First, the plans God has for you do not eliminate questions, or painful seasons, in life.

Remember, beloved, the narrow path is not necessarily an easy path.

Secondly, the love God has for you does not eliminate the hatred Satan, or the world, has for you.

Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it," which means, hell is going to try everything it can.

Finally, the promises God has given you do not eliminate your responsibility or availability to follow Him.

God didn't whisk them away to Bethlehem; He didn't snap His fingers and they immediately arrived in Egypt; He didn't make it a downhill ride into Nazareth. He could have. But He didn't.

So, stay the course, serve your King with constant, dangerous and expensive loyalty to Him.

No matter what: be it blood, sweat, toil or tears.

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