

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE.

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ST. MATTHEW.

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MATTHEW II. 1–12.

1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

2 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.

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

5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judæa; for thus it is written by the prophet,

6 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.

7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

8 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.

9 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.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding 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: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts: 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.

IT is not known who these wise men were: their names and dwelling-place are alike kept back from us; we are only told that they came “from the East.” Whether they were Chaldeans or Arabians, we cannot say: whether they learned to expect Christ from the ten tribes who went into captivity, or from the prophecies of Daniel, we do not know. It matters little who they were. The point which concerns us most is the rich instruction which their history conveys.

These verses show us *that there may be true servants of God in places where we should not expect to find them*. The Lord Jesus has many “hidden ones” like these wise men: their history on earth may be as little known as that of Melchizedek, and Jethro, and Job; but their names are in the book of life, and they will be found with Christ in the day of His appearing. It is well to remember this. We must not look round the earth and say hastily, “All is barren.” The grace of God is not tied to places and families. The Holy Ghost can lead souls to Christ without the help of many outward means. Men may be born in dark places of the earth, like these wise men, and yet like them be made “wise unto salvation.” There are some travelling to heaven at this moment, of whom the Church and the world know nothing: they flourish in secret places like the “lily among thorns,” and seem to “waste their sweetness on the desert air; but Christ loves them, and they love Christ. These

verses show us, secondly, *that it is not always those who have most religious privileges who give Christ most honour.* We might have thought that the Scribes and Pharisees would have been the first to hasten to Bethlehem, on the slightest rumour that the Saviour was born: but it was not so. A few unknown strangers from a distant land were the first, except the shepherds mentioned by St. Luke, to rejoice at His birth. "He came unto his own, and his own received him not." (John i. 11.) What a mournful picture this is of human nature! How often the same kind of thing may be seen among ourselves! How often the very persons who live nearest to the means of grace are those who neglect them most! There is only too much truth in the old proverb, "The nearer the church the further from God." Familiarity with sacred things has an awful tendency to make men despise them. There are many, who from residence and convenience ought to be first and foremost in the worship of God, and yet are always last. There are many, who might well be expected to be last, who are always first.

These verses show us, thirdly, *that there may be knowledge of Scripture in the head, while there is no grace in the heart.* We are told that king Herod sent to inquire of the priests and elders, "where Christ should be born." We are told that they returned a ready answer to him, and showed an accurate acquaintance with the letter of Scripture; but they never went to Bethlehem to seek for the coming Saviour: they would not believe in Him when He ministered among them. Their heads were better than their hearts. Let us beware with resting satisfied with head-knowledge. It is an excellent thing when rightly used; but a man may have much of it, and yet perish everlastingly. What is the state of our hearts? This is the great question. A little grace is better than many gifts: gifts alone save no one but grace leads on to glory.

These verses show us, fourthly, *a splendid example of spiritual diligence.* What trouble it must have cost these wise men to travel from their homes to the house where Jesus was born. How many weary miles they must have journeyed! The fatigues of an Eastern traveller are far greater than we in England can at all understand. The time that such a journey would occupy must necessarily have been very great; the dangers to be encountered were neither few nor small.—But none of these things moved them: they had set their hearts on seeing Him "that was born King of the Jews;" and they never rested till they saw Him. They prove to us the truth of the old saying, "Where there is a will there is a way."

It would be well for all professing Christians if they were more ready to follow the example of these good men.—Where is our self-denial? What

pains do we take about means of grace? What diligence do we show about following Christ? What does our religion cost us?—These are serious questions: they deserve serious consideration. The truly “wise,” it may be feared, are very few.

These verses show us, lastly, a *striking example of faith*. These wise men believed in Christ when they had never seen Him; but that was not all. They believed in Him when the Scribes and Pharisees were unbelieving; but that again was not all. They believed in Him when they saw Him a little infant on Mary’s knees, and worshipped Him as a King. This was the crowning point of their faith.—They saw no miracles to convince them; they heard no teaching to persuade them; they beheld no signs of divinity and greatness to overawe them; they saw nothing but a new-born infant, helpless and weak, and needing a mother’s care, like any one of ourselves. And yet when they saw that infant, they believed that they saw the Divine Saviour of the world! “They fell down and worshipped him.”

We read of no greater faith than this in the whole volume of the Bible. It is a faith that deserves to be placed side by side with that of the penitent thief. The thief saw one dying the death of a malefactor, and yet prayed to Him, and “called him Lord;” the wise men saw a new-born babe on the lap of a poor woman, and yet worshipped Him, and confessed that He was Christ. Blessed indeed are they that can believe in this fashion!

This is the kind of faith that God delights to honour. We see the proof of that at this very day. Wherever the Bible is read the conduct of these wise men is known, and told as a memorial of them. Let us walk in the steps of their faith; let us not be ashamed to believe in Jesus and confess Him, though all around us remain careless and unbelieving. Have we not a thousand-fold more evidence than the wise men had, to make us believe that Jesus is the Christ? Beyond doubt we have. Yet where is our faith?

MATTHEW II. 13–23.

13 And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

14 When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt:

15 And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men.

17 Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying,

18 In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.

19 But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

20 Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life.

21 And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel.

22 But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judæa in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee:

23 And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.

LET us observe, in this passage, how true it is that *the rulers of this world are seldom friendly to the cause of God*. The Lord Jesus comes down from heaven to save sinners, and at once we are told that Herod the king “seeks to destroy him.”

Greatness and riches are a perilous possession for the soul: those who seek to have them know not what they seek. They lead men into many temptations; they are likely to fill the heart with pride, and to chain the affections down to things below. “Not many mighty, not many noble are called.” “How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God.” (1 Cor. i. 26; Mark x. 23.)

Do we envy the rich and great? Does our heart sometimes say, “Oh, that I had their place, and rank, and substance”? Let us beware of giving way to such feelings. The very wealth which we admire may be gradually sinking its possessors down into hell. A little more money might be our ruin. Like Herod, we might run into every excess of wickedness and cruelty. “Take heed, and beware of covetousness.” “Be content with such things as ye have.” (Luke xii. 15; Heb. xiii. 5.)

Do we think that Christ's cause depends on the power and patronage of princes? We are mistaken. They have seldom done much for the advance-

ment of true religion: they have far more frequently been the enemies of the truth. “Put not your trust in princes.” (Psa. cxlvi. 3.) They who are like Herod are many: they who are like Josiah and Edward the Sixth of England are few.

Let us observe, for another thing, how the *Lord Jesus was “a man of sorrows” even from His infancy*. Trouble awaits Him as soon as He enters into the world. His life is in danger from Herod’s hatred; His mother and Joseph are obliged to take Him away by night, and “flee into Egypt.”—It was only a type and figure of all His experience upon earth. The waves of humiliation began to beat over him, even when He was a sucking child.

The Lord Jesus is just the Saviour that the suffering and sorrowful need. He knows well what we mean when we tell Him in prayer of our troubles. He can sympathize with us when we cry to Him under cruel persecution. Let us keep nothing back from Him. Let us make Him our bosom friend; let us pour out our hearts before Him. He has had great experience of affliction.

Let us observe, for another thing, how *death can remove the kings of this world, like other men*. The rulers of millions have no power to retain life when the hour of their departure comes. The murderer of helpless infants must himself die. Joseph and Mary hear the tidings that “Herod is dead;” and at once they return in safety to their own land.

True Christians should never be greatly moved by the persecution of man. Their enemies may be strong, and they may be weak; but still they ought not to be afraid. They should remember that “the triumphing of the wicked is but short.” (Job xx. 5.) What has become of the Pharaohs and Neros and Diocletians, who at one time fiercely persecuted the people of God? Where is the enmity of Charles the Ninth of France, and bloody Mary of England? They did their utmost to cast the truth down to the ground: but the truth rose again from the earth, and still lives; and they are dead, and mouldering in the grave. Let not the heart of any believer fail. Death is a mighty leveller, and can take any mountain out of the way of Christ’s Church. “The Lord liveth” for ever: His enemies are only men. The truth shall always prevail.

Let us observe, in the last place, *what a lesson of humility is taught us by the dwelling-place of the Son of God*, when He was on earth. He dwelt with His mother and Joseph “in a city called Nazareth.”

Nazareth was a small town in Galilee. It was an obscure, retired place, not so much as once mentioned in the Old Testament. Hebron, and Shiloh, and Gibeon, and Ramah, and Bethel, were far more important places. But the Lord Jesus passed by them all, and chose Nazareth. This was humility!

In Nazareth the Lord Jesus lived thirty years. It was there He grew up from infancy to childhood, and from childhood to boyhood, and from boyhood to youth, and from youth to man's estate. We know little of the manner in which those thirty years were spent. That He was "subject to Mary and Joseph," we are expressly told. (Luke ii. 41.) That He worked in the carpenter's shop with Joseph, is highly probable. We only know, that almost five-sixths of the time that the Saviour of the world was on earth, was passed among the poor of this world and passed in complete retirement. Truly this was humility!

Let us learn wisdom from our Saviour's example. We are most of us far too ready to "seek great things in this world: let us "seek them not." (Jer. xlv. 5.) To have a place and a title and a position in society is not nearly so important as people think. It is a great sin to be covetous and worldly and proud: but it is no sin to be poor. It matters not so much what money we have, and where we live, as what we are in the sight of God. Where are we going when we die? Shall we live for ever in heaven? These are the main things to which we should attend.

Above all, let us daily strive to copy our Saviour's humility. Pride is the oldest and commonest of sins: humility is the rarest and most beautiful of graces. For humility let us labour; for humility let us pray. Our knowledge may be scanty, our faith may be weak, our strength may be small; but if we are disciples of Him who "dwelt at Nazareth," let us at any rate be humble.