

## Born of a Virgin

*Matthew 1v18-25*

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

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.”

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet:

*“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—  
which means, God with us.”*

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

I'll admit, I rolled my eyes slightly when I realised I had two Christmas sermons in a row – you may just be able to recall that I spoke a few weeks ago on Isaiah 9, “unto us a child is born.” But it's actually worked out quite well, because this is like part two of that talk.

To kick off, let me ask you a question. *Do you believe that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin?* If I was to ask for a show of hands (don't worry, I won't), I wonder how many of you would say yes.

This is an aspect of Christian belief which causes people problems, and it's come under attack from all kinds of angles – from non-Christians, but also from people who should know better. As one example, this is what the American president Thomas Jefferson thought: *“The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.”* In fact, he produced his own version of the Bible, where he took out all the bits he didn't agree with, including this. If you're wondering, it's quite short and very dull. And the ending is rubbish.

Maybe you wouldn't go that far, but what if I asked you if the virgin birth is *important*. Last year there was an article in the Spectator asking important figures whether they believed in the virgin birth. One contributor said, *“I think that it is impossible to be a Christian without a literal belief in the Resurrection of Jesus. Everything falls down without it. The same is not true of the Virgin Birth.”*

Or maybe you'd be more sympathetic with Edward Stourton's view. He's a presenter on Radio 4 (apparently), and he also contributed to the Spectator article. He said, *“Hmmm. I can see the logic which argues that if you believe in the Incarnation, you need to believe in the Virgin Birth, so I suppose I ought to say yes ...but I wouldn't say it is a constant source of inspiration when I reflect on the great questions of life.”*

I think this last attitude in particular has been left unchallenged for way too long, and it inevitably leads to the other two. It's a small step from **uninspiring** to **unimportant**, and it isn't much further to **untrue**.

But as we look at this passage this morning, I want you to see that all of these statements are wrong. This is more than just a nice Christmassy details we can leave out if we want to. The virgin birth

of Christ is fundamental to who Jesus is, and to the whole Christian message. And this stupendous act of grace from God should never make us bored – if it does, you haven't understood it properly.

There are three 'chunks' to this passage, and each one helps us to unpack what's going on.

1. **The Miracle**
2. **The Message**
3. **The Messiah**

First there's...

### **The Miracle (v18-19)**

Mary and Joseph are pledged to be married. This was more than just an engagement as we'd understand it. According to Jewish tradition, there was a period before marriage called *kiddushin*, where a couple were pledged to be married. Effectively it meant the couple were legally married, although they didn't live together, and if they wanted to break it off (for infidelity, for example) they needed a formal divorce.

Mary and Joseph are in this period, planning their wedding and their married life together. But before they came together - before they slept together - Mary is found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Mary is **pregnant**, but she is still a **virgin**. This is a **miracle**!

There are two key things we should notice about this miracle. They're going to sound really obvious but, again, if you find them boring then you haven't understood them properly! The first one is: **Jesus' Father is God**. I told you it was obvious, but it is really, really important. The second is that this is an **act of God**. Miracles don't happen because humans have finally figured out how they work or how to earn them. They are supernatural events which happen at God's discretion. Right away, we see that this all happens because of God. It is only through God's generosity that this happens.

Now I realise that this miracle immediately presents some people with problems. Some of us are allergic to miracles. I trained as a scientist, which means I was trained to always start out as a sceptic, then try to prove that everything is wrong. When you can't you admit it must be true. Even those of us who aren't scientists are inclined to be sceptical of something like this. And so you should! If this is as important as I say it is, then you need to check it out.

The main objection people have is that it's impossible for a virgin to have a baby. In fact, it usually isn't so much an objection as an assumption – it's impossible, therefore it's ridiculous. But we have to remember who we're talking about. We're talking about a miracle done by **God** – the God who made the universe, who created human beings out of dust. We aren't saying this happens all the time – just the opposite! It's important *because* it's impossible. **Only God himself could do it.**

Some objections I hear seem to misunderstand what we actually mean by 'virgin birth,' which causes problems. When we say 'virgin birth,' we're saying there was no **man** involved – we aren't saying that Mary was like a lizard or a fish and just had a baby. We're saying there's no **man** involved, but we're **not** saying there's no **father** involved. That's the whole point!! Mary was a virgin, so the baby's father was God.

But what about poor old Joseph. His wife-to-be is pregnant. We aren't told whether she explained it to him or not, or whether he believed her. But his plan was to divorce her – Joseph was a

righteous man, and the righteous thing to do was to divorce her, otherwise he was condoning her 'behaviour.' But he also cared about Mary, and he didn't want to expose her to public disgrace. So he decided to do it quietly, to spare her as much of the scandal as possible.

So there's a miracle. It's mind-blowing, but it just gives Joseph a headache. Then comes...

### **The Message (v20-21, 24-25)**

While Joseph has all this on his mind, an angel appears to him in a dream and explains what's happening:

*“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.” (v20-21)*

The angel tells Joseph to take Mary as his wife, just like they planned - there's no disgrace, Mary hasn't broken her vow, because the baby is from the Holy Spirit. But more than that, Joseph finds out that she'll have a son, and they're to call him **Jesus**.

This is another detail we're so used to that we can forget why it's there. Jesus was a common name at the time, and it still is today in some parts of the world. But Mary and Joseph didn't just pick it out of a big book of boy's names. Jesus, or at least the Hebrew equivalent, means “**God saves.**” They're specifically told to call the boy '**God saves,**' “*because he will save his people from their sins.*” It's more than just a name. It tells us, right from the start, **who** he is and **why** he's come.

In the last couple of verses there, we're told that Joseph goes and does exactly as instructed. He doesn't get divorced, but instead takes Mary as his wife. And they have no union until the baby is born – there's no chance that Joseph is really the boy's father. And when he's born, they call him Jesus.

So we're building up a picture. A boy whose mother is a virgin, and whose dad is God. And an angel announces that he will be called “God saves,” because he will save his people from their sins.

Finally, Matthew spells it out for us. This kid is...

### **The Messiah (v22-23)**

*“All this took place,”* Matthew says, *“to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, God with us.'”*

Matthew makes the connection to the promise of the Messiah from Isaiah. The virgin birth of Jesus fulfils the prophecy they've been waiting for for so long.

At this point, people argue over what Isaiah meant. Did he really mean 'virgin' – you can translate it 'young woman.' This is nothing new – I was reading John Calvin on this the other day, and he didn't have much time for this argument. To see Isaiah's words as referring to just a young woman, you have to be pretty inconsistent in how you translate the word, which in most other places means 'virgin'. And, Calvin points out, it's kind of the point. If you remember back to what I was saying about Isaiah the other week, Isaiah was confronting the arrogance of King Ahaz. He declares that God will provide a sign. And what is this great sign? ***A young woman will have a baby?*** So what?! It's not much of a sign, is it? Isaiah knew what he was saying. And Matthew knew what he was saying too. It might surprise us, but they knew where babies come from. But Matthew saw that this was different. It was unique. It was the moment they had been waiting for since Isaiah made his promise 700 years before!

And because of his miraculous conception, Matthew gives the child another familiar name: **Immanuel**, which means, God with us. Again, this isn't just a name. It isn't some kind of tribute to God. This goes alongside the name **Jesus** to tell us who he is. Jesus is **God with us**, literally!

Let me condense down what these few verses show us. This is the arrival of a saviour whose Father is God, and so he is God himself – God with us. But his mother is human, so he is human himself. One baby, fully God, and fully human.

And that, in a nutshell, is why this truth is so important. Through a miraculous conception and an ordinary birth, Jesus is God made man.

### **But why is it important?**

I think part of the reason we can see this as uninspiring, and eventually unimportant, is that we only wheel it out once a year when we're all a little bit more gullible anyway, and we don't connect it with the big picture.

First we need to realise **the mess we're in**. As a species, we committed the ultimate crime when we turned our backs on God. We snubbed the almighty creator of the universe, and ruined everything. Now we're by nature turned away from God, left to deal with the consequences of our rebellion: We live in a world which is polluted by evil, and where death seems inevitable. And there's nothing we can do about it. We deserve to be *punished* for our rebellion.

What we need is someone who can take our place. One of us needs to volunteer to take the punishment. But none of us can, because each of us deserves it anyway. There's no point one inmate on death row offering to take the punishment of another – he's there because he has his own crimes to pay for. So we need someone *like us* to stand up for us, but he needs to be *unlike us*, because he needs to be free of the guilt we all carry around.

Do you see the problem?

Well I hope you've already worked out who fits the bill, but I'll spell it out for you. The only one who can do this is the Lord Jesus, and his miraculous birth shows us how. He's one of us, because he's human, and only a human could take the punishment we deserve. But he's also God – only God is free from the sin we all naturally have. When Luke covers this story in his own account, he says that Jesus' birth makes him **holy**. Somehow, his miraculous, virgin birth stops him inheriting the guilt we all inherit. He's able to obey, to live a perfect life, and then to willingly take on board our punishment, even though he is the only one in the whole of history who didn't deserve it.

**That's** why the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus is crucial. The way it happened, shows us a crystal clear picture of who Jesus is. He's human, and he's God. He's God with us, and he will save his people from their sins; he **has** saved people from their sins!

Was that guy I quoted earlier right? Could you take out the virgin birth and still carry on? What would the gospel be like? Well, the term 'gospel' (which means good news) wouldn't apply because it wouldn't be good news any more. It would mean that Jesus was just a bloke, ordinary like the rest of us and guilty like the rest of us. He would have deserved to die on the cross himself, so our problem remains. In fact, you could throw this all away and stop bothering, because the Bible is one big con.

But praise God that it **IS** true. By his grace, God provided one who could put things right between

us and God, and (as we saw last week) allow us to become God's children.

I started off with quotes about the virgin birth being uninspiring, unimportant and even untrue. We've looked at the truth of it, and the importance of it. And I hope you found it at least a bit inspiring. But I said I think that it's only a couple of short steps from seeing this as boring to seeing it as untrue. So to finish I just want to suggest why we might start to see this as uninspiring and irrelevant, and I want to plead with you to sort it out.

1. We think it's impossible too, so we push it to the back of our minds. I guess we probably all have a junk room or a loft in our houses where we stuff rubbish and mess. We can just shut the door on it and concentrate on the tidy parts of our house. We can do the same thing with our doctrine. If we find something difficult to accept, we stuff it in our 'junk room' and concentrate on the tidy parts. But hopefully you've seen that we can't do that. It might mean some hard work for us, as we wrestle with truths that we find difficult to understand, but we can't just pack this away like a box of Christmas tat, because it's way too important!

2. If we find this uninspiring, then can I suggest it could be a symptom of a bigger problem. Are we uninspired by the gospel in general? Are we getting our 'inspiration' from somewhere else? What could be more inspiring than the fact that God loved us enough to become one of us and to die for us?!

Can I also suggest you ask yourself some more basic questions. Do you trust God's revelation in the Bible? Is your view of God big enough to be able to handle him doing something like this? Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross in our place? Once one of these starts to wobble, we shouldn't be surprised if the others start to wobble too. We need to be careful we aren't basing our understanding of God on a majority vote, and substituting what is true with stuff that is plausible.

3. We've seen that Jesus is both God *and* man. The third reason I want to suggest we might find this uninspiring is if we get the balance wrong. The key point of the virgin birth is that Jesus is God and man united in one person. But if we make Jesus into one or the other, it becomes a bit pointless. The miracle is that he's fully both at the same time. This passage should help us to keep the balance, and the balance should stop us seeing this as boring.

The quotes I opened with were pretty negative, so I want to leave you with some words from one of my dead heroes. It's from a sermon by Charles Spurgeon, a guy who was clearly inspired by the virgin birth of Jesus Christ:

*“I do believe that the very angels have never wondered but once and that has been incessantly ever since they first beheld it. They never cease to tell the astonishing story, and to tell it with increasing astonishment too, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born of the Virgin Mary, and became a man. Is he not rightly called Wonderful? Infinite, and an infant — eternal, and yet born of a woman — Almighty, and yet hanging on a woman's breast - supporting the universe, and yet needing to be carried in a mother's arms — king of angels, and yet the reputed son of Joseph — heir of all things and yet the carpenter's despised son. Wonderful art thou O Jesus, and that shall be thy name for ever.”*