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December 2018 “CHRISTMAS AND OUR INHERITANCE”

Dear Friends,

Christmas is, without question, my favorite time of the year. Though not a fan of cold, snow and ice, I still enjoy all the lights, decorations, special meals and time with family. Many Christians choose not to celebrate Christmas for personal reasons; but to me, it is wonderful to see nativity scenes in people's yards, hear songs about Jesus on the radio and hear, “Merry Christmas,” from folks in stores, restaurants and other public places.

Many Christians believe that the celebration of Christmas is actually a pagan practice that goes back nearly 2,000 years. However, that is not at all the truth. Very briefly, centuries ago, December 25th fell in the midst of two pagan celebrations that were fraught with debauchery: Natalis Solis Invicti (“the birth of the unconquered sun”) and the birthday of Mithras, the Iranian Sun of Righteousness.

Around 273 AD, the Church wanted desperately to counter those ungodly celebrations. Since both of the idolatrous events centered around the birth of false gods, the decision was made to create a time of festivities acknowledging and honoring the birth of Jesus Christ, God made flesh. Thus, the choice was made to identify December 25th as the day to recognize the birth of Jesus as a direct confrontation to the height of the pagan revelry. Additionally, December 25th was to be the culmination of several days of celebrating Jesus and His birth, again as a direct challenge to the length of the pagan festivals.

Slowly but surely, celebrating Christmas began to spread. Then, in 336 AD, after the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and declared it to be the Roman empire's preferred religion, December 25th was officially recognized as the day to honor the birth of Jesus. Thus, the Church ultimately achieved its goal: the festivals surrounding both Natalis Solis Invicti and the birthday of Mithras diminished to near non-existence while the recognition of the birth of humanity's Savior became a worldwide event.

THE WISE MEN

In 2 Corinthians 8:9, we read about the substitutionary work of Jesus concerning blessings for Christians:

For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.

The phrase “became poor” implies a willing choice on the part of the individual. Some people have wondered how Jesus was rich and how He became poor. One answer is that He left the riches and glory of Heaven to come to Earth to be the sacrifice for our sins. That is 100% true and cannot be debated. There is another aspect to this of which many Christians appear to be unaware. It involves the wise men mentioned in Matthew chapter two and their visit to Jesus.

¹Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, ²Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

³When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. ⁵And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, ⁶And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. ⁷Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

⁹When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. ¹¹And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

¹²And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way. (Matthew 2:1-12)

Scripture states that wise men from the east came to Jerusalem seeking “the King of the Jews.” The phrase “wise men” comes from the Greek word “magos” (or “magi” in the plural). They were from Persia and, to the people of that culture, were the equivalent of the Jewish Levitical priesthood, having a great deal of social and political authority and influence. Highly educated, Magi were skilled in medicine and natural science. They were also practitioners of astrology (the pagan belief that the stars held power over people’s lives, i.e., the Zodiac) and experts in astronomy (the legitimate, scientific study of the solar system).

An ancient Babylonian prophecy stated that one day, a Jewish king would be born who would rise up and eventually rule over all the kingdoms on Earth. The sign of this king’s birth would be a specific movement and location of stars, especially one, unique star which would shine brighter and be positioned over the place where the king would be born. Furthermore, that prophecy said it was approximately that time in history when this star would appear and that king be born. Therefore, the Magi, as a priesthood, would have been diligently searching the sky every night. This is why in Matthew 2:2 the Magi said, “we have seen his star in the east.”

But it wasn’t just the Babylonians and Persians who believed a world-ruling king was going to be born around this period.

- Roman historians were keenly aware of this prophecy, and some believed it may be true. In fact, Roman historian Suetonius wrote, “There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world,” (Suetonius: Life of Vespian, 4:5).
- Tacitus, a Roman Senator and historian of the Roman Empire wrote, “there was a firm persuasion...that at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers coming from Judea were to acquire a universal empire,” (Tacitus: Histories, 5:13).

- Jewish historian Josephus wrote that, “about that time one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth,” (Josephus: Wars of the Jews, 6:5, 4).

Thus, we can understand why the Magi felt a tremendous sense of urgency to be the first to make contact with the one they believed would rule the world. It also explains why they brought gifts to this Jewish king.

Both the Old Testament and secular history tell us that there was almost continual warfare among nations in that part of the world. When one nation was threatened by another, the king of the threatened nation would evaluate the situation to determine if he thought his army could defeat the invading army. If not, he would try to make peace with the invading king to avoid bloodshed and death, especially his own. Jesus referred to this practice in Luke 14:31-32:

³¹Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? ³²Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassador, and desireth conditions of peace.

The most common method of trying to avoid war was to present offerings to the invading king. These offerings would consist of items considered of great value. The peace-seeking king would send high ranking officials as his representatives who would offer the invading king these gifts. The goal was to appease that king and establish a type of alliance with him which would assure there would be no conflict and, because of that alliance, would guarantee that the warring king would offer protection against other nations. The more powerful the invading king seemed to be determined how many representatives visited him and how much they offered.

Unlike the popular traditions (and songs) of today, there is no mention anywhere in the Bible that only three wise men visited Jesus. The Babylonian/Persian culture believed that this Jewish king would conquer the entire world and that all people would be subject unto him. They knew that if they could be the first nation to form an alliance with this king, they would have his protection and receive preferential treatment from him as he ruled. This is why they sought for Jesus even though He was only about two years old at the time. (No, they were not at the manger when He was born; all the nativity scenes showing them there are completely inaccurate.)

Because it was believed this Jewish king would be the most powerful in all of history, the Persian ruler would have sent the highest ranking leaders under him to be his representatives. It most definitely would not have been just three Magi. Rather, it would have been a caravan of Magi, dressed in the finest apparel, accompanied by a full contingent of attendants equally attired in beautiful clothing. When this procession entered Jerusalem, the people would have gathered along the streets to watch this stunning parade of royal pageantry. This is why Matthew 2:3 mentions that all Jerusalem was stirred at their arrival.

Scripture reveals that the wise men gave Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Another long-entrenched tradition has it that these gifts consisted of a small chest of gold and small containers of frankincense and myrrh. This is far from the truth of what would have actually happened.

Notice in the King James Version how the following from Matthew 2:11 is punctuated: ***and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense,***

and myrrh. The semi-colon after “gifts” implies only three items were presented: gold, frankincense and myrrh. But they opened their **TREASURES**; this means they had **CONTAINERS** of treasure, not just one small box of gold, one small bottle of frankincense and one small jar of myrrh. A more accurate way to read the above could be this: ***and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts, gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.*** In other words, gold, frankincense and myrrh were most likely not the only things they gave to Jesus.

Gold was the preferred gift to present to a king. Throughout the Old Testament, gold is mentioned as a precious commodity presented to royalty; 1 Kings chapter 11 reveals staggering sums of gold presented to Solomon. From the viewpoint of the Persian Magi, giving a king who would rule the world a small box of gold to establish an alliance would have been an insult. There is no way to know precisely how much gold they gave Jesus, but it is safe to say it would have been quite an impressive amount.

Often referred to as spices, frankincense and myrrh are actually resins from trees: the Boswellia (frankincense) and Commiphora (myrrh). Once the resin is obtained from the trees it is processed for a variety of applications, including aromatic incense and medicine. Due to how much time and work it took to complete the refining process in those days, both were very costly. To present someone a gift of frankincense and/or myrrh was considered one of the highest honors because of the expense incurred by the giver. As such, the Magi would not have given Jesus only a small bottle of each.

It is completely unknown what other gifts the Magi may have given. But whatever they were, they would have been of notable value.

What this means is that Joseph and Mary would not have been poor, beggarly paupers as is so often portrayed in stories and sermons. Rather, they would have enough wealth to last many, many years. It is very likely they had a nice home in which to live and raise a family, and Joseph may have had the best carpentry shop in the region; after all, he was well-known as a carpenter, as was Jesus (see Matthew 13:54-58 and Mark 6:1-6).

When Jesus was about 30 years old, He left home to begin His ministry (Luke 3:23). According to Jewish custom, the eldest son would often take over the family business and was also entitled to the largest portion of the father’s inheritance. By leaving home for ministry, He would have handed the business to his brothers (Mark 6:3) and essentially relinquished claim to His portion of the inheritance. In this respect, Jesus “became poor” so that through His completed work on Earth, we may be “rich.” Sadly, many have grossly misinterpreted 2 Corinthians 8:9 to mean that Christians are supposed to have incredible wealth and material possessions.

When people accept Jesus as Savior, they are born again. In its most basic sense, born again means our old sin nature is purged and we receive the spiritual life and nature of God. However, God did not stop there. He took it further and literally made us His offspring (Romans 8:15). Furthermore, He made us joint-heirs (heirs of equal inheritance) with our elder brother, Jesus. In fact, scripture tells us in Romans 8:32,

He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?

This does not mean that we are guaranteed to live daily having huge sums of money, large houses, expensive possessions and more. What it means is that we have access to everything we need, both spiritual and natural. This is confirmed in Philippians 4:19, ***But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.*** The supply is already available because our Father knows what we need before we ask (Matthew 6:8). This wealth is available to us because of Jesus' completed work on Earth; all the tithes and offerings we could ever give will **NEVER** increase what is already ours. Giving in offerings cannot in any way motivate our Father to make more available to us than that which we have already inherited.

Never in my life have I ever paid for a Christmas present given to me by someone else. Though we celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25th, our Christmas blessings and inheritance are available to us every, single day of the year, *and they are already paid for!* When we ask according to God's will, we can receive (John 16:24, 1 John 5:14-15).

This Christmas, enjoy the lights, decorations, family gatherings and celebrations. But most of all, rejoice that in Jesus we have Christmas blessings all year long!

May you have a blessed and peace-filled Christmas!

Jim

P.S. - I have a special sermon about the covenant God established with humanity through Jesus. It is titled, "The Christmas Covenant," and you can order a copy using the form below.

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT: Last month I ministered at IAM Ministries in Hialeah Gardens, Florida. The MP3 audio of each sermon is available at our website. The titles are:

- ◆ Friday, Nov 16, *Worship's Supernatural Origin*
 - ◆ Saturday, Nov 17 9:30 AM, *Let All the People Worship Him*
 - ◆ Saturday, Nov 17 10:45 AM, *The Heart of Worship*
 - ◆ Saturday, Nov 17 1:30 PM, *Worship: A Weapon of Devil Destruction*
 - ◆ Saturday, Nov 17 2:45 PM, *The Greatest Enemy of Worship*
 - ◆ Sunday, Nov 18, *The Miracle Available to All Christians*
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☐ Check this box to receive a CD of the sermon, *The Christmas Covenant*.

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