

A Night in Bethlehem — Adoration.

Matthew 2: 1-12.

Night Scenes of Scripture

Seventeen Bible Night Scenes, illustrating and elucidating various truths of the Gospel.

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Chapter 2

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All of you, who are conversant with Scripture, will have noticed the difference between the record given us by the Evangelist Matthew, as compared with that which is portrayed by Luke, concerning the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Both Gospels, however, open with night scenes. Luke, as we have seen, shows us the shepherds of Bethlehem visited at night by the wonderful tidings that to them was "born that day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." His record, while replete with all the surrounding and lovely attendant circumstances, purposely emphasises the truth of the incarnation of the Son of God — of how God's Son came to save that which was lost, by Himself becoming man, that, as man, He might die for men. That is the burden of Luke's Gospel.

Now Matthew's Gospel has a totally different purpose. It is written, not, like Luke's, for the Gentiles, but is clearly written for, and presents Scripture to the Jew, and deals with the earthly history of the blessed Saviour in relation to the Jewish nation. You have Him, in plain language, presented by Matthew as King of the Jews. Perhaps you have not been accustomed to read the four Gospels, as presenting Christ in four entirely different aspects; but it will greatly help you, if you carry this simple thought with you: that Matthew presents the blessed Lord as King of the Jews — alas, rejected; Mark portrays the perfect servant; Luke unfolds the Son of Man; and John delineates, as far as any writing can, the Son of God.

I want now to bring before you, for a little, man's treatment of this blessed One, who was thus born King of the Jews. The first chapter of Matthew gives us His genealogy — always an important point for the heir to a throne. The second chapter opens with the fact that certain magi, wise men of the East, Gentiles, I suppose, had travelled an enormous distance, and had come up with this query on their lips, "Where is HE that is born King of the Jews?" A very striking question is that — the first in the New Testament; and very different from the first question in the Old Testament. Have you ever observed it? God said to Adam, "Where art thou?" Oh! what a question for the sinner — Where art thou? Friend, where art thou? What is your relation to God?

The New Testament opens with the question, Where is He? "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" was a question of immense importance. If the One the magi sought be King of the Jews, His right and title to the throne of David must, in the most clear and perfect way, be presented, and the first chapter accordingly gives the genealogy of the Lord Jesus; beginning with Abraham, and coming down through David — the royal line — till at length we have Jesus born into this scene in the way Matthew describes, and the Scripture was fulfilled" Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us." Wonderful tidings! dear friends. God on earth — God here, on man's earth, and in human form — Scripture fulfilled. The Old Testament, I repeat, clearly and distinctly fulfilled. Astounding news here! that God was on earth in the form of that young child!

He is born, and His name, already foretold by the angels, is JESUS, which means "Jehovah the Saviour." This name is given Him with divine purpose. "Thou shalt call his name Jesus" — why? "For he shall save his people from their sins." I do not doubt that primarily "his people" meant the Jews; but still it is equally true in a broader sense that "he saves his people from their sins," and therefore, the sooner you get among "his people" the better for you. I do not say, The sooner you profess to be a Christian — that would be no good to you — but, The sooner you get among "his people" the better will it be for you.

"Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins," was the word to Joseph. He is born, and receives the lovely — the heaven-born — the charming name of Jesus. Jesus! Do you love that name? Does that name awaken a chord in your heart, my friend? Has the name of Jesus no charm for you? Oh! I pity you if it has not, Jesus! Jesus! It will be the song of my soul for eternity. It will ever be the theme of the saved, and He who bears that name will be the object of worship for ever of all God's people. Oh! my friend, what do you think of Jesus? Perhaps you have never thought much about Him. Very likely! for we are not any of us in a hurry to get to Christ. You know the last thing the sinner will do is to go to Jesus. Yes, it is the very last thing. I do not think any sinner goes until he is, so to speak, driven at the point of the sword — that is, until there is soul-exercise — and until he has learned his own good-for-nothingness, and that there is no one to pity him, to help him, or to save him, but Jesus. We learn Him first as a Saviour. I do not think that was the character in which these wise men of the East regarded the Lord. They came up, you observe, "when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea," inquiring, "Where is he that is born *King of the Jews*? for we have seen his star in the cast, and are come to worship him." A most remarkable mission these men had.

To me there is something exceptionally charming in this picture of these Easterns coming hundreds — possibly thousands of miles — to greet the Son of God, as He entered this world. You may say, What was the reason of their journey? Well, it is pretty well known, that about the time of the birth of our Lord, there was a widespread expectation in the East that a great and mighty being — a certain wonderful King — was to be born into the world. How, exactly, they fixed that particular date is not for me to say; but there is no doubt that the astrologers and astronomers, and the men who interested themselves in these subjects, had fixed upon that moment, towards the close of the reign of Herod the Great, as the time when this wonderful personage was to be born. The Old Testament Scripture had, I doubt not, led to this. That wicked man Balaam — a poor wretch who loved money better than truth, or the service of God — had

been led to say once, as I daresay many of you remember — and he spoke the truth, though he himself was not in any sense under the power of it — "I shall see him, but not now; I shall behold him, but not nigh." Ah! take care, my hearer, that you are not Balaam's companion for eternity. You will see Him, mind you, but oh, what an awful thing if it be not nigh. "I shall see him, but not now; I shall behold him, but not nigh; there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy the children of Sheth" (Num. 24: 17). Yes, he spoke prophetically of that wonderful Star, and no doubt the prophecy was often repeated and never died out, and at this moment, curiously enough, these magi were seeking the truth, and found it, as all earnest seekers are sure to do.

I have no doubt that the hand of God was upon these men, who had travelled such an enormous distance, as they come up and say, "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.*" I know perfectly well that infidels have tried to make a stock difficulty about this star, and the time of the appearing of the star. They say that a new star could not have appeared. My dear friend, you need never trust an infidel in his allegations against Scripture, because he believes nothing, and knows nothing. If you have been getting infidel notions into your head, the sooner you get them knocked out of it the better. The wise men had evidently seen the star. What star did they see? I do not know if I am prepared to prove what star they saw. Very likely they saw two which appeared to them as one.

It has been perfectly well proved by men, who have studied these things, that at this time there was an extraordinary phenomenon in the planetary system, caused by the juxtaposition of two of the largest sidereal bodies, Jupiter and Saturn, which at that moment, in the pursuance of their orbits, came close together. Their relative position on that occasion was such that men looking from the East would see what would appear to be a brilliant additional body in the heavens.

These wise men, doubtless, led by the hand of God, said, The moment has come — the star so long expected has arrived. As it happened, this conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn appeared in connection with the heavenly constellation, "the Fishes," which had long been connected with the Jew (as a fish is the astrological symbol of Judea). Struck by this fact, the magi were directed to the land of the Jew, and they started off to that land with the query, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" But you see they lost the star. What had become of it? They saw the star first in the month of May. Six months after, in the months of October and November, Jupiter and Saturn approached each other again just at the time when we read they came, saying, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" When they came to Jerusalem, no one could tell them anything about the One they sought, but Scripture had predicted where Christ should be born, so at Herod's command they go to Bethlehem. As they go to Bethlehem they again get guidance, for "lo, the star which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over the place where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy." The two planets were once more in close apposition, and to the unassisted eye might appear to be one star. I do not say that this coincidence is what the magi saw, but it might be the case, since such was the state of matters in the heavenly bodies when these men came up.

But without doubt the magi are led by the finger of God, as they go seeking Jesus — to worship Him. They are prepared with worship. What a striking thing! Gentiles travelling

hundreds of miles to worship Him! And His own people, what of them? Not one solitary person in Jerusalem in the upper circles of religious observance — from Matthew's record — seems to have heard or thought a bit about Him. And yet you remember that Anna, the prophetess, had spoken "of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem" (Luke 2: 38). There were a few godly people looking for the Messiah, and they recognised Him when He was born, but the king, the priests, the scribes, the elders, the heads of the nation, were not looking for Him; no one knew of Him, or His birth, and the first news they got of the birth of the King of the Jews was a year or so after His birth, and then from the lips of these eastern Gentiles, who had travelled this enormous distance to find Him.

The occasion when these men reach the spot where the Lord was, and present their offerings of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh, was not that of which the second of Luke speaks. I feel certain about that. If you notice men's pictures — and there are thousands of them representing the infant Christ in the manger — they paint the magi in a stable, among the cattle, presenting the Lord with their gifts. All these pictures are wrong. Never trust the pictures. You must go back to, Scripture, and it says, "When they were come into *the house*." It was not a stable. Clearly many months had rolled by, after the birth of Jesus, ere the magi came up. There is no doubt about it. It is quite clear if you compare the Scriptures. When the parents of Jesus bring Him to the temple, and Simeon takes Him into his arms, and cries, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation," then immediately after that the family go down to Nazareth (Luke 2: 39). You may say to me, How came it that the Lord was again in Bethlehem? Well, you remember that a godly Jew was bound to appear before the Lord three times in the year — at the feast of the passover, at the feast of weeks — what we call Pentecost — and again at the feast of tabernacles (see Deut. 16: 16). I have no doubt, therefore, that it Was on one of these occasions — probably the passover (see Luke 2: 39) — that He was again brought to Bethlehem, where Joseph's natural links were.

It is very interesting to compare the Scriptures. We live in a day when Scripture is very much doubted; but a little care will prove the accuracy and beauty of Scripture in all points. I do not know if you have ever searched out the history of Bethlehem — if not, I commend it to you. It was the spot where Rachel died. Where Rachel died, Jesus was born. The meaning of it, too, is interesting. It means "The House of Bread." Bethlehem-Ephratah, it is called also, and that is very striking. Ephratah — fruitful; and Bethlehem — the House of Bread. It was indeed fruitful. As a matter of topography, Bethlehem was a little village pitched on the summit and sides of a mountain ridge, some five miles south of Jerusalem. The steep hill beneath the village was carefully terraced in graceful slopes from top to bottom of the ridge, while vines in festoons, and luxuriant olives, and fig-trees, with dense foliage, gave a fruitful appearance, in striking contrast with the barrenness of the neighbouring desert. In the valleys below, and on a little plain to the eastward, are some cornfields, the luxuriant and beautiful crops of which doubtless gave to Bethlehem the name of "The House of Bread," or, "a fruitful place."

Immediately beyond these terraced vineyards and fields lies the wilderness of Judea, alluded to in the opening verses of the third of Matthew as the scene of the preaching of John the Baptist. That rigid, barren, arid desert lay right in front, as far as the eye could reach, in striking contrast to this peculiar place of great fertility and fruitfulness at the foot of the mountain, that gave it the name Ephratah. Its history looms largely in Scripture. It was there that Ruth first met

with Boaz. It was the House of Bread she got to. My dear friend, have you ever touched Bethlehem — the House of Bread — this spot of blessing, where Jesus was born?

It was at Bethlehem likewise that David was born. Call to mind the history of David in connection with Bethlehem. Think of him as the poet, the warrior, and the king. His youthful surroundings told on his after-life. Bethlehem's mountain ravines afforded solitude and opportunity for communion with God. There he fed his flock, and learned the lessons which the Spirit led him to indite in later days. There he learned to be the man of war, and to be alone with God — to have communion with God. David was not only born there, but there he was anointed. His chief mighty men were Bethlehemites, and it was for the water of its well he sighed, and not in vain. All these things were but the forecasts and pictures of what was to come. In this same spot Jesus — the Son of David — the Son of God, was born. Bethlehem! thou art indeed the true House of Bread. What a wonderful thing — that in thee the Saviour, the Son of God, should be born! On Bethlehem's plains, where the shepherds kept watch, the gospel tidings were first proclaimed — "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord."

And now the Easterns come up, and they repair to this mountain village, to find and worship the Lord. Their visit must have been twelve or eighteen months later than the date of the birth of Christ. That is clear, for the time taken to prepare for, and carry out a caravan journey, travelling slowly from the East, would necessarily occupy a good many months. Consequently, when Herod makes his inquiries, he is most particular to find out the time at which the star appeared, and also, you observe when he sends out the terrible edict to slaughter the children, it is against those of two years and under. Many months had rolled by since the star first appeared, and when Herod got the information about the birth of his hated and unlooked-for Rival, he fixed a limit of two years so as to ensure destroying Him. What different effects are produced on souls by the presentation of Christ! "When Herod the king had heard these things, he was *troubled*, and all Jerusalem with him." What a remarkable statement! and what a revelation as to the state of man's heart. How different is the attitude of the magi. "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*." They come with a desire to own Him, and I like to think of them prostrating themselves before Him. Have you ever bowed to Him? If not, bow tonight. Times have altered since then in a certain sense. He is not now a young child. He has died, been raised, and as the exalted Man is on the Father's throne; but He is the same Jesus, and you must have to do with Him. You must have to say to Him. You must bow to His power, in the day of judgment, or bow to Him now in the day of His grace. It would be a good thing if you were to bow to Him just now.

If you have a desire for Him, be encouraged by the example of these men. Let their example cheer you. We read — "When they saw the star, they rejoiced with *exceeding great joy*." Why? Because they had this thought, We are nearing the object of our quest now. As they travelled over that desert, during the long weary weeks and months, I have no doubt the question rose often in their minds, Shall we find Him? And now that their search is about to be rewarded, they rejoice. "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." Look at that scene. They came into the house — not a stable evidently — but some house in which Joseph and the mother of the

Lord were at this time. They came in, and they fell down before Him. Blessed moment in the history of their souls! They saw the young child, and they fell down and worshipped Him. They bow in adoration. A beautiful sight for God! A wonderful sight for heaven!

Look at these men. Why are they prostrate before Christ? Has heaven ever seen that sight in your soul's history? Has heaven ever been delighted to find you prostrate before Christ? — not now a young child, but the exalted Saviour at God's right hand, because the work of redemption is accomplished. But the principle of truth is the same. It is Christ that is sought. The same Christ attracts you, and when you bow before Him what blessedness is yours. "They worshipped him, and opened their treasures, and presented gifts; gold, frankincense, and myrrh." Whatever that may mean, it certainly means this, that the best they had was for Jesus. What have you had for Jesus yet? Unless you have learnt His grace — unless you have learnt the value of His precious blood, and unless you have learnt that He is your Saviour, you have nothing for Jesus. If you learn His grace, what will come then? Out of your heart will come the antitype of the gold, frankincense, and myrrh; you will present to Him the best of everything — the affection and worship of a loving heart.

You will be like the delivered little boy. A train was whirling along on its road, when all at once something gave way, and there was an awful railway accident. A great many people were killed, and the train was smashed. A gentleman, seeking to help the dying and the wounded, found a little boy beneath the wheels of a smashed-up carriage, and drew him out. He came out frightened a good deal, but in answer to the gentleman said he was not hurt. "Oh," said his deliverer, "I am glad of that," and was moving off. "Stop! stop!" said the little man, "do take this, it is all I have got," and he gave the gentleman a half-penny. "I hope you will take it, it is all I have got." Ah! do you see? It was all he had got, but he must offer it to his deliverer. You have your heart, and will you not yield it to Jesus? Yield it *to Him*, my friend, not to another. "And they presented *unto him* gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh."

Now mark! How much did they offer Mary? Not a grain. Oh no, it is reserved for the advanced nineteenth century, for the enlightened professing Christian of the present day to indulge in Mariolatry — the worship of Mary — and to offer incense to Mary. The magi knew better. Are you one with them? They were wise men. Perhaps you do not think they were wise, but they had divine wisdom, and they offered nothing to Mary. There was no worship of Mary then. Take up the latest hymnbooks now, some ancient, some modern, some new, others old, and note how much about Mary you will find. I sometimes wonder at the patience of God as His Son is insulted in this way.

But while on this point it is well to notice what significant silences Scripture has. Did you ever notice in the second of Luke, when Simeon came into the temple and took up the babe Jesus into his arms, the way he worships God? Of Joseph and Mary I read, "he blessed them." Simeon could bless them, but did he bless Jesus? Nay, he was divinely taught. If I went into a friend's house, where there was a recently born child, it would be the simplest thing in the world for me to put my hand on the child's head and say, "God bless the child." Simeon blesses the parents. He does not bless Christ. Ah! no! He knew he had God's Son in his arms. Here these wise men bring all their worship to the Son, and have none for the mother; and if you have been trapped into

Mariolatry, God save you. Get down on your knees, own your sin, and make everything of Jesus henceforth.

You may be perfectly sure, if you are seeking Christ, you will find Him. I hear some one say, Oh! I want Christ, but I do not know how to find Him. Do not give up your quest. Have you travelled all that distance, and gone months and months upon the road? then God will bring you to the true Bethlehem, and will bring you into living contact with Jesus. Where is He tonight? He is in the true Bethlehem, the true House of Bread, in the Father's house. If you are wanting Jesus this evening, you follow on, and you will find Him. I will tell you why? He wants to find you. Just as we sang tonight —

"Jesus, my Saviour, to Bethlehem came,

Born in a manger, to sorrow and shame;

Oh, it was wonderful — blest be His Name;

Seeking for me, for me."

Thank God for that. Ah, "seeking for me." It is God that has His eye upon us. Jesus seeks us that He may save us; we seek Him that we may worship Him. The magi, I repeat, were "wise men." They sought, found, and worshipped Jesus. Have you been as wise?