

SEEKING BETHLEHEM

For the past two weeks, we've been thinking about what people were seeking at the time of Jesus' birth. First, we considered the innkeeper. And then last Sunday, we talked about several things that the shepherds were seeking on that *"cold winter's night."*¹ And this morning we will continue on with this theme regarding the things to *"seek"* during Christmas. But, before we do, I want all of you to give an accounting. I want you to give an accounting of where you have been lately. Now, you might be thinking, *"Wait a minute preacher—it's none of your business where I've been! You can forget about getting an answer from me on that one."* Well, not so fast—all I want you to tell me is if you've ever been to a certain place. I want you to tell me if you've ever been to **Bethlehem**. So let's have a show of hands—how many of you have ever been to Bethlehem? What?—no hands? No one has been to Bethlehem? Well, that's truly amazing! Maybe you have been there but just never knew that it's called *"Bethlehem."* So, let's see if that is the case.

First, let's get a little information about Bethlehem. It's kind of hard to tell if you have ever been there without at least knowing something about the place. Bethlehem is located about 5 miles southwest of Jerusalem. The name *"Bethlehem"* means, appropriately enough, *"House of Bread"*—for it was there that Jesus, the *"Bread of Life"*², was born.³ And Bethlehem has been around a very long time. Perhaps the earliest mention of this village occurred over thirteen centuries before Jesus' birth when the ruler of Jerusalem sent a letter to the Egyptian pharaoh complaining that the people of Bethlehem were apparently getting a bit unruly and were causing unwanted disturbances throughout the land.⁴ But, of course, we are more familiar with the town of Bethlehem beginning with the various references to it in the Old Testament. For instance, the Book of Genesis tells us that Rachel, the wife of Jacob, was buried in Bethlehem.⁵ Also, much of the setting of the story of Ruth and Naomi took place around Bethlehem.⁶ And that's important because Ruth and Boaz would one day have a son who would be the grandfather of Bethlehem's most famous resident, short of Jesus Himself—that resident, of course was the shepherd boy, David, who would one day become the king of Israel.⁷ In fact, David likely cared for his father's sheep in those very same fields as those shepherds who were visited by the angels as they tended their flocks outside of Bethlehem on the night of Jesus' birth.⁸

What is so interesting about Bethlehem is that much of what we know about it from the Old Testament is directly related to those things that came to pass in the New Testament. For example, that reference to Rachel has a very sad note connected to it, for in the Old Testament Book of Jeremiah, it cites Rachel as weeping for her lost children.⁹ In the Gospel of Matthew, this passage is re-interpreted

to apply to Bethlehem as Matthew restates it: “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.”

Matthew 2:18 (ESV) This time of year we associate Bethlehem with great joy as the baby Jesus entered into this earthly realm as our Savior and King. But as Matthew points out, Bethlehem was also noted for great sorrow, as this reference to the tears of Rachel emphasizes. Matthew is referring to the great slaughter of innocent children, all under the age of two years old and younger, by the soldiers of King Herod who came sweeping down on Bethlehem in the hopes of killing the Christ Child.¹⁰ But, Joseph had been forewarned by an angel of the Lord in a dream and he left with Mary and Jesus in tow, headed for the safety of Egypt.¹¹ And when Joseph and Mary returned with Jesus to Nazareth, we again can see that even this prolonged part of the Christmas Story harkens back to the Old Testament in fulfillment of Hosea’s prophecy about Jesus when he said: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” Hosea 11:1 (NIV)

But, just think about all the places that we might have expected Jesus to have been born. With Him being the Messiah, you might have expected to see Him born in the stately home of the high priest there in Jerusalem. With Him being the King of Kings¹², you might have expected Him to have been born in the palace there in Jerusalem or even in the home of some wealthy Jewish family who may have hit it big in the world’s political seat of power in Rome. But no, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. In fact, for those well versed in prophecy, this had been foretold by the Prophet Micah: “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past.” Micah 5:2 (NLT2) And there is a Christmas message hidden in the fact that God chose Bethlehem as the place of Jesus’ birth. Pastor and Christian writer, Vance Havner, touches upon this when he says: ***“At Christmas we say much of the meaning of His coming to earth—the mission [and] the message—but we sometimes overlook the manner of His [arrival]. God set it up in a pattern [that] we never would have dreamed [of]. He was born in a stable to a lowly peasant couple in an insignificant town in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire. Think how we would have arranged it [today] in this publicity-mad day! That same pattern my Lord followed all His days; and the Church might take a hint today [when Hollywood and the news media attempt to set both the style and the morality of the day].”***¹³

Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem reflects this pattern in which humility and servanthood trumps pride and self-importance. The seemingly weak take precedence over the so-called strong and powerful. For God tells us that His grace is sufficient for us and by His power we are made perfect, even in weakness, so that in our weakness, and our humbleness and by our faith in Him, we are made strong.¹⁴ And as we have seen, Bethlehem has witnessed its times of great happiness as well as its share of very different

times filled with tears. This place of Jesus' birth represents the range of circumstances from the good times with their joys and happiness to bad times with their accompanying sorrow and tears that the hearts of Christians, through the Holy Spirit, become equipped to bear. And in that sense, we have all been to "**Bethlehem**." We have all experienced days when the elation was so great that it just seemed nothing could go wrong. But, there have been other days in which all we could do is barely hold our heads in our hands to control the sobering. Yes, we have all been to "**Bethlehem**" more than a few times.

And that's why Jesus being born in Bethlehem makes perfect sense. There was probably no other city or town with the lowly state of Bethlehem that had experienced such polar extremes of emotions—from both jubilant times of great joy to dark times of great sadness. The hope that entered into this world upon His birth in that very town was what caused the angel to announce to the shepherds that he was bringing: "Good news of great joy that will be for all the people."¹⁵ And yet Jesus is not a "**fair-weather friend**." Rather, He is a friend during those rough times as well. Jesus is there for you to dry those tears and bind those wounds—whether you require physical healing or the sometimes more difficult kind of emotional and spiritual restoration. And so, Jesus wants you to come to "**Bethlehem**"—not by way of ship or jet plane, but **by way of your heart**. God wants you to come to the One born in a manger and lay down your burdens before Him—place before Jesus your worries, your sorrows and fears—all those things that weigh you down and wound you. Jesus wants to heal those wounds.

But, if you are coming to "**Bethlehem**"—well, I've got to tell you that it's a costly trip and the ticket, by necessity, will take you far beyond that little town. So if you are even thinking about planning the trip, don't even bother unless you count the cost. And if you are thinking you can make that trip in light hiking gear, then forget it. The hiking that Jesus has in mind for you requires you to bear a heavy load. And Jesus has plainly said that no one can hike with Him who is not willing to carry his own cross.¹⁶ Now you might be thinking: "**But, you just said that I am to lay my burdens down. How can I know that I can even carry that heavy load Jesus will require of me? How can I know that I am ready?**" That's a good question to ask, particularly at Christmas time. In fact, as a Christian, you can never be truly ready for Christmas unless you know the answer to that question. I think that Henry Van Dyke, the great American author and clergyman of the 19th century, has a really good answer to that by turning the tables and asking a few questions of his own. He asks: "**Are you willing to stoop down and consider the needs and desires of little children; to remember the weaknesses and loneliness of people who are growing old; to stop asking how much your friends love you, and to ask yourself whether you love**

*them enough; to bear in mind the things that other people have to bear on their hearts; to trim your lamp so that it will give more light and less smoke, and to carry it in front so that your shadow will fall behind you; to make a grave for your ugly thoughts and a garden for your kindly feelings, with the gate open? Are you willing to do these things for a day? [If you are, only] then you are ready [for] Christmas!"*¹⁷ And only then you are ready to for that trip to "**Bethlehem.**"

Because when you get to Bethlehem and approach the manger, that little baby is very demanding. Jesus is not going to accept some second hand, recycled gifts. Jesus wants your very best. Those Wise Men didn't show up with trinkets! Way back in the beginning, Abel didn't give God anything but the best. Cain tried shuffling in a second hand gift to God and was reprimanded for his act of selfishness.¹⁸ God won't accept anything but your best¹⁹—including your total commitment to Him. Make that commitment. Don't hold out on Him—especially at Christmas time! And there is something else that God doesn't want you to do.

Once you come to "**Bethlehem,**" God doesn't want you to stay in "**Bethlehem**" this Christmas! He wants you to count the cost and take that hike with Him beyond "**Bethlehem.**" "**Where will this hike take me?**" you might ask. Everywhere that His love is needed—and it is needed most everywhere. "**And what will I do on this hike?**" you might again ask. If you do what you are called to do, you will serve the Lord. And you will do that by serving others. The Bible teaches us that when we serve others in a spirit of love,²⁰ we are, in effect, serving Christ as well.²¹ And you must not serve anyone with a "*holier than thou*" attitude. The glory of Christ can't be shown through you unless administered by a humble heart. Thabiti Anyabwile was a former Muslim, but he has found "**Bethlehem**" and is now a Christian pastor in Washington, D.C. He really nails what it means to serve others with a humble heart when he writes: "**Before there is glory, there must first be humility. That is the way the kingdom of God operates. The first will be last, and the last will be first.**"²² **God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.**²³ **Humble yourself before the Lord, and in due time He will exalt you.**²⁴ **In the kingdom of God, first comes humility then comes glory. We see this modeled for us right from the Savior's birth**"²⁵ in that little Town of Bethlehem.

So, this Christmas, remember these things when you are seeking "**Bethlehem**" and searching for the Savior. Of course, it is true that you might not have the advantage of a host of angels pointing the way as they did for the shepherds. And you might not have a shining star leading the way as it did for the Wise Men. But, you need not worry about that in the least little bit. You see, "**Bethlehem**" is not a place on a map. Rather, for us, it is a **spiritual state of mine where our hearts need to be.** And to make that **journey of the heart** the only map that you need is this one [holding the Bible]. The journey begins

in a **Garden** where a partially eaten apple lies tellingly on the ground, and proceeds to a manger, and on to a **Cross**, and finally ends with an **Empty Tomb**—pointing to your salvation and mine as well. So if you are looking for “**Bethlehem**,” don’t focus so much on the manger that you lose sight of the Cross. For the reality is that the Cross was raised there in that stable and Jesus carried it for you and me all the way from Bethlehem and until He finally put it to rest at Calvary. If you are seeking that manger, but fail to see the Cross and the empty tomb, then you have missed the real meaning of Christmas altogether.

So let me ask you again: **Have you ever been to “Bethlehem”?** If not, I hope you truly find it this Christmas and then take up your Cross and follow Him!

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
December 22, 2019
Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor
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¹ *The First Noel*, published 1833, author unknown, first appearing in “Christmas Carols: Ancient and Modern,” a collection by William B. Sandys.

² John 6:35 (ESV) 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.”

³ George W. Knight, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), s.v. “BETHLEHEM,” WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

⁴ George W. Knight, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), s.v. “BETHLEHEM,” WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

⁵ Genesis 48:7 (NIV) As I was returning from Paddan, to my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan while we were still on the way, a little distance from Ephrath. So I buried her there beside the road to Ephrath” (that is, Bethlehem).

⁶ Ruth 1:1-2 (NIV) ¹ In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ² The man’s name was Elimelech, his wife’s name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

⁷ Matthew 1:5-6 (NIV) ⁵ Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David. 1 Samuel 17:12 (NIV) Now David was the son of an Ephrathite named Jesse, who was from Bethlehem in Judah.

⁸ 1 Samuel 17:15 (NIV) David went back and forth from Saul to tend his father’s sheep at Bethlehem.

⁹ Jeremiah 31:15 (NIV) This is what the LORD says: “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.”

¹⁰ Matthew 2:16-17 (NLT) ¹⁶ Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men’s report of the star’s first appearance. ¹⁷ Herod’s brutal action fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah.

¹¹ Matthew 2:13-15 (ESV) ¹³ Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and

departed to Egypt¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

¹² Revelation 17:14 (NIV) They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because He is Lord of lords and King of kings--and with Him will be His called, chosen and faithful followers.

¹³ Vance Havner in A Treasury of Vance Havner. Christianity Today, Vol. 36, no. 15, PreachingToday.com.

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (NIV) ⁹ He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

¹⁵ Luke 2:10-11 (NIV) ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

¹⁶ Luke 14:27 (NIV) [Jesus said:] "And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple."

¹⁷ Henry Van Dyke (1852-1933) Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 77.

¹⁸ Genesis 4:3-7 (NASB) ³ So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. ⁴ Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; ⁵ but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. ⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? ⁷ "If you do well, will not *your countenance* be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."

¹⁹ Malachi 1:8 (NASB) "But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?" says the LORD of hosts.

²⁰ Galatians 5:13 (NASB) Through love serve one another.

²¹ Matthew 25:40 (NLT2) When you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!

²² Mark 10:31 (NIV) [Jesus said:] "But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

²³ James 4:6 (NIV) But He gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

1 Peter 5:5 (NIV) Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

²⁴ James 4:10 (NIV) Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

²⁵ Thabiti Anyabwile, Exalting Jesus in Luke, (Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Reference, 2018), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 42.