

The Birthplace of Jesus

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Date: 24 December 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to look at the birthplace of Jesus this morning. Anybody know where Jesus was born? Has anyone ever been to Bethlehem?

Okay, I see that hand. Is there anybody else? All right. Is it a big metropolis today? A so-so place? Well, it was a little town, as the carol says.

Oh, little town of Bethlehem. It was an old town. Jacob speaks of Bethlehem way back in Genesis, chapter 48. Remember, he ran away as Esau's brother was trying to kill him.

And he went far away into Padan. And there he married Leah and Rachel. And on his way back then, 20-some years later, he's coming back, remember.

And he meets Esau and he's coming back home. And he says, That's Genesis.

[1 : 14] So, mentioned very early in the Scriptures as the place near which Rachel died and was buried.

It was also home to what famous couple that has a name, a letter or a book of the Bible named after the wife? Ruth and Boaz.

And that whole thing takes place there in Bethlehem where their baby, Obed, was the grandfather of David.

But it was clearly David that put this little town on the map. Much like we might say that Doc Bowen put Bremen on the map.

It was King David that put Bethlehem on the map and made it a noteworthy place. It was the town of David. That's how the angels announced his birth to the shepherds.

[2 : 14] Go into the town of David. It's where David was born and raised. It's where he grazed his father's sheep. And it's also the place where Samuel anointed David to be the next king of Israel.

The word Bethlehem, anybody know what it means? The house of bread. Any significance to that? As being the birthplace of Jesus who said one day, I am the what?

The bread of life. Whoever believes in me will never be hungry. So, Bethlehem. But we have one Old Testament passage, and only one that I know of, that actually foretold the birthplace of the Messiah King of Israel as being Bethlehem.

Turn to Micah. Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah. So, as you read Isaiah and the problems in Israel that Isaiah addresses, Micah was dealing with the same people.

Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah. And chapter 5.

[3 : 33] Now, this then was written 700 years before the birth of Jesus. And chapter 5, we're going to look at verses 1 to 5.

Chapter 5 begins with a message of despair. And then it's followed by a message of hope. That's often the way the prophets were, weren't they?

They were pronouncing the judgments of God. And yet, there's hope because of His grace. And that's the way we find this passage in Micah. We first look at the message of despair.

Right from the beginning, it hits us. Marshal your troops, O city of troops, for a siege is laid against us. They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod.

So, this is pointing to the time when Jerusalem will be under siege, surrounded, no food or water coming in to the city.

[4 : 31] That was the way that battles were often fought and won in that day. And so, people would starve to death and even eat their own children and so on.

So, disastrous and hopeless was the situation under a siege. And not only that, but Israel's ruler, their king, is here said to be struck.

And since, as we'll see later, the king is to be born in Bethlehem and not in Jerusalem, it may be pointing to the fact that the Davidic dynasty of kings will have been cut off when this prophecy is

fulfilled.

Because kings would be born in Jerusalem where kings lived. Jerusalem was the city of kings. And so, the reigning king would be in Jerusalem. If he had a son to take over, he would be born in Jerusalem. But if this king to be born is not being born in Jerusalem, it may be hinting to the fact that the Davidic line of kings will be interrupted and there will be no king in Israel.

[5 : 45] So, this feeds into this whole hopeless situation that the chapter begins with. And verse 3 will also say that Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth.

So, God is going to abandon his people. He's going to turn them over to the Babylonians. And then he's going to be silent for 400 years without a king as they go away into exile.

And even as they come back under Ezra and Nehemiah, there will be no king of David sitting on a throne ruling over the land. And so, this completes the picture of humiliation and hopelessness in Israel.

But then the text pivots at verse 2. And what follows is a message of hope. And I think we need to sense the darkness and despair in order to appreciate just how glorious this note of hope is.

But you is the way the pivot begins. But you. And now God is talking to Bethlehem, the city. But you, Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me.

[7 : 01] For me, God. One who will be ruler over Israel. So, when Micah wrote, Jerusalem was the city of kings.

Bethlehem was a little insignificant town just five miles south of Jerusalem. And yet, this is God's choice as the birthplace of his Messiah King.

The one who would be ruler over Israel. Whose origins are from of old, from ancient times, as the verse continues. Verse 4 says, He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord and in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God, and they will live securely.

For then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth, and he will be their peace. And so it is this one born of Bethlehem who stood one day and said, I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. That's exactly how Micah portrayed this coming Messiah King as the shepherd who would shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord and in the majesty of God's name, Yahweh's name.

[8 : 16] Well, this is the message of hope. It's the birth in Bethlehem of the shepherd king of Israel who, though born, has origins that are from of old, from ancient times.

Now, I'd like for us just to think a bit about this. Is it not like our God to choose the little town of Bethlehem over the big city of Jerusalem?

When God rejected Saul as king, which son of Jesse was chosen to be the next king? Well, you remember that was the whole struggle inside of Samuel.

All he was told is one of the sons of Jesse will be the next king, so get your oil and go down to Bethlehem and anoint the next king. And Samuel comes and he says, Jesse, where are your sons? And he brings the first one in. Oh, he's a nice, tall, handsome guy. And Samuel thinks what? Surely the Lord's anointed is before him. And the Lord says, no, don't judge as men judge.

[9 : 24] Men look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. Oh, this isn't the king. It's not big Eliab. Well, then the next, and the next, and the next.

Finally, he's been through all of the sons except David and Samuel says, is there not another? Because God has not chosen any of these. Oh, yes, there's the little guy.

He's out taking care of the sheep. We'll call him because we're not going to start the supper until he arrives and he comes. And he is the one, the little ruddy David, only a boy named David, little David playing on his harp.

He's the king, the little one, not the big one. Do you see the similarity? God chooses little Bethlehem as the birthplace for the little David who will become king and will have a king on his throne who will reign forever and ever.

It's a theme that runs throughout the Bible. Maybe some come to your mind. God's choice of the little things, the despised things, to shame the wise and the strong and the mighty.

[10 : 35] Any ideas that come to your mind of God picking the unsuspecting one? I'm sorry? Moses, okay. Well, he was the, yeah, as a little baby in the crib.

Okay, good. Slow to speak. Anyone else? Mary herself. That's right. We'll get to that. Naaman's little maid that told him about the prophet of God in Israel that could heal her master.

Good. Who killed the mighty warrior Sisera? And who's jail? She's just a housewife that dwells in a tent and drives a tent peg through his temples.

You'd never think this mighty warrior is going to be brought down by a woman with a mallet and a stake. It's that way with David and Goliath, wasn't it?

The little brings down the big. He's chosen in Mordecai, bringing down number two in the land, Haman. Scaredy cat Gideon and his 300 men defeating 130,000, 35,000 Midianites.

[12:01] So a pattern emerges as we are familiar with our Bibles. This is clearly one of the ways of the Lord. You read about the ways of the Lord. There are his works and his ways.

His works are the actual events that he does, his actions, but his ways are more like the characteristic behavior of a man. You know, you say of this person, well, that's just the way he is. And God has that as well about him. It's just the way he is. And how do you figure that out? Well, you start to look at all of his works and you start to see patterns. And we start to see this pattern of God delighting to choose the insignificant, the little, the lowly, the ordinary, the unlikely.

Paul Worsher likes to put it this way, that God delights to choose the runt of the litter. And why is that? That he might protect his own glory. That it might be seen that anything that is, these are often in great acts of redemption for his people and God wants it to be seen that it's not this man, this woman, it's me.

Taking ordinary, weak, insignificant things and doing extraordinary things through them. Well, as Cindy said, Mary, the mother of Jesus, sees herself fitting into that pattern and she refers to that in her song.

[13:30] Turn over to Luke. To Luke chapter 1. In her Mary's song, we hear her identifying herself as it were the runt of the litter.

verses 46 to 55 is her song. Remember Elizabeth, her old relative, was in her sixth month of pregnancy after a lifetime of barrenness.

And when Mary visited her and greeted her, Elizabeth's baby, John the Baptist, six months old in the womb, leaped in her womb and Elizabeth exclaimed in a loud voice, verse 42 of Luke 1, Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear.

But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? You see the honor she heaps upon Mary. You are blessed and you are the mother of my Lord.

And why am I so favored even to have you come and visit me? And then we start to see Mary's response to that in verse 48.

[14:43] She says, well, verse 46, Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

You see it there? Her self-identity is I am of a humble, a lowly estate. I am a servant. A lowly young virgin, a little nobody from Nazareth to be the mother of Messiah.

From now on, she says, all generations will call me blessed. But she wants it to be known that it's not because of anything about her, that this favor is heaped on her, that she has this glorious honor that will be hers throughout all generations.

It's rather because, as verse 49, what she says in verse 49, it's because of what the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name.

You see, she shifts the focus from myself. I'm just a humble servant of the Lord. It's because of what the mighty one has done. He's done great things for me.

[15:59] So, I'm an ordinary, humble servant of God for whom God has done extraordinary things. It reminds me of Tim Wenger as he stood here and gave his testimony years ago and he says, I'm just an ordinary man through whom God has done, in whom God has done extraordinary things.

And that's Mary's self-identity here as she sees herself. And she sees that she's one of this history, this same pattern throughout history that we were talking about.

Mary sees that and she includes it in her song. He hunts out the little nobodies to confound the big somebodies. Look at verse 51. He's performed mighty deeds with his arm.

He's scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. That's the proud and the mighty. And he scatters them. He's brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

So, here's the proud rulers on their thrones and God scatters them, brings them down and lifts up the humble. She sees that's God's way.

[17:13] That's his habitual character. He does that often. It's one of his ways. And he's done that with me. He has filled, verse 53, he has filled the hungry with good things.

Who are the hungry? They're the poor ones, right? If you're hungry, it's because you're poor. You're not one of the wealthy ones like she's been talking about. No, he filled the hungry with good things, but he sent the proud rich away, you see, sent him away hungry.

So, that's the pattern. And even so, little unimpressive Bethlehem, the town of little David made king, is the chosen birthplace of Messiah. And I trust we can see then something of God's ways, even in the choice of Bethlehem.

It speaks of a whole pattern of his behavior. Then turn over to Matthew chapter 2. These are some of the critical places where Bethlehem is mentioned in the New Testament.

And you remember in Matthew 2, the wise men, the magi from the east, arrive in Jerusalem. And we'll just read at verse 1 of Matthew 2, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?

[18:37] We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him. And when King Herod heard this, he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him because if Herod the king is disturbed, Jerusalem had a reason to be disturbed.

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. Well, in Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, for this is what the prophet has written.

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, but for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.

It was probably assumed that the baby king would be born in Jerusalem. That's why the wise men came to Jerusalem. It's the city of kings. It's the place where kings give birth to kings.

And so they come to the city of kings and King Herod is there and he hears this question and he's upset that there's this other king that he sees as a threat to his kingship.

[19:46] And it's interesting that the Jewish leaders know right where to point in Micah chapter 5, verse 2. It was written 700 years earlier.

And so they tell him and you remember the rest of that story how he then says, go there and when you find him send word for me so I can come and worship him.

But instead of going to worship him he sends his soldiers to kill all the baby boys two years and under dated from the time the star appeared. So again, here's the New Testament verifying to us that what was said 700 years ago by Micah the prophet is now being fulfilled after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea.

Chapter 2 begins and points us to that prophecy. Now over to Luke 2. Another, this is the, perhaps the most familiar, maybe because of Charlie Brown, the most familiar passage on the birth of Jesus. Jesus, but in it we have the historical record of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. We've seen the prophecy of it, we've seen the statement of it, now we see something of the historical record of his birth in Bethlehem.

[21:11] And it presents us with something of a problem, doesn't it? Because Mary and Joseph, the betrothed couple, do not live in Bethlehem. They're from the town of Nazareth, up north in Galilee, an estimated 90 mile walk down to Bethlehem.

It would take six days if the ordinary walk of men in that day was 15 miles a day. I don't know, some of you are walkers, how far do you walk? Anybody walking 15 miles a day?

It'll take you some time. I didn't do the math, but that was the average time that if somebody, I mean, if you were going somewhere, you usually walked. And so we talked about Galilee, that whole region of Palestine, being about 30 miles from one end to another.

And the commentators say that that means that you can get from anywhere in Galilee from one place to another within two days because it's a two-day walk. 15 miles was an ordinary day's walk. So that means it would take the better part of a week if they walked 15 miles a day. But we remember this is a pregnant woman in her third trimester.

[22:25] I say we remember. Some of you remember what that would be like. And even if she rode on a donkey, which I don't know, does it say that? I haven't found it that I'm aware of.

He rode into Jerusalem with a donkey at the end of his life. But even if she rode a donkey, you can imagine the bumpy ride was no easy thing for a very pregnant woman.

But why? Why would a woman about to give birth undertake a 90-mile hike over hill and vale with danger of thieves and wild animals? Remember, this is the place where David fought the lion and

the bear that came after the sheep that he was watching over in Bethlehem.

And this is the place. And they're going to go on this 90-mile hike. Well, why are they undertaking this? Well, Luke tells us it was because Caesar issued a decree.

You see it here in chapter 2 and verse 1. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

[23 : 37] This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to his own town to register. There's the historical record. He calls out the leader.

The Caesar over the Roman Empire was Augustus. And it was during the time while Quirinius was governor of Syria. It wasn't the second census. It wasn't the third census.

It was the first census that took place. And there you have the historical record being set out for us as to this birth of Jesus and where it happened. So, why would Caesar issue such a decree?

I think we're safe to assume it wasn't because he intentionally timed it to coincide with Mary's ninth month that he knew we need to get Mary down to Bethlehem.

No, he had other reasons. Reasons of his own. I would assume he knew nothing about Mary and her baby and the prophecy of the birth in Bethlehem. But God did because it was his word and his decree.

[24 : 45] And his providence over all things then went to work to bring her down to Bethlehem to bring his decree to pass. We need to remember Proverbs 21.1 that the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord and he turns it wherever he wills like a water course is turned by a farmer who wants to bring water from this point to his crop and he can carve out a little path and make that water flow to the place he wants to get the water.

And God can do the same thing and does do the same thing with king's hearts. He turns them wherever he wants to fulfill his plan, his purpose. And so Caesar's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He rules over the entire Roman Empire. Great man! But there's one greater who has his heart in his hand and turns it to bring about this decree.

Now, somehow God worked in Caesar's thoughts and desires and will to issue this census. Maybe it was his pride. He had his own reasons for calling this census.

Maybe it was pride. He just wanted to know how many people do I reign over. That's happened before. Maybe it was his greed that wanted to levy a tax upon them because that's usually what happened and was the reason for counting your people.

[26 : 14] You would then know, okay, if I need this much money in the treasury, you've got to divide it by the number of people and that's the way they would levy a tax. Whether it was his pride, his greed, or both, or neither, God's providence had his way of bringing Caesar Augustus to freely, of his own choice, of his own will, pass a law that everyone must register in their hometown.

But there's also a perfect timing of it all so that Mary arrives in Bethlehem when she's about to give birth. If Caesar waited a few more months before he issued the decree, well, then the baby would have been born up in Nazareth and not in Bethlehem and God's plan would be trashed on the trash heap of foiled plans in history.

So there's this, you know, God's providence specializes in timing. We see that in the stories of the Bible, don't we? Just at the right time, things happen.

And so, yeah, King Darius is having a rough night sleeping and just the night before when Mordecai is going to be hung on the gallows that Haman has built, he's having this trouble sleeping, calls for the books and they come and see that actually his life had been spared by Mordecai.

Just happened to be the very night before he was to be hung and then the whole thing gets switched on that little fact. God's perfect providence is perfect in timing and so, he passes his law at just the right time for her to make it down to Bethlehem.

[27 : 59] How many of you have had babies that were born prematurely? Maybe more than, this is for the ladies now, not you men who give birth. We haven't any of that around here.

How many of you have had premature babies more than two weeks? All right. A couple. It happens, doesn't it? And we just think if Mary had had Jesus prematurely, he wouldn't have been born in Bethlehem.

Maybe the bumpy ride, maybe born some little village on the way down, brought on by the long journey. But again, we see God's overriding providence.

And so, Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth and Galilee to Judea to Bethlehem, the town of David because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with

Mary who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child or was great with child as the old language has it.

And while they were there, the days were accomplished for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

[29 : 15] So, all of it according to God's timing. Let's rejoice that we have a God who keeps his word.

A God who says something and then does it. What I have said, that will I bring about. What I have planned, that will I do. Do I speak and then not act?

Do I promise and then not fulfill? No. The promise of Jesus being born in Bethlehem must stand.

God will move the heart of the king to see that it happens.

God will ordain the timing of it all to see that it happens. And that's the same God who said that he would work all things together for our good, for us who love God and are the cold according to his purpose, according to his plan, his purpose plan.

The same God. You say, oh, but I just can't see how this could possibly have anything good come of it. Well, if he has to, he'll move heaven and earth and the hearts of kings.

[30 : 25] But one thing is certain, his word will not fail. It cannot fail. God cannot lie. And that should be our comfort. That's one takeaway from this lesson.

This is our God. The God of Mary and Joseph. The God of Bethlehem. He's the God who's made promises to us. And no one or nothing can thwart that promise or cause his word to fail.

Luke 1.45 says, blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.

Boy, I've got something to learn from Mary. To always believe that what the Lord has said will be accomplished. Even when it doesn't appear to me how he can pull that one off.

Here it is. It's faith. It's believing. It's taking God at his word. You know, she did that. I'm called to do that. You're called to do that in your trials.

[31 : 28] But who do you think had the harder thing to believe? She's a virgin being told that she's going to conceive and bear a son as a virgin. You've got your trial.

I've got mine. And we're trying to figure out how can this be? Well, God brought it about for Mary. and he's not about to become less than God for you and me.

Let's take him at his word. To credit what my Savior saith, whose words can never fail. Just one last reference with regard to Jesus' birthplace.

In John chapter 7, I was reading here this week, Jesus is at the temple in Jerusalem. He's gone up to the Feast of Tabernacles where they live in their booths remembering the days in the desert.

And here we find Jesus then goes into the temple and begins to teach and the crowd just immediately divides. One says this and one says the other. Look, we'll pick up the account in verse 40 of John chapter 7.

[32 : 40] On hearing his words, some of the people said, surely this man is the prophet. Probably referring to Deuteronomy 18. The prophet like unto Moses that was to come.

Others said, he is the Christ. He is the Messiah. Still others ask, how can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?

Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. Some wanted to seize him but no one laid a hand on him. So, here are these objectors.

Some when they said, I believe, we believe he's the Christ. He is the promised Messiah. And they said, how can he be? How can the Christ come from Galilee? The Scriptures clearly say that he's to come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived.

They had Micah 5. verse 2 in mind. So, this was one of the standard Jewish objections to Jesus' Messiahship. He can't be Messiah.

[33 : 47] He's from Galilee, not from Bethlehem. Were they right or wrong? In one sense, they're right. He is from Galilee.

That's where he lives. That's where he lived. That's where he grew up. That's where... Yeah, he split the crowd up many different ways.

That's for sure, Mark. But what they had wrong was that just because Jesus was from Nazareth... He was called Jesus the Nazarene after all, wasn't he? He was a Nazarene, from Nazareth.

That cannot be denied. That was on his cross, wasn't it? Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews. So, he's from Nazareth in that sense, but he was born in Bethlehem.

So, this trip down to Bethlehem was not known by everybody. Remember, Nazareth is a...

[34 : 49] is Nowheresville, little podunk town. Not very many people there. And the word evidently hadn't got out that Mary and Joseph took this 90-mile walk down to Bethlehem.

He was born there. They went to Egypt to flee and then came back to Nazareth. That portion of Jesus' history was not known.

And so, they just conclude he can't be Messiah because when Messiah comes, we'll know he's going to be born in Bethlehem. Well, haven't we... don't we see in the Gospels people constantly making their own assumptions as to why they reject Messiah?

And that's what they did. If they had questions, they should have come to Jesus and said, what about this passage? If they really were hungry to know him to be the Messiah, but know their animosity against him would grab hold of any little thing to catch upon.

And so, they rejected him. But interesting that this would become the very reason, the stumbling block over which people would stumble into hell because they knew the place of his birth was supposed to be Bethlehem.

[36 : 05] Well, bless God, he was born in Bethlehem. And we don't have time to sing, O Little Town of Bethlehem. But, you know, we're blessed to have good Christian carols that are true to the Scriptures.

I was wanting to sing, O Come All Ye Faithful, if we had time. There's a... Verse 2 says, God of God, light of light, Io, he abhors not the virgin's womb, very God, begotten, not created.

That's lifted right out of the Nicene Creed of 325 where the churches met to declare and to confess Jesus Christ of Nazareth is God.

And that makes it into that wonderful carol. But you know how liberal churches have gone. They've rejected all the supernatural. They've rejected that Jesus can be God.

They've rejected that Jesus was born of a virgin. They've rejected that he came to save us from our sins. And yet, those are the very truths that are just packed into our carols, aren't they?

[37 : 12] I just went through our hymnal last night and was looking at the... And how much theology and Christology of who this baby in the manger is. He's God. God of gods.

And I wonder what Christmas looks like in liberal churches. If they sing these carols, if they even sing them, they must sing them with embarrassment.

Singing about this baby born of a virgin. Or maybe they changed the words. I don't know. But it may soon be that the only carol they have is jingle bells.

Because the whole reason for the season is to rejoice that the baby in the manger is Emmanuel, God. with us.

And why? To save us from our sin. By his atoning blood. So offensive to so many today. Again, catching it.

[38 : 13] Any little thing to reject the true Christ of Christmas. Well, let's pray together, shall we? Lord, if we have eyes to see, it's because you've opened them.

We too are like anyone else. that saw no glory in our Savior, that we should live for him, that we should put our trust in him and him alone.

And so we bless you for that grace that sent him from heaven. We bless you for the grace that opened our eyes to see just who he is and help us in this next hour to confess him as God in the flesh and to glory in our Redeemer.

And may his name then forever be praised all around the world today and he receive the honor he deserves. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.