

# A VISIT TO BETHLEHEM

*“Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord has made known unto us.”*

*Luke 2:15*

NOT to Bethlehem as it now is, I would lead your meditation this evening.

Were you to visit the site of that ancient city of Judah as it is at present, you would find little enough to edify your hearts. About six miles south of Jerusalem, on the slope of a hill, lies a small, irregular village, never at any time considerable either in its extent or because of the wealth of its inhabitants. The only building worthy of notice is a convent. Should your fancy paint, as you approach it, a courtyard, a stable, or a manger, you would be sorely disappointed on your arrival! Tawdry decorations are all that would greet your eyes—rather adapted to obliterate than to preserve the sacred interest with which a Christian would regard the place. You might walk upon the marble floor of a chapel and gaze on walls bedecked with pictures and studded with the fantastic dolls and other nicknacks which are usually found in Roman Catholic places of worship. Within a small grotto you might observe the exact spot that superstition has assigned to the nativity of our Lord. There a star, composed of silver and precious stones, surrounded by golden lamps, might remind you, but merely as a parody, of the simple story of the Evangelists. Truly, Bethlehem was always little, if not the least, among the thousands of Judah—and only famous for its historic associations.

So, Beloved, “let us now go to Bethlehem” as it was—let us, if possible, bring the wondrous story of that “Childborn,” that “Son given,” down to our own times. Imagine the event to be occurring just now. I will try to paint the picture for you with vivid colors, that you may apprehend afresh the great Truth of God and be impressed, as you ought to be, with the facts concerning the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I propose now to make A VISIT TO BETHLEHEM and I need five companions to render the visit instructive. So I would have, first, an aged Jew And, last of all,

an advanced Christian. Their remarks can scarcely fail to please and profit us. Afterwards I should like to take a whole family to the manger, let them all look at the Divine Infant and hear what each one has to say about Him.

## 1. To begin, then, I WOULD GO TO BETHLEHEM WITH AN AGED JEW.

Come on, my venerable, long-bearded Brother—you are an Israelite, indeed, for your name is Simeon. Do you see the Baby “wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger”? Yes, he does and, overpowered by the sight, he clasps the Child in his arms and exclaims, “Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word: for my eyes have seen Your salvation.” “Here,” says this faithful son of Abraham, “is the fulfillment of a thousand prophecies and promises! The hope, the expectation and the joy of my noble ancestry! Here is the Antitype of all those mystic symbols and typical offerings enjoined in the Laws of Moses. You, O Son of the Highest, are Abraham’s promised Seed, the Shiloh whose coming Jacob foretold, great David’s greater Son and Israel’s rightful King! Our Prophets did herald your coming in each prophetic page. Our bards vied with one another who should chant Your praise in sweetest stanzas! And now, O happy hour—these poor dim eyes do greet Your beauteous form! It is enough—and more than enough—O God! I ask not that I may live any longer on earth!” So speaks the aged Jew and, as he speaks, I mark the rapturous smile that lights up every feature of his face and listen to the deep, mellow tones of his tremulous voice. As he gazes on the tender Baby, I hear him quote Isaiah’s words, “He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant” and then, as he glances aside at the virgin mother, descendant of the royal house of David, he quickly looks back to the sinless Baby and says, “A root

out of a dry ground.” Farewell, venerable Jew, your talk sounds sweet in my ears—may the day soon dawn when all your brethren shall return to their fatherland and there confess our Jesus as their Messiah and their King!

## II. My next companion shall be AN ANCIENT GENTILE.

He is an intelligent man. Do not ask me any questions concerning his creed. Deeply versed in the works of God in Nature, he has glimmering, flickering Light of God enough to detect the moral darkness by which he is surrounded, albeit the Truth of the Gospel has not yet found an entrance into his heart. Call him a skeptic, from the heathen point of view, if you please, but his is not a willful perversion of the heart, it is rather that transition state of the mind wherein false hopes are rejected, but the true hope has not yet been espoused. This Gentile is staying at Jerusalem and we walk and talk together as we bend our steps toward Bethlehem. He has told me what pleasure he feels in reading the Jewish Scriptures and how he has often longed for the dawn of that day which their seers predict. Now we enter the house—a star shines brightly in the sky and hovers over the stable—we look at the Child and my comrade exclaims in ecstasy, “a Light to lighten the Gentiles!” “Fair Child of promise,” he says, “Your birth shall be a joy to all people! Prince of Peace, Yours shall be a peaceful reign! Kings shall bring presents to You; all nations shall serve You. The poor shall rejoice in Your advent, for justice shall be done to them by You. And oppressors shall tremble at Your coming, for judgment upon them shall be pronounced by Your lips.”

Then sweetly did he speak of the hopes which had bloomed in that birth-chamber. He looked as if, in that same hour, he saw the application of many an ancient promise with the letter of which he was already acquainted, to the wonderful Child he there saw. It was refreshing to hear that entire quote from the evangelical Prophet, words like these, “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.”

As I bid adieu to this friend, you must allow me to offer you one or two of my own reflections. When God, in His anger, hid His face from the house of Jacob, He lifted up the Light of His Countenance on the Gentiles. When the fruitful land became a desert, the wilderness, at the same time, began to blossom as the garden of the Lord. Moses had anticipated both of these events and the Inspired Prophets had foreseen one as much as the other. The heart of the Jewish people made gross, the heaviness of their eyes and the dullness of their ears are not more striking as an exact fulfillment of Divine Judgment, than the extreme susceptibility of the Gentile mind to receive the evidence of our Lord’s Messiahship and to embrace His Gospel! Thus had Jehovah said, fifteen hundred years before, “I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people. I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.” Marvel not, then, but admire the crisis in history when Paul and Barnabas were commissioned to say to the Jews who rejected the Gospel, “Lo, we turn to the Gentiles.”

I have consulted the map and looked with intense emotion at the route which Paul and Barnabas took on their first missionary journey. Antioch, the city from which they went forth, is situated directly North of Jerusalem—and there, in not very unequal proportions, they could find both Jews and Gentiles. “To the Jew first,” was according to the Divine Injunction and, on their own nation rejecting the Grace of God, lo, they turned to the Gentiles with a result immediately following that greatly cheered them, for the Gentiles heard with gladness and glorified the Word of the Lord! As you follow the various journeys of the Apostle Paul, you will see that his course was ever Northward, or, rather, in a NorthWesterly direction—and so the tidings of the Gospel traveled on until the Church of the Redeemed found a central point in our highly-favored island!

I think I hear some of you say, “We are not antiquarian enough to appreciate the society of your two venerable companions.” Well then, Beloved, the three that follow shall be drawn from among yourselves—and it may be that you will discover your own thoughts expressed in the sketches I am about to add.

## III. Next in order is THE AWAKENED SINNER.

Come here, my Sister, I am glad to see you and I shall have much pleasure in your company to Bethlehem. Why do you start back? Do not be afraid! There is nothing to terrify you here. Come in! Come in! With trembling apprehension my Sister advances to the rough crib where the young Child lies. She looks as if she feared to rejoice and is beyond measure astonished at herself that she does not faint. She says to me, "And is this, Sir, really and truly the great Mystery of godliness? Do I, in that manger, behold 'God manifest in the flesh'? I expected to see something very different." Looking into her face, I clearly perceived that she could scarcely believe for joy. A humble, but not uninteresting visitor to the birthplace of my Lord is this trembling penitent. I wish I could have many like her out of this congregation tonight. You would see how Mystery is dissolved in mercy! No flaming sword turning every way obstructs your entrance. No ticket of admission is demanded by a surly menial at the door. No favor is shown to rank or title—you may go freely in to see the noblest Child of woman born in the humblest cot wherein infants ever nestled! Nor does a visible tiara of light encircle His brow. Too humble, I assure you, for the fancy of the poet to describe, or the pencil of the artist to sketch—like a poor man's child, he is wrapped in swaddling clothes and cradled in a manger. It needs faith to believe what the eyes of sense never could discern as you look upon "the Prince of Life" in such humble guise!

#### IV. My fourth companion is A YOUNG BELIEVER.

Well, my Brother, you and I have often had sweet communion together concerning the things of the Kingdom. "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord has made known unto us." I mark the sacred cheerfulness of my young friend's countenance as he approaches the Incarnate Mystery! Often have I heard him discussing curious doctrinal subtleties, but now, with calmness of spirit, he looks on the face of the Divine Child and says, "Truth is sprung out of the earth, for a woman has brought forth her Son and righteousness has looked down from Heaven, for God has, of a truth, revealed Himself in that Baby." He looks so wistfully at the young Child, as if a fresh spring of holy gratitude had been opened in his heart. "No vision, no imagination, no myth here," he says, "but a real partaker of our flesh and blood! He has not taken on Him the nature of angels, but the seed of Abraham. Heaven and earth have united to make us blessed. Might and weakness have joined hands here!"

He pauses to worship, then speaks again, "In what a small, weak, slender Tabernacle do You, O glorious God, now deign to dwell! Surely, mercy and truth have here met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other! O Jesus, Savior, You are Mercy itself—the tender mercy of our God is embodied in You. You are the Truth—the very Truth which the Prophets longed to see and into which the angels desire to look—the Truth my soul so long sought for, but never found till I beheld Your face. Once I thought that the Truth was hidden in some profound treatise, or in some learned book, but now I know that it is revealed in You, O Jesus, my Kinsman, yet Your Father's equal! And, sweet Baby, You are also Righteousness—the only righteousness that God can accept. What condescension, yet what patience! Ah, dear Child, how still You lie! I wonder that, conscious of your Divine Power, you can thus endure the weary, lingering hours of Infancy with humility so strange, so rare! I think if You had stood by me and watched over me in my infant weakness, that would have been a service that I could well admire, but 'tis past imagination's utmost stretch to realize what it must be for You to be thus feeble, thus helpless, thus needing to be fed and waited upon by an earthly mother! For The Wonderful, The Mighty God to stoop thus, is humility profound!"

So spoke the young Believer and I liked his speech very much, for I saw in him how faith could work by love and how the end of controversy and argument is reached at Bethlehem, for "without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh."

1. Now I will go to Bethlehem with AN ADVANCED CHRISTIAN, such an one as Paul the Aged, or John the Divine—no, rather with such an one as I might find among the circle of my own Church members!

Calm, peaceful, kind and gracious, he seems as if his training in the school of Christ and the sacred anointing of the Holy Spirit have made him like a child, himself—his character is ripening and his fitness for the Kingdom of Heaven is becoming more apparent. Tears glistened in the old

man's eyes as he looked with expressive fondness on that "Infant of Eternal Days." He spoke not much and what he said was not exactly like what any of my other companions had spoken. It was his manner to quote short sentences, with great exactness, from the Word of God. He uttered them slowly, pondered them deeply and there was much spiritual unction in the accent with which he spoke. I will just mention a few of the profitable sentences that he uttered. First he said, "No man has ascended up to Heaven, but He that came down from Heaven, even the Son of Man which is in Heaven." He really appeared to see more in that passage than I had ever seen there. Jesus, the Son of Man, in Heaven even while He was on earth! Then he looked at the Child and said, "The same was in the beginning with God." After that, he uttered these three short sentences in succession, "In the beginning was the Word—"all things were made by Him"—"and the Word was made flesh." He looked as if he realized what a great mystery it was that our Lord Jesus first made all things and afterwards was Himself "made flesh." Then he reverently bent his knee, clasped his hands and exclaimed, "My Father's gift—'Behold, what manner of love!'"

As we retire from that manger and stable, that aged Christian puts his hand on my shoulder and says, "Young man, I have often been to Bethlehem. It was a much-loved haunt of mine before you were born. And there is one sweet lesson I have learned there which I should like to pass on to you. The Infinite became finite. The Almighty consented to become weak. He that upheld all things by the word of His power, willingly became helpless. He that spoke all worlds into existence, resigned for a while even the power of speech! In all these things, He fulfilled the will of His Father, so be not you afraid, nor surprised with any amazement if you should be dealt with in like manner, for His Father is also your Father. You who have reveled in the ancient settlements of the Everlasting Covenant, may yet have to hang feebly on the mercies of the hour. You have leaned on your Savior's breast at His Table, but you may presently be so weak that you must rely on the nursing of a woman. Your tongue has been touched as with a coal from the heavenly altar, but your lips may yet be sealed as are those of an infant. If you should sink still deeper in humiliation, you will never reach the depth to which Jesus descended in this one act of His condescension." "True, true," I replied, "my young Brother hinted at the wondrous condescension of the Son of God. You have explained it to me more fully."

Thus, Beloved, I have endeavored to carry out my purpose of going to Bethlehem with five separate companions—all representative persons. Alas that some of you are not represented by any one of these characters! "Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by?" Care you not for this blessed Nativity which marked of old, "the fullness of time"? If you die without a knowledge of this Mystery, your lives will indeed be a fearful blank and your eternal portion will be truly terrible!

VI. Give me your earnest attention a little longer while I try to change the line of meditation. It may please God that while I attempt to CONDUCT A WHOLE FAMILY TO BETHLEHEM, some hearts which have thus far resisted all my appeals may yet yield to the Lord Jesus Christ!

A familiar picture will serve my purpose. Imagine this to be Christmas Eve and that a Christian father has all his household gathered with him around the fire. Desirous of blending instruction with pleasure, he proposes that "the birth of Christ" shall be the subject of their conversation—that every one of the children shall say something about it and he will preach them a short sermon on each of their remarks. He calls Mary, their servant, into the room. And when all are comfortably seated they commence.

After a simple sketch of the facts, the father turns to his youngest boy and asks, "What have you to say, Willy?" The little fellow, who is just old enough to go to the Sunday school, repeats two lines that he has learned to sing there—many of you, no doubt, know them—

*"Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior,  
Once became a Child like me."*

“Good, my dear,” says the father—“once became a child like me.” Yes. Jesus was born into the world as other littlebabies are born. He was as little, as delicate, as weak as other infants and needed to be nursed as they do—

*“Almighty God became a Man,  
A Baby like others seen—  
As small in size, and weak of frame,  
As babies have always been.  
From thence He grew an Infant mild,  
By fair and due degrees  
And then became a bigger Child,  
And sat on Mary’s knee.  
’At first held up for need of strength,  
In time alone He ran.  
Then grew a Boy. A Lad—at length  
A Youth—at last, a Man.’*

“It is wrong to draw pictures of the little Jesus and then say that they are like Him. Wicked idolaters do that. But we ought to think of Jesus Christ as made in all things like unto His brethren. There was never a thing in which He was not like us, except that He had no sin. He used to eat, drink, sleep, wake, laugh, cry and hold onto His mother, just as other children do. So it is quite right for you, Willy, to say, ‘once became a Child like me.’”

“Now, John,” said the father, addressing a lad rather older, “what have you to say?” “Well, father,” said John, “if Jesus Christ was like us in some things, I do not think He could have had so many comforts as we have—not such a nice nursery, nor such a snug bed. Was He not disturbed by the horses, and cows, and camels? It seems to me shocking that He had to live in a stable.”

“That is a very proper remark, John,” said his father. “We ought all of us to think how our blessed Lord cast in His lot with the poor. When those Wise Men came from the East, I daresay they were surprised, at first, to find that Jesus was a poor man’s Child. Yet they fell down and worshipped Him, they opened their treasury and presented to Him very costly gifts—gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. Ah, when the Son of God made that great stoop from Heaven to earth, He passed the glittering palaces of kings and the marble halls of the rich and the noble—to take up His abode in the lodgings of poverty. Still, He was ‘born King of the Jews.’ Now, John, did you ever read of a child being born a king before? Of course you never did—children have been born princes and heirs to a throne—but no other than Jesus was ever born a King. The poverty of our Savior’s circumstances is like a foil which sets off the glorious dignity of His Person. You have read of good kings, such as David, Hezekiah and Josiah, yet, if they had not been kings, we would never have heard of them. But it was quite otherwise with Jesus Christ. He was possessed of more true greatness in a stable than any other king ever possessed in a palace! But do not imagine it was only in His Childhood that Jesus was the Kinsman of the poor. When He grew up to be a Man, He said, ‘The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.’ Do you know, my children, that our comforts were purchased at the expense of His sufferings? ‘He became poor that we, through His poverty, might be rich.’ We ought, therefore, to thank and praise the blessed Jesus every time we remember how much worse off He was in this world than we are.”

“It is your turn now,” said the father, as he looked at his little daughter—an intelligent girl who was just beginning to be of some assistance to her mother in the discharge of her daily domestic duties. Poor girl, she modestly hung down her head, for she remembered, just then, how frequently little acts of carelessness had exposed her to tender but faithful rebukes from her parents. At last she said, “Oh, Father, how good Jesus Christ was! He never did anything wrong.”

"Very true, my Love," the father replied. "It is a sweet subject for meditation that you suggest. His Nature was sinless, His thoughts were pure, His heart was transparent and all His actions just and right. You have read of the lambs which Moses, in the Law, commanded the Jews to offer in sacrifice to God. They were all to be without spot or blemish—and if there had been one taint of impurity in the Child that was born of Mary, He could never have been our Savior. Sometimes we think naughty thoughts and nobody knows it but God. And, sometimes, we do what is evil, but we are not found out. It was not so with the meek and lowly Savior—He never had even one fault! His delight was in the Law of the Lord and in that Law did He meditate day and night. Even when we do not commit any positive sin, we often forget to do our duty, but Jesus never did. He was like a tree planted by the rivers of water that brings forth its fruit in its season. He never disappointed any hopes that were set upon Him."

"There now," said the father, "we have already had three beautiful thoughts—Jesus Christ took our Nature, He condescended to be very poor and He was without sin."

There was, in the room, a big boy who had just come home from boarding school to spend his Christmas holidays, so his father turned to this son and said, "Fred, we must hear your remark next." Very short, very significant was Master Fred's response—"that Child had a wonderful mind."

"Indeed He had," said the father, "and it would be well for all of us if that mind were in us which was also in Christ Jesus. His mind was Infinite, for He took part in the eternal counsels of God. But I would rather suggest to you another through a misleading medium. We form wrong impressions which we find it trouble enough afterwards to correct. But Jesus was of quick understanding to discern between good and evil. His mind was never warped by prejudice. He saw things just as they are. Never had He to borrow other people's eyes—and the ideas hatched in other people's brains never guided His judgment. He had light in Himself and that light was the life of men, so capable was He of always instructing the ignorant and guiding their feet in the paths of peace. His heart was likewise pure and that has more to do with the development of the mind and the improvement of the understanding than we are apt to suppose. No corrupt imagination ever tarnished the brightness of His vision. He was always in harmony with God and always felt good-will toward man. You might well say, Fred, that He had a wonderful mind."

The children having each made some observation, the father next addressed Mary, the servant. "Do not be timid," he said, "but speak out and let us know your thoughts." "I was just a-thinking, Sir," said Mary, "how humble it was of Him to take upon Himself the form of a Servant." "Right, Mary, quite right. And it is always profitable to consider how Jesus came down to our low estate. We may well be reconciled to any 'lot' which Jesus voluntarily chose for Himself. But there is more in your remark, as applicable to Bethlehem and the Nativity, than you perhaps imagined, for, according to Dr. Kitto's account of the inn, or

*Caravanserai that the holy family occupied. Imagine now a*

square pile of strong and lofty walls, built of brick upon a basement of stone with one great archway entrance. These walls enclose a large open area with a well in the middle. In the center is an inner quadrangle consisting of a raised platform on all four sides covered with a kind of piazza. And then, in the wall behind, there are small doors leading to the little cells which form the lodgings. Such we may suppose to have been the 'inn' in which there was 'no room' for Mary and Joseph. Now for a description of the stable. It is formed of a covered avenue between the back wall of the lodging apartments and the outer wall of the whole building—thus it is on a level with the court and three or four feet below the raised platform. The side walls of those cells, in the inner quadrangle, projecting behind into the courtyard, form recesses, or stalls, which servants and muleteers used for shelter in bad weather. Joseph and Mary seem to have found a retreat in one of these. There, it is supposed, the Infant Jesus was born. And if it is so, how literally true is it that He took on Him the form of a Servant and occupied the servant's apartment!"

Once more the father seeks a fresh text and, looking at his wife, he says, "My Dear, you have taken a quiet interest in our conversations this evening. Let us now hear your reflection. I am sure you

can say something we shall all be pleased to hear.” The mother looked absorbed in thought. She appeared to have a vivid picture of the whole scene before her and her eyes kindled as if she could actually see the little Darling lying in the manger. She spoke most naturally and most maternally, too. “What a lovely Child! And yet,” she added with a deep sigh, “He who is thus fairer than the children of men in His cradle, after a few short years was so overwhelmed with anxiety, suffering and anguish, that His visage was more marred than that of any other man! And His form more than that of the sons of men.”

A pensive sadness stole over every countenance as that godly mother offered her reflections. Woman’s tenderness seemed to be sanctified by Divine Grace in her heart and to give forth its richest fragrance. The father presently broke the stillness as he said, “Ah, my Love, you have spoken best of all! His heart was broken with reproach! That humble birth was but the prelude to a life still more humble and a death even more abased! Your feelings, my Love, are most precious evidence of your close relationship to Him—

*“A faithful friend of grief partakes;  
But union can be none  
Betwixt a heart that melts like wax  
And hearts as hard as stone.  
Betwixt a head diffusing blood  
And members sound and whole,  
Betwixt an agonizing God  
And an unfeeling soul.”*

“To close up now,” said the father, glancing round with animated expression upon his household, “I suppose you will expect a few words from me. Much as I like your mother’s observations, I think it would be hardly right, on such an auspicious day, to finish with anything melancholy and sad. You know that fathers are generally most thoughtful about the prospects of their children. I can look at you boys and think, ‘Never mind if you have a few hardships so long as you can struggle successfully against them.’ Well now, I have been picturing to myself the manger, the Baby that lay in it, and Mary, His mother watching lovingly over Him. And I’ll tell you what I thought. Those little hands will one day grasp the scepter of universal empire! Those little arms will one day grapple with the monster, ‘Death,’ and destroy it! Those little feet shall tread on the serpent’s neck and crush that old deceiver’s head! Yes, and that little tongue which has not yet learned to articulate a word shall, before long, pour from His sweet lips such streams of eloquence as shall fertilize the minds of the whole human race and infuse His teaching into the literature of the world! And again, a little while, and that tongue shall pronounce the judgments of Heaven on the destinies of all mankind!

“We have all thought it wonderful that the God of Glory should stoop so low, but we shall one day think it more wonderful that the Man of Sorrows should be exalted so high! Earth could find no place too base for Him—Heaven will scarcely find a place lofty enough for Him! If there is just this one thing to be said about Jesus Christ, He is ‘the same yesterday, and today, and forever.’ We may change with circumstances—Jesus never did and never will! When we look at Him in the manger, we may say, ‘He is The Wonderful, The Counselor, The Mighty God.’ And when we see Him exalted to His Father’s right hand, we may exclaim, ‘Behold the Man!’—

*“His human heart He still retains  
Though enthroned in highest bliss  
And feels each tempted member’s pains,  
For our affliction’s His.”*

So closed the series of observations by the various members of a Christian family around the Christmas fire. The father said it was time to retire. And he bade them all, 'good night.' And as the father said, so say I, "Good night and God bless you all!" Amen.