

BETHLEHAM

Matthew 2:1-12

In our Scripture reading this morning Matthew quotes from Micah 5:2. I would like for you to have both of these passages opened before you this morning so that we can refer to them in the message. Micah 5:2. Seven hundred years before the Lord Jesus was born it was prophesied by Micah the prophet that He would be born in Bethlehem. And one of the amazing things about the birth of the Lord Jesus is that Mary His mother and her husband Joseph lived in Northern Israel, in a town called Nazareth. And just about the time that Mary was to be delivered of her child Cesaer Augustus gave a decree that the whole Roman world was to be taxed and in order to do this they were to return to their home towns. And so it was necessary for Joseph and Mary to leave Nazareth and go down to Bethlehem which was the City of David and while they were there the Lord Jesus Christ was born. Now it doesn't take a great deal of understanding in the Scriptures to see the hand of God in all of this. Long before Soloman had written the kings heart is in the hand of the Lord as the rivers of water he turneth it whithersoever he will. And so God in a sovereign way moved Cesaer Augustus to issue this decree at the very time that it was necessary to get Mary to Bethlehem so that the prophesy of Micah 700 years before could be fulfilled. Now suddenly Bethlehem became known not only throughout Israel but as you know in the succeeding years as the birthplace as Jesus of Nazareth. To us it is a very important place. It's a very well known place but this was not the case when Micah wrote this prophesy and if you have your Bible opened to Micah 5:2 I would like for you to notice what Micah has written. "But thou Bethlehem Ephratath though thou be little among the thousands of Judah yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." Now as you look at this verse you see that this not only has to do with the first coming of Christ but it has to do with the second coming of Christ. He came the first time born in Bethlehem. He's coming the second time to be ruler in Israel. Now we're concerned this morning about His first coming and the prophesy here is that He was to be born in Bethlehem Ephratath which is called little among the thousands of Judah. Now when the Lord Jesus was born you

you remember that the angel of the Lord announced to the shepherds that unto them was born that day in the City of David a Savior which is Christ the Lord. And when the angels returned to heaven Luke records for us that the shepherds said one to another let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass which the Lord hath made known unto us. Now this morning as we look at this I want to divide my message into four parts. I want us to look first of all just briefly at the history of Bethlehem. And then secondly I want to note with you the insignificance of Bethlehem and I want to dwell on this word for just a few moments, the word little. Though you are little among the thousands of Judah. And then as we move on in this account we see the prominence of Bethlehem and how it became prominent and finally I want to take just a few moments dealing with the message that the Spirit of God evidently wants us to see in the fact that this little obscure village of Bethlehem suddenly was lifted into a place of prominence so that now it has the unique claim which no other city in the world can make and that is that it was the birth place of the Messiah. I don't know if you have ever taken your Bible and gone through the Scriptures to note the times that Bethlehem is mentioned. It is a very interesting thing to do. Bethlehem actually goes back to very ancient times and I am not going to take the time this morning to trace all that the Scriptures have to say about Bethlehem, there really isn't a great deal. But there is more than I will take time for this morning. I want to mention three instances in the Old Testament that show us that Bethlehem was an important place. The first time that Bethlehem was mentioned is in connection with the death of Rachel. Benjamin was born either in ancient Bethlehem or in that vicinity and those of you who remember the story know that as Rachel was giving birth to Benjamin she died. And she was not buried in the cave of McPelah like Abraham and Sarah and Issac and Rebekah and even Jacob and Leah. But she was buried in Bethlehem and so this city is remembered in ancient times as the place where Rachel died and the place where Benjamin was born. As you go on in the Old Testament the next prominent thing that happened in Bethlehem was the

story of Ruth. You remember how Alimilech and Naomi went down into Moab and Alimilech died and then the two sons of Alimilech and Naomi died and Naomi finally came back into the land of Israel with one of her daughter's in law, Ruth a Moabite and it was in Bethlehem that Ruth met Boaz and married Boaz and as the first chapter of the book of Matthew indicates in marrying Boaz she joined that line that was eventually to result in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to the earth. So this was undoubtedly an important thing and when you read that delightful little book of Ruth, four chapters you read an account that has to do with this city that we are interested in in connection with the birth of Christ. But probably the most important thing that ever happened at Bethlehem apart from the birth of the Lord Jesus was the fact that this was the home of David. That's the reason that Bethlehem was called the city of David and it is recorded in First Samuel 17:12 that David was the son of that Ephrathite of Bethlehem Judah whose name was Jesse. It was at Bethlehem that Samuel anointed David as King of Israel. And so Bethlehem because of this has a place of prominence but in spite of this outstanding history up to the time of David it seems that after the death of David Bethlehem became a very insignificant place and so as we come to this prophecy we see the insignificance of Bethlehem, "Thou Bethlehem Ephrath, Ephrath was its ancient name and just as Bethlehem means house of bread, Ephrath means fruitfulness but thou Bethlehem though thou be little among the thousands of Israel, thousands of Judah yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel. Now the word little can mean small in number and probably has that significance as far as Micah's time was concerned. There probably were not very many people living in Bethlehem but the word that is used here also means that it was a despised place, an insignificant place. A place of little value, a place that was as far as people in Israel concerned generally a worthless place and one of the problems that Bethlehem faced was that it was located in the shadow of Jerusalem. If you have ever been over to the Holy Land you know that Bethlehem is really closer to Jerusalem than we are here to Gresham. And so Bethlehem had that to contend with. I even

went to my concordance and I thought I would compare the number of times that Bethlehem is spoken of in Scripture with the times that Jerusalem is mentioned. How do you think they would compare. Well if you take both the Old Testament and the New Testament you would find that Bethlehem is only mentioned 53 times in the entire Bible. But the situation is a little different as far as Jerusalem is concerned because Jerusalem is mentioned approximately 800 times. Fifty three for Bethlehem, eight hundred for Jerusalem. So that this means that for every one time that Bethlehem is mentioned Jerusalem is mentioned some fifteen or sixteen times. Now when you stop to think about this it's really quite amazing that God did not choose Jerusalem as the place where His son would be born. Jerusalem was the prominent place. Jerusalem would have given Him greater significance right from the very beginning but no, God designed, God ordained that His son would be born in little insignificant Bethlehem. Now when you study the Scriptures you can't help but see that this is characteristic of God's working. One thing that God so often does when He is preparing to do a work is to put His hand upon an insignificant person or an insignificant place or an insignificant thing. I could site many examples of that. Now these people that we get acquainted with in Scripture are certainly very important as far as we are concerned and so it's difficult for us to think of a time when they were not important. But take Moses for example. When God called Moses you remember that Moses' immediate response was this, who am I that I should go unto Pharoah. Moses was in exile, Moses had had to flee from his life because he killed an Egyptian. Moses had been away from his people for forty years. There is no way for us to say how well he was remembered. But to Moses God couldn't have chosen anybody who was more insignificant and unimportant than what he saw fit to do. And so He brought Moses back out of exile and sent him to Pharoah and you know the story which followed and how God exalted His servant Moses in such an amazing way. Think of Gideon and I am thinking this morning not of what God did in cutting down the numbers of Gideon when He gave Israel victory over the Middeonites. But I am thinking of the call that God gave to Gideon. And

when God called him you remember he said I am the least in my family and he felt that he was one of the most insignificant tribes in all the land of Israel. And yet God laid His hand on Gideon and God used him in a most amazing way as one of the great judges of the children of Israel. David was so insignificant even to the members of his family that when Samuel came to his home to anoint one of the sons as king Jesse his father didn't even go to the trouble of calling him out of the field because he didn't think that there was the slightest possibility that David would be God's choice. And yet David was. And we see how God took this young man and brought him out of his insignificant place and gave him a name which as far as Scripture is concerned is probably second in significance only to the Messiah Himself. Think of the men the Lord chose as His disciples. Men who were nobodies. And yet God saw fit to chose them and to work through them. And the names that have become so well loved and so prominent among the people of God from that day until this are only prominent because of what God saw fit to do in their lives. And you could go on to other things. Insignificant people and insignificant things that God has seen fit to use. So it is entirely in keeping with what God does to see that He took this little obscure unimportant despised village and determined that this was the place where His son would be born. Now both in Micah 5:2 and also in Matthew 2 you have the anticipation of a change. Now look at Micah 5:2 if you will, where it says though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel. So the suggestion is there that God is going to do something about the insignificance of Bethlehem. But now turn to our Scripture reading for the morning in Matthew 2. Often you find a change or a variation in the way Old Testament verses are quoted in the New Testament. Sometimes this is due to the fact that the quotation comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament instead of the Hebrew original but the Spirit of God has the right to use the Old Testament and the New Testament in any way that He sees fit because He is the author of both. And will you notice in the sixth verse of Matthew 2. But thou Bethlehem

in the land of Judah, now notice it does not say are the least among the princes of Judah but it says are not the least among the princes of Judah. In Micah 5:2 Micah said speaking of Bethlehem in that day that Bethlehem was insignificant, unimportant but when this is quoted by Matthew the change has been made and Matthew is emphasizing not the first part of the quotation but the second part of the quotation. And He says you are not the least among the princes of Judah for out of thee shall come a governor that shall rule my people Israel. So here we see that an insignificant place suddenly becomes very very prominent. An event was going to take place in the city of Bethlehem that could not take place in any other city of the world. It was here that the Lord Jesus Christ was to be born. So that when the wise men came to town and they were wondering where the King of the Jews was going to be born these unbelieving chief priests and scribes knew that it was not going to be in Jerusalem but it was going to be in Bethlehem. And so suddenly this little obscure relatively unimportant village of Bethlehem had actually moved ahead of the glory of Jerusalem because it was in Bethlehem not in Jerusalem that the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world. And Bethlehem could never after that be what she had been before. No other city in Israel or in any other country of the world will ever be able to make the claim that Bethlehem is able to make because Bethlehem was the birth place of the Lord Jesus Christ the Messiah of Israel. Now I want you to see the reason for her prominence. It certainly was not because of her history. It was not because of her proximity to Jerusalem. This had probably been the greatest reason for Bethlehem's obscurity. The reason for Bethlehem's prominence was solely because Jesus Christ had been born there. It was Jesus Christ who made the change in Bethlehem. And therefore to Him belonged all of the glory. God had ordered this you remember according to Micah 5:2 from of old even from everlasting. Micah had prophesied that it would be here and so it was. Now I want to ask you a question from all of this while this material is fresh in our minds. Why do you think that God would chose an insignificant place like Bethlehem for the birth of His son. Why wasn't it in Jerusalem. Or in some other

more prominent place. Why couldn't he have been born even in Nazareth even though that seems to have been a place that was notorious because of its sin. Why did God take little insignificant obscure despised Bethlehem. Well let me suggest an answer. Because it seems that one reason that the Lord did this was because He was setting before the whole world an illustration of the Gospel and what happens to people when they are saved. Now in explaining this I am going to ask you to turn to another passage this morning and that's the passage that you will find in I Corinthians 1. Because there is a surprising parallel between the language that is used in Micah 5:2 of Bethlehem and the language that is used in this passage of those of us who were believers. First Corinthians I, the last part of the chapter beginning with verse 26. For you see your calling brethren how that not many wise men after the flesh not many mighty, not many noble are called but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty. Now notice in the next verse. And base things of the world and things which are despised hath God chosen yea and things which are not that is things which are nothing in themselves to bring to nothing the things that are. Now if there is a verse that could be used of Bethlehem in the New Testament and by the way after you leave I think it is the 6th chapter of the Gospel of John you never find Bethlehem referred to at all in the New Testament. Bethlehem is just referred to in the New Testament in Matthew, in Luke and just once in John. But verse 28 is descriptive of what ancient Bethlehem was, base, despised, something that was nothing. Because here God was bringing His Son into the world from this insignificant unimportant place and because Jesus Christ was born there and only because Jesus Christ was born there I doubt if you will ever find a person who goes to visit the land of Israel who is satisfied that they have been in the city of Jerusalem, because everybody who goes there also wants to go to the city of Bethlehem. It was there that this little insignificant place was not only raised to world prominence in one generation but throughout history it has kept that place and the only reason for that prominence

is because Jesus Christ was born there and I am sure that people who don't know anything about the Bible if they are asked where Jesus Christ was born most of them would be able to tell you because of their acquaintance with the story as a result of the Christmas season coming around every year that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem. Now the last three verses of our chapter tell why God has done this with respect to salvation. And I want you to see this morning an illustration of this as it relates to the city of Bethlehem. Because here is a picture of our salvation. And when you and I think of what God has done in our hearts and what we deserve to have done in our hearts we can see that spiritually we are just like Bethlehem was and just as Bethlehem didn't amount to anything until Jesus Christ came there so it can be said of the people of God that we don't amount to anything until Jesus Christ comes into our lives. These are days when it seems that people are concerned about self worth and about finding out who they are. And yet when they come to the Word of God to find out who they are they don't like it. Because when you look at man as he is by nature as he is portrayed in Scripture there is nothing to be proud of. Man in himself is base and despised and ruined and dead because of his sin. And the only one who can make the change that needs to be made in the lives of people wherever they may be is Jesus Christ when He comes into a life. And when the saints are gathered in heaven and you and I are among them and I hope that this includes everybody who is here in this service this morning we are all going to be able to give testimony to the glory of God that corresponds with what God did in the city of Bethlehem so long ago. Lots of the saints have become well known. We've gotten acquainted with many of them in Scripture. Some I have mentioned this morning who became prominent as the result of what God did in their hearts. But who prior to that were just as insignificant as anybody could possibly be. And you follow down through history and you find exactly the same thing and even as far as the world is concerned. The world doesn't give a great deal of prominence to those who are the people of God and to those who know the Lord Jesus Christ but I am thinking of this now from the standpoint

of what God is doing. And therefore when you think of what He has done in our hearts and the Lord Jesus Christ has saved us even though there was absolutely nothing in us that could possibly commend us to Him or even contribute to our salvation and He's done this first of all and look at verse 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence. Reading through my Bible this year I have noted again the many, many references that you have in Scripture to the pride of man. And I don't know if we really take in that emphasis as you see it in Scripture because we are so used to the pride that is in our own hearts and we're so used to listening to people boast about various things. But you see the reason that God has chosen who He has and the reason He is saving the people He is saving is that no flesh should glory in his presence. And when we stand in glory gathered around the throne giving the Lord the glory which only belongs to Him we are going to know better than we have ever known before that we of all people don't deserve to be there. And the only reason that we have been exalted from such a lowly place to such a high place where we have a standing before God that is equal to that of His Son is simply because Jesus Christ came into our lives and transformed us just as He went to Bethlehem so many years ago. Look at verse 30 of I Corinthians I. But of Him are ye in Christ Jēsus who of God is made unto us wisdom , righteousness, sanctification and redemption that according as it is written he that glorieth let him glory in the Lord. Let me ask you to turn quickly to one other passage where you can see this same thing and this is Ephesians 2. I won't take the time to read all of this but I want you to see the glory of what it means to be a Christian and the fact that we owe all of this exclusively to the Lord Jēsus Himself. Ephesians 2:1-3 give us an unbelievable picture of the human heart without Christ. And as I said earlier this morning we don't like that kind of a picture. We like to think that there is more in man than there actually is. But this is God's portrait of the human heart. And now look at the change beginning with verse 4 and notice the change begins with God and through the riches of His mercy and then notice what it leads to. God who is rich in mercy for his great love wherewith he loved us and that's when you ought

to go back and read the first three verses again and be reminded that there isn't any reason why he should love us if you are looking at us. Even when we were dead in sins have quickened us together with Christ and hath raised us up together and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. You see what a wonderful person a Christian is. Not wonderful because of anything that he has in himself but wonderful because of what God has done for him in Christ. And this work is so wonderful and I want you to see this this morning, it's so wonderful that Paul tells us in this 7th verse that God is going to be all through eternity manifesting his kindness toward us because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. Now that's amazing isn't it. He's taken us obscure hopeless defiled helpless sinners and Jesus Christ has come to us and He's transformed us and we have been raised with Him and made to sit together with Him in heavenly places for the purpose that all through eternity we might be learning more and more of the exceeding riches of his grace which was manifested to us when Jesus Christ became our Savior. That's the reason I believe that God chose Bethlehem, to be sure it was the City of David. The Lord Jesus came as the heir of David's throne but in the very act of coming to Bethlehem and the transformation that was to take place in Bethlehem when this obscure village became one of the most important places in all the earth, what a marvelous picture of what God has done for you and for me when He's taken us from our obscurity in our sin, in our defilement, in our worthlessness and because of the transforming grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the manifestation of His kindness which will never come to an end you and I have been lifted out of all of that and have been made to sit together in heavenly places in Christ. That ought to make you worship the Lord as a result of what He's done in your life and my life and may I say as I close this morning that if there is any one here who does not know the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior this message is for you and perhaps God brought you here this morning in just the same kind of a wonderful way that He moved Joseph and Mary from Nazareth down to

Bethlehem that the Word of God might be fulfilled. God has brought you here that you might hear the Gospel, that you might learn of the Lord Jesus Christ, that you might see that He was the one who came to put away the sins of men and if you will believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. If you will put your trust in Him he will do for you what He's done for us. Not making us prominent in the world but making us the saints of glory that one day we are going to have the privilege of being with Him and being with Him for all eternity that He may continue to lavish upon us the marvelous riches of His grace because of our relationship to God's dear Son.