

The Wisdom of Faith

Today being Epiphany, it's only natural that we speak of "wisdom." After all, today's the day we celebrate the Wise Men traveling from afar (presumably Babylon—"Magi" is a Persian word) in order to worship the newborn Christ. ***Why, exactly, do we call them "wise"?*** From a worldly perspective, there is no doubt that these guys were some of the ***best and brightest*** in the world at that time. Obvious masters of astronomy, literature, foreign languages, foreign cultures...these guys were wise by any standard for any place and any time in history, including today. ***And yet...that's not why Scripture calls them "wise."*** You know as well as I do that some of the smartest people in the world are the biggest fools when it comes to matters of faith and salvation.

And that's really the difference here, isn't it? **Faith.** We already know these guys are called "wise" because they were able to "connect the dots" and recognize how the rising star they were witnessing went together with the Israelite prophecy regarding the birth of the King of the Jews. They recognize, and in the ***wisdom of faith***, seek out the promised Christ so that they could ***worship*** Him. Contrast this faithful wisdom with the ***utter foolishness*** of wicked King Herod and his minions. Herod had **no idea** what these foreign wise men were talking about. He didn't even know where the Christ was supposed to be born. ***All you had to do was read the Bible!*** It's not like it was a secret or anything. Herod's "wise men" simply quote from the prophet Micah when asked where this King would be born. It's not like they do calculus or anything. They simply recite from Micah. "*As it is written, the child will be born in Bethlehem of Judea.*" And from here we know that the Magi leave Herod for Bethlehem, joyfully following the heavenly star, which leads them right into the presence of the Lord Christ, where they fall down and worship Him and present Him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned in a dream to avoid Herod, they go home a different way. The end.

And that's pretty much as far as the conversation goes. Sure, there are always a few self-proclaimed "smart" folks who add to or take away from God's Word when this story is told. They speak of comets or supernovas. They provide names for the unnamed Wise Men. ***All kinds of foolishness.*** None of that is what I mean when I lament the fact that the conversation doesn't move beyond the basic VBS rendition. ***Why were the Wise Men "wise"?***

Folks: Just consider what the text so plainly tells us. These very wise men, upon seeing the natal star in its rising and connecting the heavenly phenomenon to the ancient Hebrew Messianic prophecies, set out to locate the newborn King. There's obviously a whole lot of wisdom here! However...where do these men,

equipped with all this wisdom, set out to? Answer: King Herod's palace in Jerusalem. After all, where else would you find a king, right? Kings live in royal palaces, surrounded by royalty and nobility, eating royal food, wearing royal clothes...living the royal life. Based on this, we could rightly say that these wise men are wise with *the wisdom of common sense*, which is—admittedly—a rare and precious gift. You know as well as I do that common sense isn't very common.

I need you to think about this and wrestle with this. All their wisdom—even the wisdom of “faith” (remember: they did believe the prophecies that the king of the Jews would be born)—ultimately led them to the wrong place. **Jesus wasn't there!** That's the bare-bones reality. In fact, if you simply read the text, we're never told that these men followed the star into Jerusalem. All we're told is that they saw the star in its rising, and then they set out on their own to find the newborn king. *Their own reason and strength* is what led them to Jerusalem...to an absent Christ. It's only *after* they leave Herod and are sent to tiny little Bethlehem (the Word of God giving the directions; ref. Micah) that the natal star appears again, this time leading them *directly* into the presence of the Christ child.

God led them to the Christ child. They were wise enough to follow. Who looks for a king in such lowly environs? What kind of God-King lives in such a lowly estate in such lowly conditions? *And yet...here He was.* And this is where the true wisdom of faith is recognized—they come into His lowly presence in this lowly place...*and they fall down and worship Him.* They humble themselves and rejoice. They don't second-guess themselves. They don't re-run the calculations or re-calibrate the GPS, *and who would blame them if they did?* Like I said, what kind of king—a divine King, at that—resides in lowly Bethlehem? What kind of divine King wears rags instead of the finest robes? No royal court. No pomp and circumstance and fanfare. Still...they come into His *lowly, yet divine* presence, and they fall on their faces and worship Him. **This is what makes these men wise!** The humility of true saving faith that trusts God (not mere knowledge about God). The wise humility of faith that simply takes God at His Word!

My friends: Look around. We all know that we live in a world full of *godless fools* who don't know Christ; who may even hate Christ and want to see Him and His followers dead (like Herod did). *It doesn't take a PhD to figure this out.* What about the fools who, just like the wise men journeying to the king's palace in Jerusalem *based on the wisdom of their own reason and strength*, seek out God in **all the wrong places?** Understand: I'm not talking about those fools who dare to call themselves “good Christians,” and yet don't even make the effort to come into their Lord's presence, except for maybe the occasional Christmas Eve, Easter Sunday or funeral service. I'm not talking about them. Their fruits reveal *the truth of their foolishness*, in spite of what's spilling from their foolish mouths.

What about those Christians who really do believe in and love Jesus, but who also seek out His love, His assurance, His grace, His mercy, and His peace in places He **never** leads them? What about those dear Christians who look to their works for the assurance of salvation? What about those who look to the **warm-and-fuzzy feeling** they get in their heart after sipping their latte and singing “Shine, Jesus, Shine”? If you don’t feel happy, does it mean you’re not saved? Does it mean God doesn’t love you? **Some foolish Christians believe this.** What about those dear Christians who refuse to recognize their God and Lord in, with, and under the humble means of water, bread, and wine? They love Jesus. They have faith that Jesus died for their sins, **and for this I am thankful.** And yet...they don’t have the humility of faith, do they? They don’t have the wisdom of humble faith. Say what you will, but here is Christ. Here is God’s promise, right where He tells us to look; right where He promises to be. Here is Christ. **To deny or despise this is pretty foolish, don’t you think? It’s certainly not wise.**

Folks: You have this wisdom of faith. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, God has led you to see, to hear, and to recognize your Lord and Savior in, with, and under His humble means of grace. **My only question for you: Do you seek this out, or does your foolishness sometimes lead you astray?** The wise will confess their sins. The fools will attempt to justify their sins. Here is your God and Lord. **How can you not rejoice at this?** You are in the presence of Almighty God! In just a few minutes, He will kneel down from heaven and give you the free and unmerited gift of His body and blood for the forgiveness of all your sin; for the peace that surpasses **all understanding and wisdom.** Recognized in the wisdom of humble faith, how could you not want to fall on your face in joy and thanksgiving? Recognized in the wisdom of humble faith, only a fool wouldn’t be here each and every chance they could. **That’s just common sense.**

And that’s where we’ll end the conversation for today—focused on Christ and His means of grace, mercy, and peace. Rejoice! Rejoice in the wisdom of your salvation; the divine wisdom that took on flesh and died and rose again for you. Focus here [*the crucifix*] and rejoice in this wisdom of God, hidden in plain sight for all the world to see, for it is here **in all humility** that all of God’s righteous wrath against sin raged against His only-begotten Son, all so that it would **never** have to rage against you. Here is the wisdom of God’s love for you. Here [*the font*] is the wisdom of God’s love for you. Here [*the altar*] is the wisdom of God’s love for you. Rejoice, and wherever you are led in this life, may your rejoicing—**may God’s cruciform wisdom and love**—be witnessed in all that you say, think, and do. May you always be truly wise children of God, and may the wisdom of humble faith ever and always point to and lead others to the wisdom and love of Christ, right where He promises to be; right where He tells us to look.

To the glory of His wise and holy name...**AMEN.**