

Learning to wait: “How long, O Lord?”

Matthew 2:1-12, Philippians 2:12-13

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Introduction: Does it feel like we’re on the “**downside**” of Christmas? Just think about those shepherds as they returned from that exhilarating experience of seeing the One announced by angels, the promised Savior, Christ the Lord! Scripture says they had to go back to their fields and their shepherding: chasing the strays, caring for the lambs, defending them from wild animals, doing the shearing and cleaning, putting up with the cold nights outdoors; but do you think they went back different from that experience of seeing the Bethlehem baby? Could they ever be the same after those angels? After all, they did take their rejoicing back with them, glorifying God, the text says (Lk. 2:20); surely their outlook had been changed forever – that’s what Christmas **should** mean for us! And they also told everybody about the One they’d seen – a great example for us! But those shepherds still had to *work out* what this Baby’s birth meant to them in their everyday shepherding! How was it going to affect them?! What real difference was it going to make?

And of course, we’re not really on the “downside” of Christmas yet, are we? We’re only on the 7th day of Christmas – do you think of “7 swans a-swimming”? (The period between Dec. 25 and Epiphany is what the church since the Middle Ages has celebrated as the “12 days of Christmas,” which was actually the time they imagined it took the Wise Men to arrive in Bethlehem). Can you imagine if the Wise Men had been riding across that desert *with children*, who would’ve been asking every mile, “how much longer?” It’s a good biblical question: “How long, O Lord?” A new year in **an “old world” that’s far from new** can bring that old question to mind, frequently asked by the psalmists. Does this question resonate with you? Its application is manifold: in regard to suffering, persecution, war, illness, injustice in the world and other diverse trials, unanswered prayer! Habakkuk’s prayer (7th century B.C.): **“How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?”** In fact, it became a standard refrain in Israel (Ps. 13:1-2, 35:17, 74:10, 79:5, 80:4, 90:13, 94:3; even in Jesus’ experience: Mk. 9:19). The ancient Jews lived awaiting the day of their Messiah, century after century, even as the whole world was also waiting for the coming of the universal King.

1) Case in point: those Wise Men, who unwittingly tipped off old Herod. They'd been studying the stars probably most of their lives, and likely knew well the biblical prophecy about a king to be born among the Jews as a messianic Savior, because of the time the Jews spent exiled in Babylon. So a rare combination of astrological events suggested to these studious star-gazers a royal birth in the house of David. The biblical problem is the question of the **historical reliability** of the Wise Men story: for a long time, a standard conviction of modern biblical scholarship has been that the magi were the invention of the early church. (**How long** will we have to put up with the doubts, skepticism, and ridicule of "biblical scholars" in regard to the truthfulness of Scriptural testimony?) Raymond Brown, in his book *The Birth of the Messiah*, actually confesses that among many New Testament scholars, the slightest suggestion that you think perhaps there really were some wise men who came to Bethlehem is to write your own professional obituary. If you want to be taken seriously, you must "toe the party line, chuckle condescendingly to anyone who suggests the magi were historical, and move on." To confess you'd like to understand better who those wise men were would be like telling an English professor that "you're on a search for the historical Peter Pan." So in *Mystery of the Magi – The Quest to Identify the Three Wise Men*, Dwight Longenecker takes on the skeptics, seeking to undermine the assumption that the magi story was a fabricated fable, and to undermine the idea that it doesn't matter. But he found that to cut through the prejudice of biblical scholars is not easy ("legend" is the politically correct assessment). It's understandable *why* they would treat the magi as fable because this story more than any other biblical account has been embellished and elaborated over the centuries. So Longenecker studied the politics, religion, history, culture, economics and conflicts of 1st-century Palestine to see how the characters who have become "mystical, magical wizards from a faraway land" might actually have been "**ordinary men on an extraordinary mission** from one kingdom to another, as well as spiritual pilgrims in search of the Messiah." But to apply our underlying application question to the magi: How did their long journey affect **their** lives from that point on? Didn't they have to **work that out** somehow?

2) This quest for the **historicity of the New Testament** is more important than most people think, because the attempt to turn the gospels into nothing more than "meaningful fairy stories" has become the **default setting** not only among academics, but now among most people in secular society. Why is this important? Because history is important and the historicity of the gospels is important! The approach we should take is not to assume that the stories in the gospels are fictional fables, but to assume first that they are historical, because the authors present them as history. They don't give any impression that they're writing fantasy or fiction, and there are good reasons to believe them! Your faith is at stake here!

There are certainly no doubts about **Herod's existence**; he's well documented as one of the most evil rulers Israel had to endure, and Matthew certainly got it right about him – every brush stroke! ... And Herod brings up the question of **how long** we have to put up with bad rulers in this world?! They just keep multiplying down through history, and they certainly *whet our appetite for the one King who is worthy*. Yet even when He comes – well, He already came, and we're already invited to live under His rule! But it's like we just **start the waiting** all over again: now it's about His second coming! And *how many times* have Christians jumped the gun on that one: "This is it! It's just around the corner!" Yes, but it wasn't. "Oh, but this time is different – all the signs are coming together!" OK, so are we talking about next week or next year? Within my lifetime? Your lifetime? This century or

next? So in fact, we really don't know ... And all the thousands of books that have been written about it? Do they have the answer?

3) It all comes down to this: *the King has come*: He's with us (Immanuel), He's for us (*Deus pro nobis*); if we confess and follow Him, He's in us (God in Christ, in us); He's over us (*Yahweh nissi*). The task is to apply it, work it out – and not get stuck in the “how long?” mode! So it's about **developing patience** in our walk with the Lord, **not despising the trials** He allows into our lives, which are tools in His hands – not fretting over the how long's, because we're all on a journey, a spiritual journey! The point is to help and encourage each other along the way! So what matters is how you face your trials and tribulations this year, how you apply your faith to them! Developing the patience of Christ is a matter of *learning to work out what He worked in*. If you really believe Christ is coming back [even though we don't know the timing], the way to show it is by learning to work out what Christmas means practically, every day of the new year!

There's a word about that in Php. 2:12-13 that to some has seemed contradictory (actually a paradox): **“Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you to will and to act on behalf of His good purpose.”** Two truths are joined together here: you have to **work out what God has worked in**. If pulled apart, these two can become the battle cry of opposing theologies, because this is not about “God does His part and we do ours.” Salvation is totally His work, but our response is not a matter of crossing our arms and sitting in an armchair! “The Bible knows no unpractical theology and no untheological morality!” In other words, all biblical theology is to be put into practice, and all true morality stems from God's revelation!

– Our salvation was accomplished at Calvary, yet we must work it out. **1)** Jesus on the cross said, **“It is finished”**: He had defeated sin, the principalities and powers; only death remained, and He was about to swallow it up in victory. So salvation is utterly God's work. **2)** But we have to work it out in our daily living (Greek, *ergazomai*); and the text says this is “your personal salvation,” i.e., what's particular to you and your speks, because saving grace includes more than just deliverance from the **condemnation** of sin; God has also made available our deliverance from the **power** of sin. But it requires our **cooperation**: apply the faith given in Christ to the particular “budding and sprouting” that sin has manifested in your personal life (sin takes advantage of every life opportunity for our ego to be established as the “prime mover” and reason for being!). Idolatry is our default mode (meaning, we worship our own comfort, convenience, image, and preferences), and the seeds of that idolatry grow everywhere in our life! Jesus said the only remedy for it was cross-bearing: “Deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow me!” So your cross is peculiarly your own: your struggles, defects, deficiencies, obsessions, quirks, problems, hang-ups, burdens, background issues, relational headaches. When you determine to apply the cross of Christ and work your salvation out in every one of those areas, you can count on God's help!

– Because God is at work in us as we do so! A gardener took a rocky piece of ground and transformed it into a lovely flower garden. A pious friend told him, “It's wonderful what you and God have done here.” The man replied, “Oh, you should have seen it when God had it to Himself!” Oh what blindness! The beauty God creates, nothing can compare with it – but whatever beauty we're able to add, it's God who provided all the raw materials, the project, the energy and intellect to do something valuable with it! So when you set your sights on a

problem that needs fixing in your life, it's because God has put *His* finger on it, convicting you by the Holy Spirit, who is there by your side (the Paraclete!): not only your hope of glory (Col. 1:27), but your *only* hope of being transformed! (2 Cor. 3:18). The cross was the most radical solution that humans could never have thought of. And the same one who put that plan into motion is the God who's at work in you both to desire and to put into effect His **good pleasure***: both the will and the power (desire and action) come from God! *["good pleasure," Greek *eudokia* = delight, purpose, satisfaction; "good will" in Lk. 2:14.]

– Work it out **“with fear and trembling”**: What is faith if not the admission of our own helplessness? It's the end of all proud self-assertion, as if we could handle this ourselves. We cancel that fleshly self-confidence at the cross, and in its place we learn reliance on the grace and power of God. The fear is that self may not completely yield to Him who's at work within us; fear that you may be a hindrance to the good work God wants to do in and through you. Fear and trembling are necessary for me to be discontent with my old self and awaken to His voice. Fear and trembling are the fruit of knowing the depths of my own sinful idolatry.

– Remember the story of Abraham and Sarah, who received the promise of a son, through whom God would bless all the families of the earth? But after many years of waiting (“How long, O Lord?”), they decided they needed to intervene and fix this situation. Their solution was not great. So don't lose your taste for cross-bearing! No solution of ours will ever be its equal. This is what I want to challenge us to in this first trimester of the year ... with a series of sermons on growing toward maturity in Christ. Will you make this your aim?