

Matthew 2:1-18

Aim of lesson

To show the faith of the wise men, who travelled far to see Jesus, and to show how God protected his son from wicked men.

Background study

Isaiah 7:14 and Micah 5:2.

Suggested outline of lesson

We do not know for certain how old Jesus was when these events took place, though it is evident from Matthew 2:16 that two years had elapsed since the wise men first saw the star. Another indication may be that Jesus is described several times in verses 9-14 as a child rather than a baby.

In Herod's palace

Introduce this story by describing the scene at King Herod's palace in Jerusalem as he received the foreign visitors from an eastern country. (Tradition would have us believe that there were three wise men, probably because they brought three gifts. However, the children will be interested to learn that, in fact, the number three is never mentioned in the text so we should not assume there were three.) Emphasize the riches and splendour of this scene in contrast with the simplicity of Jesus' human origin. It would not be unusual for Herod to receive ambassadors who came to pay homage to him. Imagine the shock he received when they enquired where they could find the new king of the Jews.

Wise men

It is interesting to speculate where the wise men came from and why they came. We can only guess that they may have come from an area east of Palestine where the people of God had lived some time in the past, such as Babylon. (The same Greek word that is used of the wise men, *magos*, is used of the magicians in the book of Daniel (Daniel 1:20 for instance).

The wise men may have made the journey in response to a direct message from God, or their information about the new-born king may have been gained from writings. When the people of Israel had been captives in Babylon they had received some vitally important prophecies from Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others. The wise men may have had access to some of these and, if so, they could have learned a great deal about the promised Messiah. Whatever their source of information, it is clear that God was guiding them. Before they left home they had seen a star that was unusual in its brightness and/or its appearance. Interpreting the sight to mean that the King of the Jews had been born, they were drawn to visit the land of the Saviour's birth. The account does not tell us at this point that the star guided them, though it may have done.

The wickedness of Herod

The wise men probably thought that the birth of the Prince would already be the talk of Jerusalem. Imagine their surprise when they found that they were the ones who had brought the amazing news. Point out that Herod was a notoriously wicked and cruel man. He was filled with fear, jealousy and panic when he heard the reason for the wise men's visit. The source of their information must have been such that Herod was convinced of its validity and accuracy. He felt his position threatened and was determined to protect it at all costs. He gathered together the chief priests and scribes, who were able to quote the scriptures which foretold that Bethlehem was the place where Messiah was to be born.

Think how Herod must have flattered the wise men and charmed them into thinking that he, too, wanted to worship the baby king, while already he was concerned with plotting his death.

Following the star to Bethlehem

Eagerly the wise men set out for Bethlehem, which is about five miles from Jerusalem, and the special star went before them. If they had known the earlier scriptures they would have known that this town was already famous, for it was here that the great king David had been born. Some time had elapsed since Jesus' birth had been heralded by angels and wondered at by shepherds. Most of the visitors who had thronged the streets of Bethlehem for the census had already departed to their homes and there was now plenty of room for Mary, Joseph and Jesus in a house. There would be no small stir as these illustrious travellers approached the small town. With great joy, after their long and tiring journey, the wise men knelt before the young king, worshipping him, and presenting their gifts.

Home by another route

True to their word, the wise men had intended to return to the palace in Jerusalem to take Herod the glad news of the birth of Israel's king but God, knowing Herod's jealous heart and wicked intent, guided them again and directed them home by another route. Further intervention by God was necessary when Herod's frustration impelled him to order the killing of all boys in Bethlehem under two years of age. Hurriedly Joseph acted upon God's instructions and the little family fled from the cruel soldiers, under cover of darkness, into a foreign land, there to wait in faith until God told them to return.

Relevance to the children's lives

We see from this story how the wise men went to a great deal of trouble in their search for Jesus. They had carefully studied the scriptures, undertaken a long journey and were ready and eager to worship him when he was born. Develop the counterpart of this idea with reference to ourselves and the second coming of Jesus. Explain how the reading of the Bible will lead us to expect Jesus and make us determined to be ready to meet him when he comes. The theme can be extended to include the gifts that we can offer. (See the words of the hymn "The wise may bring their learning", Number 112 in 'Sing to the Lord')

Worksheets

These should be self-explanatory.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, please give us the desire to read about Jesus and make us determined to see him and welcome him when he comes. Amen.

Memory verse

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (Matthew 2:10).