

## Building A Beautiful Christmas Display

*Matthew 2:1-12*

One of the favorite things about celebrating Christmas for many people has to do with the colorful and bright displays that we see almost everywhere this time of year. You might find smiling elves, Santas, prancing reindeer, and every once in a while you *might* find a nativity scene. But Christmas displays are everywhere. So as a result, the manufacturing of Christmas displays has become very big business. It is possible to buy a string of Christmas lights for one dollar, or if you have lots of money and really need somewhere to spend it, a company in Cave City, Kentucky, will be more than happy to help you. They specialize in giant Christmas displays. A 15-foot Santa will only cost you \$6,500, but if you want to economize, you can have a 15-foot snowman for just over \$5,000. One display, measuring 23' high and 97' across, features animated eagles flying and landing, and uses nearly 4,800 lights. And it can be yours for only \$48,000. An 11-piece, life-size nativity scene will cost about \$11,000.

Most likely, any Christmas displays you have in your own home will be far simpler than that! A wreath on the door, a simple nativity scene, a tree—and you're set. But as we are in the final days of this year's Christmas season I would like to suggest a different kind of Christmas display, in the form of characteristics that should adorn our lives as we prepare for Christmas this year.

We find them in the story of the wise men, called *magi*. These were men of science, students of astronomy, students of the body of knowledge of their day. They were seekers of the truth and they had come upon some very important knowledge. But that knowledge alone is not what made them wise. It is what they *did* with that knowledge. You see, these wise men knew how to apply the truth they had. And that is what made them wise. That is what makes us wise, too—applying the truth we have to our own life situations.

Let's build a different kind of Christmas display. What kinds of things should we display in our lives as we prepare for Christmas?

### **1 We Should Display Expectant Hope**

Expectant hope is what we see displayed in the hearts and lives of the wise men. Expectant hope is what motivated them to set out on this long journey to find this child, because they knew that the King of the Jews would be born. They told Herod they had seen His star while they were still in the east. But just knowing about the child was not enough. Friend, it is not enough today, either! They could have made note of the sighting of His star in their journals, recording it for all time, but they wanted to see for themselves.

They were filled with anticipation of what they might discover. So, they became men on a mission, a mission full of hope, and they expected to find what they were looking for. They even brought gifts with them! They didn't just talk about it, and wonder about it, and write books about it. This was something they had to experience for themselves.

We have an expression that goes like this: "Slow as Christmas." When we say that we are referring perhaps to someone not moving quickly enough. We say they are slow as Christmas because Christmas seems to take a long time to arrive, especially when you're a child. It just seems as though it will never get here! Children just seem to thrive on anticipation. Sharon and I bought a small gift for my granddaughter, Emma Claire, for her to enjoy during the Christmas season. We were going to give it to her when we saw them at Thanksgiving. I told my daughter Jennifer about it, and she responded, "Well, I'm not going to tell Emma Claire about it yet. She'll be asking me every five minutes if it's Thanksgiving yet."

Anticipation! We can't wait for Christmas! Teenagers say they can't wait until they turn 21. Then we can't wait until we get out of college. Then we can't wait until we get married. Then we can't wait until we retire. But little children out-anticipate us all. They are always looking with great expectation to the next thing. Remember that Jesus said we must be just like that in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. At Christmas, especially, let us look to the Lord with expectant hope, believing that Christ came into the world to make a difference, and that He can make a difference in my life, and your life, today.

It is a natural thing to look forward to Christmas with expectation. I guess we never lose that, regardless of our age. But we're talking about displaying in our lives for all to see the kind of expectant hope that looks forward to our ultimate reward in Christ, that carries us along throughout our days, that gives us hope and meaning and peace.

## **2 We Should Display Simple Faith**

This is a faith that is so simple and so pure that many folks are never able to accomplish it. Even after we've followed the Lord and studied the Bible for years and years, sometimes we bog down right here, because we try to make it harder than it really is. Folks, faith is not complicated. It may be risky sometimes, in that it may require you to do things you might not ordinarily do. Other people may not always understand it. But at its core, faith is not complicated, a truth well-known to these wise men. They were possessed by an expectant hope, and they were willing to step out and believe they were right. You see, faith may be simple, but it can also be very risky.

We see that truth throughout Scripture. Pastor David Hoke has written, "Risk is what puts the works to faith. It is the wise men hitching up to the camels and starting out across the desert following the star. It is Abraham lifting the knife to sacrifice his son, Isaac, believing that

God knew what He was doing. It is Peter stepping out of the boat to walk on the water. It's Moses being pursued by Pharaoh, stretching out his rod to part the Red Sea. It's Joshua marching around the walled city of Jericho, trusting that God would bring the walls down. It's David going out to face a mighty giant, armed only with a sling and some rocks. It's Nehemiah and his men with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. It's Daniel walking into the lion's den, refusing to leave off his devotion to God. Risk is the three Hebrew men being willing to be thrown into the fiery furnace rather than disavow their faith in God. It is Paul putting his life on the line in city after city for the cause of Christ."

Isn't that the kind of faith we need in our day? We are so educated and organized and sophisticated and complicated, that sometimes we don't see what God requires. But when we step out in simple faith, our faith is stretched way beyond its normal proportions. Don't you want more than a faith that is dull and lifeless? Don't you want more than a weak, sickly, frail, pathetic little thing that passes as faith? Don't you want a faith that is vibrant and exciting and lively? Don't you want a faith that is simple enough to actually believe God and what He says?

Simple faith was intended to be put to work, not just carry around in your pocket. It is meant to be displayed, but not just to show off. It is the very nature of the sun to simply shine; it is the very nature of faith to work and be on display. Jesus said, "*Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven.*" That friend at work who needs to hear the Gospel may be the challenge which is before you. That unpopular stand which you really should take based on Christian principles may be a risk God is calling you to take. That uncharted territory into which you sense God calling you may be the adventure which will open greater doors of ministry to you. It takes simple faith, one that is willing to trust and follow Christ wherever He leads.

### **3 We Should Display A Holy Discovery**

The wise men began in hope and simple faith. Now, their hope and faith became **discovery**. The Scripture says, "*On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary*" (v. 11). They had acted on their faith and now they had arrived. They had discovered the child who was king. What they came upon was the God of the universe, who had left His throne in glory to become a man. They discovered there in Bethlehem the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

What got them to this point? They had been invited into Herod's palace and had seen the finery and luxury befitting to a king. Perhaps as they entered Herod's palace they thought that this must surely be where the King of the Jews had been born! It made perfect sense, didn't it? They're looking for a Baby King, and here they are in a palace, right? But they

discovered that the Child they were looking for wasn't there. What kind of thoughts do you think went through their heads when they discovered that the Baby King wasn't in the palace after all?

But something was wrong. There was no wonder there. The people in the palace—the servants, the family members—no one seemed to be caught up in the joy and excitement of a baby's birth in the family. This was not the atmosphere of a household, no matter how fine or luxurious, which was celebrating the birth of a royal child! There was no wonder, no rejoicing, not even any happiness at all. Their quest was not over. They must push on in their discovery.

They had to look further, and without realizing it, Herod and his chief priests were used by God to assist the wise men with their discovery. Verse eight says that Herod sent them to Bethlehem, with the instruction to come and tell him once they found the child, so that he, too, could go worship him.

Just as the wise men found what they were looking for, so can you. This Christmas, embark on a quest to discover what God has offered you. Reach out in hope and simple faith to discover the wonders and joys that Christ came to make possible for us all. Discover the meaning and purpose found in Christ alone.

If you are willing to hope, if you are willing to take a step of faith, based on the expectation that God will meet you there, then you will discover the God who can change your life.

## **4 We Should Display A Heart of Worship**

But the wise men didn't stop with merely finding the child. I think it's interesting that we have no record of the wise men, on finding the baby, questioning whether or not it made sense. He wasn't in the palace and Herod didn't know exactly where He was—things which make no sense when you try to reason it out with human logic. The only record we have is that *“they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh”* (v. 11). Their response was “Here's the King; let's worship Him.”

Wisdom is what enables us to sort through what is real and what is not. It helps us to distinguish between what is pretense and what is reality. These wise men realized that their brief visit to Herod's palace was only a detour to finding the real King. And their wisdom led them to worship Him. Their wisdom could lead them to do nothing else!

Herod did not display wisdom at all. When he wanted to know *“where the Christ was to be born”* (v. 4), he knew to turn to the chief priests and teachers of the law. But that did not

make Herod wise. You see, wisdom is much more than just knowing the right answers. Many people think they are wise and that they've got God all figured out because they know the right answers. But knowing the right answers will never lead you any further unless you have a heart to worship Him.

Please look very carefully at this with me, at something I discovered only this week. That's one of the beauties of God's Word, that after reading and studying it for years, there's always something new and fresh to find in it! The wise men came from the east to Jerusalem asking, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" But look at the familiar verse three: "*When Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.*" The King James reads that Herod was "*troubled.*" The word means to be agitated, by moving the parts to and fro. Think of your washing machine. It has something called an agitator, that functions by stirring the water and moving the clothes around and around and up and down. That pretty much describes the inner commotion of Herod's mind and heart when he heard of the quest of the wise men. And it pretty much describes the inner condition of anyone who is seeking to function and move through life without Christ. There is an inner turmoil and disturbance that can only be stilled by Christ.

But let's go deeper. The same word is used to describe the disciples' reaction when they saw Jesus walking on the water. We read that story and we get the idea that the disciples were not just pondering and turning over and over in their minds what they were seeing. They thought they were seeing a ghost, and they were terrified! That gives us a different understanding now of Herod's reaction. He wasn't just mulling it over and thinking about what to do. He was terrified!

Verse three tells us that all Jerusalem had the same reaction, probably because Herod was a very unstable man. If he was terrified there was no telling what he might do. The same reaction continues to this very day. Herod's intent was not to worship Christ, but to destroy Him. All these years later, there are those whose intent is not to worship Him, whose intent is never to worship Him, but to exploit Him, and use Him for their own goals and purposes.

People to this very day are still going through the motions of worship when they have no heart for it at all. Perhaps they do not try to literally destroy Him, as Herod did in having the infants slaughtered, but through mocking words many of them try to destroy the credibility of the Church or of Christians.

We must choose to worship Him out of hearts that are bowed before Him in genuine adoration and worship. Will you put that on display this year? There is an expression that someone is "wearing his heart on his sleeve," meaning that his emotions are out there for everyone to see. Instead of doing that, what I'm suggesting here is that we should all display

a heart of worship this Christmas, that everyone can see Christ as the One to Whom we owe our allegiance and devote ourselves. It's not enough to know about Jesus, as we learned from Herod. We must worship Him, and acknowledge Him for Who He really is.

## **5 We Should Display Unquestioning Obedience**

Finally, in verse 12 we see one more thing that should adorn our lives at Christmas and throughout the year. We see that the wise men were warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod. It seems that as a result of their worship, God was with them. And here, He gives them immediate instruction. Being wise as they were, they obeyed God's instructions. This is also a key characteristic of true wisdom — **a relentless, unquestioning obedience.**

When we expose ourselves to God's truth on a regular basis, it is easier and easier to obey Him when He tells us to do something. It becomes second nature to us. We mentioned simple faith earlier. Simple faith, combined with unquestioning obedience, may very well have been what saved their lives. It may not always be as dramatic as that in our lives today, but the fact remains that God looks to us as His people, and I believe He expects to see unquestioning obedience from us, to the point that we are willing to do whatever He says, just because He says it!

The truth of Scripture remains the same today as ever: *“Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!”* (Deuteronomy 5:29). *“If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him”* (John 14:23).

What is it about Christmas that requires unquestioning obedience, and why should it be a part of the adornment of our lives? If that Baby really was the Christ, if He really was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, if it is really true that Almighty God split time and eternity and became one of us, then He is worthy of our love and obedience. And it is important that others whose lives cross our paths know to Whom we belong and know to Whom we have devoted ourselves.

This is a simple story, one that has fascinated and thrilled people of all ages for many, many years. Because it is a simple story, we can understand it easily enough. But it is simply not enough to hear God's word and understand it. True life and joy comes from obedience. Only as we walk in the light will the light serve to illuminate our path. Only as you obey the commands of Jesus will you receive the benefits and blessings which are yours in Christ.

Imagine a family out for an evening, looking at all the Christmas displays. Hear the mother say to her children, “Oh, look at the snowman!” One child responds, “Mommy, see the reindeer!” And the father says, “And there’s Santa Claus!”

Now let’s talk about our Christmas display that we’ve built today, one which will stay up year round and be there all through our lives: Over there is **Hope**, and next to it is **Simple Faith**. Then there is **Holy Discovery**, and **a Heart of Worship**, and **Unquestioning Obedience**. These all speak to us about the possibilities of Christmas for all of us. They show us what can happen when we put our faith into action. They speak to us about an encounter with Jesus that can change lives!

You can spend a lot of money decorating your home for Christmas, and that’s fine if that’s what you want to do. But you don’t need to spend thousands of dollars to decorate your life with beautiful Christmas displays.

The old saying that “Wise Men still seek Him” has never been truer than it is right now. So what I’m asking you to do right now is to surrender your life to Christ. It will truly be the wisest choice you’ve ever made in your life.