

Sunday 30th March 2025 - Know My Name: As For Me & My House

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[0 : 00] We're on the home stretch of this Know My Name series that we've been doing, looking at the significance and the importance of names. Dave is going to conclude things next week for us.

But for today, I thought it would be good to unpack some of the importance of place names in the Bible, and in particular the links that they have to houses and perhaps the place that we might call home.

And what's interesting in the Bible is that despite containing all sorts of stories about largely tent and desert dwelling families and tribes, actually the Hebrew word for house, it crops up in the Bible in an awful lot of places.

What is the Hebrew word for house? Well, it's pronounced in different ways depending on how it's used. But it usually comes out as this, either as beth or as beth.

It's the Hebrew word for house. And this one beth in particular, the way we pronounce it often, if that sounds a bit familiar, not surprising, because there are all sorts of place names in the Bible that start with beth or with beth.

[1 : 14] Most famously, perhaps, you've got a place called beth, or beth, as we might say it. So beth, meaning house, and lechem, lechem, is the Hebrew word for bread.

So, for example, beth, literally means house of bread, which is interesting, perhaps, because when we think of Jesus being born there, Jesus himself obviously would grow up.

But he'd say of himself, I am the bread of life, you know, the one whose life we're to be spiritually fed by. Anyway, Jesus is the one who later still describes his body as the bread broken for us.

And then Jesus was the one at the beginning of his life placed in a manger, a feeding trough, again implying that we're to be spiritually fed by him. All of which, I guess, ties in with this meaning of Bethlehem being this place whose name means house of bread.

That's one Beth town in the Bible. But how about another Beth place? How about Bethel, or Bethel, as we say?

[2 : 25] Beth, meaning house, and El, as we've seen, means God in Hebrew. So Bethel means house of God. And Bethel was so named because it was where Jacob had his dream of a ladder connecting heaven with earth.

Led Zepp called it a stairway to heaven. In the Bible, perhaps more of a ladder. And having had this dream, for example, we're told that when Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.

He was afraid and said, how awesome is this place? This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven. And so he called that place Bethel.

So Bethel, Bethel, house of God. And a dream that Jacob had that helped him to realize just how close heaven is. Just how close God is to us.

In that, in this life, even in a desert place for Jacob, we live in, if you like, the whole world is the house of God. And if we go back to Jesus' time, another place that we think about is Bethsaida, which literally means house of fishing.

[3 : 41] Which again, if you remember any stories where Bethsaida gets a mention, it's kind of fitting because it was a little town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where we're told that Peter and Andrew came from.

And probably James and John originally came from there too, all of whom were indeed fishermen who Jesus calls to leave their nets and instead be not fishers of fish, but fishers of people, helping people to catch the message of Jesus' good news.

Then another Beth associated with Jesus is another town, town of Bethany. And Bethany means house of the afflicted.

And again, this fits because it's reckoned to be the location in Jesus' day of a leper colony, a community where those with the skin disease of leprosy could live alongside each other and be cared for, away from judging eyes and the prejudice of those who feared becoming infected by them.

What's interesting though with this Bethany place is that Jesus spends a lot of time in Bethany. For example, we're told that he had a meal at the house of a guy called Simon the leper.

[5 : 02] Bit of a harsh nickname, if you ask me, if he called Simon the leper. I'm not sure he would have liked that himself. But the fact that this guy lives in Bethany is consistent with the idea that Bethany was indeed a leper colony since Simon the leper lived there.

What's more, there's even a suggestion that the family who Jesus tended to stay with most in Bethany, which was Lazarus and his two sisters Mary and Martha.

Well, maybe these three had originally made their home in Bethany because, in effect, they needed to. As we said, Bethany was a place which was known as a place where the sick could be cared for.

Sick people like Lazarus, who we know had been poorly for some time before he died, only for Jesus to bring him back to life.

Who knows, maybe that helps explain why Mary and Martha, unusually for their day, weren't married. As maybe they were seen as being untouchable by most folks because their hometown was a place of care for the sick and for lepers.

[6 : 12] And maybe they were caring for their brother Lazarus for some time as well. You know, whatever the personal circumstances of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

I think it's clear the amount of time that Jesus spent in Bethany makes a deliberate point of staying there with the afflicted, we could say. Jesus' way, perhaps, of demonstrating his inclusion and his embrace of those who others might have reckoned were too unclean to hang out with.

Indeed, because of Jesus' inclusive attitude, and perhaps in response to the love shown to her by Jesus, we're told that while Jesus was staying in Bethany, that same Mary, at one point she took out a pint of pure nard, which was an expensive perfume.

She poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house, the bed, was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

I think that's a lovely picture, perhaps, of a house of affliction becoming instead of a fragrant offering to God. You know, a picture, if you like, of the effect that Jesus' loving inclusion can have, even if you like, on the fragrance of a place.

[7 : 32] I think we see, for example, therefore, with Jesus, that whether it's the way Bethlehem, as the house of bread, points to Jesus as the bread of life for all people.

Whether it was in Bethsader, the house of fishing, where Jesus calls his disciples to help people catch his good news. Whether in Bethany, this house of the afflicted, instead becomes a place, actually, of radical inclusion.

Seems to me, the idea of a house for Jesus is that it's to be a place of welcome and inclusion for all. A place of help and of hope for everyone.

And in fact, elsewhere, Jesus uses the imagery of a house to underline just how broad this invitation of welcome is from God.

Saying in John's Gospel, again, talking about a house, he says, My father's house has many rooms. If that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?

[8 : 40] And the word many here, for many rooms, it actually means an abundance of rooms. You know, more than enough space to welcome everyone who wants to be there. I guess, yes, after this verse, Jesus goes on to say this, I am the way and the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except through me.

But I think given what we know about the breadth and the inclusion of Jesus' embrace, this stands to reason, I think, because it figures that, of course, no one gets to God outside of Jesus because Jesus' arms are as wide as love itself.

I think in all of this, you know, if Jesus' understanding of a house on a community level is rooted in welcome and inclusion, then that hopefully informs what we're about as a church, suggests the qualities that need to be at the heart of our house, our house of worship, our participation in our own community.

So our invitation, our inclusion is to be for all, but especially for those who other people, perhaps other places, even sadly other churches might choose to exclude.

Because for me, the way of Jesus, as we see, I think throughout his life, is one of radical inclusion, not exclusion. In other words, we don't get to choose who's included.

[10 : 15] We're simply called by God to hand out his invitation. But I think in all this, what for me makes Jesus' principle of welcome and inclusion so compelling is that he's not asking us to do anything with our own offer of welcome that he himself was not willing to do on an incredibly personal level.

In fact, I think if we look closely at some of the gospel stories, we can see Jesus' own home life as a model for the way we might live in our homes.

See, one of the best things I think about Jesus coming in person and live among us was that we get to see him, if you like, in all his domestic as well as his divine glory.

For example, we know that Jesus himself lived in a house and we might even know where that house was. So, if we unpack that a little bit, we're told in Matthew's gospel this, that on leaving Nazareth, where he grew up as a kid, Jesus went and lived in a town called Capernaum, which was by the lake.

And Capernaum, like Bethsaida, was a small fishing town on the shore of the big lake, known as the Sea of Galilee. In fact, here's a modern day ruins of Capernaum, as it looks today.

[11 : 45] It's not massive, as you can see, probably village size for us, but it was big enough in Jesus' day to have a synagogue, which have circled there. And that was surrounded by a network of streets and houses.

By the time Jesus moved there, it seemed Peter and Andrew had also moved there from Bethsaida, because in Mark's gospel, we read that after Jesus and his disciples had left the synagogue one day in Capernaum, we're told this, that they went with James and John to the home of Peter and Andrew in Capernaum.

Peter's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and he immediately told Jesus about her. So Jesus went to her, took her hand, and helped her up.

The fever left her, and she began to wait on them. That evening after sunset, the people brought to Jesus all the sick and the demon-possessed. The whole town of Capernaum gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases.

And then the next day, very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place where he prayed.

[13 : 09] Now, it's a nice story, this, but there's a lot in it. In particular, I think, what does it tell us? Well, I think it tells us that in this particular house, Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law, fitting perhaps on this mother-in-law.

But then as evening came, we're told many more people came to the house to be healed by him. In essence, it seems like it's pretty much an open-door policy. They were told that the whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus invited them to come in and be healed.

And what's more, we also tell that Jesus obviously stayed the night in this house, because very early in the morning, Jesus got up and left the house. I don't know if the clocks had gone back that night, and it was an early start for him, but very early, we're told.

Seems, therefore, that Jesus lived in that house. With Peter and Andrew, with Peter's mother-in-law, and therefore, presumably Peter's wife, who we assume was around, and maybe any kids that they had too.

Because there'd be no reason for him to stay the night if Jesus had got his own place somewhere else in the town of Capernaum. And if we think about that, I love that idea of Jesus being a kind of lodger, if you like, with Peter's family.

[14 : 36] I love the idea that not only did the whole town know where Jesus lived, and then Jesus invited them into his home, but also that Jesus himself was essentially included as a member of Peter's extended family.

We talk about a house of welcome and inclusion, of help and hope for everyone. But hospitality was evidently at the heart of Jesus' own domestic life.

Now, what's more? After Jesus, we're told, went off to pray, and he visited some other towns after that as well, we're then told in Mark's Gospel that a few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home.

So Peter's family home had become Jesus' home. And the amazing thing is, I think we know pretty definitely where that house in Capernaum was.

So again, if you go to Capernaum today, the site is dominated by this building on the top there. It looks like kind of Bond villain lair in some ways, but it's actually a church.

[15 : 50] It's a church which is built on stilts because of what lies beneath and underneath this modern church. Well, here's a photo of what it looked like before the modern church was built.

You've got these three octagonal walls, one inside the other, walls which are actually the remaining ruins of a fifth century church, which was itself built over the remains of a much simpler, older building.

You can see those darker colour stones on the bottom right there. That, archaeologists say, was a house-sized church because it's even got early sort of Christian graffiti scratched into the walls of it.

So in Capernaum, we've got a modern church, that one on stilts, built over a fifth century church, the octagonal one, and that is built over a much earlier church from maybe the late first, early second century.

So why these three layers of churches? Why this early graffiti? Well, because it's highly likely that this very early first century black stone-built house church was originally the family home of Peter and Andrew.

[17 : 16] Indeed, a fourth century pilgrim by the name of Egeria, she wrote that in Capernaum, the house of the chief of the apostles, who was Peter, has been turned into a church.

It's this church, this house, here, this home. And so what's more, it's likely that one of the most famous healings of all happened in this very home in Capernaum, of which we've got ruined remains, the very home which Jesus shared with Peter's family.

And we're going to see that healing. We're going to pick up the story that takes place in this very house. This is a reading from Mark's Gospel, chapter 2. A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home.

They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door. And he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.

Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it.

[18 : 49] And then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, Son, your sins are forgiven.

Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone?

Immediately, Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts. And he said to them, Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier, to say to this paralyzed man, your sins are forgiven, or to say, get up, take your mat and walk.

But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. So he said to the man, I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.

He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, We've never seen anything like this.

[20 : 21] I love that healing. Partly because of this guy's friends being so faithful on his behalf. Partly because it's quite a spectacular entrance, if ever there was one as well, through the roof.

But most of all, I think I love it because it's probably Jesus' own roof that is ripped up in order for this man to be lowered down.

And yet, how does Jesus react to his home being butchered in this way? Does he say, as maybe you or I would, you know, what the hell? What are you doing? You know, come on. Come on. He's not house proud in that sense.

No, not at all. It seems he understands that there are more important things than mere bricks and mortar going on here. In fact, his words are full of compassion for this roof crasher.

He says, son, your sins are forgiven. Get up. Take up your mat and go home. And it's not even, actually, now you're well. Can you help me fix the roof that you've bust through?

[21 : 23] No, he says, off you go. You go home. Go to your own home and start enjoying your new life. You see, we talk about places being perhaps a house of bread or a house of fishing or even a house of affliction.

Jesus' own home here, you know, with its roof ripped off. Yeah, we could call that a house of holes or a house of a broken roof or whatever, but better still, I suspect we could call it a house of hospitality, a house of healing, a house of hope, maybe.

Jesus' own home. I love that example that he gives to us. Indeed, in all of this, I think, and perhaps following Jesus' own very personal example, I wonder for us, I wonder for you and for me, what God, what we, would like our homes, our houses to be known by.

What would be the name of your home? I appreciate all of our homes will be different, all of our situations are different, some of us living alone, some of us with friends, some with partners or with families, some of us will live with people who share our faith or our outlook on life, others of us will live with people who don't.

And yet, regardless, I think, of our own setting, I suspect God is calling each of us to work out with him what we'd like our homes to be known for.

[23 : 03] So, for example, we could have a house of hospitality, you know, where friends and family visit knowing that they'll receive a warm welcome and a drink and a listening ear. If so, if that's your thing, maybe you'd like to follow Jesus' example in offering that more to people.

And if that's you, great, we need hospitality. Although the challenge in offering hospitality like Jesus, I think, is to make sure that those who tend not to be included elsewhere are maybe the very first people who we invite round.

Maybe there's a prompt for some of us there about who we have round, who we invite round to our homes. However, having said that, I know for some of us and for various often very good reasons, actually offering hospitality can be difficult for us to manage.

So there's no pressure in this. But if that's the case, if hospitality is tricky for us for whatever reason, I guess we could instead consider how our homes might be a springboard for what we can do outside of our homes.

For example, we could, instead of perhaps seeing our house as a home of hospitality, we could see our home as a house of recharging in that having rested properly at home, we might be able to serve more energetically, perhaps more enthusiastically when we're outside of our home, with others, maybe here at church or in our community.

[24 : 43] If so, if that recharging idea of our home is in place, then that's great. And in which case, God might be calling us perhaps to think more carefully about what we do with our time at home in order to ensure that it is indeed a place of recharging so that we feel more refreshed to then serve God and others more effectively.

And again, no, because each of our situations are different. If I were offering hospitality or perhaps carving out a bit of more space at home, if they both feel like tall orders, perhaps more generally, we could consider what values we might want our home life to be shaped by.

So for instance, I know for me and Gemma, we've always tried to make our home wherever we've lived, you know, a house of honesty and trust where particularly we as parents now try to be as open and as vulnerable as possible with our kids so that they in turn hopefully feel able to be open and vulnerable with us.

Maybe something in that might resonate for you as well, perhaps a desire for your home to be known as a house of honesty. Not putting on a brave face when you're in your own place but rather inviting people into your highs and your lows.

You know, that's something which in my experience, particularly as a parent, yeah, it takes courage and it feels risky at times but with God's help that openness and that vulnerability can really deepen the bonds of trust between people.

[26 : 31] as I say, each of us have got different home settings but I wonder what you'd like your home to be known for either for yourself or for those you live with or for those you live alongside.

Indeed, by way of bringing all this together, by way of conclusion, I think, and in all this, the good news, the good news is that just as Jesus lived with Peter's extended family in Capernaum, so too that same arrangement is actually on offer for us as well.

As Jesus said, anyone who loves me will obey my teaching, my father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them.

What a promise, what a privilege that is to think of Jesus as your housemate, as your flatmate, as your lodger, if you like, Jesus who comes in and lives with us.

What a privilege it is that God, that Jesus, would indeed make Jesus' home with us. and so I think in whatever way God leads us and through whatever priorities God places on our hearts for our own home life, I guess my prayer is that we be able in our own way to echo words that are spoken in the book of Joshua in the Bible where Joshua says, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

[28 : 15] it's a good prayer I would suggest. May that be our prayer, our hope, our commitment to God this day. Amen.

Amen.