

Rachel's Death

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 December 2019

Preacher: Rev Andrew Coghill

[0 : 0 0] In Genesis chapter 35, we read at verse 19, Rachel died and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem.

And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave, that is the pillar of Rachel's grave, unto this day. For the next couple of weeks, I'd like us to look at what we might describe, if we're to use colloquial terms, highlights of a small town.

And we'll be looking at this small town of Bethlehem over the next four weeks or so, and see some of the highlights in Scripture as to how the Lord has made use of this place.

And it is a small town, and comparatively, you know, non-specific, comparatively, non-descript in terms of the biblical record.

It's much bigger now, of course, and has been drawn, people have been drawn to it for obvious reasons and associations with it now over the last couple of millennia.

[1 : 0 4] But to begin with, it would have been an extremely small and modest town, city only in the sense that it would have a wall rounded by way of defence and protection.

Bethlehem means, as some of you will know, house of bread, which means that it must have been a fruitful area. The land must have been good, and it must have brought forth grain abundantly, and had good pasture for flocks as well.

And indeed, in future weeks, of course, we'll look at how when Ruth goes to Bethlehem, there's mention of both the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. Different kinds of grain, obviously, being harvested in the same year.

Such an abundance of grain as is to make for an abundance of bread. Bethlehem, the house of bread. That's what it means in the Hebrews, we say.

And the way of Ephrath, or Ephrathah, which sometimes it's referred to as Bethlehem, Ephrathah, in the fruitful field, in the fruitful land. Ephrath means fruitful.

[2 : 1 0] And Jacob is journeying to Ephrath, to the fruitful area, presumably in order to graze his flocks, of which he has got such abundance.

And the pasture around Bethlehem was especially good. It's a very steep-sided area. Bethlehem is on very steep hills. Not unlike some bits of Glasgow, of course, very steep hills for the streets.

So it's on steep hills and there's steep-sided hills round about it. And sometimes, of course, the steep-sided hills would be better for pasturing than the sort of flatter land you might need for agricultural land, arable land, for growing of crops.

But obviously there was that as well in the surrounding area, because we've got reference to it elsewhere in Scripture. So it is a fruitful area. Good for pasture.

Indeed, perhaps some of the best pasture in the Holy Land. It's not for nothing that the lambs and the flocks and the sheep that were intended for temple use in later centuries were raised at Bethlehem.

- [3 : 16] And that the shepherds almost certainly who were looking after the flocks around Bethlehem at the time when our Lord was born were looking after temple flocks. The flocks, the sheep, and the lambs which would be intended for sacrifice in the temple.
- That means they would be the best of the best. Which means the pasture must have been good around that area. So it's a fruitful area. And Jacob is heading towards this fruitful area.
- He's heading south from Bethel. He's been in Bethel, remember, where the Lord told him to go to. And Bethlehem, or Ephraim, is about 15 miles south of Bethel.
- So he's heading south. Where is he heading to? Well, Ephraim, the fruitful area, is almost certainly not an end in itself. We read towards the end of the chapter, he headed down to Manarah, that is, Hebron, where his father was, and his father was dying.
- And so it's likely that Jacob is heading down south towards Hebron, where Isaac is in his final days, or his final months, probably.
- [4 : 23] Now, of course, Isaac had thought he was dying for decades before that. So perhaps there's not too much of a rush at this point. Isaac is 180 by the time he dies.
- So obviously Jacob is making his way south towards where Isaac is in order to be with his father towards the end. Well, that's what the narrative would suggest.
- However, he doesn't make it that far before Rachel gives birth to the child that becomes Benjamin. As she calls him, verse 18, Ben-oni, which means son of sorrow, or son of my sorrow.
- But his father called him Benjamin, or Ben-Yamin, meaning son of my right hand. And, obviously, it doesn't go without saying, but it's a small point to note that Benjamin is, as it happens, the only one of the sons of Jacob who is actually born in the Holy Land.
- All the others, if you think about it, are born in Syria, in Paddan Aram, where Jacob is serving with Laban. All the others, including Joseph, are born out there where he is serving with Laban.
- [5 : 36] Once he comes back into the land of Canaan, into the Holy Land, the only one of his children who is born there is Benjamin. Where is he born? He's born in Bethlehem. So, we see here that you've got both a death, a tragic death, and almost incidental here, a birth as well.
- And it all is focused here on this seemingly accidental place, where Jacob ends up having to stop because Rachel goes into labor.
- They journeyed from Bethlehem. And there was, verse 16, but a little way to come to Ephraim. He was obviously heading on to somewhere else, more fruitful for his flocks and herds, and Rachel travailed, and she had hard labor.
- They had to stop. Because you can't just dictate when a baby's going to come. The baby was coming. They had to stop. And Rachel had hard labor. And obviously, as we read, tragically, it cost her her life.
- And it almost seems, in fact, certainly it is the case, that for Jacob here, the death of his favorite beloved wife is the main event here.
- [6 : 48] Yes, he has a son. Yeah, but, you know, at this point, he's already got 11 other sons. So, it's not so much of a big deal as it might once have been. He's got his youngest son.
- Yes, you could see the number of the tribes of Israel is now complete here, with the birth of this final one, who would be one of the patriarchs of the 12 tribes. But, for Jacob, the big deal is that Rachel has died.
- The big deal is the loss of his favorite wife, whom he loved from the very first. And she, as a result, has this burial place, this pillar, all to herself.

And yet, there is a certain isolation in it. It is a grave on a journey. It is not, sort of, the tomb of his fathers or whatever.

That privilege is reserved for Leah. And in the end, as it happens, we read in Genesis 49, he says, you know, in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, he's giving his final instructions to Joseph as to what to do about his own burial.

[7 : 55] The field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham brought with the field of Ephron, the Hittite, for a position of a burial place. There they buried Abraham and Sarah, his wife.

There they buried Isaac and Rebekah, his wife. And there I buried Leah. Leah, finally, if you like, gains the seniority over her sister, who was always the favorite and always the one that Jacob really loved, although Leah was the one that produced most of the sons for him.

And altogether, she herself had six. And, of course, two that were attributed to her from her handmaid, Zilpah. And Rachel, of course, had the two from Bilhah, which would count legally as hers, but only the two actually herself that she had, Joseph and now Benjamin.

And Benjamin costs her her life. And here is part of the tragedy or the irony or the bitter sweetness of it. Shewah had said to her husband in previous chapters, Give me children or I die.

And he said, Well, I'm not in the place of God. I can't make you have children. And in the end, of course, it might have been more accurate to say, Give me children and I die. Because had she not had this final child, then she would still be living.

[9 : 17] She would still make the journey. Yes, she'd only have had the one son of her own, but she would still be there, quite certain, but for Jacob himself, he'd far rather have her. But this was the nature of it.

This was the Lord's providence in it. She had this final son, as the midwife said, Fear not, I shall have this son also. So we see, centered right at the beginning, this which is the first mention of Bethlehem in Scripture.

Here we have it as a sight both of birth and of death. Almost as it were in the same breath. Came to pass, as her soul was in departing, before she died, that she called his name Ben-Oni, but his father called him Benjamin.

And Rachel died and was buried in the way to Ephraim, which is Bethlehem. It is the sight, then, right away of a birth, yes. But primarily here, the narrative is clearly focusing more on the death.

The death of Rachel. The death of Jacob's favorite wife. And yet the two are inextricably banded up together. Had she not been giving birth, she would not have died.

[10 : 31] Had she not died, there would be no mention of Bethlehem at this point. Here in Scripture. Yes, it's mentioned later on. And yes, it comes up in the narrative various other times, most of which we will look at.

But here is the first mention in Scripture of Bethlehem. And it is a place of birth. And it is a place of death at the same time. And not surprisingly, perhaps, the death outweighs the birth.

But had there not been the one, there would not have been the other. And I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this. Because obviously, not only is that ultimately the case with the climax of Bethlehem's purpose in God's scheme of things, and his work of salvation, it is a place of birth.

But that birth is in a sense overshadowed and outweighed by the death of the one who ultimately is born there. The only reason that there is to commemorate and to celebrate, if we can say that, the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, is because he became our Savior by means of his death.

His death upon the cross at Golgotha, which paid the price of sin for everyone who would trust and believe in him. It is because of his death, because of his death and resurrection, that his birth is so significant.

[11 : 58] It is because of Calvary that Bethlehem matters. It has its fulfillment. It has its consummation. It has the ultimate purpose of its entire being on the map in the death of our Lord, which makes his birth so significant.

And here we have, right at the start, a death and a birth bound up together. A death and a birth which puts Bethlehem literally on the map.

Yes, it would have been a place of great agricultural fruitfulness. Yes, there would always be people who would settle there. It would be a place of comparatively strong defense with its steep hillsides and so on.

But it will come up several times, of course, in the Scripture narrative. And yet, its mention is always brief. Its mention is always brief.

And it becomes significant, not simply because of what is centered in it, but rather because of what comes out of it.

[13 : 08] And it is because of what comes out of Bethlehem, the death of Rachel, and then Benjamin as one of the patriarchs of the twelve tribes. And of course, it is from Benjamin that the first of the kings of Israel come.

And then, of course, out of the tribe of Judah comes David and so on. But David, of course, himself sent through in Bethlehem. Or beginning, rather, in Bethlehem. That David's greatest exploits take place out of Bethlehem.

Most of what Bethlehem becomes remembered for and significant for is not what happens in it, but because of those who originate in it, what they then do when they come out of it.

It is a beginning. It is a staging post, if you like. It has its significance only in what happens afterwards.

And to an extent, you could say that is true not only for Bethlehem, but it is true also for all of us. We all had a birthday. They were all, no doubt, delighted our parents and grandparents when we came into the world.

[14 : 17] We don't have any recollection of that. But they would have moved and had and coo-cooed over the new baby when it came into the world. But our significance is not simply that we were out of the bundle of joy one day and brought lots of joy to everyone when we were born.

It's what do we go on to do with our lives. And the most significant, the most lasting impact that anyone will ever be able to make or have upon their lives will be their relationship to, or lack of it, in terms of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is what will be the defining characteristic of any individual. Not their skin colour, or their race, or the language they speak, or even their gender.

The ultimate distinction and division in the human race will not be between men and women, or Scottish or English or black or white, or whatever it may be, but rather, as Galatians 3.28 hints, you know, in Christ there's neither Jew nor Greek nor bond nor free nor male or female.

They're all one in Christ. Or if you're out of Christ, they're likewise all in one destination as well. It is the ultimate distinction. The ultimate division is whether we are in Christ or out of Him.

[15 : 35] And the life that we go on to lead from that day of our birth that no doubt brought joy to so many people, the ultimate distinction of our lives will be where we end up in relation to Jesus Christ.

And just as Christ is the ultimate goal and the ultimate destination that is held out to every soul that comes into the world, it is their ultimate fulfilment.

And most people in the world, of course, never attain that fulfilment. It is only a minority of the population of the world that embraces Christ.

Even when you consider the exponential growth of the Christian church in places like Africa and China at the moment, it's still a minority of the population overall.

And historically, it's still a minority of the population down all through the ages who have actually embraced Christ as they are saved. And it will probably continue so to be. Unless the Lord makes one huge big in-gathering at the end, when perhaps more people will outnumber believers, might outnumber the non-believers at that time, who can say.

[16 : 50] But for most of history, it is a tiny minority of the population as a whole who embrace Christ, who have that fulfilment in Him. But that is the ultimate fulfilment for the human race.

That is the ultimate goal, the ultimate aim. It is what we are called to aspire to. And until and unless we are complete in Christ, we are never really complete at all as human beings.

We go through life unfulfilled. We go through life incomplete. And tragically, of course, that is what most people in the world are seeking to plug that gap with anything and everything else.

Whether it be the materialism of the world, whether it be pursuing their career or their job with manic compulsion, or whether it be money, or whether it be all the things of the world they try to fill that hole with, that that hole will never be filled.

That gap will never be filled. That fulfilment will never come outside of Christ. And just as we have our ultimate purpose and our chief end in Christ, so, of course, who does little Bethlehem?

[18 : 08] Here it is mentioned for the first time. And we will encounter various individuals in the coming weeks who are associated with it, and who have perhaps, oh, either their birth or their own settlement, or whatever it may be, to this little town.

And yet, ultimately, for all its comparatively rare appearances in Scripture and the prophecy associated with it, it too has its ultimate fulfilment in Christ, who is born there.

And that is what it is all giving up to. And that is the reason Bethlehem has been brought into existence in the first place. There's a long way to go before that ultimate fulfilment.

And there's a lot of people who will cross its path and who will traverse the pages of its story before that fulfilment, just as there are many pages on our own particular book of our lives before we have our fulfilment in Christ.

But that is the ultimate aim. And here we have it mentioned. In the context for the first time of a death and a birth together came to pass, as her soul was in departing, for she died, that she called his name then only Son of my Son.

[19 : 31] But his father called him Benjamin, that is a birth and a death. Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave, that is the pillar of Rachel's grave, unto this day.

It's not the tomb of his father's. It's not even taking her place in death as his ultimate wife, which is an honour that goes to Leah. It stands alone, this grave.

It has no other claim except this is where the beloved died. This is where Rachel died. It stands alone. And likewise, our relationship to Christ is that which will stand alone, in one sense.

Yes, there is a heritage into which we enter. We could claim, yes, this is the heritage of our forefathers. This is our mission, the Reformation, and the common answers, and the established church, and all the disruption, and all the great days of yore, and all the sacrifices of our forefathers.

Yes, we enter into these things, but that's just the window dressing. That's just the wrapping paper around the gift. And ultimately, none of those things will say.

[20 : 46] Like this pillar upon Rachel's grave, it stands alone in the midst of the journey. Your relationship to Christ is the thing that ultimately defines your place, not only in time, but in eternity.

That is what we are to be aiming towards. That is the fulfilment of our very being, just as it is the fulfilment for this little town.

Highlights of our little town. The story of our little town. Ultimately, of course, it is a story that culminates in Christ. As likewise, our story must, if it is to be a story worth telling at all.