

Who was Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary: Extraordinary Conception, Ordinary Birth

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Date: 28 January 2024

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[0:00] of his word. Yes, so we're working our way through the Apostles' Creed, and it has fallen on my lot to talk about Jesus as conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Now, I don't know if you saw the title of the sermon while it probably went by, but it has that statement from the Creed, but then there's a subtitle which is Extraordinary Conception, Ordinary Birth.

Extraordinary Conception, Ordinary Birth. You know, often the birth of Jesus is referred to as a virgin birth, and commentators in the Bible do that, theologians do it, Christmas songs do it. They talk about a virgin birth, but if we look at the confession, strictly speaking, it's a virginal conception and an ordinary birth. Now, a child being born to a woman that had not been conceived in the usual fashion is indeed an extraordinary thing, to be sure, but Mary's response to the Gabriel's announcement that she was going to have a child. She says, how shall I do this? I don't know a man.

Or as the ESV says, how will this be since I'm a virgin? But labeling the birth a virgin birth might lead us to think that the birth itself was unusual.

But I would argue that that's not the case. The conception was extraordinary and important for being so. But the birth was ordinary and important for being so. So we're going to consider this doctrine, this teaching of tonight's portion of the Apostles' Creed under three headings.

The who of the conception and birth, by looking at Daniel 7. The how of the conception and birth, by looking at Matthew 2. And, excuse me, it should be Matthew 1. And the why, no, it is 2, sorry.

[2:04] And the why of the conception and birth, Mark 6, 1 through 4. So let's pray first. Lord God, we are looking at something that is beyond our comprehension. And yet, we confess. We confess it because not just that we think it's a good idea, but because it's true. And because, as the Apostles' Creed says, this is who Jesus is. And so I pray that you would help me to speak of this matter and that we all, myself included, would be open to the work of your spirit as we wrestle with these profound concepts spoken in just a few words, but so challenging. So we commit our time together into your care and to your care. In Jesus' name. Amen. So first, the who of the conception and birth.

Well, as I said, we're in the section of the Apostles' Creed that teaches us about Jesus. So who's the who? Jesus. But let's back it up some 600 years before the events recorded to us in the gospel by looking at Daniel chapter 7. Now, the context of what we read is Daniel, and this is the portion of Daniel's, the prophet Daniel's book that has his name attributed, where he begins to talk about visions. We've learned some about his history and how he served in different kings and different courts. But now he's beginning, we relate visions that he has had. And the context of this particular statement that we read is that the vision included four beasts whom we later learn represent four kings, each more terrifying than the next. And then after that vision of the beast, he has a vision of the heavenly court with the Ancient of Days, God, seated upon a throne, and the books of judgment are opened. And the result is that the dominions of the beasts are taken away and the beasts are either destroyed or rendered impotent and allowed to live only a little while longer. It's as if the stage was set for what we read.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom to all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. Now look at two things we want to know. First, that he is described as one who looks like

the Son of Man. That is, he looks like a human being. And then he arrives with the clouds of heaven. And this is language associated with divine presence. You can think of Mount Sinai, where Moses goes to get the law and the cloud descends upon Mount Sinai. Or you can think of how the cloud represents God's creative power and authority.

Psalm 104, verse 3, he makes the clouds his chariot. Yeah, and unlike the kings who, though powerful and terrifying, and who make war against the saints and blaspheme God, the dominion given to the Son of Man is an everlasting dominion, a kingdom that shall not be destroyed, and it is universal. Given dominion, glory, kingdom to all peoples, nations, languages who serve them. Who is this? So who is this figure who looks like a man, and yet has the qualities of divinity, who is given all authority and a kingdom that shall have no end? Well, the interpretations are numerous. In fact, one Old Testament commentator said it is no exaggeration to say that no other concept in the Old Testament, not even the servant of the Lord has elicited more prolific literature. However, the evidence is too compelling to conclude that no other title can be given to him other than Messiah. Messiah. As one commentator said, though Daniel 7, 14 does not mention David, the Davidic Messiah is the only one to whom God gives the world's kingdoms permanently in the Old Testament. You might recall God's covenant with David.

He said, and your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever. And there's Psalm 2, I will declare the decree. The Lord has said to me, you are my son today, I begotten you. Ask of me, I will give you the nations as your inheritance, and the ends of the earth as your possession. Now, both of those passages are considered messianic.

[6:52] So, on that basis alone, we can identify the Son of Man with the Messiah. However, the most compelling evidence for the messianic identification of the Son of Man is what Christ says about himself.

He's asked by the high priest when he's being tried. He says, the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you? But he remained silent, made no answer. And then the high priest asked him, are you the Christ? Are you the Messiah? The Son of the Blessed? And Jesus says, I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds at heaven. As someone not remarks, there is no other passage in the Old Testament to which Christ could have been referring except to Daniel 7. In fact, Jesus repeatedly, over 80 times in the gospel, calls himself the Son of Man. So, to heighten the extraordinary nature of this person, when the high priest asks him about Christ's claim, what does the priest say? He says, you have heard blasphemy. And it demonstrates clearly that the priest understands that Jesus is describing deity to himself. And what's interesting in that passage is a kind of hint of the Trinity, as we've talked about already. The idea that there is this divine being, the ancient of days, sitting upon the throne, and then this other divine being coming in, riding in on the clouds. There's a kind of hint of a father-son relationship, perhaps. But again, who is this? The Son of Man, human and divine, the promised Messiah, to whom was given dominion, glory, kingdom, that all people's nations and languages who serve him, and everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away. That's who he is. The Son of Man, the Messiah, that will one day inherit all of the earth. Now, let's look at the how of the conception and birth. And we'll use Matthew 2 for that. How was this extraordinary being to come into his inheritance? Now, I used one of two accounts of Jesus' birth. Either would have served us, Matthew or Luke.

But I chose Matthew's because deity and humanity are explicitly referenced in this passage. Listen again to what Matthew says. Now, the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.

When his mother had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband, Joseph, being a just man and willing to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Mary was pregnant. And what was Joseph's assumption?

That she had committed adultery. They were betrothed. That's a legal contract in that context. And if she was sleeping with another man, that constitutes adultery and she could be put to death.

[10:14] And so, you know, Joseph can't be faulted for thinking the way that he thinks. I mean, that's how people get pregnant, by having sex. But even a media, right? Mary, Mary understands it.

How shall this be since I am a virgin? So how was this child conceived if it wasn't in the normal process? Well, all we are told in Matthew's account is that the child in her womb is not due to an act

of adultery on Mary's part, but to an act of the Holy Spirit. In Luke's account, that is described as the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. That's it.

That's it. We don't know any more than that. But we don't really need to know any more than that. I mean, we've already considered how God is the maker of heaven and earth, and he can certainly create a child in the womb of Mary in an unusual, extraordinary way.

So the simple answer as to how of the conception, it was through the power and overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit. That the conception was extraordinary in nature is emphasized in Matthew's genealogy. In Matthew's genealogy, there's series after series of that so-and-so begat so-and-so, and so-and-so begat so-and-so, and so-and-so begat so-and-so. But when it comes to Jesus, suddenly it changes. Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.

Active beginning is suddenly changed to passive, was born. And then, of course, in the Matthew passage, to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet, behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son. And by the fact that Mary, Mary was taken by Matthew as a wife, but did not have sexual relations with her, with him until after the birth of Jesus. All of these things give us understanding of the extraordinary nature of the conception of this child. It was extraordinary, and not to be confused with another extraordinary conception that took place around this same time. You remember how Elizabeth and Zechariah gave birth to John the Baptist, and they were beyond age, and yet this was going to happen. Well, it's a kind of miracle, but it's different than this.

[12:32] Jesus' conception was unique. It was unique. It was without parallel, and in this regard, then, it's set apart. He is holy. So the how of the conception? Well, we don't know much more than what we're told.

Just the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, something that God has done to create this child in the womb of Mary in an extraordinary way. But as I said at the beginning, it's an extraordinary conception, but an ordinary birth. How was the birth? All Matthew says is that he knew her not until she had given birth. Now, we'll consider under the why portion of our sermon the birth experience of Jesus, but for now, I'd like us to focus on Mary. See, earlier I said that labeling the birth a virgin birth might lead one to think that the birth itself was extraordinary, but that's not the case.

How did Mary give birth? Much like every other woman who has ever given birth, accepting the differences in experiences that each woman has. Mary did not escape the curse pronounced upon Eve after Eve had succumbed to the wiles of the devil. God said to the woman, he said, you, I will surely multiply your pain and childbearing. In pain, you shall bring forth children. Mary was as much a child of Adam and Eve as the rest of us. She needed a savior. Now, surely she was a very pious follower of Jesus and one that we should strive to emulate, but we have no reason to think that she was the exception to the rule when it came to giving birth. As the child grew within her, I'm sure she felt the changes in her body.

As organs were pushed out of the way, as she lost a taste for certain foods and just craved others. I had a sister-in-law who every time she gave birth, she said, I had a white diet, potatoes of every variety and white bread. That's all she could eat. Well, that happens to Mary. And after a little while, she develops heartburn after every meal. She begins to waddle when she walks. She has no idea that her stomach could stick out that far. How was that even possible? Her whole body was being taken over by the presence of this other life within her. And then that journey to Bethlehem, that was agonizing, incredibly uncomfortable. And then when the time came, the contraction started, lighted first, spread pretty far apart, but getting stronger. She says, Joseph, Joseph, you got to find a midwife.

There's got to be a midwife in the city and in this town. And so Joseph goes out and he finds one, brings one back. And the midwife suggested that Mary walk around the stable to see if she could get gravity, do its work of helping draw that baby into position. And then when her water broke, when her water broke, everything really kicked in. The contractions were growing stronger, scary strong.

[15:40] She'd never experienced pain like this. It felt out of control, like there was no bottom to it. And she wanted Joseph comfortable. At the same time, she didn't want him anywhere near her. She cried out to him. She cried out to God. She gripped whatever she could. And she was told by the midwife to wait for the contraction, then bear down and then push, push, push that baby out.

She was drenched with sweat, wanting nothing more than to get this baby out of her body, asking the midwife, what's happening? Are we getting anywhere? Oh, oh, oh, oh, here comes another one.

Good, says the midwife. Good. Take a deep breath. Bear down. Ah, the baby's crowning. His head is presenting itself. Oh, this is good. This is good, Mary. It'll soon be done. Mary gives it everything she can. Finally, finally, that boy pops out and she falls back exhausted. It's just, is she okay? Is he okay? Is he okay? Mary, you did a great job. You did it. You did it. Oh, praise God. She says, praise almighty God. He's good. He's good. Can I see my boy?

Oh, he's so beautiful. So beautiful. Thank you, God. Thank you, midwife. I couldn't have done it without you. Please get Joseph. I want to see Joseph. He needs to see this baby. Yeah, just an ordinary birth. Miraculous in its own way as all births are, but a fully human, ordinary birth. And how was that conception? Extraordinary. How was the birth? Oh, so ordinary. Why? Why the conception and birth?

Well, I chose a passage that might seem a little bit odd in Mark chapter six, when Jesus goes to his hometown. And in his hometown, he is teaching and people are astonished. He's doing miracles and they can't understand. Just extraordinary how it is. And then they ask, where does he get this stuff?

[17:39] How are such mighty works done by his hands? And what do they say? Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?

How do the people in Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, consider him? Well, they're certainly astonished at his teaching. They recognize his wisdom. They acknowledge his power to do mighty works. But their question is, where does the man get these things? Why do they wonder that? Because he's the carpenter. He's the carpenter. He's the son of Mary, the brother of those four other guys and his sisters. They consider Jesus just as he's always been to them, a fellow Nazarite, just a guy going about his daily business, living among his family members. Now, to be sure, he was without sin. So his behavior would have set him apart. And for some, that would have been a blessing, particularly his parents. But for others, he was probably an annoying goody two shoes, always doing everything right. But the important thing to note is that no one mistakes him for anything but a man, a homo sapien of the male variety. And why is this important? As an ancient church father, Gregory of Nazianzus, when he was dealing with a heresy within the church about how Jesus is not fully human, his statement was, that which he, Jesus, that which he has not assumed, he has not healed.

That which he has not assumed, he has not healed. That which he has not taken on to his humanity, has not been healed. This is why it's important to assert that Mary's experience of birth was absolutely ordinary. And Jesus' experience of birth was also an ordinary birth, full of the pain and suffering that every baby goes through. All the things that attend the birth of any human being attended his birth. There could have been bruises on his head where he kept butting up against Mary's pubic bone. His head could have been all misshapen until a few days. It kind of settles back into place. All the things that are part of an ordinary birth. Why? Because that which he has not assumed, he has not healed. He came to save human beings from sin. And to do this, he had to be everything a human being is. Jesus was spared none of the experience of being a human, including growing inside the womb, the pressure of his mother's contraction, pushing him down and through the birth canal, finally coming out, a helpless, bruised, battered up newborn, taking his first breath and offering up that first primal wail. And then the whole process of learning to take the breast, having food introduced, being weaned, learning to walk, being potty trained, making unformed noises, finally then learning to talk.

Jesus, Jesus, use your words. You get the idea. Everything, everything a child has to go through to mature, Jesus had to go through. This is what his neighbors in Nazareth observed and came to the conclusion that he was just one of them. And why did it have to be like that? That which he has not assumed, he has not healed. He came to redeem us, to save us from our fallen humanity and to be human in every way as us, but without the inbuilt, inbuilt, excuse me, inclination to sin, or as we learned in the Heidelberg Catechism, prone to hate God and neighbor. He was fully human, yet without sin. None of those things that I included in the process of his developing is inherently sinful. They've been affected by sin, but being born and growing up is not inherently sinful. And that Jesus could do all of that without sin, it's unfathomable to us who can't do any of it without sin worming its way in. But it was the case for him. And that leads us to the next answer as to why the conception and birth. Joseph and Mary were both told that the name of the baby was to be Jesus. And to Joseph was given the explanation, you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from

their sins. And as you're probably aware, Jesus means Yahweh is salvation or the Lord saves. What do his people need to be saved from?

[22 : 02] Their sins. What is sin? The transgressing and the breaking of God's law. Why must we be saved from their sin? Because God is righteous and he punishes sin. He would be unjust if he didn't punish sin.

His righteousness must be satisfied. Payment must be made and made in full. Yet we are powerless, powerless to pay for our unrighteousness and our debt increases every day. We are like a credit card account that is maxed out and we can't even make the interest payments.

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? The psalmist says. Our inescapable unrighteousness deserves, indeed demands, punishment. And what we need is someone who is not in debt himself and is willing and able to bear the punishment on our behalf. Why? Because as the psalm says, truly no man can ransom another or give to God the price for his life. No, what we need is a particular kind of person. We need one who is a true and righteous man and yet at the same time more powerful than all creatures. At the one same time, both man and God. Because God's righteousness requires that the one who sins pays the penalty. But we can't pay the penalty for someone else who sins. And so it has to be someone who himself takes the penalty of the sin but doesn't deserve it. And why at the same time must he be true God? Well, because he is going to bear the wrath of God and no just ordinary human being is going to be capable of doing that.

It had to be a unique being. God and man. So who is that person? Who is the person who is at the same time true God and true righteous man?

[24 : 01] It's the Son of Man, our Lord Jesus, the Messiah, who God gave to us for our redemption. See, in Daniel chapter 7, what we're told is that this figure, this Son of Man, the Messiah, who Jesus claims himself to be, is going to receive adoration and obedience from the entire earth.

Dominion is an everlasting dominion who does not pass away and all people's nations and languages will serve him. What is not revealed in Daniel's passage is how this was to be realized. It takes the extraordinary conception and ordinary birth and the taking on of the whole nature of our human existence and doing so without sin in order that he might be our redeemer.

It is on account of that descent from the heavenly courts to our fallen earth and is being found in human form and walking in perfect obedience to the will of God to the point of death, even death on a cross, that he comes into possession of his inheritance.

What does Paul say? God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[25 : 26] We began with that story in Daniel, this extraordinary figure, both God and man, name the Son of Man and that Son of Man comes into the world through this extraordinary conception and birth and Jesus takes that title upon himself.

He knows that he is that figure. He is the one who has sent. But yet in order for him to receive the inheritance that was promised to that figure, he had to be obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross, because his name was Jesus.

His name was Jesus. And he came to save his people from their sins. An extraordinary conception, an ordinary birth for us, for our salvation and for his glory.