

Scripture: The Birth of Christ Matthew 1 and Luke 2 from New International version  
(#730 Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal responsive reading)  
The visit of the wise men Matthew 2 Revised Standard Version  
(#731 Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal responsive reading)

## THOUGHTS OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas: the day on which the world celebrate the birth of Jesus. However, the date of His birth is not known. We can gain useful information from the narrative in Luke 1 and we can ascertain that Zacharias was officiating in his priestly role when the angel of the Lord appeared to him (verse 13) and announced he would become a father. Then, looking at verse 26 we find 6 months later the announcement to the Virgin Mary, Verse 28 **“Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!...”** Verse 31 **“Behold you will conceive a son, and shall call His name Jesus.”**<sup>1</sup> So, using this information some scholars have calculated 9 months later and get a time around September to October. That would coincide with Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kipper, and the Feast of Tabernacles. It would make sense that Jesus would be born at the Feast of Tabernacles, and let me tell you why. Because the light of the world was the main theme of the feast and swaddling cloth was set afire atop poles to represent “The Light of the World.” It is not mandatory to know the date Jesus was born for our salvation. But it does provide interesting insights. I find it significant that John 1 tells us that Jesus became flesh and verse 14 says he “dwelt” or as in the Amplified Bible “Tabernacled” among us And could it also be significant that this was the last of the yearly festivals? It was also called the Feast of Booths because during this time the worshipers lived in structures made of leaves and branches The rustle of the dry leaves, rasping out the dirge of a dying order, encouraged the people to think of the eternal renewal. It marked a point of transition between the pleasant memories of God’s past goodness, and the joyous hopes for the future. This festive week was to be a time for personal introspection into life’s cycles, while keeping in mind that Christ is its “beginning,” as well as its “ending.”<sup>2</sup> This festival had an additional name, Festival of lights. Jesus: the light of the world, the light of the resurrection, and the light pointing to the Eternal City.

So why is the birth of Christ celebrated on December 25<sup>th</sup>? “In AD 354, Bishop Liberius of Rome ordered the people to celebrate Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>. He probably chose this date because the people of Rome already observed it as the Feast of Saturn, celebrating the

birthday of the sun.”<sup>3</sup> Not surprising, the 25<sup>th</sup> of December has many pagan and heathen ties, which have assumed new meaning with the passage of time; and we accept the Yule log, the evergreen tree, and giving of gifts to each other, which are all pagan ideas. In addition, over the years we have seen the world has lost sight of the reason for the day as it has become commercialized until most people do not even discuss the Biblical story. At this time of year as they think only about what gift they want or will give.

What was it like in the world to which Jesus came? “The deception of sin had reached its height. All the agencies for depraving the souls of men had been put in operation. The Son of God, looking upon the world, beheld suffering and misery. With pity He saw how men had become victims of satanic cruelty. He looked with compassion upon those who were being corrupted, murdered, and lost....Bewildered and deceived, they were moving on in gloomy procession toward eternal ruin—to death in which is no hope of life, toward night to which comes no morning.... Sin had become a science.”<sup>4</sup> Is it any different today? The King of glory stooped low to take on humanity and come to this earth! Could it be He is anxious to come again?

I want to spend the next few minutes looking at the story that you have read this morning. I suspect it is not the first time you have heard or read the story; but, have you **really** studied it? Have you taken the microscope and looked at it? Have you really taken the time to see for yourself and appreciate, what occurred, when Jesus was born That is the question I had as I began planning for the message. I have made discoveries, which have thrilled my heart and time will not permit me to share them all, today.

Let’s begin by looking at the cast of characters. We have Mary, what credit we owe to her family for the instruction they had provided to prepare her for such an important role in this world’s history. What an example she is for how we are to respond, when asked to serve our Lord. Even though the rest of her life would be marred by the decision she made, she did not hesitate. Can you hear the conversations later, when Mary and Joseph return to Nazareth from Egypt? Can you see the women gathering around them? “O, what a cute baby! Look at those beautiful eyes and that cute little mouth. Is he talking? And how old is he, now? The eyebrows raise and their admiration ceases, as they remember the wedding date. Her reputation in the community was flawed. I must ask myself will I trust so completely, when the going gets tough. When the doctor’s report is unfavorable, when my beliefs are challenged, will I still trust and remain faithful?

And, how about Joseph? He can teach us how to respond to a difficult situation. Undoubtedly it would have been easier to “put Mary away secretly”<sup>5</sup>, as he had planned. However, he heeded the angel’s message and provided a home for her and her child. He too, must face the ridicule of the people. They both had the challenge of raising a child in Nazareth because it was not a good place to live. (John 1:45-46) **“Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote— Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. And Nathanael said to him, Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”** <sup>6</sup> No! Nazareth was not a good place to live. Jesus had no advantages over any person. No matter how poor you may be or which part of town you may live in Jesus understands. In Matthew and repeated in Luke Jesus says, **“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”**<sup>7</sup> Yes, Jesus had no advantages and does understand.

When I was young we had cows, horses, pigs, chickens, and goats. Because, we lived on a farm. It was part of my job to feed the animals. The cows were tied in small stalls in the barn and each area had a wooden box, called a manger. Each cow received a measured amount of grain that was placed into the manger. Are you aware that God required a cereal offering, with olive oil and grape juice, to accompany every burnt and peace offering. (Lev 2:1; Num 15: 2-19) Could it be that Jesus lying in a manger is a symbol of Jesus as the grain that will become “The Bread of Life? (John 6:35) And were you aware that Bethlehem means “House of bread?” I see that it may also represent a picture of divinity in the midst of humanity. Let me explain.

Bread making is a cruel activity. Ponder the cruelty, which underlies the making of flour and bread and you may see similarities fulfilled in the life of Christ. First the farmer cuts a grave in the earth, into which he flings the seed to lie and die in darkness and alone. (John 12:24) Jesus said, **“I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone.”** Then, once the grain is in the ground Heaven’s sun and rain bring life to the seed and eventually it springs up. **“First the blade, then the ear, and after that the full corn in the ear”**. (Mark 4:28) Then **“when the fullness of time had come”** (Galatians 4:4) man’s sickle cuts off the heads of the grain and it is thrashed unmercifully, and then wind drives away the chaff. The miller next crushes the grain between two stones, and sifts the meal until it is free from all unevenness. I see that this “fine flour” represents man’s best efforts. The best of his work and worth and then if you want to make bread, it must have additional ingredients, such as oil; symbolic of the Holy Spirit and some salt, which is valueless, alone, until it is mingled with the

dough and is lost to sight. The salt imparts the Spirit's keeping presence and preservation. Once the dough is made it is rolled, punched, and kneaded, allowed to rise and it is punched down again, kneaded then shaped and placed in pans, which, will then be placed in the oven to be baked. Bread making is a cruel process! Could this cruelty symbolize Jesus' life on earth? My favorite commentary on the life of Christ has this statement, **"God could not trust His beloved Son with men, even while carrying forward the work for their salvation. He commissioned angels to attend Jesus and protect Him till He should accomplish His mission on earth, and die by the hands of those whom He came to save."**<sup>8</sup> No, the Son of God did not have an easy life.

The shepherds: The shepherds teach us the importance of being vigilant. They were together for one purpose (tending the flock), but that didn't keep them from study of the scriptures and prayer. (Almost sounds like a prayer meeting, doesn't it?) They took advantage of the time they were given. **"Through the silent hours they talked together of the promised Savior, and prayed for the coming of the King to David's throne,"**<sup>9</sup> I find it curious that "the Good Shepherd" was first announced to the shepherds in the same fields, where the boy David had lead his flock. And did you know that Moses, a shepherd, **"was permitted to look down the stream of time and behold the first advent of our Savior. He saw Jesus as a babe in Bethlehem. He heard the voices of the angelic host break forth in the glad song of praise to God and peace on earth."**<sup>10</sup>

The innkeeper teaches us that we often miss blessings by not responding to the opportunities, when they occur. I wonder.... would he have given up **his** own bed; if he had known it would be used for the birth of a king?

And, what about the angel choir, they, who knew Him best and knew Him longest. Could they not have changed the stable into a room or a manger into a bassinette or given a gift worthy of a newborn King? No. Their gift was highly valued and worth our consideration. They gave the gift of surprise and worship. And that is what we should find in our worship. I also believe they tell us how important worship is to God. I can understand their surprise when I "see" the tiny baby.

The most incredible part of the story is this! Somehow God wrapped His huge heart in human flesh and a baby named Jesus came into this world. In the life of Jesus, God became visible. The deity was no longer an abstract conception, but a person. The very heart that throbs at the center of this vast, star shimmering, universe was somehow the heart that beat in the breast of that tiny baby. Incredible as it seems! I cannot begin to comprehend, such a gift.

This baby was wrapped in swaddling clothes. Swaddling cloth was long strips of linen or some other soft white material, which were wrapped around the baby restricting his movement. Again, type meets anti-type. I choose to believe Jesus was wrapped in white linen. For if you recall, Old Testament tells of a tabernacle. The tabernacle represented Jesus in every characteristic of its construction and its services. This tabernacle was prepared as a dwelling place for God, so He could be with his people and it was surrounded by white linen. Also the priest wore a white linen garment, which when it became soiled was not discarded or washed but torn into strips to make wicks for the candlesticks in the holy place. White linen surrounds the baby and also is His clothing, looking forward to His priestly ministry.

**“The story of Bethlehem is an exhaustless theme. In it is hidden “the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God.” (Rom. 11:33) We marvel at the Savior’s sacrifice in exchanging the throne of heaven for the manger, and the companionship of adoring angels for the beasts of the stall”.**<sup>11</sup>

Women, when have you known of men stopping to ask for directions? That’s something men are not prone to do. Matthew records the story of wise men, who stopped and asked for directions. That may have been the reason they were wise. ☺ Their mission was too important to waste precious time going in the wrong direction. Let’s spend the remainder of our time together looking at this story, recorded in Matthew 2 verses 1-12. Wise men: three of them, five of them, nobody knows how many and scripture does not tell us. If the manger scene you are seeing in front of some houses or on Christmas cards is correct, there were three of them. We do know why the wise men were wise, but they did know how to seek direction.

**“The wise men from the East were philosophers. They belonged to a large and influential class that included men of noble birth, and comprised much of the wealth and learning of their nation. Others were upright men who studied the indications of Providence in nature, and who were honored for their integrity and wisdom. Of this character were the wise men who came to Jesus.”**<sup>12</sup>

In Matthew’s narrative they embark on the journey of a lifetime and they make the discovery of a lifetime. The journey is to Jesus and the discovery is Jesus and their journey and our journey is very much alike, so I think it is worthy of our study today.

I find in it four ways God reveals His will. First, God uses the darkness to reveal His sign. (Repeat) Note the words of the wise men, **“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.”** (Matt 2:2) Most respond to the arrival of darkness by going inside, getting under the covers and closing our

eyes and going to sleep. Not so with the wise men. The arrival of the darkness was their clue to go outside and to look up. And because they were alert, when everyone else was asleep, they found the very sign of God. I'd like to ask you a question? What do you do when darkness comes? I don't mean darkness of the night, but darkness of the heart? How do you respond: when a shadow is cast upon your joy, when the brightness of your joy is eclipsed by tragedy, when an eventide settles upon your soul, when everything seems shadowy and grey? Do you close your eyes? Do you get under the covers? Depression can bring it, grief can bring it, betrayal, heartache and sorrow could bring a darkness. When that sense of darkness comes our tendency is to close our eyes and wish it would pass and to hope that we could sleep it away.

The shepherds and the wise men remind us that it is out of the darkness that God shows His brightest light. In fact, without the darkness you cannot see the brightest light. Could Peter have seen the light of God's forgiveness, were it not in contrast to the darkness of his own betrayal? Would the disciples have seen the bright light of Jesus presence on the Sea of Galilee, were His presence not cast against the canvas of the Galilean storm? Would the disciples, and would **we** have appreciated the power of the resurrection, had there not first been the permeation of death? Are there those times, when God allows a shadow to come across our world, so that He can then reveal to us a light; a brightness, something we never expected? Something that perhaps was always there, but we could not see it for the blueness of the sky and brightness of the day. So, He brings the darkness of the sky so that we can see the star that we have never seen before. God in His gracious discipline is known to darken our world so that we can see the light of His presence. His presence is always there, whether we are aware of it or not. And if your world is dark, right now, if some sorrow or tragedy, or a concern, or calamity has brought darkness to your world. I remind you that the consequence of this darkness is up to you. It can either make you bitter or it can make you better. This season of suffering can either be a stepping-stone or a stumbling block. It can either be a break through or a break down. All depending on how you look at it.

The wise men saw the advent of the darkness as a signal to look up, and when they looked up they saw a star, a sign. You say, well Dorothy, that was easy, that was a miracle. Are you telling me no miracle has come into your world? You're telling me no surprise has come into your darkness? No sudden check to pay a bill, you didn't know how you could pay? No comforting phone call, from the person you didn't know realized you were struggling? No arm around your shoulder, no appropriate message? As if, how in the world did they know I

was struggling and they said the right thing, at the right time. My suggestion to you is that it is nothing short of miraculous and God's provisions come in such signs. And these signs have a purpose. And the source of the star to the wise men is the same source as the sign in your life, right now. And the purpose of the star and purpose of the sign in your life is the same. God used the darkness to reveal the sign, but listen to this! God uses the sign to reveal the scripture.

Look what happened next to the wise men. "The star took them as far as Jerusalem, then it disappeared. It is gone! They are left in Jerusalem and they begin asking questions. Finally, their question makes its way to Herod. Herod seeks the counsel of the theologians. This is a surprise to me. **"The priests and elders of Jerusalem were not as ignorant concerning the birth of Christ as they pretended. The report of the angels' visit to the shepherds had been brought to Jerusalem, but the rabbis had treated it as unworthy of their notice. They themselves might have found Jesus, and might have been ready to lead the magi to His birthplace, but instead of this, the wise men came to call their attention to the birth of the Messiah.... here began the rejection of Christ by the priests and rabbis."**<sup>13</sup> Back to the story. The theologians seek the counsel of scripture and they open the scroll of Micah and there they read these words the prophet wrote about this in the scriptures.

**"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."** (Micah 5:2)

Please note something. The star was enough to lead the wise men to Jerusalem. But it took scripture to lead them to Jesus. The sign was enough to take them to the people of God. But, it took the word of God to take them to the Son of God. Let me say it like this: Signs in our lives may be enough to get us to church, but it takes scripture to bring us to the Christ of Christmas. A miracle or blessing may get your attention, but it takes the Bible to give you direction. You see, signs happen every day. Not a day passes that somebody, somewhere doesn't look at a sunset and say, Aaahhh! Not a day passes that somebody doesn't see a mountain peak and say, there must be a God. Not an hour passes that someone doesn't cradle a newborn and offer a silent prayer of gratitude to whomever. Signs happen every day! Do those signs bring those people to Christ? Not necessarily! Our tendency is to say, "I enjoyed that sign and I would like another. And so we go in search of another mountain peak, or another

rainbow, or another experience or another blessing. We do not understand that the purpose of every sign and every blessing, whatever it is, is to bring us to scripture, to bring us to Christ.

Paul said, perhaps we don't understand that God is kind to us so you will change your hearts and lives. The purpose of God's kindness is repentance, change<sup>14</sup>. The quest is not just to a Santa Clause bringing you one present after another. His quest is to be a Father, bringing you blessings, so you will come to Him. The wise men knew how to follow directions. Somehow they knew the goal was not just to get to a verse in the Bible, but the goal of the verse was to get them to Christ. And so interestingly enough they go to Bethlehem, while the scholars stay in Jerusalem. The ones who discover the scripture are content just to stay with scripture. The ones who are diligently searching for Christ are not content just to hear the words, or to have the knowledge; they want to see Him face to face.

We are to be preparing for the second coming, that time when we will see Jesus face to face. Are you diligent in your search of the scriptures? We are nearing the end of another year and this world's history. Many are making New Years resolutions. What must you do to be ready to meet Jesus face to face?

#### **ARE YOU READY FOR JESUS TO COME?<sup>15</sup>** Sung by Charles McDonald

And so the wise men continue their search. Until Matt 2:9 "the star came and stood shining right over the place where the child lay." Please note this! In the end it was both the miracle and the word leading the wise men to Jesus. In our lives it is both God's sign and God's scripture that bring us to Christ. In the end, signs and God's scripture have one purpose: not to entertain us but to illuminate the face of Christ. That's what that star did; because that star was right over the house of Christ, right over the place where He lay so they could see His face clearly. The purpose of God's signs and God's miracles in your life is not to give you some passing fantasy, but to help illuminate Christ. Because His ultimate goal is not just to give you everything you want and fill you stocking. His goal is to get you where He wants you to be and that is in the presence of Christ.

And that is what He did with the wise men. Both the word and the miracle worked in tandem to bring them into the presence of Christ. Look at this. God has used the darkness to reveal the sign, he has used the sign to reveal the scripture and now He uses the Scripture to reveal the King. All working together to lead them to Jesus. Verse 11 "They came to the house where the child was and saw Him with His mother, Mary and they bowed down and they worshiped Him. They opened their gifts and gave him their treasures of gold, frankincense and myrrh." Did you notice the word house? They came to the house! Contrary to the theology of

the nativity scenes and what is in the front yards of many homes they didn't come to the stable, they came to the house.

Earlier we read that Herod asked exactly when the star was seen. And if we were to read further we would hear Herod declare that every male child under the age of two would be killed in Bethlehem. Leading many scholars to surmise this journey could have lasted as long as two years. Their search and what they find is not a baby in a manger, but perhaps a toddler in a house. And they come to the King. They come not to make a request, but to worship!

The appropriate response to an encounter with Christ is to fall on your knees and fall on your face and give Him the gift of worship! This is the second season of worship. The first occurred when the shepherds came to Christ. Humble shepherds out of the field, when they saw Him they worshiped. And now the wise men come bearing gifts and they see the King and they worship. It is a worship service, because they serve Him as they worship; they minister unto Him. They give him gifts, but more importantly they give Him their heart felt praise. The gifts are so appropriate. Gold is the gift for a king. Frankincense a gift for a priest. Myrrh used to prepare a body for burial. Even now they are anticipating Jesus' Kingly task, his priestly role and his sacrificial gift. What is missing from the time of worship is those you would expect to be present? Where are those who found in the book of Micah that the coming of Christ was to be in Bethlehem? Where are the scholars, where are the rabbis? Well, they are at the temple, they are at the synagogue and they have the open Bible on their laps. Does it strike you as ironic that there they are, Bible open in their laps and Jesus is about 5 miles away and they don't do anything about it. Let all churchgoers and church leaders be warned. You can be very religious and never see Jesus. You can go to the temple, you can dress in the right clothing, you can speak the right words, you can have the very word of God on your lap and Jesus could be just a walk away and you never see Him

And so the darkness revealed the sign. The sign revealed the scripture. The scripture revealed the King and look what happened next. After finding the king, God showed them the way home. It is upon finding the King that God shows His seekers the way home. **“And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod they returned to their own country by a different way.”**<sup>16</sup> What an appropriate ending to a wonderful story: Called by a sign, instructed by scripture, overwhelmed by a King and escorted home by God.

Let me state what I hope is very obvious. God wants to do the very same for you and me. He brings signs into our life to encourage us and call us to scripture. He brings scripture

into our life to guide us and correct our course so we can find the King. And He brings the King into your life and mine to show the way home.

## Closing Song

### Closing remarks & prayer:

Many journeys to Jesus begin in darkness. It did for the wise men. So, if you are in darkness right now, or are going through a tough time, please remember,” that without the darkness God cannot show you the sign. So look for the sign that He is bringing into your life. Don't be discontented with the sign if it is not what you expect. But, let it lead you to scripture, trust in Jesus and allow Him to take you home and take you home safely, for this is the job of our King.

Dear Heavenly Father, we are so thankful for your abundant blessings. We are thankful for the scriptures, the scripture that is ever new, ever fresh. Father, may we never loose the desire to search and search diligently. Father, reveal anew your Son as we celebrate His birth. Go with us, guide and protect us until we are home safely. In Jesus Name I pray. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> New King James version for all Bible texts unless otherwise indicated

<sup>2</sup> With Jesus in His Sanctuary by Leslie Hardinge, PhD pg 455-456

<sup>3</sup> World Book Encyclopedia 1972 Volume 3 page 416

<sup>4</sup> Desire of Ages pg 36 & 37

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 1:19

<sup>6</sup> John 1: 45-46

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 8:20 & Luke 9:58

<sup>8</sup> Desire of Ages pg 67

<sup>9</sup> Desire of Ages pg 47

<sup>10</sup> Patriarchs and prophets pg 475

<sup>11</sup> Desire of Ages pg 48

<sup>12</sup> Desire of Ages pg 59

<sup>13</sup> Desire of Ages pg 62-63

<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 4:1-32

<sup>15</sup> Words by personal friend Roy Pendleton (deceased) “Advent Youth Sing” page 6

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 12:12 New American Standard Bible

Recognition must also be given to Max Lucado, Charles Stanley, Charles Swindol, and Doug Batchelor ministries, in addition to many years of exposure listening to sermons of many speakers and the writings of many authors, too numerous to mention, who have shaped and challenged my thoughts thus prompting my search of the scriptures.