

## Grace at Christmas

A debate was being held at a conference in Britain on comparative religion. These wise and scholarly were debating the differences between religions. And then the question came up, what makes Christianity unique? Incarnation? No, other religions had some version of Incarnation. Resurrection? No other religions had some version of resurrection.

At this point, C.S. Lewis wandered into the room, a little early for his presentation. He asked, "What's all this arguing about?" They told him they were trying to find the difference between Christianity and other religion. Lewis looked at them and said, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace." The room fell silent. Lewis continued that Christianity uniquely claims God's love comes free of charge, no strings attached. No other religion makes that claim. After a moment someone commented that Lewis had a point. Christianity teaches this unique idea of grace.

Grace is a word that breathes hope into our souls.

From around the year 1500, Europe began exploring, conquering and colonising lands well beyond their own. With the growing knowledge of world cultures came a growing question in the minds of Christians, what about those cultures that had never heard of the Bible, of Christ, of the Gospel? Was God going to be gracious to them? Today, with even more communication, connections and knowledge of the world, more and more critics of Christianity ask, how can your religion be the only true one if so many had never heard of it? How good is grace if it doesn't reach most men?

One of the announcements made by the angels is that the birth of Jesus represents peace on earth and goodwill to men. But does it? Or does it represent grace towards very, very few. Does the birth of Christ show that God genuinely desires peace and good towards mankind? If so, how?

Within the account of the birth of Jesus we have some of the answer to that in the account of the visit of the wise men, or the Magi to see the newborn Christ. The account of the wise men shows us the heart of God for the whole world. How they came, where they went, what they did is an example of the grace of God, and the Gospel.

In reading this, we can learn how God deals with all men, how He deals with some. We can understand how God is fair to all, and especially kind to those who seek His Son. This passage can answer our questions about God's justice, but more importantly, it shows us how grateful and thankful we can be if we have found the Saviour.

### I. Grace Draws All Men Generally

**Matthew 2:1-2** *Matthew 2:1* 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, <sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

Who were these men, where did they come from? Well, the glaring thing about these men is that they were not Jews. The book of Matthew was a Gospel written primarily to Jews, filled with Old Testament quotations, so it is very significant that of all four Gospels, Matthews is the one who records Gentile rulers coming to worship the Jewish king. It wasn't Herod and his men looking to worship Messiah, but

Gentiles, people outside the covenant, people not exposed to the Jewish Scriptures. You might call them the unreached peoples of the earth. These were men who probably lived in Babylon, where they were undoubtedly pagans. They were astrologers, men who studied the skies, calculated the movements, and read them for spiritual significance. They were dream interpreters, people who served as priests and counsellors for the Babylonian and Persian kings. You see the ancestors of this group of people in the book of Daniel, where the magi of Nebuchadnezzar could not interpret his dream, and when Daniel could, he became chief over the magi.

Now at some point, many months before the birth of Christ, God placed something that could be seen and generally understood by all. He placed a star. Modern astronomers have tried many guesses at what the star of Bethlehem was: a comet, a supernova, or something of that sort. One good guess is that in the year of Christ's birth there was a very unusual conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, which would have created a kind of dance between the two for several months until a final conjunction took place.. Whatever it was, for pagan astrologers, whose job was also to coronate and recognise kings, the event was extraordinary, and meant a great king had been born.

We don't know how they interpreted the particulars of those stars to mean a King of the Jews. We don't know how they understood the greatness of His kingship. But we do know they got enough truth from general revelation, from God's creation, to point them in the right direction. They didn't have the Bible. They may have had some traditions handed down from Daniel, but we don't know that. They obviously didn't have the Jewish Scriptures, because they had to ask Herod and his men for biblical specifics of where the king would be born. But by God's kind grace, these pagan idolaters looked up and understood a general truth: a king has been born.

Way back in Genesis 1, we read this about the stars: “**Genesis 1:14** Then God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years;

The stars are one of God's messages to all mankind. In fact, Psalm 19 tells us how vocal the stars are!

*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky proclaims the work of His hands. Day after day they pour out speech; night after night they communicate knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their message has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the inhabited world.*

God draws all men generally. All people of the earth hear God's general broadcast of His existence.

When Paul was dealing with Gentile idolaters in Acts 14, he said this about God, “*We... preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them,*”<sup>16</sup> “*who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways.*”<sup>17</sup> “*Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.*” **Acts 14:15-17**

Has God truly left Himself a witness to all people? Don Richardson wrote a book called *Eternity in Their hearts*, in which he records how many cultures that had never met a missionary or read a Bible, still had some understandings of biblical truths. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a researcher by the name of Dr. Wilhem Schmidt set about trying to record all the instances of native monotheism, the belief in one Creator God. When he finished his research in 1955, he had accumulated more than 4000 pages of evidence in a total of 12 volumes. Literally hundreds of cultures have, with variations, the story of

Creation, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel.

These traditions, combined with the witness of creation wasn't enough to save them, but it was proof enough that God draws all men generally. He has left himself a witness.

Romans chapter 1 tells us this in verse 20, "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:"

The created world tells the searching man that God exists. It tells him of God's great power – of His eternity and how as a creature he must be accountable to this God. God goes further. In Chapter 2:15, Paul tells us the following, "Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and *their* thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another" Paul says that all people have an innate sense of right and wrong. This too, is God's general revelation of Himself to mankind. When man knows it's wrong to murder – he must ask, "But how do I know that? Who put that 'law' in my heart?"

Does God love the world? John 3:16 tells us He does. **Acts 17:30** <sup>30</sup> *"Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,*  
**1 Timothy 2:4** <sup>4</sup> *who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*  
**2 Peter 3:9** <sup>9</sup> *The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.*

Through creation and conscience – God shows man that He exists. Like the star in the east – it is enough for the man to say – there is something in this. I need to investigate.

That's where it gets more interesting with these wise men. They did more than know God's general truth in their hearts, they became seekers. As this account shows us,

## II. Grace Draws Seekers Specifically

**Matthew 2:3-9** <sup>3</sup> *When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judaea, for thus it is written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.' "* <sup>7</sup> *Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also." <sup>9</sup> When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.*

The wise men saw God's general revelation in the skies. They understood it. But then they did something that makes all the difference. They became seekers. They went further. They took the general revelation and followed it up - going to Jerusalem.

And from a human point of view, they were really diligent in their seeking.

They interpret the star that it has to do with the Jews. Well, they don't go looking in Babylon then – they head for the capital of Judea – Jerusalem. From there – they go straight to the one who can help

them – the current king. It's quite bold, isn't it – to go to the current king and ask him where the king of the Jews has been born?

They are going from general to specific. And Herod, obviously no biblical scholar himself, gets his scholars together to ask where Messiah is predicted to be born. And now from the general revelation, we have the very specific, special revelation of Scripture. These men open their Bibles to Micah 5:2, where Scripture predicts Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. And then, Herod, ever the deceitful fox, uses the wise men as his spies. He, like a scheming politician, imagines that Messiah would be hidden from him, as a jealous politician, So he wants them to find out if there has been a significant birth, and then send word. Herod is only interested in assassinating the newborn King.

That's what makes their approach so interesting. These men had undertaken a hard, dangerous journey, to go and see a baby, foreign king. If they had travelled from Babylon, the journey, because of the way the caravan would follow the Euphrates river, would have been about 1600 kilometres. They're seeking.

Herod, on the other hand acts quite naturally. The wise men are acting extraordinarily, Herod is acting quite naturally.

Verse 3 “When Herod the king had heard *these things*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” Selfish man is okay to know about God in general. He is fine to know that God exists, and would like us to get along down here. But once he hears that God is the true King – he is troubled. In his heart, man wants to retain autonomy. In his heart, man wants to control his own life, to be a subject of no one, a ruler of himself. Not God's will, my will. I will live life my way.

And man of himself will not go seeking for a King. He wants to be King. He is a Herod – troubled at the news that Messiah is the true king – and that to live life apart from worshipping Him is disobedience. Man in this state will not seek God. ” Romans 3:11 “There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.”.

What did Herod do? We know He sent a command to kill all the children in the area of Bethlehem. A perfect picture of man. What did man do when God came as a man? We killed him. The cross is the epitome of man's hatred for God. *We will not have this man to rule over us*, is the cry of humanity. And though the cross was God's greatest triumph – it was also the perfect picture of what man thinks of God. Remember Christ's parable of the servants who kept killing the messengers that the lord sent to them, until finally he sent his son? The servants said – “Let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours”. Well, that in a nutshell describes the human heart. We figure if we can ignore Jesus, discredit Him, kill Him, avoid Him, then his inheritance will be ours. The right to rule – to be a lord – will be ours.

And while not all of Jerusalem was as aggressive as Herod, the rest of them were passive. They were complacent. Here is news that Messiah may have been born literally down the road from them, and they do nothing about it.

So when these wise men, these pagan, idolatrous wise men, travel 1600 kilometres to worship a baby king, then you know something unnatural is going on. They are not merely following the inclinations of their own hearts. Something is at work in them, drawing them specifically, drawing them to the Lord Jesus Christ.. John 6:44 , “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him:

And here are Gentiles, who are getting closer to being saved by Messiah, than Herod, who is in a palace 6 miles away from Bethlehem.

Maybe someone asks, were they seeking Jesus because they were being drawn, or were they being drawn because they were seeking? Part of the answer is simply Yes. God's sovereignty and man's responsibility meet in a way we cannot understand. At the same time, between God's grace, and man's seeking, we know which comes first. Which is the correct version: He loves us, because we first loved him, or we love Him because he first loved us? God's grace is always previous.

God was at work in these wise men, and they responded. They responded wholeheartedly, risking danger, pain, loss, discomfort to seek the specifics of what they knew in general. And as they did so, the wide, broad revelation they had was narrowing and focusing. From a general star about a King, to a King of the Jews, to the Jewish scriptures.

And then we read that God guided them even further to the very place.

So let's take a man today. He sees God's revelation in creation. He knows there's a God and admits it to himself. He knows this God is holy, because he sense in himself right and wrong. But now, something is stirring in him to follow that, to go further. Something is pushing, or maybe pulling him to know more.

And so if you want to know who this God is, you go to the Jewish side of things. Men have known since the time of the Greeks that the Jews had the best take on true religion, on the one true God. You don't go looking in the cyclical religions of the East. You don't go looking in the ancestral worship of the various tribes of Africa and America. You don't go looking in the brutal and recent religion of Islam. Salvation is of the Jews. And if you are in that vicinity, you pick up the Jewish Bible. The whole Bible, Old and New Testament is a Jewish book.

And as you pick up this Jewish book, you will be given specific revelation of who the Creator is, who man is, how we fell, what God has done, who the Messiah is, what you must do. If you yield to the drawing work of God, you are led straight to the Jewish Messiah, Son of God – Jesus Christ. God led those men now specifically to the house where Jesus was, and the Holy Spirit will lead you in the Scriptures to Jesus Christ.

“So then faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Romans 10:17.

But it goes one step further. Because from that general drawing, to that specific drawing, it all leads to something God had in mind from the beginning.

### III. Grace Desires Worshippers Ultimately

**Matthew 2:10-12** <sup>10</sup> *When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.* <sup>11</sup> *And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.* <sup>12</sup> *Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.*

What do these men do once they find the King they had travelled all this way to see? Do they look on with interest? Do they take notes? Do they sketch the scene? Do they begin a little debate or discussion among themselves?

Do they congratulate themselves on having discovered the answer to their question? No. for these men, the search culminated in nothing less than worship. These extremely wealthy, highly-placed Gentiles, upon finding the child in still rather humble circumstances in Bethlehem, fall down and worship. Notice three aspects of their worship. First, joy. They rejoiced with exceeding great joy. These men have found a delight to their souls they have found nowhere else. They have found something deeper, more soul-refreshing, more satisfying than all their encounters with the spirit world in their pagan homeland. Worship involves pleasure, joy, gladness, deep fulfilling happiness in God.

Second, submission. Notice, they fall down and worship. They adopt a posture of humility, saying, you are the Greater, we are the lesser. You are the ruler, we are followers. Worship involves a humble, repentant submission before God as Lord and God.

Third, adoration. They wish to express their adoration for His worth, and so they present Him with gifts worthy of a king. Myrrh, frankincense, and gold were gifts given to royalty. These magi probably did not have in mind its spiritual significance, but there certainly was. Myrrh was used to preserve bodies when embalmed. It was a picture of Christ's past ministry – His death on the cross. It was a picture of Christ as the true prophet that Moses predicted would be the Messiah.

Frankincense was a sweet perfume used in incense. It pictures Christ as our High Priest now in heaven – interceding for us- His present ministry.

Gold was given to Kings. It showed Christ's Deity and predicted His future as the earth's King. The three gifts perfectly picture the true nature of Christ – which is Greek for Maschiach or Messiah – the Prophet, Priest and King.

These men did not simply find Jesus and turn away, having satisfied their curiosity. But that is exactly what millions of people do. God's general and special revelation lead them right to the Person of Christ, and they turn back without repenting and trusting in Him as Lord and Saviour.

God seeks not simply people who intellectually agree that Jesus is the Son of God. .

**John 4:23** <sup>23</sup> *"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.*

Not mere enquirers. Not spiritual tourists. Not people playing with truth. God gives general, and then special revelation, because He desires men to worship Him. Because that is man's spiritual home, his centre, his soul's rest and fulfilment, where the Son of God is our king.

These men could never have been the same. They were warned not to go back to Herod, and so they went back home by another way. They didn't return back the same way they had come. They were forever changed. T.S. Eliot captures this in his poem *The Journey of the Magi*, where the Magi describe their difficult journey, but reflecting back, one of the Magi asks this question:

“This: were we lead all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,

With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

Eliot imagines the Magi coming back converted, born again, having died to their old idolatrous life and people, and now longing for their own death, when they would meet the God they now knew.

The account of the conversion of these Gentile wise men should forever silence anyone who asks, does God really love the world? What about those who have never heard?

Because just like those men, the progression for us looks like this: We see the signs of God in creation and in our own conscience. He has not left himself without a witness.

If someone is drawn to seeking, he will seek and God will show him special revelation. He will be led to the Scriptures. There in the Scriptures, He will see Jesus the Messiah of the whole world. He will see his own sin and rebellion, and the reason for Jesus coming.

And then, he will not simply stay there. He will repent of living life for self, bow the knee before Jesus, believe in Him as Prophet, Priest, and King, and then rejoice with exceeding great joy