



**VERSE BY VERSE MINISTRY**  
INTERNATIONAL

*TEACHING THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD*

# Why Bethlehem?

## Luke 2:1-12

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A young boy wanted a new bike for Christmas, but his mother told him they didn't have enough money that year. So the boy decided to ask Jesus for a bike, but he assumed Jesus would only answer his prayer if he was good enough. So the young boy sat down to write Jesus a letter...

He began the letter, "Dear Jesus, I want a new bike, so I promise I will be good for one year..." but then the boy paused to consider that promise for a moment. Being good for a whole year was a long time and mostly likely impossible anyway.

So he scratched that out and scribbled, "Dear Jesus I will be good for one whole month..." but then he scratched that out too, and he finally decided to go with, "Dear Jesus I will be good for one whole week..."

But on this particular week the boy had already been punished three times for various misdeeds...and it was only Monday! His chances of getting that bike seemed bleak, so in disgust he tore up the paper and went for a walk to clear his head.

As he went he passed by a local church with a traditional Nativity scene on the front lawn. Suddenly, he had an idea. He began running as fast as he could toward the Nativity, and as he passed it by, he scooped up the figure of Mary into his arms and ran home.

When he reached his house, he ran straight into his room and began to write a new letter... "Dear Jesus if you ever want to see your mother again..."

- That young boy knew how important Mary was to the story of Jesus' birth
  - But the story of Jesus' birth began long before Mary and Joseph got involved...
    - The Old Testament foretold the Messiah's birth many times, so Israel had been anticipating the Messiah's coming for some time
    - And one of the more fascinating details of those prophecies is found in the Old Testament prophet Micah
  - Micah told Israel that when her Messiah came, He would be born in the small town of Bethlehem in the land of Judah
    - Naturally, most Jews assumed that the Messiah's family would be Bethlehemites and the Messiah would grow up in that area
    - But when the time came for the Messiah, Jesus, to be born, He wasn't born to a family in Bethlehem
    - He was born to a family that lived over 90 miles away, in another town called Nazareth
- But God didn't want His Son born in Nazareth...He wanted Him to be born in Bethlehem, so God brought the family to Bethlehem for the birth

**Luke 2:1** Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

**Luke 2:2** This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

**Luke 2:3** And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city.

**Luke 2:4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David,**

**Luke 2:5 in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.**

- The Romans taxed their provinces based on population, so periodically they conducted a census, and shortly before Jesus was born, a census was ordered
  - This meant Joseph and Mary were required to travel to Joseph’s ancestral home in Bethlehem to register
    - And the timing couldn’t have been worse for this young family
    - Mary was nearly nine months pregnant and was carrying the Messiah of Israel
    - She could go into labor at any time on the journey
    - So if it had been up to them, a trip to Bethlehem would have been the last thing they would have undertaken
  - But that’s exactly why God brought about these circumstances at this time...He needed them to be in Bethlehem when the baby is born
    - Why? To fulfill Micah 5 who foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem

**Mic. 5:2 “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.  
His goings forth are from long ago,  
From the days of eternity.”**

- The prophet told Israel that their Messiah would come from Bethlehem Ephrathah, a small town south of Jerusalem
  - So with Jesus’ birth approaching, the Lord ensured that Joseph and Mary were compelled to travel there to fulfill this prophecy
  - But why was it so important to God that His Son be born in Bethlehem of all places?
- We find the answer in the name...Micah calls the place of Jesus’ birth Bethlehem *Ephrathah*
  - Ephrathah comes from a Hebrew word meaning covering, it refers to a unique agricultural site near the town
    - In Jesus’ day Bethlehem was a small insignificant town best known as David’s ancestral home
    - But in Jesus’ day the fields surrounding Bethlehem were uniquely important to the nation of Israel
  - One of these fields was called the Field of David, and rabbinical tradition says this field was donated by David to the temple priests to raise sheep

- But not just any sheep...temple sheep
  - In his day, David greatly desired to bring the ark to Jerusalem and eventually to build the temple, but God told David to wait
  - So in the meantime, David made preparations for the future day when his son, Solomon, would build the temple
- And one of those preparations was to set aside a piece of his family land near Bethlehem for the priests of Israel to raise the sacrificial sheep
  - According to ancient historical records, the Field of David was located one mile east of the town of Bethlehem
  - In the field, priests built stone watch towers for the shepherds to guard the sheep and keep watch for potential dangers
- Today, we can find ruins of stone watch towers scattered throughout a field one mile east of the city of Bethlehem, just as recorded
  - In fact, there are more shepherd watch towers in this one field than have been discovered anywhere else in the world
- Why so many towers in just this one field near Bethlehem? Because this field produced the most important sheep in all Israel
  - The lambs raised in this field were to be used for the daily sacrifices made by the priests at the temple
    - In particular the Passover Lamb, the most important sacrifice of the Jewish year, would come from this flock
    - According to the Law, a sacrificial lamb had to be spotless and without any blemishes whatsoever
    - So the priests went to great length to protect and watch over these special lambs in David's field
    - Nothing could be allowed to injure or mark an animal while grazing, so that when the time came, it would be perfect
  - So David arranged for all the lambs sacrificed in the temple to be raised in this place near Bethlehem
    - And since these lambs were a sacrificial covering for sin, the field became known as Bethlehem *Ephrathah*, meaning "covering"
    - Micah tells us that God intended for our Messiah to be born here
    - Not just in the *town* of Bethlehem, but more specifically Micah says the Messiah will be from Bethlehem *Ephrathah*
    - The Messiah will be born in the Field of David, from the flock of sacrificial lambs, because He was going to be our sacrifice
  - Elsewhere in Micah, we get confirmation that Jesus would be born in the field under the watchful eye of these towers

**Mic. 4:7 "I will make the lame a remnant  
And the outcasts a strong nation,  
And the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion  
From now on and forever.**

**Mic. 4:8 “As for you, tower of the flock,  
Hill of the daughter of Zion,  
To you it will come —  
Even the former dominion will come,  
The kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem.**

- The prophet speaks to the land of Bethlehem in v.8 saying that from the “hill of the daughter of Zion” and the “tower of the flock” it will come
  - The “it” is a reference to the Messiah and His Kingdom...these things will begin at the tower of the flock
  - The phrase “tower of the flock” is Migdal Eder in Hebrew, and it was another name for this same field near Bethlehem
- Micah says that the Messiah and His Kingdom will come from Migdal Eder, the field of David filled with watch towers...
  - This is the specific place of Jesus’ birth, and it explains why God wanted His Son born in a manger

**Luke 2:6 While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth.  
Luke 2:7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.**

- ◦ The Roman census forced so many families in Israel to travel that all the available rooms in every little town were booked
  - So Joseph and his family had no choice but to wander outside the city and into the fields looking for somewhere to bed down
  - They eventually came to the Field of David, where Joseph and Mary found refuge in a manger stall used to bed animals at night
- And while they were in the manger on that particular night, Mary goes into labor and Jesus is born
  - I wonder if Joseph was saying to himself, “I knew this would happen,” as he lamented their unfortunate turn of events
  - Or did he understand that this is exactly what God wanted, exactly what God planned... His Son born like a lamb
  - This family wouldn’t have chosen to sleep in the fields in a manger on that night
  - Even less, they wouldn’t have planned to give birth to Jesus in a manger in an empty field
- But God gave them no other option, because He wanted everyone to understand what this special Child would do for all humanity
  - Jesus would be the Lamb of God, born among the flock of temple sheep destined to be sacrificed at the temple
  - The Good Shepherd Who would one day lay His own life down for His sheep

- So it's no coincidence that Jesus' first visitors on that night were none other than the very shepherds who watched over the sacrificial lambs in those towers

**Luke 2:8** In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night.

**Luke 2:9** And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.

**Luke 2:10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people;

**Luke 2:11** for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

**Luke 2:12** "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

- Luke says the shepherds came upon a child lying in a manger wrapped in cloths, and these boys must have been amazed by what they saw
  - Rabbinical tradition records that at Passover each year, the high priest would travel to Bethlehem Ephrathah to select a lamb for the sacrifice
    - This lamb would be the one national lamb sacrificed on the day of Passover in the temple, and it must be perfect and spotless
    - The shepherds brought the priest a lamb from the flock and placed it in a manger in the field
    - The priest would inspect the lamb carefully, and if it was found to be spotless, then the priest selected it for the sacrifice
  - But when it was time to transport the lamb to the temple in Jerusalem, extra care was taken to ensure the lamb wasn't injured on the journey
    - The priest couldn't afford to allow the lamb to walk the six mile distance to the temple over rocky terrain
    - What if the lamb stumbled and broke a bone or was scratched on a thorn bush or bruised by a fall? It would be disqualified
    - So to protect the lamb, the high priest would carry the sacrificial lamb the entire way to the temple
    - And to ensure the lamb didn't wriggle out of his arms on the way, the lamb was wrapped in cloths...like a baby
  - These shepherds had witnessed this process year after year...young lambs inspected in a manger, wrapped in cloth and taken to Jerusalem
    - But they had probably never seen a baby treated in that same way, so the message on that special year was clear
    - This Child was the Lamb of God...our Messiah...born so that He might die one day in our place
- Luke goes on to tell us that a few weeks later, Mary and Joseph took their Son to the temple to dedicate Him, just as the high priest carried the Passover lamb
  - And while they were there, a man named Simeon came up to the family at the

temple, took Jesus from them and said this:

**Luke 2:34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed —**

**Luke 2:35 and a sword will pierce even your own soul — to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”**

- ○ Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit to expect to see the Messiah before he died, and so he was waiting eagerly
  - And on this day as his eyes fell on Joseph’s family, he knew this Child was the One promised to Israel and the world
- But then Simeon described the impact this child would have on the world...the Messiah’s arrival would divide humanity he said
  - At the appearing of Christ, some would rise and some would fall
  - Some would embrace Jesus as Simeon did on that day, while others would oppose Him
- Some believe Jesus is the One God promised Who came to die in our place, taking the penalty for our sin, so we can receive God’s forgiveness
  - While others think this testimony is merely myth and fairytale, and so they oppose the Christian Gospel
  - There is no third choice...which is why Simeon compares Jesus to a sword that can pierce our very soul and reveal true thoughts
- Simply put, what we believe about Jesus will determine the destiny of our souls in eternity
  - And on this Christmas I ask each of us to reflect on that question right now... who is this Child, born like a lamb in a manger?
  - Who is the Man who healed the sick, cured the lame, and raised the dead?
  - Who is this Man who voluntarily became our sacrifice in Jerusalem to pay the price for sin?
  - Will He be your sacrifice this Christmas so you may receive God’s forgiveness?