

What is the significance of Bethany in the Bible?

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Bethany was a village in Judea about two miles east of Jerusalem (John 11:18), a distance considered a “Sabbath day’s journey” (Acts 1:12). Bethany was situated on the well-traveled road to Jericho. Some scholars think Bethany was more like a modern subdivision or a neighborhood rather than an entire town. The edges of Bethany reached to the Mount of Olives and also bordered Bethphage, a suburb of Jerusalem.

Bethany is probably best known for being the hometown of Jesus’ good friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Bethany was the place where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1, 41-44), it was the home of Simon the leper (Mark 14:3-10), and it was the place where Mary anointed Jesus’ feet with perfume (Matthew 26:6-13). Other references to Bethany are Mark 11:1 and Luke 19:29, which describe the preparations for Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the cursing of the fig tree in Mark 11:11-13, and the place where Jesus stayed overnight during His final week of earthly ministry, between His triumphal entry and His crucifixion (Matthew 21:17).

The name Bethany is translated by some to mean “house of figs,” as there are many fig trees and palms in the area; others translate it as “house of misery,” speculating that Bethany was a designated place for the sick and those with contagious diseases.

Bethany is also significant as the place near which Christ ascended back into heaven (Luke 24:50). Forty days after His resurrection, Jesus gathered His eleven disciples to give them final instructions before He left the earth (Luke 24:50-51). He took them to the Mount of Olives, in “the vicinity of Bethany” (verse 50), where He blessed them and

commissioned them. The Lord was then lifted up into the clouds (Acts 1:9). As the disciples stood staring upwards, two angels appeared to them and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

Bethany has an exciting future prophesied. Zechariah 14:4 says, “On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east.” When Jesus returns to set up His kingdom, it will be to the very place He left: the Mount of Olives near Bethany. Though the ancient town of Bethany may have been small and seemingly insignificant, it will be the scene of a world-changing event: the glorious return of Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:11-16).