



1 CHRISTMAS  
DECEMBER 28, 2014

FIRST, MARSHALL  
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

PSALM 96:1-13; MATTHEW 2:1-12  
*As With Gladness*

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

As I mentioned earlier, this will be a dialog sermon...between:  
-us and our hymn, As With Gladness Men of Old,  
-and a dialog between you and me as we look at the story of the Wise Men, and the significance of, or meaning behind, their mysterious visit.

So keep your finger in the hymnal on #302, and we'll sing a verse and talk, then sing and talk, etc... Let's sing v. 1:

*1. As with gladness men of old Did the guiding star behold;  
As with joy they hailed its light, Leading onward, beaming bright,  
So, most gracious Lord, may we Evermore be led by Thee!*

Here are my two basic questions for this verse:  
***Who were the wise men? And What was the star?***

\* **Who were the wise men?** What do we know about them? The Bible is, as usual, a little short on the details. Legend states that there were three, each coming from a country like Persia, India, etc. No biblical data

\* **What was the star?**

-Was it like a comet that moved? Or was it a stationary sign in the heavens. I'm thinking the latter, otherwise they wouldn't have stopped in Jerusalem, but simply kept on their way to Bethlehem, although Matthew says they followed the star to Bethlehem where it stopped over the house where the child lay.

***-And what in the world does all this mean for our lives today? What's the light that we're to follow – and where might it lead us?***

**Verse two of our hymn:**

2. *As with joyful steps they sped, Savior, to Thy lowly bed,  
There to bend the knee before Thee whom heaven and earth adore,  
So may we with willing feet Ever seek Thy mercy-seat!*

**\*How in the world did these “Wise Men” get it?**

-I wonder what compelled them to honor Jesus as the king of the Jews? I mean, in the grand scheme of important positions of power in the world, being the ***King of the Jews*** at that time was kind of like being, well a... Minnesota Viking football player this year...the good news is: you made it to the big leagues...the bad news is: nobody really cares!

It's odd, isn't it, that they seem to have received their info through **the horoscope**...And yet, if that's how they're used to seeing God's presence in life's events, then maybe God simply said, ***Yeah, I can work with that***, and gave them the message in the fashion that they could understand.

-And that, actually, is a very comforting word for me – that if and when God chooses to communicate with us, we won't have to be scholars of the biblical languages, or experts on the Age of Aquarius. Instead, we can trust that God will make himself known in a way that makes sense to us.

\*But, again, ***why*** did that baby's birth mean something to them, and ***what*** did it mean?

\*What in the world did the wise men take away from the experience?

\*What did they report back home and what did they do with that knowledge?

\*What does the last line mean for us: ***So may we with willing feet Ever seek Thy mercy-seat!***

**Verse three of our hymn:**

3. *As they offered gifts most rare At Thy cradle, rude and bare,  
So may we with holy joy, Pure and free from sin's alloy,  
All our costliest treasures bring, Christ, to Thee, our heavenly King!*

Somebody once said that the Wise Men really needed a woman along on the trip. A woman would have brought along much more age-appropriate gifts for a little boy than *gold, frankincense and myrrh*... *The gifts are never explained by Matthew, but does anyone know the legend behind their meaning?*

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_Magi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi))

Gold: a symbol of kingship on earth  
 Frankincense: incense = a symbol of deity  
 Myrrh: an embalming oil as a symbol of death

\*What is *our* take-away here (*all our costliest treasures bring, Christ, to Thee our heavenly King*)??

**Let's sing verses four and five of our hymn:**

4. *Holy Jesus, every day Keep us in the narrow way;  
 And when earthly things are past, Bring our ransomed souls at last  
 Where they need no star to guide, Where no clouds Thy glory hide.*

5. *In the heavenly country bright Need they no created light;  
 Thou its Light, its Joy, its Crown, Thou its Sun which goes not down.  
 There forever may we sing Alleluias to our King!*

\*When we sing *Holy Jesus, every day Keep us in the narrow way*? How does the Lord do that for us?

- His words and deeds may inspire/incite us
- His death and resurrection may set us free from our sins
- His love and compassion may warm or comfort our hearts

\*These last two verses address what happens to us after death. So, let's talk about **heaven** for a moment. Three big questions:

**Will we know our loved ones in heaven?**

**How quickly do we get there?**

**What'll it be like?**

1. Will we know our loved ones in heaven?

- I have no idea. Jesus had a conversation with his enemies, the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection. They described a tricky scenario: a woman is married and her husband dies. By Jewish law, the next oldest

brother marries her, but then he dies. So it goes with all seven *very unlucky* brothers. Then he is asked, *To which brother will she be married in heaven?* Jesus says in response, *In the resurrection, people neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven...* (Mark 12:25). So, I guess we won't be dating in heaven, which is what I take away from that.

-But Jesus' answer still doesn't address the question: *Will we **know** our loved ones in heaven?* And to that question, I can only tell you a story about a farmer from Ada, MN, by the name of Ken. He had a really bad heart, had coded a number of times over a couple of years, his family had gathered at least twice to say goodbye to him... and yet there he was, still alive and kicking. Shortly after I came to town, he had one more heart episode, and I went to the hospital to visit him.

Having journeyed a number of times through that *valley of the shadow of death*, I asked him, *How do you feel about dying?* He said, *That doesn't bother me a bit...I've been there three times – I see Jesus, and my parents, and everything's fine...and then the Lord smiles, shakes his head, holds up his hand...and I wake up in my hospital bed...* Then Ken said, *This **isn't** hard on **me**...it's hard on my **family!** I just wish I knew why I keep being sent back...*

**Will we all see our loved ones as Ken did?** I have no idea. But it gives me a sense of comfort to think that we'll at least recognize each other. But I'm guessing that C.S. Lewis may be right on this account: that though the gift of human love is the most important thing about life, all of our very best earthly experiences, love, joy, faith, hope, peace, all will be like a little Christmas-Eve-Silent-Night candle compared to the love and joy of God's glory...

## 2. How quickly do we get there?

-I stumbled across a conversation on the internet this week between a group of pastors who were discussing that ages-old question about what happens to a faith-filled person when they die. Some were certain that we don't go immediately to heaven, while others were certain that we do. The only thing I'm certain about here, is that only God knows.

So we look at various places in the bible to find a sense of meaning and comfort – and I choose as my guiding light on this issue, Jesus’ conversation with the thief on the cross in Luke 23 where the Lord says to his new-found friend, *Today you will be with me in Paradise.*

3. What will heaven be like?

-Cartoon icon: When someone goes to heaven, they get angel wings, a harp, and they sit on a cloud

-C. S. Lewis, Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle: The first thing a person encounters is a glorious feast – every delightful food imaginable. But that’s just the appetizer. They all continue to experience an overwhelming urge to keep going, beyond the banquet table and up into the rolling hills toward the highest mountain. Filled with joy, filled with peace, filled with love, they feel compelled to go upward and onward toward the source of that incredible feeling...which, we would say, is God himself.

But again, we pick and choose those portions of scripture that give us comfort and hope, and on this issue about what will heaven be like, I embrace the words of John’s Revelation, Chapter 21, verses 1-6. Writes the apostle:

*<sup>1</sup> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.*

*He will dwell with them;*

*they will be his peoples,*

*and God himself will be with them;*

*<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

*Death will be no more;*

*mourning and crying and pain will be no more,*

*for the first things have passed away.”*

*<sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup> Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.*

Amen and Amen!