

Prayers

Opening prayer

Forgive me for rushing, dear Lord, for there is too much to do and I can never get everything done. Bless me by Your Spirit, Lord God, for You can strengthen me for what lies ahead, and guide me through all life's complexities. Your support and presence is the most amazing blessing; how could I ever succeed without You? Thank You, Lord God: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: CHRISTMAS

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord to help you understand those things that have happened in your recent past, which trouble you. Let the Lord guide you into His answers for your problems

2. For your friends and family

Continue to bless your friends and family by looking ahead to what is happening and praying about things before they take place. See what a difference this can make!

3. For the church and its work

Thank God for the work done by your church and others, which change the lives of people for the better, whether spiritually or physically

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

At this time of year, people commonly think of the New Year with a certain degree of fatalism. Ask the Lord to show Himself in power within the world, even now.

Meditation

The heart is not defeated
When it rests in the freedom of our Lord,
And the truth of eternal peace has been installed within.

The mind is not dismayed
When it is satisfied by the Word of God
Which reveals the truth about our history to all humanity.

The spirit is not downcast
When it is constantly renewed, refreshed,
By the liberating touch of the wondrous gift of the Spirit.

The body is never useless
When it is committed to its loving Lord
To do the glorious things for which it has been made.

The soul is never conquered
When it is secured in Christ's salvation
And redeemed to take its place in God's amazing world!

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 2:7-12

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly, and found out from them exactly when the star appeared. ⁸ He sent them on to Bethlehem and said,

'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and honour him.'

⁹ When they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they saw in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy.

¹¹ They came into the house and saw the child with his mother Mary, so they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

¹² But they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and they returned to their country by another route.

Review

When the Magi visited Herod in Jerusalem, they were able to obtain from details about where the Messiah was to be born. Herod sent them on their way out of politeness, but neither he nor the scribes he consulted were willing to consider whether there might be some truth either to the Magi's tale or to the fulfilment of any of the ancient prophecies about the Messiah. Herod's words sound polite enough (2:8), but the Magi probably knew they were being either used. If Herod was really interested in their report, he would have wished to be the first find out what was happening.

The Magi continued on their way, and miraculously found Jesus, led by the star (2:10). There has been a great deal of interest in the phenomenon of the star, and clearly, the Magi were deeply impressed by some astrological phenomenon. Historical records show that ancient Persians were capable of calculating that in 6/7 BC there would be an astrological conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the astrological region of Pisces. What makes this significant for Matthew's story is that Jupiter was considered the 'Star of the Universe', Saturn was the 'Star of Palestine', and Pisces was the constellation representing the 'last days'. This would have been regarded as a remarkable omen by people of those times and it is no wonder that the Magi came to Palestine to see what was going on!

However, if this is all we make of the star then we forget the wider picture, for Matthew was not an astrologer and he would have held astrology in disdain as Christians do today. In his Gospel, Matthew's intention is for us to see Jesus' birth as miraculous (see 1:19-25), so we should not be looking for a 'natural' explanation of the movement of the star. This chapter tells us that the star rises in the east (2:2), at an exact time (2:7), went ahead of the Magi from Jerusalem to Bethlehem (2:9) and then stopped (2:9). Now, all the speculation about Saturn and Jupiter may be seen to fit with the first two of these references, but the last two are different, because stars do not just 'stop', or indicate a geographical place on earth! This, for Matthew remains a miracle, and shows God's command of the universe. He is able even to guide pagan astrologers to the baby Jesus! It was God's plan to make the Messiah known to all.

When the Magi came to the child, they instantly recognised what we already know, that the child was indeed born of God, and they honoured him suitably, presenting their famous gifts of gold, incense and myrrh, indicating royalty, holiness and honour. Many theories have been put forward to explain the meaning of the gifts, but it is probably unwise to go beyond these simple Biblical word associations. The gifts represent the Magi's acceptance of the baby Jesus' royalty (gold), His divinity (incense - purity) and his unique role (myrrh - honour) in God's plans for the world.

When they found the baby, Matthew says that the Magi worshipped the infant Jesus. The Greek text says here that they 'fell down and worshipped', which indicates that the Magi believed that He was indeed God. The Magi knew nothing of the meaning of the coming of the Messiah because they did not come from a Jewish background; nevertheless, they accepted Jesus for what they could know of Him. Their faith was a simple faith and although it does not show the level of personal commitment we attach to that word, what they did was remarkable. Gentile kings worshipped the baby Jesus for who He was and according to the revelation they had received, moreover, they were the first people ever to worship Jesus according to Matthew!

Despite the wonder and the majesty of these events, the story is not over. Whenever Jesus is honoured as Lord, there are consequences, and in a land where many people were expecting a Messiah, the discovery and worship of the infant Jesus was bound to draw a response from the earthly authorities, and we shall see more of that tomorrow.

Discipleship

Questions for groups

1. If the Magi came to Jesus through astrology, do people come to Jesus today, being led through other pagan means? Discuss this in your group
2. What do the gifts mean to you, and what could they mean to Mary and Joseph, his parents?
3. Is there any value in knowing the astrological details of the stars at the time of Jesus' birth, and what do they tell us, if anything?

Discipleship challenges

- *Herod urged the Magi to search for the child, and they found Him. How do you seek to find Jesus, or do you feel that you have already found Him? Pray about this, and ask the Lord to help you find out more about the Jesus you love and worship.*
- *Pray that God will lead more 'gentiles' to seek for Jesus and pray that God's people, the church, will not stop them from finding the true Christ.*

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, You were born into this world with nothing, and yet the Magi worshipped You as Lord. May we be inspired by God to worship You as a baby this Christmas time, not expecting anything in return, but giving You our best and our all. You are worth our love, Lord Jesus, AMEN
