



The Birth of Jesus

Matthew 1:18-25

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December 23, 2018

The gospel according to Matthew is Matthew's presentation of the good news about Jesus Christ. The word "gospel" means good news and the good news according to the Bible is all about Jesus and what he came to do. Matthew's gospel was written to tell the story of Jesus for the edification and spiritual growth of believers and also to present him to unbelievers, particularly Jewish unbelievers. The first 17 verses have presented Jesus as the culmination and goal of Israel's history and as the one through whom the promises embedded in that history would be fulfilled. Indeed, you can say that the reason that Israel was chosen to be the people of God is to be the people from whom Jesus would be born.

The primary meaning of Israel's history is to demonstrate the need for Jesus and his mission and to be the background for understanding Jesus and his significance. Israel's existence and history was God's preparation for Jesus. That becomes very clear in the whole of the New Testament which explains Jesus using concepts and events and practices that were part of the life and experience of the people of Israel in the centuries that precede Jesus. Jesus is the heart of the biblical message and he is presented in the Bible as the meaning of history. Earlier history leads to him. Later history flows from him. History will end when he returns.

Jesus is more than the reason for the season. Jesus is the reason for everything. As the risen and ascended Jesus himself says to John in Revelation 1:17, "I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." This is the Jesus whom Matthew is going to present in his gospel and having identified him as the goal of Israel's history, he gives an account of his birth. Matthew 1:18, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ

took place in this way.” Our birthday is a significant day in each of our lives. Jesus’ birth is significant for everyone’s life.

So we read the familiar story of the birth of Jesus from Joseph’s perspective. Joseph was engaged to Mary. Engagement in that culture was more binding than it is today, but otherwise it is similar. Joseph and Mary were committed to each other, but they were not yet married. They were not single, and they were not yet married. It was an exclusive relationship, but they were not yet living together, and sex was not yet allowed. And Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant. So he decides to quietly divorce her.

In this context Joseph receives the kind of commendation that we should all seek from God and from other people. He is called a just man. It means that he lived by God’s law. This was probably his reputation in the community and as it is included in God’s infallible word, it is God’s assessment of him as well. It does not mean that he was without sin, but it does mean that he was a man who sincerely sought to live by God’s commands. In the light of the whole biblical way of evaluating people – he was a sinner who needed forgiveness for his sins, but he was saved by grace and in that context he lived a life that was pleasing to God. In the biblical way of looking at this, that should be our highest aspiration – for God to be pleased with how we have lived our lives. That is the most worthy goal for our lives.

Joseph decided to divorce Mary – quietly. That speaks to his character. As far as he was concerned Mary had cheated on him. He had the option of divorcing her with a lot of drama and publicity, but even though it seemed obvious that she had wronged him horribly and no doubt broken his heart, he did not want to put Mary through any more humiliation than she would already be facing and so he “resolved to divorce her quietly.”

Now it is not really the point of the passage, but I want to make an observation at this point that is very relevant in our time. This part of the story of the birth of Jesus reflects the biblical teaching that sex is only right within marriage between a man and a woman. The story assumes the biblical teaching that sex outside of marriage is wrong and it assumes the biblical teaching that the only proper place for sex is

within a marriage between a man and a woman. That is not the point of the passage, as I said, but the quiet assumption is powerful none the less as part of the whole biblical witness of the way that human beings are to relate to one another sexually.

Joseph was sure that Mary had had sex outside of marriage and that was a very serious matter. He is called a just man. He is the kind of person of whom God approves. His sexual purity is part of the reason he is called a just man and his taking what he considered to be Mary's impurity seriously is also part of the reason that he is a just man. The biblical teaching on sex and marriage are part of the fabric of his story.

Our culture has come to the point in its rebellion against God that just to affirm that teaching is considered to be hateful and harmful and in certain situations has already led to overt persecution. In the view of those who hold the power in our society and who contribute to shaping the opinions of the masses, the biblical view of sex and marriage reflected in the story of Jesus's birth is dangerous and harmful to people who have chosen to satisfy their sexual urges any way they please. And the trajectory is toward persecution to those who hold it.

It is sad that there are people today who claim follow the Bible but who nevertheless accept the worldly way of thinking about sex and marriage. Whatever they claim to be, what they are not, is faithful to the clear teaching of the word of God. Loving God includes loving his design for sex and marriage and the Bible makes it very clear that failure to live by that standard is to live the kind of life which excludes one from the kingdom of God. Sexual sinners can be saved. Otherwise we would all be lost. But the way to that salvation is repentance and the result of that salvation is seeking to live according to God's will and those who will not repent show thereby that they are not saved. So the story of the birth of Jesus reflects the biblical teaching on sex and marriage.

Another thing that is embedded in the story of the birth of Jesus is a recognition of the reality of the supernatural. This point is part of Matthew's point in telling of the story and thus also God's point in telling this story through Matthew. The story of Jesus birth, as Matthew tells it in these verses, makes the point that Jesus was not conceived in the normal way – that it was a direct result of the power of the Holy

Spirit and that there was no human male involved in Jesus' conception. That had never happened before, and it has never happened since, but Matthew is claiming that it did happen in the womb of Mary and it is the way in which Jesus was conceived. This is a unique event in the whole history of the world and Matthew, and thus also the God who inspired him to write this passage, is claiming that this is what happened – as an actual fact. This is one of the great truth-claims of the Bible. To deny it is to deny the Bible.

Joseph was going to divorce Mary because he was convinced that she had had sex with another man. Joseph knew that there was only one way for a woman to get pregnant. He knew that he was not that man. And so he did the math and “resolved to divorce her quietly.” But God knew that Mary had been faithful to Joseph and Joseph was about to learn that there was one time in the history of the world in which a woman became pregnant without a human male having anything to do with it. Verse 20, “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.” This is a clear unambiguous claim that Jesus Christ was conceived in the womb of Mary without any human sperm being involved. It is a claim that this conception happened by the direct action of the Holy Spirit. “[T]hat which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

The conception of Jesus was a miracle. It did not happen by any natural process. There is no un-supernatural explanation for it. It was a once-only event in the history of the world. And it is presented in the Bible as a sober literal supernatural fact. This is something that happened in “space and time” history. It was a miracle.

Now for many people that is impossible to believe. While there are still quite a few people in our society who do believe that there is more to existence than the physical world, the spirit of the age is that it is naive and childish and unintelligent to believe that a miracle like the virgin conception could actual happen.

The view that is prominent in our society is that reasonable people do not believe in miracles. Reasonable people believe only what can be

proved by the scientific method. People who believe in miracles, especially the miracles of the Bible, are believing things that could not possibly happen according to the reigning worldview that accepts nothing but what can be proven by reason and experience. According to the wisdom of our time, reasonable people do not take seriously claims made in an ancient book that an axe-head floated, that a man walked on water, that a few people have actually been raised from the dead and that Jesus was conceived in the womb of a woman who had never had sex. According to the wisdom of our time, to seriously believe such things as literally true is really quite silly and childish.

But the kind of Christianity that is faithful to the Bible believes that there is more to existence than the material world, that there is a spiritual world and that there is a God who made the world by speaking and who is more than capable of doing things that cannot be explained by the scientific method. The Bible teaches this. The Bible teaches miracles and so faithfulness to the Bible includes believing in miracles including this one that Jesus was conceived without the involvement of a human male and thus that he did not have a human biological father. This has never happened before or since, but true Christians believe it because true Christians accept the Bible as the word of God. Any other position is to stand in judgment over the word of God which is in fact to believe God only as far as consistent with what we are willing to accept as true. That is not a position you will want to have held when you face God on the day of judgment.

But it can be difficult to believe such a thing in the context in which we are living. It used to be the case that the majority of people believed in the supernatural and so it was relatively easy to accept the fact that God sometimes does miracles. That is no longer the case. The scorn of the world is intimidating and the worldly way of looking at the world has a way of seeping into our minds so that it seems more plausible than accepting the biblical account of reality which includes such things as the virgin birth. And one of the results of this is that many people, reject orthodox Christianity. Whatever is the dominant way of looking at life and reality in a culture has a powerful almost overwhelming shaping influence on those who live in it.

Let me remind you of a few things that the Bible teaches that put this into a perspective. It says that those who reject God are fools. Romans 1:21 says of those who do not honor God that they are “futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts [are] darkened.”

And you can see evidence of that if you take the time to study apologetics which is the rational defense of the Christian faith. The best Christian defenses of the biblical worldview show very clearly that any way of explaining the world that is not based on all that the Bible teaches is actually naïve and foolish. It sounds sophisticated, and something that is believed by enough people can sound sophisticated even if it is untrue. But when you look at it closely you find that it's is only convincing because people want to be convinced of it so that they can live as they please. The dominant naturalistic worldview of our culture does not offer convincing arguments of why the world exists at all and it does not give a coherent account of such things as evil and love and human consciousness and many other things. When it is examined closely, as many brilliant Christians have done, it becomes clear that rejecting the biblical worldview is irrational at a fundamental level.

I would urge reading some apologetics. On the one hand, it is true that faith comes and is sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit - opening our eyes to see and accept the truth of God and his word. But it is also true that the Bible tells us to be able to give reasons for the hope that is in us and so the study of those reasons is a legitimate and important activity for Christians especially in a context in which Christianity is so much under attack. And when that is done, it becomes clear that the people who reject Christianity have very poor reasons for the hope that is in them. Science and the scientific method are very impressive when it comes to showing how the world works, but they have nothing intelligent to say about why there is a world at all and the innate sense that we all have that life is meaningful. It has nothing intelligent to say about why we have such a powerful sense that some things are always right, and other things are always wrong. It is not convincing when it tries to explain things like love and personality and many of the other things in human experience. If you want to learn more of this, I recommend the apologetic writings of Tim Keller and C.S. Lewis.

So Christmas is the celebration of a miracle. Jesus was conceived supernaturally by the direct operation of the Holy Spirit without the involvement of human sperm and it belongs to the essence of biblical Christianity to accept the biblical teaching that the God who created the world and who upholds the world by his word is quite capable of doing things that cannot be explained by the scientific method.

And this means that Jesus was and is an utterly unique being. He is both God and man. He is the only being that is both God and man. This passage does not get into that – the full teaching about Jesus is found in the rest of the Bible’s witness about him. But from this passage we learn that Jesus is special - that he is utterly unique - that he is human being, but also that he is more than just a human being because as Matthew puts it in this passage, “that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

The rest of the passage tells us two key things about Jesus. The angel who appeared to Joseph told him that Joseph should “not fear to take Mary as [his] wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” The angel goes on to say in verse 21, “She will bear his son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

This fits with the storyline of the Bible as we saw this morning. The problem of all problems is sin both at an individual level and at a cosmic level and the story of the Bible is about what God is doing to get rid of sin without sending every one of us to hell. The story of the Bible is the story of how God is at work in overcoming sin and evil and death and Satan and the birth of Jesus is a key part of the outworking of that plan. It is summed by his name and its meaning. “[Y]ou shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Now as is so often the case in the New Testament, these words reflect words that are found in the Old Testament. In this case, the instruction of the angel concerning Jesus’ name reflects the last verse of Psalm 130 which says of Yahweh, the God of Israel, “And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” Listen to this again together with the verse that comes before it. “O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” This was at the core of the hope of Israel

as that is articulated in the Old Testament. Israel's greatest problem was her sin and her sinfulness. And the hope of the godly in Israel was based on promises and prophecies such as this, "And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities." And now in connection with the birth of Jesus, the angel instructs Joseph, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Notice that this is an assertion of Jesus' deity. Psalm 130 says that Yahweh will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. The angel says that Jesus will save his people from their sins. Both of these statements mean the same thing and together they identify Jesus and Yahweh.

Psalm 130, which forms the background for the words of the angel, is a poignant expression of the distress that the awareness of sin causes for those who, by God's grace, understand its significance. All people know what it is to feel guilty and all people know at some level that there is something terribly wrong about them and how they have lived their lives. That knowledge is something that gets clarified when the Holy Spirit works in people's hearts through the word of God to give them an understanding of our great their sins and miseries are. Psalm 130 expresses what this feels like. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy! If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?"

This expresses what it is like to come to understand and care about the fact that one is a sinner before God. There is distress. There is the awareness that if God would deal with us as we deserve, we could not stand.

Jesus's name and its meaning takes its meaning from this context. Just as the last verse of Psalm 130 expresses the hope of a sinner convicted of his sins, the name of Jesus is the fulfillment of that hope and identifies the one in whom that hope will be realized. And it is when we have known something of the depths of seeing the seriousness of our sins that we can also know something of the relief and joy that is rooted in the meaning of the name of Jesus. It means that there is forgiveness that leads to the fear of the LORD.

The fear of the LORD is not terror but reverent love and from it comes the desire to enter into the fullness of what it means to be forgiven and what it means to be saved from the power of sin. It is precious to read and to sing, “And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” It is even more precious to read and to celebrate, “[Y]ou shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.”

The account of the events surrounding Jesus’ conception and birth continues in verse 22 of Matthew 1. “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name “Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

One of the key truths that the Bible teaches us is that the closer we are to God the better our lives are and the further we are from God, the worse our lives are. God is the greatest good. He is perfectly good, and he is the fountain of all that is good, and we are created to experience the greatest joy and fulfillment and wellbeing in God – in knowing him, in being loved by him and loving him, in serving him and in being in his presence. Outside of that the greatest and most profound joys and satisfactions of life are being with the people we love. That is true in an exponentially greater way when it comes to being in the presence of God. This is powerfully expressed in Psalm 16:11 which says to God, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” I think it is true to say that this truth is foundational for every sermon that is faithful to the word of God.

Moses understood this. After the incident of the golden calf God told him that he was no longer going to be with his people on their journey to the Promised Land. In Exodus 33:2 God says to Moses, “I will send an angel before you ... but I will not go up among you.” And in reply Moses said, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people?” (Exodus 33:14-15) Moses understood that the presence of God with his people was at the very heart of what it meant to be the people of God. The presence of God with his people is at the very heart of the blessedness of being the people of God.

The meaning of the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of this biblical theme. “[T]hey shall call his name “Immanuel” (which means, God with us.) This is God fulfilling his promise to dwell with his people. John spoke of this when he wrote, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.... (John 1:14). Jesus referred to this when he promised his disciples before his ascension into heaven, “And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age.” And the finale of the biblical story is found in Revelation 21:3 where the apostle John writes, “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’”

One of Jesus’ names is Immanuel – God with us. This is the meaning of the birth of Christ. To bring this meaning to its fulfillment, Jesus not only had to become a man, he had to die for our sins so that we could be safe in the presence of God. But this is what it is all about. Sin separates us from God and all that is good. Jesus saves us from our sins so that God can dwell with us without consuming us. God’s presence is the place of fullness of joy and pleasures forever more. This is the abundant life that Jesus came to bring. And that is why we celebrate his birth. May we all reflect that reality in our lives.