

The Virgin Birth

Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38

On a scale of 1 to 10, how badly do you think God wants a relationship with us? “1” would be not at all; “5” would be that He could take it or leave it; “10” would be Diana Ross “Ain’t no mountain high enough. . .” What do you think? And how do you even answer a question like that? You could go by your feelings (“I feel like God barely wants a relationship with me. . .”) or you could go by your circumstances (“Since my life is so awesome God must want a relationship with me. . .”). But our feelings and circumstances are fickle criteria for evaluating God’s intentions towards us.

As in any relationship, it’s much better to evaluate what a person says and what a person does. When we consider what God has said about a relationship with us, we have to conclude that His desire for us is a “10”: God said of the new covenant, “I will remove your sin as far as the east is from the west . . . I will be your God and you will be My people.”

When we evaluate what God has done in order to reach out to us, we’d also have to say “10”: when we were yet sinners, He sent His one and only Son to die for our sins. He never would have paid the highest price to secure our salvation if He weren’t passionate about a relationship with us.

This morning as we continue our Advent series on the Incarnation (Jesus becoming one of us), we’re going to consider “the virgin birth.” We are going to see that the virgin birth provides yet more evidence that God was intent on pursuing a relationship with us. Specifically, the virgin birth will illustrate God’s initiative and God’s power in providing a way for us to come back to Him.

The “virgin birth” might seem like a remote, obscure doctrine that can’t possibly have much relevance for our lives, but I think we’ll see that the virgin birth reveals some things about God that can be nourishing for our souls.

NOTE: Numerous people have pointed out that the “virgin birth” is not the type of teaching that the early church would have made up - especially in their Jewish context. The Jews were repulsed by the Greek pantheon because many of their “gods” had sexual relations with humans. Zeus, for example, was very promiscuous with human women; in Greek mythology, Hercules was Zeus’ son by a woman. All of this was grotesque and repulsive to Jews in the first century. And so the early church would not have made up a teaching like the one we’re going to consider today; if anything it was another stumbling block.

The Revelation of the Virgin Birth (Luke 1, Matthew 1)

We believe that Jesus was born of a virgin because that’s what the Scriptures teach, not because we completely understand it or because we have a rational explanation of how such a unique event could have happened. Like all of the core doctrines of Christianity, we believe in the virgin birth because the Scriptures reveal that Jesus was born of a virgin. On the other hand, those who reject the virgin birth do not claim that the Bible

doesn't teach that Jesus was born of a virgin; most who reject the virgin birth do so because they reject anything supernatural.

With that in mind, let's see how the Scriptures reveal that Jesus was born of a virgin. We will first consider Luke's account in Luke 1:26-38. We'll pay special attention to how intent God was on providing a way for us to return to Him.

26 Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And coming in, he said to her, "Hail, favored one! The Lord *is* with you."

Gabriel announces to Mary that she was a "favored one" or "graced one" – one upon whom God had poured His grace.

29 But she was greatly troubled at *this* statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.

Gabriel mentioned again that Mary had found favor (or "grace") with God. God was pleased with her life and was pouring out His grace upon her. This grace, however, would be different from anything she could have expected.

31 "And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. 32 "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; 33 and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end."

You probably noticed that Gabriel didn't ask Mary whether she was willing to give birth to the Messiah; He simply announces what *will* happen. This was an assignment from God. This announcement would ruin Mary's life forever - in a most painful but beautiful way.

Gabriel **announces** that she would "conceive in [her] womb" and give birth to a son. Five things would be true of this child born of Mary:

- His name would be Jesus. Jesus = Joshua = YHWH's salvation.
- He will be great. Greatness is an apt description of Jesus' life, teachings, death, resurrection, and present glory.
- He will be called Son of the Most High. Whereas all believers are "sons of God," Jesus is God's "one and only" eternal Son.
- The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. Jesus is the promised King who would sit on David's throne.
- He will reign forever. His kingdom has no end.

Obviously, this Child was destined to play a central role in God's plan for the world. But Mary seemed to be stuck on one detail. She doesn't ask Gabriel some deep theological

question about his description of the Child. She asks him a more obvious personal question:

34 And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

She understood that Gabriel wasn't saying that she would get married to Joseph and that they would have a child together. She understood that she would conceive a child independent of a man. This had never happened in all of history.

35 And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God.

The Holy Spirit was the explanation for Mary conceiving the Child while she was still a virgin. The Holy Spirit would "come upon" her. The power of the Most High would "overshadow" her. Just as God manifested His presence at the Transfiguration by the cloud that "overshadowed" the disciples (Luke 9:34), the Holy Spirit would overshadow Mary. The Holy Spirit is called "the power of the Most High." The most basic thing we are told is that Mary's pregnancy was the result of the **power of God through the person of the Holy Spirit**. Not surprisingly, the virgin birth involved all three persons of the Trinity. At the initiative of the Father, the Holy Spirit overshadowed the virgin Mary with the result that she would give birth to the Son. As we discussed last week, Jesus didn't come into existence at that time; rather Jesus had existed from eternity past and would now become human.

Gabriel gives Mary encouragement and confirmation by pointing to the experience of Elizabeth, her relative.

36 "And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. 37 "For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Elizabeth's pregnancy was evidence of God's miraculous power and that "nothing will be impossible with God." If God could give Elizabeth a child in her old age, God could give Mary a child – even though she was a virgin. Mary's faith is amazing. She didn't have all her questions answered, but she submitted to God's will: "be it done to me according to your word."

Matthew is the other gospel writer who records the virgin birth. The primary thing Matthew adds is that the virgin birth was the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14. After recounting the angel's assurances to Joseph that Mary's pregnancy was "of the Holy Spirit," Matthew gives the following commentary in 1:22-25.

22 Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, 23 "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with

us." 24 And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took *her* as his wife, 25 and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

The prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 is notoriously complicated to understand both in its original context and its fulfillment here in Matthew 1. What is significant for us is that Matthew understood that the virgin birth of the Messiah was rooted in Jewish prophecy. It was not some odd doctrine that was added later to explain how God could become a man. It wasn't a Christian version of Greek mythology. It was fully consistent with the portrait of the Messiah that was painted in the OT. The virgin Mary conceiving the Son of the Most High God in her womb was the fullest expression of the name Immanuel. Through the virgin Mary God would be "with us" because He would be one of us! The virgin birth was the *means* of accomplishing this astonishing feat.

In our time remaining I want us to answer the question we consider almost every single time we study the Bible: "So what?" Why does it matter that Jesus was born of a virgin? We need to be careful in answering this question so that we don't draw implications that go beyond the evidence.

For example, it is common to hear that the virgin birth is the **only** way that Jesus could have been introduced into the world without sin, that if Jesus had an earthly father, he would have inherited sin. In fact, the Scriptures don't teach that sin is passed on biologically by our fathers; rather, Romans 5 traces our sinfulness back to Adam's sin.

If you think that sin is inherited biologically, you also have to come up with an explanation why Jesus didn't inherit sin from Mary. [The Roman Catholic Church has addressed this problem by developing a whole cluster of other doctrines surrounding Mary: the sinlessness of Mary (if she had sin, it would have been passed on to Jesus), the immaculate conception (the idea that Mary had herself never inherited original sin), the assumption of Mary (because she was sinless, she never died, but was taken directly to heaven). These aren't teachings found in Scripture, but have been added unnecessarily (IMHO) due to the unnecessary implication that sin is inherited physically from our biological parents.] We are told explicitly that Jesus was sinless, but we aren't really told why He didn't inherit sin from His mother, Mary.

I mention these issues to point out that unless we are careful, we will find ourselves trying to answer all sorts of complicated questions about Jesus' birth that are beyond our scrutiny. It is better, I think, to see the virgin birth as reinforcing more basic truths that are clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture.

Implications of the Virgin Birth:
Jesus is unique among all humans.

Larry King, the CNN talk show host, was once asked who he would most want to interview if he could choose anyone from all of history. He said, "Jesus Christ." The questioner said, "And what would you like to ask Him?" King replied, "I would like to

ask Him if He was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me." (*Just Thinking*, RZIM, Winter 1998)

He understood that the claim of the virgin birth sets Jesus apart from all other humans. If Jesus was unique, you cannot ignore His life, His teachings, His death and resurrection.

The virgin birth was really the first tangible evidence of Jesus' uniqueness. This uniqueness would be confirmed throughout the rest of His time on earth.

- Angels and shepherds and Magi showed up to worship the Child.
- Simeon and Anna recognized the infant Jesus as the Savior of Israel.
- At age 12 Jesus confounded teachers in the temple with His wisdom.
- During His public ministry Jesus taught with a type of authority that people had never seen before.
- Jesus performed miracles with a touch or a word or a glance; He even demonstrated authority over nature when He calmed the Sea of Galilee.
- The crowning evidence of Jesus' uniqueness, of course, was His bodily resurrection on the third day.

Jesus is unique among all who have ever lived. There is none like Him. All other religions are founded by men and women who were born in sin just like you and me. All of their religious systems are variations on a couple of basic themes: 1) by obeying a set of rules, you can make yourself acceptable to God, or 2) you're already god (or part of god), so don't sweat it.

Jesus, by contrast, came teaching a unique message of grace that was first introduced in the Old Testament: "Come and buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isaiah 55:1). Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" We are saved "by grace through faith" in Jesus as "a gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jesus is unique among all who have ever lived.

The second implication of the virgin birth is this:

Our salvation is the result of God's initiative and power.

As we have seen, the emphasis in the birth narratives is upon God breaking into history "at the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4). God took the ***initiative***: God sent an angel and announced to Mary, "You will give birth to a son . . . Jesus . . . great . . . son of the Most High." God also manifested His ***power***: The Holy Spirit, the "power of the Most High" overshadowed Mary. The virgin birth came about as a result of the power of God. The initiative and the power of God we see in the virgin birth only foreshadow God's initiative and power displayed ***throughout the entirety of Jesus' life***.

When you read the Gospels, you see that Jesus was continually taking initiative and demonstrating the power of God. Nothing could keep Him from accomplishing the will of God. Jesus rejected suggestions (both from Satan and from His own disciples) that He take a different path and avoid the cross. And nothing could keep Him in the grave

after He had been crucified. He was raised up by the power of God and seated at His right hand!

The New Testament depicts **a God whose mind was set** on securing our salvation. You may be at a place in your life where you wonder whether God really desires a relationship with you. Perhaps you're not feeling especially close to God. Or perhaps there's some sin that dominates your life and you think that God has given up on you. Or perhaps you've prayed about some difficulty in your life and it seems like God could care less. For a variety of different reasons we sometimes wonder whether God is really committed to a relationship with us.

This is where a truth such as "the virgin birth" can speak powerfully into our lives. Based on what God has said and done, we have to conclude that God is passionate about a relationship with us. Through the virgin birth God broke into human history in the boldest of ways in order to secure our salvation. There we see God's initiative and God's power in pursuing a relationship with us.

Bryan Chapell tells a story that illustrates God's power and initiative in our salvation.

One of the most powerful images of my wife's childhood came when she and a neighbor girl were playing in some woods behind their homes. The neighbor girl wandered from the path and stepped into a nest of ground bees. As the bees began to swarm and sting, the girls began to scream for help. Suddenly, out of nowhere—like superman, my wife says—her dad came crashing through the woods, leaping over fallen logs, hurdling vines and bushes. He swooped up a girl under each arm and tore through the woods at full speed to get away from the bees. As he ran, the father's grip bruised the children's arms, branches scratched their thighs, and thorns grabbed at their clothes and skin. The rescue hurt, but it was better than the bees.

(Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace*, Crossway, 2001, p. 180)

In a similar way, our sin required a bold, aggressive rescue. The virgin birth reflects the fact that there was nothing half-hearted or timid about the way God came crashing into history and secured our salvation. And this rescue wasn't painless. It certainly wasn't painless for Jesus. And it's not painless for those who are rescued.

This rescue wasn't painless for Mary. She was the first disciple - the first person who had to learn to submit to and follow Jesus. As Simeon predicted when Jesus was only eight days old, "a sword pierced her soul" when her Savior Son died on the cross. And our rescue isn't painless; it's often painful when we experience Jesus rescuing us from ourselves and from our sin. It's a type of death ("dying to self"). But we must not misinterpret our pain as God's displeasure or indifference. The virgin birth and the entire earthly existence of Jesus screams that God is passionate about a relationship with us. He never would have come crashing into history the way He did if that weren't the case.