

Prayers

Opening prayer

Mighty Saviour, give me strength to hold on to the great blessings and wonderful gifts You have given me. Especially the blessings of Your promises, Your presence, Your peace, Your guidance, Your healing, and the gifts of salvation, faith, hope, love and eternal life. May I never forget these blessings or fail to use these gifts, and may they always be to me a proof of Your gracious love. Thank You for all You have given me: thank You, Mighty Saviour, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: CHRISTMAS

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord to teach you what you need to know about Jesus and His coming into the world. All of us know God's Word but in part, and we need to know more, so ask the Lord to help you perceive His deeper truths.

2. For your friends and family

Pray that the Lord will become real for your family and friends this Christmas time, through the celebrations, through individual acts of kindness, or through any means God chooses

3. For the church and its work

Pray that the presence of Jesus Christ will never leave your church or congregation, and pray that you may be worthy of your call as God's chosen people

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for those who are afflicted by cruelty and disaster this Christmas. Pray for those who are least able to protect themselves in this world

Meditation

You are everything to me, Lord Jesus,
Let me not turn away from You,
Through ignorance, weakness or neglect.

Teacher of Life; teach me love, and test my skills;
Divine Physician; heal my body, and strengthen my bones;
Holy Comforter; calm my spirit, and grant me peace;
Great Preacher; challenge me again, and lead me on.

Never will I leave Your side,
Never will I deny Your Cross,
Lord Jesus Christ, my Saviour.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matt 2:1-6

¹ When Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked,

'Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star rise in the east and have come in honour of him.'

³ When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, as were all in Jerusalem. ⁴ He called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, and then asked them where the Messiah was to be born. They replied,

⁵ 'In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what was written by the prophet:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are certainly not the least among the rulers of Judah; for from you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

Review

Here, Matthew continues to tell us about Jesus' coming into the world. In church, the first few verses of Matthew 2 are usually read some time after Christmas, as part of the celebration of the coming of the Magi (Epiphany), but as far as Matthew was concerned, they follow on from his description of Mary's pregnancy and Joseph's faithfulness in providing for Mary and her child.

Around the time Jesus was born, there was feverish expectation about the coming of God's Messiah amongst every level of Jewish society, especially amongst rulers and religious groups, for example the Essenes, a religious group known about from the Dead Sea Scrolls who lived in desert communities. However, Jesus was not born into any such group, but into an ordinary Jewish home, untroubled by the politics of his day; both Matthew and Luke agree (Luke 2:1f.) that Jesus was born amongst ordinary people, in 'Bethlehem of Judea' (2:1). What Matthew does however, is to tell us how Jesus' birth affected the kings and rulers of His day, and this passage introduces us to a strange combination of leaders who were affected by his birth; the King of Israel, Herod the Great, and some foreign 'Magi', who were also seeking the truth about God's coming into the world.

Little is known about the Magi. Many people think there were three, but Matthew does not say this; people have deduced this from the fact that three gifts were given (2:11)! In order to find Jesus, the Magi used 'astrological' skills to follow a star, and some find it hard to understand why God accepted homage to Jesus from such pagans. However they came to Jesus, we should note that on arrival (2:11), they 'paid Him homage' by worshipping Him as King and God. This is the clear meaning of the gifts they brought of gold, frankincense and myrrh, indicating royalty, holiness and honour. Later, the Magi returned home; but in our part of the story today, they represent Gentile seekers for God, and it is therefore not at all surprising that they had begun their search using methods that were not 'proper'. People cannot have their eyes opened until they meet Christ!

Herod the Great was a different character altogether. He was the ruler of 'greater Palestine' from 37 – 4 BC acting with the authority of the Roman Empire. He was ruthless, cruel and, like many a dictator, wanted to leave a heritage by which he would be remembered. He was not loved by the Jewish people because he was half Jew and half Gentile, but in order to gain the people's affections, he had accepted circumcision and built a magnificent new Temple in Jerusalem. There is little doubt that Herod would have regarded any 'Messiah' as a threat to his authority, and he knew that groups like the Essenes were preparing for the 'last days', believing that at such a time all Roman authority would be overthrown. Of course, if Rome was overthrown, then Herod would lose all his power, so his interest in any Messiah would only be to destroy him as a threat to his own power!

Knowing this, we can explain the mystery of verse 6, the supposed quote from the Old Testament, mentioning Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah. In verse 4, in answer to the questions of the Magi, Herod asks scribes to look up in Scriptures where the Messiah would be born. The answer given by the scribes bears some connection with Micah 5:2, but if you look up this passage, you will find that it is a concoction of Micah 5:2, 2 Samuel 5:2 and Isaiah 11:1! What were the scribes doing? We can solve the mystery if we realise that the scribes were probably making a point to Herod as well as answering him. Herod did not know Scriptures but they did, so they sent him an answer giving him the information he wanted, but also telling him that the Messiah would be a humble servant like David! The message was a polite way of telling Herod that he was not the Messiah!

Discipleship

Questions for groups

1. What can we learn about the Messiah from this part of the story, particularly in verse 6 of this passage?

2. The Magi came to find Jesus after studying the stars. Can we expect to find that people come searching for Jesus from similar backgrounds today?
3. Just because Scripture manipulates texts from the Old Testament (see verse 6), does this give us permission to do the same today?

Discipleship challenges

- *Look up the passages of scripture which are mentioned here as behind verse 6. Read them carefully and find the words which go together to make up the quote. What do these passages say to you, and what do they say about Jesus?*
 - *If you can, find an opportunity to share what you think about this story with someone who is not a regular church goer. Dare to explain the difference between myth and scripture!*
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Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, may we seek and always find You within this world of ours. All too often we forget You and miss what You are doing. So, give us the grace to accept our failures and turn to You for constant love, support and guidance. You never fail us! Thanks be to God! AMEN
