

## Two Planets Align December 21: The Christmas Star?

*The Wired Word for the Week of December 20, 2020*

### In the News

On December 21, the winter solstice, which is the longest night of the year, a bright "Christmas star" will appear in the night sky, and if weather conditions are right, it will be visible to the naked eye.

Actually, the phenomenon won't be a star per se, but rather a rare alignment of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, which from Earth may look like one shining star.

The "nearness" of the two planets needs to be thought of in cosmic dimensions, for they will be 450 million miles apart - but nearly in line as viewed from the earth. And the effect, which astronomers call the "Great Conjunction," will be as one "star," when viewed without a telescope or binoculars.

"Alignments between these two planets are rather rare, occurring once every 20 years or so, but this conjunction is exceptionally rare because of how close the planets will appear to one another," said Patrick Hartigan, a professor of physics and astronomy at Rice University.

"Exceptionally rare" is right. The last time the Great Conjunction occurred was in 1623, and before that in 1226, and neither of those was in December. This near alignment won't occur again, astronomers say, until March of 2080, and after that, not until the year 2400.

"On the evening of closest approach on December 21 they will look like a double planet, separated by only 1/5th the diameter of the full moon," Hartigan explained in a statement. "For most telescope viewers, each planet and several of their largest moons will be visible in the same field of view that evening."

"Saturn will appear as close to Jupiter as some of Jupiter's moons," says NASA on its website.

To see the alignment of the two planets, "Look for them low in the southwest in the hour after sunset," advises NASA.

Could something like the Great Conjunction be the explanation for the Star of Bethlehem that led the Magi to the baby Jesus? Many Bible readers and others have long speculated that such might be the case.

Using computer simulations, modern astronomers have suggested that the Star of Bethlehem was either a nova or a conjunction of planets -- possibly an alignment of Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, which occurred in 6 B.C. or of Jupiter and Venus in 3 B.C. or a comet in 5 B.C.

Attempts to attribute the Bethlehem Star to a natural occurrence, however, cannot explain the behavior of the star described in Matthew 2, which remained stationary while the wise men were in Jerusalem, then led them not only to Bethlehem, but to the precise location of Jesus, where it "stopped over the place where the child was" (Matthew 2:9).

For many Christians, there is no contradiction in the biblical account. "Matthew is clearly describing a miraculous phenomenon directed behind the scenes by God," says Bible scholar M. Eugene Boring, writing in *The New Interpreter's Bible*.

Joanne Kimberlin wrote the news about the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn for *The Virginian-Pilot*, and we like how she concluded her article. After referring to how difficult 2020 has been, she returned to the news of the Great Conjunction, saying "A miracle or merely astrophysics. A light at the end of a long, dark tunnel."

Indeed.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[In Their Best Show in 800 Years, Jupiter and Saturn Will Align to Create a Wonder: A Christmas Star. \*The Virginian-Pilot\*](#)  
[Do You See What I See? Planetary Alignment to Create a 'Christmas Star.' \*Religion News Service\*](#)  
[What's Up: December 2020 \[Video\]. \*NASA\*](#)

### **Applying the News Story**

Regardless of whether the Bethlehem Star was a natural occurrence or a miraculous intervention of God into the workings of the cosmos, the effect of the star on the Magi was of God *beckoning* them. The star is also a reminder that many of us began our journey toward God because in some way, God drew us toward him through means that we did not immediately recognize as spiritual or divine.

For many, "beckoning" is the right word, while for others it is a mystery that can only be seen in light of a Christian "looking back" and seeing God's love. For the former, God does not summon or force us toward him, but rather gives us hints of his reality and subtle invitations to look for him. The latter see their faith as solely a gift of God, and, by that faith, they are able look backward and see God's work and love for them.

Whichever the case, we can know that God loves those whom he has brought into his family, and has shown his love for them even before they had "come to the knowledge of the truth."

What we are talking about is the grace of God that comes to us before we go looking for it -- or God's tap on our shoulder when our attention is focused on anything but him, but which becomes the beginning of our deliverance.

Our "great conjunction" occurs when we are aligned with the call and will of God.

## The Big Questions

1. How, if at all, does the Bethlehem Star figure into your usual celebration of Christmas?
2. When, if ever, did you become aware that some unusual or even seemingly everyday occurrence was God inviting you to look to him? What helped you come to that realization?
3. In what ways do you work to see other people in the light of God?
4. How do you suppose God was active in the things that "softened you up" to receive him?
5. In what sense are you looking for a light at the end of the tunnel this year?

## Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

### Matthew 2:2

*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.* (For context, read 2:1-12.)

In his book *The Christmas Star*, astronomer John Mosley tells that according to the ancient historian Josephus, Herod the Great died of his madness between a total lunar eclipse and the Passover that followed. Mosley says that the only eclipse that fits the bill took place on January 9, 1 B.C. Passover followed April 8 of that year. The Christmas Star had to appear long enough before that so the Magi could pack, travel, and arrive between the birth of Jesus and Herod's death.

By Mosley's reckoning, the "star" the Magi saw, was on August 13, 3 B.C. Jupiter, the King Planet, and Venus, the Queen Planet, appeared to touch in the sky near Regulus, the King Star, which is in the constellation of Leo, the Lion, associated with the Lion of Judah. This formation occurred twice more, in February and May of 2 B.C. The Magi would interpret these signs to mean a king would be born in Judea.

But maybe we're being misdirected when we speculate about what the star was. A quote attributed to Albert Einstein has it that "There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." Or, as TWW team member Mary Sells puts it, "Just because we know a smidgen of science does not negate God's presence in everything and everyone."

**Questions:** What do those quotes mean to you in terms of how you view life? Are they in any way especially important this year? What does it mean that God is self-communicating?

### Isaiah 65:1-2 (The Message)

*"I've made myself available to those who haven't bothered to ask. I'm here, ready to be found by those who haven't bothered to look. I kept saying 'I'm here, I'm right here' to a nation that*

*ignored me. I reached out day after day to a people who turned their backs on me, People who make wrong turns, who insist on doing things their own way. (For context, read 65:1-5.)*

God is the speaker in these verses, and what he says reveals an aspect of his grace that precedes saving grace. The verse is not suggesting that God waits passively for us to discover him, however, but rather that God opens the paths that run toward him ahead of when we start looking for him. That kind of grace is the beginning of deliverance from spiritual blindness that God gives us before we ourselves make the slightest move toward him.

Another way to put this is that God is always there; it is we who reject him. Yet, he still loves us and shows his love to us. He brings us to him. Or, as John writes in his first epistle, "We love [God] because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

**Question:** Where do you see evidence of God running ahead of you in life to bless you?

### **John 7:37**

*... Let anyone who is thirsty come to me ... (For context, read 7:37-44.)*

Here is an invitation from Jesus, given to a crowd, with no indication that anyone in that crowd had asked anything from him. It was perhaps an offer that preceded anyone's spoken need, but which was there nonetheless for those with whom Jesus' words resonated. It was a beckoning from God, through his Son.

**Question:** What "thirst" in your life is addressed through your relationship with Christ?

### **John 12:32**

*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. (For context, read 12:27-36.)*

Here Jesus is talking about the form of death that is soon to come to him -- crucifixion -- but also about how his death will function in God's plan -- to draw all people unto him. In other words, even the ability to feel the need of God, long before we have responded to him, is a gift of God's grace.

Behind this verse is the fact that God made the first move in our salvation, before we even knew that we needed it.

**Questions:** What drew you to Christ? What continues to keep you in Christ's realm?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Comment on this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "What we're seeing this December, which, thanks to Indiana's weather may be opaque to me, isn't the Christmas Star but that doesn't matter. What matters is if our eyes are open to wonder and wondering. Ultimately there's nothing odd about conjunctions. They're bound to happen sooner or later because the visible planets orbit the sun along the plane of the ecliptic. What matters is that we're looking at

the universe. John 1:5 says 'the light shines in the darkness.' I wonder if that could be John's way of giving a shout-out to the [Bethlehem] Star?"

2. Respond to this, from TWW team member Stan Purdum's sermon, "Another Amazing Grace": "The Bible tells us that God's grace runs ahead of us, working to open our hearts to him. Sometimes we hear of someone having a seemingly sudden conversion to Christ, but when you talk to them about it, you'll often find that for the days or weeks or longer preceding that conversion moment -- there were things happening that began to awaken the person's spirituality. A friend may have said something that started the person thinking. Some seemingly mundane experience may have pricked the person's conscience. The person may have chanced to read something that caused the person to think about ideas not thought about before, and so on. All of that is God's grace preparing the heart. ...

"The point here is that if we could only become righteous people by means of our own willful choice, our condition would be hopeless, for our wills are infected with sin. But God continually works with us by his grace, giving us the ability to will rightly even before we consciously respond to him by faith. God makes repentance possible. It is God taking the initiative, paving the way for us to hear him. It is the grace that precedes us.

"This kind of grace means that when we find ourselves in trouble or in rough places in life, God is already there. He goes before us. Thus there is no such thing as a 'godforsaken' place, or a 'godforsaken' circumstance.

"This grace also means that when we make the effort to share our faith with another person, we are not 'taking God' to them and we are not working alone. God is already there, even in places where the Gospel has never been preached. Either God has been preparing that person to receive our witness, or our witnessing is part of the way God is calling the person to open his or her heart. Everywhere we go God is already there and is already at work. He wants us to join him.

"Finally, this grace means that we are not waiting for God to show up. Rather, God is waiting for us to recognize where he is working so that we might join him. Because God has taken the initiative, we need to be looking for his activity and listening for his word."

3. Amy Grant's song "Angels Watchin' Over Me," includes these lines: "God only knows the times my life was threatened just today. / A reckless car ran out of gas before it ran my way. / Near misses all around me, accidents unknown, / Though I never see with human eyes the hands that lead me home." What justifies considering "near misses" as the grace of God?

## **Responding to the News**

This is a good time to consider how God comes to us ahead of our spoken needs for him.

## **Prayer**

Jesus, Bright Morning Star, shine in our lives always. Amen.