

A Season of Appointments: The Appointed Place

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[0 : 00] Bibles, and open to Genesis 35. And Genesis 35.

So as I've mentioned, and as you are very well aware of, that Christmas is fast approaching. It's eight or nine days away, depending on how you count them.

Some people count today as a day, so it'd be nine. Some people don't count today, then it'd be eight. But either way, it's less than ten, and it's coming quick. I don't know about you, but Christmas music has saturated my home for weeks now.

Has been to some degree in the stores, on the radio stations, in churches. We have sung hymns and songs related to Christmas, related to the birth of Christ.

Gifts are being purchased and wrapped. We have more purchasing and wrapping to do ourselves. Parties are being planned and enjoyed. Kids are looking forward to time off of school.

[1 : 15] It's going to be exciting. And parents are looking forward to the kids going back to school. And they're not even done yet. So, but that's what Christmas vacation typically entails.

You know, lots of busyness. But what I do appreciate, and especially when we have this opportunity, this time together, to come together for worship and gather as a church, is we don't have to be busy.

Right now is not a time for us to be busy. It's a time for us to rest together. It's a time for us to encourage one another and pray for one another.

It's a time for us to focus on the birth of our Savior, Jesus. I'm really excited about the Christmas program coming up on Friday.

It's going to be good. I know there's a lot of work that's gone into it. And I'm looking forward to that. It'll be a time of focus on Christ. I enjoy that as we gather on Sundays in the month of December, we light the Advent candles with each week, emphasizing a certain aspect in Advent, whether it's the preparation or the love of God or the joy that we have in Christ or God's gift, himself, Jesus.

[2 : 49] I've enjoyed this study that we've been doing through Advent and looking at Advent as a season of appointments. A few weeks ago, we saw the appointed prophet in John the Baptist, hundreds of years before he would be born, is prophesied to come to turn the hearts of the people back to God.

Last week, we saw the appointed family with Mary and Joseph and that God chose a family who was God-fearing and law-abiding for Jesus to grow up in.

Today, we're going to look at, in our continued study, the appointed place. The appointed place, obviously, we know is Bethlehem.

And we know that Bethlehem was a small town that was used by God. We sing, O little town of Bethlehem.

I hope that's not where you get your theology from or your understanding of things, but it is true. But even though it was tiny, Bethlehem is quite significant in Jewish history.

[4 : 04] Bethlehem is about 90 miles from Nazareth and almost seven miles south of Jerusalem. So I think about that, the length, when you think about these miles, I'm afraid at this time, this era, I'm afraid 90 miles doesn't really, like, get the point across.

Like, you think of, oh yeah, 90 miles will, excuse me, you know, that's, you know, 90 minutes or whatever on the highway. But this is 90 miles walking from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

So just keep that in mind when we say 90 miles or 100 miles, that's a significant amount of distance to cover, several days, at least, of walking and transport.

So back to Bethlehem now. Excuse me. In the book of Ruth, Naomi's family are identified as being Ephrathites from Bethlehem. Eli Melech and Naomi and their boys were from Bethlehem.

We're also told in 1 Samuel 17, and naturally as it flows along the genealogy of Jesus, Jesse, the father of David, is an Ephrathite. 1 Samuel 17, verse 12, I believe it says that.

[5 : 29] The name Ephrathite is derived from the initial name of the city, which is Ephrath, and it's given to us in Genesis 35. And that's what we're going to look at right now.

Genesis 35, I want to read verses 16 through 21. Verse 21. Then they journeyed from Bethel.

When there was still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor. And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, Do not fear, for you have another son.

And as her soul was departing, for she was dying, she called his name Ben-Oni. But his father called him Benjamin.

So to give explanation, Ben-Oni means son of my sorrow, and Benjamin means son of the right hand. That will be significant later.

[6 : 31] Verse 19. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath, that is, Bethlehem. And Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day.

And Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Adar. So, this is really the first exposure to the town of Bethlehem here in Genesis 35.

And it's not even called Bethlehem at the time. It's Ephrath. At some point, it gets the name change. But those who dwell in Bethlehem are known as Ephrathites in Scripture.

And we see Rachel was buried on the way there. They were going down that way, and that's where she had Benjamin. That's where she died. That's where her tomb is. And we see that Jacob, it says, journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Adar, which is also an important aspect, which we'll look at next week.

You wouldn't think that's such an obscure thing. Tower of Adar would even, I mean, how many, maybe some of you have heard of the tower of Adar. I know my father-in-law has.

[7 : 49] I know he shared that, actually, at our everyone breakfast, right? You mentioned the tower of Adar, among other things. I forget when he says things, you know, specifically.

He's just always going, love you. But, so we're going to look at that next week. But Genesis 35, 21 adds, and this is going to be a little snippet of what we're going to look at, in the Aramaic Targum.

So if you ever heard, if you ever see the word Targum as related to text of scripture, it just means, it's more than, it's not really a translation, it's kind of a translation, but it's an interpretation or a paraphrase.

So, in the Aramaic Targum of Genesis 35, 21, it adds that the tower of Adar is the place from which the king Messiah will reveal himself at the end of days.

So, that's something you can just think about for the next week or so as we get into that next week. But coming back to Rachel and the story here of Bethlehem, and you may be wondering, like, why are we talking about Rachel's death on the way to Bethlehem?

[9 : 02] What does this have, how does this play a part? As I was reading this and thinking about the, you know, the Christmas account of the birth of Christ, there are some astonishing parallels here.

Especially when you get to defining words, and names that are in this account in Genesis 35. So, just for your reference, and I hope to keep this, I should have had a slide for it to be up there.

The name Bethel, which is where they journeyed from, Bethel means house of God. That's what it means, house of God. Israel means God prevails or God perseveres.

Rachel means you. Not like Y-O-U, but E-W-E. You know, like a lamb. Okay? Benoni, as I mentioned, is son of my sorrow, and Benjamin is the son of the right hand.

Alright, so you got some definitions there you got to keep in mind. Now this is the, to me, the striking parallels here. You've got Rachel, the ewe, the, you know, female lamb, carrying her little lamb, who leaves the house of God, Bethel, to be born in Bethlehem, which is the house of bread.

[10 : 25] So when children were born in ancient times, they're often named by the circumstances which they were born in. So knowing, Rachel, knowing that she was dying, named her little lamb, Benoni, son of my sorrow.

She knew she was dying. She knew something was not right. This was a sorrowful time for her and her family. But Israel, right, her husband, which means God prevails, right, renames him Benjamin, which means son of the right hand.

Alright, follow that? Yeah? Still with me? Alright. Compare that to Mary. Mary is carrying the son of God himself, a gift straight from the house of God.

He's born as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world in a place called Bethlehem, which is the house of bread. The one who is born in the house of bread is called himself the bread of life.

He refers to himself as that. When Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple for his dedication at around 40 days old, according to the law, Simeon, remember that's Luke 2, verses 34 and 35, makes this statement.

[11 : 40] He says, Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is opposed. And a sword will pierce through your own soul also, so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.

So the child, Jesus, would become the son of sorrow for Mary, just as Benoni was for Rachel. yet through God the Father's declaration, Jesus is the son of the Father's right hand.

Now, I don't know if there's anything to that other than maybe coincidence, but I don't think so. Rachel and Jacob, they're important in Jewish history.

and Rachel, you know, dying on the way to Bethlehem and all, like, the apparent symbolism with the names involved and what took place, I think is just too much, too coincidental for it to just be passed by.

But I'm also not saying that God was using Rachel as a way of pointing people to Mary. That's not it at all. But it's just interesting to me the similarities that are there.

[12 : 51] And it really drives home the importance of the city of Bethlehem in the plans of God from the beginning. So Israel, you know, you've got Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, right?

Jacob's name, Israel. But Israel is the one through whom God gives the promise or is going to give the promised Messiah to his people and to the world. And this major event takes place in his life at Bethlehem.

Now, was Bethlehem really that important to the Jewish faithful? I mean, did they really care or think much about Bethlehem? Absolutely they did.

We know from Micah 5, 2, the prophet says, 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.

See, Micah was the last Old Testament prophet to give revelation of God to his people before there was a period known as the 400 silent years.

[14 : 00] So you read through the Old Testament and their history and the prophets, you've got God communicating with his people almost, you know, like all the time in their history.

But then around 430 B.C., it stops. Micah's the last of it. And this is one of the last verses in the book of Micah.

The promise of Beth, of the ruler in Israel coming forth from Bethlehem. So yeah, it was very important to the Jewish people.

It was very important to them because they understood that as being God's Messiah coming through Bethlehem. So Bethlehem was very important to them. When the wise men appeared to King Herod, he, you know, remember he cobbled together the chief priests and the scribes.

And, you know, he was concerned the wise men show up. We're here to bring gifts and to, you know, see the one who was born king of the Jews. Well, Herod, in his mind, is the king of the Jews.

[15 : 09] He is over Judea. The Jews are his people that he is over. He is not himself Jewish. And so, when he hears the news of someone else being born that is king of the Jews, that would naturally, Herod being who he was, paranoid and protective of his reign and power in any way possible, which that in itself is an interesting study, Herod's paranoia and what he did to keep his power, so obviously he was very concerned.

So he brings the chief priests and the scribes together and he said, in assembling them all together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. And they told him, in Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet.

And then they quote Micah 5 too. During the life and ministry of Jesus, the argument against Jesus' Messiahship, so those of you who were in my, in the Bible study, going through the Gospel of John, you remember we talked about this.

One of the arguments against Jesus being the Messiah that the people have been waiting for is that he did not have the correct geographical origins according to the people, the leadership.

In John 7, verse 42, they say, has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?

[16 : 42] Of course, the reason they thought that is because they thought he was from Nazareth. That's what he's built as. You see that throughout the New Testament. Jesus of Nazareth. Right? Because that's where his family settled after he was born.

But they don't know his origin, that he was actually born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem. So it's fascinating that God chose such a small, obscure city to send his son into the world.

Bethlehem. You read about it like three or four times in the entire Bible. And it's just little blips, but it's such an important city. But it's also not surprising that God would choose a small, obscure city to send his son into the world.

Because God specializes in utilizing the small, seemingly insignificant, to bring glory to himself. Turn with me to Deuteronomy 7.

Deuteronomy 7, verses 6 through 11.

[18 : 02] We see that Israel, God's chosen people, was a small nation that was chosen by God to be used for his glory. Deuteronomy 7, verse 6 through 11.

For you, are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you are the fewest of all peoples. But it's because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations and repays to their face those who hate him by destroying them.

He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face. You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you today.

[19 : 21] God chose the nation of Israel to be the people through whom Jesus would be born. We know in Genesis 3, it's believed Genesis 3 verse 15 is referred to as what was referred to as the proto-evangeliums, the first gospel, the hint of a gospel of a deliverer that God will send to deliver man out of the consequence of his sin and separation from God.

And that's later confirmed that the Messiah, that deliverer from Genesis 3 would come through the line of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in Genesis 12. And we see that in his promise to Abraham, God tells Abraham, look, you're going to have many descendants.

This guy who had none to begin with and was concerned about giving, like all of his stuff going to somebody who's not part of his household, God promises to give him a son and that he's going to have descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens or the sand on the seashore.

Innumerable descendants. And part of those descendants is the nation of Israel. And he says that they are going to be slaves for 400 years.

Right? That's the promise prophecy that God gives Abraham. They're going to be slaves for 400 years. Then I'm going to bring them out. And that's what the book of Exodus is about.

[20 : 48] The nation of Israel has been, they've been slaves for 400 years and God works to bring them out. So he had chose them before they were even a nation, before there was even a nation to talk about.

He chose the descendants of Abraham who were then the nation of Israel who were enslaved to Pharaoh. They, these are people who are as insignificant as you can think of on the planet and in the world.

They're slaves. They have no value. But God chose them and brought them out. Now God, who can see the beginning from the end, knew who they were going to be, what they were going to be, and what he was going to have to do to bring them out.

They're not the most in number, the least in number. They're least in significance. They don't even have a land. They're a nation that is living amidst another nation.

And God brings them out. And as his chosen people, he held Israel to a high standard. It was his desire that they would go and teach others about him.

[21 : 58] Read the Old Testament. This is the purpose of Israel is to be a testimony for God to point people to Yahweh. Joshua 22.5 shows that they were expected to preserve and keep the law.

In Exodus 19.6, there would be a kingdom of priests and holy among the nations. They were to have a testimony that was different from the rest of the world.

And that difference is because they had Yahweh as their God and they were to point people toward him. Their testimony ultimately was to bring praise and glory to the name of the Lord.

That's Jeremiah 13.11. Their high calling is straight from God who chose them out of all the nations on the earth. God chose the least and he expected the most.

Though they were not faithful to keep their covenant with God, he still was faithful to deliver the Messiah to the world through them at Bethlehem. An insignificant nation.

[23 : 07] Seemingly insignificant nation. Small nation. Through whom the Messiah would be born in a small, seemingly insignificant town.

one other aspect of God specializing in the utilization of the seemingly insignificant. Please turn with me to 1 Corinthians 1.

This is the last passage we'll be looking at this morning. We see in 1 Corinthians 1 that God chose to save those who were considered the least in society.

1 Corinthians 1 we'll read verses 26 through 31. For consider your calling, brothers.

Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

[24 : 17] God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world. Even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are.

So that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

so that as it is written let the one who boasts boast in the Lord. What more can be said? According to the world's estimation God chose the foolish and I have been called a fool on more than one occasion or has been implied that I'm a fool because of what I believe as a follower of Christ.

by the worldly estimation God chose the weak. Nobody who's particularly strong. God chose the low and despised.

This is the way God operates. It has been the case from the very beginning and it continues to be the case. God is not particularly interested in those who are considered wise by the world or rich by the world's standards or strong by the world's standards.

[25 : 39] It's not that he won't that he hasn't chosen or won't save them. But the fact is when you look at the church as a whole when you look at the people that God used when you look at the twelve disciples the apostles that God used to spread the message of the gospel through the book of Acts.

These were guys who had no particular great reputation. They were not Elon Musk with billions of dollars. They weren't Stephen Hawking with a great mind to think and philosophize anything like that.

These were fishermen and tax collectors the low and despised in the community that God has chosen to bring his message to the world.

he's chosen the foolish the weak the low and despised to praise him and bring him glory through the redemption that was offered through the baby born in lowly Bethlehem two thousand years ago.

So no it's not particularly shocking that God would choose a city so small a small town with seemingly no significance to bring his son into the world because it's just how God operates.

[27 : 01] The Advent season is the time to reflect on what God has done to bring his son into the world. As we examine these seasons of appointments I want to take encouragement from the way that God has worked.

The appointed prophet he sent to prepare his people to receive their Messiah. The appointed family to bring up Jesus in a God fearing law abiding home. the appointed place least among the clans but containing the most important birth in world history.

It's easy in our little area of the world to diminish our significance because of our size. We live in Shapley, Maine. Man you go like more than 15 miles away from here and people don't know what Shapley, Maine is.

Maybe that's an exaggeration. The fact is it's not a particularly significant part of the world. And we're a small church in a small town.

And we don't have the glitz and glam or a budget of larger urban churches. We don't have all the stuff. We don't have TV programs. We're not on TV all the time or whatever.

[28 : 07] We don't have that. We're a small church in a small town that's seemingly insignificant. And we can't offer the same ministry. Some of the ministries that other churches can offer, larger churches can offer and all that.

But as has been shown this morning, God specializes in using the small and seemingly insignificant. So as we average our 50 to 55 on a Sunday morning, don't let it discourage you.

I could easily let it discourage me. Because I have probably the best view of the house. to see when it's full and when it's empty. And there was one week not too terribly long ago that it was really empty.

And it was like, man, what's going on? Man, we're just a small town church. And we've got people come and go. But we are here to praise and glorify God with our words and with our service.

To love others in this seemingly insignificant town. Because Jesus died for the people of Shapley, Maine, as much as he died for the people of Sanford or the people of Portland or the people in Sacramento, California.

[29 : 29] It doesn't matter how large your area, the question is, are you faithful to do what God has called you to do? as those who have been chosen by God and saved through his son.

He holds us to a high standard of expectation. Are we following through? Are we living in obedience? Galatians chapter 6 verses 9 and 10.

And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Father, thank you for a little town of Bethlehem where you chose to send the most significant birth in the history of the world.

Lord, where you chose to step into history, to take on flesh, to live a life of perfection, abiding by your law. the same life that would be given for the forgiveness of our sins.

[30 : 43] It started in Bethlehem, Lord. Your people that you chose started as slaves. And we here, who you chose, were slaves to sin until we came to know Jesus.

in each situation, Lord, we believe you specialize in working with the small and the seemingly insignificant for your glory.

And Lord, we pray that you would indeed use us, that Lord, you would help us to be faithful to your word, to point people to you this Christmas season and beyond.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.