

## The Wisdom of Matthew's Nativity

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Hey, wanna play a game? I just got a new board game. I've never played it before. It's got lots of pieces in it. Let's just play.

What? How to play it? Well, never mind that. I think we can just start playing and we'll figure it out.

Rule book? Well sure, there's a rule book. But really, I'm sure it'll be just fine. How about you take some pieces and I'll take some pieces and we'll just do something with it. It will be perfect creativity with no boundaries.

Playing a game. Making a PB&J sandwich. Fixing a car. Starting and maintaining a relationship. Becoming an angel. A similar principle applies to each of these—that is, we need to know *how* to do something in order to do it. If we are lacking basic knowledge about how something works or fits together, then we will miss the point of whatever it is we are trying to do, we may break something, or even worse, we may hurt somebody. Ignorance may be a valid reason the first time we mess up, but after that, if we willfully remain ignorant, then we become guilty in our stupidity.

We overcome ignorance through learning, and learning is the beginning of a life-long process of being regenerated—or becoming spiritual. Another way to think of regeneration is that the Lord and His love are being born in us. And this is what we celebrate every Christmas: the hope and joy of the Lord's birth into this world and in each one of us.

Did you know that the classic stories of the Lord's birth only show up in two of the four gospels? They show up in Matthew and Luke. Mark basically has no Christmas story to speak of, and John's Christmas story can be summed up in these five words: "And the Word became flesh."

And did you know that Matthew and Luke each have different parts of the Christmas story in them? Some people may not be aware of this because our tableaux and some of the Biblical Christmas videos that we experience weave the stories from the two gospels together to form one beautiful Nativity narrative.

Today, our focus is on the importance of learning and knowledge on our spiritual journeys, and we'll do this by focusing on the Christmas story in Matthew.

Let's begin with the beginning. The gospel of Matthew opens with the genealogy or ancestry of Jesus; it is sometimes affectionately referred to as the "begots"—Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob. We won't go through the entire genealogy. But it's good to have some idea of what's going on in the opening verses because when we are reading a story in the Lord's Word, the first part of that story sets the stage for everything else that follows. The Matthew genealogy begins with Abraham, and it continues to the birth of Jesus. It is significant that the ancestral line is traced from Abraham to Jesus—this forward movement through the family tree to the Lord mirrors our experience of learning about and approaching the Lord through His Word and through all those stories of the Children of Israel. Our spiritual journey towards the birth of the Lord's love in us starts with opening His Word.

Let's jump into the proper Nativity now.

The leading role in Matthew's gospel is Joseph, as compared to Mary taking that role in Luke's gospel. In Matthew, it is Joseph who is visited by an angel, and it is Joseph who names the child *Jesus*. As a man in the Bible, Joseph is a symbol of our understanding, representing the way we process and respond to life in an intellectual way. The intellectual process from our understanding is essential for our spiritual growth. The Lord allows us to think about and consider ideas that go against our core loves. This is a very good thing because, when we begin our journey, our core loves go against the Lord's leading. Matthew was written to speak to us especially at the beginning of our spiritual journey when things are a bit dark. The learning that we do shines a light in that darkness.

I'd like to take a short detour here to talk about the reason for having four gospels in the first place. Our teachings don't address this issue directly, but be sure that there is order and organization in everything in the Lord's Word. Numbers of people or things in the Word have specific meanings. For example, a pair of people or things tends to relate to the Divine pair of Love and Wisdom. A triplet of things or people tends to relate to love, wisdom, and use. How about quadruplets? Well, there are the four directions, (N,S,E,& W), and there are also the four beasts in Daniel and Revelation, four steps in the circle of life (know, understand, will, do), and four steps of repentance (Examine yourself, acknowledge your sins, ask the Lord for help, live a new life). These quadruplets tend to relate to spiritual steps that we progress through. For the purposes of today's talk, and to keep this sermon under an hour, we will just look at the first step because we are focusing on the Nativity in Matthew today.

Well, the first step in these quadruplets is related to knowledge and the intellect (circle of life = know; steps of repentance=examine). Well, in order to make progress toward a good life, we must first *know* what makes a good life. In order to be useful, it would help to know *what* usefulness even is. Ideas give form and boundaries to our love, and without this boundary, our formless love would give equal attention to the good *and* the evil.

This is the reason we give so much importance to the education of children early in life. Education provides the framework within which humans can be useful. And this is also the reason that the gospel of Matthew highlights a state of life in which we learn and focus on gathering ideas. And this ... this is why the *Joseph* intellect takes the leading role in Matthew, as compared to Mary taking that role in Luke.

You know, "knowledge" and "truth" sound very wise and enlightened. And, compared to the darkness we were in before, it *is* enlightened. But if we compare this to the later states in which we act from a life of love, our Joseph states of learning in Matthew are relatively dim and fuzzy. This is why the angels that appear to Joseph and the wisemen in the Matthew Nativity appear during a state of sleep.

In Matthew, the only visitors to the baby Jesus are the wisemen. It's not difficult to see the relationship of the wisemen to the theme of *knowledge and truth* that is presented in Matthew. The wisemen follow a star. A star represents knowledge. Think of it as a pinpoint idea that might help guide us, but it doesn't really shine much light on our path. Even though Matthew presents us with an obscure sleepy state and there is darkness, the knowledge available to us is enough to lead us to the Lord.

Wise though the wisemen are, they seek advice from someone who is interested only in maintaining his own power—Herod. Herod is a ruling idea in us based on pure selfishness. On a pretense of being helpful, our selfish desires are willing to entertain the idea of finding the Lord. As we struggle in our dark states to begin our spiritual journey, we may not even be aware of our own selfishness. Our selfishness is tricky and deceitful, and we will

not easily let go of our desire for control and power. Herod was perfectly willing to destroy innocence in the name of self-preservation. It's heartbreaking to witness this evil in ourselves, but the important thing is that we do see it for what it is. Knowledge of the Lord's truth is what makes it possible to identify the Herod in us. The desire probably lurks in most aspects of our lives ... not only things that affect our life directly, but also indirectly. How much do we want to control the various aspects of our own home, our neighborhood, our church, and then we experience anger and frustration when it doesn't go our way, and unkind words escape our lips?

Our wisemen are able to follow some simple ideas to the Lord, and the Lord helps us identify the cruelty of Herod's selfishness that will do anything it can to keep the Lord out. The Lord sends His angel messenger telling us that we need to take in more spiritual ideas in order to continue our spiritual improvement. So, Joseph and Mary escape with Jesus to Egypt.

You know, every location in the Word represents a spiritual state that we pass through in our journey. Egypt, with its deep scientific knowledge, represents a place of learning and instruction. This journey to Egypt is necessary as long as our evil loves are still in control of the land. Evil's false ideas of selfishness are only able to be defeated with an arsenal of true ideas—it is necessary to learn deeper spiritual ideas if we really want to keep the Lord alive in us.

Matthew depicts the beginning of our spiritual journey, with Joseph representing our intellect that we engage in order to figure things out. We do this because we know that things can be better. We know we can be happier. Jesus says His yoke is easy and His burden is light ... but how do I experience that??

The gospel of Matthew presents the reality of darkness that needs to be overcome early in our efforts to look to the Lord. But we are also presented with beautiful ideas that help us overcome that darkness: Joseph's devotion to Mary, the epic journey of the wisemen, and the beauty of the Christmas star. The deeper meaning of Matthew's Nativity shows us the practical necessity of learning true ideas which help us fight against the cunning and cruelty of our lust for control. These ideas, like the star that the wisemen followed, aren't the goal, but they lead us to the goal, of witnessing the Lord's birth in our lives—the beginning of a true love for our neighbor and trust in the Lord's Providence.

Readings:

Selections from Matthew 1,2:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers. [...] And Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, from David until the captivity in Babylon are fourteen generations, and from the captivity in Babylon until the Christ are fourteen generations.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." And Herod sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also." And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:

"A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more."

*(Heavenly Secrets 1495.2)* When a person is receiving instruction during earliest childhood [spiritual things flow from the celestial down to the natural], but it appears to be otherwise; that is to say, the person appears to progress from facts to rational things, from these to spiritual, and so at length to celestial things. All instruction is simply the opening of a way; and as the way is opened - or what amounts to the same, as vessels are opened - an ordered influx accordingly takes place.

*(Apocalypse Explained 242.4)* The circle of a person's life is to know, to understand, to will, and to do; for the spiritual life of man commences from knowing, thence it is continued into understanding, afterwards into willing, and lastly into doing. From this it is also evident, that knowledges in the memory are only in the entrance to the life, and that they are not fully in the person until they are in his deeds; also, that they are more fully in his deeds the more fully they are in his understanding and will.

*(True Christianity 530)* How are we to repent? The answer is, we are to do so actively. That is, we are to examine ourselves, recognize and admit to our sins, pray to the Lord, and begin a new life. Repentance is not possible without examining ourselves. And what is the point of examining ourselves unless we recognize our sins? What is the point of that recognition unless we admit that those sins are in us? What is the point of all three of these steps unless we confess our sins before the Lord, pray for his help, and then begin a new life, which is the purpose of the whole exercise? This is active repentance.