

# O LOUSY TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

## MATTHEW 2:4-6, MICAH 5:2

Let me begin today with a **hymn** and a **Scripture**...

First, the passage of Scripture, Matthew 2:4-6, tells us, “**And when he (that is, Herod the king) had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.’ ”**

Now a hymn you’ve sung a thousand times... “**O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.**”

Over the last few years, I’ve seen on the internet multiple lists of **Disappointing Tourist Destinations**. Imagine, setting your sights on a place you want to see, saving your money, planning your trip, arriving at the attraction... only to discover it’s a bust, a bummer!

Here are a few destinations that appear on more than one list... **First** is **the Mona Lisa**. It hangs in the Louvre in Paris. Yet the painting is barely bigger than a postage stamp. You have to strain and jostle with others just to get close enough to see it. Two minutes and you’re done... **Second** are **the Spanish Steps** in Rome, Italy. As an eyewitness puts it, “**they’re just steps.**” It’s a great place to sit in the shade, *but that’s it*. The fountain in the plaza is just a trickle, and there’s no need to go to the top, the view is nothing to write home about... **Third** is **Plymouth Rock**, south of Boston. When I visited the Pilgrims’ landing spot in the New World, I expected to find a huge cliff jutting out over the ocean, but that’s not the real Plymouth Rock. *Here it is...* It’s a small, shapeless rock with the stamp, “1620.”

Yet none of these attractions, as big a letdown as they are, compares to the world’s **most overrated** tourist destination. The San Francisco Chronicle names a town in Israel as first place on their list of tourism bummer - *it’s **Bethlehem***. From a typical tourist’s point-of-view, *O Little Town Of Bethlehem* would be better named *O Lousy Town Of Bethlehem*.

I've visited Bethlehem twice on my trips to Israel. Once in the early 90s, and later in the 2010s, and it's only gotten worse since. Bethlehem has very little to offer in the way of *thrills* and *chills*. It's a *grimy, grubby, gloomy* little town. You'd think the birthplace of our Lord would be *grand and glorious*, but it's far more "*grunge*."

Most Israeli tour guides are reluctant to go to Bethlehem... One reason is that it's an Arab town on the West Bank, under Palestinian control. Christians and Jews aren't welcome... The simpler reason is that the guides just don't think there's anything in Bethlehem worth seeing. They also view *Bethlehem as a bust*...

And as we drove through the streets on my first visit, at first I agreed. Dilapidated buildings, dirty sidewalks, walls defaced with Arabic graffiti, boarded up windows, overflowing trash cans, hooligans prowling the streets. "*O Littered Town of Bethlehem*" seemed more fitting.

Even the souvenir store we visited in Bethlehem looked more like a military compound. The parking lot was surrounded by high walls. The need for such tight security didn't speak well of the neighborhood.

I'll never forget, on the way to the Church Of The Nativity, our driver had a near miss with a pedestrian. He rolled down his window and shouted at the guy in Arabic... The first lesson I got in Bethlehem was how to say "*donkey*" in Arabic. It was an educational trip.

When we arrived downtown, the *turmoil and tension* in Bethlehem were palpable. As we got out of the van and started across the plaza to the celebrated church, we were accosted by *Palestinian panhandlers*. They approached us asking for hand-outs and selling cheap postcards, "*One dollar, one dollar, only one dollar*" was the refrain. We held onto our wallets a little tighter. "*Bethlehem*" means "*house of bread*" - I figured it got its name because everybody was out for my money!

I saw Bethlehem as sort of a miniature, third-world New York City... Which reminds me of the year the garbage collectors went on strike in the Big Apple. Trash piled up in city streets until New Yorkers proved their ingenuity. They placed Christmas bows on garbage bags and left them on the backseat of their unlocked cars. New York's dependable thieves mistook the *trash bags* for *shopping bags* and hauled off their garbage. *That strategy would've worked in Bethlehem.*

The Church of the Nativity is quite a sight... It's one of the oldest Christian basilicas in the world - *and it looks it*. The building hasn't had a fresh coat of paint in 1500 years. The block facade outside is weathered and crumbling. Over the church's 1600-year history, it's been riddled with cannonballs, bullets, and mortar fire.

The church is actually the linking together of several buildings owned by three separate churches: the Armenians, the Greek Orthodox, and the Franciscans.

Repairs to the building are impossible because of the dispute between the churches over who controls the compound. *Red tape* keeps the church *rundown*. On occasion, fights even break out between rival priests...

On December 29, 2007, an article appeared in The London Times. The first sentence says it all: "[The cradle of Christianity was rocked by an unholy punch-up when Greek Orthodox and Armenian priests came to blows in a dispute over how to clean Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity.](#)" Amazingly, rival religious factions can't even agree to spruce up the place.

Witnesses say Armenian priests got upset when Greek Orthodox priests set up their ladders on what the Armenians claimed was their part of the building. Angry words turned into violent blows. The melee lasted over an hour. Five priests were injured. It took Palestinian police to break up the brawl. *And we wonder why the locals aren't flocking to become Christians?* This ugly church building, and the ugly behavior that goes on inside, is religion at its worst...

And over the years, the situation hasn't gotten better. In a 2011 BBC article, the priests were still fighting. This time it was a battle of brooms. A Bethlehem police officer told a Reuters reporter, "[It occurs every year. No one was arrested because all those involved were men of God. Nobody was seriously injured in the scuffles.](#)" That's why I'm calling it, *O lousy town of Bethlehem*.

As you walk into the Church of the Nativity, the doorway is so low that a normal person has to duck. And this design was intentional. **Its entrance is also the result of the Church's sordid past...** When Muslims controlled the Holy Land, bullies would ride horses into the church to torment its worshippers and destroy its property. The priests shrank the door to keep out the *horses and hellions*. They figured correctly that no Muslim would bow under an arch to enter a Christian church.

I'll never forget walking through the door of the basilica for the first time. *What a disappointment it was!* When I looked at the ceiling, the church's wooden rafters were black and dirty. Its columns were limestone turn brown. The air was damp and musty.

The Church of the Nativity felt more like a *barn* than a *basilica*. *Why did we even bother to visit Bethlehem?*

I was about to admit that our tour guide was right, that there was nothing worth seeing in this lousy, little town **until we walked down the flight of stairs just below**

**the altar...** Realize, the Church of the Nativity was built over a series of caves that were situated on the outskirts of ancient Bethlehem. In the first century, the town's livestock were stabled in these caves.

As early as the second century, these caves were identified as the place Joseph and Mary sought refuge after being turned away from the Bethlehem Inn.

And as I descended those stairs leading into those underground caves, I felt a strange peace. I was leaving behind the *trouble* brewing in the city. I was moving deeper, beyond the social, religious, and political strife that was looming outside, and causing so much anger and animosity among the people above.

Under this infamous church, in a hollowed-out cave, I sensed the presence of Jesus – *the warm and wonderful and welcoming glow of God*. And I truly felt I was visiting the place where Jesus had been born. Below Bethlehem's *greed* and *grime*, I found *grace*. My time in Bethlehem turned from *bummer* into *blessing*.

Understand, Joseph and Mary didn't just stumble into Bethlehem desperate for a place to stay. The town was more than a convenient road stop on their journey south. God booked their stay a long time in advance...

In Micah 5:2, the prophet had declared, "**But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.**" The Prophet Micah had predicted the town of Bethlehem would be the Messiah's birthplace 700 years before Jesus was born.

And trust me, the town of Bethlehem was the same kind of skanky, roughneck place when Joseph and Mary were there, as when I visited - *if not worse!*

The village of Bethlehem began as a Philistine stronghold. When the Hebrews took it over, it became a farming town - thus its name, "*house of bread*." By the first century, Bethlehem was a haven for shepherds and sheep. In fact, the *sacred sheep* used in the Temple sacrifices grazed in its fields... *under Bethlehem skies*.

Of course, this didn't do much to enhance its image. In ancient times, *shepherds* and *sailors* had a similar reputation - both were *foul-mouthed, free-spirited, and fiery-tempered*. Shepherds were rowdy. Sheep reeked with foul odors. Even then, *Bethlehem was a barrio*.

On the night Joseph and Mary arrived, the town was full of visitors. Refugees from all over Palestine had returned to their hometowns to register for the census. You can be sure the place was crawling with the tired, the poor, and the lonely. They were stuck

in a one-horse town with nothing to do. Imagine the combination of *bored visitors*, *boisterous shepherds*, and *streets full of smelly sheep*... A night in Bethlehem was a *nightmare*.

On that first Christmas Eve, *O little town of Bethlehem* was full of *commotion*, *conflict*, and *commercialism*. In its streets, there was more *pain on earth* than "*peace on earth*." Drunken brawls and fist fights were more common than "*goodwill toward men*."

*And there's been bedlam in Bethlehem for quite a while now*... First century Bethlehem was much like twenty-first century Bethlehem - rough and rank - an eyesore and a cesspool - *one more lousy little town*.

In fact, the city of Bethlehem is a lot like the places we live. This world we all occupy can also be a *grimy, greedy, grubby* place - *it can be one lousy little town*.

Still today, buildings get boarded up. Hooligans prowl the streets. *Conflict*, and *chaos*, and *commercialism*, and *commotion* haunt the hood at Christmas... Yet as the famous Christmas carol says of the little town of Bethlehem, "*Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light*." God's light still shines in dark streets.

Despite our dismal surroundings - the garbage of our sin - the pot-marks of our mistakes... despite the hassle of red-tape - and the prevalence of greed - and the painful cries we hear around us... *The Savior can still be found! His light still shines in dark streets!*

To our shock and surprise, heaven is reachable even *by way of Bethlehem*. The little town in which our Savior was born proves once and for all that Jesus can be found even in the lousiest locations and situations!

The Prophet Micah commented on Bethlehem's earthly insignificance when he said, "*Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to me the one to be ruler in Israel*."

Here are a few other translations of Micah's description of Bethlehem, "*only a small village in Judah*" - "*tiniest of townships in all Judah*" - "*least of the clans in Judah*." God deliberately chose a lousy little town as a birthplace for His Son, *to prove to every other town that He's not above becoming a resident*.

God promises us a heavenly home one day, **but first he wants to come home with us**. You might be embarrassed or feel awkward having God at your house (*or in your heart*), but we celebrate Christmas for this very reason. God invaded our space, right where we live. Even if all I can give Him is a cave, from there Jesus will shine His light and touch our lives!



Bethlehem is not as far from heaven as you might have first thought - and neither is Stone Mountain, or Lilburn, or Snellville, or Lawrenceville, or Loganville.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, a few prisoners still occupied the Siberian work camps. Life in these camps was bleak, and hard, and depressing. One Christmas morning, the church bells rang. The prisoners crowded around the fence to watch the townspeople walk merrily up the hill to the local cathedral to worship the Savior. The prisoners assumed they'd been forgotten... *forsaken to celebrate Christmas in cold obscurity.*

But after the service, the pastor made his way down the hill to the camp. He set up a communion table and led the prisoners in worship. The beaten-down men were delighted to worship Jesus on Christmas Day.

One of the workers said to the pastor, "Thanks so much for being here. Now, God has come to us." The pastor, though, offered a gentle rebuke, "No, you misunderstand. This camp is where Jesus lives all year long. He goes to the cathedral only on special occasions." And this is what Bethlehem teaches us...

If God is at home in the *tiniest of townships* and in *the vilest of villages*, then He'll make His home anywhere with *anyone* who invites Him to enter.

The message of that first Christmas over 2000 years ago is that God is not intimidated by our filth, or our fighting, or our foolishness. He's not afraid of rough neighborhoods, violent streets, and turbulent homes...

God won't back away for fear of our fallenness. *Christmas means God doesn't need rubber gloves to touch us!* He loves us - all of us. And before He *moves us out of **this world***, He first *moves into **our world***.

Today, our surroundings are full of commotion and chaos. Every day, we travel in unfriendly environments. We rub shoulders with folks who want what we've got. We dodge people who'll pick our pocket or pick a fight.

We live among bullies, burglars, businessmen, and politicians - and it's hard to tell the difference at times. Foul odors, red tape, boarded up opportunities, and dilapidated possibilities make our lives harder.

***Welcome, friends, to Bethlehem!***

And here's our problem... we often come home from work or school *beaten down*. At times, it's more like we've been *beaten up*... We believe in God - and when we

come to church, we feel closer to Him - *but where we live, it's a different story*. Back home, life seems so hopeless and far removed from God's presence.

If this is you, understand, *you've yet to grasp the meaning of Christmas!* God chose to birth His Son in a lousy town like Bethlehem for a reason! It's undeniable proof that if you go deep enough with God, if you trust Him, you'll find Him in the midst of life, even in life's hardships. No matter how miserable our surroundings, God reveals His presence in the cave of our heart.

It's been said, "The question which Christmas most surely should bring, along with the beautiful carols we sing, and the happy excitement of trimming the tree... **is simply this, has Bethlehem happened to me?**"

As in the town of Bethlehem, we can find God in the midst of the lousiest of circumstances. In the middle of your mess - underneath all that disgusts you, and tires you, and frustrates you - you can find peace and rest.

Here's the line in our carol we often sing so glibly, "Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light." Yet if we believe that line, we'll sing it with conviction and courage. **God's light does shine in dark places.**

The birth of the Savior in a place like Bethlehem proves undeniably that we don't have to be victimized by our environment. No matter where we live, we're not alone! Jesus came into our darkness to shine His light.

The fact you've gotten *down and dirty* in your lifetime... lived a *dilapidated life*... even spent time on the wrong side of the tracks... *none of that frightens God off from you one bit*. His Son was born in a lousy town like Bethlehem to prove that God is willing to save you and me *just as we are and right where we are*.

It's a shame we never sing the last two stanzas of the hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." These are the verses our weary hearts really need to hear. Philips Brooks also wrote these lyrics, "How silently, how silently the wondrous Gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming; but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him, still, the dear Christ enters in. O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell, O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel."

Remember, the name "Emmanuel" means "God with us." And no matter how bad our wretched world gets, or how rundown our situation becomes, nothing can rob us of the Christmas promise... "God is with us!"

Trust Jesus - walk in His ways - follow after Him with all your heart... for God promises to be with us in this cold, cruel, calloused world. His light strengthens us in our challenges and comforts us in our sorrows.

God will even use the turmoil of this world to make us more like Jesus and prepare us for eternity. If we let Him, God can create *beauty* even in the midst of our *Bethlehem*. Here's the message of Christmas... The Savior is with us... *even in a lousy little town!*