

Matthew 2:1-12
The Epiphany of our Lord
January 6, 2026

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In our study of Galatians this last number of months, we have spent a good amount of time considering that the former *gentile* unbelievers now turned Christian were being asked to think and act like Jews. Where it would have been wrong for those Christians to be burdened into the merit-based law-keeping of the Jews, ironically, we Lutherans often don't realize we read the Scriptures – and see the connection between Old Testament anticipation and Old Testament fulfillment – we see that connection pretty much through the informed lens of the Jews! Gentiles (meaning anyone *other* than descendants of Abraham) didn't *have* a 'natural knowledge' of the Old Testament; it wasn't part of their studied history, not part of their daily lives; any intentional study of the Old Testament for them would be akin to us learning a long history about, say, the Argentinians or Koreans or Nigerians. We'd say, "What does this have anything to do with us?", even though, somewhere back in history, we are all part of the same line of Adam.

But that gentile ignorance of the Old Testament and its promises also means the “sitting in darkness” is of a different nature for gentiles than it is for Jews. Interestingly, we often assume those “sitting in darkness” are the ignorant gentiles; but both Isaiah 9 and Isaiah 60 use the darkness/light motif to speak of Christ arriving in the line of Israel. Thus, both Jew and Gentile are those who sat in darkness... but perhaps of a difference nature.

The Jews’ darkness was known to them – an eternal bondage to sin, preached in their temporal slavery to Egypt and Babylon. Indeed, from God’s promise to Abraham that the Messiah would come through *his* line, his descendants had 2000 years of anticipation! And every so often during those two millennia, they were given reminder both of their *need* (slavery to Egypt, bondage in Babylon) and of their coming Messiah (some sort of a prophecy, about a name Immanuel, or a virgin birth, or the line of Jesse, or the Elijah to come, or the town of Bethlehem Ephrathah... some prophecy that should have awakened and heightened their anticipation.)

But, what about for the gentiles? The gentiles’ darkness of eternal bondage to sin was not known to them; they lived in ignorant bliss as if free of sin, so their darkness was a different type... a complete ignorance. There was no anticipation for the gentiles. Very few of them had ever heard such promises. They simply sat in darkness and in the shadow of death – with *no* comprehension of it!

They simply lived generation after generation having learned to get used to and even embrace the dead of spiritual winter, embodied by that fictional land of Narnia where, CS Lewis says, it was always winter and never Christmas. And the gentiles had no reason to hope – or even be concerned! – that that would ever change. That doesn't make their darkness one to be excused, but nevertheless to be understood as a totally different type of darkness... a similar type of darkness to someone who doesn't get the inside joke, someone who "had to be there" but wasn't... or someone who is oblivious to the big picture because he has such tunnel vision on his own self.

So, both Jew and Gentile could be described, but in far different ways, by the verse, "Those sitting in darkness have seen a marvelous light; on them a light has shined."

As we former gentiles have been "grafted in" as branches to the vine of Christ and have now studied the Old Testament and seen history's link from Eden to Christ, we actually tend to look through the lens of Jewish eyes, if you will. As we study the Scriptures, we genuinely/rightly appreciate and take to heart all of the Old Testament prophecies and foreshadowings and feasts and covenantal customs that aided the line of Abraham in looking forward to the coming Messiah.

But, to appreciate this Epiphany festival, let yourselves be reminded: your ancestors are gentiles – a totally different branch in Adam's tree than the line of Abraham. Pretend for a moment that

you do not know the Old Testament as an insider. Pretend that you have no appreciation of God's promises of the coming Messiah... that you've never heard of Moses or Abraham or The Ten Commandments or the Exodus or King David. Pretend that you have not grown up in a society that willingly hyphenates Christian and Judeo as if we're cousins... and recognize that you are gentiles. There is no reason in your family line to ever have had any anticipation for the coming Christ. There is no reason in your family line to ever have had any expectation of a savior or salvific deliverance from all the problems of this world. In many ways, there is no reason in your family line – other than it being seared into your heart and weighing heavily on your conscience and being seen in daily life breakdown, death, and decay – to know that God's Law condemns your sin.

All you have reason to know as a gentile is that you *are* (for some reason) burdened in conscience; you *do* know the weight of your sin, but don't even know why; but you know the world is chaotic, full of pains and problems, and you cannot explain it and do *not* have any reason to hope it will change or even is meant to change. Your pagan gods have never delivered. They've all proven to be impotent myths. Your love of money proves itself to be moth-ridden and vain. Your supposed wisdom proves itself at the same time egotistical and foolish! You simply sit in darkness and under the ominous and ever-present shadow of death.

But, what you do not know as you sit in your darkness is that somewhere in history God re-introduced His Gospel to your kinsmen. There's a pretty good chance (though, we can't say with certainty) it happened during the Babylonian captivity, when a Hebrew named Daniel won favor in the eyes of King Nebuchadnezzar and was put in charge over the court magi. Perhaps, these wise men learned from Daniel of the promise of the coming Messiah and the prophecy from the book of Numbers that the Messiah's star "shall come forth from Jacob." And that generation of magi handed down through the generations of the court magi such knowledge to be studied and looked for.

And so, these magi kinsmen of yours, scientists and mathematicians, really – not kings – they kept that prophecy in mind for generations... even after Babylon was defeated by the Persians, the Persians by the Greeks, and the Greeks by the Romans... through it all, they learned not to trust in earthly empires, but in the promise of the God of Israel. And, after hundreds of years... maybe even as hopes and hearts grew dim, suddenly – behold! - in the darkness of the night sky, a light shines.

There are two times, actually, that Matthew records that your ancestors followed the star. The first was when the star first arose, first appeared. They knew enough that it was over the land of Jacob, but it did not lead them so directly that they knew to go to

Bethlehem rather than using their own human wisdom to assume they were supposed to go to Jerusalem, the city where kings live.

Yes, Jerusalem makes sense – it’s the place of kings. It’s the city of Jewish royalty. It’s even the capital city the magi’s ancestors ransacked to take the Hebrews into captivity. This is where the king must be born! And so, as the wise men ask around (remember, not being kings themselves, there’s no reason they ought have been treated as nobility. We ought not assume they went directly to Herod, but – as the Greek text indicates – they were “asking (around) continuously”... (and, if these gentiles know about the birth of Messiah, how shocking it must have been to them that the inhabitants of Jerusalem *don’t!*)... as they ask around, they are brought before Herod, and it is Herod’s chief priests and scribes who (though they themselves later proved faithless) in that moment confessed to Herod and indirectly taught the magi. And, as Herod then directs the gentiles to Bethlehem, behold – a second time – there is the star (a sign that works with and, if you will, for the holy Word... Word and sign together)... the star of the Messianic child! And it leads them right to the house where God in the flesh can be found.

That’s *your* Christmas, friends... because that is the Christmas of your gentile ancestors: not a manger, but a star. *There* is where it is made known to **our** line that God has come in the flesh... and, more importantly, that He has come in the flesh *for us*. Consider the

words of our text: “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”

Listen to that again: “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” – in the Greek, it could very woodenly be rendered, “they rejoiced with joy great greatly.” Notice how both concepts are *doubled with almost superfluous over-emphasis*. They rejoiced with joy – what else would they rejoice with?! You can even hear the same root word in the Greek: χαίρω χαράν. And their joy was great, greatly... greatly great... exceedingly great!

How else does one describe the feeling whereby the magi might have said, “We had lost the star that was going to show us the way to salvation, but there it is again!” How else does one capture the euphoria of saying, “The God of Israel is including *us* in His plans and in the promised Messiah!”

Some will argue that perhaps these men simply were rejoicing in the same way that scientists rejoice over a magnificent discovery (“Eureka! Our hypothesis has been proven!”); some are quite skeptical about whether they truly rejoiced “theologically, spiritually, faithfully” (if you will) and truly understood they were rejoicing in the fulfilled promises of God in the flesh. But the magi’s behavior in the presence of this child tells us all we need to know:

The text says, “And when they went into the house they saw the child... and, they fell down (or, as one English version interprets

it, “having fallen prostrate”), they worshipped him” – literally, “they *proskyneo*-ed, they dogged toward him, to kiss the ring of the master.” Notice the great truth: the magi of the gentiles – the wise ones of the pagans – on their hands and knees... begging, worshipping, the Christ of *the God of Israel*. And, to further show their faith in him, they gave gifts rich with theological meaning – gold: gifts for a king; incense: the fragrance of priestly prayers; myrrh: the preparation for a death and burial, as the prophets foretold it.

Friends, your ancestors knew this Child had been born to die *for the whole world*, and that includes gentiles sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death. *Here* is Christmas for the gentiles.

Before this moment in history, it could be argued that the angels in the night sky, when they said, “To you is born” they were only referring to *Jewish* shepherds... and when they sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to those with whom He is pleased” – oh, well that’s of course, *His* people – the line of Abraham!

But, here, the Scriptural testimony is undeniable... the Christ child is for all people, even as we sing with Simeon sing – “a light to lighten *the gentiles*, and the glory of Thy people Israel.” Simeon was not overstating it. The Christ child is for all people.

And, if this holy child welcomed your gentile ancestors to his feet, then He is *for you* as well. As beneficial as it is to understand the Old Testament foreshadowings all throughout the line of Israel,

you don't have to be an expert in them to know that this child is for you, too... even if you have no claim in the line of Israel.

The world doesn't have to *pretend* Christmas is for it... because Christmas is. The whole pagan world hijacks the term, tries to cleanse it of all things Christ in the flesh and replace it with spiritually-driven materialistic pagan euphoria. Throughout the whole season, the world pretends that it has successfully shared in a utopian ritual called Christmas that supposedly has nothing to do with the birth of God in the flesh... and yet, tonight, we hear that the world doesn't have to deceive itself to such lengths! Christmas is for the gentile as well... because it points the gentile to Christ and says, "Here, in your world of utter chaos and confusion and cultural stupidity and woke-political-correctness-leading-to-decadence... Here, the Christ child is for you, too. He brings order to your confusion, law to your lawlessness, gospel to your brokenness, hope to your hopelessness, healing to your pain, forgiveness to your sin, light to your darkness, redemption to your captivity, eternal living to your eternal dying."

These are objectively true benefits; they're not sentimental "holiday season feelings" that evaporate as soon as the tree is thrown out to the curb. These are the objective gifts the Christ makes known, even *brings in Word and sign, Word and Sacrament*, to this broken world for every day of your sin-plagued life. Does such truth not give us reason to "rejoice exceedingly with great joy"?

So, come to His table this night and *proskyneo* (fall down and “beg like a dog”) before him and kiss the ring of the King... and receive the gifts this same Jesus Christ brings to you.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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