

TRILOGY: THE SEARCH FOR CHRISTMAS JOY
"Part I - The PATH To Christmas Joy"
(Matthew 2:1-11)

Introduction: (To show the need . . .)

Many people we meet are **lack** the joy of Christmas!

(1) According to statistics put out by the National Mental Health Association, in a letter I received from this organization just this past week, I read that "Suicide is now the third leading cause of death for those aged 15 to 24!" In other words, **many in the prime of youth in life are dreadfully unhappy, and are taking their own lives at an horrendous rate as a result!**

(2) The statistics reveal that between 7,300 and 14,600 15- to 24-year-olds will **attempt** suicide in **Connecticut** this year, and that five times **more** of them will be **boys** than **girls!** (Joyce Peck, "Awareness is crucial to suicide prevention," Torrington Reg.-Cit.)

(3) One of the highest **times** for people to be depressed is the holiday season between Thanksgiving and New Year's. On Friday after Thanksgiving, while dropping into Torrington's Wal-Mart for some small items, I noticed people shopping in droves for the "best pickings" for Christmas presents, and were they every testy! The lines were long, the children were cranky, and people were **unhappy** about unloading their money for all sorts of **stuff** to round out their Christmas lists! **Christmas then becomes a prime time for depression leading to pressures to suicide!**

(4) **Christians** can lack real joy at Christmas as well:

(a) A son of missionaries whom I knew in the school for missionary children in Nigeria while growing up has committed suicide. He was distraught over the fact that his job was being transferred, and his wife didn't want to relocate to the state where his business wanted him to go. Feeling trapped, he went out into an orchard and shot himself. Needless to say, his parents whom I know very well are beside themselves with grief.

(b) This week my wife was introduced to a party as belonging to a certain relative, a believer she knows. However, she got the connection **wrong** because the believer has since divorced for the **second** time, a fact she didn't **know!** Both of us were stunned! It reinforced the fact that many of us as believers are not full of joy!

Where can one find real JOY this Christmas -- where can a troubled CHRISTIAN find fulfilling joy? Where do we begin?!

(We turn to the sermon "Need" section . . .)

Need: "With suicide a big health problem among those in the prime of life, and depression a great cause of it during this holiday season, WHY do I MYSELF often lack deep JOY this Christmas?!"

I. **In the account of the visit of the Magi at Christ's nativity, a stark CONTRAST exists between the GREAT JOY of the Magi and the way Herod and Jerusalem remained UPSET, Mtt. 2:2-3, 10.**

A. King Herod and **all** Jerusalem's religious elite were **disturbed** at the magi's proposal that Messiah had been born in Israel, Mtt. 2:2-3 NIV.

B. Conversely, the **magi**, upon seeing the nativity star move to direct them to Jesus (2:2b, 9), **rejoiced** with **exceeding great joy**, 2:10-11.

II. **Studying the REASONS BEHIND this CONTRAST of emotional expression exposes the PATH to Christmas joy for US as follows:**

A. There was a great **CONTRAST** in the **focus** in these two groups:

1. On the one hand, Jerusalem had locked itself into a spiritually self-defeating web of **worldly goals** and **security concerns:**

a. Three years before Christ's birth, Herod the Great came into disfavor with Caesar, leading to Rome's direct rule of Judaea and a **tense Herod**, Hoehner, Chr. Aspects of the Life of Chr., p. 17.

b. As he was also aged and ill, Herod's sons started jockeying for the throne. **Paranoid**, Herod executed two sons. However, his **surviving** sons **boosted** their efforts for the throne as there were now fewer rivals left to compete. Herod next altered his will 3 times, executing one son 5 days before his death, *Ibid.*, p. 22.

c. Well, every time Herod changed his will, he had to get approval from the Emperor, so **Caesar** was signaled by the will changes that Judea faced potential unrest. Caesar possibly ordered the census to gain information needed in the event of trouble, *Ibid.*

d. Also, Persian-Parthian **magi** like those in Mtt. 2 were known, powerful **anti-Rome king makers**, s. v. "Magi," Z.P.E.B., v. 4!

e. Thus, the request by these **magi** for the location of a **newborn Jewish KING**, in **upsetting** both Herod and **all Jerusalem**, exposed a city too caught up in the world's values and worries to welcome God's Blessed Messiah! (Mtt. 13:22)

2. By contrast, the magi's *candid* search for the newborn as proved by the star's *verifiably* non-manmade origin showed they were **not** on a covert political mission; they were just spiritually *thirsty pagans*!
- B. **THIS contrast in focus** led in turn to a **CONTRAST** in **applying** God-given **information** with **contrasting EMOTIONAL** results:
1. Jerusalem's elite, *distracted* by worldly *worries* simply **disregarded** their God-given insight to miss the Messiah and **remain in unrest**:
 - a. Jerusalem's leaders could tell the magi that Messiah would be born in the Bethlehem of Judaea -- not the one in Galilee -- (The Macmillan Bible Atlas, p. 73) according to Mic. 5:2, Mtt. 2:4-6. This was since Ephrathah, mentioned there with the hamlet, was located **only 7 miles SSW** of Jerusalem (1961 Israeli map and Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, fn. to Micah 5:2 with Gen. 48:7).
 - b. Besides, when the magi reported on a new star sighting, something **anyone** could see in the **sky**, these leaders **could** have **checked** the **SKY** for ratification of the Old Testament Numbers 24:17 prophecy of Messiah's star by the ancient **magus**, Balaam!
 - c. However, caught up in their godless worries, none but the magi even *bothered* to *head* to Bethlehem or *check* the *sky* even to see God *move* the star to *locate* the *Messiah*! (Mtt. 2:9-10)
 2. Conversely, the spiritually *thirsty* magi, seeking Messiah with what **scant** insight they **had**, were richly and *joyfully* rewarded by God!
 - a. **Pagan** seers felt a star appeared to signal that a **pagan** was born to rule under its quadrant, s. v. "Star of the Magi," Z.P.E.B., v. 5.
 - b. Using this belief, the spiritually *thirsty* magi came to Jerusalem.
 - c. In **reality**, **God** expropriated a prediction made by **ancient pagan soothsayer**, Balaam to foretell the birth of Jesus in Num. 24:1, 17! In *grace* God had let His truth be *couched* in Balaam's pagan motif, leading to His producing a **star** at *Christ's* birth!
 - d. Now, as the magi from **400 mile distant** Persia had to ask for the infant's location in v. 2 where the **star moved** to **show his HOUSE** only 7 miles away in 2:9, 11, we know the star had **not** moved *until* these magi had talked with Herod in Mtt. 2:7-8.
 - e. So for **applying** the **Biblical** insight of Micah 5:2 (2:2-8) told to them at Jerusalem, and that by heading off to Bethlehem, God **rewarded** the magi by *starting to move* the star to lead them to Christ. This also showed they were being led by the **Creator** to worship **His King**, a wonderfully unexpected revelation which gave these spiritually *thirsty* magi "*exceeding great joy*", 2:9-10

Lesson Application: (1) *Getting distracted by godless values and worries so as NOT to APPLY the Scripture we KNOW will keep us from God's joy, Mtt. 2:3. Rather, the PATH to God's Christmas JOY leads to (2) forsaking our worldly values and worries all to (3) apply what BIBLICAL truth we know. (4) GOD then gives us more insight that leads to joyful fulfillment in Him, Mark 4:24-25.*

Conclusion: (To illustrate the sermon lesson . . .)

Mike Ridley, an elder at the Wintonbury Baptist Church in Bloomfield, Connecticut, works as a public high school psychologist. In June of 1990, he wrote in the "Elder's Epistle" section of the church newsletter the following observations regarding the quest for happiness he has seen with respect to his job and church experiences:

"Since becoming an elder a little over a month ago, I have been asked what's it like being an elder! Well, for me it has been a refreshing and challenging time. I have gotten the greatest *joy* from hearing individuals share how they came to faith in Jesus. It is beautiful to see people relive the *joy* they first experienced when they accepted Christ.

Psychologist. My most important duties at school are individual and small group counseling and crisis intervention. During the course of my day, I meet with many young people who are truly hurting. For some, they are caught up in the wicked cycle of drug and alcohol abuse. Others are rebelling against parents or reacting to a painful divorce or separation in the family. Still others are emotionally troubled by inability to relate with their peers or with adults. Some struggle with depression and poor self images.

Unfortunately many of them have **tried** to **solve** their problems through drug use, sexual experiences, running away, suicide attempts and some even Satan worship. Others have tried to handle their problems through more positive means by involving themselves in athletics or by excelling academically.

Joy of those individuals I spoke of in the opening paragraph.

God's Word . . . "

Take it from an elder at Wintonbury Baptist in Bloomfield, a high school psychologist: the key to JOY this Christmas is an abandonment of self-help efforts to counter worrisome problems unto seeking Christ and His guidance through Scripture!