

THE SAVIOR IS BORN

Matthew 1:18-25

Merry Christmas. An odd greeting in September, but a greeting appropriate to our clause in the creed and our text in the Scripture. I invite you to open your Bible to **Matthew 1:18-25**.

The creed says, *“I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.”* This is not a doctrine pulled out of the air. Nor is it the early church’s attempt to **match the pagan stories** of gods appearing in the guise of humans and fathering children with human women. The Scripture confirms that Jesus was conceived without sexual activity from a man or a god. The story of Jesus’ virgin conception *“is without precedent either in Jewish or pagan literature.”*¹ God is doing a new thing.

Luke tells this story in the first chapter of his Gospel from Mary’s point of view. The angel Gabriel appears to Mary, tells her she will give birth to the Messiah. She asks, *“How can this be since I have never been with a man?”* Gabriel answers, *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God”* (Lk 1:35). This is a **remarkable claim**: the Holy Spirit overshadowed the virgin Mary, and Jesus, the Son of God, was conceived in her womb. A unique conception. One of a kind. Nothing like it before or since. Luke tells this story through Mary’s eyes.

And Matthew tells the same story and affirms the same truth from Joseph’s point of view. Hear the word of the Lord ... (***read the text***).

I

Up to this point, Joseph and Mary’s path toward marriage and children was as conventional as it gets. Matthew writes that *“Mary had been engaged to Joseph”* (v. 18). Many times over the years, dating couples find me in the foyer after worship and the girl stretches out

¹Ben Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 70.

her left arm to me, hand hanging down to show me a ring: *"We're engaged!"* That's always a joyful occasion. But that's **not the same kind of engagement** as Mary's engagement to Joseph. We're talking a higher degree of commitment in their culture. If the couple ends their engagement, it requires a formal divorce. If there is unfaithfulness, it is considered adultery. If the husband-to-be dies during the engagement, his fiancé is considered a widow. The engagement lasts at least a year and maybe longer. And during that time the new groom has to come up with a gift of sorts to the bride's father for the privilege of taking his daughter in marriage. Mary and Joseph's engagement was like marriage in every way except that the couple did not yet live together or consummate their union. It was a typical engagement.

But then **a lightning bolt out of the blue**. Matthew says it this way: *"it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit"* (v. 18). Yeah, right. Joseph wasn't buying what Mary was selling. Would you? And how was this *"discovered"*? Did Mary grow a bit cold to Joseph, unsure how to break the news? Did Joseph sense this and confront the issue? Did the conversation go something like this?

"Joseph, I'm pregnant," says Mary.

I suspect Joseph was prepared for about anything but that. *"How could you be pregnant? We never have ... well, you know."*

"It's not you, Joseph."

"I know it's not me. But who is it? Is it Thaddeus? I've seen the way he looks at you ..."

"No, Joseph, please stop," she said, putting her fingers to his lips. *"Don't talk like this. It's not what you think. I have not been with a man. It is the Lord, Joseph. The Lord. An angel visited me in the night and told me that God favored me and chose me to bear his Son, our Savior, the Messiah. The angel told me that the Holy Spirit would overshadow me and conceive within my womb God's very own son. I know it's hard to believe. It's hard for me to believe, but I tell you truth, Joseph."*

"You call this the truth? This is the best story you got? I know I'm not the smartest man in town, Mary, but why on top of all else do you treat me like a fool?"

Did Joseph walk away angry, hurt, confused? It would only be a matter of time before Mary's pregnancy became obvious to anyone who could see. The word would get out, and Joseph would look like the town clown.

I wonder if he **sought counsel** from family or trusted friends: *"Dump her, Joe. She's a harlot now; she'll be a harlot later. Why should you have to raise another man's child?"* Their opinions were clear: *"Divorce her, Joseph. It's the only honorable way out of this mess."* God's law is clear. Mary is an adulteress. She could be stoned. But hurt as he is, Joseph, *"being a righteous man"* (v. 19), refused to press that issue. He'd do the proper thing, the *legal* thing: he would give her a certificate of divorce and set her free to marry the father of her child. And he'd do it as quietly as he could to spare them both from being the object of scorn and the butt of a hundred jokes and wisecracks.

So Joseph was prepared to set the process in motion when a **second lightning bolt struck**. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and confirmed Mary's story:

Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins (vv. 20-21).

And when Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the Lord's angel commanded him. He **officially tied the knot** with Mary. But to ensure that readers like us don't get the idea that maybe Joseph was the biological father after all, Matthew is quick to add that Joseph *"did not have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. And he named him Jesus"* (v. 25).

"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary." I love the way the creed takes pains to **locate Jesus Christ in history**: *"born of the virgin Mary"*—a particular girl in a particular town at a particular moment in history.

Our Christian faith did not come down from heaven on golden tablets. It is rooted in real people in real places in real time and history. And many of the Old Testament messianic promises were fulfilled at the sound of that baby's cry.

The baby *"conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary."*

II

**Many across the history of the church
have downplayed this doctrine as unbelievable.**

"This can't be true. It's some kind of myth," some say. *"Babies are not born to virgins. Name me one other baby born to a virgin. You can't, can you? It is a biological impossibility. Case closed."* Hard to blame the skeptics on this matter. Mary and Joseph were skeptics when they first heard the news. It is a **miracle conception** for sure. It *is* unique. No other human being in history can claim virgin conception. But I'm with Madeline L'Engle on this. She wrote:

The virgin birth has never been a major stumbling block in my struggle with Christianity; it's far less mind-boggling than the Power of all Creation stooping so low as to become one of us. ... That's the wonder: that God can reach out and become one with that which has been created.²

How come many find the virgin conception is so unbelievable? **If God** can create the universe with his word, if God can become a man and remain God at the same time, if Jesus can heal a man born blind, stop storms with a word, heal lepers, walk on water, and get up from the grave the third day after he was executed on a cross, the virgin conception seems a small thing to such a great God who engineered human reproduction in the first place.

This doctrine wasn't unbelievable to the **authors of Scripture**. As we've already seen, Matthew and Luke (1:26-38) include this doctrine in their nativity narratives. **Luke** sets Jesus'

²Madeline L'Engle, *A Stone for a Pillow* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986), 107-108.

virgin conception alongside the conception of **John the Baptist**, the prophesied forerunner of Jesus. John's mother Elizabeth had been barren her entire adult life. Yet in her old age, she conceived John. Hers was a natural conception. It was not so much miraculous as it was unexpected and biologically unlikely. Like Sarah in the Old Testament, women who haven't been able to conceive in their prime rarely, if ever, conceive when they're old enough for Medicare. But John's conception was by *natural* means: a man and his wife in old age make a baby. Jesus' conception was by *supernatural* means: the Holy Spirit overshadows a virgin and Jesus is conceived. Luke had no problems believing in the virgin conception.

Nor did **Matthew**. In our text, either the angel or Matthew points out in his telling of the story that Jesus' virgin conception is the final fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy. He quotes Isaiah 7:14 – *“See the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel—which is translated ‘God is with us.’”* Looking at that text through New Testament eyes, Matthew is using it to demonstrate that the virgin conception wasn't some last-minute decision on God's part—God saying to the heavenly council, *“You know what would be really cool?”* No! It was God's plan all along.

Mark includes nothing of Jesus' birth in *his* Gospel, yet in Mark 6:3, he records that the people of Nazareth, breaking typical Jewish pedigree-speak, refer to Jesus as *“the son of Mary,”* an unusual reference in that culture and signals a likely awareness among the folks in Jesus' hometown that Joseph was not his real father.

John's Gospel doesn't include nativity narratives either. He uses the first 18 verses of his gospel to describe the incarnation of Jesus—the eternal Word made flesh to dwell among us. Without using the term *virgin conception*, he makes clear that Jesus' coming to the world was unique.

And in Galatians 4:4, the **apostle Paul**, shows awareness of this doctrine in this statement: *“When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman”* Tom Oden observes,

“Why not [born of a] ‘man and woman’? The omission of the father in this reference makes it particularly unusual and noteworthy.”³

The biblical writers found this doctrine believable. So did most **early church fathers** so far as we know. Affirmation of the virgin conception finds its way into the earliest Christian creeds—like the Apostles’ Creed from the second century and the Nicene Creed from the fourth century. The church fathers believed in Jesus’ virgin conception. And why wouldn’t they? If you can believe in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ, virgin conception is small potatoes to a God who can do all that. Peter Larson observed:

The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: the virgin's womb and the empty tomb. He came into the world through a door marked, "No Entrance" and left the world through a door marked, "No Exit!"⁴

If you can believe the resurrection, the virgin conception shouldn’t be a problem.

And remember the Scripture only ascribes the miracle to the conception **not the birth**. Jesus developed in Mary’s womb like any other child, slowly taking shape, organs developing, his heart beating, growing from embryo to ounces to pounds, his lungs the last organs ready for life outside the womb. Like any other mother, Mary’s water broke. And when it was time, Mary began to feel contractions, minutes apart, then closer together, then full blown labor as Jesus worked his way down the birth canal and into the world streaked with amniotic fluid and his mother’s blood, still attached to his mother until Joseph or a midwife cut the umbilical cord. **Jesus is God’s Son, but he is fully human too**. Jesus did not emerge from the womb, stretch big, shake out his body, and say to his parents, *“I thought I’d never get out of there. Anyway, I’m here now and ready to save the world. Let’s get on with it.”* Nope. He cried. He slept. He needed his diapers changed. He spit up. He fussed when he was hungry or distressed. He woke his parents up in the middle of the night. His voice cracked in early adolescence. He may have had a pimple or two. Jesus’

³Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology*: Vol. 2 (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 144.

⁴http://www.finestquotes.com/author_quotes-author-Peter+Larson-page-0.htm

conception is supernatural, a God-thing. His *birth*, his growth, a natural, human thing. **He fully experiences human life from development in the womb to burial in a tomb.**

Nobody scoffs at his birth. But plenty across the centuries have scoffed at his conception. They find it unbelievable. I don't. Do you?

III

There are others who find it unimportant.

They are wrong. Jesus' virgin conception is **logically consistent** with other doctrines pertaining to Christ⁵ ...

The virgin conception is consistent with **the pre-existent Christ** who John called the eternal Word who was in the beginning *with* God and *as* God (Jn 1:1). The pre-existent Christ could not be conceived into this world by purely human means or else there would be some period of time in which Christ ceased to exist.

The virgin conception is consistent with **the humanity of Christ**. He didn't beam down like the angel Gabriel did. He developed in a woman's womb and came into the world the same way as you and I.

It's also consistent with **the deity of Christ** for the Holy Spirit was as much a part of the conception as the human Mary. This is why Gabriel told Mary that this "*holy child*" born to her "*will be called the Son of God*" (Lk 1:35). Christ retains his deity even in his conception.

The virgin conception is consistent with **the incarnation**: God in the flesh. Fully God, fully man. As one man put it, "*In the incarnation, God's Son did not merely veil His divinity with skin—like Superman wears glasses and pretends to be Clark Kent.*"⁶ He wasn't God in disguise—God

⁵I'm indebted for some of these insights to Oden, 148.

⁶W. Bingham Hunter, *The God Who Hears* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 182.

dressed as a man at a masquerade ball. Rather, the eternal Word—the pre-existent Christ—became flesh and dwelled among us (Jn 1:14). Divinity and humanity linked together, growing together in intimate connection, otherwise, as Calvin put it, “*the nearness would not have been near enough.*”⁷ The virgin conception is consistent with Jesus’ incarnation.

And it’s consistent with **the sinlessness of Christ**. Without virgin conception Jesus would have been fully man without being God. Since Adam, every human being sins. The Bible is clear. You know Romans 3:23 – “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” Had the Holy Spirit not been part of Jesus’ conception, Jesus would be human *alone* and as incriminated by these Scriptures as you and me. But because he is also fully God, he had the capacity to say no to his temptations and emerge through life without sin (Heb 4:15). That matters because only a sinless Christ could bear the sins of the rest of us on the cross. Israel’s high priest had to offer sacrifice for his own sins before he could offer sacrifice for the sins of the Israel (Heb 5:3, 7:7). But Jesus could atone directly for our sins because he had no sins of his own. He is the Lamb without blemish, the perfect, pure, holy sacrifice that could bear our sins, forgive our sins, and save our souls. The virgin conception matters. It is consistent with Jesus’ sinlessness.

Since God can do anything the way he way he wants to do it, I would **not go so far** as to say the virgin conception is *required* for these things. But I would say it’s *consistent* with the rest of Jesus’ character and life.

What I wouldn’t say is what some have suggested: that the virgin conception implies that God considers human sexuality to be base, coarse, even sinful on its face. Certainly, human sexuality has become the devil’s playground, but the virgin conception does not imply that God is against sex. In fact, God sending his only Son into the world through a virgin’s womb still honors the reproductive system God created and blesses within the boundaries of a one-man, one-woman marriage. The virgin conception does not mean that God condemns human sexuality.

⁷John Calvin, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, *Institutes of the Christian Religion I*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 464.

Jesus' virgin conception is a **miraculous, glorious, God-honoring, human-honoring doctrine** that matters deeply to our Christian faith and a correct understanding of who Jesus Christ is. Don't dismiss it. Don't discount it. Don't say it's unimportant and doesn't really matter. It matters. As Millard Erickson observes:

- The virgin conception reminds us that **our salvation is supernatural**. When we are born into the kingdom of God we are born "*not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God*" (Jn 1:13). Supernatural. New birth—spiritual birth.
- The virgin conception also reminds us that **salvation is a gift of grace**. There was nothing particularly deserving about Mary. Probably countless Jewish girls could have played this role, but God "*avored*" Mary. He *graced* Mary and not for anything she did. Pure grace.
- It also highlights the **uniqueness of Jesus**. He is unlike any other person ever born on this planet.
- And it reminds us that **God is sovereign over nature**. In the Scripture, God provided children to a few women—Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, Elizabeth—who were barren, but God did this through natural means. Jesus' conception was of supernatural means because God is not bound by natural law.⁸

The virgin conception is important, and it matters. It **matters to Jesus**. It matters to Matthew and Luke and John and Paul in the Scripture. It matters to the church fathers who capsulated the bedrock doctrines of the Christian faith in creeds.

IV

**And it matters to you and me because this is the way
God determined to come into our world to save us from our sins.**

⁸Indebted for these observations to Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 757.

In v. 21 of our text, the angel said to Joseph in his dream: *"She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

Roberta Hestenes tells about a time the **flood waters poured into Los Angeles**. The city is filled with concrete-lined riverbeds which stay empty most of the time. But one day the rains came in a torrent. A young boy, used to riding his bicycle onto the concrete bed did, it again. But he didn't realize that since it had rained, the water was coming. It was only a trickle as he entered the riverbed, but then very quickly the **waters rolled down**. Suddenly, there was a streaming caldron of churning, muddy, debris-laden water. The boy lost his footing on his bike and fell into the raging waters. Someone saw him and called 911. Television crews picked up the story, and the whole country watched as the boy, his head bobbing up and down, was swept from one buttress to the next.

Groups of people came to a place where they could lean over to try to reach out their hands—but they couldn't reach far enough to catch him. At the next spot a fire truck had its ladder fully extended and the men were racing to get the ladder out to save him. But it wouldn't reach all the way to where he was, and he was swept further down the river.

Helicopters hovered overhead and lowered their dangling rope ladders, but it was not safe to come too far down, so the ladders hung flopping in the air, the boy's hands reaching up helplessly from below.

One of those watching all these vain efforts on television suddenly cried out in anguish, *"Dear God, why doesn't somebody get in the water?"* There was no other way to save the boy than to get in the water with him—to enter the swift and raging current, to risk life, to come close enough to sweep him up with strong arms and drag him to safety.⁹

⁹From a sermon by Roberta Hestenes entitled "I Believe in Jesus Christ," *The Library of Distinctive Sermons*, Vol. 3, Gary W. Klingsporn, gen. ed. (Sisters, OR: Questar Publishers, 1996), 76.

That's what Jesus did for us. And he did it not by beaming down from heaven like an angel. Not by coming to earth a full-grown man. He did it by living our life without sin and by dying our death on the cross. He **won our salvation** when he died on the cross bearing your sins and mine, killing the curse that bound us to our sins and their penalty. He **sealed the victory** when he rose from the dead. He will **consummate the victory** when he returns in glory. And the **catalytic event** for all this was a simple yet profound line we say in the Apostles' Creed: *"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary."* This isn't fluff. This isn't unimportant. It is the truth, and it matters. Merry Christmas.

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