

Glad Tidings

Of The Kingdom Of God



Featured **Articles**

The Man who Came by Night (p. 3)

Himalayan Sunrise (p. 5)

Who Can Pray to God? (p. 10)

A monthly magazine written and published by the Christadelphians (brothers and sisters in Christ) and available throughout the world.

Its objectives are to encourage the study of the Bible as God's inspired message to humankind; to call attention to the divine offer of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ; and to warn people that soon Christ will return to earth as judge and ruler of God's worldwide Kingdom.

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Glad Tidings Distributors for orders and payments

United Kingdom

Becky Collard, 7 Lindridge Close,
Redditch, Worcs. B98 0QJ, UK
Tel: +44 (0)7521 079 190 (24 hrs)
orders-uk@gladtidingsmagazine.org

Australia

Ruth Morgan, 41 Dimboola Road,
Warracknabeal, VIC 3393, Australia
gladtidingsaustralia@gmail.com

Canada

Vivian Thorp, 5377 Birdcage Walk,
Burlington, ON L7L 3K5, Canada
vivianthorp@bell.net

New Zealand

Jenny Luxmoore, 47 Woodfern Crescent,
Titirangi, Auckland 0604,
New Zealand
delux@xtra.co.nz

U.S.A.

Pat Hemingray, 1244 Pennsylvania
Avenue, Oakmont, PA 15139, USA
orders-usa@gladtidingsmagazine.org

Other Countries

Andrew Johnson, 22 Hazel Drive,
Hollywood, Birmingham B47 5RJ, UK
orders-int@gladtidingsmagazine.org

Editor

Chris Parkin, 7 Thorntree Lane, Newhall,
Swadlincote, Derbyshire DE11 0LP, UK
editor@gladtidingsmagazine.org

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The Man who Came by Night

JESUS' MINISTRY had only recently begun, but already he was antagonising the authorities. John chapter 2 describes his visit to the temple in Jerusalem during the busy Passover festival. The corrupt rulers had commercialised the temple and were profiteering from the pilgrims who came to worship. Jesus was incensed, and drove them out (John 2:14–16).



After this he received a visit from a member of the authorities.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him" (John 3:1–2).

Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council. He came by night, evidently because he didn't want people to know about his visit. We

don't know whether he had been sent by the Sanhedrin, or whether he was hiding his visit from them as well.

We're only given a summary of the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus. It ends with Jesus' words, *"This is the judgement: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light..."* (vs. 19–21).

Jesus claimed to be the 'light of the world' (John 8:12). Nicodemus had come to the light, because he wanted to know more—but he had come under cover of darkness, because he wasn't ready to commit himself. Jesus left him with a challenge: would he become Jesus' follower, or would he slink back into the darkness?

Secret Believers

The Jewish authorities were constant critics of Jesus. They recognised him as a threat. Actually, a number of them did secretly believe in him, but they weren't prepared to admit it: *'Many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue' (John 12:42).* They did not have the courage to come to the light.

The next time we see Nicodemus is in John 7. The Pharisees had tried to have Jesus arrested (v. 32), but the plan hadn't worked and they and chief priests were holding a heated discussion. Surprisingly, one of their own number spoke up in defence of Jesus: '*Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee"*' (vs. 50–52). Nicodemus spoke up for what he knew was right, and—as often happens—he was met with ridicule.

This is a challenge that all followers of Jesus need to face, sooner or later. You cannot be a 'closet Christian'. To be a follower of Jesus Christ means letting your light shine (Matthew 5:16). If your light does not shine, then you're in darkness and you're not following Christ.

Standing Up and Standing Out

Three years after that first Passover, Jesus' mission was complete. The time came for him to die on the cross. His enemies finally managed to have him arrested, thanks to the treachery of his disciple Judas (who chose to go out into the dark rather than stay in the light, John 13:30). The greatest miscarriage of justice in world history was perpetrated, and Jesus was crucified. Ordinarily the bodies of crucified criminals were dumped over the city walls into the Kidron Valley, but finally it was time for Jesus' friends to show themselves:

After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear

of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews... (John 19:38–40).



Jesus' body was not thrown into the city dump, it was buried with reverence in a tomb, and so his resurrection could be witnessed and verified.

We hear nothing more about Joseph or Nicodemus. Their colleagues on the Sanhedrin would certainly have discovered what they'd done. We don't know what happened to them. But their act of devotion and courage has been written in history—and more importantly, it will be remembered by their Lord when he returns as judge and king: '*Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven*' (Matthew 10:32–33).

Himalayan Sunrise



IT WAS AN EARLY morning in Nepal. Our bleary-eyed band of men, women and children climbed aboard the old bus. We shivered in the cold night air. Some were slightly fearful, others excited because this was their first ever trip on a bus, out of Kathmandu, a journey into the unknown.

The crate of fresh drinks and breakfast boxes were loaded aboard and we set off. The bus rattled and banged through the dark streets. The excited chatter of its passengers subsided, partly because it was difficult to hear each other, partly because of the slight uneasiness that accompanied the journey. Eventually the streets gave way to roads and the roads conducted us onward and upward towards the Annapurna mountains. The old bus began to protest as it climbed from the valley floor high into the foothills. It was a race against time to reach a spot from which we could watch the sunrise.

At last the bus screeched to a halt on the loose dust and grit. The driver killed the engine, and there was a moment or two of silence. Then the chattering began again as people stirred and scrambled off the bus.

We stood and shivered in the cold morning air. What now? We looked around to get our bearings. Out and ahead of us was a valley, a vast open space, and beyond that the hills rose again, rose again into great snow-topped peaks. In the darkness ahead appeared a glimmer of light silhouetting the mountains, and the glow of day began to steal across the mist that rested in the valley. Again the chattering stopped, and we stood still and gazed at the sunrise.

The Coming of Light

The glow of daylight increased behind the mountain tops. The first rays of the sun appeared over and around Mount Everest, then they spread out, in between the lower peaks and across the valleys below. Spontaneously the women in the party began to dance and sing. Light was coming into the world, lifting hearts and minds in exaltation. As the dance progressed, the sun rose in the sky dispelling the darkness. The music and dance subsided, but the sun rose higher and brought warmth to the world.

It was time for a prayer of thanksgiving to the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth.

The words of a Psalm came to my mind:

*The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his
handiwork.*

*Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals
knowledge.*

*There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.*

*Their voice goes out through all the
earth,
and their words to the end of the
world.*

*In them he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a
bridegroom leaving his
chamber,
and, like a strong man, runs its
course with joy.*

*Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them,
and there is nothing hidden from
its heat.*

(Psalm 19:1-6)

That experience of gathering warmth and light on the mountainside showed what a blessing it was for God to have created light first and then appointed the great lights of the sun and moon to regulate the days and nights, times and seasons on the earth (Genesis 1).

The Gift of Life

When God created the human race, starting with Adam, He did not create him in a vacuum. He gave him an idyllic place in which to live, the garden of Eden (Genesis 2). His task was to care for the garden, take responsibility for it. It was to be a joint project undertaken by man

and woman in the closest of all human partnerships. Eve, having been created out of Adam's side, was brought to him as a suitable helper in their life's work. Just as every new day is a remembrance of that first day when light was brought to the earth, so each new live birth is a celebration of the human partnership God first made with Adam and Eve and is, indeed, just as much of a miracle.

What a terrible shame then—having been appointed custodians of such a breathtakingly beautiful planet (Genesis 1:28), we have reduced it to a world which is facing environmental disaster. Humankind has sought other gods—the gods of material progress and secularism.

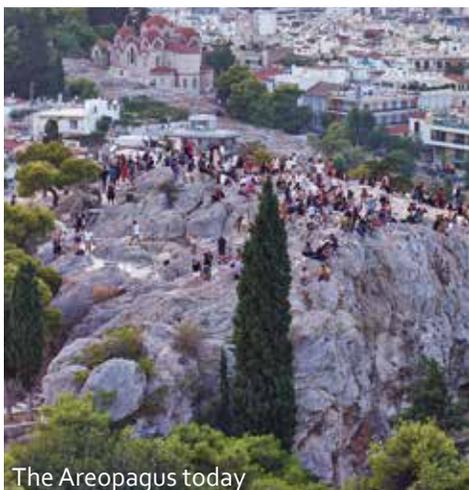


Nothing New Under the Sun

Nearly 2000 years ago the Apostle Paul walked the streets of Athens and arrived in the marketplace, and began preaching. He was soon spotted. I imagine he was

preaching with some venom as he had been aroused by the sight of one idol after another, one altar after another to this and that god. Finally he had noticed the altar to the Unknown God—which had been erected in case there was another god they had missed. (It was the same in Nepal: all manner of things were marked with a red-orange dye to indicate that they had been dedicated as gods, including me on one occasion!)

Paul was noticed as one who was speaking about 'foreign divinities' (Acts 17:18). They called him a 'babbling'—literally a 'seed picker', one who idled his time away and made a living picking up and recycling scraps of knowledge. But they were interested, and he was taken to the place where the best minds of Athens met to discuss new ideas - Mars Hill, the Areopagus (v. 19).



The Areopagus today

Incidentally you can visit the exact location where Paul stood to speak to them. The spot is marked by a plaque. This is what he said:

Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him.

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

(Acts 17: 22–31).

A New Teaching

Here's a summary of Paul's main points.

- The God who created all things really is the one and only true God.
- He is the Almighty, Living God who cannot be contained in temples or represented by marble statues and stone altars or even the limited theorising of the cleverest people. He is a living God and wants us, as real living people, to get in touch with Him. How do we know?
- God sent His Son, Jesus Christ. He lived a human being; he died a criminal's death upon the cross. But then, he rose from the dead and now lives for ever—he is just as much alive today as he was in Bible times. Because Jesus overcame all his temptations to sin where the rest of us singularly fail, God has appointed him to be the future Judge of all the earth. He is to return from heaven to accomplish this. Jesus is now the ever-living Saviour of the world; he is the one who will enable us to be restored to everlasting life and the earth to its former glory. Jesus is the One who proves all other idols false and worthless.

You will perhaps have noticed that Paul did not mention Jesus Christ by name, but he is at the centre of Paul's message.

On another occasion this is what the Apostle Peter said to his audience in Jerusalem:

Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of

the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago (Acts 3:19–21).

There is a challenge, of course: you have to repent, change your ways, leaving behind all worldly idols, believing in the wonderful person, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the only true representative of the Living God. The question is—as it was with the Greeks of Athens, can you really believe in the living and true God, the God who has a unique plan and purpose? Can you believe in the resurrection of the dead? Or is it just a bit of 'babble' to you? It is the only true hope for humankind. It is the ultimate miracle which makes life worth living, and brings light and warmth into this dark cold world.

David Nightingale



Philemon

PHILEMON WAS a believer belonging to the congregation at Colosse in Asia Minor. He appears to have been a wealthy man, for we know that he had at least one slave. From Rome, Paul wrote a letter to Philemon, as well as one to Colosse; from the letter to the Colossians (4:8)



Roman master and slave

it would appear that Tychicus was the bearer of both letters and that Onesimus accompanied him on his journey from Rome to Colosse. This letter begins by commending Philemon for his faith and love towards Jesus Christ, and his kindness to the believers (verse 5).

Onesimus—the Slave

But then the letter appeals to Philemon to receive back his slave, Onesimus, who had escaped and run away to Rome. Whilst in

Rome Onesimus had met Paul, who had taught him the good news of salvation in Christ. Onesimus (whose name means 'useful') should now be received back (verse 16). He had become 'useful to you and to me' (verse 11)—useful to Paul the prisoner in Rome, to Philemon, and above all to Christ! Philemon will surely have reacted graciously to Paul's kindly letter, and will have welcomed back Onesimus—not only as a slave but also as a brother.

Who Is Your Master?

We are not useful by nature, but we can be received by Christ upon our acceptance of the true Gospel. We have to be willing to obey his commands. It is far better to be a servant of Christ, than a servant of sin (see Romans 6:17). This is true freedom!

Norman Owen

By kind permission of 'The Christadelphian'



Some interesting links with other parts of the Bible:

- ◆ Philemon verse 3—see Romans 3:24.
- ◆ Philemon verse 10—see Colossians 4:7–9.
- ◆ Philemon verse 16—see Romans 14:18; Ephesians 6:9; Titus 1:1.

Who Can Pray to God?

THE BASIC ANSWER to this question is straightforward: anyone can say the words of a prayer to God. But that is not really the point! When I was a young girl there was a strict schoolteacher who scared me. I used to pray that she would be ill so that I would not have to face her. No doubt God was aware of my foolish childish words, but happily they had no effect. So the real issue is: when is prayer acceptable to God?

Prayer in the Bible

There are many prayers recorded in the Bible. Jesus prayed regularly and for hours at a time, sometimes all night (Luke 6:12). At the request of his disciples he taught them what we know as 'the Lord's prayer' (Luke 11:1-4). This is a sample prayer for baptised Christians, who are members of God's family and therefore entitled to call Him 'father'. The apostles were in the habit of praying regularly (Acts 2:42). Paul told believers to '*pray without ceasing*' (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and to '*continue steadfastly in prayer*' (Colossians 4:2). We're assured that prayer can achieve a great deal (James 5:16). Prayer is important.

But not all prayer is acceptable. Jesus told a chilling parable about a religious ruler who believed he was praying to God. In reality, however, he was just congratulating himself (Luke 18:9-14), and so he was wasting his time. Jesus warned not to make a show of praying, but to do it privately and in simple, humble terms; not using empty

repetitions (Matthew 6:5-7). Furthermore, he taught not to hold grudges against other people when praying to God (Mark 11:25-26).

Consequently, there are some prayers that God does not accept. The Israelite king Saul reached a point where God would not answer him '*either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets*' (1 Samuel 28:6). Later, when the Jewish nation had forsaken Him, God refused to hear the people (Isaiah 1:15). And He repeatedly ordered His faithful prophet Jeremiah not to pray for the nation because He would not hear him (Jeremiah 7:16, 11:14, 14:11-12). Clearly then, the content of a prayer, the attitude of the person praying, and the nature of their relationship with God all matter.

Many, many prayers are heard and answered. There are lots of examples in the Bible. But even if God accepts a prayer He does not always grant the requests that are in it. The Apostle Paul pleaded



with the Lord three times that a problem would be taken away, but in the Lord's wisdom his request was not granted (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). And, of course, the ultimate example is Jesus who prayed in anguish in Gethsemane:

Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done (Luke 22:42).

The cup of suffering and death by crucifixion were not removed. It was God's will for Jesus to endure this. But Jesus had asked for God's will to be done, and he really meant it—so in that sense his request was granted. This is a key lesson for us.

Acceptable Prayer

In everything, and especially in prayer, it is important that we acknowledge the supremacy of God. This means accepting, unreservedly, that everything has to be in accordance with what He wants, even if that is not what we would like. We should want to submit to God's will. We should want to find out what is God's will.

The Apostle James addresses the issue in his letter, where he encourages his readers to pray, and to pray in an acceptable way.

You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions (James 4:2–3).

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord (James 1:5–7).

So faith and confidence are intrinsic parts of prayer. Now there is little point in having confidence in something that God has not actually promised: something that He will not do. That is fake faith. And we cannot work out for ourselves what God wants. We need to read His word and learn about and from Him. Then we can offer prayers that are acceptable to Him. Of course, it is entirely up to Him what He does with any prayer: it is not our place to tell Him what He can or should do. But it is still our place to approach Him in the right way, trying to accept His will and acknowledging our position in His sight.

Anyone can say a prayer. Prayer, however, should be consistent with the principles described in the Bible. It should be offered in a way acceptable to God, and it should reflect the correct relationship between us and God. And of one thing we can be sure:

The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous (Proverbs 15:29).

Anna Hart



The Sacrifice of Christ

THE FACT THAT Jesus Christ died on the cross, as we are told in the Gospels and letters of the Bible's New Testament, is generally accepted throughout the world. The Bible tells us it was not just the death of an innocent man—Jesus Christ was the Son of God who died to save us from our sins. How was his death able to do this?

To answer this question and to understand why Christ gave himself as a sacrifice, we need to go back to the Old Testament.

The Origin of Sacrifice

The Bible is in two sections—the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament was written many years before Christ, by different people who were moved by God's Holy Spirit to enable them to speak and write down God's Word (2 Peter 1:20–21).

The Old Testament explains the origin of sacrifice, how it was required by the Lord God as part of their worship and for the forgiveness of their sins.

The sacrifice of animals for the forgiveness of sin began with Adam and Eve, who disobeyed God's commandment that they should not eat of the fruit of 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' (Genesis 2:9, 3:6). The consequence of their disobedience was they were cursed by God to die and all their descendants were too (Genesis 3:17–19). Adam and Eve were ashamed of what they had done. Their shame was expressed

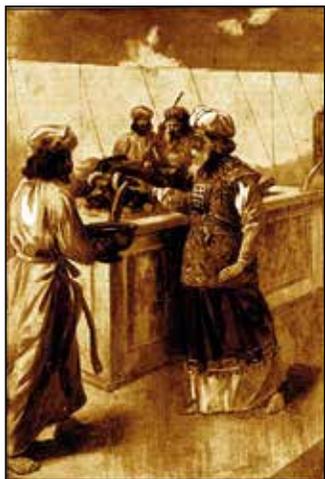
in the realisation that they were naked. In order to show how their shame could be removed, God provided a covering for their nakedness—the skin of an animal. 'And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them' (Genesis 3:21). We see that for Adam and Eve to be forgiven an animal had to die.



This principle was repeated in the account of the worship of Adam and Eve's sons, Cain and Abel. Cain brought an offering of vegetables, and God rejected it. But 'Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering' (Genesis 4:4).

The principle of sacrifice became part of The Law of Moses for the Israelites. They were commanded to sacrifice bulls and goats as a necessary part of their worship

(for example Leviticus 1). Interestingly, they should not consume the blood of any animal they killed, they had to pour out the blood: *'For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life'* (Leviticus 17:11). 'Atonement' means reconciliation, bringing together; in the Bible it speaks of repairing the breach between God and people.



Under the Law of Moses, a bullock was to be offered every day as a sin offering for atonement (Exodus 29:36). However, the fact was that animal sacrifices did not actually achieve forgiveness of sins. The New Testament shows that all the sacrifices of the Law of Moses were actually only pointing forward to the ultimate sacrifice that was to be provided by God. This is comprehensively explained in the Letter to the Hebrews. For example:

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same

sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshippers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Hebrews 10:1–4).

The sacrifices of bulls and goats was a 'shadow' of the real thing that was promised in the Old Testament. It was a lesson that taught of the reality that was to come—the sacrifice that God would make in giving His perfect Son, Jesus Christ, to die for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2).

The Ultimate Sacrifice

The letter to the Hebrews explains how it was necessary that the Old Testament had to be completed by the New. It shows how the priests that offered the sacrifices under the Law of Moses were replaced by the Lord Jesus Christ after his resurrection from the dead, to sit at God's right hand in heaven. Jesus Christ is the new sacrifice, and the new priest:

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven... As it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises (Hebrews 8:1, 6).

The True High Priest

As High Priest, Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and humankind. In order to do this it was necessary that he should

die first. He knew this at the very start of his ministry. John the Baptist said of him, *'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'* (John 1:29). And Jesus said himself, *'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep'* (John 10:11, 15).



It was the purpose of God to give His only Son as an unblemished human sacrifice to be the atonement for the sins of all people: that is, all people who believe in him and his promise of eternal life.

By his death on the cross Jesus Christ became the saviour from sin for all nations, he became the covering for sin. If he hadn't submitted to this cruel death, he would not have been resurrected to immortality; then there would have been no hope of eternal life for any of his followers, and their faith would have been empty and in vain (1 Corinthians 15:13–20).

However, if we are truly followers of Jesus Christ, the immortal High Priest in heaven

who has promised salvation for all who love him and keep his commandments—then he will grant to us eternal life in the Kingdom of God when he returns to the earth:

Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Hebrews 9:28).

Grahame A Cooper

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Wise Men Came to Jesus

ANYONE WHO HAS received Christmas cards or watched a nativity play will be familiar with the story of the three kings who came to the stable to see the baby Jesus. Do you think you know the story? Here it is in full:



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; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he enquired 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.'" Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search

diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

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. 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, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way... 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".

(Matthew 2:1-12, 16)

Facts Versus Traditions

So, how many kings came to the stable? None, of course! They were 'wise men', not kings. Presumably the assumption is made

that there were three because there were three gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh—but we're not told how many men there were. And they did not go to the stable to see a baby, they went to a house and saw a child.

Luke's record tells us that shepherds went to see the baby Jesus on the day he was born. They were visited by angels who told them the news of Jesus' birth: *"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).*



But time elapsed between the visit of the shepherds and that of the wise men. Some of it would be occupied in the long journey from the east. When King Herod realised that the wise men were not coming back to him, he attempted to kill Jesus by ordering the slaughter of all the children two years old and younger—because that was how old Jesus would have been by that time.

This is an example of how the Bible text can be changed by traditions. If we want to get to the truth of a Bible story or a Bible teaching, we need to set aside traditions

and preconceptions, and carefully read the written record itself.

How Did They Know?

Let's make it clear from the start—we do not know how the wise men knew about the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. But there is information in the Bible which suggests how they might have known. What follows is a linking of Bible passages which may be relevant, and this illustrates the benefits of comparing different parts of the Bible with each other in order to understand better the treasures of God's Word.

Abraham was the ancestor of the Jews and many of the Arabs. He is commended as a man of faith, who would exert a strong influence on his family:

The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice..." (Genesis 18:17–19).

Before he died Abraham separated his other children from his chosen son Isaac (who was to become the ancestor of the Jews).

Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastwards to the east country (Genesis 25:5–6).

These sons and their families, with a knowledge of God's promises to Abraham, went their way and may have become a

community of God-believers far away to the east, probably in Mesopotamia. (This was where Abraham had come from, see Acts 7:1–4.)

Over the centuries Isaac’s descendants became the kingdom of Israel. The kingdom split in two, and declined because of the people’s disobedience. The northern part was deported by the Assyrians. The southern part was later deported by the Babylonians to Mesopotamia.

The Jews would have taken with them their Scriptures, which included the record of Abraham and God’s promises to him. The prophet Daniel was one of those deported to Babylon, and to him were revealed prophecies concerning the nations of the Middle East, and especially of Israel. These prophecies are in the book of Daniel. One of these prophecies concerned the timing of the coming of the Messiah (the ‘anointed one’):

Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time (Daniel 9:25).

This prophecy is complicated to us, but faithful Jews would have been able to calculate the timing, starting from the Persian King Cyrus’ order to rebuild Jerusalem. There is evidence (in the Bible and other sources) that at the time Jesus was born there was a mood of expectation among the Jews that the Messiah was about to arrive, for example Luke 2:38 and John 1:19–20.

Some of the Jews remained in Babylon when others returned. There may also have been God-fearing remnants of Abraham’s other descendants there. So we see, then, possible ways in which the wise men could have become acquainted with prophecies of the Messiah, and anticipated his birth.

The wise men followed a star. We don’t know why this was, but there is an intriguing prophecy that was given by Balaam (a prophet from Mesopotamia, Numbers 22:5):

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel (Numbers 24:17).



The sceptre speaks of kingship. Perhaps this is why the appearance of a special star was seen as the signal for the journey which would lead eventually to Bethlehem.

We have seen from this example that when we read a passage of the Bible carefully, discarding any preconceptions, its meaning will become clear; and also, when we compare a passage with other parts of the Bible we can gain fascinating insights that were not apparent at first.

Peter Banyard

MS **Why are we born sinful? Couldn't God have made us perfect?**

Ed GOD COULD HAVE CREATED us perfect, like the angels. Angels are immortal, they don't suffer and they cannot do wrong. *'Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?'* (Hebrews 1:14). Why did God not make us like the angels?

God made humans very good (Genesis 1:31) but not perfect. He gave Adam and Eve free will. Then He gave them a test to see if they would obey Him—this was the lie of the serpent, as recorded in Genesis 3. (There is a view that the serpent's deceit of Adam and Eve was nothing to do with God. According to this view, the devil snuck into the Garden of Eden and corrupted the serpent in order to bring about the downfall of the human race. There are problems with this view: it assumes that God is not all-powerful, and that the devil is a person. Both these views go against Bible teaching, and they're both different subjects!)

The fact is, God does put people in difficult situations in order to test them. He tested Abraham's faith and obedience (Genesis 22:1), and the people of Israel in the wilderness: *'You shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God*

has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not' (Deuteronomy 8:2).

So God tested Adam and Eve. They failed the test and brought the curse of mortality upon themselves and the world (Genesis 3:17-19). God set about the process of bringing out from their descendants people who would believe and obey Him. As Jesus said, *'This is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day'* (John 6:40).

But why? Surely the history of the world would have been much less painful if God had just made us like the angels in the first place.

God wants us to love and obey Him because of our own free will, not because we don't have any choice. *'The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love'* (Psalm 147:11). When we have shown that we want to do this, then one day God will take away our imperfections. Jesus said of people who will be given eternal life at his return, *'When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven'* (Mark 12:25).

Across

Down

- 1 Jesus came to save his people from these (Matthew 1:21)
- 3 The king at the time of Jesus' birth (Matthew 2:1)
- 5 Observed (Matthew 2:2)
- 7 Jesus was born to be king of these (Matthew 2:2)
- 8 The wise men went into this to see Jesus (Matthew 2:11)
- 10 The angels wished peace on this (Luke 2:14)
- 12 The character of Joseph the husband of Mary (Matthew 1:19)
- 13 Jesus was Mary's firstborn (Luke 2:7)
- 14 Jesus when the wise men visited him (Matthew 2:11)
- 15 The mother of Jesus (Matthew 2:11)



- 1 The wife of Abraham from whom Jesus was descended (Genesis 17:15)
- 2 Herod asked these men where Jesus was to be born (Matthew 2:4)
- 4 These men visited Jesus (Matthew 2:1)
- 6 The men in 4 down wished to do this to Jesus (Matthew 2:2)
- 9 The men in 4 down came from this direction (Matthew 2:1)
- 11 John the Baptist ate this (Matthew 3:4)

(These clues use the English Standard Version of the Bible. If you're using another version some words may not be quite the same.)

Colin Jannaway

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cbma.treasurer@gmail.com

Caribbean

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philsnobelen@shaw.ca

India

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