Born of a Virgin

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[0:00] Matthew chapter 1, we'll be reading verses 18 through 25.

As we're turning there, let me pray, and then we'll read together. Father, thank you for your word. Thank you for this season that we can remember and celebrate your first coming.
We pray that as we do that, that we would at the same time live with longing and hope for your return and look forward to the day when you will come and make all things new.
Bless us as we look into this passage this morning, and we pray that you would speak to us and help us to be strengthened and equipped. In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen. Matthew chapter 1, beginning at verse 18. Now, the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.
[1:17] And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling 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. She will bear a son. And you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.
All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. But behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son. And they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.
When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus.
One of the most profound and awe-inspiring experiences that a human being can have is to see a new human being come into the world. From the moment of realization she's pregnant, through the months of preparation, as the baby gradually develops to the climactic moment of birth, there is a sense of mystery and wonder at the fragility and the beauty of a new human life.
[2:42] Now, sometimes the birth of a particular child is seen as particularly unusual or providential. I think of children born to couples in their mid-forties who thought they were past the age of childbearing, or couples who for years thought they were infertile, yet conceived multiple children, or children who were born several weeks premature and yet survived with the aid of modern technology.

I think of a child who, by God's grace, survived an attempt to abort him, or children born after a previous miscarriage or stillbirth. But the reality is not only in unusual circumstances, but every time that any child is born into the world, something amazing and extraordinary has happened.
Most things that have happened over the last ten years I have long since forgotten, but I have distinct memories of watching each of my children be born and of the circumstances surrounding their birth.
It's something you don't quickly forget. Now, sometimes we are surprised and rightly grieved when someone has a miscarriage or stillbirth, but perhaps we should be even more amazed every time that a baby is born, considering all the perils that attend the development of the tiniest human lives from the moment of conception onwards.
This morning we're looking at Matthew's account of the conception and birth of Jesus. And Matthew wants us to know that of all the unusual and providential births that have ever occurred in human history, the birth of Jesus was the most unusual of all.
[4:22] Matthew wants us to know that of all the people that have ever occurred in the world. Matthew wants us to see that the conception and birth of Jesus was not just unusual, not just providential, not just amazing and awe-inspiring, but it was positively supernatural and miraculous.

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Verse 18 begins, Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. That word translated birth is the same word that in verse 1 is translated genealogy.
It is the Greek word Genesis, what we call the first book of the Bible. It could also be translated origin, right? In chapter, in verse 1, the book of the origin of Jesus Christ.
Verse 18, the origin of Jesus Christ took place in this way. So Matthew's telling us in this chapter about Jesus' origins. Now last week, the first half of the chapter in the genealogy, we saw Jesus' human origins.
He was the son of David, the son of Abraham, descended from the genealogical line of the people of Israel to whom God had made his promise long ago. That a descendant of Abraham would be the means through which all the nations of the world would be blessed.
[5:34] That a son of David would arise as a righteous and victorious and merciful ruler. So we saw Jesus' human origins last week, but in the second half of the chapter, what we're looking at today, Matthew emphasizes Jesus' divine origin.

Verse 18, now or but, the origin of Jesus Christ took place in this way. Matthew's saying he's making a contrast between all the other births recorded in the genealogy, all 42 of them in the chapter 1, and the birth of Jesus.
If you look at the genealogy, it follows a typical pattern. A is the father of B. B is the father of C. C is the father of D. In some unusual circumstances, the mother is also mentioned.
But at the end of the genealogy, in verse 16, Matthew breaks the pattern. Verse 16 says, Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.
That word Christ is the same word for Messiah. So Matthew carefully avoids saying that Joseph was the biological father of Jesus, even though the rest of his narrative in chapters 1 and 2 focuses far more on the character of Joseph than on Mary.
[6:56] So in verse 16, he's alerting us to something unusual. Then verse 18, he picks up that thread. It happened in this way. How exactly did Jesus originate? In a supernatural and miraculous way.

And throughout the second half of the chapter, Matthew intentionally points out Jesus' divine and supernatural origin. Verse 18, Before Mary and Joseph came together, Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.
Verse 20, The angel says to Joseph, That which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Verse 23, Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son. Verse 24, Joseph took his wife but knew her not until she had given birth to a son.
So Matthew repeatedly points out that Jesus did not originate in the normal human way. In the words of the Apostles' Creed, Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.
This is something that Christians have always and everywhere believed ever since the beginning of the Christian movement. Now this morning, I want us to consider two things.
[8:04] First, I want us to consider whether this is actually plausible. Right? Can we really believe this? Second, I want us to consider why does it matter?

Why is it important that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he was supernaturally conceived? So first, is this actually believable?
Is it plausible? Ever since the beginning of Christianity, right, Christians have always proclaimed this and believed this and confessed this, but many people have been skeptical. Also ever since the beginning of Christianity, not just in modern times.
some people, some of the Jewish people who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah accused him of being born illegitimately.
There was a rumor that he was born of a Roman soldier getting together with Mary. Right? So from the beginning, people were skeptical. And so we have to ask, is this plausible? Right?
[9:04] Some people say today, a virgin birth, scientifically impossible. Now, parthenogenesis, that's the scientific term for virgin birth, does occur occasionally in some animals, but how could a woman with XX chromosomes give birth to a man with XY?

Where does the Y come from? Without any male involvement. That seems unbelievable, right? But the search for a scientific explanation is misguided. Because Matthew is not claiming that God used a very unusual or previously unrecognized set of natural processes to produce a very statistically unlikely outcome.

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No. His claim is that the God who made the world chose to intervene within it. The Christian claim is God acted supernaturally.
He did something that would never have happened through natural processes alone. So we then have to ask, well, could God intervene in the world? Can God step in and do something that would never happen through natural processes alone?
Well, if you believe in the God of the Bible, or really if you believe in any kind of God at all, or even if you're agnostic, you can't rule out the possibility of divine intervention in principle.
[10:22] You have to evaluate on a case-by-case basis. Now, that doesn't mean that you should believe everyone who tells you that they have seen a miracle or that God has spoken to them and told them to do them something or appeared to them in a dream.

In fact, the Bible instructs us to be discerning, not to just believe everything, not to be naive. The Bible instructs us neither to dismiss all such claims out of hand.
It says, don't despise prophecies, but test everything, hold on to what is good. Don't dismiss everything out of hand, but also don't naively believe anyone regardless of, without checking into their story.
So the question isn't, is the virgin birth of Christ possible, but more like, is it fitting? Is it plausible? Does it make sense given what we know of the character of God?
Is this the kind of thing that the true God would actually do? Now, some people say no. Some people say the idea of a virgin birth sounds like a pagan legend, right?
[11:27] They say, pagan legend imported from Greek and Roman legends and created long after the fact. Doesn't the Roman writer Ovid have stories of the gods copulating with mortals and producing demigods?

Well, yes. Although, there are stories of pagan gods who take on the bodies of men or of animals and produce demigods born of human mothers. Those are not stories, however, of virginal conceptions, and they are very different from what we see here.
All that Matthew tells us is that Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. There are no sensational details or wild speculations.
It's seen as something that was real and yet mysterious. Further, other stories of supposedly miraculous births were written down hundreds of years after the hero died.
So, there's a legend that Alexander the Great was born of the Greek god Zeus. That legend was written down 400 years after Alexander died by the Roman writer Plutarch.
[12:33] The Gospel of Matthew, by contrast, was written at most 50 or 60 years after Jesus died, perhaps even before that. And most scholars believe that Matthew was drawing on earlier traditions.

Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels, so, most likely, those traditions came from Jerusalem or Judea, the most Jewish area. Now, for the first 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, guess who was leading the church in Jerusalem?
Jesus' own brother James. Unfounded legends about miraculous births do not usually originate when family members who know the truth are there.
to set the story right. Now, other people say Matthew created the idea of a virgin birth out of Old Testament prophecies like the one he quotes in verse 23.
Isn't that what he's doing? He finds an Old Testament text and then he makes a story around it to show the people that the prophecy has been fulfilled. But really, he made the story up.
[13:44] But, there's a problem. Prior to Matthew, we have no evidence that anyone interpreted Isaiah 7, which is the chapter he's quoting from, as a prophecy of a literal virgin giving birth to the Messiah.

So, in fact, nobody even saw it as talking about the Messiah. So, why would Matthew take a verse that no one had previously seen as a messianic prophecy and invent a story around it that had no historical basis?
That's just stupid. If you want to persuade somebody, that won't persuade anybody. People will be like, what? Nobody even thinks that text is talking about that at all.
Right? It only makes sense the other way around. It's much more likely that Matthew received a report from reliable sources, perhaps from Jesus' family members or relatives themselves, that Jesus was born supernaturally, born of a virgin, and in light of that report and that reality, he saw that the prophecy of Isaiah had been fulfilled in a way that no one had previously expected.

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You see, many things in life only become clear to us in hindsight when we're looking back on them. We never could have guessed how they would turn out in advance.
[15:06] And that's true with many Old Testament prophecies. We wouldn't have guessed exactly how they would be fulfilled in advance. But when we look back on them, we see something that we couldn't see before.

Now, if you're interested in Isaiah chapter 7 in particular, what was its meaning in Isaiah's time and how was it fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, I preached a sermon about a year ago on that chapter. You can listen to it. It's on the church website and you can ask me about or you can ask me about it afterwards if you have questions because I'm not going to get into all the details today. So, many reasons why people reject the virgin birth are not actually that convincing.
But are there any positive reasons to think that the virgin birth of Jesus actually is fitting and plausible and appropriate? Well, imagine if you were one of Matthew's first readers.
You would have already been familiar with the Old Testament because Matthew's gospel is the most Jewish of all the gospels. Almost everybody agrees that he was writing to people of Jewish background, whether they were Jews who had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah or whether he was writing to persuade Jews to believe in Jesus as the promised Messiah.
[16:24] But he's writing to a largely, though not exclusively, Jewish audience. And so, they would have known that in the Old Testament we have a few examples of unusual or even miraculous births.

Periodically, the people of Israel found themselves in desperate straits. Things were going badly and it seemed like everything was going to fall apart.
But God demonstrated his kindness to his people and his faithfulness to his promises by providing a child. And that child would later grow up to lead and teach and deliver the people of Israel.
So, a few examples from the Old Testament of this. We might think of the founders of the Jewish nation, Abraham and Sarah. Right? God had called them.
They had left behind everything they had ever known, left behind their home country, followed the call of God, and God had promised that through one of their descendants, that one of their descendants would eventually become the ancestor of a great nation.
[17:33] And yet, they get older and older, they get into their 80s and 90s, and still, they have no child of their own. Until, God provides a son, Isaac, when Abraham is 100 and Sarah is 90.

Or, you might think of a few hundred years later. People of Israel are oppressed and enslaved in Egypt. Pharaoh is attempting to exterminate them. But then, baby Moses was born.
Now, his parents were likely young, no unusual circumstances in that regard, but Moses particularly was preserved in a time when his very life was threatened. He was preserved through childhood and was able to grow up and grew up to deliver God's people.
Or, a couple hundred years later, the people of Israel are in the land of Canaan and they're defeated and oppressed by the Philistines and the angel of the Lord comes to a couple who are previously infertile and says, you will have a son, call him Samson.
And he will begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines. Not long after that, God answered the prayers of Hannah, another infertile woman, she and her husband and gave her and her husband a son Samuel who grew up to be a prophet and teacher of God's people.
[18:54] So, we see, periodically, on multiple occasions, God's people find themselves in desperate circumstances and God shows his kindness and faithfulness to them through the gift of a child.

And Matthew's readers would have known that and they would have said, yes, that's the God we believe in. We believe in a God who sees us when we are in desperate straits and who hears our prayers and who answers our prayers and sometimes the way he answers prayers is by providing in unusual ways for a child to be born and to grow up and to fulfill his mission and to lead the people.
They would have said, yes, that's the God we know and trust. And Matthew says to them and he says to us, look here. Here's the same God.
The one true God showing his kindness, showing his faithfulness through the greatest gift of all. The same Holy Spirit who quietly hovered over the formless emptiness in Genesis 1 who gave life to all that God had made is still alive and now active in bringing Jesus, the Messiah, into the world.

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Of all the unusual and providential births that have happened in human history, isn't it fitting that the birth of the Messiah himself would be the most unusual and directly supernatural of all?
[20:29] So I think it is fitting and plausible and appropriate to believe in the virgin birth. But second, I want us to ask, why does that matter?

Why is this important that Jesus was born in a supernatural way, not through the natural means, not through natural way of being conceived? I think at its core when we say Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, what we're saying is that our Savior and Lord is fully divine and fully human.
He's fully divine, conceived by the Holy Spirit, or as Peter will say later in the Gospel of Matthew, the Christ, the Son of the living God. He's also fully human, born of a human mother, Mary, and here adopted and raised by his legal father, Joseph.
By marrying Mary, Joseph takes on the legal responsibility of being the adoptive father of Jesus. So he's fully divine and fully human.
And we see this union of human and divine in the two names that are given to our Savior in this passage. First, verse 21, the angel says, you shall call his name Jesus.
[21:56] Now, Jesus is the Hebrew name Joshua. It's a common name in the Old Testament and still today. Joshua was the successor of Moses who led the people of Israel into the promised land later on after the exile.

Another Joshua was the high priest who led the people in rebuilding the temple and several other less important characters in the Old Testament also shared that name. So at one level, the name Jesus or Joshua emphasizes his human nature.
Jesus came from the people of Israel. He's connected to them. But the name Jesus also points to his divine nature because the name Jesus or Joshua means the Lord saves.
Verse 21 says, he will save his people from their sins. Now, human beings have many problems, right?
We have sickness and pain, weariness and loneliness, relational conflicts, frustrations, unfulfilled longings.
[23:04] But the Bible says that the deepest problem of all is our sins. Our sins are everything that keeps us alienated from God.

Everything that corrupts us from the inside out. Everything that's contrary to God's intent and purpose for us as human beings.
Our sins are the deepest and most intractable of all human problems. And Jesus has come to save us. Not just from our day-to-day challenges, not just from the occasional frustrations we face or sorrows we endure, but He hasn't just come to save us from some of our sins but from all of our sins.
And only God can do that. In fact, Psalm chapter 130 verse 8 says, the Lord Himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.
And verse 21, maybe echoing that Psalm, He will save His people from their sins and the people would have remembered in that Psalm that they would frequently sing, the Lord Himself will come and redeem us from all our sins.
[24:18] Jesus is the Lord Himself. Now, the second name given to the Savior is in verse 23. They shall call His name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Now, this is a less common name. It only appears here and in Isaiah. And at one level, the name Emmanuel obviously indicates Jesus' divine nature, right?
He is God. God with us. God Himself. We read earlier in Isaiah that prophecy of that the child to be born will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Those titles are far too exalted for a mere human being. You don't call a normal guy Mighty God or Everlasting Father.
No, those titles indicate that we're dealing with somebody much more exalted than that. And yet, what does Emmanuel mean? God with us.
[25:27] Again, it points to Jesus' divine nature but also to His human nature that He has come to share our humanity. He's the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise that God Himself would come to dwell and rest with His people.

And we can call Him Emmanuel because He is God who has come to be with us. In verse 23, Matthew quotes from Isaiah chapter 7 verse 14.

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And he quotes the verse almost exactly but He changes one word. Isaiah says, Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and she shall call His name Emmanuel.
But Matthew says, Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call His name Emmanuel. You see, it's not just Mary who can call Jesus God with us.
it's all the people who He has come to save from our sins. Right? Who's they? Well, you look up at verse 21.
[26:39] He will save His people from their sins and they shall call His name Emmanuel. Every one of us who have received Jesus' forgiveness, who have looked to Him, we can know and call Him God with us.

J.C. Ryle put it this way. He said, If we want to have a strong foundation for our faith and hope, we must keep constantly in view our Savior's divinity.
We must remember that Jesus is fully God. He in whose blood we are invited to trust is the Almighty God. All power is His in heaven and earth. If we are true believers in Jesus, our heart need not be troubled or afraid.
But then He goes on, He says, And if we would have sweet comfort in suffering and trial, we must keep constantly in view our Savior's humanity. He is the man, Christ Jesus, who lay on the bosom of the Virgin Mary as a little infant.
He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He has experienced Satan's temptations. He has endured hunger, shed tears, and felt pain. He can sympathize with us.
[27:57] Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is very good news. That we have a fully divine and fully human Savior. And He has been this way ever since His conception.

You know, I want you to just consider for a few moments what some of the implications would be if Jesus had come into the world in some other way. What if God had instead chosen to send Jesus into the world as a fully formed adult?
What if He had bypassed the long years of childhood? We don't know exactly what He did as a child anyway, for the most part. What if He had gone more directly to the culmination of His mission, to die on the cross for our sins?
But in that case, He would have had no human parents. He would have been neither a son of David nor a son of Abraham. So He couldn't have fulfilled any of the Old Testament prophecies.
So that's a problem. But even more, if Jesus had come into the world as a fully formed adult, could we really say that He had been made like us His brothers and sisters in every respect, as the author of Hebrews says?
[29:23] Would He really be one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin? Would it really reflect His merciful will to save children as well as adults?

Now, children, I know you're out there. I want to talk to you for a minute. So look up at me. If you've been drawing or coloring, that's fine, but I want to talk to you directly for a minute or two.
Right? Maybe you're younger, maybe you're older, but you're living at home, you're under the authority of your parents. Let me ask you a question. Do you ever feel like your parents don't completely understand you?
That maybe they've forgotten what it's like to be a kid? Now, Jesus knows exactly what it's like to be a kid because he was once a kid too, and Jesus never forgets anything.
He hasn't forgotten what it's like to be a kid, and he understands the challenges you face, and he's always available to help you.
[30:36] When Jesus was a kid, he had to honor and obey his parents, even though his parents weren't perfect and he was a lot smarter than them. And he can help you to honor and obey your parents too, even when they fall short, because that's one of the responsibilities that God has given to you.

Jesus died on the cross for children, not just for adults, and so he invites you to talk to him in prayer, and he promises that he will always listen.
So it's good that Jesus didn't just come into the world as an adult. But let's think about one other possibility. What if Jesus had come into the world in the normal way?
What if this story about being born of a virgin wasn't true at all? He just came with the normal contribution of a human father and a human mother, and then maybe at birth or maybe later on he was anointed by the Holy Spirit like King David?

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Now that's what many people say who find the virgin birth too hard to swallow, but they still want to believe that Jesus was somehow special. But again, that option creates big problems.
[32:04] For one thing, it would mean that both Matthew and Luke, who both tell us that Jesus was born of a virgin, that both Matthew and Luke are lying to us, or at the very least carelessly passing on unreliable and fanciful accounts of Jesus' origins.

Even more than that, if Jesus was conceived by purely natural means, then the Savior of the world would then be the result of a joint human effort.
Mary and Joseph could look at each other and say, we produce the Savior, just the two of us. Aren't we special? We've accomplished something really great.
But the whole message of the Bible is that God's salvation is not the result of a human initiative using natural means. God's grace is not just the frosting on the cake of our human accomplishments.
God sent Jesus to save us because all of our human efforts to make things right have fallen short and failed to produce the redemption that we need and long for.
[33:19] God's salvation is carried out by the power of the Holy Spirit within all those who, like Joseph and Mary, simply receive His Word and respond to Him with trust and obedience.

An early Christian writer whose name has been lost to us wrote this, Humanity is born out of the necessity to exist. Today we might say humanity reproduces out of the struggle to survive.
He continues, Christ, however, was not born out of the necessity of nature to exist, but by His merciful will to save. not out of the necessity of nature, but by His merciful will to save.
That's what it means that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. It shows us God's merciful will to save. Or as another early church father, Origen, put it, His birth was both like ours and above ours.
To be born of a woman is like our birth, but to be born not of the will of the flesh or of man is above ours. There is here a hint, a prior announcement of a future birth to be bestowed upon us by the Spirit.
[34:40] You see, what Origen was getting at was this, because Jesus came into the world in a divine and supernatural way, the salvation that He gives us is a divine and supernatural gift.

Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit within the womb of Mary in a wonderful and mysterious way, and similarly, we are born again. We are brought into new life in Christ through the same Holy Spirit in a wonderful and mysterious way that we can't even fully explain.
Jesus says, the wind blows where it pleases, and you can see its effects, but you can't grasp onto it. You can't… There's a mystery to it. There's a mystery to how God brings us out of ourselves and out of our darkness into the light of Jesus, but boy, is it real.
Just because it's mysterious don't make it any less real. The early church father said over and over, He has taken on what was ours, our humanity, even our sin and our death, in order to generously share with us what was His, His divinity, His righteousness and life.
He's taken on what was ours to give us what was His. Have you received God's grace in Jesus as a gift? Have you turned away from trusting in yourself and trying to save yourself through your own efforts and your own accomplishments?
[36:04] Have you come to trust in Jesus, the fully divine and fully human one, as your and the only Savior and Lord? Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace.

Hail, the Son of Righteousness, light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give us second birth.
Let's pray. Father, thank You for the gift of Your Son.
Thank You for the power of Your Spirit. Thank You for Matthew and His faithful report. We pray, Lord, that we would know the power of Your Spirit working in our hearts today.
Lord, that we would know the joy and peace that You have come to save us from our sins, that You have come to be God with us, the God who has promised never to leave us, never to forsake us, to be with us to the very end of the age.
[37:29] We thank You, Lord, for who You are. Pray this in Your name. Amen.

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