

Bethlehem

As Christmas approaches, our thoughts once again turn to the events that led to the birth of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, in that little town of Bethlehem in the land of Judah. Something like 2,000 years before this supremely remarkable event, another birth had taken place in Bethlehem. Rachel, the wife for whom Jacob had worked so hard, gave birth to Benjamin in her dying hour. She called him Benoni, meaning "son of my sorrow" but Jacob called him Benjamin meaning, "the son of my right hand". This first mention of Bethlehem in the Bible (Gen 35:18-19) reveals the awesome significance of the future birth to take place there. The Lord Jesus was to be a man of sorrow, acquainted with grief but, praise God, He is now seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Retired Members Corner



Bethlehem, 'house of bread', is often associated with the Book of Ruth. Far off pastures often look greener than your patch. People emigrate in search of a better life and then realise that they've made a false move and regret it. Naomi emigrated from Bethlehem to Moab in the face of God's disapproval. Disaster befell her there and eventually she returned to Bethlehem with Ruth during the barley harvest. It is good to feel you are where God wants you to be. Back in her home town the story is familiar. Ruth married Boaz, and their son, Obed, was born - the father of Jesse, David's father.

Bethlehem was the destination to which the Lord sent Samuel in order to anoint the next king of Israel. David, the young shepherd, thought by his father to be the least likely candidate, proved to be the Lord's choice and became the most notable king in Israel's history. Bethlehem was David's royal city.

In ancient Israel when you wanted water there were no taps to turn on. You had to go to a well and draw water. Judging by David's despairing cry in the Cave of Adullam, the water in the well of Bethlehem was very much to his liking. "Oh that one would give me drink of the well of Bethlehem which is by the gate" (2 Sam 23:15). Reading Psalm 142 leaves the impression that David was in the depths of depression. He felt his soul was in a prison. At this time Bethlehem was in the hands

of the Philistines and, in obtaining the water which David craved, his three chief mighty men put their lives in jeopardy by going through the enemy's lines. Those three men were willing to give their lives to satisfy the longing of their master. We have a Lord who gave His life to save our souls. David couldn't drink the water; it was too precious. He poured it out as a libation to the Lord. The child that would be born in Bethlehem would grow up and eventually provide a fountain of blood so precious that nothing in this world could match its worth. That blood can provide the answer to all the problems of life; it can cleanse from all sin.

Why were Joseph and Mary, whose home was in Nazareth, having to make the 90-mile journey to Bethlehem at such an awkward time for Mary? The land of Judea was part of the Roman Empire, ruled at that time by Caesar Augustus, and he had issued a decree that everyone should be enrolled in order to be taxed. For some reason, not quite clear, all had to go to the city of their ancestors and, because Joseph was a descendant of David, he had to go to Bethlehem. This, of course, fulfilled the prophecy of Micah 5:2: 'But thou Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.' Over 1,000 years before Micah, Jacob, on his deathbed, gathered his sons together and spoke to each one. To Judah he said: 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet until Shiloh come and unto him shall the gathering of the people be' (Gen 49:10). Our Lord is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, as well as being the Lamb that was slain.

I sometimes turn things over in my mind. I was a Purchase Tax Officer in Glasgow for five years and I used to register people for Purchase Tax if they fulfilled the requirements. I would issue them with a Purchase Tax Certificate which they could quote in order to purchase goods tax free. It never entered my head that I might be registering someone whose name would go down in history. It was usually those who failed to register who made the headlines. The official who registered Joseph would be totally amazed to know that what he was doing helped to fulfil prophecy.

Joseph and Mary eventually arrived back in Nazareth with their child, having been to Egypt en route, and Bethlehem falls out of the Bible narrative. However, another well is mentioned where the water is even more beneficial than the water David longed for. In a small village called Sychar in Samaria there was a well called Jacob's well. One day as the Lord Jesus was resting there He met a woman who had come to draw water. She was at a loss to know why He was even talking to her because He was a Jew and she was a Samaritan. As the conversation progressed He revealed to her all her past life and her present condition. She realised she was talking to the Messiah. Do you talk to the Messiah? Does He reveal things to you through the Holy Spirit? Has He given you a well of water springing up into everlasting life? That's His promise to whosoever believeth in Him. One day He is coming back to reign over the earth in Jerusalem, just five miles from Bethlehem. What a day, glorious day, that will be!