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## SERMON X.

### THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN OF THE EAST TO CHRIST.

ST. MATTHEW ii. 9.—“And, lo, the star which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.”

THE evangelist appears to record this circumstance with a feeling of admiration, if not of wonder. And perhaps the interest which the whole of this narrative possesses, may be traced, in some measure, to the mystery that hangs over it. It rivets our attention because it excites our curiosity. But it was not written for such a purpose. There is instruction in it, and instruction designed by the Holy Spirit for every one of us. May he give us grace to discover and receive it!

We may divide the history into three parts—the description it gives us of the men who are the subjects of it, the star which appeared to them, and the conduct they manifested.

I. *The description afforded us of these visitants at Bethlehem*, is very short. All we are told is, that they were “wise men from the east.”

By “the east,” the people of Judæa would understand either Arabia or Persia; and by “wise men,” not merely men of well informed minds and sound understandings, but men who made science their pursuit and profession. The quarter they came from, leads us to suppose that they were astronomers, and their immediate discovery of the miraculous star goes far to confirm this opinion. That they were men of some wealth, is clear from the gifts they brought with them, while the sensation they excited in Jerusalem, is a proof, if not of their elevated rank, yet at least of the widely spread and high estimation in which they were held. Herod seeks a private interview with them; the sanhedrim is called together to answer their inquiries; so much importance is attached to their words, that all the city is thrown by them into a state of alarm. The king trembles for the safety of his throne, and the people are apprehensive of new commotions and oppressions. Bringing all these circumstances together, we may infer that they were learned men, rich men, and perhaps celebrated men.

1. See then in this narrative *the power of God over the human mind*.

At this period, he was about to introduce into the world a new revelation of himself; and this revelation was intended to manifest his perfections more gloriously than they had ever been manifested before, and, at the

same time, to put into man the deepest feeling of self-abasement of which his proud nature is capable. "The lofty looks of man shall be humbled," says God as he forms the scheme of man's redemption, "and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day." In furtherance of this design, he determines to pass by, in a marked manner, all that the world admires; and to take as the special objects of his favour, those whom the world most contemns, the poor, the ignorant, the mean.

But this procedure was evidently liable to be misunderstood—the divine intention in it might be overlooked; men might ascribe the success of the gospel, not to the power of Jehovah, but to the weakness of those who embraced it; and thus the outward meanness of the church, instead of confounding human pride, might serve only to tarnish its Redeemer's glory. And how does an all-wise God act? He first brings to the birthplace of his Son a company of humble shepherds, and bids us mark well that of such, in the main, shall be his kingdom; but then to let us see that he can go where he will for trophies of his greatness, that he can bow down the rich and noble yet lower than he lays the poor, that he can triumph over the pride of intellect, the love of fame, the dread of scorn, as easily and completely as he triumphs over the dullness of ignorance and the sordid apathy of want, he leads these wise men from the east to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. And when in the Redeemer's presence, how do they demean themselves? The peasant shepherds stood erect there; at least, if they prostrated themselves before him, we are not told so; but these eastern sages fall down in his lowly dwelling, and do him reverence.

What an encouragement, brethren, is here for every soul that feels its pride and hates it! There is a Being who can make me humble as an angel; One who can master this proud, ungovernable heart of mine. And this Being is calling me to his feet. If I am in earnest in my prayers for a humble heart, I shall go to him, and beseech him to show forth in me also his abasing power.

2. We have too in this history, *a fulfilment of prophecy.*

The predictions that announced the coming of the Messiah, foretold of him that he should beat down the partition-wall which had so long excluded the Gentiles from the church of God. He was to be the Shiloh unto whom should be "the gathering of the people the seed of Abraham," in whom all the families of the earth should be blessed." "Ask of me," said God to him, "and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession." And no sooner does he appear in the world, than God seems impatient to fulfil his promise. The angel who publishes to the shepherds the tidings of his birth, is commanded to declare that they shall be tidings of great joy "to all people;" and then comes a confir-

mation of this saying in these worshipping and rejoicing Gentiles.

The Messiah came first to his own, “but his own received him not.” “The daughter of Zion” was called on to exult at his approach, but she manifested no joy when she saw him, and “the daughter of Jerusalem” was troubled. God leaves them to their folly; but, in the greatness of his strength, he lays bare his arm, and a company of heralds is brought out of a heathen land to proclaim the King of Zion in Zion’s streets. “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.”

And the matter did not end here. After a while, these men are shown to us bowing down at Bethlehem to the very King whom Jerusalem rejected; worshipping that Messiah whom the people that had for ages professed to look for him, were either afraid or ashamed to own.

In this situation, they were at once witnesses against unbelieving Israel, and proofs to the Gentile world of the divine faithfulness. They were intimations and pledges of the divine purposes. They were tokens of the ability of Jehovah to make the kingdoms of the earth his own. As such we must still regard them. Looking on them at the Redeemer’s feet, we must cease to talk of difficulties in the career of a mighty God; we must cease to be discouraged at the slow progress of his gospel in our world. They were the first fruits of a harvest which from eternity he determined to gather in; he is gathering it in, and the day is coming, when the whole earth shall be one vast field of joy and glory. Unbelief may say of this great change, It is incredible. Carnal wisdom, as she looks at the darkness which covers the earth, may pronounce it impossible. But what then? While these men were worshipping at Bethlehem, the Jews might have said the same of heathen Britain, and said it with more of the semblance of truth. But what says history and what says fact now? “The Gentiles have come to thy light,” O blessed Saviour, and our once heathen “kings to the brightness of thy rising.” The Holy One of Israel has been honoured in England, as he never perhaps was honoured in his chosen Zion; and soon all “the kingdoms of the world” shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.

Is all this nothing to you, brethren? Has this prospect no power to excite within you one feeling of delight or one rising of prayer? Then where is your faith in the only book which brings “life and immortality to light?” and where is your love for the only Being in the universe, to whom you can look for the rescue of your lost souls?

II. We come now to our next point—*the star which conducted these wise men to Christ.*

What this was, we are not told. It could not be any one of the known

heavenly bodies, for it at once attracted notice as something strange; nor can we suppose that it was any new world introduced into our system. It was probably a meteor in the earth's own atmosphere, assuming the appearance of a star.

We are kept in the same ignorance as to the reason which led these sages to connect it with Christ. They call it "his star," and they evidently act under a full conviction that it proclaimed his birth; but whence came this conviction? It has been supposed that the Jewish expectation of the Messiah had reached them among the mountains of the east, carried thither by some of the dispersed Israelites; and that they had, in this way, become familiar with the prophecies which foretold his advent. One of these spoke of him under the image of a star, and, at the same time, represented him as a King; and it is further remarkable that this had for its author a prophet who himself had an eastern origin. "There shall come a star out of Jacob," said Balaam, "and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel." But a prophecy like this, supposing them to be ever so well acquainted with it, could hardly produce in men like these a conviction so strong as we see them manifesting. There is no indication of doubt or conjecture in their language; all they say bespeaks knowledge, certainty, assurance.

None but God, brethren, can lead a sinner to the Lord Jesus. Means he may employ, but whether they are stars, or prophecies, or ministers, he will so employ them, as to make us feel their insufficiency and look through them to himself. In this case, he bids a shining meteor testify of his Son; and then undoubtedly he himself, by his Spirit, explains its language. He darts into the minds of these happy men a brighter light than ever flowed from any created thing, tells them of the Sun of righteousness, and then leads them by a faint emblem of him to his presence.

1. Assuming that they were astronomers, we perceive in this miraculous guide *the condescension of God*. We learn that *he often meets man in man's own paths*.

It was the ordinary employment of these philosophers to contemplate the heavens. This was the work assigned them by Providence, and expected from them by their fellow-men. In this employment, the Lord reveals to them a Saviour.

And herein he acted only in conformity with his usual ways. David was taken from the sheep-fold to be anointed king. Gideon was in his father's barn, when he was called to deliver Israel. "According to the custom of his office," Zacharias was burning incense in the temple, when the angel of the Lord promised him joy and gladness in a son; and when the multitude of the heavenly host sung of a new-born Saviour, none on earth heard them save shepherds who were "keeping watch over their flocks by night." Matthew was called from "the receipt of custom" to follow Christ, and the fish-

ermen Peter, and James, and John, were casting a net into the sea, when our Lord called them to be “fishers of men.” The inference we draw is this—we need not go out of our station to seek God; we need not lay aside the ordinary duties of life to find God; we need not strike into new and unusual paths in order to honour him.

We are all tempted to think that we are not in our right place; that our souls would prosper more and the Redeemer be glorified by us more, could we make some change in our situation, or disentangle ourselves from some of its cares and duties. But are we where God placed us, and where God evidently keeps us? Are our employments honest, such as we may carry on without violating the divine law? Then, whatever our feelings may say, there is not on earth, no, nor in heaven, a situation where we could bring more glory to Jehovah, or draw out of Jehovah more abundant mercy. Were there such a spot, we should be on it in a moment. Though it lay at the utmost bounds of the creation, he whose “work is perfect,” whose love to us is boundless, and whose ability to do us good is infinite, would at once find it out, and place us in it. But he says, “I will come to thee where I have placed thee, and there will I be found of thee. No distance, no cares, no turmoil, shall hide thee from me. Thou shalt see me where thou lookest not for me. I will give thee vineyards in the wilderness, and waters in the desert. Stand thou still, and see my salvation.”

2. This star exhibits to us also *the greatness of God*. It says that *he often puts much honour on Christ by the means which he makes use of to lead sinners to him*.

In the first instance, like these wise men, we are generally led to the Lord Jesus as an abased Saviour; as One sustaining a character which harmonizes much better with the manger and the cross, than with the crown or the throne. We look on him as the “despised and rejected” Son of Man; the mind contemplates him as wounded and bruised, crucified and slain, “redeeming us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.” But yet, in some way or other, the greatness of Christ generally bursts out amidst this degradation. No angel comes down from above to tell us that he is the Lord, no new star shines forth in the heavens to declare his glory; but God so orders the means of our conviction; employs such instruments to enlighten, convert, and subdue us; and makes his hand so visible in every part of that blessed work which he accomplishes by them in our hearts, that a man at noon-day might as well doubt whether the sun has risen, as a sinner draw near to Jesus of Nazareth, and not see in him an honour that is divine. His glory and his Father’s are displayed together; displayed, not merely by the grace they impart and the wonderful salvation they bestow, but by the means that have taught us our need of that grace, by the way a God of wisdom has chosen to make that salvation our own. Look at these philosophers

amid their native mountains. A messenger from Bethlehem might have brought them to Jesus; a report of his birth would have soon prostrated them at his feet; but no. The Son of the Highest is lying in a manger, the King of glory is despised on the earth he is born to save; the heavens above him therefore shall proclaim his majesty, inanimate nature shall bear witness to her Lord. At his Father's bidding, an unknown star places these Gentiles by his side, and testifies to their astonished minds his hidden greatness.

3. Behold further here *the compassion and care of God. He adapts his guidance to our necessities.* He gives us no reason to look for extraordinary help, when the common means of grace are sufficient to lead us to him; but rather than suffer one humble soul to seek his face in vain, he will shake heaven and earth, he will come out of his place, to be its instructor and guide.

He had taught these learned men to expect a Saviour. No sooner does that Saviour appear in a distant land, than a miracle is wrought to make known to them his birth. His star shows itself to them in the east, does its errand, and then disappears. Judæa, it is obvious, had been pointed out before as the place of his nativity. To Jerusalem therefore, its chief city, they hurried. When there, they could learn from the priests and scribes where Christ was to be born. On this point, no divine instruction was needed; and accordingly none was given. But when they had left Jerusalem, when they were on their way to Bethlehem, and might be unable to ascertain in that strange and now crowded village the Saviour's dwelling, the star again shines forth, their welcome and almost exulting guide. "Lo," says the half-wondering historian, "the star which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was." And then he adds, "When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy."

And is this anything more, Christian brethren, than an external representation of what has taken place, unseen by mortal eye, in our souls? There have been times in which the light that once shone so brightly on us from heaven, has disappeared. We have been perplexed in our way to God; content perhaps to go anywhere or do anything at his command, but not knowing whither to go or what he would have us to do. And this darkness has not been for an hour. It has continued so long, that we have sometimes thought the light would never break on us again, that we should be left to go along a path of wretchedness to a world of unbroken despair. And how has all this ended? As our fears predicted? O no! We enquired for Christ; we sought him; the morning, as it rose, found us in prayer to him; the sun, as it set, left us thirsting for his presence; and where are we now? Nearer to him perhaps than he ever drew us before; almost where these happy Gentiles were—at his feet. The light that was sown for us, has sprung up; he

“who sitteth between the cherubim,” has shone forth. The consequence is, our perplexities have all vanished; the oppression that bore down our spirits has vanished with them; and instead of feverish anxieties and restless doubts, a peace has been given us, if not as sweet as the peace of heaven, yet so calm, so strengthening, so elevating, that let others deem it what they will, it is to us a pledge and a foretaste of eternal joys. It cannot be otherwise. We feel, as we experience it, Jehovah’s power and Jehovah’s faithfulness. He has brought us “in a way that we knew not;” he has led us “in paths that we had not known;” he has made “darkness light before us, and crooked things straight and we are as sure as though a voice from the skies proclaimed it, that he will never leave nor forsake us, that “he will guide us by his counsel, and receive us to his glory.” We can say with exultation and confidence, and say it of him who rules in the highest heavens, “This God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even unto death.”

### III. Notice now *the conduct of these men.*

1. And the first point which calls for our attention here, is that which was the spring of all we admire in them—*their faith.*

We are often told that men of learning and science have peculiar difficulties to struggle with in their Christian course. The pride of the understanding, it is said, opposes itself to the humiliating doctrines of the cross, and habits of reasoning indispose and almost disqualify the mind for a simple exercise of faith. Be it so; it probably often is so. But what then? Is a corrupt mind a greater evil than a debased heart? Is a proud understanding harder to be subdued, than polluted affections? Are habits of thought more inveterate than habits of sin? And what if they were? Were all the pride that swells in every soul heaped together in any one soul, an omnipotent God could beat it down in a moment; and, in another moment, “bring every thought” within that soul “into captivity to the obedience of Christ.” He may find a difference between man and man, but when he leads men to his Son, he lays them all down alike before him, or sometimes he lays the highest and proudest the most low. Look at Paul, the learned, reasoning, strong-minded Paul. Not one of the fishermen of Galilee received the truth in greater simplicity than that man, or held it with a firmer grasp. His noble understanding became the ally of his faith. It gave an extent to his view, an elevation to his glance, which often enabled him to see, where others could only believe. It had, it may be, its trials and dangers, but high indeed were its enjoyments and splendid its triumphs. And look at these philosophers of the east. Their faith was simple as the faith of a little child; and so strong, that nothing could shake it. When they came to Jerusalem, they undoubtedly expected to find the city resounding with acclamations at the birth of its King: but none of its people had even heard of his birth; and when they



were told of it, they were troubled at the tidings. These Gentiles however stood firm. Not one doubt do they express of the fact; the only question they ask is, "Where is he?" And when they were actually in his presence, what a trial for their faith was there! With their eastern notions of royal magnificence, a king in a stable and a manger, or even in a peasant's hut, must have appeared to them an almost confounding spectacle; more startling, if not more marvellous, than his star in the skies. But it mattered not. They wondered perhaps, but yet they believed.

2. And notice *the moral greatness* they exhibited. There was a loftiness in their conduct, that elevation of judgment and feeling, about which the men of the world may talk, but which none, save a man of God, can either possess or understand.

Behold them as they enter Jerusalem, enquiring in the presence of the tyrant Herod for another and a more rightful owner to the very throne he sat on; and avowing, among the reckless and perhaps scoffing people, their conviction of his advent, and their determination to honour him. "We have seen his star," said they, "and are come to worship him." That was the victory of faith over the fear of man; now behold its victory over worldly expectations and worldly prejudices. Mark how it penetrates through discouraging appearances, counteracts their influence, and gives to the winds long cherished feelings. These men of the east, the region of princely state and splendour, can see in a helpless infant an object of adoration, can bow down in a cottage to one whom they had expected to find admired in a palace, or worshipped on a throne.

Brethren, the things with which the faith of the heaven-taught Christian is conversant, are high things. Their greatness is a greatness of the noblest kind, a spiritual and moral greatness, and they teach him to measure all he sees by a moral standard. They assimilate his mind to themselves. His taste becomes elevated. The tinsel of the world now appears to him as tinsel. He can look through it; he can despise it. He can see the meanness which it often aims to hide, and admire the grandeur which the want of it cannot impair. If you wish to see man in his dignity, if you are enquiring for a soaring mind, a lofty spirit, or an expanded heart, you may find it even on this base earth; but you must go for it, not to the stately mansion and the glittering palace, but to the Christian's home; and to see it best, you must go there when the man seems stripped bare of all his greatness, when the hand of heaven is on him, and, like Job, he has nothing left him but his sorrow, his religion, and his God.

3. Observe one feature more in the conduct we are examining—*the devotedness of these men to Christ,*

They undoubtedly believed on him as the promised Messiah, and looked to him, in that character, for spiritual mercies; but not one word ap-

pears in this history of any blessing they sought or expected from him. He is spoken of only as a King, and the sole object they profess to have in view in their journey to him, is not, like that of the dying malefactor, that he may remember them in his kingdom, but that they may lie down in the dust before him, and honour him there. "We are come," said they, "to worship him." And they did not content themselves with an empty homage. They had brought with them to Bethlehem such gifts as the great men of the east were accustomed to present to their monarchs, gold, and frankincense, and myrrh; and though they knew not how these could benefit him, they offered them to their infant Lord. And they appear to have rejoiced as they offered them. The tribute they rendered to him was evidently no cold service of duty; it was the dictate of feeling, the natural expression of the thankfulness, and admiration, and love, which God had put in their hearts. Had the wealth of the whole world been theirs, they would have deemed themselves honoured to be allowed to cast it at his feet.

Brethren, what know you of this devotedness? Referring to the days of the Gentile church, the psalmist says, "The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts." Isaiah declares that when "they from Sheba shall come, they shall bring gold and incense, and they shall show forth the praises of the Lord." The question then recurs, what gifts have you laid down before him? What praise have you rendered him? What honour have you done him? Say not that you are nothing, and can do nothing, and can give nothing. He well knows what you are, and yet he has condescended to ask a gift at your hands. He stands almost as a suppliant before you. He asks of you your hearts, yourselves, all you have to bestow, your souls and bodies which are his. To profess to come to him and worship him, and yet to refuse him his own; to keep back from him everything that the world will accept; to live regardless of his honour; to place ease, or reputation, or pleasure, or money, or anything, above him in the heart; like the men of Jerusalem, to hear of an incarnate Saviour, and yet to be determined that he shall influence none of your actions and interfere with none of your pursuits;—these converted heathen shall rise up in the judgment, and condemn such a religion as this. They saw him only as a Babe of yesterday, but their costliest treasures were his; we profess to look on him as a King in his glory, clothed with light as a garment, and ruling heaven and earth by his word; and yet all the service and gifts that we offer him, are the world's refuse, the very dregs of our affections, the fragments of our thoughts and time. This is not Christianity. It is a pretence, a delusion. I will not say, it mocks God; it mocks and is ruining you. O that you were enlightened to discover its true character! You would start at its hollowness. Like the stricken Paul, you would tremble and be astonished. O for a religion like that of these converted heathen! a reli-

gion which leads through every obstacle to Christ, rejoices with exceeding joy as it finds him, lies down in conscious abasement before him, is elevated almost to heaven by a sight of his majesty and love, and finds its chief joy and its noblest honour in its efforts to give the King of glory his own.