



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“When Bethlehem Became the House of Bread,” Matthew 2:1-12 – TRANSCRIPT

The Scripture reading this morning is found in two passages, one in the Old Testament and one in the New. Will you turn, first of all, with me to Micah chapter 5. Micah chapter 5, and then I want to read Matthew chapter 2 verses 1 through 12. Micah chapter 5 verse 1 through verse 3. The prophet writes,

“Now gather thyself in troops, O daughter of troops: he hath laid siege against us; they shall smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek. But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall one come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she who travaileth hath brought forth: then the remnant of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel.”

Now we turn to the New Testament, and read the first twelve verses of Matthew chapter 2, as we continue our study in the Gospel of Matthew:

“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 saw his star in its rising, and are come to worship him.” (I’ve made a slight change in the text; the words “in the east” are most likely rendered, “in its rising”) When Herod the king heard it, 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 the Christ (or the Messiah) should be born. And they said unto him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written through the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the Land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah: for out of thee shall come forth a governor who shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod when he had privately called the Wise-men, inquired 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, that I also may come and worship him.’ 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. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And they came into the house (evidently, this is a few weeks later and Mary and the baby were now not in the manger but were in the home) they saw the young child with Mary his mother; and they fell down and worshipped him; and when they had opened their treasures they presented unto him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his word.

It might seem strange for the Jewish gospel to give us the visit of the Gentile Wise men from the east. But one of the things that we learn about God’s plans for the Nation

Israel, is not only is the Messiah the glory of his people Israel, but he is also a light to lighten the Gentiles. And as we have seen in the opening of this wonderful gospel that Matthew wrote, the Lord Jesus is not only presented as the Son of David, but as the Son of Abraham. And in the Old Testament, even in those sections of the Old Testament that seem to us to be so closely related to God’s plans for the Nation Israel, there is frequent mention of the fact that his plans encompass not only the nation but also the Gentile nations.

In one of the great Messianic sections of Isaiah we read, “And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. And so we should not be surprised, then, that the Jewish gospel should, instead of Luke (which might be called a Gentile gospel) give us this beautiful account of the coming of the Wise men, in order to worship the Lord Jesus at his birth with their gifts.

How different is the reality from the symbolism of this account. Today, Israel, instead of being a light, is blind. And the nations, instead of listening to the light which has come to us through our great Israelitish Messiah, are raging. And it is, of course, not too surprising to us to see this, but I think it is surprising for us and shocking to realize that the church of Jesus Christ is also in spiritual disarray.

Vance Havener said, a number of years ago, “We are living in an age of hazy standards of right and wrong. The old line of demarcation has practically disappeared from modern thinking.” And then he points to a prominent minister who has said, “The delineation of sin has undergone a transformation somewhat similar to that which has taken place in the world of painting. The old clear-cut lines have given way to an impressionistic indefiniteness, and the black and white contrasts to low-tone grays. The churches have adopted a hush-hush policy on the doctrine of depravity, and a Rotarian gospel takes the place of repentance.” And Mr. Havener comments – I like this reference to painting – “There was a time when you could look at a picture and tell what it was.

Today, black and white have become gray.” Someone has said, the religion of China is Confucian, and the religion of America is confusion.

A country schoolteacher applying for a job was asked, “Do you teach that the earth is round or flat?”

“Which way do you want it taught?” was the reply, “I can teach it either way.” One gains the impression that there’s a great deal of truth to this in the preaching of the gospel in our churches today, for one gains the distinct impression that many who stand in the pulpit are not so anxious to tell us what the word of God says, as they are to tell us what they think will please those who are there to listen.

To Bethlehem came the eastern pilgrims. Bethlehem means “the house of bread.” It was a lovely place with a lovely history. I think one of the most striking things about Bethlehem is one that we do not ponder very much. It was at Bethlehem that the first announcement of the Temple was made. And it is at Bethlehem in the New Testament that we read of the birth of him who was the true temple of God. It was in the Bethlehem that Jacob buried Rachel, and next Sunday, Lord willing, we shall have something to say about the connection of Rachel with this account in Matthew chapter 2. It was at Bethlehem that Ruth and Boaz met, and above all, it was at Bethlehem that David lived and reigned. And so it is fitting that David’s greater son should be born in Bethlehem in accordance with the teaching of the word of God.

Isn’t it a striking thing that in the Lord Jesus Christ’s life and ministry, one sees the activity of all who are in heaven, and of many who are upon the earth, even in the times of what appear to be his humiliation. You can see in his humiliation, the glory of God. He is born of lowly parents. He is laid in a manger. He is wrapped in swaddling clothes, but the principalities and powers that are in heaven are immediately in commotion when the Son of God comes to tabernacle with men. An angel descends to proclaim the advent of the newborn king, and suddenly there is with him a heavenly host, and they are

praising God and thanking God for the things that are happening in that little manger, in that place of humiliation.

Not only are the angels active, but a star is deputed on behalf of all the stars to guide the Wise-men from the east to the place where the shepherds are to be born. The shepherds have come to pay their homage, the homage of simple-minded ones, and as they come and see the birth, or the child, they go back to their fields rejoicing and praising God for what they have seen. And then representatives from the Gentiles come to visit him. And so in the midst of the state of humiliation of our Lord, all of the angelic armies of heaven are in commotion.

It is, of course, an intended thing that through this we should understand that through the ministry of the Lord Jesus, we have that which is the theme and center of all of heaven, and we should never forget it. So, the moment the little babe is laid in the manger, it seems as if all the universe is active in this praise and thanksgiving, and the angels, the stars, the shepherds and the learned Gentiles are all concerned over what has happened.

It is rather striking and almost stimulating to notice the little that is said about these Wise-men in the word of God. McLaren says,

“Where they came from, how long they had been traveling, how many there were, what was their rank whither they went – all of these questions are left unsolved. They glide into the story, they present their silent adoration, and as silently steal away. The tasteless medieval tradition knows all about them: they were three. It is not said, of course, they were three. It is said they brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and on the basis of that it has been reasoned that there must have been three of them, but the text of Scripture does not say. They said they were

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kings, evidently relying on the text of the Book of Isaiah. It knows their names. Their names are Caspar, Melchior and Balthazzar. And if we chose to pay the fee, we can see their bones today in the shrine behind the altar in the cathedral in Cologne in Germany.

“How much more impressive is the indefiniteness of our narrative, and how much the half sometimes is than the whole,” McLaren adds.

So we do not know who the Wise-men were. We do not know the place from which they came. We do not know who they were. We do know their names. There are many other things about them. We have no idea that they were kings. The text of Scripture simply says that they were *mogoi*, or *magi* – “wise men.”

The Wise-men have a lengthy and uncertain ancestry, but they were men who were skilled in philosophy. They were skilled in medicine. They were skilled in natural science, and they were also very interested in interpreting dreams and in soothsaying. In the early days of the history of the Wise-men, they had been looked upon, as far as we can tell, they were men who were learned men. In the later days they came to be associated with the charlatans and fortune-tellers and others. But so far as we can tell from this account, these men were learned men, and they evidently were very good men, and they evidently were very earnest men who were anxious to interpret the things that they had seen in disguise. And since they had come into contact with something that was supernatural, and since they responded as they did, I think we are justified in saying that these were men who were a tribute and a glory to the profession of the Magi.

Now we read in verse 1, “When Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, behold there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, and they said, “Where is he who was born King of the Jews, for we have seen his star in its rising.” What this star is, we do not know. It is possible that it was some natural phenomenon that occurred at that time. Scientists have told us that about 11 B.C., Halley’s Comet was visible, shooting brilliantly

across the skies, but that does not have, it seems, very close connection with the star they evidently saw, and particularly since the star came and stood over the place where the child was in the little village of Bethlehem.

In 7 B.C. there was a brilliant conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, and some have wondered if this perhaps was the mighty star that they had seen. In the years 5 to 2 B.C., there was also an unusual astronomical phenomenon, and no doubt as we learn through astronomy the things of the past, we shall learn of other possibilities. But so far as the text is concerned, there is no indication other than, given us, other than that this was probably a supernatural phenomenon.

And while none of us really knows what it was like, I presume it must have been so unusual that the Wise-men immediately recognized it as being unusual, and since it came and stood precisely over the place where the babe was, and since Bethlehem is so close to Jerusalem, it must have been a low-moving star. It evidently was a supernatural phenomenon designed to lead the Wise-men to the precise place where the baby lay.

There was a strange feeling of expectancy in the east. We have it in the writings of Suetonius who writes, “There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world.” And Tacitus has also written that, “There was a firm persuasion that at this time, this very time, the east was to grow powerful, and rulers coming from Judea were to acquire universal dominion.” So there were moving about in the east reports from Judea there would come someone who was to be a kind of universal ruler.

I would gather that the reason for this was the Jews were, in spite of their failure, not completely derelict in preaching the gospel of the coming Messiah. And they had read the Scriptures, and they had proclaimed those Scriptures, and as a result of their proclamation of the Scriptures they had spread over the east some anticipation of the fact that the Messiah would come and that he would be a universal ruler. And the fact that

we have some in the city of Jerusalem and in other places who are expecting the Messiah, as the Lord’s ministry seems to indicate, would seem to confirm that.

The question that these Wise-men raised when they finally reached the city of Jerusalem is a question that is beautifully pointed: where is he that is born King of the Jews? But the response is revealingly tragic. So far as we can tell, they went up and down the streets of the city of Jerusalem asking the question where is he that is born King of the Jews, and the city of peace, the city that is David’s great city, could give them no answer. They were asking, and they could gain no response. And not only could they gain no response, but it’s evident that no one even wanted to know the answer to the question they were asking.

Finally, as a result of their continued asking of the question, word came to Herod. And immediately alarm set in. For Herod was not an ordinary kind of king. And when Herod became disturbed, the whole city became disturbed because of the kind of person Herod was. Herod was half-Jew and half-Idumean. He was an Edomite. And the Edomites were the implacable enemies of Israel. He was a descendant of Esau, and I think that is very revealing.

He would have naturally been disturbed if someone should say within his kingdom, for he is called Herod the King, that someone has been born as a king. Now I am told – I have not done an investigation into this matter at all – but I am told that no one is ever born a king, that the Lord Jesus is the only one born a king. But that is incidental to the major point. It’s evident that when the word came to Herod, who was the king, that a baby had been born who was destined to be king, that he immediately became disturbed, because being the king he naturally would be disturbed if some were insisting that someone had been born who might be a usurper of his throne and his right. But by this time Herod was a murderous old man, and insanely jealous. And any kind of rivalry he could not stand. He was a lovely character. He had murdered his wife. He had murdered his mother-in-law (well, perhaps that’s not so bad you might say

[laughter]). But he had murdered one of his sons and then two more of his sons. So he was a murderous old man, and he did not mind murdering those who were nearest to him. So when he became disturbed, the whole city became disturbed, because, as we often say, all hell would break loose when Herod became disturbed.

Augustus said, with reference to him that – and he played upon two Greek words (the word *bous*, which means a pig, and the word *buios*, which means a son) – that one would be better off as Herod’s *bous* than his *buios*, because he murdered so many of his sons. Therefore it’s not surprising that we read in verse 3 that Herod the King, when he had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Now they were not troubled over the fact that the Messiah had been born. They were not disturbed over that fact. They were disturbed over the fact that Herod was disturbed, because they knew that they might suffer from it.

Now we read that when Herod learned of this, he called together a meeting of the chief priests and the scribes of the people, and he demanded of them where the Messiah should be born. Evidently, the Holy Spirit spoke to the heart of Herod, and there was brought home to this man the conviction that these Wise-men who have come from the east might be giving us a true story of what has happened to them. And so he asks of these experts in Scriptural understanding where is the Messiah to be born? And there is no hesitation, for the text of Scripture is extremely clear. The Jews know the correct answer, the evangelist knows the correct answer, and even the stars in heaven know the correct answer: the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem.

And they said unto him, we read in the 5th verse, in Bethlehem of Judea. And Matthew adds these words, “For thus it is written by the prophet, AND THOU BETHLEHEM, IN THE LAND OF JUDAH, ART NOT THE LEAST AMONG THE PRINCES OF JUDAH: FOR OUT OF THEE SHALL COME A GOVERNOR WHO SHALL RULE MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.” So there is no hesitation. These wise men who study the text of Scripture know precisely where the Messiah is to be born.

Isn’t it beautiful the way the Old Testament gives us the details of the coming of the king? It begins in the broadest possible way by saying the Messiah shall come of the seed of the woman. And then we have all types of limitations. He is limited to a certain line. He is limited to a certain kind of birth. And finally, he is limited to a certain locality: the city of Bethlehem. And in the Book of Daniel, he is limited to a specific time in which he shall offer himself as king to Israel. If they had been students of the Old Testament, they would have known, not only that he would be born in Bethlehem, but that they were fast approaching the time when the Messiah should come. And the arrival of Wise-men, learned philosophers and students of such things from the east, who evidently were extremely good men, with a report that they had seen this marvelous phenomenon in the skies, would have alerted all whose hearts were responsive to divine things to the possibility that the King has truly been born.

That prophecy in the prophecy of Micah is a study in itself. But there is no question about the definiteness of it. And I love that prophecy in Micah for this reason. We have in it a beautiful illustration of the difference between the prophecies of men and the prophecies of God.

Recently, I read in the newspapers that Jean Dixon was studying a particular phenomenon that she might make a prophecy sooner or later concerning it. The prophecies of Scripture are not prophecies that are given in ambiguous, loose language so that they might be fulfilled in several ways. The prophecies of Scripture are not like the Delphic Oracle, not like the words given to King Croesus when he asked if he should attack in order to win a victory. And the reply comes back to him, if you cross the river, a great empire shall be destroyed. Now the prophecy is so worded in ambiguity, that if he crossed and won, the prophecy would be right, and if he crossed and lost, the prophecy would still be right. For in one case, it would be the empire that he attacked that fell, and in the other, it would be his own empire. Scripture is no Delphic Oracle. Scripture does not say “even in Bethlehem” but “in Bethlehem Ephrathah.” There are two Bethlehems in

the Old Testament record. There is one in Judea, there is one in Zebulon. And so we read in the Old Testament, “but thou Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, out of these shall he come forth to be who is to be ruler in Israel.”

This, then, is no prophecy that a Jean Dixon or a Maurice Woodruff or any of the other false prophets might devise for us that might be fulfilled in several different ways. At least, you would think that he might have hedged by saying, “in Bethlehem,” and if it happened to be the one in Zebulon he would still be right. But no, it’s Bethlehem Ephrathah and Judah that’s specifically mentioned. These are prophecies of the word of God, and the prophecies of the word of God are tremendously different from the prophecies of men.

There are individuals today who believe that in the meetings of the saints, there are prophets who are able to stand up and prophesy. I’m always looking for these prophecies. I never can get any real prophecies out of them. They frequently give me such things as well, somebody stood up last Sunday and said, “Next Sunday we’re going to have a great blessing the meeting of the assembly.” That’s not a very definite kind of prophecy. It’s not one that I can test at all. Incidentally, if you have any prophecies that your friends claim to have made, I would like to know what they are, specifically. I’ve been doing some investigation of this, and I cannot find any real prophecies that are being made today, and yet there are a number of evangelical people that are saying that we not only have people who are speaking in tongues today, but prophesying. So I would like to test that just a little bit.

These prophecies of Scripture are definite, and they are to the point, and they can be tested. And when they are fulfilled, we can know that God has been the origin of the prophecy. The details of the prophecy in Micah are very striking: thou Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah—now Matthew, writing from a different perspective draws another truth out of that. He states: thou Bethlehem

in the land of Judah at least among the princes of Judah. He of course knows that as a result of what has happened in little Bethlehem, Bethlehem has been exalted above cities of like character. But the text of the Old Testament says, “Thou Bethlehem Ephrathah, out of thee shall he come forth unto me, whose goings forth have been from of old from everlasting.”

And that word “come” and the word “goings forth” are from the same Hebrew root. So what we are taught in that passage is that there are two kinds of comings. There is a coming in history in which the Messianic king shall come, and he shall come out of Bethlehem, for he is a ruler who will rule in the earth, and he is possessed of human nature. He shall have in one true sense his origin in Bethlehem. So far as his human nature is concerned, he derives his human nature by virtue of the supernatural ministry of the Holy Spirit, through the nature of the Virgin Mary, so that he is literally of her flesh. So he is the human Son of God. And he is born in a specific place, so he can be called a Bethlehemite, in the sense that he was born there. So, out of thee, Bethlehem, shall he come forth.

Now that is coming that is at one point in time, the historical time when the Son of God came, and when out of his human nature was born and began his life as the God-man. Now last week, I mentioned that we would probably be more accurate in speaking of the virgin conception rather than the virgin birth, for our Lord was born just as any other person was born. The supernatural character of his beginning is as his conception, but the text says out of thee, Bethlehem, shall he come forth unto me.

But then lest you gain the wrong impression, this coming of the Son out of Bethlehem is not the only coming which may be posited with reference to him. His goings forth, his comings and goings forth, have been of old from everlasting. And in that statement, reference is made to the fact that throughout the whole of the Old Testament period of time, the Son has been active. He was active in Creation. He was active in the theophanies. He was in the garden in Eden. He was the one who met with Abraham.

He was with Joshua. He was with Gideon. He was with Samson and his family, so that throughout the Old Testament, his goings forth have been from of old from everlasting. He has been active throughout all eternity. For he is not only the human son, he is also the divine Son, the second person of the eternal Trinity, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.

When I was in Scotland a number of years ago, I had the privilege of meeting the Moderator of the Church of Scotland. He was one of the professors at the University of Edinburgh. Just a few years before that at the General Assembly—or just a year before that at the General Assembly—Sir Bernard Lovell, a great astronomer and scientist, had lectured the assembly. And he had lectured the assembly of this large and influential church of Scotland on the wonders of the natural world with which he was so naturally acquainted.

And when he had sat down after he had given his lecture, Mr. Burley stood up and he said, “Mr. Lovell, we want to thank you for this beautiful and inspiring lecture which you have given us today. But we want to remind you, that our God rules over all your worlds.” And how true that is. Our God does rule over all these worlds that are about us. And he can even command a star and have a star as his messenger, and have a star to lead and guide some Wise-men to the place where the Son of God is lying in a home.

Herod has a very strange policy: if this infant is God’s Messiah, I will kill him. That’s his policy. That’s the policy of a madman. That’s the policy of a man who is insane. That’s the policy of an irrational being. Now [indistinct] Herod, if he’s the Messiah—if he’s not the Messiah, then let him be. It will soon come out that he’s not the Messiah. But if he is the Messiah, Herod, what in the world can you do about it? But the irrationality of objection to the Messiahship of the Lord Jesus – and it is characteristic of human nature – if he’s, if this infant is God’s Messiah, I will kill him.

That policy has characterized the world down through the centuries, and it characterizes the policy of every individual who hears the message concerning the Lord Jesus and does not respond to it. For in his rejection, he operates on the same policy that Herod the King operated upon.

Herod makes a request. He calls another meeting, a secret meeting this time with the Wise-men. He desires that they become his spies. And they are, as so many earnest, sincere, good men, gullible. And we read in the 7th verse, “Then Herod, when he had privately called the Wise-men inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.” They said, why Herod, it’s been a long time now, we took a long time coming to the West. The star was very slow in the sky. It did not get ahead of us. In fact, it has probably been eighteen to twenty months or so ago. And so Herod, in order to make his net as wide as possible, put in his mind two years. We shall study something about that next week.

At any rate, he says to them, I want you to go to Bethlehem because we have learned that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem, and I want you to search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, I want you to bring me word again because I want to come and worship him, too. Isn’t that beautiful? I can just imagine some gullible Christian saying, you know, Herod may become a Christian. [Laughter] He’s evidently received our testimony. And if we find the child, we’ll go get Herod, and we’ll have the king become a Christian, and we’ll become a Christian land, and we shall have wonderful life and fellowship throughout all the land of Palestine and ultimately, perhaps, to the ends of the earth.

Now this little man was not intending to worship the Lord Jesus at all. But God overrules the enmity of this little puppet that sits upon the throne of Judea and Galilee. The Wise-men leave. Not too wise. “But when they heard the king they departed, and lo, the star which they saw in the east went before them til it came and stood over where the young child was.” It seems evident from this that this was a miracle, because a star

that was seen in the sky in Bethlehem would be seen in the same way – in Jerusalem – would be seen in the same way in Bethlehem, for they were so close together. But they could sense that this star was moving, and they could sense when it came and stood just over the place where the young child was. So evidently it was a very low-moving star, something very unusual. God had, I say, deputed one of his stars to carry out his task. There’s a great deal of discussion over this star, but as far as I can tell, this account gives me the impression that it was a miraculous thing.

The guidance brings the Wise-men to the place where the infant is, so that special revelation, Micah’s prophecy in the Old Testament, and general revelation, God’s revelation of himself in the sky, in nature, unite in Bethlehem. Isn’t it interesting that this star which so beautifully represents heaven and does not disobey heaven in any way – for it cannot do anything but the will of God in heaven – this star is evidently only concerned with Jesus Christ.

On the long trip from the east, if they came from the east, to the west, we have no indication that it went off into any bypass. We do not read that when those men went to the village of Bethlehem that it engaged in any other ancillary ministries. That star is totally concerned with the infant, for heaven is totally concerned with Jesus Christ.

Not only that, but this star leads to Jesus Christ, and I gather from this, if I may reason from the activity of this star – you’ll recognize, of course, this may be a little speculative – but if I may reason from the activity of this star, which is obviously under the control of heaven, it is concerned with the Lord Jesus and it always, in all of its activities, leads to him.

And finally, when it reaches the place where the child is, it stops. And stops right there, and its history ends, for it has reached the Lord Jesus. There’s a beautiful legend, I’m sure by someone who was thinking about this and reflecting upon what I am saying but nevertheless desirous of adding a little bit to the truth. In this beautiful legend, the legend is that the star, after standing in the sky for some time, fell into the well in

Bethlehem, and there, on certain days, holy people, if they look carefully, may see the star in the midst of the well. It’s only a legend, but it does express the fact that when the star reaches Bethlehem, when it has brought a man to the place of Jesus Christ, then its ministry is over. And furthermore, it does not go beyond him. It stays there and completes its ministry there.

Now I think this is very remarkable, because it’s evident that this star leads to Christ in spite of the religious leaders of the day, in spite of the enmity of the king, in spite of the indifference of the people, the star leads the Wise-men to the Lord Jesus. And when it has come to the Lord Jesus, it’s ministry is over.

There are remarkable stars in the theological sky today, and they would not only lead us to Jesus, a kind of Jesus – not like the Jesus of the word of God, not the second person of the Trinity who possesses full deity and true humanity; not the second person of the Trinity who has offered a sacrifice through substitution that is a penal satisfaction of the holiness and righteousness of God – not that kind of Jesus as all, but they offer us a Jesus – but they not only offer us a Jesus, they also want to go on beyond him – their stars are not stable when they reach the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. If I had only one thing that I would like for God to say about my ministry it would be: that he preached the person and work of the Lord Jesus.

I had a student who came to me not long ago, and he had heard me preach, evidently, a few times, and he said, “Dr. Johnson, that was a good message, but I have never heard you preach sermons on anything but the person and work of Christ.” Well actually I do vary my message every now and then. I sometimes preach on the person of Christ, and then I sometimes speak on Christ’s person. [Laughter] And then I sometimes speak on the work of Christ, and then sometimes of Christ’s work. So there is some variety. And there are some subjects that I undertake, too.

It seems to me that if it could be said honestly and truly—I’m not sure it could be honestly and truly—he preached the person and work of Jesus Christ, that was the theme

of his ministry, I would not be disappointed with that at all. I would consider it a complement.

There are these stars in the theological sky, but they want to lead us to the regions beyond the Lord Jesus.

In the New Testament, in 2 John verse 9, there is a text that I have always thought was good for ministers of the word of God to pay attention to, for Sunday School teachers, for anyone who seeks to bring the message of Christ to others. The text in 2 John 9 says, “Whosoever goes forward and abides not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God.” It’s alright to advance. It’s alright to go forward. It’s alright to study the Scriptures and advance in the knowledge of him, but if we go forward and we do not abide in the doctrine of Christ, then we do not have God. In other words, it’s alright to advance, but we advance from a foundation in which we never leave in the preaching of the word of God.

The gifts that the Wise-men bring are described in the last two verses of this account. Discovery leads to adoration and to offering. When they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary. Incidentally, have you noticed that throughout this account, the important thing is the young child. Have you noticed that? Will you notice the expression in verse 11: “the young child with Mary.” Verse 13: “Arise, and take the young child and his mother.” Verse 14: “When he arose, he took the young child and his mother.” Verse 20: “saying, ‘Arise and take the young child and his mother.’” Verse 21: “And he arose and took the young child and his mother.” Pre-eminent in the story is the young child. It is not Mary. It is not Mary the Virgin. Pre-eminent is our Lord Jesus.

And no wonder. Because if in the Lord Jesus we have an incarnation of the eternal God, then earth is no longer a disregarded spec in the infinite azure. God does care about this earth, and about its inhabitants of whom we are part.

James Orr has written some rather interesting words on the subject of redemption. He has pointed out in his words on redemption that the Lord Jesus was not a great religious leader and preacher of righteousness. He was not a great religious and social reformer. It was not his main business to inoculate men with a new enthusiasm for humanity. “Christ was all of these things, but he was infinitely more,” the professor said. “God’s end in his Creation indeed stands as also his purpose to realize it, but under the conditions in which humanity exists, the end can only be realized through redemption, and it is the redemption which Christ pre-eminently came into the world to effect.” And so we cannot think of him in his ministry apart from his redemption if we are to think correctly about him.

The gifts, what do they signify? We do not know. It has almost been universally thought that the gift of gold refers to the royalty of the Son. The gift of frankincense, since incense was offered to God, may suggest the divinity of the Son. And the gift of myrrh, which was often used in the burial of people, suggests his humanity. If we are to think of the myrrh as suggestive of his humanity, for he shall die, then we can see what we shall see all through the Gospel of Matthew, that the shadow of the cross of the Lord Jesus falls over everything that precedes the description of it in the 27th chapter. This gospel is the gospel of a king who shall suffer. And right here in the beginning, in the offering of the myrrh, there is suggestive of the fact that while he is human, he must also suffer and die.

Well only on this night, and only in the coming of our Lord Jesus to Bethlehem, does Bethlehem attain to her true name, “house of bread.” We have tried Sinai, with its thou shalt and thou shalt nots, but Sinai does not bring salvation. The works of the law cannot save anyone, nor can any other works of religion that we do.

Men do not come to the Lord Jesus by joining the church. They do not come to know the Lord Jesus by undergoing water baptism. They do not come to know the Lord Jesus through the Lord’s Supper. They do not come to know the Lord Jesus by being a

good citizen. They do not come to know the Lord Jesus by being a good church member. They do not come to know the Lord Jesus by being educated, by being reformed, by being cultured individuals. All of these things may have some merit and value in their place, but there is only one way to the knowledge of the infinite God and to the forgiveness of sins, and that is through the personal relationship with the Lord Jesus who suffered and died for us under the judgment of God who is just in punishing sin but gracious in forgiving those who come through the Lord Jesus.

These common reactions that we find in this first paragraph are so instructive. There is Herod. He is the man who knows the truth, and against the knowledge that he possesses, there is something here, he suppresses it. As Paul says in Romans chapter 1 and verse 18: “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who are holding down the truth in unrighteousness.” And I say to you my dear friend, sitting in the audience this morning, you who have not believed in the Lord Jesus, you who know that there is a God, and you do know that he exists, but in your rejection you are suppressing the truth that God has written in your nature and character; Herod is a man like that.

No man can be neutral concerning Jesus Christ. No man can disregard him. And even in our indifference as the priests and scribes in this second attitude exhibit, they know him to exist. The priests and the scribes, they know where he is to be born, but they do not care enough to go and see if he is born in Bethlehem. And what a beautiful illustration it is, my dear friend sitting in the audience, that if your knowledge of the word of God is limited to the clergy, you’re liable to have no true saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus. These men had to surmount the obstacles of the clergy in order to reach the Savior.

And that’s the story of the whole of the New Testament. The story is that one must mount up upon and over the clergy, the religious leaders, if he is to attain to truth. I

hope that you will apply that to me to, and that you will study the Scriptures for yourself in order to find Christ and the wise-men who worship him.

Knowledge climaxes in the bowing of the head and the heart. They use their knowledge. They persevered in the knowledge they possessed, in spite of the clergy, and when they came to the house where the baby was, they didn’t stay outside and say, well, we’ve found the child. They entered in and they bowed down before him, and they worshipped him, and there is no true finding of Jesus Christ until this comes, this worship of him, this personal relationship to him. Then, the quest reaches its designed end.

P.T. Forsythe, one of the great men of a generation or two ago said, “The world finds its consummation not in finding itself, but in finding its master. Not in coming to its true self, but in meeting its true Lord and Savior. Not in overcoming, but in being overcome.” Now I know you expected me to say something Calvinistic. That’s true.

They overcame in being overcome, because this whole story from beginning to end is the story of a great God who through the star leads his own through the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. And it is true, we overcome, not by overcoming, but by being overcome.

Can the babe give us life that is life indeed? The text in the Old Testament says, “Whose goings forth have been of old from everlasting.” He is one who has been there, and because he has been there, he is able to lead us there, and he can be trusted. May God through the Holy Spirit so convict your heart concerning the Lord Jesus and his ministry that you are brought to him, is my prayer. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] We are so thankful to Thee, Lord, for the Lord Jesus Christ and his ministry. We’re so thankful to Thee for the Holy Spirit who has brought us to the Messiah. And we thank Thee that in Thy marvelous grace Thou hast brought us to the worship of him.

“When Bethlehem Became the House of Bread” by S. Lewis Johnson
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O God, if there is some person, young or old, in this auditorium who has not yet come to Christ, give no rest or peace – may every experience of life speak of him to lay rest in Christ.

We pray for Jesus’ sake. Amen.