

The Virgin Birth

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[0 : 00] Now, can you turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Matthew, as we continue to explore the early chapters of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's Gospel, we're going to read from chapter 1, verse 18 to verse 25.

And we're going to consider today the virgin birth and the incarnation of Jesus becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

Matthew chapter 1, verse 18. This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph.

But before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 12] She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet.

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son, and he gave him the name Jesus.

Amen. This is God's word. Now, as we come to a passage like this, as we begin to explore together the virgin birth, perhaps some of us will be here with questions, wondering how this can be.

We are dealing with a profound mystery here, as J.I. Packer puts it, and we're talking about the babyhood of the Son of God. And we're talking about the union of God and man in the person of Jesus, and all that by the power of the Holy Spirit.

[2 : 42] As we come to this passage, we discover striking things about the identity of Jesus. So as we've been thinking through this morning, in verse 23, we are told the child in the manger was God.

But then as the angel speaks to Joseph, we discover that the child in the manger was God who became human by the creative power of God, the Holy Spirit.

And we're told something striking too about the purpose, about the mission of this child. He is, verse 21, God's promised Savior.

So as we sit here today, what do we make of this? Is this truth that causes us to worship? Or perhaps it causes us to wonder and to have questions?

You maybe saw in the news this week of the sale of Einstein's so-called God letter, selling for two million pounds. It was a letter written a year before he died.

[3 : 55] Einstein was a man who, through his life, seemed to wrestle with science and his own sort of Jewish faith. But in that short letter, he speaks of the Bible. And he calls it a collection of venerable, but still rather primitive legends.

And he speaks on religion in general as an incarnation of a primitive superstition. Words that are echoed by folks in our own day, like Richard Dawkins, who would describe miracles and the virgin birth as a story for unsophisticated people and for children.

And so that's the understanding of some within the scientific community and some within our community. Perhaps you're here today and you have significant questions about what we just read.

Or maybe you're having conversations with friends at work or in your community and they have questions at this time of year about what we believe about the virgin birth. Or maybe we're

wondering, even as Christians, is the virgin birth something that really matters anyway? Is it something that should be central or can we, and some parts of the church are doing this, shall we just sort of ignore it? It's kind of embarrassing and hard to deal with. Well, before we really get into the text, can I suggest two reasons why I think the virgin birth and the incarnation are reasonable and are crucially important for our faith, that they're not just a primitive superstition.

[5 : 32] The two things that I would say, first of all, is just thinking about the text, think about it in terms of the difficult detail that this is giving to us. The virgin birth is not something that's going to make Christianity seem more plausible.

If people were writing this as a work of fiction, they would have no good reason for making that up. It's a unique claim. You look around all of the various religions and you're not going to find another example of God taking on full humanity to live in his creation.

This isn't something that's been copied from another belief system. central to our text in Matthew is that passage and especially Isaiah 7.14 that Donald read for us.

And we need to understand that that was not a key messianic prophecy. There weren't lots and lots of Jewish people waiting, looking around for virgins who would give birth to a baby who would be God's savior.

If this was a work of fiction and if the writer was wanting to say, here is a special child who's come into the world, there would be other ways to do it.

[6 : 46] In the Old Testament, what happens when God is going to do something new, when God is going to provide a deliverer sometimes or provide a child a promise, that child will be born to a barren woman.

That's often the pattern in the Old Testament. So it doesn't fit with an existing type or pattern. And there doesn't appear at a human level to be any benefit whatsoever in giving Jesus Christ such dubious origins.

And we find all through his life people asking questions and people being scandalized because of questions about who his father was.

So it's a difficult detail. And when we come to difficult details, it leads us often to think, well, the best explanation for it is because it's true.

The best explanation for the virgin birth is that Matthew, the New Testament writers, the eyewitnesses, the church, through most of history, believed it to be true.

[7 : 52] Scaling back a little bit, the question of whether we think the virgin birth is reasonable or ridiculous will in large part depend on our worldview and on certain faith beliefs.

So for people like Einstein and Dawkins, if you believe in a closed universe that where either there is no God or there's no God who intervenes, then of course, something miraculous like a virgin birth seems pure following.

There's a Christian scholar and debater and writer by the name of William Lane Craig. He said when he first came across the idea of the virgin birth before he was a Christian, he wrote it off as being something absurd.

I mean, he didn't have the ability to create from nothing a male child. Where did the male Y chromosome come from was one of his questions.

But nevertheless, he kind of pinned in that doubt and continued to explore the life of Jesus. And as he read into the life and the teaching and the death of Jesus and the significance of his death for sinners and as he looked at the historical reliable evidence for the resurrection, Lane Craig was persuaded that the Bible speaks truth.

[9 : 11] And when you understand that the Bible speaks truth and you go to the beginning of the Bible, you meet the God who created a whole cosmos just by speaking. And therefore, Lane Craig concluded creating a Y chromosome is child's play compared to that.

So it depends on our view of the world. It depends on our understanding of the universe. The God of the Bible didn't wind up the world and let it go and then stands back and doesn't get involved. He intervenes in supernatural ways, in miracles. So if we believe in a God who created by intelligent design, then the virgin birth stands as entirely reasonable.

How do you and I or how can you and I believe this kind of deep mystery? Something that on the surface seems as Craig but it absurd.

Well, it requires faith, doesn't it? And it needs for us to know Jesus personally. Let me try and illustrate how this process works.

[10:19] So I had to visit a friend in St. Andrews for the first time this week and I wasn't entirely sure where he lived so that was my first question where exactly am I supposed to be going but then when I arrived, second question then is after making that journey, is my friend in?

So as I got out of my car, I saw that his car was also parked on the street. That was a good sign. As I got closer to the door, I saw that the lights were on and the front door was unlocked.

So those are good signs, aren't they? They're good clues but they're not decisive. Could have been his wife, could have been another family member that was in the house but as soon as I knock the door and my friend opens, now the question is answered once and for all with absolute certainty. Those clues, that's secondary evidence, not as important as meeting my friend face to face. And that's at the heart of Christianity is meeting with Jesus and that's a gift that he gives.

Jesus spoke to Nicodemus in John chapter 3 and he said, I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. We need that miracle of new life to be worked in us before this makes sense.

[11:37] Ultimately, to see the child in the manger as God's chosen king requires the gift of faith. So if you're here and you want to believe, you want to believe in Jesus, you want to know more, then ask God for the gift of faith.

And for our family and friends who don't believe, that's what we need to pray for them, that God would give to them the gift of faith that they might hear and believe. So that just by way of introduction to say that I think the virgin birth is both reasonable and really important for our faith and I hope we'll see that as we go.

Let's think now about our text, let's think about the history of the incarnation. Read with me again verse 18. This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.

Now notice, Matthew writes presuming that his first readers know about the virgin birth, about the virgin conception. So he's writing sometime between 60 and 80 AD.

He's writing at a time when some of the eyewitnesses were still alive. he's writing of a truth that was accepted by the church for some 1800 years.

[12:48] He's presuming that they know this story. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph but before they came together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

So we've got this human couple in focus who we met last week in verse 16 in the family line of King David and they are Mary and Joseph and they are betrothed.

So there's this binding agreement. They're not married yet but it's binding like a marriage. It's a legal commitment to one another. But in their situation where they're unmarried and where they've never slept together Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant.

You see that the information is told from Joseph's point of view. But just imagine that. We get used to the Christmas story don't we? We've heard it lots of times before but imagine the shock and the hurt and confusion when Joseph discovers his bride-to-be is pregnant.

Bear in mind too that he lives in a very conservative religious society. Remember the shock and the shame and the scandal that comes with this kind of news.

[14:03] Verse 19 what do we discover about Joseph? Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace so he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

He's a righteous man he's living by God's law and in God's law if someone is unfaithful you do not need to marry or remain married to them. And so Joseph doesn't want to marry Mary but he still cares for her doesn't want to publicly disgrace her so he has in mind a quiet divorce.

He doesn't know about the angel's announcement to Mary and what God by the Holy Spirit has done in Mary at this stage. So he's made that decision I'm going to divorce her quietly I don't want that scandal and to live with that hurt but after his decision verse 20 an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said Joseph son of David do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what's conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

So the angel comes in a dream and says do not fear. Now a lot of times when the angels come to people they say do not be afraid because people are quaking in terror because of the appearance of the angels in power and glory but here it's not the angel that Joseph is afraid of rather he had been afraid to take Mary home as his wife but he's told don't be afraid she's not been unfaithful what's conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit there's been a new life creative work through the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary.

Notice it's Joseph son of David a reminder that Joseph's in King David's family line verse 21 she will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins it was Joseph you are to name him Jesus in naming Jesus that would be a sign of legal adoption that would be a sign of Jesus being taken legally into the family line of King David which is so important as we'll see to the promises and we thought about that last week as well how does Joseph react verse 24 when Joseph woke up Joseph stands like other figures of faith you can read about in the Old Testament and did like Mary as we discovered in Luke's gospel with obedience to the word of God in his case that meant taking Mary home as his wife but we're told importantly there is no sexual union until after

[16:57] Jesus is born and Jesus is legally adopted given the name Jesus now two points of application as we think about the history the events that we have here the first general point about labelling people we discover in the story of Jesus and his family they were labelled wrongly as it turned out but labelling people is damaging this week I've heard of two stories of women who were looked down on ignored rejected within their churches because of their past because of accusations about their past because of disapproval about family situation labelled and rejected that's wrong isn't it we must both believe and live out the gospel of grace grace that covers sin and shame grace that gives people welcome so labelling people as we see in the story of Jesus and his family is damaging and his wrong and the second thing we see at a very basic level is that faith in God is not always easy faith in God comes with a cause you read the gospels and you sense the shame and the scandal that Mary and Joseph lived under the accusations against Mary the questioning of who Jesus father is rejecting him because of his unknown parentage it was costly for Joseph to obey and faith will always come with a cause of different kinds perhaps for us it might be the loss of our reputation because of our Christian beliefs because we hold things like the virgin birth to be true perhaps it will be for us a loss of independence where we're no longer free to say I'm just going to do whatever I want regardless of consequences because we want to submit to God it's costly in the sense that we're called daily to die to ourselves for the sake of God and the good of others we're called constantly to put others ahead of ourselves so that costs us in our time and our energy and our resources in the emotion and care that we pour out for the sake of others it's costly to say Jesus is my Lord because it means submitting with all of our lives and all of our hearts to him a couple of weeks ago at the church planting conference up in St.

Columbus the minister of a new church plant in Glasgow Christ Church Glasgow Jonathan de Groot was speaking about their first convert he is an Iranian student who began reading the Bible with a friend began exploring the claims of Jesus and came to faith in the Lord Jesus and began to tell his Iranian friends about what he now believes now one of those friends has since reported back to the authorities in Iran and so Jonathan de Groot was talking to this man who's newly started trusting in Jesus and he was asking him do you realize the cost that will be involved for you and the man said yes I know that if I go back to Iran there is a fair chance that people will want me killed but he said since this is true since Jesus is Lord he said it's worth it faith is costly faith in

Jesus is worth it now that's the historical events around the incarnation but let's think together for a few minutes about the significance of the incarnation of Jesus taking on human flesh and dwelling among us the big so what question why do you and I need the story of the birth of Jesus Christ well we find in our text three words that take us right to the heart of the gospel the first word to think about is salvation we find it in verse 21 she will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins are you discovering your footnote the name Jesus means God saves here is the rescuer here is the saviour promised and what do we discover about him in verse 23 he is

[22:12] God the psalm that we read just before the psalm that we sang rather just before reading from Matthew ends in this way psalm 130 let me remind you of the closing two verses oh Israel written to the people of God put your hope in the Lord for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption release from slavery another way of talking about salvation and then it says he himself will redeem Israel from all their sins in the Old Testament the Lord himself will redeem Israel from their sins New Testament what do we discover Jesus will save his people from their sins what's the angel saying the child in the manger is God the Savior Jesus is how God is going to carry out his rescue now just to think for a moment about Jesus unique birth what does that teach us that we need somebody we need the Son of God to come to be our Savior it says to us we need a rescuer who comes from outside in order to save us so on the one hand we think about the virgin

birth it speaks a word of judgment on us because it says that none of us by ourselves are good enough for a holy and perfect

God and that none of us by ourselves have the ability to find our way back to God that left to ourselves we would all remain under the judgment of God with no hope of mercy and forgiveness but the virgin birth doesn't just speak judgment to it it also speaks grace to us because who is the baby in the manger he is Jesus the God man born in Bethlehem to die on the cross at Calvary now does it matter to us that Jesus is both human and divine as the Bible makes clear absolutely it does he needs to be fully human to save us to save us he must identify with us he comes to be a perfect representative to be one of us he's not like Superman the comic book hero he appears to be like a man but he's actually from another planet he's not human at all that's not how

Jesus came Jesus came fully God and fully human and he needs to be fully human in order to identify with us also to obey the law for us we need somebody who can keep the law we need somebody who can please God we need someone who is faithful in loving God and loving other people it's not us we need a representative Jesus comes in his perfect obedience to fully obey the law for us and he comes to suffer the punishment for human sin in a human body we need him as our perfect substitute representative and sacrifice he takes our place dies in our place so that we might know forgiveness it matters that he's fully human and it matters too that he's fully divine quoting from the new city catechism because of his divine nature his obedience and suffering would be perfect and effective that what

Jesus does is perfect and effective satisfying the law of God satisfying the just judgment of God bearing the anger against sin and defeating death in order to give us new life and to bring us into favor with God so we hear this word of salvation in the coming of Jesus we also hear and it's connected we hear a word of promise look at verse 22 all this took place to fulfill that's a word connected to promise isn't it all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet and then we get that quote from Isaiah chapter 7 verse 14 God keeps his promise Jesus comes as the savior king that

Isaiah spoke of some 700 years earlier now if we were to spend a bit of time in Isaiah chapter 7 to 11 the focus is on a child a promised child who is the answer to the judgment that the people were under because of their rebellion against God and we learn some remarkable things about that child in that section so in chapter 7 as we're told here the child to be born is Emmanuel God with us in Isaiah chapter 9 we discover that among the child's name is mighty God and then in Isaiah chapter 11 we discover that this child will rule in supernatural power God's promise of redemption comes as God himself comes as our savior king in his son

[28 : 01] Jesus Christ this promise is a sign it's a sign to Israel that they had endured much hardship that they had questions has God forgotten us will God be faithful to his promise and here's the answer God does keep his promise God delights to show love and salvation to those who turn to him and this sign also stands as a promise to us when God makes a promise he keeps it we know from experience don't we the pain of broken promises sometimes we let other people down good intentions but we become forgetful or we lack the resources to keep that promise and we know the pain of promises made to us that are then broken disappointing maybe we have the question will

God be any different maybe we've heard the phrase promises are only as strong as the person who makes them who is it that made this promise to Isaiah some 700 years earlier it's the one who delivered on that promise by giving us Jesus who is the child in the manger he is the perfect son of God come to be our rescuer come to be a sign that God is faithful that we can trust him in a world of broken promises and disappointment here is one who will never let us down the third word that was to think about connected to the virgin birth and the coming of Jesus and connecting us to the gospel is that of presence back to verse 23 the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel which means God with us who is the child in the manger he is the divine son of

God who has come to be with us has taken on human nature in order that he might be with us it's significant that at the beginning and the end of Matthew's gospel you get this promise of Emmanuel so here in chapter 1 verse 23 before Jesus comes into the world there is this announcement he will be God with us and then you go right to the very end chapter 28 verse 20 just before so Jesus has died on the cross and he's resurrected and he's about to return to the glory of heaven and he's giving the commission to the disciples to preach the good news to all nations and then he says to

them I am with you always to the very end of the beginning of the gospel end of the gospel God is with us in Jesus it's a rich promise we have a family wedding this Christmas a few days after Christmas and thinking about marriage marriage is a promise of witness isn't it even in the vows that we take we promise a husband and wife promise in riches and poverty to be with each other in sickness and in health to be with and for each other and so it's a joyful celebration of witness and community and friendship and they're all a gift from God but in those marriage promises there's also that reality till death do us part the coming of Jesus is different here is the one time where we can be with someone and it will never come to an end this is the witness that every heart truly longs for because it's for now and it's for eternity and it's right at the heart of the Bible we go back to the garden of Eden Adam and Eve living in a perfect world what's God doing he's walking and talking with them in the garden the nation of Israel set free from Egypt and they camp around the tabernacle the tent of God as the newly established nation of God God is literally and symbolically in the middle of their national life and Jesus comes Jesus comes as friend of sinners to offer friendship with God to be God with us we go to the end of the Bible what's the hope of the new heaven and the newer God dwelling with his people forever what's the hope of the hearts of every Christian that one day we'll see Jesus face to face having been like him we'll get to be with him forever God with us is our way to enjoy life with God is our way to enjoy life the way that it was made to be it's a wonderful promise to us as Christians that we are never alone when we have Jesus in heaven we always have someone to turn to we always have someone who is there for us who is with us even when we think about why and who Matthew wrote the gospel to he's writing the gospel to a group of [33 : 38] Christians who are facing the persecution of the Roman Empire and he's saying to them hold on Jesus is with you Jesus has you you are secure in him what we discovered in the story of Christmas is that Jesus became one of us Jesus walked in our shoes in order to rescue us in order to remain with us in order to be our forever king and here's why the Christmas story is so precious to us because it reminds us of God's extravagant grace to us that saw Jesus leave the glory of heaven to be born as a baby to be born in that stable to then die on a cross for the sins of his people so that he might one day be with his bride his church forever God