

**Micah 5: 2-5a; “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah”, A
Christmas Sermon for December 20th, 2009, Delivered in the
Morning Worship Service by Pastor Paul Rendall.**

Out of seemingly small and insignificant things come great and mighty things. This is one of the great principles of truth which those who know the Lord should remember and live their lives by it. The Lord sometimes delights to bring a man out of obscurity to do a great work in the society in which he lives. How much more so in the giving of His own beloved Son. Everything that has anything to do with His Only-Begotten has significance in His sight. Even the city in which He would be born - Bethlehem. Bethlehem is small but significant. Bethlehem may be a small and insignificant place in the eyes of men, but God chose her to be the place where His Son would be born into this world. The greatest man, the most holy man, the most loving man who has ever lived came from Bethlehem. And so I believe that we who are believers and also all who would become believers should take cognizance of Bethlehem Ephrathah. She is little, but she is not despised by God. Rather, she is honored. And so too, we may be little but we are not despised by God because He has given us His Son. Let us take notice this morning of what God desires to show us in relation to the birth of His Son. What is the significance of Bethlehem to all believers everywhere in all generations? That is the question that we are asking this morning. The answer is that the significance of Bethlehem is all related to knowing Christ in the following ways. There are 4 of them from this text.

1st - Out of Bethlehem Christ came forth unto God.

You would think that when God was about to do His greatest work that He would pick a great and notable place to have it begin. Instead He would pick little Bethlehem. But the text says, “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.” God’s plan is that from littleness comes greatness. Let us understand this morning and note it very carefully, that our salvation is the plan and the work of the Triune God. God’s plan is greatness for His Son, but this greatness would come about through the veiling of His glory. This greatness would come about through agreeing to take upon Himself the form of a man and the form of a servant. This was the plan of the Father for Him. The Son of God, the 2nd person of the Trinity did not set out from heaven on His own, but He was sent by the Father and accompanied by the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ “came forth to Me” the text says. “His goings” it says, “were from of old, from everlasting.” “From the days of eternity,” it literally reads. It was from all eternity that the Lord Jesus thought of the children of men and had His delight in the sons of men. In Jesus Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge it says in Colossians 2: 3. And in Proverbs 8 we find wisdom personified speaking about

that time before the world was made. Why don't you turn with me there. Proverbs 8: 22 says, "The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old." "I have been established from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth." "When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no fountains abounding with water." "Before the mountains were settled, before the hills, I was brought forth; while as yet He had not made the earth or the fields, or the primal dust of the world." "When He prepared the heavens, I was there when He drew a circle on the face of the deep, when He strengthened the fountains of the deep, when He assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters would not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth, Then I was beside Him as a master craftsman; and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in His inhabited world, and my delight was with the sons of men." These verses obviously refer to a Person with God, and beside Him as a "master craftsman." This was a Person Who was daily His delight. This was the One who was always "before Him, rejoicing in His inhabited world and whose delight was with the sons of men." I would suggest that this can be none other than the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus Christ. Certainly this is the description of when He was "brought forth" as the Only-begotten of the Father, from all eternity. But do you not also see the Father in these verses as well, making all the plans, interested in all the details of not only creation, but redemption? And then in the fullness of time, Who was it that formed the Lord Jesus in the womb of Mary? Who was it that insured that everything that was fashioned in her womb was perfect human nature? Who brought together this sinless human nature with the Divine 2nd Person of the Godhead? It was the Holy Spirit. And Who was it that led Jesus into the Wilderness to be tempted by the Devil? And Who was it that was in Christ at the cross, reconciling the world to Himself? And Who was it that providentially ordered the marvelous set of circumstances that led to Caesar Augustus making a decree that all the Roman world be taxed so that everyone had to go to their home town to be registered. Why just at this time? Because there was a decree behind the decree, that must needs be fulfilled. Luke 2: 4 says, "Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child." "So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered." "And she brought forth her first born Son, and wrapped Him in a swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." There was no room for Him there, but He is the apple of His Father God's eye; He is His very heart, His is His eternal purpose in terms of our salvation and yet there is no room for Him in Bethlehem's inn. Out of Bethlehem Christ came forth unto God, to fulfill His altogether holy purpose, even when there were so few people who knew what it meant. Out of little things in men's sight come great things in God's sight. It was so in Bethlehem when Christ was born.

2ndly- The significance of Bethlehem is that out of Bethlehem Christ came forth as a Ruler in Israel. (Verse 2b)

“Out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel.” When Christ was born in Bethlehem He was born a King. It is not that He was made a King when He was born. There was no room for Him in the inn, and He came to His own but His own did not receive Him. No, He had been a King since before His birth and shall be a king forever. Psalm 29: 10 says, “The Lord sat enthroned at the Flood, and the Lord sits as King forever.” Certainly Jesus Christ is the King of glory and has been from all eternity. The angels say to the shepherds when Jesus is born, “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” He is Christ the Lord. He is a king. In Matthew 2: 2 when the wise men from the East come to Jerusalem they say, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” This is the way that He was born. Listen to Spurgeon on this. “Very few have ever been born king. Men are born princes, but they are seldom born kings. I do not think you can find an instance in history where any infant was born king. He was the prince of Wales, perhaps, and he had to wait a number of years, till his father died, and then they manufactured him into a king, by putting a crown on his head, but he was not born a king. I remember no one who was born a king except Jesus. There is emphatic meaning in that verse that we sing - “Born thy people to deliver; born a child and yet a king.”

And you and I should understand that when He comes into the hearts of His people, when they call upon His name, He comes as King and Lord. He comes not only to save, but also to rule over His people. He is the only Mediator between God and man and yet His is a mediatorial kingdom. He is reigning now and yet He is yet to reign in a greater sense in us in the years to come. Ask yourself whether your loyalty and love and sense of duty to this ruler of your heart is something which is alive and growing? Is He ruling over your heart or not? He came to rule over Israel and yet not all Israel is spiritual Israel. You can know whether Christ is ruler over your heart by whether you love His Word and His commandments, whether you are ruled by His laws because you love Him. There is the reality of loving your liege Lord, and there is progress in that loyalty where you study to promote His kingdom in your heart and its progress there, and with other people. Ask yourself if this is your desire, the supreme desire of your heart? Ask yourself, “Is this my freedom, to do what He commands?” Truly then, you are enlisted in His holy army and are one of His loyal holy subjects.

There is progress in His kingdom in our hearts and there is progress in His kingdom also among the nations. Jesus is reigning over His church, His Elect right now. All who believe in Him acknowledge His reign, that He is King of the nations now. And yet the nations are now, for the most part, deceived and under the sway of the evil one. The Jews have been under this deception that Jesus is not their king for some 2000 years. A partial hardening has happened to them until the “fullness of the Gentiles comes in.” But this will someday change and Christ will reign, He must reign in a more glorious sense over His ancient people the

Jews. They shall be brought into the church, they shall be grafted in to the church and Christ shall reign over them gloriously. You see this in Micah 4: 6-8. "In that day, says the Lord, I will assemble the lame, I will gather the outcast and those whom I have afflicted; I will make the lame a remnant and the outcast a strong nation; So the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on, even forever." "And you, O tower of the flock, the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, even the former dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem." Christ's reigning over them as a nation, and their being brought into the church, will be a great witness to the other nations of the earth who still for the most part sit in the darkness of unbelief and sin. "For He must reign until He puts all His enemies under His feet." And the Father says, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. The Lord shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of your enemies." (Psalm 110: 1, 2) But let us understand that His rule began in Bethlehem long ago, even when the wise men came to worship Him, even when the rulers of Israel would not. They would bow before Him and give Him their gifts even when His own would not. The rulers of the Gentiles came to worship Him first; then late in time, behold the Jews will come.

3rdly- It was out of Bethlehem that the effects of Christ's birth would be felt.

(Verse 3)

I take this from verse 3 where it says, "Therefore He shall give them up, until the time that she who is in labor has given birth; then the remnant of His brethren shall return to the children of Israel." God had determined to give His people up to the captivity under Nebuchadnezzar and Babylonians for 70 years and then the captivity would end. Israel would be like a woman in travail and labor until that time was ended and they could return. But this prophecy also points on forward to the time when Mary would give birth to Jesus. Because it is His birth, His incarnation that is the basis of all deliverance from the captivity that sin brings us into. Look at Micah 4: 9, 10. "Now why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in your midst? Has your counselor perished? For pangs have seized you like a woman in labor. Be in pain, and labor to bring forth, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in birth pangs. For now you shall go forth from the city, you shall dwell in the field and to Babylon you shall go. There you shall be delivered; there the Lord will redeem you from the hand of your enemies." It is not only the disobedient people of Judah and Jerusalem that are in captivity due to their sin. It is all men in all places, and God gives us up to it to show us the awful effects that sin brings, and the separation from all of His goodness and blessing that results from our holding on to it. The whole world was held in bondage to sin, captive to sin and Satan, until the time that Mary had given birth. Galatians 4: 3 says, "Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law that we might receive the

adoption as sons. He is speaking of Jews under the guardianship of the law, which was a tutor to lead them to Christ. But he is also speaking to all, in regard to Christ's redeeming each one who believes from the bondage that we come into by trying to be justified by our own works and ideas of how we might be saved and please God.

But the effects of Christ's birth would be felt. Bethlehem was a place of sorrow to Rachel in Genesis 35: 16, 17. It says, "Then they journeyed from Bethel." "And when there was but a little distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel labored in childbirth, and she had hard labor." "Now it came to pass, when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said to her, 'Do not fear; you will have this son also.'" "And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died) that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin. I want you to hear what Spurgeon says on this passage, because it is so very good. "Might not Mary have called her own son Jesus her Ben-Oni; for he was to be the child of sorrow? Simeon said to her, "Yea a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." But while she might have called him Ben-Oni, what did God his Father call him? Benjamin, the son of my right hand. Ben-Oni was He as a man; Benjamin as to his Godhead. "This little incident seems to be almost a prophecy that Ben-Oni - Benjamin, the Lord Jesus, should be born in Bethlehem." That is good, is it not?

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem and the wise men came looking and asking for Him, Herod the King looked and asked too; but for a far different reason. He wanted to kill Jesus when he said that he wanted to worship Him. He heard this same prophecy read to him and yet remained hardened in hatred toward the little King Jesus who had come to save sinners. He sent forth and put to death, it says in Matthew 2: 16, "all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under. Bethlehem became the place of mourning, Rachel weeping for her children. I am told that Bethlehem the name, has two meanings. It means, "the house of bread" and it means "the house of war". And so it is very appropriate for us here today. Being born in Bethlehem either Jesus Christ is the bread of life to us and we live and feed upon His faithfulness and His words and we dwell in His house; or He is the house of war to us. That is, He has said that He has not come to bring peace but a sword; and because we do not want Him or see our need of Him we are actually His enemies and God's. But listen, you do not have to be in the house of war today. Come to Bethlehem and see, Christ the Lord the newborn King. And out of Bethlehem the effects of His birth shall be felt by you. This is why He came to take away the sorrow and bring Joy to the world! Come to Christ and your sins shall be forgiven. Christ will be born in you!

4thly and finally - Out of Bethlehem would come Christ, the great Shepherd of God's sheep. (Verses 4, 5a)

It says, "And He shall stand and feed His flock in the strength of the Lord, In the majesty of the name of the Lord His God; and they shall abide, for now He

shall be great to the ends of the earth.” Beginning at Bethlehem, Christ would spread out and be great to the ends of the earth. The reason for His greatness is that He would be the Great Shepherd of His sheep, His believing people. He would shepherd them through His under shepherds, His apostles who were “the remnant of His brethren” who would return and preach the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus Christ to the children of Israel. This is how He would feed and shepherd His flock and build His church. He stands in the midst of His churches. He feeds them bread in His house. The ministry goes on in His strength. The majesty of His Name is seen. And His people abide, they remain in the faith because He keeps them in it. And to Him belongs all the glory. He shall be great to the ends of the earth, for He is our peace. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. And this is the message which came to shepherds who were pasturing their flocks outside of Bethlehem that night that Jesus was born. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” This is the significance of Bethlehem Ephrathah. Out of her, Christ came forth unto God. Out of her, Christ came forth as a Ruler in Israel. Out of her the effects of Christ’s birth would be felt. And out of her would come Christ as the great Shepherd of God’s sheep. May the Lord bless you richly this Christmas with these blessed truths.