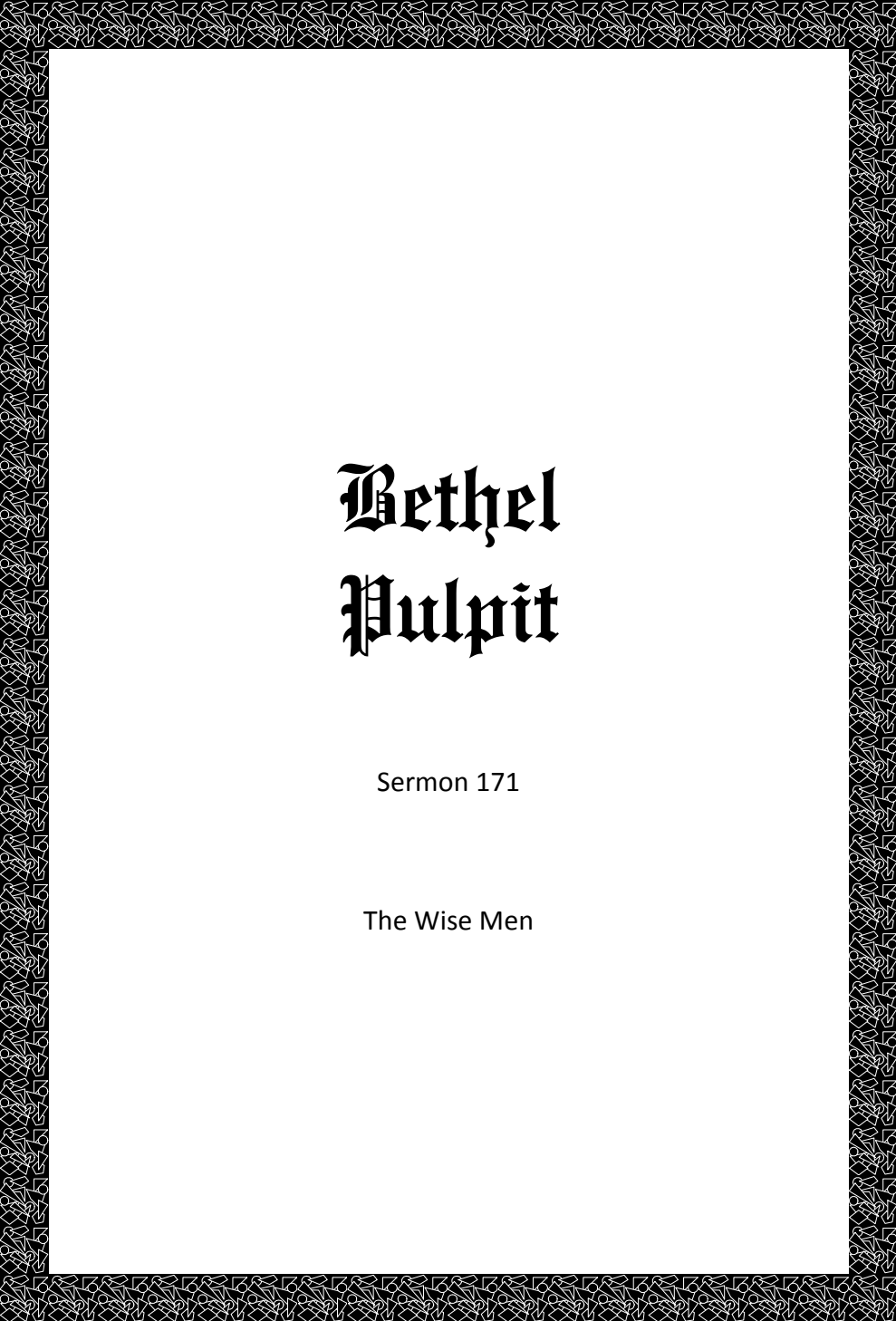




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 171

The Wise Men

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 20th December, 1998**

Text: “*And fell down, and worshipped Him*” (Matthew 2. 11).

This morning, I will not be speaking exactly on the words I have read, but on the very important things that come before. I should like, as enabled by the Holy Spirit, later on to try to speak to you about the real nature of spiritual worship and what it is at Bethlehem to worship our incarnate God, to worship the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

* * * * *

Exactly who these wise men were, we do not know, we are not told: how many there were, what their names were, where they came from, whether or not they were kings. Of course, there is so much tradition concerning them. The Word of God, the Greek, calls them the *Magi*, which we render as the *wise men*. The reason that they are thought to be kings is because the prophecy in Isaiah 60 has always been taken as referring to them, that light that shall shine from heaven, and kings shall come to the brightness of Thy rising. It has usually been agreed that they came from Persia or Arabia.

But leaving all that, whatever it means, who they were, what their names were, where they came from, what exactly it means by the Magi, the wise men, one thing is abundantly clear: they were made “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus,” and that is the only true wisdom that matters, to be “made to salvation wise.” They had this wonderful revelation. God made Himself, His truth, known to them through this bright star. There was the desire that worked in their heart to find the Saviour, the promised Messiah, the new-born King. And they set out and at last they found Him. Now beloved friends, the great point with you and me is to be found among those who are made “wise unto salvation.” When Scripture speaks of those who are wise, it does not mean those who are clever, those who are intelligent. Some are people with no intellect at all, people who cannot read or write, people who can hardly understand anything. Also, when the Word of God speaks of those who are foolish, it does not mean those who are silly or ignorant. It means

those who are destitute of the truth as it is in Jesus. O the great point is for the Spirit of God to make us wise! If we are made wise, the great concern will be our immortal souls. If we are made truly wise, like these wise men, we shall have no rest, no peace, till we come right where the Lord Jesus is, till we find Him, till we see Him, till we worship Him for ourselves.

The Lord Jesus so often spoke of those who were wise. Let me just give you two instances. The wise virgins. Why were they wise? Well, because the day of the Lord's coming did not take them by surprise. They were made right. They were made ready. They had oil in their lamps. Their lamps were trimmed and burning, and when that solemn cry was heard which one day you and I will hear: "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet Him," "they that were ready went in with Him to the marriage: and the door was shut." And then the other case: the wise man who built his house on the rock. Why was he wise? Because he had a good foundation. His house was built on the rock, and then when the awful storm came and beat vehemently, his house "fell not: for it was founded upon a rock." May we, like these wise men, be made "wise unto salvation." Like the wise virgins, may we be made ready. Like the wise man, may our house be built upon the Rock of eternal ages.

"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." Really, this was the firstfruits of the bringing in of the Gentiles into the church of God. The shepherds, of course, were Jews; they were Israelites. But these wise men were Gentiles, and they were the firstfruits of that great and glorious work which has been going on ever since – because we are Gentile sinners, who by nature and birth are "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise." But that word has a relevance to Gentile sinners: "But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ." O these wise men were made nigh. They were brought nigh. You know, the Lord says, "Covet earnestly the best gifts." O to covet an interest in this in our souls feelings, to be "made nigh by the blood of Christ."

"Behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" It is a great question, isn't it? "Where is He?" Of course, the other great question of the gospel is this: "Who is He?" The wise men said, "Where is He?" When the Lord Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that ass to die, the people said, "Who is this?" You

little ones sometimes sing in the Sabbath school, “Who is this in yonder stall, at whose feet the shepherds fall?” When we think of the Babe of Bethlehem, when we think of the birth of the Lord Jesus, the great question is, “Who is this?” And the greatest act of faith is to look on a helpless Babe lying in a manger in a stable, and to say, “This is true Almighty God.” It is the highest act of faith, and it is that faith that every sinner saved by grace possesses, that the Babe of Bethlehem is our Maker, our Creator, the second Person in the Godhead, co-equal, co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Ghost. “Who is this?” To say that this is true Almighty God, and to believe it. And you see, that is the wonder of it. I would that all of us during this coming week might have a sense of wonder and amazement, because I do believe that if our religion is real, at times there will be a sense of wonder and amazement. That beautiful hymn has the heading over the top, “The Wonders of Redemption”:

“And did the Holy and the Just,
The Sovereign of the skies,
Stoop down to wretchedness and dust,
That guilty worms might rise?”

“Who is this?” And when we think of who Christ is, and who He was from all eternity, O this will magnify His love to us, and this will magnify His condescension. How low He stooped to become “a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief”! And never forget that He became a real Man. That is, He took a human body and He took a true, reasonable, human soul into union with His divine Person, never to be separated to all eternity. Now hold that point fast. In the early days of the Christian church, the first attack of Satan was on the Godhead of Christ, and that did not succeed. The attack was how could it be possible that this Babe, this Man, was true Almighty God? That was Satan’s first attack, and it did not succeed. And then the second attack, and this did in measure succeed: well, if He was true Almighty God, He could not really have been a real Man as well. That did succeed, and solemnly it is rearing its ugly head today. Now hold fast to the truth, as you value your immortal soul, that the Lord Jesus was a real Man, though “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners.” He was a real Man, though true Almighty God. Not two separate persons, but two natures, one human, one divine, in one glorious Christ. He must be a real Man that He might suffer and bleed and die. But He must be true

Almighty God that there might be any value, any efficacy in the blood He shed, the work He came to perform.

Now, “Who is this?” But you know, it can be put in a personal sense. “Who is this?” I have sometimes thought of it something like this. There might be some most honourable, important person, and people say, “Who is this?” They say, Well, he is the Prime Minister, or, he is some great man. You might ask someone else, and they say, He is my brother. You might ask another, and they say, He is my father. You might ask another, and they say, He is my friend. I trust all of us this morning can rightly answer this question, “Who is this?” That He is the Son of God from all eternity. The godly Scottish covenanter said, “You have never to preach the birth of Jesus without His eternal generation as the Son of God.” I hope all can say, This is true Almighty God. But, “Who is this?” Can you say that He is my Saviour, He is my Redeemer? If you do not go just as far as that, can you say, He is my only hope? “If ever my poor soul be saved, ’tis Christ must be the way.” In the fifth chapter of the Song of Solomon, the daughters of Jerusalem really ask the church, the bride of Christ, “Who is this” (verse 9), and she gave a wonderful answer. She ended up, “His mouth is most sweet: yea, He is altogether lovely. This is my Beloved, and this is my Friend, O ye daughters of Jerusalem.” O can you answer that question, “What think ye of Christ?”

But you see, the question the wise men asked: “*Where* is He?” “Where is He that is born King of the Jews?” And the learned men, the rabbis in Jerusalem, could give the answer. They could give the wise men the answer. They could give Herod the answer, because it was clearly recorded in Scripture: Bethlehem Judah. “Thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be Ruler in Israel.” It is a beautiful Scripture, that, isn’t it? Can any of you go with me in this this morning, that the very sound of the name, the word *Bethlehem*, is attractive to you? Why, because it was here that the Son of God, “though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor.” O the sweet sound in the name of Bethlehem! But that is a beautiful Scripture, from Micah 5. “Where is He that is born King of the Jews?” “And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judæa: for thus it is written by the prophet.” “But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be Ruler in Israel.” Now this is

it: “Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” You know what follows in the same chapter. You cannot separate it. In Micah 5, you cannot separate verse 2 from verse 5, that verse which some of us love so much: “And this Man shall be the peace.” That is just what we want. “Peace by His cross has Jesus made.” The angels came from heaven to sing about it: “Peace on earth.” And we want to feel that peace in our hearts.

“Where is He that is born King of the Jews?” But you will not find Him in Bethlehem now. You will not find Him in Bethlehem this morning. “Come, see the place where the Lord lay.” That manger, that stable, they are for ever vacated. We remember Bethlehem, but we do not find the Lord Jesus in Bethlehem this morning. You have to go on from Bethlehem. Well, “Where is He?” We see Him hanging, bleeding, dying on the cross, our only hope. He came to Bethlehem that He might go to Calvary. But you will not find Him this morning hanging on the cross; that cross is for ever vacated. That is the evil, the wickedness of these crucifixes. They are wrong to portray the Lord Jesus, but wrong to portray Him as though He is still on the cross. “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” If you want to find Him this morning, you have to go up to heaven and see the risen, exalted Saviour. “Wherefore” – because He came to Bethlehem, because He came to Calvary, because He died and rose again – “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name.” I believe there are many of you here this morning and from an honest heart you can say this, whatever else you cannot say: “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds!” “Because of the savour of Thy good ointments Thy name is as ointment poured forth.” “Draw me, we will run after Thee.” “The desire of our soul is to Thy name, and to the remembrance of Thee.” “None but Jesus.” “Thou shalt call His name Jesus: for He shall save His people from their sins.”

“Where is He that is born King of the Jews?” Well, He is in heaven, exalted at God’s right hand. And the redeemed sing to Him eternally, “Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father; to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.” But, “Where is He?” Well, He is to be found in His holy Word. “Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me.” He is in the

house of God this morning. Do you believe it? Do you believe what you do believe? “Where two or three are gathered together in to My name, there *am* I in the midst.” You cannot see Him, but do you believe He is here? Now, “Where is He that is born King of the Jews?” He is in the preaching of the everlasting gospel. He is the glory of the gospel. Without Him there would not be any gospel. “Where is He?” Is He found in your heart, or is your heart like the crowded inn at Bethlehem, room for everyone and everything else, but no room for Him? Is Christ found in your heart the hope of glory? Or shall I put it like this: if you dare not say that Christ is in your heart, you do have to pray, “O come to my heart, Lord Jesus; there is room in my heart for Thee”? It is a wonderful thing if you have got a space in your heart and none but Jesus can fill it, if you have that aching void, and none but Jesus can relieve it.

“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 they did worship Him. They did find Him. But there is this wonderful revelation to them, that the promised Messiah, the Son of God, had been born. Whether they still had some of the ancient Scriptures out in those eastern lands, or whether it was pure revelation, we do not know, but they had it made known to them that the King of the Jews was born. I take it by “the King of the Jews,” they meant the promised Messiah, the Son of God. They must have known He was more than an earthly King because they wanted to worship Him. This is an attractive subject, the star of Bethlehem. “Shine, Bethlehem’s star, O shine; the night is dark and I am far from home.” Beloved friends, the church of God today is not led by some star in the sky. Spiritually, the star of Bethlehem still leads the people of God, and by the star of Bethlehem leading the people of God, I understand these two things: the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Never the Spirit of God contrary to the Word of God, or the Word of God contrary to the Spirit of God. These two together: the Spirit of God and the Word of God. The Word of God shining into your heart; the Spirit of God shining into your heart. The Word of God shining upon your pathway; the Spirit of God shining on your pathway. That heavenly light. “A light to shine upon the road that leads me to the Lamb.” And the point with them was this: they wanted to come where Christ was; they wanted to find Christ. Have you a religion like that? “I must have Christ as All in all, or sink in ruin, guilt and thrall.” “None but Jesus.”

So they set out on pilgrimage. I take it that this must have been a long journey, and it must have been a very dangerous journey, and it must have caused them a lot of inconvenience. They had to leave everyone and everything and they had to set forth and go on this spiritual journey, and they could find no rest, and they could find no peace, until they found Christ. Now have you a religion like that? You are made willing to leave the world. You are made willing to leave everything. There is only one thing that really matters, and that is to find Christ. You know, if your religion does not cost you anything, it is not worth anything. There was a reality in their religion. Their religion had to come first. There is a scripture, and I do feel that we as a congregation need it: “And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart.” It is not a kind of half-hearted seeking Christ. Some of us go back to those days when eternity was made such a solemn reality. It cast a dark, black cloud over everything. I go back to those days, the dark, black cloud that was over everything. No peace, no joy, no happiness, no satisfaction here. But then there is that conflict, that struggle. You feel you must be going after Christ, but the world still pulling you, the world trying to hold you. You know you cannot have both. In the end, you are made willing in the day of His power to leave everything if only you might find Christ. May the star of Bethlehem shine in your hearts and may the star of Bethlehem lead you to where the infant Redeemer lies.

Now the star of Bethlehem will never lead you wrongly, never lead you amiss. It seems to me in reading this chapter, they followed the star intently until they were getting to the land of Israel, but they ended in the wrong place. They ended up at Herod’s palace in Jerusalem. I do not believe the star led them wrongly. I believe they took their eyes off the star and the star withdrew itself. These wise men were taking things for granted, using their earthly wisdom. We are seeking the King of the Jews. We are nearly there. Surely it must be at Jerusalem. Surely it must be in the palace. And they went to the palace, but the Infant Christ was not to be found there. We do have to beware of our human reason when we are seeking after Christ. We need to be under the influence of the Spirit of God. We need to be led by the star of Bethlehem.

“And, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.” But right at the beginning, there

was the sorrow and there was the trial, and there always will be that. Herod seeking the young Child that he might slay Him, and then Herod putting to death all those young children in and around Bethlehem. It will always be the same. We had a baptismal service twenty-two years ago this week. It was Christmas week. Do you know what the text was at that baptismal service? Can any of you remember? “Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.” As I remember, the points were something like this: the opposition to the Saviour’s coming into this world, the hatred of Satan, and yet he could not destroy the young Child. Christ could not be destroyed. He could not die until that day eternally fixed in the counsels of God came. I think I spoke of it something like this: that wherever there is the beginning of a work of grace in a sinner’s heart, then, “Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.” But he never will, and he never can. But there will be the trials, and there will be the sorrow, and there will be the testing.

“And, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.” It brought them to Christ. And perhaps some of you young ones are tried whether you know anything about the Holy Spirit’s work. I was, in my spiritual beginnings, very, very much so. I felt I knew Christ personally and savingly, but the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit’s work, well, I was so tried and tempted on it, until it was made so clear that the office of the Holy Spirit is not to speak of Himself, not to glorify Himself, but His covenant office is to reveal Christ. And the more you are brought to esteem and love Christ, the more the Holy Spirit is honoured and glorified. Really it is this:

“The soul that with sincere desires
Seeks after Jesus’ love,
That soul the Holy Ghost inspires
With breathings from above.”

But the Holy Spirit will always lead you to Christ. That is the test of the Holy Spirit’s work: you will be led to Christ. Christ will be glorified. Christ will be made precious. So these wise men did not see the star in vain, and they did not leave all in vain. They did not follow the star of Bethlehem in vain and neither will you. If the star of Bethlehem, the star of hope, has begun to shine upon your life and in your heart and upon the Word and upon your pathway, then He will never leave you until He leads

you even where the young Child is. They were brought right to the very place, right to the very Person, this glorious Person, our incarnate God who came into this world of sin and sorrow to save sinners. O what an encouragement there is for you longing, seeking souls, that they that seek shall find! “Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near.” For none ever sought the Lord in vain, and these wise men did not. There was the trial, the disappointment, the trial when they could not see the star, the trial with Herod. But, “Lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.” A sinner brought to the feet of Jesus, and that will be you, as by precious faith you are able to follow the star of Bethlehem with that one desire to be brought where Jesus is.

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young Child.” Of course, in medieval pageantry and paintings, there are all kinds of strange things. But obviously this was not the night of the Saviour’s birth. This was no longer the stable: this was the house, some humble dwelling, some house in Bethlehem. “And when they were come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down, and worshipped Him.” They did not fall down and worship *her*. They fell down and worshipped *Him*. “And when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.” Now with the Lord’s help, I should love to try to speak to you this evening of what real, spiritual worship is, as displayed in the wise men, the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh, the bowing down, the holy admiration. Because so many of these hymns we sing now are about worship. “Come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!” “Come and worship, worship Christ, the new-born King.” The nature of true, spiritual worship. The wise men falling down before the Infant Christ at Bethlehem. And we too would join with them and we too would be real, spiritual worshippers. “They ... fell down, and worshipped Him.”

(If the Lord will, the evening sermon on the same text will be published next month.)