

STUMBLING TOWARD THE STAR

The Attitude of the Wise Men: Seeking Christ

1997 by Mark Beaird

Matthew 2:1-2 & 9-11

What does it mean to stumble toward the Star? To me it means that man has found God in spite of himself. Man has forever proven himself to be, by nature, hardhearted toward God and slow to hear the voice of his Creator. Therefore, God had to reveal Himself to mankind in the clearest possible way. This revelation brings us to the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Star lit the way for three wise men as they "stumbled" toward an encounter with God.

■ Gene Bartlett writes, "The best way to send an idea," said scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer, "is to wrap it up in a person." The theological word for that is *incarnation*, meaning "in the flesh." Jesus was the incarnation of God. Jesus was the way that God sent His "idea" to humanity; there was and is no better way! One of the early church fathers whose name was Ignatius explained that "by the incarnation God broke His silence." Less scholarly as an explanation but equally to the point was the remark of a little girl who said, "Some people couldn't hear God's inside whisper and so He sent Jesus to tell them out loud." The gospel of John declares dramatically, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Word, that living expression of God, tells out loud His truth and sees to it that we are in touch with the power and glory at the heart of Creation. (Hewett, 300)

After 400 years without a message from God the Star announced the arrival of God's message -- Jesus Christ. The wise men sought to follow the Star and find what awaited them. In a sense, we can identify with the wise men searching for the Savior. The wise men, like many today, respond to the Star by moving toward it's message with great hope and yet in an unsure and awkward manner.

Let's look at the journey of the wise men and compare their journey to our own. There are several lessons that we can learn from their experience.

I. THERE ARE REASONS WHY WE STUMBLE.

A. We stumble at the length of the journey.

We do not come to know Christ as we should in a matter of minutes or days. The wise men followed the star for many months, perhaps years. This, in itself, would be considered foolish to the world. But it was worth all the ridicule when they found what they were looking for.

■ *One author writes, "It had been a long journey. For many of us it is a long journey still.... Our journey begins where the wisemen's ended. Like them, we have found a Wisdom not to ponder but to worship, a wisdom that is not a matter of words but who is the Word. This Wisdom has everything to do with life because He is the Life. He gives us wisdom because He gives us Himself. The Magi journeyed to Jesus, but our journey is *with* Jesus, a sacred and long, long journey."* (Card, 51)

B. We stumble at the One called Savior.

1. It's doubtful that the wise men saw what or whom they expected to see.

■ In his song entitled *The Promise*, Michael Card writes,

For a thousand years the dreamers dreamt
And hoped to see His love.
But the Promise showed their wildest dreams
Had simply not been wild enough.

2. Jesus did not come to fit into man's mold or to gain man's approval.

■ *Both the prophet Isaiah and the apostle Peter referred to Jesus as, "A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense."* (Isaiah 8:14 & I Pet. 2:8)

3. Many are offended at the Jesus of the Bible.

The word *offense* in the Greek is *skandalon* from which we get our English word "**scandal**." In other words, some find it scandalous or shameful to believe in the Jesus of the Bible.

C. We stumble at the cost of following.

What had it cost these men to follow the star and seek out Christ? What will it cost us? The cost is certainly self-denial.

II. THERE ARE PROVEN WAYS TO FIND HIM.

A. We must follow His witness – the WORD.

The wise men followed the star because of the prophetic predictions found in the word of God.

■ *Jesus said to the Jews in John 5:39*, "You search the scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me."

B. We must seek what we know leads to Him.

It's not the logic or wisdom of the world that will lead you to Christ it is the direction of the Holy Spirit.

■ *I Corinthians 1:18 tells us*, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

■ *I Corinthians 2:12 reads*, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God."

III. THERE ARE APPROPRIATE WAYS TO RESPOND TO HIM.

A. We can *worship*.

B. We can *rejoice*.

C. We can *give*.

CONCLUSION

The real shame of this story is that the very people who should have recognized and welcomed Jesus were the same ones who ignored and rejected Him.

■ "The leaders misread the signs. The baby born in the stable is not a sign of a weak and ineffectual king. But it is a sign of a majesty who is secure and knows who He is. It's a sign of love. The leaders of that time didn't know anything about that. And so they missed it." Earl Palmer (Hewett, 76)

Many are without the fullness of God's love because of lessons they have failed to learn. Don't miss out by not responding to the star. Don't ignore God's message of love. It's all right to stumble toward it. Just don't miss out by ignoring it.

References

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HIDING FROM THE STAR

The Attitude of the Chief Priest and Scribes: Ignoring Christ

1997 by Mark Beard

Text: Matthew 2:4-6

How could the Savior of the world, the Son of God, the awaited Messiah be born into the world and he ignored? How could the religious leaders who should have greeted Him turn a deaf ear to the announcement of His arrival? For what or who were they waiting?

■ *Max Lucado elaborates on the inglorious birth of Jesus.*

“God had come near.

He came, not as a flash of light or as an unapproachable conqueror, but as one whose first cries were heard by a peasant girl and a sleepy carpenter. The hands that first held him were unmanicured, callused and dirty.

No silk. No ivory. No hype. No party. No hoopla.

Were it not for the shepherds, there would have been no reception. And were it not for a group of stargazers, there would have been no gifts.” (Lucado 26)

The only possible explanation for such an obvious disregard would be that they were hiding from the message of the star. Jesus did not appear as they thought He would; therefore, they would have no part of His arrival. He exerted no worldly influence; hence they wanted no part of His kingdom.

As we examine the attitude of the Chief Priest and Scribes we can draw several *conclusions* about people who "hide" their hearts from the message of the star.

I. SOME HIDE BECAUSE OF IGNORANCE.

The word **Ignorance** is defined as - uninformed or unaware. How could the religious hierarchy of the Jewish faith be ignorant concerning the birth of their Messiah?

A. Some people are *willingly* ignorant of God's truth.

The basis of this willing ignorance is apathy. Consider for a moment the unconcern of these men. These men knew the scriptures well enough to tell King Herod the place of the Messiah's birth. They knew all the signs. After all, He was to be *their Messiah*.

What makes matters worse is that they were only 5 miles away from Bethlehem. Yet they would not take the time and trouble to go and seek for Him.

B. Some people are *spiritually* ignorant.

■ These people are like those Paul spoke of in II Timothy 3:7, "*always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.*"

Being religious does not make one spiritual. Having the Holy Spirit living in one's heart is that which makes one spiritual. Without the Spirit of God in our heart the true message of Christmas -- the arrival of Christ into the world-- will mean no more to you and I than the arrival of a stranger into our hometown.

II. SOME HIDE WITHOUT KNOWING.

A. Do we substitute religious activity for a true, life changing experience with Jesus?

■ Elbert Hubbard said, "If your religion does not change you, then you should change your religion."

The Chief Priests and Scribes knew all about God, they just didn't care anything about meeting Him.

B. Do we have difficulty accepting Jesus as He is?

The religious leaders couldn't believe that their savior would be born in a stable. Later in His life they could not believe that a prophet, much less the Messiah, could have lived in Galilee. Galilee was a ghetto. It was beneath them to accept a savior like Jesus.

We might ask ourselves the question, “Are we only comfortable with Jesus when surrounded by stained glass and pews?” Do we care if our friends and neighbors know that we are a committed Christian? Are we trying to get Jesus to accept our way of living or are we willing to accept His way?

C. Do we resist His guidance in our life?

In other words, do we say, "I know that I should not... but I will just this once," if so, we are ignoring Christ. Something else has our attention. *We are choosing to follow Christ event by event, not once and for all.*

■ Oswald Chambers explains what it means to be totally committed to the Lord. He writes, *"At first we want the consciousness of being guided by God, then as we go on we live so much in the consciousness of God that we do not need to ask what His will because the thought of choosing any other will never occur to us."* (113)

CONCLUSION

When it comes to giving Christ first place in our lives too many people do on purpose what one boy did by accident.

■ The kids were putting on the Christmas play. To show the radiance of the new-born Savior an electric light bulb was hidden in the manger. All the stage lights were to be turned off so that only the brightness of the manger could be seen, but the boy who controlled the light got confused all the lights went out!

It was a tense moment, broken only when one of the shepherds said in a loud stage whisper. **"Hey! You switched off Jesus!"** (Hewett, 86)

Jesus doesn't want to be switched on and off in our lives as the situation changes. He wants to be our constant guide. He doesn't want to be switched on during the Christmas holidays and switched off after the New Year. He wants to share His message through us all year. Above all He doesn't want to be ignored.

SCREAMING AT THE STAR

The Attitude of King Herod: Opposing Christ

Text: Matthew 2:3-4, 7-8, 14-19

Have you noticed how anti-Christian the world is becoming -- even at Christmas!

■ Just a few days before Christmas two ladies stood looking into a department store window at a large display of the manger scene with clay figures of the baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, and the animals. Disgustedly, one lady said, "Look at that, the church trying to horn in on Christmas!" (Hewett, 79)

Imagine the advent of our Savior's birth, what Christmas is all about, provoking such anger by the world. Half of the problem is ignorance on the part of our society and the other half is an attitude of opposition to Christ.

King Herod's attitude mirrors the world's attitude toward God's message. When we take this into consideration, it is no wonder we see the *reactions* to the gospel, and thus to Christ, that are so prominent in our society today.

I. THE WORLD WILL ALWAYS CHALLENGE THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S MESSAGE.

What is the message? Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

A. Mankind resists the message because it reveals Jesus as purely divine.

■ "One true story I read recently told of a commercial venture of one of the largest department stores in our nation. It proved to be disastrously unsuccessful. It was a doll in the form of the baby Jesus. It was advertised as being unbreakable, washable, and cuddly. It was packaged in straw with a satin crib and plastic surroundings, and appropriate biblical text added here and there to make the scene complete.

It did not sell. The manager of one of the stores in the department chain panicked. He carried out a last-ditch promotion to get rid of these dolls. He brandished a huge sign outside his store that read:

**JESUS CHRIST—
MARKED DOWN 50%
GET HIM WHILE YOU CAN**

My friend, Jesus is God's Lamb, the Son of God. He didn't come to be packaged and offered for half price where, if you hurry, you can get Him. He came as very God." (Swindoll, 90-1)

B. Mankind resists the message because it exposes sinners in need of a Savior.

II. THE WORLD WILL ALWAYS TRY TO SILENCE GOD'S MESSAGE.

A. The light of the gospel, like that of the star, cannot be extinguished.

We see God's message included in books of so-called higher learning--newspapers, magazines, TV shows, college classrooms, and even in some seminaries.

They may try to twist it, kill it, pervert it, and discredit it. But it is as pure and faithful today as the moment God spoke it in eternity past--long before the advent of the skeptic and unbelievers.

■ Jesus said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My Word will never pass away."

B. Opposing Christ will destroy one's soul but never God's truth.

III. THE WORLD WILL ALWAYS OPPOSE CHRIST BUT HIS MESSAGE WILL ENDURE.

There are *two certainties* we know for sure:

- A. There will always be opposition.

- B. There will always be the triumph of God's message.

CONCLUSION

One cannot oppose the message without opposing the Christ of the message. Christ is the message in its entirety. He is the embodiment of all that God wanted to say to mankind. Some would like to accept the historical figure of Jesus Christ but refuse to accept His claims of divinity.

■ Speaking of people's reaction to the claim that Jesus Christ was and is the Son of God, C. S. Lewis wrote, "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

The preaching of Christ will bring many different *reactions* from those around us--some good, some evil. We can only control our reaction, our response. How will you respond today.

References

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SURRENDERING TO THE STAR

The Attitude of Mary and Joseph: Welcoming Christ

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

What is Christmas all about? We say we know that *Jesus is the Reason for the Season*, but our actions betray us.

In 1822 Clement C. Moore wrote a classic Christmas poem *The Night Before Christmas*. Most of us grew up with the familiar verses. Most everyone can quote, "T'was the night before Christmas and all through the house...."

■ "Almost two hundred Christmases and thousands of shopping trips later, another father has composed a somewhat less idealistic poem about the Yuletide event. It is titled "'Twas the Day *after* Christmas."

'Twas the day after Christmas,
When all through the place
There were arguments and depression—
Even Mom had a long face.

The stockings hung empty,
And the house was a mess;
The new clothes didn't fit...
And Dad was under stress.

The family was irritable,
And the children--no one could please;
Because the instructions for the swing set
Were *written* in Chinese!

The bells no longer jingled,
And no carolers came around;
The sink was stacked with dishes,
And the tree was turning brown.

The stores were full of people
Returning things that fizzled and failed,
And the shoppers were discouraged
Because everything they'd bought was now on
half-price sale!

T'was the day AFTER Christmas—
The spirit of joy had disappeared;
The only hope on the horizon
Was twelve bowl games the first day of the
New Year!

--Charles R. Swindoll-- (Swindoll, 30-1)

Doesn't it seem that we've made Christmas a little too much about us? The poem hits a little too close to home—don't you think? It almost seems that Christmas has been reduced to one big interruption in our over-packed schedule. But that's the way it seems that God has been getting humanities attention for centuries—by *interrupting* our lives and doing the miraculous.

Mary and Joseph's lives were certainly interrupted by God! Wouldn't you say? As we look back over this very familiar story I ask you to consider the *feelings* of Mary and Joseph as they dealt with the miraculous, the divine, and to the human mind, the impossible!

I. NO DOUBT, THERE WERE FEELINGS OF CONFUSION AND TREPEDATION (vv. 18-20).

A. Mary had her life all planned out—but she hadn't planned on this.

Mary had planned to marry Joseph and settle down to a quiet and obscure life. Then an angel paid her a visit and her life was never the same.

It's overwhelming enough to some that God would want to be a part of their life; but it is simply too much when He wants to take control of it. I'm glad Mary didn't feel that way.

B. Joseph was asked to believe more than his mind could conceive.

He was asked to believe in his wife's virtue, in a dream and in his own sanity! It was enough to shake any man; but Joseph was willing to believe God.

■ Author and songwriter Michael Card writes, “Joseph was the first person to really struggle with the incarnation. Mary’s momentary, ‘How could these things be?’ seemed to come and go, like a cool breeze. But Joseph saw no angels. He only dreamed dreams. He had no quickening in his belly to tell him that life had indeed been conceived without his flesh. We know almost nothing about Joseph, apart from his gentleness and willingness to say ‘No’ to himself for Mary’s sake and for God’s.

Imagine the dilemma of that simple man, finding himself cast in the role of father to the Son of God.” (Card, 42)

Many had, and still have, a difficult time believing that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. Why do we believe and accept Him as Son of God? We believe because of the fulfillment of the prophecies in His birth, life and death.

■ Josh McDowell points out in his book *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*:

"The chance that any man might have lived down to the present time and fulfilled....eight prophecies is 1 in 10^{17} ." That would be 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000. In order to help us comprehend this staggering probability, [Peter] Stoner illustrates it by supposing that "we take 10^{17} silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover all of the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that this is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing . . . eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time."

Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1963), as quoted by Josh McDowell in *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, rev. ed. (San Bernardino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), p. 167.

When you know and believe the promises of God you expect the miraculous.

II. UNEASINESS GAVE WAY TO FEELINGS OF PEACE AND ASSURANCE (vv. 21-25).

A. Mary and Joseph were at peace because of their willingness to open their hearts to divine possibilities (vv. 21-23).

This Holy Child would be the **Savior** of the world (v. 21).
He would be **God living with humanity** (v. 23).

■ “Existing in the form of God, Christ took on the form of a man, even a slave.⁵ As a result, His appearance changed. He no longer looked like God; He looked human and felt human in every way. He hurt, He laughed, and He bled. No halo hovered beatifically over Jesus' head, no royal robes draped His shoulders, no angelic wings graced His back. Because He was human, people could come near Him. Fishermen felt comfortable in His presence. Prostitutes spoke to Him without shrinking back in shame. Even lepers called Him friend.

"He was the God-man," wrote commentator C. Campbell Morgan.

Not God indwelling a man. Of such there have been many. Not a man Deified. Of such there have been none save in the myths of pagan systems of thought; but God and man, combining in one Personality the two natures, a perpetual enigma and mystery, baffling the possibility of explanation.⁶

(Swindoll, 25)

5. What would it have been like for infinite God to take on a human body? "The Eternal Being," wrote C. S. Lewis, "who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a [fetus] inside a Woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab." *Mere Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York, N.Y.: Macmillan Publishing Co., Collier Books, (1952), p.155.

6. G. Campbell Morgan, *The Crisis of the Christ* (Old Tappan, N.J., Fleming H. Revell Co., 1936), p. 79.

B. Joseph found the assurance to follow the Lord into an unknown future.

In his song *Joseph's Song*, Michael Card writes of Joseph's desire to follow the plan of God though he was uncertain how. The first verse of the lyrics read.....

Joseph's Song

*How could it be?
This baby in my arms,
Sleeping now so peacefully,
'The Son of God,' the angel said.
How could it be?*

*"Lord, I know He's not my own,
Not of my flesh, not of my bone.
Still Father let this baby be
The son of my love.*

*Father show me where I fit into
This plan of yours.
How can a man be father to the Son of God?
Lord, for all my life I've been a simple carpenter.
How can I raise a king?
How can I raise a king?*

How often have we welcomed Christ into our lives to be our sole preoccupation and joy?

CONCLUSION

In 1994, two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics (based on biblical principles) in the public schools. They were invited to teach at prisons, businesses, the fire and police departments and a large orphanage. About 100 boys and girls, who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program were in the orphanage. They relate the following story in their own words:

It was nearing the holiday season, 1994, time for our orphans to hear, for the first time, the traditional story of Christmas. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger.

Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word. Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. No colored paper was available in the city.

Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn-out nightgown an American lady was throwing away as she left Russia, were used for the baby's blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt we had brought from the United States.

The orphans were busy assembling their manger as I walked among them to see if they needed any help. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously.

For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately--until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said, "And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift.

So I asked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?" And Jesus told me. "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me." "So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him--for always."

As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed with tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him--FOR ALWAYS.

Isn't it amazing that we who have so much knowledge of God and are exposed to so much of the Christian religion spend so little time welcoming the presence of Christ into our lives? We know the story; but we miss the point. The little boy in the story, upon hearing the gospel one time, understood the message of the star. He understood that the only proper way to respond to the Christ is to welcome Him in love, and that if we will put our *feelings* of uneasiness aside we can find what we've been looking for. He came to live with us for a short while so that we might **live with Him forever!**

I've learned that it's *not what* you have in your life, *but who* you have in your life that counts!

References

Card, Michael. (1990). *Immanuel: Reflections on the life of Christ*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

Swindoll, Charles R.

