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Sermon

Virgin Birth – Miraculous Conception

Matthew 1:18-25

22nd December, 2013

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Each year, we hear the old, old story of the birth of Jesus. How often do we think through what is happening there? Today, let's think about the Virgin birth.

Many people struggle with this. Yet it is simply and plainly stated in the two gospels which cover the birth of Jesus. We believe and know that these are inspired ("God-breathed" as Paul puts it in 1 Timothy 3:16) and that should really be enough for us to believe. However, our minds may struggle with the idea and rebel - seeing it as illogical or unbelievable.

It was preached by the early church. Bishop Ignatius wrote just after 100AD:

" For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived in the womb by Mary through God's good purposes, of the seed of David but also by the Holy Ghost."

Both the Apostles and the Nicene Creeds state Jesus "was born of the Virgin Mary." They thought it was of fundamental importance in a statement of Christian belief. Similarly, it is affirmed in the Thirty-Nine Articles, our Anglican foundational beliefs.

Yet some people struggle with the idea. Clearly, the virgin birth is a miracle. So to ask how it happened is futile. If you are determined that miracles cannot happen, I can't see how you can even be a Christian. If everything must be confined to what we can understand, there would be no universe. Your salvation depends on believing Jesus Christ rose from the dead – that is a miracle! Your hope is in a future life with him – that will require actions and powers beyond our current understanding to place us in that future state. The heavenly existence itself is beyond measurable space. If the miracle of the virgin birth is a problem, I suggest you have bigger problems still to struggle with!

Let's consider the necessity of the Virgin birth. Jesus had to be human to be the human saviour. He had to be one of us so he could die in our place.

On the other hand, to be able to save us Jesus needed the divine nature. That means the pre-existent divine life had to be coupled with a genuine human life.

If he were just another human he would not be free from the inherited sin principle (“original sin”) and thus he would still inherit sin which would require atonement. If he had had any sin which required forgiveness, he would not have been able to pay for our sin for us. The penalty for sin is death and he only had one death available. He couldn’t die for himself and also for us.

Something had to be different from the ordinary human so he would not inherit sin - yet he had to be an ordinary human so he could save us.

We could imagine other solutions besides virgin birth for the saviour. He could have been given a human body in heaven and descended to earth without a human parent. But then it would be hard for us to see how Jesus could be fully human and he would not be descended from Adam. That is required for the undoing of Adam’s sin.

Some other sort of conception was needed for the Saviour because Jesus is God. God already existed. In all other pregnancies, a new spirit is created by God for that new person. The idea that we exist somewhere before conception occurs is not Christian. Dr Wayne Grudem says:

“There is [a] popular view called pre-existentism, namely that the souls of people exist in heaven long before their bodies are conceived in the wombs of their mothers, and that God then brings the soul to earth to be joined with the baby’s body as he or she grows in the womb. But this view is not held by either Roman Catholic or Protestant theologians and is dangerously akin to ideas of reincarnation found in Eastern religions. Moreover, there is no support for this view in Scripture. Before we were conceived in the wombs of our mothers, we simply did not exist. We were not. Of course, God looked forward into future and knew that we would exist, but that is far removed from saying that we actually did exist at some previous time.”¹

So God the eternal Son was to become human and live on earth. This was the miracle called incarnation, taking on flesh. The Son of God already existed but was now to be given a body. It is reasonable that this should be done differently from the normal process of human conception. If Jesus had been conceived normally of Joseph and Mary, he would not have been the Son of God, but a son of Joseph just as his brothers James, Joseph, Jude and Simon were. If you want to produce a different result, you have to change the method.

We don’t know the details of how this was done (and I doubt we could understand them) except that the Holy Spirit was the agent. Luke records Mary very reasonably asking how as a virgin she would have a child who would be the Son of the Most High.

“How can this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin.”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, So the Holy One who will be born of you will be called the Son of God.”²

This does not mean and was never thought to mean, any physical procreation as in the Greek myths. People who think like that have perhaps never experienced an encounter with God. It is common when praying for healing for people that they feel heat in affected parts of their bodies or other sensations. God is able to affect our physical bodies by His Spirit. We see it when people are healed – and Helen and I and many of you have seen many immediate physical healings.

Before I was a Christian I did not believe in the Virgin Birth or a lot of other Christian beliefs. But as soon as I gave my life to Christ, sought His forgiveness and asked him to be my Saviour and my Lord – suddenly I knew! There was an immediate change of belief inside me. I didn’t have to try and believe – I found I did!

I remember thinking, “I know Jesus was born of a virgin as surely as I know I am breathing.” It was now inherent and obvious truth. I had received a revelation. Such a change is possible and we can ask for it.

¹ Grudem W., 1994, *Systematic Theology, An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, IVP Leicester, page 484

² Luke 1:34-35

Miracles are remarkable changes to what we would normally expect. Christianity is a religion of miracles. If you take out the miraculous from the Bible, you have hollowed out, powerless philosophy. But the interaction of God with his people was never like that in the Biblical record.

It's full of miracles! Now miracles do not necessarily mean the "breaking of natural laws."

As an analogy, think of flight – it is apparently a breaking of the Law of Gravity. But of course it isn't. Gravity still works on the flying object just as normal, but some other force is at work which counteracts gravity – in this case the lift gained from the difference in air pressures as air passes over a wing. Gravity still applies, just another force has been applied which counteracts it.

God is sovereign and know all the ways and means there are. I suspect that when miracles occur there would always a means by which he has intervened to change the expected course of events. I have to allow that his mind is infinite and mine is finite, so I do not expect to understand how these things happen – however much I may puzzle over them.

The evidence of the early church is that they saw many miracles. God has not changed. There is no statement that these would not continue. We need to reclaim our responsibility to advance the Kingdom of God through all means available - including miracles.

We have seen a goodly number here among the people of St Stephen's. You can read Barbara Thatcher's testimony in the magazine of her back being instantly healed. Joan has told us of the healing a fortnight ago of the pain in the left side of her neck

Most of us will remember the restoration of Ray's ability to swallow and later to keep food down, after we as a congregation prayerfully commanded those changes to occur.

I can cite many other examples of the power of God breaking into our lives to bring healing and change.

I remember the wonder of the girl in our congregation in Carlisle who had one leg which had been surgically broken 9 years before and had never healed. It was markedly shorter than the other. She was lined up for another attempt at surgery and had already been measured up for the operation. She visited her home church where a visiting healing evangelist prayed for her. Her leg grew longer. She went back to the surgeon who announced her leg was longer than the other one which was good because the operation would shorten it. She had the operation, the leg set and the final result was both legs were the same length! Note that shows God working with humanity doing what we couldn't do but allowing us to make our contribution.

I could remind you again of the woman in Romford, East London who came for prayer for her leg which had broken badly 6 months before. She was on crutches and could not put the bad foot on the ground. We prayed the pain away from her foot and ankle then asked her gently to try to do what she couldn't do before. She gingerly put her foot on the floor, then gently put weight on it, then increased the weight. In the end, she was hopping on the bad foot!

God can do miracles amongst us. I believe he wants and intends to. We need to learn how to work with him and trust him against our natural expectations; to hope against hope – that is to expect against normal expectations.

I know that some of you will listen to these stories and find all sorts of reasons to disbelieve and discard them. Doubt assails us all. It is very hard to believe things can be different from what you have always known. Some time ago, a man asked Helen to pray with him about troublesome unbelief. Whenever he was asked to pray for healing his mind would fill with thoughts that nothing would happen, he couldn't pray successfully. As they prayed together, three words came to his mind: doubt, unbelief and scepticism. So he prayed renouncing them and commanded them to go. There was no drama but from that time on when he prayed that overlay of unbelief had gone and it seemed possible that God would answer prayer. Now I know the story is true because I am the man!

Will you push against the complacency of unbelief? Do you desire to see the Kingdom of God among us here? I think it would be good if we similarly aligned ourselves with Jesus' purposes and his kingdom.

As a start we can make a declaration rejecting unbelief and embracing trust.

We are born again into eternal life. We are translated from the Kingdom of Darkness into the Kingdom of God's own Son.

We choose to renounce doubt, scepticism and unbelief – we will no longer be dominated by them. We choose to embrace trust and faith. We welcome the revelation of the Holy Spirit.

We ask, Father, that we see your miracles amongst us in increasing measure so that you would be glorified among us. Lord, entrust us with your miracles to draw many into the Kingdom and eternal life. Amen.

I intend to teach on these matters early next year as we are already seeing more of the Spirit's work among us.

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