

“A Place of Sorrow”

Gen. 35; Ruth 1; Matt. 2; Heb. 4:14-16

It's Christmas season again – even Covid can't stop us from celebrating the birth of Jesus. For those of you looking to give a book to someone for Christmas, here's a review of a book you might be interested in.

The plot ... will make you understand things you have never understood before and see things you would have been blind to. This story addresses your deepest questions and most terrifying fears. It has a shocking beginning, a horrible dilemma, an unexpected solution, and a glorious ending. It is the story of stories, the one narrative that every human being needs to hear and understand.

The story ... is a death-and-life story. The stink of death and the fragrance of life are on every page. It can make you weep and celebrate. It can produce more sadness and deeper joy than you thought you could ever experience.

... you'll be captivated by its plot, ... hooked on every word spoken by the main character and in awe of its Author

The Bible is the story of Christ coming to earth to defeat sin and death and to restore a perfect, eternal relationship to the creatures he made in his likeness.

The Bible speaks to our real needs and doesn't hide the sins or the pains and struggles of those who follow God. As we begin Advent 2020 I want us to explore reasons why Bethlehem was chosen as the place of the birth of our Saviour. This was planned by God Himself so it is no less significant than Jerusalem or Nazareth or Babylon or Rome. There was a purpose as we'll see.

Some place names have a negative association to it because of tragedies that happened there. Humboldt, Saskatchewan will always be associated with the terrible bus crash that killed almost an entire Jr. hockey team. Walkerton, Ontario will always be associated with the e-coli outbreak due to the water contamination. Jonestown, Guyana, the place where 909 followers of cult leader Jim Jones were brainwashed into drinking poison. And Pearl Harbor, a beautiful spot in Oahu Hawaii will always be associated with its being bombed by the Japanese and bringing the USA into WWII.

I say all that to introduce you to Bethlehem before the birth of Jesus. As we open the pages of the Bible our first reference of Bethlehem contains a tragic event. Actually the first three times Bethlehem appears in Scripture, tragic events happen each time. So here's the first thing we learn about why Bethlehem was likely chosen to be the birthplace of the Messiah:

Bethlehem was no Stranger to Suffering **Gen. 35; Judges 17-19; Ruth 1**

Let's turn to Gen. 35. Jacob had experienced many hardships in his life, even though God had appeared to him in a dream back in Gen. 28, when Jacob left home because of Esau's anger over the blessing incident. God reassured Jacob He would indeed bless him as He promised Abraham and Isaac. So Jacob built an altar to God at that place, calling it Bethel.

Shortly after that Jacob arrives near Haran, the place where Abraham had relatives, and soon meets Rachel, daughter of Laban. Initially all seems well. Jacob is engaged to Rachel, agrees to work

for Laban for 7 years for her hand in marriage. But come the wedding night Laban tricks Jacob and switches out Rachel for Leah on the wedding night. Thus starts 14 years or more of up and down life with Laban and his treachery and the baby feuds between Leah and Rachel. Through this God does indeed bless Jacob with 11 sons through Leah, Rachel and their servants Bilhah and Zilpah. Jacob ends up fleeing Laban, heading back to the land of Canaan. Once the dust settle on that tense situation, he hears Esau is coming to him. Expecting the worse Jacob frets and schemes and even wrestles an angel only to learn that Esau has forgiven Jacob and wants to be brothers. Jacob is glad but still doesn't trust Esau and heads his own way. Shortly after this his daughter Dinah is raped but the man Shechem, son of Hamor takes responsibility for his actions and wants to marry Dinah. However, two of Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi trick the Shechemites into agreeing to a covenant involving circumcision, and use their weakened state to attack them. Jacob is horrified.

But when we come to Ch. 35 things go well for Jacob. God revisits him, tells him to go back to Bethel and renew the covenant. God reassures Jacob of His blessing. Jacob does everything God asks and we anticipate things will finally go well for Jacob, now renamed Israel by God. But then we read vv.16-20,

¹⁶ Then they moved on from Bethel. While they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty. ¹⁷ And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth, the midwife said to her, "Don't be afraid, for you have another son." ¹⁸ As she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named her son Ben-Oni. But his father named him Benjamin.

¹⁹ So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). ²⁰ Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb.

Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin, Jacob's 12th son and she dies in Bethlehem. Her tomb is still marked by a building. It would seem odd to us that Jacob would suffer this harsh tragedy in life when it appeared life was finally going well. But Bethlehem reminds us that suffering happens to the best of God's people

Even when we're 'right' with God (Gen. 35:16-20)

Who of us hasn't struggled to understand God's will in our life when suffering and pain appears out of nowhere even though we were following God in our life. But God never promises us freedom from pain, even as believers. Paul told a young Timothy struggling with trials in ministry,

^{2 Tim. 3:10} You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹ persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it,

There's this false expectation among some believers that we feel God owes us a pain free life because we've given our life to Jesus. He said we will be satisfied and find His joy and peace but even in difficulties. Bethlehem reminds us that suffering is part of the believers' life.

The next time Bethlehem appears in the Bible is in Judges 17-19. Ch. 17 begins with a strange incident of a Jewish man named Micah (no relation to the prophet) who hires a young Levite who was from the town of Bethlehem. As if anticipating we're going to wonder why, the author throws in 17:6

⁶ In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.

And so this Micah from Ephraim hires the Levite from Bethlehem to be his personal priest. Soon after men from the tribe of Dan come and see this Levite from Bethlehem and take him to be their priest. What's going on? A priest to the highest bidder?

Then Judges 19 begins about another Levite who lived in the north took a concubine from Bethlehem, but she was unfaithful to him and left him. After 4 months he travelled to Bethlehem to get her back. She agrees. They leave for Jerusalem where some wicked men of the tribe of Benjamin want to have sex with him, so he gives his concubine to them. They in turn abuse her all night and she dies. The Levite does a horrible thing but cutting her body in 12 pieces, sends them to each tribe and they all agree to wipe out the tribe of Benjamin. The Lord intervenes and they stop killing the men. But here's the point. Suffering and pain come into our lives

When we fail to follow God as He prescribes (Judges 16-17)

Judges is a sad book of strange and awful episodes of bad behaviour on the part of those who are supposed to follow God. It's a reminder that God's people are capable of terrible sins. And this even from Bethlehem.

The this time Bethlehem is mentioned in the Bible is also during the times of the Judges but this time in the book of Ruth. The story begins with Naomi and her husband, their two sons and their wives (one Ruth a Moabitess) who we are told live in Bethlehem. And in those days there's a famine. Putting the two statements together – time of the Judges and a famine – it would seem a judgment from God on the land of Israel for their disobedience according to Deut. 28. They leave the land of promise for the land of Moab; possibly a mistake as evidenced by the deaths of all the males and they produce no child. I believe we are to come to that conclusion. Naomi says she's going back to Bethlehem where family is and Ruth a non-Jew commits to Naomi's well-being and faith (that part we'll pick up next week). But notice again the negative experience in Bethlehem. God knows we'll experience suffering in our life

When we struggle to believe God can has the power to change our situations (Ruth 1)

Naomi returns to Bethlehem – a smart move – not alone but with a daughter –in-law committed to her God and her well-being. But Naomi is bitter and tells her people

²⁰ "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. ²¹ I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

Naomi blames God for her misfortune but ultimately we are to conclude it was her husband's poor decision to leave the land and go to Gentile country to find blessing. That plan never works. Naomi refuses to believe God can take a bad situation and turn it into blessing. And this happens in Bethlehem.

We'll revisit Jacob and Ruth next week because we know the story isn't over. But Bethlehem first comes on the pages of Scripture as a place where sad things happen and God's people suffer for various reasons. But God is no stranger to suffering either and knows what we need for our sorrow and suffering:

We Have a Saviour Who Identifies with our Suffering

While many sad things can happen anywhere – and they do – and to anyone – and they do – not everyone has a person they can turn to who completely understands and is full of compassion for their plight. Only God and Jesus meet that standard. God sent Jesus because of His love for us, to die for us so we could receive forgiveness of sins. When Moses wants to see God, God allows him just a glimpse but He also gives him more than he asked by speaking of Himself. God said to Moses as He passed by,

⁶ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”

God cares about His people. He desires our devotion and is willing to meet our needs, pour out His love in us by His Spirit and answer our prayers in the best way we need help. David said out of personal experience in Ps. 34:18

¹⁸ The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

‘Broken-hearted’ and ‘crushed in spirit’ are about as low as we can go. God reaches out to us in our lowest moments. And so of course does Jesus.

He & His Father are full of compassion (Ex. 34:6-7; Ps. 34:18; Matt. 9:36)

Matthew’s gospel records Jesus having compassion on people four times and that doesn’t count the many verses that use other words. But Matt. 9:36 sounds a lot like His Father:

³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

And many times Jesus was moved with compassion and fed people, healed people and drew them near to Himself. Jesus is well-acquainted with suffering and so is His Father. We read in Isaiah 53 that the cross was the Father’s idea. God allowed Jesus to suffer for our sake:

³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

He suffered so we could live (Is. 53:4-7)

At Advent we celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world. We don’t just celebrate His birth but the reason why He came, to suffer for us. But He rose from the grave and now sits at the Father’s right hand interceding for us, as our Great High Priest.

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

That God chose for Jesus to be born in a place that was well-acquainted with grief and suffering was not a coincidence. Jesus came to right the wrongs and heal the hurts. He prays for us and invites to come to Him in prayer.

He overcame to strengthen us in our sorrow (Heb. 4:14-16)

We who know Him as Lord will also overcome in our suffering that we experience in this life. We can come to Him because He understands us since He lived as one of us. God doesn't abandon us in our suffering (as we'll see in Gen. 35 and Ruth next week). He's right there with us reminding us we are overcomers, that we too will rise one day and that grace and mercy are available 24 x7.

And that would be a great place to stop and be washed and refreshed in the compassion of a suffering Saviour, but there was more to His suffering.

He endured so we would follow His example (1 Pet. 2:18-25)

Peter, who was an apostle, didn't get this right away and learned through the loving, forgiving heart of His Saviour that Jesus calls us to suffer for Him:

¹⁸ Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. ¹⁹ For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. ²⁰ But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹ To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Jacob and Ruth and Peter and millions more have discovered that we might have to suffer in this life. We will all experience pain and sadness but we have a Saviour whose experienced far worse and endured through it all. He also expects us to endure too and trust Him to meet our needs of grace and mercy.

We're all struggling a little bit this Advent during Covid as we anticipate a smaller Christmas gathering, fewer presents perhaps or a stay at home Christmas instead. This isn't suffering just setbacks. Let's keep a healthy perspective on what Christmas is about. Yet some are suffering because the great Christmas they had last year with their family has changed dramatically. Or the health they enjoyed one year ago, feels like a lifetime ago. Or other circumstances has worsened and heart-ache, pain or sorrow is their present reality. God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit have not left you. They are with you and invite you to draw near to God; and He will draw near to you. To give you comfort, strength and compassion you need (2 Cor. 1).

But He also does that through us, His people. And many passages call us to be kind and compassionate towards others, forgiving each other just as Christ Jesus did for us, being the hands and feet of Jesus to fill a lonely void in people's hearts. Bethlehem wasn't just a cute rural, serene scene of humble and happy people. It had a history of pain and sorrow. And God and Jesus decided, this looks like a good place to start.

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