

SESSION 1: O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

Watch the video or read the script together as a group; then discuss the following questions. Keep in mind the questions are meant to prompt conversation, so don't feel the need to use or discuss every question.

BIBLE REFERENCES

Micah 5:2

QUESTIONS

1. Have one person read the first verse while everyone else closes their eyes. What do you imagine when you hear these words? What imagery is expressed in the lyrics? What other Christmas carols can you think of that use vivid descriptions in their lyrics to paint a picture?
2. Read and discuss the promise given to Bethlehem through the prophet Micah (Micah 5:2). Why is Jesus described as the *One to be Ruler in Israel*, and how are His *goings forth from of old, and from everlasting*?
3. Read Luke 2:1-20 together. Discuss how this biblical account of Jesus' birth are reflected in the lyrics of the song.
4. Discuss the significance of the first two verses. Why is the imagery used to describe Bethlehem on the night of Christ's birth important? Why are the last two lines of the first verse not to be glossed over? Discuss the meaning of this phrase: *the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight*.
5. Read the third verse and discuss. What does it mean when we sing about Christ *entering in*, and what are some ways that we *receive Him* today? How does God *impart the blessings of His heaven* to us? Have you experienced His silent blessings this Advent?
6. The fourth and final verse can be seen as a sung prayer. What requests are we making when we sing this verse? Why should we desire the "new life" that Jesus offers?

[illegible]

7. *O come to us, abide with us...* Discuss the following verses: John 12:46, John 14:15-17, John 15:1-11, 1 John 4:12-16. What does it mean to abide with Christ?

O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight

For Christ is born of Mary
And gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth
And praises sing to God the King
And Peace to men on earth

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven
No ear may hear His coming
But in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive him still
The dear Christ enters in

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born in us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel

SCRIPT & ADDITIONAL CONTEXT

SESSION 1: O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

Welcome! In this session, we'll explore and see what we can learn from the well-known Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

The lyrics for this beloved carol were written in 1868 by Phillips Brooks, a well-regarded 19th century preacher, several years after he had returned from a trip to the Holy Land. The experience of spending Christmas Eve in Bethlehem and worshipping in the Church of the Nativity - thought to be the place of Christ's birth - made an indelible impression on Brooks. Three years later, while pastor at a church in Philadelphia, he was searching for a new carol for his children to sing in their Sunday school Christmas program. Brooks gave a copy of the text he had written to the organist, Lewis H. Redner, and asked him to compose a simple melody that children could sing easily. Redner struggled for a considerable time to contrive just the right tune for the text. On the evening before the program was to be given, he suddenly awakened from his sleep and composed the present melody. The carol was an immediate favorite with the children, as it has been with children and adults around the world ever since.

Within the beauty of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" is one of God's promises, given through the prophet Micah: *But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting* (Micah 5:2). The carol takes us on a wonderful journey from the past to the present, and starts by giving us a vivid picture of the seemingly insignificant town out of which the Savior of the world would come. Phrases such as *how still we see thee lie* and *above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go* by remind us that Bethlehem barely stirred as the most significant event in the history of the world unfolded. The first verse also reminds us that this event is about so much more than the birth of a baby in a small town in a Middle Eastern country; it's about Jesus Christ - the Light of the World - breaking through the world's darkness: *Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

The second verse emphasizes the seemingly quick and mostly unnoticed appearance of Jesus as a baby, born in humble circumstances, *while mortals sleep*. Amazingly, only the angels and a group of unsuspecting shepherds were witnesses to this momentous occasion.

The last two verses move us from the past to the present. Now we consider how this incredible gift of God has changed

history and how His birth - and ultimately His death and resurrection - have enabled us to be reconciled to God. The third verse is perhaps the most profound: *How silently, how silently the wondrous Gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His Heaven. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.* What a powerful reminder this is, especially in the midst of the busyness of the Christmas season, that Christ desires to enter into our hearts. He - the Savior of the world - wants to commune with us. How incredible this is, and humbling. The question from 2,000 years ago remains relevant today, however: "will you and I receive Him?"

The fourth and final verse is a beautiful prayer in which we express our desire to receive Him; here we ask for our sin to be cast out, and for the new life that Jesus offers to *be born in us today*. Through the singing of this verse, we make it clear that we recognize that Jesus' birth isn't just a historical fact, but rather something that still has a tremendous impact on our lives today. We confirm that He is not distant but close. He is always with us as He promised He would be, *Our Lord, Emmanuel!*