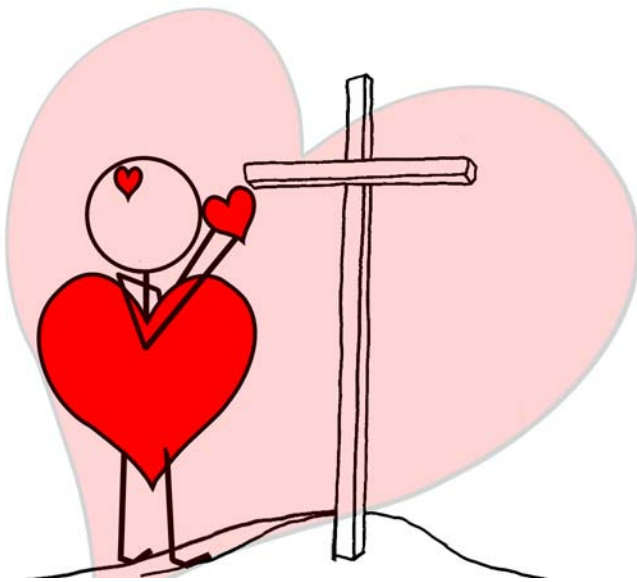


“We have come to worship Him...”

EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW

[Matthew 2:1-2 and Romans 14:11]

12/28/2008
Valley Chapel FMC
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As we come to the final installment of our Bethlehem Bound Series, scripture shares with us that a group of men from the East arrived in Jerusalem following the birth of Jesus. The Biblical account is not specific about their journey or the details following their arrival in Jerusalem; what the Bible says is this, "...some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.'" Later, we are told, the men from the east arrive at a house where they find Mary and Jesus. Scripture reads that upon finding the house, "they entered it and saw the child with his mother and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold frankincense, and myrrh."¹

How many here today are familiar with the Christmas Story? I think most of us are... but as I was preparing for this message I came across some interesting thoughts I'd like to read to you excerpted from the blog post of Pastor Larry DeBruyn² who writes:

By their notice of Christ's birth star, God called these men, students of the skies, to worship "the Child". God gives to all people's ample testimony about Himself in nature.³ These men looked at the heavens and acknowledged the God of creation. How many other Magi had studied the night skies, observed that special star, but could not bring themselves to make a trek of faith to find the Messiah? After having observed the heavens for years, the witness of God's special star beckoned this group of Magi to commence their journey of faith.

Their travel from Persia to Bethlehem must have involved both personal peril and physical hardship. For months, perhaps even a year or more, these Magi journeyed over dusty and dry deserts by day, and slept beneath the stars during frigid nights. Yet they were unrelenting in their pursuit of the truth. Faith needs feet, and these men braved a most hazardous journey to find the one who was born King of the Jews.

Their journey of faith saw them as the earliest Gentile converts to the person of Jesus. From their astronomical calculations, reading of the Hebrew prophets, and the appearance of a special star that may be compared to the Shekinah light that led Israel during her wilderness wanderings, God guided these ancient wise men from paganism to faith in "the Child" of Israel.

With five miles to go, the star reappeared and guided the Magi to the worship of the Savior. Drawing attention to Jesus, Matthew calls him "the Child".⁴ No other youngster in history deserved to be worshipped like the Christ Child. Imagine the sight of it: Adult men prostrating themselves on the ground before the toddler! It makes no sense at all; unless in fact, the little boy was the Christ. Men from another land, Gentiles, worshipped Jesus in Bethlehem, while those in Jerusalem ignored him.

¹ Matthew 2:11

² *Star Trek Sages: The Magi's Journey of Faith*; by Pastor Larry DeBruyn, <http://www.frbaptist.org>; Franklin Rd. Baptist Church

³ Psalm 19:1-2; Romans 1:20

⁴ Matthew 2:11

The irony of that confirmation was that those “chief priests and scribes” knew where to find the prophecy though they themselves did not bother to walk the five miles to Bethlehem to see the promised Messiah who had been born in their own backyard! That indifference portended things to come. The religionists, who ignored Christ's birth, also antagonized him during His life and reviled Him during his crucifixion. “How often,” wrote J.C. Ryle, “the very persons who live nearest to the means of grace are those who neglect them the most! There is only too much truth to the proverb, ‘The nearer the church the further from God.’ Familiarity with sacred things has an awful tendency to make men despise them. There are many, who from residence and convenience ought to be the first and foremost in the worship of God, and yet they are always last.”⁵

There is a Christmas saying that goes, “Wise men still seek Him.” In America, we must admit, we have been born close to Christianity. Every Christmas and Easter season testifies to this fact. The question then becomes, Are we too close to care? Or, will we like the Magi of old, wisely seek Him?

The correlation of these thoughts written by Pastor DeBruyn and what God has stirred in my own heart over the past couple of weeks is what I would like to share with you today. Are we too close to care? Do we truly seek Him; I mean seek Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? Have our lives, and all that we are, fallen prostrate before our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ? Let me begin our scripture examination this morning with these questions and the following words of the apostle Paul from the thirteenth and fourteenth chapter of his letter to the Romans:

“This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”⁶ And... “As surely as I live, says the Lord, every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will confess and give praise to God... Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God.”⁷

Many of us will equate “salvation is nearer” with the prophesied return of Jesus Christ; however, I’m not sure that is necessarily what the apostle had in mind when he wrote those words. It strikes me that regardless of whether Jesus returns today or in ten million years; I have a finite amount of time (somewhere in the span of one hundred years) before I must give a personal account to him for what I did with his gift of salvation he offered to me. Did I prostrate myself before Him, offering my life as a sacrifice for his glory? Is my every breath an act of worship and praise to my God? These are the questions we will answer on that day we stand before Him, and it concerns me that there are some of us in this room today that will not be able to answer in the affirmative. There are some of us who believe because we were baptized, we are saved. Baptism is not a means to salvation. There are others who believe praying the “sinner’s prayer” is their ticket to heaven and escape from hell. The utterance of a prayer has no power to save, unless it is motivated by a repentant and changed heart. There are still others who will say the

⁵ John Charles Ryle, *St. Matthew, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1956) 10.

⁶ Romans 13:11

⁷ Romans 14:11-13

Scriptures teach us, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.”⁸ This is true, if you understand its meaning from the original intent; it is untrue, if your understanding is anything less. What do I mean by “anything less”? Two points immediately come to mind with the first being the words of James who writes, “You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror.”⁹ Demons believe, yet they rebelled against God and follow the leadership of Satan; they are not and will not be saved. The second point is a statistic you continue to hear; eighty-five to ninety-five percent of Americans profess a belief in God. This is where I would like to concentrate my explanation of “anything less” than the Apostle Paul’s original intent of “*confess with your mouth and believe in your heart...*”

While it is not my intent to come off as critical or judgmental, I think many of us have an incorrect interpretation of “believing in your heart and confessing with your mouth...” According to my experiential witness and observation, we believe “confess” means audible and verbal agreement to a statement. We understand and define “belief/believe” to include the act of “confessing” with association to an acknowledgment of agreement toward a system or thing. An example of “believe” by this definition might be me confessing my acknowledgment of a friend’s integrity or character; I might say, “I believe in you...” to them. This confession may or may not change my behavior toward the rest of the world or how I respond to said friend; it is simply an open confession that I recognize their integrity/character. I could present other examples, but I am hopeful that this one is sufficient to support my premise. My point is that I think, while this example is an accurate explanation for “believe,” I think it is just one example and serves to illustrate a shallow representation of what is intended by “**believe in your heart**” from Paul’s letter.

Why do I think our general understanding and definition of “believe” is shallow? Let’s examine a few definitions, but before we do, let me add that I do not think we put emphasis (from the perspective of the western mind) on what it means when we add “with heart” to believe. I think that we perceive those added words to act more as a descriptive identifier much like an adjective or adverb as opposed to describing the origin of the belief. Hopefully, our definitions will help to clarify my thoughts.

- Heart, as defined by the **English** dictionary (Merriam-Webster), is the emotional or moral as distinguished from the intellectual nature...<a feeling>
- Heart, as defined and used in the **Greek** (Romans 10:9), is *Kardiōa* [Strong’s #2588] – denotes the centre of all physical and spiritual life.
- Heart, as defined and used in the **Hebrew** (Romans 10:8 quoting Deut. 30:12-14), is *Lebab* [Strong’s #3824] – inner man, mind, will, heart, soul, understanding; mind, knowledge, thinking, reflection, memory; inclination, resolution, determination (of will); conscience; as seat of emotions and passions

⁸ Romans 10:9

⁹ James 2:19

I think as we work our way backwards through the translations and cultural usage of the word “heart” we begin to notice that the meaning and intended use of the word has changed. The primary use and understanding of the word “heart” from the Hebrew mind is the “inner man” and the locus of all that a man is...mind, body, soul, intellect, conscience, passion...everything. The Greek understanding is similar to the Hebrew, but there begins a separation of this same inclusiveness as it is defined in the Hebrew understanding. Two millennia later, we arrive at our current English understanding of the usage for “heart.” We see that separation of meaning-definition has been completed and there is little resemblance to the original intent of the Biblical texts. Why is this significant? The significance is how it affects our belief and relationship with God today. It is the reason many of us *“confess with our mouth and believe with our heads, but not our hearts...”* Let’s go back to those wise men from the east for a moment. Their belief changed their thinking. Their belief forced a change in their behavior and their desires. Other people saw the star...Hebrews and Israelites knew the prophecies about the Savior King, the Messiah, but the Bible records only the Magi from the east leaving their places of comfort for a difficult and lengthy journey to seek Him; to find Him; and ultimately...to worship Him and experience His Presence. How does our belief change our lives? Are we too familiar with the sacred things that we no longer respond to them? Are we really that different from the world around us?

The prophet Ezekiel speaks the words of God; saying, *“And I will give you a new **heart**, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.”*¹⁰

The apostle Paul expresses this change of heart similarly in several of his letters; *“Christ's love controls us. Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life. He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them. So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!”*¹¹ In another letter he shares, *“And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice-- the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.”*¹²

¹⁰ Ezekiel 36:26-27

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:14-17

¹² Romans 12:1-2

I think that we can interpret the scriptures above to mean that “believe with your heart” is evidenced by a changed life. It is not enough to merely confess with the mouth that “I believe.” The evidence of belief is realized by the change in every aspect of an individual’s life. The “new heart” that is mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel is “*Lebab*.” This means that God changes the person who “believes with their heart.” He (God) puts a “heart” that is predisposed toward Him into the person who submits their whole self to Him.

...Believe with your heart. It is more than a profession of faith; it is a changed life because of a new heart, a new locus of being. The Hebrew mind, and the original intent of the authors of scripture meant this change would be evidenced in the inner man, mind, will, heart, soul, and understanding. It would affect the **heart** (of man), soul (of man), mind, knowledge, thinking, reflection, memory (of man), inclination, resolution, determination (of will of the man), and the conscience (of the man). It would change the appetites, emotions, and passions of the man...all of which would be now predisposed and effectual toward the Creator God. Can we say this is true of us? Ask yourself; “Can I say this is true of me?” If you cannot answer that question, it probably is not true. If you don’t think it possible to live with that type of heart, it probably is not true. If you think I am making incorrect interpretations from scripture, let me invite you listen in on some of the prayer of the One we claim to “believe” from John’s Gospel, chapter seventeen.

Jesus Prays for His Followers:

- **John 17:13-14** “I told them many things while I was with them in this world **so they would be filled with my joy**. I have given them your word. And the world hates them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.” *(emphasis on filled with Christ’s joy, people that have God’s word, and not belonging to world – inference being that we are not consumed with or worried over the affairs of the world. We work to live out God’s Kingdom here on earth, but we are not fretful or overwrought when governments and/or economies crumble around us...)*
- **John 17:17-19** “Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth. **Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world**. And I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them so they can be made holy by your truth.” *(Sent into the world on, and with, the same mission as Jesus Christ—to sacrifice ourselves so others can be made by God’s holy truth as we are made holy by His truth)*
- **John 17:20** “I am praying not only for these disciples **but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message**.” *(It, the message and prayer, is not just for them...it IS FOR US!!!)*
- **John 17:21** “**I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you**. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.” *(Unified in heart, mind, and spirit just as Jesus is with God, the Father, and God, the Holy Spirit...if you don’t believe this, read what Jesus prays in the next sentence.)*
- **John 17:22** “I have **given them the glory you gave me**, so **they may be one as we are one**.”

- **John 17:25-26** “O righteous Father, the world doesn't know you, but I do; and these disciples know you sent me. I have revealed you to them, and I will continue to do so. Then your love for me will be in them, and I will be in them.”

Ask yourself; do I believe with my heart? Do I have an overwhelming hunger for God such that every aspect of my life is consumed with thoughts of Him? Do I want to see the answer of Jesus' prayer (John 17) become true in my life. Do I want to know the Creator-Father, Savior-Son, and Indwelling-Holy Spirit as One; not only as the Person of God, but existing in my life as Jesus Christ prayed on that night? If you cannot answer yes to those questions, understand that *“This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”*¹³ And... *“As surely as I live, says the Lord, every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will confess and give praise to God... Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God.”*¹⁴

Can you say today, as those wise men from the east some two-thousand years ago; “we have come to worship him...”and mean it with all your heart? If what I've shared with you today annoys you, bothers you, aggravates you, or if you find these words convicting...don't just dismiss them or push those feelings aside. Don't ignore what the Spirit might be speaking to your heart; deal with it and get resolution. If you question what I've shared with you from the Scriptures, please read them for yourself asking God to reveal His truth to you. Have you come to worship Him? Do you love Him and worship Him with your whole heart? Don't leave today without being able to answer yes.

¹³ Romans 13:11

¹⁴ Romans 14:11-13