

THE FAR-OFF, NEAR—THE NEAR, FAR OFF

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A SERMON

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DELIVERED BY C. H. SPURGEON

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“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.”
Matthew 2:1-4

I AM not going to expound the whole passage that I have read as a text, but I desire to help you to gather some lessons from this familiar narrative.

“When Jesus was born.” A stir begins as soon as Christ is born. He has not spoken a word. He has not worked a miracle. He has not proclaimed a single doctrine, but “when Jesus was born,” at the very first, while as yet you hear nothing but infant cries and can see nothing but infant weakness, still His influence upon the world is manifest. “When Jesus was born, there came wise men from the east,” and so on.

There is infinite power even in an infant Savior. When Jesus is born in the heart and there are only the feeblest impulses towards righteousness and repentance with regard to sin, He makes a stir in our whole nature. The most distant faculty feels that something wonderful has happened. When Christ is formed in us, the hope of glory, a sacred revolution commences within us. When Christ is born in a village, a town, a city, the first sinner converted, the first open-air sermon preached, the first giving away of sacred literature makes a stir.

It is wonderful how soon it begins to manifest itself. Somebody or other is affected by the fact that Christ has come. He cannot be hid. The first match struck makes a great blaze. Jesus of Nazareth is so potent a factor in the world of mind that, no sooner is He there in His utmost weakness, a new-born King, than He begins to reign.

Before He mounts the throne, friends bring Him presents and His enemies compass His death. Oh, that the Lord Jesus might be here tonight, if it be but as new born, in some few hearts! There will be a result from Christ's coming, even though I preach Him very feebly—though you may say that I can only bring to you an infant Christ—though my power of speech may fail me and I may but set Him forth in His littleness rather than in His greatness. When Christ is born, when Christ is only feebly preached, when Christ is but stammered out, a great result comes of it and His name is made glorious.

There were two results from Christ's coming, as there always will be, for this Child is not only a Savior to some, but also a stumbling block to others. His Gospel is either “a savor of life unto life” or else “a savor of death unto death.”

I want you, first, to notice the note of exclamation that we have in the first verse. “When Jesus was born, *behold.*” *Ecce!* Behold! There is something to look at, something good that is worth gazing upon. Behold it. *Here are far-off persons who come very nigh.* Wise men from the east come and worship the infant Christ. But there is something to which there is no “behold” put, yet it is sorrowfully worth considering. *Here are near ones who are far-off*—Herod, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the chief priests,

and the scribes. They are as far from Christ as if He had been born in the distant east, while they who lived in the far country came as near to Him as if they themselves had dwelt at Bethlehem.

So I have these two things to talk about tonight—first, the extraordinary fact that many far-off ones are brought nigh, and the sad but almost equally extraordinary fact that many who are apparently very near never really come nigh to Jesus.

I. To begin, then, at the beginning. THERE ARE FAR-OFF ONES BROUGHT NIGH.

God saves whom He wills to save. His grace is most sovereign. You cannot see, as I do, so many persons brought to Christ without often wondering why they were brought. I have often seen the last first and the first last—people of whose conversion I would hardly have dreamed become converted, while other persons, for whom I have hoped and over whom I have prayed, remain unconverted. It is very delightful, as well as very wonderful, to notice the strange way in which the grace of God singles out men, and the marvelous measures which the God of grace uses to bring these men to the feet of Jesus.

Well now, first, these people were *wise men*, magi, students of astronomy, learned in the lore of the ancients. Their philosophy was not a very true one—it was about as true as modern philosophy, which is not saying much. They believed very absurd things, these magi, almost as absurd as the scientists of the present day, perhaps not quite as ridiculous, for science has grown in absurdity, especially of late, but these men were professors of the philosophy of the period.

They were the wise men. If they came from Media, they were probably fire-worshippers, or worshippers of the elements of nature. Theirs was a refined form of idolatry which is not to be excused, but still, if there can be any choice where all is bad, it is perhaps a little better than some others. They were very great students so far as their light went—they sought after knowledge and wisdom.

Well now, truth to tell, it is not many of this sort of people who come to Christ. His doctrine is too simple for them. He Himself lays the axe too near the root of the tree. His teaching is too plain. They are so wise that His wisdom baffles them. They know so much, as they think, yet His better and higher knowledge overshadows theirs, and they cannot brook it, and will not yield to Him. “Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.”

But here the infinite sovereignty of God calls these wise men first. No, I must not say first, for the shepherds came first, but next to the shepherds, the Lord calls these wise men from the distant east. It has been truly remarked that the shepherds did not miss their way—they came to Christ at once, while the wise men, even with a star to guide them, yet missed their way and went to Jerusalem instead of to Bethlehem, and inquired at the palace of Herod, instead of at the stable where the Christ was born. However, they did come to Christ, even if they did come in a roundabout way, and make a blunder or two.

Here was the wonder, that they did come, and if I address myself tonight, as I would do most respectfully, to any here who excel in human wisdom, how I wish they would join divinity to their humanities. And if they know much, yet I long that, with all their knowledge they would know Christ, and with all their gettings that they would get understanding, for the science of Christ crucified is the most excellent of all the sciences. It is the central one round which every true science will revolve in its proper place, and happy is the man whose solar system of knowledge has Christ in the very center of it. Still, if it be so, I shall not cease to wonder and bless God that He has again brought wise men, like Saul of Tarsus, and like these wise men from the east, to worship this new-born Savior.

Notice also that these men were not only wise men, which is one cause of our wonder that they sought Christ, but *they lived far away in the east*. We do not know the distance they had traveled, but it does not matter—it was a long way and probably a very difficult journey, in those days, at any rate. It did not seem likely, when this Child was born at Bethlehem, that worshippers should come outside of Judea, or that they should come from distant regions unknown to the Jews themselves, but yet God in His mercy called these men from the farthest east.

Oh, that His love would light on some tonight who are strangers and foreigners, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, perhaps without God and without hope in the world! May His grace call such! What a mass of people we are, and what odd people there must be here, whom none of us could describe!

After this morning's sermon, [Sermon #2099, Volume 35—*Concerning the Consolations of God*] somebody told me that, had I known the story of one of my hearers, I should not have dared to describe him as correctly as I did. Happily I did not know that hearer—I am glad that I did not—my message should come all the more distinctly as a voice from God to him, because it did so accurately describe him.

But I will breathe this prayer, that somebody here, who is a stranger even to the very form of religion, someone who has never been in this house before, or in any other place of Christian worship, may be called by the mighty voice of God, attracted by the irresistible charms of Christ, and may come and believe in the Incarnate God who took our flesh at Bethlehem, that He might bear our sin and bear us up to the throne of God with Himself. Here was the double wonder, then, about the magi coming to Christ—they were unlikely men from an unlikely place. As we think of them, we are constrained to say, as we have often sung,

*“How sweet and awful is the place,
With Christ within the doors,
While everlasting love displays
The choicest of her stores.*

*Pity the nations, O our God!
Constrain the earth to come.
Send Thy victorious Word abroad,
And bring the strangers home.”*

And they were *singularly guided*, were they not? They were watching the midnight heaven and they spied a strange star. According to astronomers, there was probably a conjunction of two planets about that date. When two planets were in conjunction in 1640, or about that date, it was said that such a conjunction must have taken place at about the time when Christ was born, and that the wise men may have thought it was a new star.

I do not, however, think that that can have been the case. It was probably not simply a star, but a marked appearance which moved through the heavens. Well now, it was a strange thing that they should see this star and more strange still that, seeing it, they should put this and that together, and by their astrology, for perhaps it was nothing better, infer that some wondrous personage was born away there in Judea and they must needs go forth to find Him.

They may have heard of the famous prophecy of Balaam. There might have been traditions in their country that the Coming Man was to be born in Judea. All that may have been, I do not know, but this I know—God miraculously sent this star. If men are not to be reached in any ordinary way, God's elect shall be brought to Him in an extraordinary way. If they are given to the study of the stars, God will write in that illuminated book which they are accustomed to read, and they shall there see a new letter, and learn something fresh concerning His will.

I have known the Lord meet with men in the midst of evil, in the very act of sin. We have known men struck down by the most singular accidents and the most extraordinary chain of circumstances, men whom it seemed impossible to reach. Beloved, no man is beyond the reach of God. He has ways and means of enlightening the understanding, awakening the conscience, and renewing the heart, of which we know but little.

“Remember that Omnipotence has servants everywhere”—in the heaven above, and in the earth beneath, and in the waters under the earth. He has means of getting at the hearts of men and He will do it. If it cannot be done anyhow else, He will make new stars. I was about to say, He will make new

heavens and a new earth, but He will call His own. When Christ is born, the wise men from the east must come, and a star shall be sent to guide them.

Perhaps, by some remarkable circumstances, you, my friend, are here tonight. It was very unlikely that you should be here, but you have come into the Tabernacle that the grace of God may arrest you, that the hand of eternal love may be laid upon your shoulder and that you may be taken prisoner for Christ, henceforth to be His servant and His alone.

It is worth noticing, again, that these men *earnestly inquired*. Having once seen the star, they hurried off, no matter how long the journey, to find the new-born King, and they asked everybody to tell them the way to Him. They even went to the court of Herod to ask the way to find Christ. A man must have a deal of curiosity when he puts his head between the jaws of such a lion as Herod, in order to find what he wants to know.

I wish that God would stir up that kind of curiosity and inquiry in many men's minds. The general way now is to put off the truth of God with a huff, to suppose that it is not worth looking into, but the claims of the eternal Son of God, the claims of His grace, and of His throne ought not to be treated so.

May God give back to the people a spirit of inquiry into the things of God, so that they may not be as indifferent as the masses of our fellow citizens now are! May they begin to question and say, "Which is the way to heaven? Who is this Christ? What is the plan of salvation?" If it be so, we shall soon have cause enough for joy and we shall praise the sovereign grace of God.

Being inquirers, these men were *singularly unprejudiced*. They said, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" "Jews?" Who cared for Jews? Even in those days, Jews were the subject of contempt, for they had aforetime been carried captive into the east. Although they are the very aristocracy of God, His chosen people, yet the nations looked down upon the Jews. Judah was a little paltry territory, insignificant and small, and many asked with Sanballat, "What do these feeble Jews?"

But here are men from a great empire, like Persia or Media, asking about the King of the Jews. Surely there are still some candid men about, some who will inquire after Christ, even though they have to ask of Methodists, and Baptists, and the like. Oh, that men could break through the foolish shell of prejudice to inquire if these things indeed are so. The time was when the very word "Evangelical" had a kind of contempt affixed to it. I am not sure that that time has quite yet passed. Yet, whatever others may say or do, let none of us be swayed by prejudice or disdain, but let us search and see whether these things are so.

And note again, that these men, being candid inquirers, were *wonderfully prompt*—"When Jesus was born, there came wise men from the east." Well now, I think that it would naturally strike you that if a man were born a king, there would be time enough to pay him homage when he grew up. To bring gold, and frankincense, and myrrh, to a babe, does not always commend itself to wise men. Let us see the child become a toddler, and the toddler a youth, and the youth become a man—then we may take this long journey to find His Royal Highness.

But no, when the King was born, and the wise men came to Him, they must have started to find Him long before. I would that the Lord might put into the hearts of men today something like this energy and promptness about divine things. If God really was incarnate, if He did come here in human form, oh, come, let us go and find Him! Let us bow at His shrine and worship at His feet. Did He really die and die for guilty men? Did He in their place and stead bear the penalty of their sin? Come, let us seek this "Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world," and let us seek Him ere another sun has risen.

And then see, dear friends, how *supremely obedient* they were, how entirely surrendered to the divine impulse that moved them, for they hastened to do what they were told to do, and rejoiced as they bowed low before the new-born Child, worshipping and adoring Him.

They were also *abundantly generous* with their offerings. They brought the best that they could find—gold, and frankincense, and myrrh—and they spread the royal gifts before the royal Child. Lord, send us converts like these wise men! Send us men and women, in great multitudes, who will cheerfully

obey, who will find a delight in worshipping Christ, in paying Him homage, giving to His service, and in giving themselves to Him.

Thus I have tried to show you what the sovereign grace of God did when Christ was born. May the Lord in His mercy do the like to many here! Oh, how often has it happened that, when I least know it, I was preaching to one who would become afterwards one of our best helpers, one of our most earnest brothers, one of our most fervent sisters! I hope that I am speaking to some such tonight—utter strangers as yet, who will be brought into this church, or into some other church of Jesus Christ, and become not a whit behind the very chief of the apostles, though as yet they are not numbered with the household of faith.

II. But now, in the second place, I have a sad task. The other was a glad task, but now I have the sad task of noticing THE NIGH ONES FAR OFF.

Here, first, we read that *many were troubled about Christ*. He was but newly born and yet He troubled them. Herod was troubled and all Jerusalem was troubled with him. It is an unusual thing to hear of a king troubled by a babe. Proud Herod, the fire-eater, troubled by a babe in swaddling bands, lying in a manger? Ah me! How little is the real greatness of wickedness and how small a power of goodness may bring it grief! Herod was troubled and all Jerusalem with Him.

So, when some people hear the Gospel, and find that it has power in it, they are troubled. Herod was troubled, because he feared that he should lose his throne. He thought that the house of David, in the person of the newborn Child, would take possession of his throne, so he trembled and was troubled. How many there are who think that, if religion be true, they will lose by it! Business will suffer. There are some businesses that ought to suffer, and as true godliness spreads, they will suffer.

I need not indicate them, but those who are engaged in them usually feel that they had better cry out, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians," for they get their living by making and selling her shrines, and if their shrines are in danger and their craft is in danger, then they are troubled. There are such. I have known men who have been leaders in sin, ringleaders in sin, and they have thought that they would lose some of their followers through Christ's coming, so they have been troubled.

But all Jerusalem was troubled with Herod. Why was that? It was most probably because they thought there would be contention. If there was a new King born, there would be a fight between Him and Herod, and there would be trouble for Jerusalem. So there are some men who say, "Do not bring that religion here. It makes such contention. One believes this, and one believes that, and another believes nothing at all. We shall have trouble in the family if we get religion into it." Yes, you will—that is acknowledged in the Scriptures—for our Lord came to bring fire on the earth. He has come, with a sword in His hand, on purpose, to fight against everything that is evil—and there will be contention. I do not wonder that the great lovers of ease are troubled.

But the fact is that many are troubled because the Gospel interferes with their sin. "If I become a Christian, I cannot live as I have been accustomed to live," says one, "so I will not believe the Gospel." The great argument against the Bible is an ungodly life. If you probe to the bottom of the matter, some sinful pleasure is the reason of many a man's infidelity. There is a practical reason against his repenting—he cannot give up his darling sin—he will not give it up, so he is troubled when Christ comes near.

It is a terrible thing to cling to sin. That Spartan boy, who caught a young fox and carried it in his bosom, and then, lest the schoolmaster should see it, and chastise him, allowed the fox to go on eating into his flesh till it ate into his heart, is like you. You are hugging this fox, this wolf, this asp to your bosom all the while we are preaching to you.

What comfort can we give you? Quit your sin, or quit all hope. Will you have your sin and go to hell, or will you leave your sin and go to heaven? You cannot have Christ and sin—the two are diametrically opposed. I will not mention what your sin may be. Let your own conscience tell you that. You cannot continue in the practice of any known sin, willfully and deliberately, and yet find any

comfort from the Word of God, or from the Gospel. There must be, in your heart's intent and resolve, the quitting of sin, or there cannot be the finding of the Savior.

I have told you, before, of the two Highlanders, who wanted to row across a certain inlet on one occasion. They had been largely helping themselves to whisky before they got into the boat, but they began to row and they kept on rowing, but they made no progress. They could not understand how it was that, with all their rowing, they stayed in the same position till one said, "Sandy, did you pull the anchor up?" No, he had never pulled the anchor up, so there they were, with the anchor down and pulling away to no purpose. You must have that anchor up, young man, whether it is drink, or lust, or gambling, or pilfering. You are a fool if you pretend to row when you know that the anchor is still sticking in the mud.

Oftentimes, when a man is troubled about religion, he says, "If I become a Christian, I shall have to give up my pleasure." Not that true religion requires us to give up anything which is real pleasure, or if it makes us give up what affords us pleasure now, it changes our tastes so that it would be no longer a pleasure could we indulge in what we once loved. True religion gives us new pleasures—it takes away our halfpence and it gives us golden coin instead thereof. It does better than that, but I cannot employ a figure good enough to describe the change. True religion never was designed to make our pleasures less and it does not make them less. But still some think that it will do so and hence their trouble.

You would be astonished if you knew why some men oppose true religion. The wife will not go to a place of worship. There shall not be a Bible in the house. They will not have their boy attending a chapel where there is a prayer meeting, or they will not allow the master where he is apprenticed to take the boy with him to the house of God. Men say and do all sorts of strange things when they are troubled by Christ—and it is not because they have any real ground for their perplexity. They are troubled about Christ very much for the same reason that Herod and Jerusalem were troubled about Him, certainly for no better reason.

Well now, this is very sad, that the Gospel, which is meant to be good news to men, should trouble them, that the heavenly offer of free grace should trouble them, that to have heaven's gate widely open before them should trouble them, that to be asked to wash themselves or to be washed in the blood of Christ should trouble them. Troubled by infinite mercy! Troubled by almighty love! Yet such is the depravity of human nature that to many who hear the Gospel every day, it is still nothing but a trouble to them.

Now there is another case here. It is the same man in another character. *There is one who plays the hypocrite.* "Yes," he says, "there is one who is born King of the Jews. Will you wise men kindly tell me all about it? You say you saw a star? When did the star appear? Be very particular. Did you take note of its movements? You say *you* saw it, and *you* saw it, and *you* saw it? What time in the evening was it first visible? What day of the month did it appear?"

Herod is very particular in getting all the information that he can about that star. And now he sends for the doctors of divinity, and the scribes, and the priests, and he says, "When ought this Messiah that you talk about to be born, and where ought He to be born? Tell me." Herod, you see, is a wonderful disciple, is he not? He is sitting at the feet of the doctors. He is willing to be instructed by the magi and then he finishes up by saying to the wise men, "Go now. You go and worship the newborn King. You are quite right to have come all this distance to worship this Child. Be particular, too, to take notes as to where you find Him, and then come and tell me about Him, that I also may go and worship Him."

So we always find that where Christ is, there is a Judas somewhere about. If the Gospel comes to any place, there is a certain number of persons who say, "Oh, yes, yes, yes, we shall attend that place!" I know a certain town where there is one true preacher of the Gospel, who has won many to Christ—but there are a great many who go there who know nothing at all about Christ. Of course they go to what is called, "The Tabernacle," in that place, because it is the right place to attend. I know a town where there is one church in which Evangelical doctrine is preached, and the good people all used to go to "St.

Peter's." It was a kind of patent of respectability to have a pew at St. Peter's, because good evangelical doctrine was preached there.

Well now, that is just how it is with some persons nowadays. A certain number of people would think that all was wrong with them if they did not hear sound doctrine, but all the while they have made up their minds that sound doctrine shall never change their lives and shall never affect their inward character. They are hypocrites, just as this man, Herod was. They will not have Christ to reign over them. They do not mind hearing about Him. They do not mind acknowledging to a certain extent His rights, but they will not yield allegiance to Him, they will not practically submit to His rule, and become believers in Him.

Am I not speaking to some such tonight? I know that I am. Dear friends, do not stop in that state, I pray you. You do not wish to be called a hypocrite—well then, if you cannot bear to be called by that name, do not be such a character. Be true. Come to Christ, bow at His feet, accept Him as your Lord, trust Him to save you, and then rejoice in Him as your Savior and King.

But there were other characters beside the hypocrite who were troubled, and they were *the men who displayed their learning*. These were the scribes and the chief priests who looked in their Bibles and turned up that passage of the prophet which said where Jesus was to be born. Now, I like these people for looking up their Bibles and studying the Scriptures, but what I do not like in them is that, while they told Herod that Christ was to be born at Bethlehem, none of them said that they would go to Bethlehem and worship Him. Not a living soul of them, not a scribe or a chief priest said, "If this is the Messiah, who was to be born at Bethlehem—and this remarkable star makes us believe that it is even so—we will go with the wise men and worship Him." No, not they. They were quite content to have the sacred roll, and read it, and know all about the truth, and yet to leave it there.

I used to know, in my youth, certain very sound Calvinistic brethren. I fancy that they were a little too sound, certainly sixteen ounces to the pound with an ounce or two of bone thrown in, and after they had had a glass or two of beer, they could talk over Scripture better than they could before. I think that the most of those people sleep in the dust. I hope that the whole tribe will—I mean those who live only upon talking sound doctrine without feeling the power of it.

But nowadays I meet people "mighty in the Scriptures," yes, and very keen too upon doctrine, who—

*"Could a hair divide
Betwixt the west and northwest side,"*

as regards points of divinity, but as to charity to the poor, as to visiting the needy, as to caring for the souls of men, as to holy living, and as to prevalence in prayer with God, they are nowhere at all. I pray you to dread a religion which is all in the Book. You must have it in the heart—you must have it in the life—or else this Child that was born at Bethlehem will only affect you so far that you turn over the Books of Scripture, and that is an end of the matter so far as you are concerned.

Yes, yes, yes, know your Bible, that is good, but practice what your Bible tells you, for that is better. Yes, yes, yes, understand the doctrines of grace, be clear upon them—but love them, live them, for that is better far. Yes, yes, yes, be a sound divine, but let us see a holy humanity about you as well. God grant that it may be so! Otherwise, I tell you, your book-learning will still leave you an enemy of Christ.

The saddest point is that *none of these people sought Christ*—not Herod with his hypocrisy, nor Jerusalem with its troubles, nor the scribes and priests with their ancient knowledge—none of them sought Christ. May God grant that no hearer of mine may be on that black list! Oh, may we all seek Jesus! May we all find Him! May we find Him tonight! We shall seek and find Him if we really felt in our hearts that hymn that we sang just before the sermon,

*"I need Thee, precious Jesus!
For I am full of sin;
My soul is dark and guilty,*

*My heart is dead within;
I need the cleansing fountain,
Where I can always flee,
The blood of Christ most precious,
The sinner's perfect plea."*

There are two prayers with which I wish to close my discourse. One is, "Lord, bring the far-off ones near tonight!" May I beg the thousands of Israel present tonight to pray that prayer? You cannot tell for whom you are praying, but you need not know. There may be persons here who are as far from God as they can be. To them I give this text, the word of our exalted Savior and Lord, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else." Look, look, look, look! Sinner, look unto Him and be saved!

*"There is life for a look at the crucified One,
There is life at this moment for thee."*

"For thee." "For thee." Then look you, look now, and find it to be even so.

"There is life at this moment for thee."

The other prayer, and I ask my brothers and sisters here who have power in prayer to pray it, is, "Lord, bring the nigh ones really nigh—these many who are always in this house and yet not in Christ." No, I must not say these "many"—I mean these few—for there are now few who are in that condition. Lord, bring them in!

One came the other Monday and said, "I am one of the few. I have been attending the Tabernacle for many years and yet I have never told you that I have found the Savior." And he came to confess his Master. There are some few of that sort still. Lord, bring them all in!

You who are always hearers only, do you ever remember that text, "Many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom"—that is, you people who have heard the Gospel ever since you were children—"the children of the kingdom shall be cast out"—pushed aside—"cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth"? Pray that it may not be so with one single hearer of mine tonight, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON

MATTHEW 2:1-12

Verses 1-2. *Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.*

Observe here that when the Son of God was born into the world, it was in a very lowly village, the village of Bethlehem. Very naturally, the wise men supposed that "the King of the Jews" would be born in the palace, in the metropolis of the country, at Jerusalem. But it pleased the Lord that everything about Christ's birth should have the stamp of lowliness, that the poorest and humblest of men might understand that Christ took not upon Him the nature of princes, but the nature of men, not of the great ones of the earth, but of our common humanity.

Hence Jesus was born of a lowly virgin and was but roughly cradled in a manger, and the village chosen as the place of His birth was Bethlehem, well-named the, "house of bread," for it is there that the Bread of our souls is found.

The holy child Jesus was born “in the days of Herod the king.” The last spark of sovereignty was just dying out. Herod, an alien, held the kingdom under the Roman Empire. Did not old Jacob’s prophecy say, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come?” Therefore is it expressly mentioned that Jesus was born “in the days of Herod the king.”

We must also remember that, although our Lord’s birth is full of every circumstance of humiliation, it has a wondrous glory about it. The Magi, probably from Persia—“wise men,” philosophers and theologians—heard in far-off lands of His fame and a star led them to His feet. “There came wise men from the east.” They supposed that the birth of Christ would be well known among the Jews and be a common theme of conversation. So, when they reached Jerusalem, they inquired, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?”

Ah, when the heart is awakened to the love of Christ, it often dreams that everybody else feels an equal interest in Him, but it is not so! The world is dead and cold to Christ, and men look astonished when we ask the question, “Where is He? We have seen His star in the east and are come to worship him.”

These wise men were not Unitarians, who disbelieved the deity of Christ. It has been said by some that they only meant that they came to pay Him the homage of a king. Then why did they not worship Herod, and why did Herod say that he wished to worship Him? It will not do, the thought is not to be endured for a single moment. The magi believed that He who was born King of the Jews was more than a human being and they had come to worship him.

3. *When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.*

The wise men brought the best news that ever was told and yet it troubled people. Does the Gospel trouble you, my friend? Then I am afraid you must be of Herod’s kith and kin. It is an ill sign of a man’s heart when that which is for the good of all men becomes a trouble to him. It is an ill stomach that turns good meat to poison. I suppose “all Jerusalem” was troubled with Herod because they knew that, whenever this gloomy tyrant had a fit upon him, he was sure to draw blood somewhere—therefore they were troubled with him.

4. *And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.*

Think of this vile wretch taking to studying his Bible. Yet there are some who do the like still. Reckoning that gain is godliness and therefore turning godliness into gain for sinister motives, they would be religious and wish to be instructed in the truths of the Bible. Such was Herod—so he gathered all the chief priests and scribes together and demanded of them where Christ should be born.

5-6. *And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, and thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.*

Now, you see, what Herod did with an ill design was overruled for good, for thus we know on the highest authority that Christ was born at Bethlehem. The chief priests and scribes, great students of the law, when they were assembled in the presence of Herod, declared that, according to prophecy, Christ was to be born in Bethlehem.

7-8. *Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.*

Covering his bloody design with the pretense of reverence. There is never a worse sin in the world than that which a man covers over with the cloak of religion. Let us ever beware of falling into this evil.

9-10. *When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.*

You see, the light of the star was taken from them for a time, just as sometimes the delightful presence of God is withdrawn from His people. Then, beloved, you walk by faith alone and not by sight,

as these men did. But oh! when the light comes back again—when, after hearing all the chattering of false priests and scribes, and all the talk of Herod the great one, they see the star again—how glad they are! When God sends to His people clear shinings after rain, the brightness of His presence, after a time of gloom, then is it with them its it was with the wise men, “They rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.”

11. *And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him:*

The old Reformers used to say, “Here is a bone that sticks in the throat of the Romanists and they can neither get it up nor down, for it does not say, ‘They saw Mary and the young child.’ The young child is put first—they came to see *Him*—and it does not say that ‘they fell down and worshipped them.’” If ever there was an opportunity for Mariolatry, surely this was the one, when the child was as yet newly-born and depended so much upon His mother. Why did not the magi say, “Ave Maria!” and commence at once their Mariolatry? Ay, but these were wise men—they were not priests from Rome, otherwise they might have done it.

11. *And when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.*

The best they had, presents fit for a King—offered as the tribute of the country from which they came—gold, and frankincense, and myrrh being found in the east. It is well to bring to Christ the best we have, and the best of the best—“gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.”

12. *And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.*

HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—538, 256, 574

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