

SERIES: BOOK OF RUTH  
“Bethlehem“  
Ruth 1:19

We all have special places. The TV commercial shows a young couple revisiting several places in town and the young man is rehearsing why each spot is special. Then they come to a park bench where she sits down, and he says “this spot will also become special” as he drops to a knee, opens a little box, and proposes. We all have special places. A special place is where something unique, unusual, and unrivaled took place, which will forever distinguish this place from everywhere else on earth. Every time you think about it, pass close by it, or actually visit it, there will be an emotional response of some kind. These special places can be either good or bad. But the point is, we all have special places that are important to us, regardless of the reason.

The most thrilling story ever known to man began in a special little place called Bethlehem....<sup>1</sup>

The story behind this special place began a long time ago. Until a certain event took place, there was nothing associated with this little town that would make anyone sit-up and take notice. [It would have been nice if the event would have been as dramatic as the swishing and swirling entrance of Loretta Young, for those of you who remember the beginning of the Loretta Young Show on early TV.] But this event was the exact opposite. For a little while no one noticed the arrival of the two dusty, road-weary women who walked into town. With their arrival things began to change for this little place. We read about their entrance in **Ruth 1:19**: “So they [that is, Naomi and Ruth] continued their journey until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them,...” The Message says “the whole town was soon buzzing”. This may have been the first time the town buzzed, but it would not be the last. Bethlehem was about to become a special place.

Let me give you some of the history and trivia of this special place.

### BETHLEHEM’S BEGINNING

Bethlehem is mentioned 49 times in 47 verses in our Bibles. It is mentioned, by name, seven times in the little book of Ruth [1:1, 2, 19 (2x), 22; 2:4; 4:11], and 34 other times in the OT. It is mentioned 8 times in the NT, with seven of those references being in the birth narratives of Jesus (the Christmas Story). Matthew mentions it 5 times, Luke 2 times.

The town’s first name appears to have been Ephrath or Ephrathah. If you glance quickly at Ruth 4:11, at the end of the blessing given to Boaz, you will see the equation of Ephrathah and Bethlehem. [All the people who were in the court, and the elders, said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel; and may you achieve wealth in Ephrathah and become famous in Bethlehem]. Ruth 4:11 (NASB95) The people giving the blessing make a centuries old connection to the first reference to Bethlehem in the Bible. Turn to **Genesis 35:16-20** and intercept the journey of Jacob, his family, and a very pregnant Rachel. READ IT

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<sup>1</sup>Osbeck, Kenneth W.: *Amazing Grace : 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions*. Grand Rapids, Mich. : Kregel Publications, 1990, S. 371

The very first mention of Ephrath/Bethlehem involves the birth of a baby boy named Benjamin and the death and burial of his beautiful mother. So from its very beginning Bethlehem has been a place of joy because of the birth of a boy-child, and a place of sorrow because of the death associated with the birth.

In 1 Ch. 2:51 Salma the son of Caleb [of the Joshua and Caleb story] is described as the “father of Bethlehem.” It is interesting to note the names of the women married to, or in the family line of Caleb. There is both an Ephrath and an Ephrathah. It appears that Salma changed the name to Bethlehem.

### BETHLEHEM’S LOCATION

There are two little towns in Israel with the name Bethlehem. The one is in north Israel, in the territory of Zebulun. Because of this, the one of our interest is referred to as Bethlehem-judah, or EPHRATH or Ephrathah. This town is located on the edge of the desert of Judah, 5 miles (8 km) South of Jerusalem, 2500 feet (760 m) above sea level, situated on a rocky spur of the mountains of Judah just off the main road to Hebron and Egypt. It has a typical Mediterranean climate, which is made milder through its altitude and the nearness of the sea. The average temperature in summer is 73°F (23°C), in winter 57°F (14°C). The average annual rainfall has been 18.5 inches (47 cm.). Bethlehem is surrounded by fertile fields, fig and olive orchards, and vineyards.<sup>2</sup> It does get snow on occasion.

### BETHLEHEM’S INTERESTING PEOPLE

Bethlehem has had some interesting people associated with it. Here are a few of them:

- During the period of the Judges, the setting for Ruth, one of the Judges, **Ibzan**, [Judges 12: 8-10] was born, raised, and buried in Bethlehem.
- The last judge and first speaking prophet, **Samuel**, came to Bethlehem. His arrival scared the inhabitants [1 Sam. 16:4].
- **Boaz**, **Ruth**, **Naomi**, and **Obed** are the ones who started Bethlehem on its path to significance.
- One of the most renowned persons from this special place was **David** and those associated with him. Here is a summary of this family’s dominance of this place.

David himself is declared “the son of that Ephrathite of Bethlehem-judah, whose name was Jesse” (1 S. 17:12). Samuel was sent to Bethlehem to anoint David as successor to unworthy Saul (16:1f, 12). At Bethlehem David went about feeding his father’s sheep (17:5). In the days of David the town was occupied by a garrison of the Philistines (2 S. 23:14; 1 Ch. 11:16). During this time, David moved his father and mother to a “safe place”. The Scriptures say: **And David went from there to Mizpah of Moab; and he said to the king of Moab, “Please let my father and my mother come and stay with you until I know what God will do for me.”**<sup>4</sup> **Then he left them with the king of Moab; and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold.** (1 Samuel 22:3-4 (NASB95)). Moab was a safe place because of the connection with Ruth. After this David’s men broke through the host of Philistines to draw water out of the well of Bethlehem and brought it to David (2 S. 23:16). According to tradition, the well is a short distance NE of Bethlehem. David’s nephews, [some of his 30 mighty men] the sons of Zeruiah (1 Ch. 2:15f),

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km kilometer(s)  
m meter(s); Matthaean source (See GOSPELS, SYNOPTIC V)

<sup>2</sup>Bromiley, Geoffrey W.: *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988; 2002, S. 1:472

came from Bethlehem; Asahel, one of the nephews, was buried “in the sepulchre of his father, which was Bethlehem” (2 S. 2:32).

- **Rehoboam**, son and successor of King Solomon, fortified Bethlehem to guard the approach to Jerusalem (2 Ch. 11:5f).
- After the return of the Jews from exile (ca 538 B.C.). Bethlehem was sparsely populated (Ezr. 2:21; Neh. 7:26).
- But the most famous of all people associated with Bethlehem is **Jesus**. Joseph and Mary came more than eighty miles, covering from four to six days. Never was a child’s birth so magnificent and at the same time so poverty stricken. Drivers frequently sleep in the stable compartment of an inn. Such appears to have been the lodging place of Joseph and Mary.

Instead of in a cradle, Jesus was laid in a manger or a feeding trough. In the east end of the village is the Church of the Nativity, which reaches back to 330 A. D. and it is said to occupy the site over a cave where Jesus was born. According to Justin Martyr, caves were sometimes used for both dwelling–houses and stables.

### BETHLEHEM’S INTERESTING EVENTS

After the NT period, Bethlehem has had some interesting things happen to it.

- When Rome was sacked by Alaric, many of its leading citizens found a refuge at Bethlehem, which served as a shelter for the remnant of the starving citizens of proud Rome.<sup>3</sup> The “house of bread” still feeding the masses.
- The cave-stable [in which Jesus was born] is mentioned by [the Church Fathers] Justin Martyr (Dial 78.5f), Origen (*Contra Celsum* i.51), and Jerome (Ep 108.10).
- After the Romans conquered Bethlehem anew (A.D. 135) the site of the Nativity was desecrated, probably under Hadrian (117–138; cf. Jerome Ep 58.3).
- Jerome lived for thirty-three years in Bethlehem (A.D. 387–420). Here he helped found and direct pilgrim hospices, convents for women, and a monastery. During this time, by the request of Pope Damasus, Jerome began his revision of the Latin NT and his comparison of the Greek version of the OT with the original Hebrew, which ultimately led to the composition of the Vulgate. The cell where Jerome made his famous translation is still maintained as a chapel in the Church of the Nativity.
- The desert East of Bethlehem is still inhabited by Moslem bedouin who use this fertile land for grazing goats and sheep. A field located a short distance SE of Bethlehem is designated as the place where the angels appeared to the shepherds to bring them the good tidings of the birth of the Savior (Lk. 2:8).
- Bethlehem has had some other interesting history. The Persians spared it in A.D. 614, the Arabs in 636. The inhabitants invited the Crusaders to occupy the city in 1099. In the 12th cent a Latin bishopric was erected in Bethlehem; in the 14th cent an Episcopal see was constituted there by the Greek Church; the same was done by the Armenian Church in the 17th century. The wall

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ca *circa*, about

<sup>3</sup>Ainslie, Peter: *Among the Gospels and the Acts Being Notes and Comments Covering the Life of Christ in the Flesh, and the First Thirty Years' History of His Church*. Baltimore : Temple Seminary Press, 1908, S. 172

Dial *Dialogus contra Tryphonem*

Ep *Epistulae*

OT Old Testament

cent century, centuries

and the towers, symbolizing Bethlehem on the Madeba Map, were demolished and the moat was filled in 1489. Ibrahim Pasha, Egyptian general and son of Muhammed Ali, as punishment for a Moslem insurrection laid waste the Moslem section of the town in 1834.<sup>4</sup>

- Today, the city is in the hands of the Arabs and under the control of Hamas. [Let's look at a little of it] It was a pretty little city when I was there. Now it is ravaged!

## BETHLEHEM IS SPECIAL

There are at least four things that make Bethlehem special, and special to us.

**1. The city is special because it is PROPHETICALLY SIGNIFICANT.** After David, the city declined in importance and shrunk to the point of insignificance. Then one day, about 735 B.C., a preaching prophet named Micah spoke of Bethlehem in a prophetically significant way. He said,<sup>2</sup> “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.*” This speaks of the Advent of the Messiah. It emphasizes the eternalness and full deity of this person.<sup>3</sup> *Therefore He [God] will give them up until the time [this is the 400 silent years between the Testaments] When she who is in labor has borne a child [The birth of Jesus by Mary].* Then Micah continues and speaks to the Second Coming of the Messiah: <sup>4</sup> *And He [Jesus] will arise and shepherd His flock In the strength of the LORD, In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. And they will remain, [ie, last forever] Because at that time He will be great To the ends of the earth.* Micah 5:2-4 (NASB95) This prophecy laid on the books until 735 years later, the angel referenced it in his message to Mary. He also spoke of both Advents: *The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High [emphasis on His eternalness and full deity] ; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end. [ie. Last forever]”* Luke 1:30-33 (NASB95)

Sometime after Jesus was born, the Magi arrived in Jerusalem looking for the king of the Jews. They were directed to Bethlehem by Micah's verse. Bethlehem had again been prophetically significant.

## **2. The city is special because it is the BIRTH PLACE OF THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD.**

We are all familiar with the Lukan text that tells us about this great event, **Luke 2: 4-7, 10-11.** Even though the world doesn't want to hear such a thing, it is still true: The Savior has been born! It is a bit ironic that the first woman to birth a baby boy in Bethlehem gave her life so he might live. The last Scripturally significant baby boy born in Bethlehem gave his life so that all might have life. In between these two, no one would have thought a Moabitess (Ruth) would become the great-grandmother of a godly king, whose line would produce this Savior. **Unlike the NT account of Mary's pregnancy, the book of Ruth records no dreams, no angelic visitors, no prophecies from on high, and no promises of a son. Still God was clearly at work in Ruth's heart and life as He guided her to pick leftover grain in the field of Boaz....Ruth literally fulfilled the blessing that was given when she married Boaz. She became like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel” (Ruth 4:11).** Among Jews, few blessings top that one, then or now.... Not a miraculous conception like Mary's, but still a blessing from God. More than a millennium apart in the same ancient city came the happy report: “She gave birth to a son” (Ruth 4:13; Mt. 1:25)

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<sup>4</sup>Bromiley, Geoffrey W.: *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised.* Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988; 2002, S. 1:472-473

“Glory to God in the highest” sang the angels when Jesus was born (Luke 2:14), and, “Praise be to the Lord” declared the women of Bethlehem when Obed arrived (Ruth 4:14) This season and always, the goodness of God and the gift of His Son are the best news to come out of Bethlehem.<sup>5</sup>

**3. The city is special because it is PROOF OF THE MESSIAH.** In the one NT text outside the birth narratives, the Apostle John mentions Bethlehem as a proof for the Messiah. John 7 is an account of the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. There was a great public debate about Jesus and whether He was the Messiah or not. John focuses the debate with these words: **Others were saying, “This is the Christ.” Still others were saying, “Surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee, is He? [John then gives the answer to the question by asking another question] “Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the descendants of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?”<sup>43</sup> So a division occurred in the crowd because of Him.** John 7:41-43 (NASB95) People then, as now, have to make a decision about Jesus. Is He who He claimed to be, or is He not? What say you? Is He the Christ of God, or not? John indicated that because Jesus was born in Bethlehem, He fulfilled the needed requirement to be the Christ.

**4. The city is special because it is where we find THE BREAD OF LIFE.** Remember, the name Bethlehem means “house of bread”. *We all need a Bethlehem, a house of bread, where our spirit gets fed. Jesus is our Bethlehem!* In John 6 Jesus speaks of Himself as the Bread of life. The Bread of life came from the house of bread in order to give us eternal life. Listen to His words: **“Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.”** (John 6:27) **“Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.”** (John 6:35, NASB95) **“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. “I am the bread of life.”** (John 6:47-48) **“I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.”** (John 6:51)

To eat this bread means to believe Jesus. To put your full faith and trust in this One who is God in the flesh and then took that flesh to the cross and paid for your sin debt in full. The result of this act of faith results in eternal life. Have you eaten of His bread?

In addition, Jesus promised that He is the answer to our deepest spiritual needs. He will satisfy our spiritual hunger. We never have to earn our way into God’s good grace or try to appease an angry God. The more we learn of Jesus the more satisfied we are spiritually. Come to Jesus and have your spirit fed.

In the same way that God’s “wondrous gift” came to Bethlehem, silently, so Christ comes into our lives today and casts out our sins and fears if we are willing to have Him abide in our lives. Then “the dear Christ enters in.” How beautifully the glorious message of Christmas is told in this well-phrased hymn by Phillips Brooks, one of America’s most outstanding ministers of the past century.

During a trip to the Holy Land in 1865, Brooks went to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve and worshiped there. He was deeply moved by this experience. Three years later, while pastoring the Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia, Brooks desired to have a special carol for the children to sing in their Sunday school Christmas program. Recalling

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<sup>5</sup> Liz Curtis Higgs, in *Today’s Christian Woman*, Nov/Dec 2008, “Ruth: Waiting for the One”, p. 24.

the peaceful scene in the little town of Bethlehem, Brooks completed the writing of the text in just one evening. He gave a copy of the words to his organist, Lewis R. Redner, and requested him to compose a melody that would be easy for the children to sing. On the evening just before the program was to be given, Redner awakened suddenly from his sleep with the present melody in his mind—and he quickly wrote it out. “O Little Town of Bethlehem” has been a favorite with children and adults around the world since that time.

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by; yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light—the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heav'n. No ear may hear His coming, but, in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in—be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!

In the midst of all the rush and activity of the Christmas season, take time to rejoice in the joy of Christ's birth and ask Him to abide with you in a special way.<sup>6</sup>

You see, Bethlehem is a special place.

So where is your “Bethlehem”---that special place where you meet with Jesus and His Word?

Do you have a favorite chair where you sit and read the word?

A desk or table where you can read and record your thoughts and observations?

A place where you can pray uninterrupted?

I encourage you, even you kids, to establish a “Bethlehem” in your home, office, vehicle, someplace you can visit frequently to spend a few minutes reading God's Word and thinking about Jesus and your relationship with Him.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup>Osbeck, K. W. (1990). *Amazing grace : 366 inspiring hymn stories for daily devotions*. Includes indexes. (370). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications.