

Not Fake News!

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- [0 : 0 0] Now imagine if I told you that my neighbor has revealed to me that her 18-year-old daughter is pregnant. Now you might think, a bit young, but hey, you know, it happens nowadays.
- Then imagine if I said that the daughter insists she had nothing to do with it, that she'd never slept with anyone. Now no one would believe that, would they? And then we hear she's also engaged to a guy.
- And that's when we immediately conclude, aha, he's got to be the father. But whatever the explanation might be, there's no way that she could have been a virgin.
- Now I think you've probably guessed by now, but what I've just recounted is very similar to the account of Jesus' virgin birth, which actually appears not just in tonight's reading in Matthew, but later on in Luke's Gospel as well, chapter 2, which actually we'll look at next week.
- And just as you found my story of the neighbor's daughter a bit incredible and unbelievable, I think most people would ordinarily also find the virgin birth in the Gospels unbelievable as well.
- [1 : 1 7] In fact, the American atheist has gone so far as to call it fake news. So on their website, they have this image of a nativity scene with the words fake news across it.
- And then on the next side, across some states in the US this Christmas, what they're going to do is put up billboards which has this message. It's going to say, just skip church, it's all fake news.
- Now whether you find this slightly humorous or not, I don't know, but they actually raise a serious point, don't they? I know that some Christians today may think that whatever the events in the Bible, whether they're historical or not, it doesn't really matter, as long as we can learn moral lessons from it.
- But why I for one actually agree with the premise of the atheist. If the Christmas story is really fake news, then yes, let's just skip church.
- Let's not bother with Doncaster carols. Let's not bother with the decorations that can't stay up. Gideon's been practicing with his band.
- [2 : 2 3] Let's not worry about that. Wrapping gifts for visitors. No, it's all a lie, so let's just forget about it. But on the other hand, if it is true, then the implications are huge as well, aren't they?
- But only on the reverse. Now, thankfully, Luke, in his gospel, helps us to work out whether it's fake news or not. For in the very first four verses, which Brendan read, he insists that this is not fake news, and he gives us his reasons why.
- Now, Luke himself was not an eyewitness to the accounts or the events. He was a Gentile and only converted after Jesus had ascended into heaven.
- And so Luke wasn't there at the start, you know, taking notes as things were happening. In fact, when it came to Jesus' birth and childhood, nobody was.

And that's because before Jesus became famous, before he died and rose again, no one really took any interest in him. He was just like any other kid in the neighborhood, much like, you know, many of the famous people today.

[3 : 33] So Roger Federer, for instance, wasn't followed around by the media when he was a little boy. It was only when he started to win Grand Slams that, you know, the reporters then began to delve into his childhood, you know, to try and unmask the secret of his success.

And that's maybe when his mom might have pulled out an old video of him, you know, serving aces even when he's shorter than the net, something like that, I don't know. And so it was with Jesus.

Even Mary and Joseph, who may have had some inkling of what was going to happen, would have kept quiet. Mary, in Luke chapter 2, for instance, said of her that she pondered and treasured everything in her heart, which meant actually that she kept it all to herself until the time came.

Because the truth is, if they had actually told other people, both Mary and Joseph, they would have been laughed and ridiculed, wouldn't they? Because no one would have believed in the virgin birth then, as they don't now.

It's only after Jesus died and rose again, that actually people became interested in Jesus' early life. That's how it worked. The events of the death and resurrection of Jesus forced, initially his disciples, then others, to consider afresh what Jesus did and what he said.

[4 : 56] And this included what happened at his birth. And that is exactly what Luke says in verse 1 and 2. If you look on the screen, he says, Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who were from the first, eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

That is, firstly, eyewitnesses started to describe what they saw, and then some started to write them down, write the things down. Perhaps they too were eyewitnesses, or perhaps they were just writing down what other people had seen.

And then, finally, Luke comes along as a third wave, as it were, and he himself, in verse 3, carefully investigates everything to put his own account together.

Now, we may think, for instance, that because Luke was not an eyewitness, therefore his account was inferior. But I actually think that, and I've got three reasons to think, to argue that actually that's not the case.

For a start, he was actually a Gentile. So there's actually no cultural bias or pressure for him to make Jesus into a Jewish hero. Just like you would never cheer for the Scotch College team if you've never been an old boy, right?

[6 : 15] I hope so. There's no reason to. Further, because Luke was not an eyewitness, he wouldn't have been caught up in the hype of it either. He's like that person who turns up at our church one year after a supposed revival where a hundred people come to Christ in one single service.

But because he wasn't there, he could actually soberly assess whether these conversions are real or not. He would be asking, oh, how many people are still believing? How have their lives changed?

He would have been able to investigate having not been caught up in the hype in the first place. But thirdly, we also know that Luke was a scholar or doctor, as they called him then, which means when he says he's carefully investigated everything, he's actually been methodical, carefully analyzing the evidence, as he says in these verses, and then from that drawing conclusions from it.

He knew how to reconcile conflicting accounts, perhaps work out who was telling the truth or not. And so in this way, he's able to give Theophilus certainty in what's being taught.

Theophilus, in other words, can be sure the Christmas story and indeed the entire gospel isn't fake news, but true historical events. That everything Luke said happened, actually happened.

[7 : 32] Now there's a lot more I could say about this, but hopefully I've been able to give you a sense of how much actually rigor has gone behind Luke's work. But if you want to know more, do come and speak to me afterwards.

There's a lot of research that's been done by lots of scholars over many years. And in fact, most skeptics, even those people who don't believe in Jesus, among the scholars, don't actually doubt that Jesus existed.

He was a man that walked on this earth 2,000 years ago. As for his death and resurrection, well, again, Christian scholars, this time people who do believe, are able to argue coherently that actually it is the most plausible explanation of Jesus' life and what happened to him.

And so if you think that the miracle of the resurrection is possible and credible, then logically, so would the virgin birth. Because if you believe that there is an all-powerful God that exists, then you can believe as well that he will intervene supernaturally as well.

Particularly in this instance. But let's move on, shall we? Because there's one other thing which I think demonstrates why the Christmas story is true. And that's my second bullet point.

[8 : 44] And that can be backed up by what Luke tells us in the very first verse. So let's go back to that first verse again. For Luke says that these things happened to fulfill what had been written.

The verse actually says, many have taken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us. And that word fulfilled is actually very significant.

It means that things didn't just happen and eyewitnesses said it happened, but that they were actually foretold to happen as well. And it was foretold in the prophecies that were contained in the Old Testament in documents which the Jews have had and have studied and have read for hundreds if not thousands of years.

Now it's not like you can turn to page 949 of the Old Testament and there you'll find a list, 101 things the Messiah will fulfill. and then there'll be a committee of priests or something that will tick off the list as every person comes along and see, okay, they've met all the criteria.

That's not how it works. Rather, all these prophecies are interspersed across the entire Old Testament. And often it's not even clear that they are prophecies that are meant or waiting to be fulfilled.

[10 : 01] Instead, what God does over time is paint a picture of His plans. He makes promises to His people about the future. And what grows from it is an expectation of a Savior or Messiah.

It's an expectation that things will be restored or renewed to how they were before Israel's sin. And in the midst of all that prophecy, details are given.

Sometimes it's not clear how these will be fulfilled. Other times these promises are fulfilled, but then people don't realize that actually there's a greater fulfillment to come. And then when Jesus finally arrives, and straight after He's resurrected, what He does is sit down with His disciples, and Luke himself records this at the end of his Gospel, in chapter 24, verse 44 and 45.

What Jesus does is reveal to them everything written about Him in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms. And there's a verse out there which says exactly that.

That is, the Old Testament, everything in it points to Jesus, is a fulfillment of Him. And so He opens their minds, Luke says, so that they could understand the Scriptures.

[11 : 19] In fact, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in that passage just before, the story just before, in verse 32, said that, questioned themselves and said, were not our hearts burning within us, they said, while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us.

And friends, I can personally testify how amazing that is, when God does open my mind or your mind to the Scriptures. When you begin to see how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, it actually fills your heart with wonder and awe.

You're gripped by the person of Jesus. And as the disciples said, your heart burns with that knowledge. It warms the very fact that, wow, this is what God has done.

That's one reason why here at HTD, we often follow the end of our Christianity Explored course with a Bible Overview course. We go through the entire Bible with this very aim to show how the Bible points to Jesus as God's Son and Savior, how the Old Testament shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

And we're going to probably run one soon, early in the new year. So again, if you're interested, then please come and speak to me about it. But for me, this is yet another thing that shows that the Christmas story isn't fake, isn't fake news.

[12 : 41] It's like a jigsaw puzzle and Jesus is like that picture on the box. Without that picture, no one reading the Old Testament would be able to fit any of those pieces together.

all these promises in the Old Testament. No one could dream up a life like Jesus to make it all fit. No one would even know that they were connected in the first place because all these details are actually quite disparate and disjointed.

But when Jesus does come, he's like that picture. You see what it's meant to look like and everything then falls into place. Everyone goes, aha, and says, of course, this peace goes there, this peace goes there, this peace goes there, and then you get the whole jigsaw put together.

And when we look at Matthew in the other passage, Matthew then gives us two things which we see that is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, two things about Jesus' birth.

And what I want to argue is that in doing that, Matthew shows us that not only is the Christmas story not fake news, but in point two of my outline, the Christmas story is also life-changing news.

[13 : 55] It's not just news that you go, all right, yeah, it's true, but it's news that goes, wow, our lives are changed. Indeed, the whole world is changed by it. So I just want to look at that passage.

Firstly, let's look at verses 22 and 23 of Matthew 1. And there, Matthew says that the virgin birth took place to fulfill, see that word again, what the Lord has said through the prophets.

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. Now, if I had an extra hour, I'd like to really just delve into that prophecy because there's so much that could be said about the meaning of the word virgin in the first place, the fact that the prophecy wasn't even messianic, but I'll just leave that all for tonight and instead, I just want to focus on that very promise that the son will be called Emmanuel, which means in Hebrew, God with us.

Now, to my knowledge, as I've read through the Bible, no one actually ever refers to Jesus by that name. No one ever calls Jesus Emmanuel. And even Jesus himself didn't call himself Emmanuel.

So, the question is, why is Matthew mentioning this prophecy where a son is called Emmanuel when Jesus doesn't go by that name? Well, I think the reason is because Matthew is concerned not with the naming so much as the fact that when the one who is born of a virgin comes, then he will be a sign that God is with them because that someone will be God himself.

[15 : 32] So, the name itself is not important whether Jesus is called, but what he signifies is important, that he is going to be God with us. And we can't even begin to imagine, because we're not Jews in the first century, what that fulfillment is like, because there was a great longing in Israel for someone like that.

We've been going through Genesis, but all through Genesis we've seen, haven't we, that God's promise was to be with his people. First, he gave it to Abraham and then Isaac, and then in our series this year, he gave it to Jacob.

Time and time again, God says, he will be with them wherever they go. And then later on in Exodus, God was with them in the desert as well. First in the pillar of cloud and then in the pillar of fire at night.

And then when they finally got to the promised land and they built the temple, God's presence filled the temple, didn't it, in Jerusalem in a thick cloud of smoke. But all these physical signs were lost when they went into exile, when they were banished from the promised land because of their rebellion.

and it didn't resume actually when they returned. They came back to a Jerusalem that was in rubble and that's, you know, the temple got rebuilt but God did not actually return in that physical manifestation.

[16 : 56] All they had were promises through the prophets that yes, one day God will restore everything. God will restore his presence to them. And some of their promises, of all the promises, one of them was this one about the virgin in Isaiah.

And so they had all these promises but then they were waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting. And it was actually 400 years between the last book that was written in the Old Testament, Malachi, it's belief, and Matthew, the coming of Jesus.

But then finally, one day, it happens. God comes to them but this time not merely with symbols, not merely with smoke and fire.

He doesn't even come through angels but he comes as a human. The familiarity of flesh and blood, someone who could be held, who could be touched, someone who is subject to the pain and emotion of joy and laughter just like us.

God comes to be like us. And he's not just here for a day or two but for a lifetime, for 30 plus years.

[18 : 12] It's amazing, isn't it? God with us as a human. Now some of you will know sometimes that Elisa is a way for work and thankfully with modern technology it's possible to keep in touch.

We use Facebook, Wi-Fi, it's even free. That's the best part. But great as that is, it's not the same thing, is it, as having her there with us.

That's why when someone is away and there's a homecoming, it's always great, isn't it? The initial great joy of having them back. That's why too, virtual church and listening to sermons online is not a substitute, is it, for being here together as a church.

And if you have loved ones who live overseas or interstate, it's always great, isn't it, when you hear that they're going to be back for Christmas or they'll be back for Chinese New Year. Yeah, it's Asians here.

And so it is with God. I know Jesus isn't physically with us right now, but God is with us by His Spirit. And so the same joy and peace and wisdom that the disciples had when Jesus was with them, they're ours as well by the Spirit.

[19 : 25] God is with us. Of course, there's still a longing for physical presence and that's why we long for Jesus' return because then finally we'll be with God, not just spiritually but physically as well and not just for a lifetime but this time for eternity.

Now, the other promise that Matthew raises is actually back a couple of verses in verse 21 where the other name for this son, Jesus, which we've been using all this while, will show that His mission is to save His people from their sins.

You see, God with us is only possible once the sin and rebellion of the people are dealt with. When God departed from the temple and sent them into exile, it was because of sin.

And so sin, whether it's individual or corporate, means we don't deserve His presence actually. We actually deserve His punishment. but God sends His Son, Jesus, to take that punishment so that Jesus can save us from our sin.

And unlike some today who tend to shy away, they don't want to speak about sin and salvation on the cross at Christmas, it's interesting, isn't it? Matthew has no qualms about doing that right here in the Christmas story.

[20 : 47] Matthew is bold about proclaiming Jesus as Savior at His birth. Christmas for him isn't just about the incarnation, that is, God becoming man, but about redemption as well.

The crib and the cross for Matthew are intimately connected. And peace, joy, and blessing, all these things we celebrate at Christmas, they are all only possible because of what Jesus has done on the cross.

In fact, there's actually one place in the Old Testament where I found that this promise or two promises of God's presence and salvation actually come together. So it's in Jeremiah chapter 30 and verse 11 which in itself is part of a richer section about God's promise of restoration.

But here's what the verse says and I'm going to read from verse 10. It says, So do not be afraid, Jacob, my servant. Do not be dismayed, Israel, declares the Lord. I will surely save you out of a distant place, your descendants from the land of their exile.

Jacob will again have peace and security and no one will make him afraid. And here it is, I am with you and will save you, declares the Lord.

[22 : 01] Matthew chapter 1 foreshadows this one declaration with both names in the very one section. I am with you, Emmanuel, and I will save you, Jesus.

Friends, if you read my newsletter this week, I sort of invited most of you to do a little experiment with me. I asked you to go into, you know, wherever, in the CBD or shopping centers to look at the various Christmas decorations that are around and see how much of the Christmas story is being told in our shopping centers.

Well, I did the experiment myself this week and I wandered around Cheston on Thursday. It took me half an hour or so to sort of cover everywhere.

But here are some of the images of Christmas I found in the windows. As I go through, can you spot anything about the Christmas story in any of these pictures?

Now, I know it's a shopping center and I know the shops just want to sell us stuff. That's their aim. But even so, I found lots of images or icons or pictures or whatever of Santa, reindeers and snowmen.

[23 : 16] But I could not find a single image of Jesus or Mary and Joseph or angels or wise men or shepherds. Not one image.

Can you believe that? Not one image. Actually, I do lie. There is one image but I'll get to it later. Now, I get I get to I get why people are doing this, right?

It's all politically correct. They don't want to offend people who aren't Christians. Although, as an aside, if you ask me, I've never known a committed Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu or whatever to be offended by Christmas images.

Instead, I think the push is actually from former Christians. There's Westerners who don't want to be reminded of things they have forsaken. I think that's the real people that get offended. But anyway, I did find one one shop with one trace of the real Christmas story.

And is that picture? No, it's before that. If you can go back one. It's actually the Oxfam shop, believe it or not.

[24 : 21] And you can see the three figures when we get to it on this last slide. There you are. Can you see the three figures in the middle? The one in the middle is Mary carrying Jesus.

To her left is the angel and to the right is the shepherd. So in half an hour, maybe I didn't look hard enough, there was only one image. And I suspect that this is only there because these figures were made in the developing country, maybe like Colombia or somewhere, where people actually still value the Christmas story and they were sending it all over back here so that people can pay money for it and help the poor there.

But the thing is that as I walked around, I was actually filled with grief, actually, to the point of tears. And it finally hit home for me as I saw this other, the next one, this image in front of the Kiki K shop.

Yes, that's the stationary shop that my daughters love. Because right in front of the Christmas displays, I don't know whether you can see it, in front of the reindeer and the snowman, are the words, the joy of Christmas.

Now, friends, if you truly believe in Jesus, if you truly believe that God came and saved us from our sins, then tell me, isn't this fake news? To think that the joy of Christmas, true joy, can be found by buying, I don't know whether you can read that at the bottom, delicious stationery.

[25 : 51] that is what is being promoted and proclaimed as the joy of Christmas. Can you see what's happening? You know, all these words which have such rich and profound meaning, joy, peace, and blessing, they are being co-opted and used to promote things that can never give true joy, peace, and blessing.

And the focus of Christmas has shifted, hasn't it? So that it's all about being with people you love, which again, it's important, yes, we should be with people we love, but isn't it God with us being more important than us being with each other?

Because that's fellowship with our Creator. And the word peace, people talk about peace being, you know, stopping North Korea going nuclear or stopping the strife in the Middle East.

And again, that's important, but when the angels came and declared peace on earth, they were talking about peace with God, a restored relationship with the Creator.

So yes, I know this is a bit of a lament on my part, but I'm not saying it in despair because I do know that the true message of Christmas will not be silenced.

[27 : 13] God will never allow the light of Christ to fade away. But even so, I think there may come a time in the future where maybe it is already here that December 25th is so secularized that as faithful Christians, we're going to find it harder and harder to proclaim the message of Christmas at that time.

And maybe one day we might just have to turn December 25th back to its pagan roots and pick another day, maybe January 7th, which is the Orthodox Christmas, maybe, and then perhaps we have some clear air to truly proclaim its life-changing message.

I don't know. But in the meantime, whilst we still have December 25th, let's be like a lighthouse, shining even in the darkest of the storms. Let's keep insisting, graciously but persistently, that Christmas is about Jesus, it's not about stationery.

and tell people what Jesus means, that God is with us and he's with us, he was with us and has saved us from our sins. So yes, please pray as I've already said and invite your friends next week to Doncaster Carols the week after Christmas events, that we will have food and fun next week.

I'm not trying to be a killjoy. The band will be playing and will be singing heartily the carols. But at the end of the day, it's the words of the carols, the life-changing message of Jesus that we want our friends and family to hear.

[28 : 44] And better yet, let's live out this life-changing impact of Christmas, not just at Christmas but each and every day of the year. Because it's only when Jesus truly changes us and transform us that we will have the courage of conviction to tell others about it, to keep insisting that our lives have been changed and therefore we want your lives to be changed as well.

We want it to be changed by you hearing about the gospel. Friends, I know life, most of life, it's not black and white often. But the Christmas story is in this respect.

Either it is fake news and then we should just skip church altogether or it's life-changing, earth-shattering news. And so, let me say to you, if you've been living life in between, not quite believing it's fake news but yet not really allow it to transform your life as well, then let me urge you to make a choice tonight.

I know some of you have been investigating Jesus if you've come to us and you've been doing the CE course and we're just so happy that you're doing that. If you still have doubts in your mind, then please come and speak to me, speak to Devin.

We want you to be sure that it is not fake news but life-changing news. And if you're courageous enough, then say a prayer to God today.

[30 : 10] Make a request of God this Christmas and ask Him, like Luke wished for Theophilus, to give you certainty in what you're being told so that you may know for sure that Jesus is God, that He came to save us from our sins, and then ask Him to give you faith to believe in Him.

Let's pray. Father, help us to know that Jesus' birth and life and death and resurrection is not fake news. We know that in Him you are finally with us and by His sacrifice you have saved us from our sins.

Help us to be shaped daily by this awesome truth, to know the peace and joy and blessing of believing in Him. not simply on Christmas Day on the 25th, but every day of our lives.

And now we do pray for our friends and family who do not yet know this and have not experienced this. Open their minds and hearts to the Scripture. May they have a chance to come this Christmas to hear and to believe.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.