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Who were the Wisemen?

By Clifford Lones

During the Christmas season we hear about the Wisemen who came from the East to see the baby Jesus. Our modern custom of giving gifts seems to be based upon the Wisemen's giving gifts to the baby Jesus.

The Bible says the Wisemen came from the East where they saw the star. The word "wisemen" in the original language seems to be a Babylonish word, so it is believed the Wisemen were from Babylon, which is east of Jerusalem.

Some 500 years before this, the prophet Daniel was led captive from Israel into Babylon. Because of the wisdom God gave Daniel, he was made the chief of the wisemen in Babylon by the then king. "Then the king made Daniel a great man ... and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wisemen of Babylon," Daniel 2:48.

Perhaps the scriptural knowledge of Daniel was known throughout the following generations of wisemen up until the time of Jesus' birth. So when the Wisemen saw the unusual star, they knew it was the sign of the birth of the King of Israel promised by God as recorded in the book of Numbers, 24:17: "...there shall come a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise of Israel."

Thus, the Wisemen made their journey to Jerusalem in Israel and went to King Herod to ask him where the child was born who was to be the promised Messianic King. Herod contacted the religious leaders and they told him the Scriptures said that it was in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). This whole event is recorded in Matthew 2:1-11.

What excites me the most in all this is the integrity of Old Testament Scriptures. The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in caves in 1947 and carbon dated to around 300 B.C., contain the Old Testament books of Numbers and Micah. Such prophecies and their fulfillment could have come only from God who planned and revealed it all. It shows that critics of the Bible who say the Bible was made up and written just by men are all wrong. It is no wonder the Bible has withstood as superior to all literature ever written and more copies of the Bible have been made and sold than any other book. Let us all read the accounts of Jesus' birth as recorded in the first few chapters of Matthew and Luke this Christmas season. •

It's fun to give

By Reverend William Randall

The Bible tells us that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We know that is true, but a gift with lots of love tucked in with it can also be a great joy to receive.

One year my wife wished that she had more pantry space. Believe it or not, there were more than enough closets at our house. Our son-in-law fashioned a little tree out of wood a few inches tall and printed the words "A Pan tree" on it and wrapped it up. There was also a little note that told of his intention to build shelves for canned and boxed foods in a closet close to the working area of the kitchen. The unwrapping of the little tree brought laughter and joy, and the transformed closet is still being appreciated years later. It seems that gifts that involve thought and the giving of one's self are the greatest.

Some were not able nor did they want to battle the crowds on so-called "Black Friday." You can be sure that there will still be sales right up to midnight of December 24. Many have given up on Christmas shopping and give money instead. It can be fun, too. How about a treasure hunt with clues and maps? How about "Say it with flowers"? Money could be folded in the likeness of interesting blooms. It could be a work of art, almost too pretty to spend. How about a book as a gift with a bill attached to each chapter? Hopefully, the recipient will only remove the money after each chapter is read; at least that could be suggested. Maybe a Bible could be given with bills placed throughout where verses are highlighted. The recipient would not only be richer financially, but also spiritually. Attractive boxes are available which are made to hold gift cards, but why not make some novel boxes from materials at hand? One year, a family member boxed and wrapped an old bowling ball, Wow, what would it be? I wouldn't mind unwrapping an old bowling ball if I found some money stuffed into the finger holes.

There is a way of making someone rich that I wouldn't encourage. Lottery tickets are merchandised as a gift suggestion. I suppose it would be exciting to rub off film or peel off tickets hoping to be rich. A few might have a very merry Christmas, but most would end up with nothing but some scraps of paper. No gambling operation intends to give most of the money to the gullible ones who try their luck. That's not their idea, be it lotteries, casinos or racetracks. It would seem that the Grinch who stole Christmas would have done his deed. The whole gambling idea is so phony.

When you give a Christmas gift, give your love and be a blessing to someone else. After all, when God gave the gift of His Son, it was a demonstration of love. "God so loved the world that He gave..." •

Surprise! It's Christmas!

By Pastor John Koedyker

(Pastor, Word of Hope Church)

Do you like surprise parties? I am not sure I always do.

When it is for someone else, that's fine. I join in the laughter and good times. But when it is for me, I have different emotions. I like to plan things out ahead of time. I never go in to a meeting unprepared. It's not that I am a controlling personality, but I do like to have at least a pretty good idea of what to expect.

With surprises, that is not possible. Surprises are sprung on you. They come out of the blue and there is no way to prepare. And for me, and perhaps many of you, this is uncomfortable.

You'd think I would be more used to surprises. After all, as a pastor I have been a student of the Scriptures for more years than I'd like to admit. And the Bible is full of surprises!

Christmas is a good example of that. The young girl Mary was taken by surprise with the news that she would have a Son — not with Joseph her betrothed — but by the Holy Spirit of God. Joseph, when he got the same news, was also surprised.

The shepherds keeping watch over their flocks outside Bethlehem were also surprised by God's announcement to them through the angels.

But what is really important, it seems to me, is that in all these "surprising stories," the surprised ones responded well. They didn't freak out — well, at least not too much. Certainly there was astonishment and some confusion at first. But these people *believed*. They trusted. They obeyed.

I think we need more of that today. Pure and simple faith to believe what God reveals to us. And believe me, He does reveal things to us. His presence is all around us. His Word is available to us. The question for us is, can we see God's hand at work in the world? Or are we too preoccupied with other things? Are we too interested in stuff — material things? God is doing amazing things around us all the time, but if our hearts are not open to Him, we will miss them.

The people who were surprised in the Christmas story were better prepared than many of us are to respond well to very anxious situations. Why? Because their hearts were attuned to spiritual things. When a message came from God, they heard it, whereas we might miss it due to the fact that we have "more important" things to concentrate on — like the TV and the NFL and shopping for cool stuff on the internet or at the mall.

Christmas is a good time to reconnect with God. It is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on miracles that *do* happen, often in surprising ways.

I hope you will go to church in December. Christmas services can be very touching and inspiring. And when you are at home some time, on a cold winter's night, why not play some Christmas carols or listen to Handel's *Messiah* and listen closely to the words — they are tremendous! Or, open that Bible that has been sitting on the shelf to Luke 2 and Matthew 2.

In doing one or more of these things, I hope you experience the good news of God's grace and love in a way that may surprise you with joy!

Merry Christmas! •

2012 unique holiday shopping

(Submitted by the Lakeshore Museum Center)

The Union Depot is the Muskegon landmark featured on this year's holiday ornament for sale in the Muskegon Mercantile and Museum Store at the Hackley and Hume historic site. The depot, designed in the Richardsonian Romanesque style, opened in 1895 and served three railroad companies before ending service in 1971 with the Chesapeake & Ohio. It is now home to the Muskegon County Convention and Visitors Bureau. The gold-rimmed porcelain ornament is the 18th in our collectible series and it sells for \$16.99.

Our gift shops offer unique items for those on your holiday shopping list. The shelves are full of jewelry, books, and videos on local history, Michigan-themed items and more. For the children on your list, there are plenty of games, puzzles, educational toys, plush and books to select from.

Can't decide? Purchase a gift certificate and let the recipient go shopping! Museum members receive a 10 percent discount on their purchases.

The museum and mercantile are open weekdays from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and on weekends from noon to 4 p.m. •