

The Birth of Jesus

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone. If you have a Bible, you might like to turn to Matthew chapter 2, and I'm going to read verse 1 to 12. So Matthew chapter 2 and verse 1 to 12.

Feel free to get up, stretch your legs if you want to go and get a Bible. It's at the back, or just stand and stretch your legs anyway. I'm just going to pray. Lord, we just thank you for your word. We pray you'd help us as we look at it.

Pray that you just use your spirit to work in our hearts. We want to hear your voice. Pray that you would do that as we spend time in your word. Amen.

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?

We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him. When he'd called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

[1:10] 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. For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people, Israel.

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me so that I too may go and worship him.

After they had heard the king, they went on their way and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. So have you all got your Christmas shopping finished?

[2:18] Hopefully. Well, how many tried to beat the queues and did some online shopping? Well, if you did order online, did all of the items arrive? Did they arrive on time?

We do lots of shopping on Amazon. In fact, it's become more of our normal these days since we're further from the shops that we know and that we like up in Cork.

And in fact, I was in Cork on Friday. I did a bit of Christmas shopping and it was quite a novelty to walk into a shop and to immediately walk out with the goods that I wanted rather than having to wait days for them to arrive in the post.

Well, maybe you have ordered something online and it hasn't arrived yet. Maybe it's past the promised date. But they tell you it's still going to arrive. Don't worry. You still have a week.

Well, the word fulfilled in the world of online ordering is something very different, isn't it? When you place an order, you're given a promise of delivery and then hopefully the order is fulfilled just as was promised.

[3:27] Online fulfillment is all about the delivery date. When is my order going to arrive? Why is it late? But it's all about the arrival. What about fulfillment in the ancient world?

The fulfillment that we're going to think about today is all about arrival as well. But rather than a specific date, the arrival is in a specific place and of a specific person.

So here we have the promise of a ruler. The promise of a ruler. Let's start back at the beginning.

This passage that we read referred to a passage in Micah chapter 5, which I'm just going to read briefly.

It says, Marshal your troops now, city of troops, for a siege is laid against us. They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod. But you, Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.

Therefore, Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God, and they will live securely.

[4 : 51] For then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. Micah was writing around the same time as Isaiah. The nation of Israel had been split into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

Both were prospering economically, but beginning to rot spiritually. Foreign religion and social injustice were becoming the norm.

And the passage in Micah starts with a message of doom, where a siege, an attack was coming, and Israel's ruler would be struck on the cheek with a rod. The extremist of insults.

Micah was declaring that God's judgment on the people of Israel for their rebellion against God. But Micah has a message of hope as well, that one day there would be a great ruler over Israel.

A ruler who would shepherd God's people, and there will be security and peace, and his greatness will reach the ends of the earth. But why would the people need a ruler like this?

[6 : 00] The people need a leader. The people needed protection. The people needed guidance. People needed to be cared for. The people needed peace. Some leaders that had come before had brought some of these things and some less so, but none of them lasted.

New king after new king, new ruler after new ruler. The people needed a ruler and shepherd who would bring everlasting peace and security and joy.

For us, what would happen if our online orders aren't fulfilled when maybe no presents on Christmas Day? Sorry, family. But what about this ruler? What if he didn't come? What if that promise wasn't fulfilled?

Well, then there'd be no lasting peace. There'd be no security forever. There'd be no protection. Just like people in Micah's day, we need a ruler like this.

One who is kind, who is just, strong, and caring. We tend to flock to good leaders, don't we? Maybe someone who's very charismatic, very outgoing, or someone we look up to and she is really, she does exactly what she needs to do.

[7 : 16] We flock to strong leaders, and even the best leaders that we know aren't perfect. And as good as they are, they don't last.

We need a ruler and shepherd that we can flock to, to lead us and guide us, to care for us and protect us. So where did Micah say the ruler was going to come from?

Where was this promise going to happen? Well, he was going to come from Bethlehem. And Ephrathah, meaning it was the Bethlehem that King David was from. The message was spoken by Micah, and it became part of this hope that the Jewish people had.

The hope that one day a great king would rise up and become a ruler of the people. He would bring peace and security to the whole world. This short passage is quite explicit in its detail.

The ruler would come from Judah, from the line of David, from the small, obscure town of David, called Bethlehem. When we lived in Mitchellstown, we started a Christmas tradition of where we would go to get our Christmas tree.

[8 : 28] Even when we moved to Bandon, which was like an hour away from Mitchellstown, we even continued this tradition. We enjoyed it so much, where we used to go and get our Christmas tree from an obscure little place called Skihina Rinke.

It's a tiny place with not much to it, but it has a school and it has a Christmas tree farm. It's an obscure little place with no major significance.

But sometimes a place gets put on a map because of people. I found out that this place, Gahina Rinke, that the former Taoiseach, Gareth Fitzgerald, can trace his family to this town.

His grandfather was from there. Well, Bethlehem is a little bit like that. It's an obscure, backwater little place, but it's been put on the map because of King David.

And this was going to be the place that the ruler would come from. You see, God works in incredible ways using small, weak, insignificant things to achieve his purposes.

[9 : 36] Small, like Bethlehem, weak, like the cross, insignificant, like you and me, to fulfill his plans for the world.

Do you ever think, what good could I do for God's kingdom? Surely he can't use me. Maybe he'll use us as a church when there's 50 of us together or 80 or 100 or 200 of us together.

Maybe then God could use us in Skibbereen. He can use every single one of us. No matter how insignificant or small we feel.

No matter how little reach we feel we have with our neighbors or our friends. No matter how infrequently we talk to others about Jesus or the gospel.

Or how scared we might feel to do that. He can use you greatly. Just like this insignificant little place.

[10 : 45] Insignificant you and me. God can use greatly for his purposes. Be encouraged.

When you think, it's just me. Yes, it is just you. And God will use you. Well, what was this ruler going to do? It says in 2 Samuel, You shall shepherd my people Israel, and you shall become their ruler.

That was what the Lord had said to King David. But this prophecy is made after David. So it was going to be someone greater than David who was going to come and shepherd God's people to care for them, guide them, and protect them.

The people longed for this ruler to come. To someone who would put an end to all war, injustice, the false religion. When would he come? Well, the stage was set.

But Micah, who promised this ruler, never saw it fulfilled. Prophecy fulfillment can be a little bit slower than online fulfillment.

[11 : 51] We have to go forward 750 years now to get to the fulfillment of this promise. Can you imagine the scene now?

It seemed funny to me thinking about it. Herod is in his palace. Sir, the Magi have arrived. The who? The Magi. They say they're wise men from the east. Okay. They've come to worship the king of the Jews. Oh, well, why didn't you say so?

Send them in. No, sir. They're asking where he is. Herod wasn't too happy when he heard their message, was he?

He was disturbed. It says, along with all Jerusalem. You see, Herod was a fraud. He was not the true king. He was just scratching Roman backs to keep his place of power.

[12 : 52] Maybe with hints of what's to come in Jewish resistance to Jesus and in Herod and the leaders of Jerusalem being disturbed of this news. And maybe that hint of Gentile inclusion as the first to come and worship Jesus weren't even Jewish.

Well, Herod calls together the chief priests and the teachers of the law to find out where is this Messiah supposed to be born? And these are the verses that are quoted from Micah chapter 5. It's Bethlehem in the land of Judah. The town where David was born is where the Messiah is to be born. This is where the great ruler was to come from.

This prophecy that had been made hundreds of years earlier. And now these men from the east, they claim his star has risen and they've come to worship him.

He's been born. He's finally here. Are you sure? Well, Herod starts acting very suspiciously. He has a secret meeting with the Magi to find out exactly when the star had appeared.

[13 : 59] When was this ruler born? So they were sent on their way to Bethlehem where the long-awaited ruler would come from. Look again at verse 9.

After they had heard the king, they went on their way and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Now, there's some celestial things happening, isn't there, with the star in the sky? Would have been an amazing sight to see. We're not sure exactly what's happening with the star, but it leads the way to this child.

They find this promised ruler. This great promised king and shepherd who would be great over all the earth. And he's just a child born into a lowly family in an insignificant town among the towns of Judah.

[15 : 14] This is the incredible thing that we remember around Christmastime and all year round as Jesus was born, who would write something like this?

Who could think of such contrast that the God of the universe would come as a little baby? That the great ruler king would come and it would be God himself that he would arrive as a baby in a little obscure town into poverty.

It's just amazing what God has done. If Jesus were to come now as a baby, if that didn't happen but he chose in 2023, that this would be the time that he would come, we might imagine that he would arrive with better treatment, that he would be in a nice maternity hospital.

But God has used the small insignificant things of the world to work out his purposes. A God who would stoop so low, as low as Bethlehem, as low as a baby, as low as the cross, because he loves us so much.

He came to be our great ruler and shepherd. Just like your online orders hopefully will arrive, the great ruler has come.

[16 : 44] The words that Micah spoke have been fulfilled. And not just the words of Micah, but this specific promise that it would be in Bethlehem, the town of David, the Savior would be born, has been fulfilled in Jesus.

The great ruler and shepherd that the people of Israel and that we today so desperately need has come.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the town of David, out of the tribe of Judah to be the great king who would bring peace to the world. And that peace was not as expected.

Jesus didn't come as a great mediator between the Romans and the Jews, helping to sign peace treaties and trade deals. He didn't rise up in rebellion against the Romans and bring peace through force.

He didn't take part in a protest that finally led to the independence of Israel. Israel, the way of peace was his death.

[18 : 01] We become very familiar to it, but does it sound a bit crazy? That death is what was needed for peace. But it was the greatest danger to our peace.

Not nations fighting or families feuding. It is the God that Micah spoke about who deals with evil, injustice, and rebellion.

That God's anger towards sin and rebellion was there. God was demonstrating his judgment against sin and his grace for us when Jesus died on the cross.

And we know that it's all true the prophecy, the fulfillment, the peace, the promise, all because Jesus rose again.

He didn't stay dead. He is alive today. So we can be filled with great joy because the great ruler and shepherd has finally come.

[19 : 09] He came all those years ago. Or as we think about it, maybe we're filled with terror because this great ruler has come and he's promised to deal with sin and evil and we're not so sure where we stand.

Or maybe we're filled with indifference. So what? Jesus was born. Well, prophecies like this help us help us to take Jesus seriously.

Words written and spoken hundreds and hundreds of years earlier coming true in Jesus. Not just once but again and again and again.

We must take Jesus seriously. The great ruler and shepherd has come. He has come for his people.

Anyone who will turn to him and follow him as their king. So as we see Christmas happening around us, let's not be distracted from the Christ who arrived but let's worship him as the Magi did.

[20 : 31] As the king. As the great ruler. Let's not reject him like Herod did scheming and plotting and grasping for power.

we might like the power we feel in our own lives. I'm in control of me. Let's set aside that grasping of independence and power and submit ourselves to our king.

Let's worship him as the ruler and shepherd who has come to bring peace and security and life forever. forever. You may have hope that all of your online orders will be fulfilled.

Well, we have a wonderful and rock solid hope that the words of Micah, the words of other prophets have been fulfilled.

And we can rejoice. The great ruler and king, he has been born in a very specific place called Bethlehem and his name is Jesus.

[21 : 40] Let's pray together. Lord, we are amazed when we think that what you have done is so real. Just like babies who are born this very month, this year.

Jesus was born hundreds of years ago. That that birth was just as real as any birth that we can think about. That he came into history as a human man.

that you, God, entered history. And all of this was promised hundreds of years before that and fulfilled in your coming.

We thank you for the assurance we can have. We thank you that we know that it is true because, Jesus, you are alive.

Help us, Lord, to respond in worship like these magi who bowed down before this baby king that we would fall in worship every day before you.

[22 : 49] Submit ourselves to you, set aside our own desires and graspings and submit them all to you, that you would use us, insignificant little us, for your glory.

We thank you that you do that. we give you praise in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to sing one last song as we finish up.

It's a Christmas carol, O little town of Bethlehem. There's a line in that, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

Bethlehem was that place where the promise was focused, where Jesus would be born. And I think it's that wonderful reminder as we think of Bethlehem that God uses the insignificant places and things and people to achieve his amazing purposes.

So we're going to