

CHAPTER 2

In this chapter, we have the history of our Saviour's infancy, where we find how early he began to suffer, and that in him the word of righteousness was fulfilled, before he himself began to fulfil all righteousness. Here is,

- I. The wise men's solicitous enquiry after Christ (v. 1-8).
- II. Their devout attendance on him, when they found out where he was (v. 9-12).
- III. Christ's flight into Egypt, to avoid the cruelty of Herod (v. 13-15).
- IV. The barbarous murder of the infants of Bethlehem (v. 16-18).
- V. Christ's return out of Egypt into the land of Israel again (v. 19-23).

⌘ MATTHEW 2:1-8

THE WISE MEN COME TO JERUSALEM

It was a *mark of humiliation* put upon the Lord Jesus that, though he was the *Desire of all nations*, yet his coming into the world was little observed and taken notice of, his birth was obscure and unregarded: herein he emptied himself, and made himself of no reputation. If the Son of God must be brought into the world, one might justly expect that he should be received with all the ceremony possible, that crowns and sceptres should immediately have been laid at his feet, and that the high and mighty princes of the world should have been his humble servants; such a Messiah as this the Jews expected, but we see none of all this; he *came into the world*, and the *world knew him not*; nay, he *came to his own*, and *his own received him not*; for having undertaken to make satisfaction to his Father for the wrong done him *in his honour* by the sin of man, he did it by denying himself in, and despoiling himself of, the honours undoubtedly due to an incarnate Deity; yet, as afterward, so in his birth, some rays of glory darted forth in the midst of the greatest instances of his

abasement. Though *there was the hiding of his power*, yet he had *horns coming out of his hand* (³¹⁷⁴Habakkuk 3:4) enough to condemn the world, and the Jews especially, for their stupidity.

The first who took notice of Christ after his birth were the shepherds (⁴⁰²⁵Luke 2:15, etc.), who saw and heard glorious things concerning him, and *made them known abroad*, to the amazement of all that heard them, v. 17, 18. After that, Simeon and Anna spoke of him, by the Spirit, to all that were disposed to heed what they said, (⁴⁰²⁸Luke 2:38). Now, one would think, these hints should have been taken by the men of Judah and the *inhabitants of Jerusalem*, and they should with both arms have embraced the long-looked-for Messiah; but, for aught that appears, he continued nearly two years after at Bethlehem, and no further notice was taken of him till these wise men came. Note, Nothing will awaken those that are resolved to be regardless. Oh the amazing stupidity of these Jews! And no less that of many who are called Christians! Observe,

I. When this enquiry was made concerning Christ. It was *in the days of Herod the king*. This Herod was an Edomite, made king of Judea by Augustus and Antonius, the then chief rulers of the Roman state, a man made up of falsehood and cruelty; yet he was complimented with the title of *Herod the Great*. Christ was born in the 35th year of his reign, and notice is taken of this, to show that the *sceptre* had now *departed from Judah*, and *the lawgiver from between his feet*; and therefore now was the time for Shiloh to come, and *to him shall the gathering of the people be*: witness these wise men, (⁴¹⁰⁰Genesis 49:10).

II. Who and what these *wise men* were; they are here called *Magoi* — *Magicians*. Some that it in a good sense; the *Magi* among the *Persians* were their philosophers and their priests; nor would they admit any one for their king who had not first been enrolled among the *Magi*; others think they dealt in unlawful arts; the word is used of Simon, the sorcerer (⁴⁴⁸⁹Acts 8:9, 11), and of Elymas, the sorcerer (⁴⁴¹⁶Acts 13:6), nor does the scripture use it in any other sense; and then it was an early instance and presage of Christ's victory over the devil, when those who had been so much his devotees became the early adorers even of the infant Jesus; so soon were trophies of his victory over the powers of darkness erected. Well, whatever sort of wise men they were before, now they began to be *wise men* indeed when they set themselves to enquire after Christ.

This we are sure of,

1. That they were Gentiles, and not belonging to the commonwealth of Israel. The Jews regarded not Christ, but these Gentiles enquired him out. Note, Many times those who are nearest to the means, are furthest from the end. See ^{<401>}Matthew 8:11, 12. The respect paid to Christ by these Gentiles was a happy presage and specimen of what would follow when those who were *afar off* should be *made nigh by Christ*.
2. That they were *scholars*. They dealt in arts, curious arts; good scholars should be good Christians, and *then* they complete their *learning* when they *learn Christ*.
3. That they were *men of the east*, who were noted for their *soothsaying*, ^{<406>}Isaiah 2:6. Arabia is called the land of *the east* (^{<426>}Genesis 25:6), and the *Arabians* are called *men of the east*, ^{<463>}Judges 6:3. The presents they brought were the products of that country; the Arabians had done homage to David and Solomon as types of Christ. Jethro and Job were of that country. More than this we have not to say of them. The traditions of the Romish church are frivolous, that they were in number three (though one of the ancients says that they were fourteen), that they were kings, and that they lie buried in Colen, thence called the *three kings of Colen*; we covet not to be wise above what is written.

III. What induced them to make this enquiry. They, in their country, which was in the *east*, had seen an *extraordinary star*, such as they had not seen before; which they took to be an indication of an extraordinary person born in the land of *Judea*, over which land this star was seen to hover, in the nature of a comet, or a meteor rather, in the lowers regions of the air; this differed so much from any thing that was common that they concluded it to signify something uncommon. Note, Extraordinary appearances of God in the creatures should put us upon enquiring after his mind and will therein; Christ foretold *signs in the heavens*. The birth of Christ was notified to the Jewish shepherds by *an angel*, to the Gentile philosophers by a *star*: to both God spoke in their own language, and in the way they were best acquainted with. Some think that the light which the shepherds saw shining round about them, the night after Christ was born, was the very same which to the wise men, who lived at such a distance, appeared as a star; but this we cannot easily admit, because the same star which they had seen in the *east* they saw a great while after,

leading them to the house where Christ lay; it was a candle set up on purpose to guide them to Christ. The idolaters worshipped the stars as the *host of heaven*, especially the *eastern* nations, whence the planets have the names of their idol-gods; we read of a particular *star* they had in veneration, ^{<305>}Amos 5:26. Thus the stars that had been misused came to be put to the right use, to lead men to Christ; the gods of the heathen became his servants. Some think this star put them in mind of Balaam's prophecy, that a star should come out of Jacob, pointing at a *sceptre*, that shall *rise out of Israel*; see ^{<307>}Numbers 24:17. Balaam came from the *mountains of the east*, and was one of their *wise men*. Others impute their enquiry to the general expectation entertained at that time, in those *eastern* parts, of some great prince to appear. Tacitus, in his history (*lib.* 5), takes notice of it; *Pluribus persuasio inerat, antiquis sacerdotum literis contineri, eo ipso tempore fore, ut valesceret oriens, profectique Judaea rerum potirentur* — *A persuasion existed in the minds of many that some ancient writings of the priests contained a prediction that about that time an eastern power would prevail, and that persons proceeding from Judea would obtain dominion.* Suetonius also, in the life of *Vespasian*, speaks of it; so that this extraordinary phenomenon was construed as pointing to *that king*; and we may suppose a divine impression made upon their minds, enabling them to interpret this star as a signal given by Heaven of the birth of Christ.

IV. How they prosecuted this enquiry. *They came from the east to Jerusalem, in further quest of this prince. Wither shall they come to enquire for the king of the Jews, but to Jerusalem, the mother-city, whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord?* They might have said, “If such a prince be born, we shall hear of him shortly in our own country, and it will be time enough then to pay our homage to him.” But so impatient were they to be better acquainted with him, that they took a long journey on purpose to enquire after him. Note, Those who truly desire to know Christ, and find him, will not regard pains or perils in seeking after him. *Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord.*

Their question is, *Where is he that is born king of the Jews?* They do not ask, *whether there were such a one born?* (they are sure of that, and speak of it with assurance, so strongly was it set home upon their hearts); but, *Where is he born?* Note, Those who know *something* of Christ cannot but covet to *know more* of him. They call Christ the *King of the Jews*, for so

the Messiah was expected to be: and he is Protector and Ruler of all the spiritual Israel, he is *born a King*.

To this question they doubted not but to have a ready answer, and to find all Jerusalem worshipping at the feet of this new king; but they come from door to door with this question, and no man can give them any information. Note, There is more gross ignorance in the world, and in the church too, than we are aware of. Many that we think should direct us to Christ are themselves strangers to him. They ask, as the spouse of the daughters of Jerusalem, *Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?* But they are never the wiser. However, like the spouse, they pursue the enquiry, *Where is he that is born king of the Jews?* Are they asked, “Why do ye make this enquiry?” It is because they have *seen his star in the east*. Are they asked, “What business have ye with him? What have the men of the *east* to do with the *King of the Jews?*” They have their answer ready, *We are come to worship him*. They conclude he will, in process of time, be *their king*, and therefore they will betimes ingratiate themselves with him and with those about him. Note, Those in whose hearts the day-star is risen, to give them any thing of the knowledge of Christ, must make it their business to worship him. Have we seen Christ's star? Let us study to give him honour.

V. How this enquiry was treated at Jerusalem. News of it at last came to court; and *when Herod heard it he was troubled*, v. 3. He could not be a stranger to the prophecies of the *Old Testament*, concerning the Messiah and his kingdom, and the times fixed for his appearing by Daniel's weeks; but, having himself reigned so long and so successfully, he began to hope that those promises would for ever fail, and that his kingdom would be established and perpetuated in spite of them. What a damp therefore must it needs be upon him, to hear talk of this King being born, now, when the time fixed for his appearing had come! Note, Carnal wicked hearts dread nothing so much as the fulfilling of the scriptures.

But though Herod, an Edomite, was troubled, one would have thought Jerusalem should rejoice greatly to hear that her King comes; yet, it seems, *all Jerusalem*, except the few there that *waited for the consolation of Israel*, were troubled with Herod, and were apprehensive of I know not what ill consequences of the birth of this new king, that it would involve them in war, or restrain their lusts; they, for their parts, desired no king but Herod; no, not the Messiah himself. Note, The slavery of sin is foolishly preferred by many to the glorious liberty of the children of God, only

because they apprehend some present difficulties attending that necessary revolution of the government in the soul. Herod and Jerusalem were thus troubled, from a mistaken notion that the kingdom of the Messiah would clash and interfere with the secular powers; whereas the star that proclaimed him king plainly intimated that his kingdom was heavenly, and not of this lower world. Note, The reason why the kings of the earth, and the people, oppose the kingdom of Christ, is because they do not know it, but err concerning it.

VI. What assistance they met with in this enquiry from the scribes and the priests, v. 4-6. Nobody can pretend to tell where the King of the Jews is, but Herod enquires where it was expected *he should be born*. The persons he consults are, the chief priests, who were teachers by office; and the scribes, who made it their business to study the law; their *lips must keep knowledge*, but then the people must *enquire the law at their mouth*, ^{<387E>}Malachi 2:7. It was generally known that Christ should be *born at Bethlehem* (^{<387D>}John 7:42); but Herod would have counsel's opinion upon it, and therefore applies himself to the proper persons; and, that he might be the better satisfied, he has them altogether, *all the chief priests, and all the scribes; and demands of them* what was the place, according to the scriptures of the Old Testament, *where Christ should be born?* Many a good question is put with an ill design, so was this by Herod.

The priests and scribes need not take any long time to give an answer to this query; nor do they differ in their opinion, but all agree that the Messiah must be *born in Bethlehem, the city of David*, here called *Bethlehem of Judea*, to distinguish it from another city of the same name in the land of Zebulun, ^{<3885>}Joshua 19:15. *Bethlehem* signifies the *house of bread*; the fittest place for him to be born in who is the true manna, *the bread which came down from heaven, which was given for the life of the world*. The proof they produce is taken from ^{<388D>}Micah 5:2, where it is foretold that though *Bethlehem be little among the thousands of Judah* (so it is in *Micah*), no very populous place, yet it shall be found *not the least among the princes of Judah* (so it is here); for Bethlehem's honour lay not, as that of other cities, in the multitude of the people, but in the magnificence of the princes it produced. Though, upon some accounts, Bethlehem was little, yet herein it had the pre-eminence above all the cities of Israel, that *the Lord shall count, when he writes up the people, that this man, even the man Christ Jesus, was born there*, ^{<3886>}Psalms 87:6. *Out of thee shall come a Governor, the King of the Jews*. Note, Christ will

be a *Saviour* to those only who are willing to take him for their *Governor*. Bethlehem was the *city of David*, and David the glory of Bethlehem; there, therefore, must David's son and successor be born. There was a famous well at *Bethlehem*, by the gate, which David longed to drink of (¹¹²⁵2 Samuel 23:15); in Christ we have not only bread enough and to spare, but may come and take also *of the water of life freely*. Observe here how Jews and Gentiles compare notes about Jesus Christ. The Gentiles know the time of his birth by a star; the Jews know the place of it by the scriptures; and so they are capable of informing one another. Note, It would contribute much to the increase of knowledge, if we did thus mutually communicate what we know. Men grow rich by bartering and exchanging; so, if we have knowledge to communicate to others, they will be ready to communicate to us; thus many shall discourse, shall *run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased*.

VII. The bloody project and design of Herod, occasioned by this enquiry, v. 7, 8. Herod was now an old man, and had reigned thirty-five years; this king was but newly born, and not likely to enterprise any thing considerable for many years; yet Herod is jealous of him. Crowned heads cannot endure to think of successors, much less of rivals; and therefore nothing less than the blood of this infant king will satisfy him; and he will not give himself liberty to think that, if this new-born child should be indeed the Messiah, in opposing him, or making any attempts upon him, he would *be found fighting against God*, than which nothing is more vain, nothing more dangerous. Passion has got the mastery of reason and conscience.

Now,

1. See how cunningly he laid the project (v. 7, 8). *He privily called the wise men*, to talk with them about this matter. He would not openly own his fears and jealousies; it would be his disgrace to let the wise men know them, and dangerous to let the people know them. Sinners are often tormented with secret fears, which they keep to themselves. Herod learns of the wise men the *time when the star appeared*, that he might take his measures accordingly; and then employs them to enquire further, and bids them bring him an account. All this might look suspicious, if he had not covered it with a show of religion: *that I may come and worship him also*. Note, The greatest wickedness often conceals itself under a mask of piety. Absalom cloaks his rebellious project with a vow.

2. See how strangely he was befooled and infatuated in this, that he trusted it with the wise men, and did not choose some other managers, that would have been true to his interests. It was but seven miles from Jerusalem; how easily might he have sent spies to watch the wise men, who might have been as soon there to destroy the child as they to worship him! Note, God can hide from the eyes of the church's enemies those methods by which they might easily destroy the church; when he intends to *lead princes away spoiled*, his way is to *make the judges fools*.

◀11▶ MATTHEW 2:9-12

THE WISE MEN WORSHIP CHRIST

We have here the wise men's humble attendance upon this new-born *King of the Jews*, and the honours they paid him. From Jerusalem they went to Bethlehem, resolving to *seek till they should find*; but it is very strange that they went alone; that not one person of the court, church, or city, should accompany them, if not in conscience, yet in civility to them, or touched with a curiosity to see this young prince. *As the queen of the south, so the wise men of the east, will rise up in judgment against the men of that generation, and of this too, and will condemn them*; for they *came from a far country*, to worship Christ; while the Jews, his kinsmen, would not stir a step, would not go to the next town to bid him welcome. It might have been a discouragement to these wise men to find him whom they sought thus neglected at home. Are we come so far to honour *the King of the Jews*, and do the Jews themselves put such a slight upon him and us? Yet they persist in their resolution. Note, We must continue our attendance upon Christ, though we be alone in it; whatever others do, we must *serve the Lord*; if they will not go to heaven with us, yet we must not go to hell with them. Now,

I. See how they found out Christ by the same star that they had seen in their own country, v. 9, 10. Observe,

1. How graciously God directed them. By the first appearance of the star they were given to understand where they might enquire for this King, and then it disappeared, and they were left to take the usual methods for such an enquiry. Note, Extraordinary helps are not to be expected where ordinary means are to be had. Well, they had traced the matter as far as

they could; they were upon their journey to Bethlehem, but that is a populous town, where shall they find him when they come thither? Here they were at a loss, at their wit's end, but not at their faith's end; they believed that God, who had brought them thither by his word, would not leave them there; nor did he; for, behold, *the star which they saw in the east went before them*. Note, If we go on as far as we can in the way of duty, God will direct and enable us to do that which of ourselves we cannot do; *Up, and be doing, and the Lord will be with thee. Vigilantibus, non dormientibus, succurrit lex* — *The law affords its aid, not to the idle, but to the active*. The star had left them a great while, yet now returns. They who follow God in the dark shall find that light is sown, is reserved, for them. Israel was led by a pillar of fire to *the promised land*, the wise men by a star to *the promised Seed*, who is himself *the bright and morning Star*, ^{<6226>}Revelation 22:16. God would rather *create a new thing* than leave those at a loss who diligently and faithfully sought him. This star was the token of God's presence with them; for he is light, and goes before his people as their Guide. Note, If we by faith eye God in all our ways, we may see ourselves under his conduct; he *guides with his eye* (^{<5318>}Psalm 32:8), and said to them, *This is the way, walk in it:* and there is a day-star that arises in the hearts of those that enquire after Christ, ^{<6019>}2 Peter 1:19.

2. Observe how joyfully they followed God's direction (v. 10). *When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy*. Now they saw they were not deceived, and had not taken this long journey in vain. *When the desire cometh, it is a tree of life*. Now they were sure that God was with them, and the tokens of his presence and favour cannot but fill with joy unspeakable the souls of those that know how to value them. Now they could laugh at the Jews in Jerusalem, who, probably, had laughed at them as coming on a fool's errand. The watchmen can give the spouse no tidings of her beloved; yet *it is but a little that she passes from them, and she finds him*, ^{<2318>}Song of Solomon 3:3, 4. We cannot expect too little from man, nor too much from God. What a transport of joy these wise men were in upon this sight of the star; none know so well as those who, after a long and melancholy night of temptation and desertion, under the power of a *Spirit of bondage*, at length *receive the spirit of adoption, witnessing with their spirits that they are the children of God*; this is light out of darkness; it is life from the dead. Now they had reason to hope for a sight of *the Lord's Christ* speedily, of the *Sun of righteousness*, for they see *the Morning Star*. Note, We should be glad of every thing that will show us

the way to Christ. This star was sent to meet the wise men, and to conduct them into the presence chamber of the King; by this master of ceremonies they were introduced, to have their audience. Now God fulfills his promise of meeting those that are disposed to *rejoice and work righteousness* (^{264B}Isaiah 64:5), and they fulfill his precept. *Let the hearts of those rejoice that seek the Lord,* ^{265B}Psalm 105:3. Note, God is pleased sometimes to favour young converts with such tokens of his love as are very encouraging to them, in reference to the difficulties they meet with at their setting out of the ways of God.

II. See how they made their address to him when they had found him, v. 11. We may well imagine their expectations were raised to find this royal babe, though slighted by the nation, yet honourably attended at home; and what a disappointment it was to them when they found a cottage was his palace, and his own poor mother all the retinue he had! Is this *the Saviour of the world*? Is this *the King of the Jews*, nay, and *the Prince of the kings of the earth*? Yes, this is he, who, *though he was rich, yet, for our sakes, became thus poor*. However, these wise men were so wise as to see through this veil, and in this despised babe to discern *the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father*; they did not think themselves balked or baffled in their enquiry; but, as having found the King they sought, they presented themselves first, and then their gifts, to him.

1. They presented themselves to him: *they fell down, and worshipped him*. We do not read that they gave such honour to Herod, though he was in the height of his royal grandeur; but to this babe they gave this honour, not only as to a king (then they would have done the same to Herod), but as to a God. Note, All that have found Christ fall down before him; they adore him, and submit themselves to him. *He is thy Lord, and worship thou him*. It will be the wisdom of the wisest of men, and by this it will appear they know Christ, and understand themselves and their true interests, if they be humble, faithful worshippers of the Lord Jesus.

2. *They presented their gifts to him*. In the eastern nations, when they did homage to their kings, they made them presents; thus the subjection of the kings of Sheba to Christ is spoken of (^{372D}Psalm 72:10), *They shall bring presents, and offer gifts*. See ^{266B}Isaiah 60:6. Note, With ourselves, we must give up all that we have to Jesus Christ; and if we be sincere in the surrender of ourselves to him, we shall not be unwilling to part with what is dearest to us, and most valuable, to him and for him; nor are our gifts

accepted, unless we first present ourselves to him living sacrifices. *God had respect to Abel, and then to his offering.* The gifts they presented were, *gold, frankincense, and myrrh*, money, and money's-worth. Providence sent this for a seasonable relief to Joseph and Mary in their present poor condition. These were the products of their own country; what God favours us with, we must honour him with. Some think there was a significancy in their gifts; they offered him *gold*, as a king, paying him tribute, *to Caesar, the things that are Caesar's; frankincense*, as God, for they honoured God with the smoke of incense; and *myrrh*, as a Man that should die, for *myrrh* was used in embalming dead bodies.

III. See how they left him when they had made their address to him, v. 12. Herod appointed them to *bring him word* what discoveries they had made, and, it is probable, they would have done so, if they had not been countermanded, not suspecting their being thus made his tools in a wicked design. Those that mean honestly and well themselves are easily made to believe that others do so too, and cannot think the world is as bad as it really is; but *the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptation.* We do not find that the wise men promised to come back to Herod, and, if they had, it must have been with the usual proviso, *If God permit; God did not permit them, and prevented the mischief Herod designed to the Child Jesus, and the trouble it would have been to the wise men to have been made involuntarily accessory to it. They were warned of God, chrematisthentes* — *oraculo vel responso accepto* — *by an oracular intimation.* Some think it intimates that they asked counsel of God, and that this was the answer. Note, Those that act cautiously, and are afraid of sin and snares, if they apply themselves to God for direction, may expect to be led in the right way. They were *warned not to return to Herod*, nor to Jerusalem; those were unworthy to have reports brought them concerning Christ, that might have seen with their own eyes, and would not. *They departed into their own country another way*, to bring the tidings to their countrymen; but it is strange that we never hear any more of them, and that they or theirs did not afterwards attend *him* in the temple, whom they had worshipped in the cradle. However, the direction they had from God in their return would be a further confirmation of their faith in this Child, *as the Lord from heaven.*

4023 MATTHEW 2:13-15

THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

We have here Christ's flight into Egypt to avoid the cruelty of Herod, and this was the effect of the wise men's enquiry after him; for, before that, the obscurity he lay in was his protection. It was but little respect (compared with what should have been) that was paid to Christ in his infancy: yet even that, instead of honouring him among his people, did but expose him.

Now here observe,

I. The command given to Joseph concerning it, v. 13. Joseph knew neither the danger the child was in, nor how to escape it; but God by *an angel*, tells him both *in a dream*, as before he directed him in like manner what to do, 4010 Matthew 1:20. Joseph, before his alliance to Christ, had not been wont to converse with angels as now. Note, those that are spiritually related to Christ by faith have that communion and correspondence with Heaven which before they were strangers to.

1. Joseph is here told what their danger was: *Herod will seek the young child to destroy him*. Note, God is acquainted with all the cruel projects and purposes of the enemies of his church. *I know thy rage against me*, saith God to Sennacherib, 2373 Isaiah 37:28. How early was the blessed Jesus involved in trouble! Usually, even those whose riper years are attended with toils and perils have a peaceable and quiet infancy; but it was not so with the blessed Jesus: his life and sufferings began together; he was born *a man striven with*, as Jeremiah was (2450 Jeremiah 15:10), who was *sanctified from the womb*, 2005 Jeremiah 1:5. Both Christ the head, and the church his body, agree in saying, *Many a time have they afflicted me, from my youth up*. Pharaoh's cruelty fastens upon the Hebrews' children, and a great red dragon stands ready to *devour the man-child as soon as it should be born*, 6120 Revelation 12:4.

2. He is directed what to do, to escape the danger; *Take the young child, and flee into Egypt*. Thus early must Christ give an example to his own rule (4023 Matthew 10:23): *When they persecute you in one city, flee to another*. He that came to die for us, when *his hour was not yet come*, fled for his own safety. Self-preservation, being a branch of the law of nature, is eminently a part of the law of God. *Flee*; but why *into Egypt*? Egypt

was infamous for idolatry, tyranny, and enmity to the people of God; it had been a house of bondage to Israel, and particularly cruel to the infants of Israel; in Egypt, as much as in Ramah, *Rachel had been weeping for her children*; yet that is appointed to be a place of refuge to the hold child Jesus. Note, God, when he pleases, can make the worst of places serve the best of purposes; for *the earth is the Lord's*, he makes what use he pleases of it: sometimes the earth *helps the woman* ⁴²¹⁶ Revelation 12:16. God, who made Moab a shelter to his outcasts, makes Egypt a refuge for his Son. This may be considered,

(1.) As a trial of faith of Joseph and Mary. They might be tempted to think, “If this child be the Son of God, as we are told he is, has he no other way to secure himself from a man that is a worm, than by such a mean and inglorious retreat as this? Cannot he summon legions of angels to be his life-guard, or cherubim with flaming swords to keep this *tree of life*? Cannot he strike Herod dead, or wither the hand that is stretched out against him, and so save us the trouble of this remove?” They had been lately told that he should be *the glory of his people Israel*; and is the land of Israel so soon become too hot for him? But we find not that they made any such objections; their faith, being tried, was found firm, they believe *this is the Son of God*, though they see no miracle wrought for his preservation; but they are put to the use of ordinary means. Joseph had great honour put upon him in being the husband of the blessed virgin; but that honour has trouble attending it, as all honours have in this world; Joseph must *take the young child*, and carry him *into Egypt*; and now it appeared how well God had provided for *the young child and his mother*, in appointing Joseph to stand in so near a relation to them; now the gold which the wise men brought would stand them in stead to bear their charges. God foresees his people's distresses, and provides against them beforehand. God intimates the continuance of his care and guidance, when he saith, *Be thou there until I bring thee word*, so that he must expect to hear from God again, and not stir without fresh orders. Thus God will keep his people still in a dependence upon him.

(2.) As an instance of the humiliation of our Lord Jesus. As there was no room for him in the inn in Bethlehem, so there was no quiet room for him in the land of Judea. Thus was he banished from the earthly Canaan, that we, who for sin were banished from the heavenly Canaan, might not be forever expelled. If we and our infants be at any time in straits, let us

remember the straits Christ in his infancy was brought into, and be reconciled to them.

(3.) As a token of God's displeasure against the Jews, who took so little notice of him; justly does he leave those who have slighted him. We have also here an earnest of his favour to the Gentiles, to whom the apostles were to bring the gospel when the Jews rejected it. If Egypt entertain Christ when he is forced out of Judea, it will not be long ere it be said, *Blessed be Egypt my people,* ^{<315>}Isaiah 19:25.

II. Joseph's obedience to this command, v. 14. The journey would be inconvenient and perilous both to the young child and to his mother; they were but poorly provided for it, and were likely to meet with cold entertainment in Egypt: yet Joseph *was not disobedient to the heavenly vision*, made no objection, nor was dilatory in his disobedience. As soon as he had received his orders, he immediately *arose*, and went away *by night*, the same night, as it should seem, that he received the orders. Note, Those that would make *sure* work of their obedience must make *quick* work of it. Now Joseph went out, as his father Abraham did, with an implicit dependence upon God, *not knowing whither he went*, ^{<318>}Hebrews 11:8. Joseph and his wife, having little, had little to care of in this remove. An abundance encumbers a necessary flight. If rich people have the advantage of the poor while they possess what they have, the poor have the advantage of the rich when they are called to part with it.

Joseph took the young child and his mother. Some observe, that *the young child* is put first, as the principal person, and Mary is called, not *the wife of Joseph*, but, which was her great dignity, *the mother of the young child*. This was not the first Joseph that was driven from Canaan to Egypt for a shelter from the anger of his brethren; this Joseph ought to be welcome there for the sake of that.

If we may credit tradition, at their entrance into Egypt, happening to go into a temple, all the images of their gods were overthrown by an invisible power, and fell, like Dagon before the ark, according to that prophecy, *The Lord shall come into Egypt, and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at his presence*, ^{<311>}Isaiah 19:1. They continued in Egypt till the death of Herod, which, some think, was seven years, others think, not so many months. There they were at a distance from the temple and the service of it, and in the midst of idolaters; but God sent them thither, and will *have mercy, and*

not sacrifice. Though they were far from the temple of the Lord, they had with them the Lord of the temple. A forced absence from God's ordinances, and a forced presence with wicked people, may be the lot, are not the sin, yet cannot but be the grief, of good people.

III. The fulfilling of the scripture in a this — that scripture (³¹⁰Hosea 11:1), *Out of Egypt have I called my son*. Of all the evangelists, Matthew takes most notice of the fulfilling of the scripture in what concerned Christ, because his gospel was first published among the Jews, with whom that would add much strength and lustre to it. Now this word of the prophet undoubtedly referred to the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt, in which God owned them for his son, his first-born (³¹²Exodus 4:22); but it is here applied, by way of analogy, to Christ, the Head of the church. Note, The scripture has many accomplishments, so full and copious is it, and so well ordered in all things. God is every day fulfilling the scripture. Scripture is not of private interpretation: we must give it its full latitude. “*When Israel was a child, then I loved him; and, though I loved him, I suffered him to be a great while in Egypt; but, because I loved him, in due time I called him out of Egypt.*” They that read this must, in their thoughts, not only look back, but look forward; *that which has been shall be again* (³¹⁹Ecclesiastes 1:9); and the manner of expression intimates this; for it is not said, I called *him*, but I called *my son*, out of Egypt. Note, It is no new thing for God's sons to be in Egypt, in a strange land, in a house of bondage; but they shall be fetched out. They may be hid in Egypt, but they shall not be left there. All the elect of God, being by nature children of wrath, are born in a spiritual Egypt, and in conversion are effectually called out. It might be objected against Christ that he had been in Egypt. Must *the Sun of righteousness* arise out of that land of darkness! But this shows that to be no strange thing; Israel was brought out of Egypt, to be advanced to the highest honours; and this is but doing the same thing.

⁴⁰²⁶MATTHEW 2:16-18

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE CHILDREN

Here is,

I. Herod's resentment of the departure of the wise men. He waited long for their return; he hopes, though they be slow, they will be sure, and he shall crush this rival at his first appearing; but he hears, upon enquiry, that they are gone off another way, which increases his jealousy, and makes him suspect they are in the interest of this new King, which made him *exceedingly wroth*; and he is the more desperate and outrageous for his being disappointed. Note, Inveterate corruption swells the higher for the obstructions it meets with in a sinful pursuit.

II. His political contrivance, notwithstanding this, to take off him that is *born King of the Jews*. If he could not reach him by a particular execution, he doubted not but to involve him in a general stroke, which, like the sword of war, should *devour one as well as another*. This would be sure work; and thus those that would destroy *their own* iniquity must be sure to destroy *all* their iniquities. Herod was an Edomite, enmity to Israel was bred in the bone with him. Doeg was an Edomite, who, for David's sake, *slew all the priests of the Lord*. It was strange that Herod could find any so inhuman as to be employed in such a bloody and barbarous piece of work; but wicked hands never want wicked tools to work with. Little children have always been taken under the special protection, not only of human laws, but of human nature; yet these are sacrificed to the rage of this tyrant, under whom, as under Nero, innocence is the least security. Herod was, throughout his reign, a bloody man; it was not long before, that he destroyed the whole Sanhedrim, or bench of judges; but blood to the blood-thirsty is like drink to those in a dropsy; *Quo plus sunt potae, plus sitiuntur aquae* — *The more they drink, the more thirsty they become*. Herod was now about seventy years old, so that an infant, at this time *under two years old*, was not likely ever to give him any disturbance. Nor was he a man over fond of his own children, or of their preferment, having formerly slain two of his own sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, and his son Antipater after this, but five days before he himself died; so that it was purely to gratify his own brutish lusts of pride and cruelty that he did this. All is fish that comes to his net.

Observe, What large measures he took,

1. As to time; He *slew all from two years old and under*. It is probable that the blessed Jesus was at this time not a year old; yet Herod took in all the infants *under two years old*, that he might be sure not to miss of his prey.

He cares not how many heads fall, which he allows to be innocent, provided that escape not which he supposes to be guilty.

2. As to place; He kills all the male children, not only *in Bethlehem*, but *in all the coasts thereof*, in all the villages of that city. This was being *overmuch wicked*, ^{<107>}Ecclesiastes 7:17. Hate, an unbridled wrath, armed with an unlawful power, often transports men to the most absurd and unreasonable instances of cruelty. It was no unrighteous thing for God to permit this; every life is forfeited to his justice as soon as it commences; that sin which entered by one man's disobedience, introduced death with it; and we are not to suppose any thing more than that common guilt, we are not to suppose that these children *were sinners above all that were in Israel*, because they suffered such things. *God's judgments are a great deep*. The diseases and deaths of little children are proofs of original sin. But we must look upon this murder of the infants under another character: it was their martyrdom. How early did persecution commence against Christ and his kingdom! *Think ye that he came to send peace on the earth?* No, *but a sword*, such a sword as this, ^{<108>}Matthew 10:34, 35. A passive testimony was hereby given to the Lord Jesus. As when he was in the womb, he was witnessed to by a child's leaping in the womb for joy at his approach, so now, at *two years old*, he had contemporary witnesses to him of the same age. They shed their blood for him, who afterwards shed his for them. These were the infantry of *the noble army of martyrs*. If these infants were thus baptized with blood, though it were their own, into the church triumphant, it could not be said but that, with what they got in heaven, they were abundantly recompensed for what they lost on earth. *Out of the mouths of these babes and sucklings God did perfect his praise;* otherwise, *it is not good to the Almighty that he should thus afflict*.

The tradition of the Greek church (and we have it in the Aethiopic missal) is, that the number of the children slain was 14,000; but that is very absurd. I believe, if the births of the male children in the weekly bills were computed, there would not be found so many *under two years old*, in one of the most populous cities in the world, that was not near a fortieth part of it. But it is an instance of the vanity of tradition. It is strange that Josephus does not relate this story; but he wrote long after St. Matthew, and it is probable that he *therefore* would not relate it, because he would not so far countenance the Christian history; for he was a zealous Jew; but, to be sure, if it had not been true and well attested, he would have contested it. Macrobius, a heathen writer, tells us, that when Augustus Caesar heard

that Herod, among the children he order to be slain *under two years old*, slew his own son, he passed this jest upon him, That it was better to be Herod's swine than his son. The usage of the country forbade him to kill a swine, but nothing could restrain him from killing his son. Some think that he had a young child at nurse in Bethlehem; others think that, through mistake, two events are confounded — the murder of the infants, and the murder of his son Antipater. But for the church of Rome to put the Holy Innocents, as they call them, into their calendar, and observe a day in memory of them, while they have so often, by their barbarous massacres, justified, and even out-one Herod, is but to do as their predecessors did, who built the tombs of the prophets, while they themselves filled up the same measure.

Some observe another design of Providence in the murder of the infants. By all the prophecies of the Old Testament it appears that Bethlehem was the place, and this the time, of the Messiah's nativity; now all the children of Bethlehem, born at this time, being murdered, and Jesus only escaping, none but Jesus could pretend to be the Messiah. Herod now thought he had baffled all the Old Testament prophecies, had defeated the indications of the star, and the devotions of the wise men, by ridding the country of this new King; having burnt the hive, he concludes he had killed the master bee; but God in heaven *laughs* at him, *and has him in derision*. Whatever crafty cruel devices are in men's hearts, *the counsel of the Lord shall stand*.

III. The fulfilling of scripture in this (v. 17, 18); *Then was fulfilled* that prophecy (²³¹⁵Jeremiah 31:15), *A voice was heard in Ramah*. See and adore the fulness of the scripture! That prediction was accomplished in Jeremiah's time, when Nebuzaradan, after he had destroyed Jerusalem, brought all his prisoners to Ramah (²⁴⁰¹Jeremiah 40:1), and there disposed of them as he pleased, for the sword, or for captivity. Then was the cry *in Ramah heard* to Bethlehem (for those two cities, the one in Judah's lot, and the other in Benjamin's, were not far asunder); but now the prophecy is again fulfilled in the great sorrow that was for the death of these infants. The scripture was fulfilled,

1. In the place of this mourning. The noise of it was heard from Bethlehem to Ramah; for Herod's cruelty extended itself to *all the coasts of Bethlehem*, even into the lot of Benjamin, among the children of Rachel. Some think the country about Bethlehem was called *Rachel*, because there

she died, and was buried. Rachel's sepulchre was hard by Bethlehem, ^{<1516}Genesis 35:16, 19. Compare ^{<1910>}1 Samuel 10:2. Rachel had her heart much set upon children: the son she died in travail of she called *Benoni* — *the son of her sorrow*. These mothers were like Rachel, lived near Rachel's grave, and many of them descended from Rachel; and therefore their lamentations are elegantly represented by *Rachel's weeping*.

2. In the degree of this mourning. It was *lamentation and mourning, and great mourning*; all little enough to express the sense they had of this aggravated calamity. There was a great cry in Egypt when the first-born were slain, and so there was here when the youngest was slain; for whom we naturally have a particular tenderness. Here was a representation of this world we live in. We hear in it *lamentation, and weeping, and mourning*, and see *the tears of the oppressed*, some upon one account, and some upon another. Our ways lie through a *vale of tears*. This sorrow was so great, that they *would not be comforted*. They hardened themselves in it, and took a pleasure in their grief. Blessed be God, there is no occasion of grief in this world, no, not that which is supplied by sin itself, that will justify us in refusing to *be comforted!* They *would not be comforted, because they are not*, that is, *they are not* in the land of the living, *are not* as they were, in their mothers' embraces. If, indeed, *they were not*, there might be some excuse for sorrowing as though we had no hope; but we know they are not lost, but gone before; if we forget that *they are*, we lose the best ground of our comfort, ^{<1513>}1 Thessalonians 4:13. Some make this grief of the Bethlehemites to be a judgment upon them for their contempt of Christ. They that would not rejoice for the birth of the Son of God, are justly made to weep for the death of their own sons; for they only *wondered* at the tidings the shepherds brought them, but did not *welcome* them.

The quoting of this prophecy might serve to obviate an objection which some would make against Christ, upon this sad providence. "Can the Messiah, who is to be the Consolation of Israel, be introduced with all this lamentation?" Yes, for so it was foretold, and the scripture must be accomplished. And besides, if we look further into this prophecy, we shall find that *the bitter weeping* in Ramah was but a prologue to the greatest joy, for it follows, *Thy work shall be rewarded, and there is hope in thy end*. The worse things are, the sooner they will mend. Unto them a child was born, sufficient to repair their losses.

~~4129~~ MATTHEW 2:19-23

CHRIST'S RETURN FROM EGYPT

We have here Christ's return out of Egypt into the *land of Israel* again. Egypt may serve to sojourn in, or take shelter in, for a while, but not to abide in. Christ was *sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*, and therefore to them he must return. Observe,

I. What it was that made way for his return — the death of Herod, which happened not long after the murder of the infants; some think not above three months. Such quick work did divine vengeance make! Note, Herods must die; proud tyrants, that were the terror of the mighty, and the oppressors of the godly, *in the land of the living*, their day must come to fall, and down to the pit they must go. *Who art thou then, that thou shouldst be afraid of a man that shall die?* (~~2512~~ Isaiah 51:12, 13) especially considering that at death, not only their envy and hatred are perished (~~2196~~ Ecclesiastes 9:6), and they cease from troubling (~~3817~~ Job 3:17), but they are punished. Of all sins, the guilt of innocent blood fills the measure soonest. It is a dreadful account which Josephus gives of the death of this same Herod (*Antiq.* 17.146-199), that he was seized with a disease which burned him inwardly with an inexpressible torture; that he was insatiably greedy of meat; had the colic, and gout, and dropsy; such an intolerable stench attended his disease, that none could come near him: and so passionate and impatient was he, that he was a torment to himself, and a terror to all that attended him: his innate cruelty, being thus exasperated, made him more barbarous than ever; having ordered his own son to be put to death, he imprisoned many of the nobility and gentry, and ordered that as soon as he was dead they should be killed; but that execution was prevented. See what kind of men have been the enemies and persecutors of Christ and his followers! Few have opposed Christianity but such as have first divested themselves of humanity, as Nero and Domitian.

II. The orders given from heaven concerning their return, and Joseph's obedience to those orders, v. 19-21. God had sent Joseph into Egypt, and there he staid till the same that brought him thither ordered him thence. Note, In all our removes, it is good to see our way plain, and God going before us; we should not move either one way or the other without order.

These orders were sent him by an angel. Note, Our intercourse with God, if it be kept up on our part, shall be kept up on his, wherever we are. No place can exclude God's gracious visits. Angels come to Joseph in Egypt, to Ezekiel in Babylon, and to John in Patmos. Now,

1. The angel informs him of the death of Herod and his accomplices: *They are dead, which sought the young Child's life.* They are dead, but the young Child lives. Persecuted saints sometimes live to tread upon the graves of their persecutors. Thus did the church's King weather the storm, and many a one has the church in like manner weathered. *They are dead,* to wit, Herod and his son Antipater, who, though there were mutual jealousies between them, yet, probably, concurred in seeking the destruction of this new King. If Herod first kill Antipater, and then die himself, the coasts are cleared, and *the Lord is known by the judgments which he executes,* when one wicked instrument is in the ruin of another.

2. He directs him what to do. He must *go* and return *to the land of Israel;* and he did so without delay; not pleading the tolerably good settlement he had in Egypt, or the inconveniences of the journey, especially if, as is supposed, it was in the beginning of winter that Herod died. God's people follow his direction whithersoever he leads them, wherever he lodges them. Did we but look upon the world as our Egypt, the place of our bondage and banishment, and heaven only as our Canaan, our home, our rest, we should as readily *arise,* and depart thither, when we are called for, as Joseph did out of Egypt.

III. The further direction he had from God, which way to steer, and where to fix in the land of Israel, v. 22, 23. God could have given him these instructions with the former, but God reveals his mind to his people by degrees, to keep them still waiting on him, and expecting to hear further from him. These orders Joseph received *in a dream,* probably, as those before, by the ministration of an angel. God could have signified his will to Joseph by the Child Jesus, but we do not find that in those removes he either takes notice, or gives notice, of any thing that occurred; surely it was because *in all things it behoved him to be made like his brethren;* being a *Child,* he *spake as a child,* and did *as a child,* and drew a veil over his infinite knowledge and power; as a child he *increased in wisdom.*

Now the direction given this holy, royal family, is,

1. That it might not settle in Judea, v. 22. Joseph might think that Jesus, being *born in Bethlehem*, must be brought up there; yet he is prudently *afraid for the young Child*, because *he hears that Archelaus reigns in Herod's stead*, not over all the kingdom as his father did, but only over Judea, the other provinces being put into other hands. See what a succession of enemies there is to fight against Christ and his church! If one drop off, another presently appears, to keep up the old enmity. But for this reason Joseph must not take the young Child into Judea. Note, God will not thrust his children into the mouth of danger, but when it is for his own glory and their trial; for *precious in the sight of the Lord are the life and the death of his saints; precious is their blood to him*.

2. That it must settle in Galilee, v. 22. There Philip now ruled, who was a mild, quiet, man. Note, The providence of God commonly so orders it, that his people shall not want a quiet retreat from the storm and from the tempest; when one climate becomes hot and scorching, another shall be kept more cool and temperate. Galilee lay far north; Samaria lay between it and Judea; thither they were sent, to Nazareth, a city upon a hill, in the centre of the lot of Zebulun; there the mother of our Lord lived, when she conceived that *holy thing*; and, probably, Joseph lived there too, ^{<41B>}Luke 1:26, 27. Thither they were sent, and there they were well known, and were among their relations; the most proper place for them to be in. There they continued, and from thence our Saviour was called *Jesus of Nazareth*, which was to *the Jews a stumbling-block*, for, *Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?*

In this is said to be fulfilled what was *spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene*. Which may be looked upon,

(1.) As a man of honour and dignity, though primarily it signifies no more than *a man of Nazareth*; there is an allusion or mystery in speaking it, speaking Christ to be,

[1.] The *Man, the Branch*, spoken of, ^{<230>}Isaiah 11:1. The word there is *Netzar*, which signifies either a *branch*, or *the city of Nazareth*; in being denominated from that *city*, he is declared to be that Branch.

[2.] It speaks him to be the *great Nazarite*; of whom the legal Nazarites were a type and figure (especially Samson, ^{<07B>}Judges 13:5), and Joseph, who is called a *Nazarite among his brethren* (^{<04B>}Genesis 49:26), and to whom that which was prescribed concerning the Nazarites, has reference,

~~406~~ Numbers 6:2, etc. Not that Christ was, *strictly, a Nazarite*, for he drank wine, and touched dead bodies; but he was *eminently* so, both as he was singularly holy, and as he was by a solemn designation and dedication set apart to the honour of God in the work of our redemption, as Samson was to save Israel. And it is a name we have all reason to rejoice in, and to know him by. Or,

(2.) As a name of reproach and contempt. To be called a *Nazarene*, was to be called a *despicable man*, a man from whom no good was to be expected, and to whom no respect was to be paid. The devil first fastened this name upon Christ, to render him mean, and prejudice people against him, and it stuck as a nickname to him and his followers. Now this was not particularly foretold by any one prophet, but, in general, it was *spoken by the prophets*, that he should be *despised and rejected of men* (~~251~~ Isaiah 53:2, 3), a *Worm, and no man* (~~526~~ Psalm 22:6, 7), that he should be an *Alien to his brethren* (~~560~~ Psalm 69:7, 8). Let no name of reproach for religion's sake seem hard to us, when our Master was himself called a *Nazarene*.