

I Believe

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
(Genesis 1:1 ESV)*

*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.
(Hebrews 11:6 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

Conceived And Born

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Matthew 1:18-25

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 1.

Today, we come to a line in the Creed that will lead many of your neighbours to laugh at you. It's true. In my spare time, I often watch videos on Youtube that have titles like: "Atheist DESTROYS Christian in debate!!!!". Maybe that seems weird to you, but you do lots of weird things too, so don't be judgy. I like to know the kinds of things that will come up when I share the gospel with my atheist neighbour. I like being prepared.

All that being said, you'd be surprised how often the doctrine of the virgin birth comes up in these public debates. If ever the Christian seems to be winning over the audience – if he's coming across as reasonable or intelligent – the debater will then turn and say, "O, and did you learn that from the same book that speaks of a VIRGIN BIRTH?" And then the crowd laughs hysterically, and the Christian has to confess in front of everyone that he believes the preposterous claim that the virgin Mary gave birth to a son.

You might think, "But the Bible is FULL of miracles! Why is this one so hard to believe?" The reality is, most of your neighbours haven't read the Bible. THIS is the miracle that they know about. And THIS is the miracle that they are SHOCKED that you actually believe. When you

confess this line in the creed, you confess that you believe in a miracle-working God. And as people who are steeped in a secular humanist, rationalistic culture, it is good for us to proclaim this truth time and time again. We believe in miracles.

With each passing line in this creed, the number of people who are able to recite it in faith diminishes. There is a weaning down as we press forward. And, as we come to this line, almost every other voice has dropped off. The voice of your atheist neighbour dropped off when we proclaimed: “I believe in God”. The voice of every other world religion dropped off when we confessed: “and in Jesus Christ His only Son”. The voice of the half-hearted follower and the voice of the demon dropped off when we confessed Jesus as “our Lord”. And now, the voice of many of the progressive and liberal “Christians” must drop off as we proclaim that this Jesus:

was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,

I love this quote by Donald Macleod. He writes:

The virgin birth is posted on guard at the door of the mystery of Christmas; and none of us must think of hurrying past it. It stands on the threshold of the New Testament, blatantly supernatural, defying our rationalism, informing us that all that follows belongs to the same order as itself and that if we find it offensive there is no point in proceeding further.¹

The virgin birth is posted on guard at the entrance to the New Testament. It is as if Matthew is saying, “You won’t understand anything that follows unless you see this glorious, miraculous truth. Only the eyes of faith will see anything beyond this point.”

But if you have the eyes of faith, what you will see in this doctrine is absolutely breath-taking. Look with me now at Matthew 1, beginning in verse 18. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

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.¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.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

¹ Donald Macleod as quoted by R. Albert Mohler Jr. *The Apostle's Creed - Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), 44-45.

take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Most of us have likely heard ten sermons on this passage. If you didn't hear a sermon from this text this past Christmas, make no mistake, you will hear it next December. That being said, we are going to move very quickly through the *details* of this story so that we can spend the bulk of our time reflecting on the *doctrine* in this story.

So, let's begin with a very quick summary of the pertinent details in this story. Joseph and Mary were betrothed to be married. Most betrothals lasted about a year, after which the bride would move in with the groom and they would consummate their marriage. That had not yet happened. Mary had not been with Joseph. Therefore, when he discovered that she was pregnant, his natural inclination was to assume that she had been unfaithful.

In Jewish culture, the betrothal was not something that could be simply cut off. It was a legally binding agreement. Joseph had every right to publicly bring Mary to court to annul the marriage. In fact, most men would have done just that so as to avoid any possible suspicion about foul play on their part. A public trial would have humiliated Mary and could have even led to her being stoned to death. But Joseph was a righteous man and he resolved to divorce her quietly.

Then, however, an angel appeared to Joseph and declared to him:

“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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:20b-21 ESV)

Unbelievable as it was, Mary's story was true! She had not been unfaithful. This baby was conceived by the Holy Ghost! This baby was going to save Joseph's people from their sins!

Those are the details of our text, but as I mentioned, I want to spend our time pulling out and unpacking the *doctrine* of this text. The verses that follow will introduce us to two basic yet profound doctrinal truths.

Unpacking The Doctrine

First, this story teaches us that:

1. Jesus is the miraculous fulfillment of Old Testament expectations

Many of you are relatively young in your faith. Perhaps you've never read through the Old Testament, or maybe you've done it once or twice. Let me encourage you that, as the years go on and as you become more and more familiar with the storyline of Scripture, God's Word will become more and more incredible in your eyes! Themes and stories and symbols and prophecies spring up from the Old Testament and, on first reading, they seem disjointed and disconnected. But then all of those seemingly scattered strands come together as Jesus comes onto the scene. In him the unity of the Bible is on full display. As Jesus said:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me (John 5:39 ESV)

At risk of sounding overly simplistic, this is the Jesus Book. As we read the bible, the Holy Spirit helps us to see and understand the Son of God. And as we see Jesus, we come to a greater understanding of who the Father is. Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Therefore, everything *here* is preparing us to see and understand and worship *him!* Matthew understood that. And as he reflected on this miraculous birth, immediately his mind shot back to the book of Isaiah. We read:

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:22-23 ESV)

This quotation is from the Book of Isaiah, written around 700 years before the virgin birth. Isaiah wrote as the northern tribe of Israel was about to be wiped off the map by the Assyrians. He wrote a generation before the Babylonians would take the southern tribe of Judah into exile. He wrote to prepare God's people for a season in which it was going to look for all the world like the promises of God had failed. Isaiah prophesied to his people that out of the coming darkness, the cry of a newborn baby will be heard. He will be born to a virgin, and we will call him "God with us".

If you have read through the Old Testament, you know that this isn't the first time that a miraculous birth has signaled a turning point in redemptive history. Think of the miraculous birth of Isaac to "past the age of childbearing" Sarah. Think of the miraculous birth of Joseph to barren Rachel. Think of the birth of Sampson and the birth of Samuel and the birth of John the Baptist. All of these miraculous births – all of these markers for a turning point in the story – served to prepare us for THE turning point in our story! As Ben Myers writes:

The confession that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin isn't just a bit of theological eccentricity. It's not a random miracle story. It's a reminder that our faith has deep roots in Israel's story and Israel's Scriptures. The coming of the Saviour wasn't just a new thing. It was the culmination of the whole great story of God's loving faithfulness to the people of Israel.²

He is the child who was promised to Eve in Genesis chapter 3. He is the son of the woman who has come once and for all to crush the serpent's head. He is the miraculous fulfillment of Old Testament expectations. But unlike all of the miraculous births in the past, this birth was unique. With every other birth, God miraculously allowed a man and a woman to conceive. Jesus, however, was the only child who was born without a human father. This isn't just a TURN in the story. God is doing SOMETHING ENTIRELY NEW!

This lead us to the second doctrine that we need to unpack:

2. Jesus is truly God and truly man

² Ben Myers, *The Apostle's Creed - A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 54.

Why is it that Jesus needed to be conceived by the Holy Ghost? Why didn't God simply anoint one of Joseph and Mary's biological children like every other prophet in history? And why did they have to be a conception at all? Why didn't Jesus just beam down from heaven as a fully grown man to fulfill his ministry? Theologian Wayne Grudem notes:

God, in his wisdom, ordained a combination of human and divine influence in the birth of Christ, so that his full humanity would be evident to us from the fact of his ordinary human birth from a human mother, and his full deity would be evident from the fact of his conception in Mary's womb by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.³

Just look at the ways in which the divine and the human come together in this story. Matthew is careful to include the detail that Mary and Joseph had not consummated their marriage. In fact, he goes on to write:

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife,²⁵ **but knew her not until she had given birth to a son.** (Matthew 1:24-25a ESV)

Joseph didn't want to leave any room for doubt as to who the Father of Jesus truly was, so he chose not to consummate their marriage until after Jesus had been born. Unlike every man who had ever been born or ever will be born, Jesus was not conceived by the fusion of a sperm and an egg.

This shouldn't need to be said, but I will say it anyway just to be crystal clear: There was no physical intimacy in the immaculate conception. The Holy Spirit mysteriously and miraculously fused the Divine seed with Mary's human egg. Joseph adopted Jesus as his son, but Joseph was not the father. Jesus has no earthly father. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost because Jesus is truly God.

And he is truly man. He was born as we were born, and grew as we grow, and ate and drank and slept as we do. He grew tired as we grow tired. The gospels are full of these details that remind us of Jesus' humanity. Even after Jesus' resurrection, he appeared to his disciples and – as if to make an undeniable case for his humanity – said:

³ Wayne Grudem as quoted by R. Albert Mohler Jr. *The Apostle's Creed - Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), 50.

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. **For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.**" ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate before them. (Luke 24:39-43 ESV)

Jesus has a physical body. He eats physical food. And yet, death has no authority to hold him. Jesus is truly God and truly man. In theological terms, this is referred to as the hypostatic union. When we think about the Son, we should always think about Him according to these two natures.

Over the course of church history, people have gotten this wrong on either side of the ditch. Some have attempted to merge the two natures of Jesus together so as to make them indistinguishable. They would say that, just as red and blue combine to make purple, Jesus' humanity and divinity combined to make a whole new thing. That's unhelpful and unbiblical. But on the other side of the ditch, some people have so separated the two natures of Jesus that, when they describe him, he almost sounds like someone suffering from multiple personality disorder.

This union of his two natures is one of the great theological mysteries of our faith. In the second century, a theologian named Origen attempted to make sense of the relationship with an analogy. Every analogy falls short, but I found this one to be helpful. He described a bar of iron that has been placed in a furnace. Eventually, that bar of iron becomes so heated that it glows red. At this point, he says, the iron:

has become wholly fire, since nothing else is discerned in it except fire; and if anyone were to attempt to touch or handle it, he would feel not the power of iron but of fire. In this way, then, that soul [that is, Jesus' human soul] which, like iron in the fire, was placed in the Word forever, in Wisdom forever, in God forever, is God in all that it does, feels, and understands.⁴

Thus, the man Jesus spoke, but everyone who heard him recoiled because they heard his divinity. And the man Jesus walked, but those with him recoiled because he could even walk on the sea! The man Jesus suffered, but the centurion who witnessed his suffering proclaimed:

⁴ Origen of Alexandria as quoted by Ben Myers, *The Apostle's Creed - A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 44.

“Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39b ESV)

Then, the body of the man Jesus was buried, but three days later he removed his burial clothe and stepped out of the darkness and into the light. The iron blazes with fire! The man is God!

The Gospels compel us to come face to face with Jesus Christ – the fulfillment of the Old Testament – the one who was and is and forevermore will be truly God and truly man. The earliest Christians understood these truths to be foundational to our faith and thus they wrote them into our creed.

But with the time that we have remaining, I want to ask a simple question: Why do I need to know this? How do these doctrines impact my faith and my life in any way? Am I ever going to use the term “hypostatic union” in my evangelism? In short: Why does this doctrine matter?

Why Does This Doctrine Matter?

That’s a great question, and I’m glad you asked. The truth is, it matters more than you and I can even begin to understand. This doctrine is ASTOUNDING! Let me give you two reasons why. First of all, this doctrine matters because:

1. It puts the radical love of God on full display

I mentioned off the top that this is one of those doctrines that your neighbors laugh behind your back about. This isn’t unique to our current cultural moment. They were laughing in the fourth century too. Saint Augustine wrote:

To them it’s just plain embarrassing that God should walk around in a silly, ill-fitting body. To us, of course, it’s a genuinely encouraging sight. To put it another way, which’ll truly appear perverse to the Unwise and Imprudent, the more impossible the virgin birth of a human being appears to them, the more divine it seems to us.⁵

⁵ Augustine as quoted by R. Albert Mohler Jr. *The Apostle's Creed - Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), 47.

Let's just stop and think for a moment about how ridiculous the virgin birth truly is. Let's think about those details that would make our neighbours laugh. Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity, has always existed. The Bible teaches us that it was through him that everything was made that has been made. But we believe that a little over 2000 years ago, the eternal, holy, creator of the universe entered into the egg of a virgin. Think about this for a moment: The Son of God who formed the STARS became an embryo. He developed a little heartbeat and little toes and fingers. For nine months, the second Person of the Godhead lived in a womb.

Then he went through the traumatic process of birth. He was pushed through the birth canal – his little skull feeling the compression and his shoulders adjusting as the contractions pressed him through. And he emerged into the hands of his adopted father, Joseph, a tradesman. He blinked and cried as his eyes became acclimatized to the light of the stars – the stars that he spoke into existence.

Little ___ Allen was born this past week and a little Warren and a little VanKessel will be here in March. Jocelyn Turran is sitting here in the front row. She is entirely dependent upon her mother. She can't put a blanket over herself if she gets cold or roll back onto her back if she gets flipped over at night. She can't feed herself, burp herself, change herself – she is the definition of helpless. 2,000 years ago, the Maker of heaven and earth became a helpless baby and was cared for by a young mother named Mary.

It is ridiculous, isn't it? Especially when you consider all that we discussed last week about the holiness of God and the depravity of man. Our text last week left us saying, "God is so holy and He hates sin so much that I'm shocked He hasn't struck us ALL down!" The Philistines cast the ark out of the camp! They thought He was a tyrant!

But here, we see that the holy God loves us so much that He entered into our weakness and clothed Himself in our flesh so that we could be redeemed. He's not the tyrant that the Philistines imagined Him to be. He is the God who has drawn near. He is God with us.

Your neighbour thinks this is ridiculous. Because it is. God's love for us – the kind of love that has condescended down to enter into our brokenness – is absolutely ridiculous. And praise God that it is! I agree with Saint Augustine:

the more impossible the virgin birth of a human being appears to them, the more divine it seems to us.⁶

Of course, there is so much more that we could say, but I want to close with the most significant reason as to why this doctrine matters. It matters because:

2. **Without it, our debt of sin could never be paid**

The early church understood that the confessions in the creed about Jesus' suffering, death, burial, resurrection and ascension would not make sense if they were divorced from this confession about the incarnation. As Albert Mohler notes:

The church fathers understood that without a proper understanding of Jesus in the womb one would never understand the significance of Christ on the cross.⁷

Let's flesh this out. As we discussed last week, God graciously instituted the sacrificial system through Moses. In the sacrificial system, animals were sacrificed to make atonement for the sins of God's people. The sacrifices served as object lessons. They reminded the Israelites that their sin separated them from their holy God and that the penalty for sin is death. As the Israelites made these sacrifices to the Lord in faith – as they placed their trust in the plan that He had provided to cover over their sin – they were saved.

But, while the sacrifices were designed to teach a lesson, the inherent flaw in the sacrificial system was also designed to teach a lesson. The author to the Hebrews explains:

For since the law has **but a shadow** of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near... ⁴ **For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.** (Hebrews 10:1,4 ESV)

⁶ Augustine as quoted by R. Albert Mohler Jr. *The Apostle's Creed - Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), 47.

⁷ R. Albert Mohler Jr. *The Apostle's Creed - Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), 44-45.

Do you see what he's saying? The law was a *shadow* of good things to come! It was never the final plan. If the point of the sacrifice is to teach me that the penalty for my sin is death, then how come an animal is offered in my place? How is that fair? It doesn't make sense!

If my neighbour set my house on fire and I brought the case to a judge, I doubt I would be satisfied if he said, "You're right! Your neighbour is guilty! To satisfy his debt I am going to kill this squirrel!" I'd probably respond, "But a squirrel didn't sin against me! A man did! THAT man did!"

In the same vein, the author to the Hebrews explains that the sacrificial system could not have been God's final plan, because the blood of bulls and goats could never ultimately serve as a substitute for the sins of men. The system clearly pointed forward. John the Baptist was the first to verbally connect the dots. When he saw Jesus, he exclaimed:

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29 ESV)

The blood of animals was never sufficient to pay for the sins of men but, behold! These sacrifices pointed forward to Jesus the one true sacrifice that will once and for all satisfy the debt that we owe! We needed a man to stand as a substitute for mankind, and as we have seen, Jesus was and is truly man.

But couldn't any man have done that? Trillions of men and women have lived and died on this earth since the fall. Hundreds of thousands of men have even died on a cross. If, say, John the Baptist had so desired, could he have offered himself up for the sins of the world? If not, why not?

This is perhaps an aspect of the atonement that we don't often think about.

Think about this for a moment: When you sin against God, it is not like sinning against your neighbour. First of all, your neighbour is himself a sinner. For many of your neighbours, an argument could be made that they deserved to be sinned against! Second, your neighbour is mortal. Therefore, the effect of your sin against that neighbour will eventually come to an end.

Now think about your sin against God. Unlike your neighbour, God is absolutely innocent. You sinned against the PERFECT One. And, unlike your neighbour, God is immortal. He is infinite. He has always been, and He always will be. Which means, your sin against God is an INFINITE offense against a PERFECTLY INNOCENT party.

So how could the death of one man satisfy the infinite debt that is owed by all of mankind?

We would need an infinite man to satisfy that debt. We would need a Godman. A man who is both truly man and truly God. A man who could legitimately represent us as the guilty party and who could legitimately represent God as the offended party. And, as we have learned, that's exactly who Jesus is. As the Apostle Paul wrote:

For in him **all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell**,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, **making peace by the blood of his cross.**
(Colossians 1:19-20 ESV)

Why does this doctrine matter? Because, without this doctrine, there is no forgiveness of sins! Without this doctrine, Jesus would just be one more tragic story of a man dying on a Roman cross! Without this doctrine, our debt of sin could never be paid!

Over the next three weeks, we are going to fix our eyes on the suffering, death and descent of the Son of God, but none of that will make any sense unless we understand what happened in this virgin birth.

Why is Jesus' death sufficient for all? Why is it that death had no hold on him? How can I be sure that death will have no hold on me? How can I know that I am forgiven?

Because God became man. Because the only One who had the currency to settle the debt that we owed humbled himself to reside in a virgin's womb. He is the one that the prophets anticipated. He is the one that the sacrifices pointed forward to. He is the fulfillment of every Old Testament expectation! He is truly God and truly man.

This is very good news! And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.