

How far is it to Bethlehem?

How far is it for pilgrims today?

When Jesus came kicking and screaming as a little baby into this world he arrived to a very small village. But it was the same place where David, his ancestor had grown up as a child before becoming king. Today people go through security checkpoints because Bethlehem lies within Palestinian territory. But while the governments around Bethlehem have changed, in 3000 years its location has not.

Ask people what they know about Bethlehem and they might know the famous event that happened there. But people aren't longing to go there. Sure, tourists travel to see the traditional sites, but many people aren't really looking to Bethlehem. They don't care if this Christmas they take a stop in Bethlehem or not. Bethlehem is just another old city to them which couldn't be further away.

Yet the events that happened there 2000 years ago are for every pilgrim out there; for every person who lives on this planet for a time. The events that happened in Bethlehem are life changing, but people have to come. If they don't care to take the trip, if they don't care to be looking, God can't help them. That's not you or me. We are pilgrims traveling to Bethlehem. It's not far at all.

How far is it to Bethlehem?

How far was it for Mary and Joseph?

80 miles. That's the distance from Nazareth where Mary and Joseph lived to Bethlehem where they needed to go for the census. Doesn't sound like a lot to us; but 1st century travelers walked, across difficult terrain, with only the provisions they could carry. 80 miles was no easy trip. Add to that a pregnant wife and the trip was extremely difficult. But it was necessary.

Their minds were swirling with visions, prophecies, and concern. An angel had visited both Mary and Joseph. Mary was told she would give birth even though she was a virgin. Joseph was told his wife would have a child but he wouldn't be the father. These visits by angels combined with the Old Testament prophecy they both knew well amazed them. They were waiting for the Messiah. Miracle of miracles, their son was to be that Messiah.

But they lived in Nazareth. The prophecy called for the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem. A problem for them, but no problem for God. At just the right time God got Mary and Joseph going on the 80 mile trek to Bethlehem. They arrived and Mary gave birth, her first child, a son. A son not just for them but for all people. A son for you and for me.

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How far was it for the angels?

We might think angels know a lot more than we do just because they are face to face with God. But these are created beings. They aren't God, so they don't know everything. They serve God as messengers. And throughout history they have announced some of the most wonderful things on God's behalf.

But the secret of how God would save the world was something they were waiting for with as much anticipation as human beings. God spoke promises to Abraham of a great descendant, and the angels listened with eagerness. "So the Messiah will come from his line, we'll just have to watch that." David received assurance that his throne would never end. The angels must have said, "Alright, we're looking for a king from David's line." Then when God gave the angel Gabriel the message for the Virgin Mary the other angels possibly were saying, "Do you think this is it? Could now be the time?"

Then like a bucking bronco being held down the angels waited for their cue to go on before the shepherds. And when it came, the praise that broke out was the culmination of centuries of waiting. They had waited so long for what they knew would be big. Now their praise sounded. Praise and thanks that God had finally revealed the plan. God's plan to save the world was being put into effect. "Today! A Savior! He is Christ the Lord!"

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How far was it for the shepherds?

Put yourself in the shepherds' sandals. Responsibility for the sheep couldn't stop them from going. The time of night couldn't stop them. The fact they weren't always welcome in town couldn't stop them. The amazing news had to be checked out. Nothing would stop these shepherds from going to Bethlehem.

Shepherds weren't exactly high class. News usually was last to get to them. Maybe they expected a line when they arrived. Surely this was big news all around Bethlehem. It's not every day that God sends his Savior into the world. But when they arrived at the manger side they were the only ones there. Here was the Messiah people had waited centuries for and the shepherds were seeing him first.

Soon after they left that would change. "Come and see for yourselves God's Messiah. This little baby is no regular baby. Don't wait, this is a must see, once in a lifetime opportunity." Nothing stopped the shepherds from going to Bethlehem, and once they saw Jesus nothing could stop them from going out from Bethlehem. For them it wasn't about how far it was to Bethlehem, but how far could they get out from Bethlehem with the news that a Savior had been born!

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How far was it for the wise men?

No one but the wise men could make the claim of the longest trip to Bethlehem to see Jesus. Trained as astrologers these were truly wise men. But what made them even wiser was that these men from the east were students of Scripture. Investigating the Scriptures led them to a prophecy of a king being born. Needing to know if the Scriptures were fulfilled they set out to worship him.

It made sense to go first where a king would most likely be, Jerusalem. They found the king, Herod, but he wasn't having a son. So their journey continued led by the star they had first seen before they set out. Suddenly the star stopped over a house. Inside their journey ended. They presented their gifts to the newborn King and worshiped him just as they said they would.

Imagine their journey home. Imagine the conversation they must have had. "I don't believe it, it was a baby all along. I wouldn't have guessed. Not only was he cute, but he is the Messiah, the king. I still can't get over the fact that this child will be the Messiah. God sure is amazing." Might our conversation about this child sound very similar? God's amazing love wrapped up in the sight of a little child who we call the Savior. I wouldn't have guessed.

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How far was it for God?

The Bible makes it very clear; when you talk about Jesus you're talking about God. You're talking about someone who is equal with God in every way. He could have celebrated that equality. He could've grabbed hold of it and made himself someone important. He could have paraded it in front of everyone else. He could've, but he didn't.

The Bible also talks about Jesus as a human being. Not just partial human being. Not just half way human. No Jesus was fully human being just like us going through the same things we do. He had the appearance of a man for the entire time he made his home on this earth. From the time of his birth in Bethlehem to the time of his death just outside Jerusalem, Jesus walked and talked like a human being.

The distance between the two, Jesus as God and Jesus as human being, is how far God came for you and for me. He came all the way. Jesus is true God able to live the perfect life for us, able to pay for all our sins, able to save us for eternity. He is also true man able to live under the law like us, able to hurt like us, able to die just like us. That's how far God was willing to go for you; all the way from the manger to the cross.

How far is it to Bethlehem?

How far is it for you and me?

It's completely appropriate for us to ask, how far is it for you and me tonight to Bethlehem? Hopefully it's clear that the distance isn't miles on a map. In fact, we can't measure the distance from our perspective at all. If we think that we can cover that distance from here to there by ourselves we're all fools.

God helped Mary and Joseph cover the distance to Bethlehem to get them there right when they needed to be, just as the baby was born. God trumpeted the news of the Savior's birth through angels who had waited a long time to spread the news. God brought shepherds the distance to Bethlehem to worship their newborn King. God called wise men from the east to go the distance to Bethlehem to worship the Savior of the Gentiles. God took on flesh to cover the distance for you and me.

The distance from here to there is nothing. Nothing separates us from God because God came the full distance. He puts the manger of Bethlehem among us this evening and says, "Come and see for yourselves. I did this for you. I won't spare this baby when he's older, so that you'll be completely spared. I'll make you like him, sharing in his death, sharing in his resurrection. And I'll give you peace through him."

So at Bethlehem's manger stare at the baby Jesus who'll take your sins away. Come to Bethlehem. It's not far for me or for you.