

# The Advent Of Joy

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[ 0 : 00 ] It was 1857 when John Hopkins first published the carol that we know as We Three Kings. It became a classic carol.

Perhaps you sung it at some point. I don't think we sang it in our congregational singing, but perhaps you have reflected on it at some point this month. It walks us through the details of this particular text, but there are a couple of discrepancies with the hymn that are worth noting. The first one being that the men, the journeymen in this particular story, were not kings. It's not who they were. It's a different word that's used to describe that we translate as wise men.

Really, the word is magi. They weren't kingly figures per se. So that's the first discrepancy. The other is that it's really unlikely that there were only three of them.

There probably were actually much more than just three. But both of these notes in the carol, it comes from the emphasis on the three gifts that they open up and give to the baby Jesus or the toddler Jesus, however old he might have been at the time that they arrived.

[ 1 : 08 ] There were three of them, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And so John Hopkins associates these men as being kings because the gifts that were given were very, very valuable.

They were extremely valuable, actually. So valuable that these are the kind of things that would have really only belonged to or been given to kings. And so he associates these men, perhaps they're kings.

The reason he says that there might be three of them is because there were three gifts. And of course, we know that we can think that through and understand that that's not exactly what the text says. Could have been three.

Probably was a lot more than that, actually, at this particular moment. So there's some discrepancies in the carol, not to ruin it for you. But though it may be a bit off, there are at least two kings in this text.

One was obsessed with preserving his power, going so far as to even execute all the male children, two and under, in Bethlehem, in the region around Bethlehem, just in his attempt to preserve his own position of authority and power over the people.

[ 2 : 21 ] The other one couldn't have been more different than that. The other king in this text is the one that Paul would later say in Philippians chapter 2, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, a thing to hold on to at all costs, but instead humbled himself, became a servant, was made in the likeness of men.

One murdered innocent people to maintain his place, while the other one, the truly innocent one, laid down his life for the guilty.

Mark, after church last Sunday, came up and he told me a joke, and I found it funny, especially coming from Mark. He had a great joke, and he said, what's the difference between Santa and Jesus?

I really don't know what's the difference. And he said, he said, Santa brings gifts to all the people who are nice. Jesus brings his gift to all the people who are naughty. And that's exactly true, isn't it? That's really what the gospel is. Herod, on one hand, he murders innocent people in order to preserve his power. Jesus, one with God the Father and God the Spirit, leaves the throne of heaven, takes on humanity, suffers in our place, not for the nice ones and the ones who did all the good things this year.

[ 3 : 46 ] He actually did that for sinners, for the naughty ones. And as we'll see throughout our study, one of these kings brought tremendous trouble. One of them actually brought exceedingly great joy.

Now here's the approach I want to take to the passage. I think there's three potential responses to the advent of the Christ, to the birth of the King.

Three potential responses to Jesus that are revealed or exposed in this particular text. Each one has a distinct outcome, but only one of them results in true and lasting joy.

And I want us to take a few minutes to consider each of these responses. And in the process of doing that, examine our own hearts to see which one of these responses most characterizes our own.

Here's the first one. We want to look at those who are threatened by the King. Those who are threatened by the King. This comes in the first four verses.

[ 4 : 52 ] I know we've read it twice already, but it's just my habit to keep reading it. So let's just read those four verses again. Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem saying, Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. And when Herod the King heard this, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him.

So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes, inquiring of them where the Christ was to be born. Herod the Great is how we know this man historically.

He ruled over Israel for about 40 years under the authority of Rome. And he's really known for two things. He's known for building tremendous buildings.

He had all kinds of fortresses. He's responsible for even the amazing architectural achievement that was the temple in Jerusalem for the Jews at that particular time.

[ 5 : 54 ] And he's known for that. He's regarded for the things that he built. The other thing that he's known for is murdering anyone that he saw as a threat to his own power. He was a murderous man.

In fact, he was personally responsible for the murder of hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals, including his wife, his mother-in-law, which maybe some of you could understand.

Three of his sons, all because he felt like they were a threat to his own power. This was his legacy, really, of his own time.

And he knew that. He knew it so intently that he ordered and arranged that hundreds of the notable men in Israel and Jerusalem be gathered in the Hippodrome on the day that his own death was announced so that in Jerusalem the people would weep rather than celebrate on the day of his death.

That's what he was known for. He knew it. He was a vile man, a wicked man, ruthlessly taking the lives of others that he perceived as threatening.

[ 7 : 09 ] Well, it's no surprise then that Herod was troubled when he heard that this group of magi from the east were in town and the thing that they were asking for was the birthplace of this new king of the Jews.

Herod hears that and he says, Wait a minute. I'm the king of the Jews. Who is this that they're looking for that they say is the new king of the Jews? And it's also no surprise that everyone else in Jerusalem was troubled by what Herod might have done as a result of this inquiry.

Notice what the text says. Herod is troubled. And because Herod is troubled, everyone else in Jerusalem is troubled too because they know what he's capable of. And certainly those worries and troubling thoughts were warranted.

And so this section, these first four verses, they really show us the first of our three responses. And it's this. Herod says, Those who are threatened by the king are full of trouble.

They're troubled by him. Now Herod's response actually reveals the credibility of Jesus' threat. If he didn't think that Jesus could indeed be one who would dethrone him, there would have been no reason for him to do what he did.

[ 8 : 33 ] He legitimately perceived Jesus as a threat. And he immediately understood that the one the wise men were searching for was not just any child.

He understood enough about the Jewish scriptures to know they're asking about the child, the one who would actually be capable of dethroning him.

That's why he gathers all the experts. It's not the experts that come to Herod and say, This might be the Christ. Let's look at the scriptures and see what they say.

It's Herod that goes to the experts. And he says, Tell me, where is it that the Christ has been said to be born in the scriptures? If what the wise men suggested was true, this baby was a genuine threat

to Herod's rule.

And so his response to that threat was to eliminate it at all cost. That was his goal. Now, the application of this is not just limited to rulers of nations, of counties and cities or whatever it may be. [ 9 : 43 ] This isn't just about politics here. Those who are determined to be the supreme ruler of their own lives will always find Jesus to be a threat.

Always. And the insistence on Jesus as Messiah will always be troubling. It will always upset them. The demand of his lordship and of his kingship over each and every one of us will be something that they deny and reject vehemently.

Think about this for just a moment. It's not hard to see it. Consider the secularist for just a moment. Have you ever wondered why they carry so much vitriol so often towards something that they insist isn't actually true?

There are so many more crazy things to believe in this world than the Christian religion. And yet, talk of Jesus is the thing that they routinely label even as dangerous.

[ 10 : 57 ] Some going so far as to write that to put your faith as a Christian before your children is tantamount to child abuse in some occasions.

Why such hatefulness toward this? If it's not true, why make such a big fuss about it? And I think the answer for that, at least in some sense, must be the same that it was for Herod.

Jesus is a threat to our personal kingdom. And when we have a threat to our own personal autonomy, a threat to our own personal kingdom, our reaction is to eliminate that threat at all costs. But it's not just secularists here. That's not the only thing that we see. What about those who attempt to blend somehow the rule of Jesus with their own personal autonomy and their own rule over their life?

They're just as troubled by the insistence of the Scripture on the things of Christ. They don't mind coming alongside and being religious to some extent, but in order to do that, they have to dethrone Jesus to some extent, primarily by rejecting and denying any of Jesus' teachings that they feel are intolerable or go against what it is that they truly want out of their lives.

[ 12 : 19 ] He becomes a threat. So they must bring the threat down. And what do we find by this? Those who are threatened by the King, they really have no joy.

There's no real joy in their life because any time Jesus comes up, it troubles them. It's painful for them. It's frustrating for them.

They are utterly troubled in heart. But that's not the only response we see here. We see the extreme response of Herod, those who are threatened by the Christ. Secondly, we see those who are indifferent to the King.

Those who are indifferent. Look at verse 5. The chief priest and the scribes told Herod in Bethlehem of Judea, for so it's written of the prophet, by the prophet, and you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people, Israel.

So the religious leaders here, they reveal the second potential response, which is indifference.

Think about the men that Herod has gathered. They knew the scriptures better than anybody else in Israel.

[ 13 : 31 ] And they immediately knew the right answer to Herod's question. As soon as he brings them in and he says, where is it that the scriptures say the Christ is to be born? I would imagine they were all, perhaps in unison, said, Bethlehem.

This is what Micah says. This is, it must be Bethlehem. But what's fascinating about their response is not that they knew the answer. What's fascinating about their response is that they did nothing about the possibility that the Christ might have come.

Think about this. What was the purpose in them studying the scriptures? In order to learn who God is, in order to live a life that was pleasing to God, they're all looking for this coming Savior and King and Messiah.

And now these men have come. They're troubling the whole city now because they're saying, we saw this supernatural sign. We think that the Messiah is here. Where might we find him?

They know the answer. And then they did nothing. Nothing. We're not even told of a routine inquiry into the suggestion of the wise men.

[ 14 : 47 ] These men traveled perhaps hundreds of miles over many months to visit this child. And the spiritual leaders in Jerusalem, they couldn't make a six-mile walk to Bethlehem just to ask around?

You know, if they had, I wonder who they might have come across. Maybe they had come across that group of shepherds who on the night of Jesus' birth just happened to be out in the field and had this amazing experience with the heavenly host who immediately rushed in and found this baby in a manger and worshiped him.

Maybe they would have found those men and those men may have given a little credibility to what even the wise men had said. Maybe they had bumped into a few others who said, yeah, we heard about this thing.

It's really quite amazing. We're not sure what to think about it. We don't see anything about that. Douglas Sean O'Donnell says it this way. What is surprising is that they did nothing with the answer.

Unlike these foreigners who traversed afar over field and mountain, moor and fountain, these religious experts pushed their buzzer, won their prize, and went back to bury their heads in the Word of God.

[16:03] As Paul put it, they were always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. They were as indifferent to Jesus as the priest and Levite were to the bruised and battered man in the parable of a good Samaritan.

That's really what's intriguing here, isn't it? It's not what the leaders did. It's what they didn't do. Which brings to life something that John says at the beginning of his gospel.

In John chapter 1 and verse 11, he says, Jesus came to his own and his own did not receive him.

Now, of the three responses as we're thinking through potential applications for our own lives, of the three responses we're covering, this is the one that I think is the most common.

I think it's probably the one that most of us will be familiar with. Because churches like ours are absolutely full of people just like this. People that can answer all the trivia about who Jesus is.

They can tell you where he was born. They can maybe even point you and connect all the dots that Matthew begins to connect in his gospel. But when you really get to know them and you begin to talk to them, you find out that the truth of Christ and the potential of this gospel message has really had no real impact on their lives.

[17:26] They know all the things, but it doesn't really mean anything to them. It hasn't done anything in them. They're basically indifferent.

And those who are relatively indifferent to Jesus, they're not troubled by him the way Herod is troubled by him. They're not troubled by him in the same way that people who feel the immediate threat that Jesus imposes to their own personal life.

After all, they generally do most of the things that good Christians are supposed to do. But, they've never truly experienced the joy of knowing him either.

Generally, they're content with that. They do the things, they say the prayers, they attend the services, they do good works, they do their best and they try their hardest, but there's really not been any joy to be found in Christ for them.

Why? Because basically, they're indifferent. They know the things, but they don't know him. But what's to come of these people? Well, if you go to chapter 3 and you start to read a little bit of John the Baptist, you'll see John the Baptist referred to them as chaff, an empty shell that only appears for a season to be the real thing.

[19:01] And John said, ultimately, they'll face Jesus' judgment. Look at Matthew 3, verse 12. John says this, Jesus' winnowing fork is in his hand.

This is an agriculture illustration. His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

Those who are threatened by Jesus and those who are indifferent to Jesus have very different dispositions toward him, but ultimately, they face the same fate.

they don't experience the joy of eternal salvation. Rather, they must settle for whatever fleeting moments of happiness they're privileged to experience now.

But there is something far better than this for us, which brings us to the final response. There are those who are threatened by the king. There are those who are indifferent to the king finally there are those who come and genuinely worship the king.

[20:19] Verse 7, Herod summoned the wise men secretly. He ascertained from them what time the star had appeared and he sent them to Bethlehem saying, Go and search for the child and when you found him come and let me know so I can worship him too.

After listening to the king they went on their way and behold the star that they had seen when it rose it went before them again until it rested over the place where the child was. And when they saw this star they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

Not because of the star itself but because of what the star was leading them to at least what they believed the star was leading them to. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother and what did they do?

They fell down and they worshipped him. They opened their treasures. They offered him gifts gold and frankincense and myrror. It's quite a different reaction from the other two.

Let's talk for just a moment again about who these men were. Wise men translates a Greek word that we would say is magi which is linguistically connected to magic or magician that kind of gives us an understanding of what these men were like.

[ 21 : 40 ] The term initially referred to those in Persia who were experts in Persian and Babylonian mysteries. Eventually it took on a broader meaning and really was used to refer to people who were immersed in magic or astrology the interpretation of dreams studies of sacred writings and so on.

A good biblical parallel if you're looking to see who would these people match at other places in the Bible you might go to the book of Exodus and you see the sorcerers who Pharaoh used to mimic the works and the powers of Moses.

This would probably be somewhat in line with the background of these men and of course perhaps coming from the Babylonian era where they were introduced to the things of the Hebrew beliefs.

So the identity of these men is unique in the incarnation narrative. They were Gentiles whose lives were linked to things that are expressly forbidden in the scriptures.

Yet they're the ones in the story who ultimately experienced the joy that came with the advent of the Christ. Now many people believe that their interest in the Hebrew scriptures is the lasting result of Daniel's influence in Babylon.

[ 23 : 06 ] You remember Daniel ruled as a Hebrew over Babylon and even Persia with King Darius for many, many, many years and his influence was certainly lasting there and perhaps that's how they became familiar with the Hebrew Bible and some of the prophecies that are in it.

But their reason for looking for and following a star is not actually very clear in the scriptures. Most people suggest that it probably came from Balaam's prophecy in Numbers chapter 24 which says this, I see him but not now, I behold him but not near, a star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.

Now there's no doubt that Balaam's prophecy has to do with the forthcoming Messiah. But it's not entirely clear if the star that Balaam talks about is meant to be taken literally here.

I'm not so sure that it is. I guess it's possible. Many people have suggested that but the text doesn't tell us that. Now here's my hang up. Matthew is very much concerned with notating when something in the narrative actually fulfills an Old Testament prophecy.

He does it at least six different times in the first three chapters alone of his gospel. But he doesn't do it here. And the reason I think is because they're searching for a star and noticing of a star I don't think actually had anything to do with prophecy at all.

[ 24 : 39 ] These men were probably astrologers. They were stargazers. They interpreted life and events and future things on the basis of the movements of the stars and the planets much like astrologers might do today.

But they were also for some reason compelled by the Hebrew scriptures. So they've got this life in paganism that they live out but then they've also got somehow this fascination with the Hebrew scripture that talks about a coming Messiah and king and these two things start to collide together.

So God then supernaturally I think that's clear in the text certainly Matthew believes this is a supernatural event. He sends a star that grabs their attention they associate it somehow with this coming Messiah and they pack up their bags and they head toward Jerusalem.

It takes them however long it takes to get there and eventually they get there not having seen the star again and then after this conversation with Herod suddenly the star that they had noticed before appears again.

There's something supernatural happening in that and what I think is happening here is a demonstration of God's sovereign work to bring even the most unlikely of people to Christ.

[ 26 : 05 ] I think that's what's happening here. God may even use elements of our sin and confusion to draw us to himself and in the case of these men it resulted in the experience of exceedingly great joy.

Now isn't this a marvelous truth of how God works in our lives? Many of you may have a similar testimony. You didn't come to Christ because you were looking for Christ you came to Christ because something in your life wasn't right and the Lord used that thing that wasn't right to put you in just the right place where somebody introduced you to the gospel or you came to a church service or something happened and the Lord was actually using the error of your life the confusion of your life to get you to the truth and I think that's what he's doing with these men.

He's drawing them even with their own deception so that he might get them to the truth of the person of Christ. It's amazing. Now the Magi they weren't threatened by Christ.

they were humbled by Christ. They weren't indifferent to Christ. If they were coming from the regions near Babylon like they we think they might have come we're looking at an 800 mile journey perhaps on foot many months to actually get to Jerusalem and then perhaps a few weeks longer before they actually figured out to go to Bethlehem or whatever the case may have been.

Jesus and his family for some reason are still there and they come in. This is tremendous effort. That's not indifference.

[ 27 : 50 ] It's effort to get to the truth to get to this Christ King and when they get there there's no indifference in their reaction. There's tremendous sacrifice in their reaction.

Gold frankincense and myrrh people have tried to make some connections there. Some symbolic connections perhaps there's some the text doesn't tell us that. I think these were gifts meant for a king. This was an acknowledgement that they believed in that moment.

This child is the king who is said to come and they sacrifice tremendous wealth and they get on their hands and knees and they worship the child.

It's tremendous faith. They came to Jesus based on their faith in what the Bible said. Sound familiar? If you're going to come to Jesus at some point you're going to come because the Bible says so.

They come because they've been enamored at some point with the Hebrew scriptures with the Bible. They worshipped at his feet in recognition that he is the true king and Messiah and through this encounter with the Christ they experienced a joy that no one else in this text understood.

[ 29 : 02 ] Herod never had this joy. At least at this moment the Jews in Jerusalem didn't experience this joy. No the Gentile magic stargazers from Babylon they were the ones who experienced the joy.

So let me ask you a question. Are you a sinner? Are you a sinner? here to examine your life and the truth out for you would you just have to say maybe there's people worthy of salvation.

I'm not one of them. I match probably a little more closely to these men in the way that I've lived my life. Maybe you're the one that in your family if people were to come over at Christmas and they were to say okay this is the one in our family who's probably going to be most likely to want to think about Christ and talk about Christ and be impacted by the gospel and read Luke chapter 2 before we open up our presents or whatever the thing is that we do.

You're the last one that they would say would do it. Well I've got good news for you in this text because these men they were the last ones in all the Christmas story that we would have ever expected would have come to a saving knowledge of Christ and the gospel and yet it's them.

This text has great news for all of us that the joy of Jesus is offered to all who will come to him and worship him.

[ 30 : 44 ] Let me conclude this way. All sorts of things can contribute to both our troubling experiences and even our happy experiences in life.

Only one thing though can actually bring us genuine joy and that's Jesus. He's the only one. The joy that he brings though it doesn't come merely because of his birth.

It doesn't come merely because of his existence. It actually ultimately comes through his death on the cross. That's where the joy comes from.

The basis of our joy as Christians is Christ's joy in making an atonement for our sins.

Consider Hebrews chapter 12. The writer says we are to look to Jesus who is the founder and perfecter of our faith who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

[ 32 : 04 ] In other words the writer of Hebrews is saying the death and resurrection of Jesus he pursued that willingly as a pursuit of joy. joy was going to come to him as a result of him laying down his life in this way.

And then the writer follows it up in the next verse and he says so consider Jesus who endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that he says you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. Well what's the opposite of weary and faint-hearted? I would say joy is probably a pretty good description of the antonym there. What is the writer saying? Our joy comes from the cross and the resurrection and so does Christ's joy.

His joy comes from saving us through his cross and resurrection. It's amazing. He said it all sounds so great. How can I actually have this joy?

How can I experience the joy? Well the scriptures tell us that the joy of salvation is not something you can earn. You don't hit a button or go to a certain amount of services or do certain amount of religious things.

[ 33 : 21 ] It's a gift that has to be received and the Bible says that we receive that gift through faith in Jesus. By our faith he transforms our lives.

He redeems our souls and he brings us this joy. And I'll show you. First Peter chapter one verse eight says this. Though you have not seen him you love him.

Ever thought about that? Ever experienced a true affection for Jesus who is someone that you've never actually even seen before? Though you do not see him you love him.

Though you do not now see him you believe in him. and you rejoice with a joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.

Obtaining the outcome of your faith which he says is the salvation of your soul. This joy of salvation is not something you earn by doing your best and trying your hardest.

[ 34 : 30 ] forgiveness. It's something you receive by coming to the king, worshiping at his feet, trusting by faith in who he is and what he's done to save your soul.

Now you can fight against the truth and feel miserably troubled at the threat that Jesus poses to your life and it is a legitimate threat.

You can also remain indifferent searching for meaning and happiness and all sorts of things but always ending up empty in the end.

We all know what that's like. We've been there. We've experienced that. You can continue in your indifference and that experience will continue the way that it is. But if you will come by faith and worship the king, you too will know this inexpressible joy that comes from knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior.

And I know if you're here and you're not a believer, you're not even sure if you're a believer, you're trying to sort things out. Let me just say, I'm glad you're here. And I want you to keep coming until you get it sorted out.

[ 35 : 51 ] And when you keep coming to the word and seeing it's good that you're here, it's good that you're thinking and it's good that you're listening. But if you're here and you don't know him, it's hard for me to explain anything other than what I've just said.

Faith comes by hearing. Hearing comes by the word of God and joy comes by the faith. Now you've already got part of that out of the way. You've heard the word of God.

You can come back to it again and again to understand the gospel message as clearly as you possibly can. You've heard it. What's left is for you to believe it. And when you believe it, you'll feel the joy of it.

And I hope that you will do that. That you won't waste another moment of your life feeling threatened or indifferent to Jesus. But that you'll accept the joy that he desires to give you.

That was his joy to provide for you. And come to him in faith. Well, that was goodNINGNINGNING