

WHAT NOT TO PUT AWAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Matthew 2:1-12

(NIV) After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him."³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel'" [Micah 5:2].⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child. As soon as you find Him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him."⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the Child was.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the Child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

INTRODUCTION

Snopes.com (*Urban Legends*), the authoritative online myth-busting site, verifies how the seldom-heard words, phrasings, and clever wordplay of Christmas carols are often misconstrued in our increasingly urban and Biblically ignorant society. The *Away in a Manger* lyrics, "the cattle are lowing" [mooing] are sung as, "the cattle are *glowing*." Instead of, "The First Noel, the angels did say, was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay," people sing, "The First Noel, the angels did say, was to *frighten* poor shepherds in fields as they lay." And the *Go Tell It on the Mountain* lyrics, "While shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground," are sung as, "While shepherds *washed their socks* at night, all seated on the ground."

Many Americans say the Holiday season from Thanksgiving Day through New Year's Day is their favorite time of year. We often enjoy more treats, more time with family and friends, and more time away from regular routines. As Christians, *our* main focus is celebrating the birth of our "Savior" on Christmas Day. **Luke 2:10-11** (NASB) records an angel announced to shepherds, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Christmas gift-giving mirrors God's "indescribable gift" to us (**II Corinthians 9:15**), "Jesus," the "Son of God" (**Luke 1:35**) who came to "save His people from their sins" (**Matthew 1:21**).

The Holiday season that peaks with the observance of Christmas is also a time of added stress. Circumstances may keep us apart from those we most love. Efforts to decorate our home, to shop, send cards, ship packages, participate in church or community events, prepare special goodies, or attend family gatherings, may take their toll. We may long for the Holidays *to end* so we can return to our less demanding routines. As we take down decorations and put things away in coming days, may the Magi who demonstrated a life-changing devotion to **Jesus** as their Lord and Savior be our guide in what *not* to put away after Christmas.

I. WONDER

New Testament Israelites experienced much more *wonder* over **Jesus'** birth than we may think. We lack their knowledge of the Magi and miss the significance of the events in **Matthew 2:1-12**. "Magi" ("wise men"), transliterates (is the sound equivalent of) a Greek word that, in turn, transliterates a Persian word for a class of priestly astronomers. They may have been converted to belief in one true God and the practice of blood sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins by the influence of godly Jews like Daniel. An official presiding over Babylon's conquest of Israel's southern Kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C. is called a "Rab-mag" in **Jeremiah 39:3**, which means "chief magus" (singular of "magi"). Daniel was taken captive

to Babylon in 605 B.C. by King Nebuchadnezzar, who appointed him, "ruler over the entire province of Babylon and chief governor over all the wise men of Babylon," and made Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, Daniel's godly, young Jewish friends, his top assistants (**Daniel 2:48-49**). Daniel excelled all Magi, fortune tellers, and sorcerers in revealing God's mind to the King and the significance of key events. Due to Daniel's prominence and godliness, the Magi may have learned what the Bible taught about the LORD through Daniel and his Jewish assistants, including the promise of the birth of God's Christ, the Messiah.

After the Babylonians fell to the Medo-Persian Empire in 539 B.C, the Magi grew to such prominence that no Persian could become king except under two conditions: master the Magi's scientific and religious disciplines, and be endorsed and crowned by the Magi. In effect, this made the Magi king-makers. The Magi retained such prestige when portions of the Persian Empire that now comprise much of Iraq and Iran were absorbed by the Parthian Empire, which existed from about 250 years before **Jesus'** birth until 250 years afterward ("Parthians" are mentioned in **Acts 2:9**). Parthia was the only empire Rome could not vanquish. In 53 B.C. a combination of Parthian heavy cavalry (forerunners of medieval knights) and light cavalry annihilated Crassus and 40,000 Roman troops under his command, at the time Crassus shared rule over the Roman Empire with Julius Caesar and Pompey. In 40 B.C., Parthians invaded Israel and freed the High Priest imprisoned by the Herod of **Matthew 2**. This forced Herod to flee to Rome. He convinced the Roman Senate to appoint him King of Judea. Not until he subdued all opposition to his rule with the backing of a Roman army, by 37 B.C., did he begin his reign as the man history now calls Herod the Great.

Knowing this background, we can now appreciate the tremors convulsing Jerusalem when king-makers arrived from the only empire Rome could not conquer, the Parthian Magi, announcing the birth of the "King of the Jews" (**Matthew 2:1-2**)! Herod, who was an Edomite descended from Esau and not even an Israelite, had fled before the Parthians once. It's no wonder "King Herod . . . was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him," by the Magi's appearance! "Disturbed" in Greek literally means "shaken," "stirred up," or "agitated." To Herod's mind, these Magi suddenly arrived with divine and political authority to place their approval upon the true, legitimate ruler of the Jewish people. Herod had dreaded such a terrifying prospect throughout his turbulent reign. Jerusalem may have braced itself for another Parthian invasion!

The Magi of **Matthew 2** illustrate our theme, What Not to Put Away *after* Christmas, because all their actions toward Christ did not take place until more than a *month after* His birth. Joseph and Mary had two duties to perform at Jerusalem's Temple: (1) Pay the five shekels (\$150 today) God required to redeem all firstborn males of Israel (to testify of God sparing Israel's firstborn males in His final judgment upon the Egyptians prior to Israel's Exodus from Egypt), and (2) Present Mary's purification offering for the birth of a child. God's law specified these duties could not be fulfilled until at least 40 days *after* the birth of a son (**Luke 2:21-24; Exodus 13:1-2, 11-15; Leviticus 12:1-8; Numbers 3:40-48**). If Joseph and Mary had already possessed the Magi's gifts, do you think they would have provided the minimum offering God specified, a "pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons," which God allowed to be presented by those who "cannot afford" a "one year old lamb" that was the preferred offering (**Leviticus 12:1-8; Luke 2:24**)? No.

This reveals **Jesus'** family remained in Bethlehem, "the city of David" (**Luke 2:11**) and a mere five miles from Jerusalem, for some time. **Jesus** was the promised Savior of the "house of David" (**Luke 1:68-69**) and was known during His ministry as the "Son of David" (**Matthew 9:27**). As a carpenter, Joseph could find work anywhere and may have thought, "What better place to raise **Jesus** than David's ancestral home near Jerusalem and the Temple?" This explains why **Matthew 2:11** states the Magi found the Christ Child in a "house," not the "manger" to which the angels directed the shepherds at His birth (**Luke 2:8-12**). Joseph may have rented this house while working as a carpenter, and the family returned there after the redemption and purification rites in the Temple described in **Luke 2**. They did not leave Bethlehem until after the Magi departed, when an angel warned them to do so to flee Herod's wrath (**Matthew 2:12-14**).

Every attempt to provide a natural explanation of the "star" leading the Magi falls short, like an alignment of planets intensifying their brightness, or a nova making a star too distant to be seen from earth without a telescope (which did not exist in Biblical times) dramatically and temporarily visible. Astronomical language in **vss. 9-10** is very precise: "After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the Child was.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed." The Greek text literally says of this star's movement, "until, having arrived, it stood still over where was the little child." No natural phenomenon matches this description. Nearly every aspect of the Birth of our Savior was heralded and directed by supernatural interventions into our natural world, including the angel Gabriel's announcements to Zechariah and Mary (**Luke 1**) and angels bursting the news of the birth of "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" to "shepherds" in Bethlehem's "fields," and then directing these "shepherds" how to find and identify the Christ Child (**Luke 2:8-12**). We insult our awesomely supernatural Creator-God by seeking to reduce His Divine handiwork to natural causes.

But the greatest wonder of the Magi is not that these king-makers were drawn by the appearance of a supernatural "star" to "worship" the astounding phenomenon of God's Son come to earth as a child. The greatest wonder is that countless others beheld this same "star" and let its significance literally sail right over their heads, even those who claimed they were most longing for His coming. The Magi grasped the world-changing wonder of Christ's birth. This is why they came more than 500 miles, scorning the dangers and costs; counting it a privilege to be allowed to bestow their costliest gifts upon God's Messiah (Christ).

How about today? Is it possible to get caught up in life's daily demands or the routine practices of our Christian faith and lose our sense of *awe* over Christ's Birth that first Christmas? **John 1:14** eloquently proclaims: "The Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We observed His glory, the glory as the One and Only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright finally succeeded in getting their "flying machine" off the ground at Kitty Hawk, NC. Thrilled by their achievement, they telegraphed this message to their sister Katherine in their hometown of Dayton, OH: "We have actually flown 120 feet! Will be home for Christmas." Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper to show him their message. He glanced at it and said, "How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas." He totally missed the big news of the day—man had flown!

II. WORSHIP

Picture the Magi's arrival in Bethlehem. They held great power, prestige, and prosperity, but they were not content to send agents to pay homage to the Christ Child. Kings normally *bowed* to them for approval, yet, "falling to their knees, they worshiped Him" (HCSB). They customarily *received* gifts from rulers they advised and sustained in power, yet they came to *present* gifts to a mere baby. The particular gift you give to someone at Christmas or on other occasions often reveals the importance you attach to the one receiving your gift. The Magi *magnificently* honored the Christ Child for all He would accomplish for them by saving them from sin's penalty and power and restoring them to full fellowship with God! Their actions put on display their worship of Christ as their Savior and Lord. The Greek text for **Matthew 2:11** might more descriptively be translated, "Having entered the house, they saw the little child with Mary his mother, and they cast themselves to the ground and worshiped Him. Next, they opened their treasure-chests and presented Him with gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh."

The Bible often describes "gold" as tribute worthy of a king (as **Psalms 72:15**). By offering the infant **Jesus** gold, the Magi recognized Him as their King and their Master. This was not a one-time gift, as a typical Christmas present might be. They were literally pledging themselves and their resources to Christ as His subjects. How easy it is to forget God's generosity toward us when it comes to our money. A man who was seriously ill called for the pastor. "Pastor, if you pray for me to recover and I do, I will give you \$25,000 toward the new church you are building!" The pastor prayed for him and the man did get well. But when the pastor tried to remind him tactfully of his pledge, the man failed to take the hint. Finally, the

pastor told him directly, "You promised to give \$25,000 for the new church." "Did I?" said the recovered man. "Well, that should give you some idea of how sick I really was." Will this be our attitude in 2019?

The Magi's pledge of themselves to **Jesus** as their Master was strengthened by their gift of rare and costly "frankincense." In Old Testament days, frankincense (which literally means "pure incense") was nearly always reserved exclusively for the LORD'S worship (as in **Exodus 30:34-38**). Thus, the Magi were recognizing **Jesus**, even as an infant, as the Son of God and their divine LORD. We follow the Magi's example when we recognize the exclusive daily claims **Jesus** has upon us as our Savior and our Lord.

The Magi's third gift of "myrrh" signified their awareness that the Christ Child, despite being their God and King, was also a mortal man born to experience life's woes and to die. Myrrh was a perfume used to make mortal life more pleasant, pain less dreadful as one of the most commonly used analgesics prior to the discovery of morphine and modern pain killers (**Mark 15:23**), and burial less repulsive as a spice used with linen burial wrappings (**John 19:39-40**). We honor the Magi's gift by relating to **Jesus** as one who is fully human and understands our struggles, and by properly valuing the horrors of His sufferings for us.

III. WITNESS

The Bible is silent about the Magi after their departure from Bethlehem. But when they first arrived in Jerusalem, they stirred up the whole town by asking everyone, "What can you tell us about the birth of the Messiah, the 'King of the Jews'?" Imagine the fervency of their witness on their long journey home, and for as long as they lived, as they recounted their experiences to everyone who would listen about being led by God's "star" to a personal encounter with the "Savior, who is Christ the Lord," as the angels proclaimed Him the night of His Birth (**Luke 2:8-14**)! Is this not our same privilege for as long as we walk this Earth?

CONCLUSION

Early in this sermon it was said, "may the Magi who demonstrated a life-changing devotion to **Jesus** as Lord and Savior be our guide in what *not* to put away after Christmas!" The Bible reveals that those most blessed by the events surrounding the first Christmas were those accepting the risks and costs of obedience to the will of God. Christ's Birth inspired their Wonder, their Worship, and their Witness. This includes the Magi; the shepherds who risked their flocks to thieves or wild animals to rush to the manger where the Christ Child lay; Joseph & Mary enduring the stigma of her apparent illegitimate pregnancy, their difficult trip to Bethlehem, and their flight to Egypt; and Zechariah and Elizabeth having their prayers for a child denied for so long it seemed their dream had died, prior to their son John's birth as Christ's forerunner. What astounding blessings may we lose if we fail to follow their examples by accepting the risks and costs tied to the Wonder, the Worship, and the Witness of the coming of the Son of God, our Savior, to Earth?

Some years back, a church in Galveston, TX, had a Tithing Demonstration Sunday for its members. On a designated Sunday, everyone was asked to give a tithe of one week's salary. They urged everyone, even if they didn't usually tithe, to give a tithe that one time. For many in that church, they would be allowing their commitment to **Jesus Christ** as Lord and Savior to cost them the most financially in their entire lives.

As you can imagine, the offering that Sunday was the largest ever given: six times the usual amount. The aftermath, though, was even more exciting. Many who'd never before tithed changed their attitude and decided if they could do it once, they could do it again. By the end of that year, giving was up almost three times what it had been before the Tithing Demonstration. Their enthusiasm as Christ's followers rose even more. Over and over, people gave testimonies of the many surprising and remarkable changes that had taken place in their lives as God fulfilled His promise in **Malachi 3:10** (NLT), "'Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food [provisions] in my Temple. If you do,' says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, 'I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test!'" If we fall short of maintaining the Wonder, the Worship, or the Witness over the Christmas miracle of our Savior's Birth, we are shortchanging ourselves!