

BETHLEHEM – The Door from Heaven!

Bethlehem played host to the Nativity,
an event that the world hardly noticed,
yet changed the destiny of every human creature.

– David Jeremiah

We all love pictures – especially family pictures whether they are old ones stored in a drawer or photo album or the new ones of today in our phones. I have spoken about biblical pictures many times over the years in our lessons. In this lesson, we will look at some ‘Christmas pictures’ that relate to Bethlehem – the physical birthplace of the Son of God.

At the time of Jesus’ birth, Bethlehem was a little town of between 300 to 1,000 residents. Today, it is still not a heavily populated place. It has about 28,000 people who rely heavily on the tourist industry. What people might not know is that Bethlehem today which is about six to eight miles from Jerusalem is not in Israel but in Palestine. One third its population is composed of Palestinian Christians. In accordance to the Oslo Peace Accord, Israel turned Bethlehem over to the Palestinian National Authority in 1995.

As we move through our ‘Bethlehem pictures’, the first mention of Bethlehem in Scripture is in connection with the death of Jacob's favorite wife. It was the time when Jacob was returning from Paddam-Aram to the Promised Land with his family. As they neared Bethlehem, the area became the place of both Jacob and Rachel’s sorrow.

Read Genesis 35:19 (ESV) ¹⁹ *So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem),*

As Rachel, the wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph, gave birth to her second son, she was destined to die. Notice that she was buried on the way to Bethlehem – not specifically in Bethlehem. When looking through pictures, you often come across ‘random’ pictures and I want to mention one here. Although Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife, the line of David and ultimately the bloodline of Jesus passed through Leah and her son Judah, not Rachel reminding us that the LORD’s choice is not always our choice.

In her final pain, Rachel named her son Ben-oni, which means ‘son of my sorrow’; but Jacob renamed the boy, calling him Benjamin, ‘son of my right hand’. Although unknown to Rachel or Jacob, the two names they chose would become a picture of the One who would later be born in Bethlehem as Savior of the world. The name Ben-oni, son of my sorrow, reflects Jesus’ suffering and the cross. The name Benjamin, son of my right hand, reflects Jesus’ glory as he sits on the throne at the Father's right hand.

Next, let’s look at a picture taken by the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, who made a prophecy concerning the coming Messiah and Rachel’s sorrow.

Read Jeremiah 31:15 (ESV) ¹⁵ *Thus says the LORD: “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.”*

Scripture tells us that Rachel was buried along the way to Bethlehem. Jeremiah recognized the place of her burial as Ramah. Jeremiah prophesied of Rachel weeping in Ramah at the time Jewish prisoners were assembled there for their long journey to Babylon. Her descendants through Joseph had been captured by the Assyrians, and now her descendants through Benjamin were going to Babylon. Jeremiah pictures Rachel weeping over her labor as a mother that she felt was in vain! But God told her to wipe away her tears. Jeremiah gives us another picture.

Read Jeremiah 31:16-17 (ESV) ¹⁶ *Thus says the LORD: “Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.* ¹⁷ *There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country.*

There was hope in Ramah for Rachel’s descendants did return to the Promised Land and through many trials and tribulations her descendants still dwell in that land today.

I have some wonderful old photographs of family members that I never met on this side of heaven but I still love their pictures. Matthew went back to Jeremiah’s picture of the weeping Rachel when he wrote of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Read Matthew 2:16-18 (ESV) ¹⁶ *Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.* ¹⁷ *Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:* ¹⁸ *“A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

Ramah was about as far north of Jerusalem as Bethlehem was south of Jerusalem. Ramah was Jeremiah's country. J Vernon McGee’s speculations helps us envision what Herod did when he realized the King of the Jews had been born. McGee writes, “I imagine that when the soldiers had been given their orders to slay the children, the captain said to Herod, ‘Where do you want me to begin?’ And I think that old Herod said, ‘Well, just draw a circle around Jerusalem with the radius as far south as Bethlehem and as far north as Ramah’ -- yet Ramah was not in any way involved in it. So, you see, Herod slew a great many children. You can imagine the weeping all the way from Bethlehem to Ramah, a radius of about ten to twelve miles, or twenty to twenty-five miles across the area. It must have been a heartbreaking time in the lives of these people when they lost their little ones. The prophecy of weeping given through Jeremiah was literally fulfilled.

Our next picture is of Ruth, a Moabitess, and her mother-in-law, Naomi, a woman from Bethlehem who had moved to Moab during a famine. The Moabites were descendants of a son of Lot by an incestuous union with his older daughter. Ruth married one of Naomi’s sons. Before long, Naomi’s husband and two sons died. These two women who had no bread and no way to get it in Moab decided to return to Naomi’s home in Bethlehem. The name of this town means the House of Bread. Bread was a staple in the ancient diet providing both comfort and food. Bread was used in temple worship to symbolize God’s provision and presence.

Ruth and Naomi returned at a time when the LORD was once again blessing Israel. It was the time of the barley harvest. Barley was the food of the poor. Barley flour was used to make bread. Later it would be five barley loaves that Jesus used to feed 5,000 people.

Ruth ended up gleaning in a field owned by Boaz. Gleaning was the process of gathering grain or produce left behind by the reapers. Mosaic law required leaving this portion so that the poor and aliens might have a means of earning a living.

As I think of the town of Bethlehem being the House of Bread, and Ruth finding bread there, it reminds me of a picture of Jesus, our Redeemer who is the Bread of life!

Read John 6:32-35 (ESV) ³² *Jesus then said to them...* ³³ *For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.* ³⁴ *They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."* ³⁵ *Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*

Jesus Himself is the Living Bread who came from heaven through the door of Bethlehem to bring us eternal life. As we think of Jesus, our Redeemer, that gives way to another 'family picture' – the picture of Boaz.

Boaz of the tribe of Judah, became Ruth's kinsman-redeemer. Ruth's experience in Bethlehem is a picture of the believer who is redeemed. A kinsman was usually a blood relative who had certain family obligations. When a husband died and had no son, the Old Testament law of levirate marriage went into effect. The term levirate means husband's brother. Legally, a dead man's brother (levirate) was required to marry his childless widow and father a son who would assume the dead man's name and inherit his portion of the Promised Land thereby providing for the continuation of a man's name. Scripture does not give the specific family relationship of Boaz to Naomi's husband – only that he was a near kinsman.

There was another near kinsman but he declined the responsibility and Boaz married Ruth and became her kinsman-redeemer. They are both listed in the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah in **Matthew 1**. The most important picture in the book of Ruth is that Ruth's redemption by Boaz pictures our redemption by the Savior who was born in Bethlehem.

Job spoke of the coming Kinsman-Redeemer.

Read Job 19:25 (ESV) ²⁵ *For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.*

The God of heaven entered our earthly realm through the door of Bethlehem. In other words, God became a human baby born by the Spirit of God to a virgin mother. That baby grew to manhood for the purpose of becoming our Kinsman-Redeemer. Those who accept the Kinsman-Redeemer, Jesus, become a part of the 'Bride of Christ'. Those who have accepted Christ as Savior can say like Job: *For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.*

Our last picture in this study was taken by the Old Testament prophet, Micah who lived in the 8th Century B.C. Micah lived in the same time period as Isaiah. Jeremiah mentioned Micah by name in his book. (**Jeremiah**

26:18) Our focus is on one brief picture that mentions the coming Messiah and His earthly birthplace. Let's read his words.

Read Micah 5:2 (ESV) ² *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.*

Ephrathah or Ephrath (an alternate spelling) mean fruitful. Most scholars believe that Ephrathah and Bethlehem are actually two names for the same place (**Genesis 35:19** and **Ruth 4:11**). Most likely, Ephrathah was the ancient name for the Canaanite city, and Bethlehem was the Jewish name. However, The Life Application Notes say that Ephrathah was the district where Bethlehem was located. There were two Bethlehems so the Ephrathah may have been added to be specific.

The Jews in Jesus' time knew that Bethlehem was to be the place of the Messiah's birth.

Read John 7:42 (ESV) ⁴² *Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?"*

Yet when the Messiah came they identified Him only with Galilee ignoring that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Micah named the place where Christ was to be born 700 years before He was born there. After 700 years, there seemed to be little chance that one in the line of David could be born in Bethlehem. The family of David was scattered. Yet Bethlehem must be the place where the Son of God was to be born, according to Micah. This prophecy was the sole basis on which the scribes directed the wise men to Bethlehem.

Read Matthew 2:3-6 (ESV) ³ *When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."*

The magi were seeking the King; Herod was opposing the King; and the Jewish priests were ignoring the King. These priests knew the Scriptures and pointed others to the Savior. They quoted **Micah 5:2** but did not obey it. They were *five miles* from the very Son of God, yet they did not go to see Him!

Micah also foretold that the One born in Bethlehem *coming forth is from of old, from ancient days*. The Baby Jesus did NOT begin like each of us – at the point of our birth. Jesus came forth from *old, from ancient of days*. The Apostle John explained this way: **John 1:1 (ESV)** ¹ *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* God's Word to us comes through Jesus. Jesus although born physically in Bethlehem was for certain from ancient days since He was God and He still is! Hallelujah! What a Savior!