

What's in a Name?

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[0 : 00] I want to take time this morning to consider these very familiar verses to us at the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew. And I suppose I want us to try and do something that's rather difficult.

And that is I want us to try and approach them as though we're reading them for the first time. As though we are reading them without all the kind of additions that have been brought over the centuries and read into this particular text.

And I want us really to see it within the context of the Gospel of Matthew itself. So I'm not looking at this passage, I want you to look at the Christmas story.

I'm not terribly concerned that you might feel Christmassy today or anything like that. That's not my goal. I want us to read the passage for the purpose that Matthew has given it to us at this place in his Gospel record.

And I suppose you may have noticed, many of you would be faithful Bible readers, that actually only two of the four biblical Gospels actually record the birth of our Lord.

[1 : 17] So that at the very least suggests that it's not essential to communicating the Gospel. Mark, for example, has no record of the birth of Jesus.

And yet his Gospel is used as the foundation for quite a number of different courses that are used to introduce people to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But Matthew, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, includes this record in his Gospel because he sees that there are elements here that bear eloquent testimony and witness to Jesus as the one in whom we should put our faith and the one who should be at the very center of our lives.

Now, as we look at the passage this morning, there's a kind of thread that runs through this. And I want to see it in terms of the thread being God's supernatural intervention in this situation.

There are great miracles. But I'm using the term supernatural as an overarching term. I'm not using it in terms of things that go bump in the night. I'm thinking of things that are beyond the realm of nature, that are works of Almighty God.

And first we'll look at the supernatural intervention in the message that is given to Joseph. Then there's a supernatural nature of our Lord Jesus Christ at His birth.

[3 : 03] You'll know very well that there is a necessity of a divine intervention. And really, that's the first thing that Matthew raises in this passage. Verses 18 and 19.

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. But before they came together, she was found to be pregnant.

Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the lot, yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. So Matthew is narrating how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came to pass.

And we're given this picture that Joseph is pledged to be married or betrothed to Mary. Both those terms are good terms to use. Some of the more modern translations use the term engaged.

And that's not a good use because this was a very different thing from our modern engagement. As will become immediately obvious in our passage, as you will see.

[4 : 12] So the translations that have that do us no favors at all. The notion that the seriousness of a betrothal or being pledged was a far more formal thing than our modern engagement.

Not only formal, it had a legal status. And when these betrothals were broken, it was a very serious matter. In ancient times sometimes, there were nations went to war over an occasion where a betrothal or a pledge to marriage was broken.

And you can see the legal obligation within it. Because in order for this to be severed or broken off, it involves a bill of divorce.

Now that's not the case with the modern engagement. Sometimes people are engaged to be married and it breaks down.

There's tears and recriminations. Sometimes the tears are even from the bride-to-be in those occasions. There is a returning of rings.

[5 : 23] Or sometimes the throwing of rings, depending on how acrimonious the breakup is. Nothing as serious as a divorce. Remember, we're in a culture where there are dowries and things like that.

So it was a far more formal thing. And that's relevant to our passage. In our passage, Joseph becomes aware that his betrothed Mary is pregnant.

We're not told in the narrative how he comes to know that. Has Mary spoken to him? About the encounter she has recorded in Luke's gospel with the angel Gabriel.

The text does not specify. It is a most natural thing in the world for Joseph to assume that Mary has been unfaithful to him.

He knows that he cannot be the father. Because the text says that all of this was before they came together. Even if Mary had told Joseph about the virginal conception, it would still have been hard to swallow, wouldn't it?

[6 : 52] I don't think she did, because that's why the angel is speaking to him. But it's a difficult thing to take on both, isn't it? I remember last year about this time, I watched a small clip from Michael McIntyre's quiz, The Wheel.

I'm not a fan of the show. I don't generally watch it. But this particular time, I did. And as always with these quizzes, somebody comes on and there's a chat between the host and the person.

And there was a female contestant who was on Michael McIntyre's show. And in this chat, she said that she had had a baby, but that she didn't realize she was pregnant.

I'm listening to this. What? I think she said she phoned her husband at work to tell him that she was having a child. And Michael McIntyre asked her, had she not noticed any changes in her body? She replied that she often carried a bit of weight. I saw this act. I didn't believe this. This seemed incredible.

[8 : 08] How much more difficult is it for Joseph to get his head around the fact that Mary is carrying a child? And it's a supernatural, miraculous conception.

She's pregnant without being with another man. And over the years, perhaps, we're not told much about Joseph in the Gospels.

But we are told here, there's a lovely balance in this, that he was a righteous man, but he's concerned, and he had a concern, therefore, to do the right thing. But he also had a deep concern for Mary.

There's something wonderful about this. I rather suspect that in similar situations, many men in those days would have been very quick to sue for this bill of divorce, to make sure that no blame was attached to the hymn, to make sure that their reputation and their standing in society was well maintained.

But it's not as simple as that for Joseph. He still loves Mary. He's concerned for Mary.

[9 : 32] He doesn't want to expose her to public disgrace. Very laudable motives for the way that he's seeking to go about doing what he seems the right thing.

His concern for Mary is such that he will not allow him to rush into action. Any feelings of hurt that he may have because of what he knows about the situation are tempered by the mercy and the compassion he has for Mary.

And then the Lord intervenes with this divine message. 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.

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. Notice he is given an injunction, an exhortation, go ahead with the marriage.

That's a real challenge. A challenge that he takes up and ultimately obeys, you'll notice in verses 24 and 25.

[11 : 04] But that means that he's going to take some of the the tut-tuts and the shame and the reproach of people. They'll all do their sums.

They'll know that when the child is born, it's not at the right time. And it seems that not only is Joseph willing to obey the word, he's willing to bear something of the reproach and the shame that

will be falsely given to both he and Mary.

The gossips who will say they must have slept together before they're married. But it's so vital to the plan of the Lord that Mary and Joseph are married together.

Because you see, the plan of God is that Jesus will be descended from David. Now, according to genealogies, there is a line that King David is descended to Mary's line in a biological sense.

But in legal terms, it has to be Joseph as well. And that's why Luke makes it so clear that it's a result of Joseph lineage that they have to go to Bethlehem.

[12:33] That's his ancestral hope. And thus fulfilling the prophecy that Anne read for us earlier from Micah chapter 5.

So that's the first part of the angel's message. Joseph, I think, really does emerge as a strong character in this passage. He seems ready to accept the Savior's message.

I'm not sure everybody would. But he knew the amazing truth of the identity of his son and the miracle of his birth.

And that leads us to the second thing, the miraculous nature of the birth of our world. If we're going to be pedantic or technically accurate, it's not really the virgin birth that is miraculous.

It's his virginal conception. There is a sense in which Jesus' birth was like the birth of any child, any other child. To those of you who have been mothers here today, you might be pleased to hear that.

[13:47] It might have occurred to you before. You remember what you were like when you had your children. And you see these artistic representations of Mary in all her beautiful glory.

Not at all looking as though she's just giving birth to a child. That's not the way it was. And when Jesus was born, like every other child, he cried.

Like a real human being. Away in the manger is wrong. No crying, he makes. Once in Royal David's city's right, tears and smiles like us he knew.

But God has intervened to give Mary this child, Mary and Joseph this child in a miraculous fashion. And it's a wondrous and a glorious thing. And that's why it's sad that there are those who doubt this great truth.

And sadly, the loudest voices of skepticism about the truth of the virgin birth come from those who are theologically liberal. The begrudge who come up to you and when they say, here do you believe in the virgin birth, they speak to you very often in a patronizing tone.

[15:08] Oh, well, you know, you can't expect people to believe that nowadays. We expect people to believe every single word that God says because His word is truth.

His word is God-breathed. Some might come to you and say, oh, well, you know, it's only mentioned in the Bible twice.

in Matthew's gospel and Luke's gospel. Professor Donal McLeod points out, however, well, Galatians chapter 4 there's an allusion to it.

But in actual fact, I would want to answer these critics and say that, well, actually, a truth only has to be mentioned once in the Bible to be true because it's God's breathed out word and utterly true, absolutely reliable.

The people that really puzzle me, I don't know if you've ever come across this before, the people that really puzzle me who will say to you that they believe in the incarnation, that God became man, that the word became flesh, but they don't believe in the virgin birth.

[16:28] Now, maybe I'm just being a wee bit simplistic about this, but it does seem to me that the incarnation is a big thing, the greater miracle. That comparatively speaking, the virgin birth is relatively straightforward.

I really do want to set this in the story the way that it's given to us.

Sometimes we're encouraged to look for things in Scripture that surprise us. Sometimes people who teach Bible study will say that, is there something that surprises you about the way the text works, the way the things are expected?

But in a sense, when it comes to this, I want to say there's something unsurprising about the supernatural miraculous birth of our Lord.

Why do I say that? Well, if God becomes man, since God, the word has been made flesh, Jesus left the realms of glory to come amongst us, what could be more unsurprising that both his entry into and his exit from our world will be by miraculous and supernatural means?

[17:51] Is it not fitting? Something not surprising about it at all. There's something almost natural about it from the point of view of the works and the ways of God.

The third part of our study is to see these supernaturally divinely appointed names that are given to our Lord according to the angelic instruction.

In our day, the choosing of names is really a pretty random thing, isn't it? In the 20th century, it used to be that people named their children after other people in their family, sometimes their own fathers.

One branch of my family where I had an Uncle Billy and he had a son and they called him Billy. And then, so Uncle Billy was Big Billy and Wee Billy was Wee Billy until Wee Billy grew up and was bigger than Big Billy.

A little bit strange. It was an amazing name. The world of celebrity, I'd hate to be a child of a celebrity. You have no idea what kind of name you're going to get.

[19:15] Gwyneth Paltrow called her daughter Apple. Perhaps she wanted to keep the doctor away. I don't know. I actually heard someone who worked in a hospital in Sunderland when she was training and the word came out that there was a Mr. and Mrs.

McCleary who had a child. Now this was in the mid-90s. What's your name? And they decided to call this poor girl Pocahontas. There are cases where people just don't think of a second name. You've got to think of the second name. A lovely story about an English professor who's called Professor Butter. who's like an English professor would know better than to call his son Roland. Roland Butter. Poor lad. That never happened in the Hebrew tradition at all. Names were always chosen very significantly.

Sometimes to indicate something about their birth. You may recall that when Jacob was born Jacob's name means heel snatcher because when he was born he was holding on to the heel of his elder brother.

[20:27] Most of the names in the Bible have part of God's name. So El is everywhere. Elohim, El Shaddai, Daniel, Mishael.

El is in there. And that's deliberate. So that every time as a child's growing up their name's called something of the name of God is being said that they know they're part of God's people.

Or equally well Yahweh is mentioned in all the names with Yah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Other times names are given as a declaration of faith like the name of Jesus here.

Quite common to have a name that means the Lord is salvation. That's what Joshua's name means. Also J. Joshua. Also Jesus.

Jesus. But I want you to notice from the text there are some differences here. So Jesus' name means the Lord is salvation. But the significance here is that when Joseph is given this name from the angel what the angel is going to say to him is you're going to give him this name that means the Lord is salvation but he's the one who's going to bring the salvation.

[21:51] When anybody else has got it as a name it's an expression of the hope that God will bring salvation. But in Jesus' case he is the one in whom salvation is to be found.

And here as I say we're looking at this as part of the gospel story. I said at the start of the sermon we're not looking at this as a Christmas story. because that's not the way Matthew thinks about it. When he gives this name I reckon that Matthew is already thinking about the end of his gospel. As he writes that prophecy that historically happened where the angel said you shall call his name Jesus because he shall save his people from their sins.

Matthew is thinking to himself and he does that at Calvary. I'm telling you about the birth of the Messiah but this Messiah is a savior who will die upon the cross.

God and I want you to notice also the phraseology of this declaration that the angel makes about the child.

[23:13] I say that because it's particular and it's not a universal thing. Did you notice that? You shall call his name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

not everybody his people those who put their faith and trust in him and those alone are those who will be saved.

That's a very important thing. The gospel is for all people, every tribe, every nation and culture in its scope. It's for all ranks and classes of society.

society, but it will only actually apply, it will only actually make a difference when we put our faith and our trust in him, when we become his people by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

I wonder how many people will receive the Christmas card this year and it might say on one side of it, Matthew 121.

[24 : 26] It might print these very words. You shall call his name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. And there are many people who need to think about that.

You know, in certain circles, if you mention the subject of sin, it's not very popular really at all. Like the story of the old minister who heard somebody come to him and say, well, minister, we really didn't know what sin was until you came.

That kind of compliment you like. No, we're certainly not supposed to bring it up. And the subject of this time of the year doesn't spoil the Christmasy feeling.

But that's why he came. We have a malaise, we have a problem, we have the problem of sin that needs to be dealt with. And from the very start of his life, there is a message, this is his mission, this is why he has come.

So that the Lord can look upon his people and say, I will remember their sins no more. There is a wonderful fulfillment here.

[25 : 47] all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said to the prophet. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Now that's a quotation from Isaiah chapter 7 verse 14. Written seven or eight hundred years before Jesus was ever born.

Not even the most skeptical theological liberal scholar in the world would ever cast any doubt that that prophecy was written 700 years before Jesus was born.

Is that not amazing? That's not something that gives you confidence in God's word. That he can say that he's going to be given this name. he's going to be born of a virgin.

I mean, there are some times when Jesus fulfills prophecy by his own action. So, for example, he will ride on a donkey into Jerusalem to fulfill Zechariah chapter 9.

[27 : 00] Not in this case. It's a work of God. And it really gives great confidence in the word of God that these scriptures are fulfilled.

And he's given this title, Emmanuel. And really what the angel is saying here, you see, this title, Emmanuel, being 700, 800 years old, would be understood at one level by the people of Israel. Whenever God sent somebody to them in the days of judges, deliverers, the prophets who were sent, Moses, Joshua, when the servants of the Lord came to work with the Lord and great things happened, the people would say, well, God is with us.

The Lord is with us. We can see that. He's at work amongst us. And they would rejoice in these things. And so when they receive the promise, Emmanuel, Emmanuel coming, they would think, it'll be just like that.

Somebody will come. That's the way they saw the Messiah, a human figure that the Lord's going to be using. And because the Lord's using him, the Lord is with us. what he did not expect was that Emmanuel would be literal.

[28 : 15] He will literally be God with us. It's one of the most frustrating things sometimes when people say to us who are not believers, I would like to believe.

I don't know how much they really mean that, but I would need God to speak to me. They're not asking for much. They're just asking for God to write in the clouds of the sky, hello Jimmy, I am here, I am God, and I am real.

That kind of thing, that's all we're asking. It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? What if God tells us that by sending Jesus, that's precisely what God has done?

Do you remember in the upper room, in John chapter 14 to 17, Philip says to Jesus, if you show us a father, that will be enough.

I once heard somebody say, well, I jolly well would think so. Do you remember Jesus' answer? If you have seen me, you have seen the father.

[29 : 28] God with us, and it's so wonderful. You know something that we long for, and here we have it, in Jesus Christ.

He is Emmanuel, God with us. In one of the carols, the little town of Bethlehem, we sing these words, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

The whole thing comes together as a package, doesn't it? If we want the Lord to be with us, then we need to have the humility, the humility to humble ourselves, to acknowledge our sin and repent of our sin, because that's why Jesus came, to save his people from their sin, so that they might know him as Emmanuel, God with us.

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