

## CHRISTMAS BRINGS OUT THE BEST AND THE WORST

### **TEXT: MATTHEW 2:1-18**

#### **Introduction:**

1. Charles Dickens began his famous novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* with this statement, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."
2. I thought of that line as I sat down and prepared this message because I have noticed that Christmas brings out the best and the worst in people.
3. For example, one report I read recently said that charitable giving increases by over 40% during November and December compared to other months throughout the remainder of the year.
4. Some cynics would say this is for tax deductions, but nevertheless, many people do give sincerely and generously.
5. Three times as many people make donations during the Christmas season compared to the rest of the year.
6. Christmas brings families together. Christmas is a wonderful time to invite lost friends and relatives to church to hear a Gospel message.
7. Spurgeon criticized the superstitions and paganism associated with Christmas, but he also appreciated the good side of Christmas.
8. "However, I wish there were ten or a dozen Christmas-days in the year; for there is work enough in the world, and a little more rest would not hurt labouring people. Christmas-day is really a boon to us; particularly as it enables us to assemble round the family hearth and meet our friends once more. Still, although we do not fall exactly in the track of other people, I see no harm in thinking of the incarnation and birth of the Lord Jesus" ("The Incarnation and Birth of Christ," preached December 23rd, 1855).
9. I was reminded of all of this the other day when I read an article about a group of atheists who call themselves, "The Freedom from Religion Foundation."
10. These people do not really want freedom from religion. What they really want is freedom from God (cf. Psalm 2).
11. They are not really opposed to religion; they are opposed to Christianity. It is a fact that humanism (liberalism, progressivism) is a religion.
12. These people from the so-called "Freedom from Religion Foundation" are particularly busy this time of year protesting against Christmas.
13. They spend much money on ads that say, "At this season of the Winter Solstice, may reason prevail. There are no gods, no devils, no

- angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds."
14. Psalm 14:1 says, "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God."
  15. They deny the existence of devils, but they themselves are being deceived and misled by devils ("seducing spirits" -- I Tim. 4:1).
  16. They deny the existence of hell, but unless they repent they will spend eternity in hell weeping and wailing and gnashing their teeth.
  17. They say that religion "hardens hearts and enslaves minds." I wonder if they realize that these words come straight from the Bible.
  18. Proverbs 28:14 says, "Happy is the man that feareth alway: but he that hardeneth his heart shall fall into mischief" (cf. II Timothy 2:24-26).
  19. Actually, it is not Christianity that has hardened the hearts and enslaved the minds of sinners, but the devil (cf. II Cor. 4:3, 4).
  20. Three years ago, the famous atheist Christopher Hitchens called the Christmas season a "moral and aesthetic nightmare." In his article, Mr. Hitchens complained about having to endure listening to Christmas carols, and saying "Merry Christmas."
  21. Mr. Hitchens died this past Thursday.
  22. Unless he repented of his unbelief, he is in hell right now, where he will not have to listen to any more Christmas carols or "Merry Christmas," or Bible reading or preaching, etc.
  23. When we consider that Christmas seems to bring out the best and the worst in people, let us remember that this is what the Bible teaches.
  24. In fact, it was like this way back before there ever was a Christmas.

## **I. THE UNBELIEF OF HEROD (MATT. 2:1-18)**

1. When the wise men arrived at Jerusalem with their inquiry regarding the birth of the King of the Jews, we are told that Herod "was troubled" (Matthew 2:2).
2. I mentioned that God-haters like Christopher Hitchens get troubled at Christmas time. Matthew 2:2 tells us Herod "was troubled."
3. Many people are "troubled" over the Lord Jesus Christ. Many people hate the name of Jesus. Many only use it when they curse and swear.
4. Friday while in a store, I gave a man a Gospel tract. The man ran out of the store yelling at me. He bent the tract with his fist and handed it back to me. His face was flushed with anger.
5. Many people have substituted Santa Claus for Jesus. Santa Claus laughs and says, "Ho ho ho!" Jesus says, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5).

6. The wise men were seeking after Jesus, but Herod had no inclination to do so. Herod "was troubled" (Matt. 2:3) because he was jealous.
7. He was "Herod the king" (Matt. 2:1), and he did not welcome the birth of the "King of the Jews" (Matt. 2:2).
8. Herod did not want any competition.
9. The chief priests and scribes explained to Herod that according to the prophecy of Micah 5:2, the Lord Jesus Christ was to be born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:4-6).
10. This prophecy (recorded 700 years before) should have convicted and humbled Herod. But Herod had no inclination to go to Bethlehem to worship the baby Jesus.
11. Herod was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau, Jacob's twin brother. Though he was an Edomite, Herod was a Jew religiously and had spent much money rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. That is why it is generally referred to as "Herod's temple."
12. *Unger's Bible Dictionary* says Herod was "a Jew in religion, but he was a heathen in practice and a monster in character."
13. "A monster in character." If you ever wonder why Christmas brings out the worst in people -- people shooting each other over a parking spot in a mall, or pepper-spraying other shoppers -- think of Herod.
14. Caesar Augustus said, "It is better to be Herod's hog than to be his son." Augustus had good reason to say this. Herod gave orders to have his own son Antipater killed.
15. Herod was a tyrant. Herod was a murderer. But it was the terrible sin of unbelief that sent Herod to hell.
16. John 3:36 says, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."
17. Hebrews 9:27 says, "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment."
18. Like all men, Herod had his appointed day to die (Matthew 2:19).
19. Death comes to all men -- kings and beggars, rich and poor, black and white, young and old. All must leave this world some day and face God.
20. Christopher Hitchens made a career out of blaspheming God. He wrote a book entitled. *God is Not Great*. But Mr. Hitchens was wrong, and now he is dead.
21. "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

22. Mr. Hitchens said, "God is not great," but Deuteronomy 10:17 says, "For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God."
23. Psalm 95:3 says, "For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods." We can choose to believe the Bible or Christopher Hitchens. I choose to believe the Bible.
24. Titus 2:13 says, "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."
25. This reminds us that the Lord Jesus Christ is our "great God."

## **II. THE FAITH OF THE WISE MEN (MATT. 2:1-12)**

1. What a contrast -- the unbelief of wicked King Herod, and the faith of these wise men from the East (Matt. 2:1, 2).
2. An aura of intrigue surrounds the story of the wise men. Precisely who they were, we do not know.
3. Whence they came, we have only a general idea -- "from the east" (2:1). Matthew 2:12 says that after they worshiped the baby Jesus, "they departed into their own country another way."
4. But the Bible does not name their country. Some say Persia, but this is based on conjecture.
5. How these wise men knew enough to follow the star, we can only surmise. They certainly were "wise."
6. Tradition says there were three of them, but the Bible does not say.
7. We love to sing, "Then entered in those wise men three..." and, "We three kings of Orient are..."
8. We are accustomed to seeing beautiful Christmas cards with these three wise men dressed in their beautiful, colorful robes, etc.
9. Or Sunday School Christmas plays with three wise men, etc.
10. Just yesterday I saw two cartoons, and in both of them there were three wise men. In the first cartoon, one wise man is seen kneeling down and worshiping the baby Jesus. The second wise man whispers to the third, "He is Tebowing."
11. In the other cartoon, the three wise men are riding on their camels, but one of them hits a cow and is seen flying into the air. A cell phone is seen falling out of his hand. The second wise man turns to say, "Stop texting."
12. Tradition says there were three because of the three presents (2:11).
13. Out of nowhere these wise men seem to walk onto the pages of holy Scripture, to pay homage to the newborn king. Then they mysteriously disappear back into obscurity.

14. Though we know little about them, they are an important part of the Christmas story. Their story is fascinating, and I am looking forward to meeting them up yonder in heaven.
15. As we read this story once again, let us consider three things about these great and wise men:
16. First, they were led by the Lord (2:1, 2, 9, 10).
17. When the Jews were in captivity, their teachings and sacred writings were scattered widely among the heathen.
18. For example, Balaam had prophesied the rise of "a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17).
19. In the Bible, a "sceptre" represents a king. Quoting Psalm 45:6, Hebrews 1:8 says, "But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom."
20. More than likely, the wise men were familiar with these prophecies.
21. Furthermore, these wise men were astronomers. The term "wise men" is used twelve times in the book of Daniel. It refers to the astrologers and astronomers of Babylon.
22. Our English term "wise men" is translated from the Greek word, *Magi*, which was a term used by the Babylonians and Persians for astronomers and astrologers.
23. So the wise men were led by the Lord as they followed "his star" (2:2, 7, 9, 10).
24. Secondly, the wise men worshiped the Lord (2:2, 11). Not Mary.
25. Cultists and agnostics and modernists and liberals refuse to worship Jesus, but wise men and women worship Jesus.
26. Philippians 2:9-11 says, "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."
27. The wise men were led by the Lord.
28. The wise men worshiped the Lord.
29. Also, the wise men presented gifts to the Lord (2:11).
30. It has been observed that at Christmas nearly everyone gets gifts...except the one we are supposed to be honoring, the Lord Jesus Christ! That's a strange birthday party!
31. Someone said you can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.

32. Giving to the Lord is how we show our love. Second Corinthians 8:8 says we are to "prove the sincerity" of our love by our giving.
33. Giving to the Lord is practical. Since Joseph and Mary were poor, the gold given by the wise men probably paid for their expenses when they had to move to Egypt (Matt. 2:13-15).

### **III. THE APPLICATION FOR TODAY**

1. I have already made some application. Today there are many proud unbelievers like Herod, and many humble believers like the wise men.
2. I have already made this application, but let me go a little further before we conclude.
3. Matthew 2:12 says that after the wise men met the Lord, they went "another way." It has always been this way.
4. After a person meets Jesus, he or she always goes a different way.
5. In fact, the early Christians were referred to as "the way" many times in the book of Acts (19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22; cf. Acts 9:1, 2).
6. Saul of Tarsus was "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord," but after he met the Lord, he too went "another way" (cf. Acts 9:3-6).
7. There are basically only two ways to go. Our Lord said, "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:13, 14).
8. Which "way" are you going?

### **CONCLUSION:**

1. I started out by saying that Christmas brings out the best (the wise men), and the worst (King Herod).
2. It's always been that way, and always will.
3. Over 100 years ago, the worldly writer George Bernard Shaw started an organization for the abolition of Christmas. After fifty years of campaigning, Mr. Shaw had to give it up. He admitted he was the only member!
4. Mr. Shaw died in 1950. If he were alive today he could probably get quite a few members.
5. Let me say this: without Christmas there would be no New Testaments, no Lord's Day, no churches, no Christmas carols, and no salvation.

6. Some people think that would be fine with them. Well, if they die without Christ they will surely go to hell, where there are no churches and no Christians and no singing hymns and no Christmas carols!
7. Instead of hearing *Handel's Messiah* or "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," they will hear weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.
8. For all eternity!