

As with Gladness Men of Old



The journey of the Wisemen, the Kings, or the Magi still intrigues us today. Their long trip is memorialized in bumper stickers (Wise men still seek him) and Christmas pageants. But the most interesting aspect of their seeking the young Jesus is the convergence of basic human paths toward knowledge that is on display. The Wisemen traveled as scholars of scriptural prophecy, as scientists in astronomy, as spiritualists in astrology, and as agents of political strategy.

This hymn by William Dix places us on the back of a camel, gazing at the star. We, too, as singers, are journeying toward Jesus with three gifts in hand: our devotion in this life, our earthly treasure, and our hope for salvation. The hymn and literary legend take us to the manger. As we know, the Kings probably found a toddler staring at them while they stared at him; quite possibly more interested in their camels than in their strange gifts. The message of the hymn, however, takes us to a place of humble bowing; a place, indeed, to lay down our wills, our possessions, and our self-sufficiency.

We are also carried, as were the Magi, beyond the Christmas scene. The fourth stanza prays that “every day” will be given to this journey. The hymn writer sees us following Jesus all the way home on his return trip. From Heaven he came, to Heaven he returned and he bids us follow him. There will be no need for a star there, not even the star named Sun. Jesus is the light of the world and of Heaven.

Our hymn begins to reveal the fact that in this case, the Lamb came into the far country to rescue the shepherd, and those who consider themselves wise, and those who seek, and those who are poor, and those who find their treasure to be heavy baggage. Still Jesus transforms journeys of seeking and inquiry into new routes home; still tents and palaces are transformed by a stable.

One packs lightly for a journey, some otherwise useful things get left behind. Only the essentials make it into the bag. But this hymn might be worth sticking into a folded shirt or pair of pants. The tune carries the message of more than one hymn, and the text contains truth for many seekers and every generation.

A trip becomes a journey when it is known or anticipated that its end will hold great significance. The “men of old” in this hymn had reason to believe that this was no ordinary trip. They had reason to believe that lives and kingdoms, even the world itself might be changed by what was to be found under the star.

It makes one wonder what manger waits at the end of the hymn today.

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