

4 – The Virgin Shall Conceive

2013 Christmas Conference

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Now as I was thinking late last night as to what I would be saying, not on the magi but on this passage, I want to divide our thoughts into two principal sections this morning and I'm going to give them a very simple descriptive. First of all, what Joseph didn't do; and secondly, what Joseph did do.

Now this is a parallel to the account that you have in Luke 1, only the passage in Luke 1 is told from the perspective of Mary, a Mary who is suddenly confronted by an angel, Gabriel, an archangel, and is told that she is going to conceive, and how she thinks and how she ponders, reasons within herself, and then asks the question, you will recall, "How will this be seeing that I am a virgin?" And then that beautiful statement in Luke's account of the advent and of the announcement of the conception of Jesus, that she obeyed, she yielded, she did exactly what Gabriel asked her to do. Now in this section, we are seeing the same event but now being told from the point of view of Joseph, Joseph to whom Mary was betrothed, legally engaged, more than that even, it was to all intents and purposes a marriage, an unconsummated marriage, and to break it involves, as we see here, the language of divorce. And I want us to see, first of all, the non-role that Joseph plays. I want to put it that way, the non-role. He has no role to play. He is approached and he is told when "Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly." And what we have here is the announcement to Joseph of the virginal conception. There is no such thing as a virgin birth; we speak of the virgin birth, it's here born of the virgin Mary. Yes, she was a virgin when Jesus was born but the miracle is not the birth, the birth was entirely ordinary. She went into labor and gave birth as any other mother would give birth.

There's nothing miraculous about the birth of Jesus, the miracle occurs at the point of conception. It's a virginal conception. That's the miracle. And we are told about it very clearly in verse 18, "the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way." Before they came together, before sexual union had taken place, she is found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. It's an astonishing statement. It's a statement of supernatural import and intent, parthenogenesis, that here is a young virgin, she is probably, scholars debate and differ, but she is probably 14 years old, some say younger but let's go with 14 years of age. And she's betrothed to be married, that marriage would take place perhaps within the next

year, possibly longer. The unwritten part of the narrative in either Luke or Matthew is that Mary's father would have consented to this marriage, paid the bridal price for this marriage. And she is pregnant, and as we used to say, out of wedlock. And some of you have been there perhaps in your family, a young girl, a daughter, niece, and she's pregnant. You can remember the occasion in the kitchen, perhaps in the living room, it's deeply ingrained in your memory the announcement. You had suspected perhaps and it is true and now there are consequences and there are decisions to be made, and they are going to be difficult no matter what the decision is. It's probably going to be difficult.

Here's a young girl, Mary, 14 years of age or so, and she is pregnant and she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, right. Of course, people don't believe in a virgin birth. We sang the original version of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," in the red hymnal, a copy of which sits in my congregation. The words are entirely changed, all reference to the virgin birth has been taken out. There was a hymnbook put together in the wake of liberalism that came in in the late 19th and early 20th century of where such things do not happen, cannot happen, and so some other line, some other sentiment is expressed instead of that reference to the virgin birth in "Hark the Herald Angels Sing."

And here in Matthew's gospel we're told the story from Joseph's perspective. Do you think Joseph didn't know how babies are born and conceived? C. S. Lewis, you know, tells this story that he's worshipping in Oxford one advent season and an oxford don comes and says to him, "Aren't you glad we know better?" Arrogant so-and-so that he was, this don, what an arrogant assessment of our ancestors, that is, "You know that Mary is just a poor ignorant peasant girl from the first century who didn't really understand how babies are conceived." Right. Joseph understood, for sure. He understood there's only one explanation why Mary is expecting a baby, why she's pregnant and that's because she's slept with another man, and out of this sense of honor to Mary and perhaps to his family, there's only one option and that is to divorce her, to do it quietly but that's the only option left to him. Do you not think that Mary and Joseph and Matthew and Luke understand how babies are born? Of course they understand how babies are born.

Do you think it's only in the 21st century that a reaction of shock and horror that people believe in a virgin birth would only take place in the 21st century? Do you think that the first readers of the gospels reading this, she's a 14 year old girl and she's pregnant and it's, yes, it's from the Holy Spirit. Actually, science used to scoff at this when I went to seminary in the '70s. I remember reading articles of leading gynecologists and others scoffing at the very notion of parthenogenesis. They don't do it anymore, of course, such advances have been made in science now and past due babies and in vitro fertilization and so on. I mean, all the significant advances that have been made in conception that leading scientists even with a different worldview and a different meta-narrative than ours and a biblical one, will no longer scoff at the notion of parthenogenesis.

I believe in the virgin birth. I believe in born of the virgin Mary, that she was a virgin when Jesus was born, and she was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. And I believe that. This is a beautiful thing. It is so countercultural. These 10 Commandments and the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, it is so countercultural. And this narrative, you know

what this narrative is saying? It's saying stand up and take notice here because at the very beginning of the story of Jesus there is the intrusion of the supernatural.

You know, the Bible doesn't make a great deal of the virgin birth. Have you noticed that? There isn't really a reference to the virgin birth in John. There is that verse in the prologue of John's gospel, John 1:13, "born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." And there is a textual tradition that has some evidence behind it that that shouldn't be translated "who were born" in reference to the likes of you and me, Christians who are born again of the Spirit of God, but actually it should be read "but was born," as a reference to Jesus. He was born not of the will of man, nor of the will of the flesh but of God, and in which case John 1:13 would then be a testimony to the virginal conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary.

Then there's that statement in Galatians 4:4 where Paul says about Jesus, that he was born of a woman, made under the law. It's rather a strange statement, isn't it, born of a woman? I mean, how else would he be born? You know, meet So-and-so, he's born of a woman and try it. I mean, before the day is out when you're introducing somebody, "Here's So-and-so and he's born of a woman," you know, see how far it goes. It's a very strange statement that Paul makes. He's born of a woman, well, of course he's born of a woman, and is it that Paul is making some kind of veiled allusion to the virgin birth, that he was born of a woman in the sense that he wasn't born with any input from a man? Is that what he's saying? I don't think so but is that what he's saying? Maybe possibly an allusion just to the peculiarity of the birth of the conception of Jesus. Actually I think it's a reference to Genesis 3:15, that he is the seed of the woman, and Mary is the woman that Genesis 3:15 is alluding to, and he is the fulfillment of that first gospel promise.

So if you take John 1:13 or Galatians 4:4 out of the picture, it's rather strange that the rest of the New Testament doesn't really make any great deal of the virgin birth. It makes a great deal of the death of Jesus. It makes a great deal of the resurrection of Jesus. But not so much of the virgin birth of Jesus, but let me turn that around. Of the books in the Bible that refer to the conception and birth of Jesus, and there are only two, Matthew and Luke, the testimony is 100%, it is 100%. Of the two passages in the New Testament that actually refer to the conception of Jesus, the testimony is 100%.

Now you notice Matthew mentions the Isaiah passage there in verse 23 from Isaiah 7, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son. They shall call his name Emmanuel, meaning God with us." There's been a great deal of debate as to the meaning and translation of that passage in Isaiah, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive," the Hebrew word "almah," and whether "almah" should be rendered not a virgin but young girl, a young girl will conceive rather than a virgin. And I was so impressed recently, and if you want to chase this up a little more, you should consult Alec Motyer's commentary. He has two of them, one is definitely not easy reading, and one is a little easier. But Alec Motyer's commentary, InterVarsity Press, on Isaiah, definitive commentary on Isaiah, it has no equal and he has an extensive study of that Hebrew translation of "almah" in Isaiah 7 and verse 14 and insists that it's perfectly reasonable, absolutely and perfectly reasonable and he laments that Evangelicals seem to have given way on this issue over the years,

scholarly Evangelicals have given way over the use and he argues very strongly that the word should be and in context must be translated as virgin, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name Emmanuel." This is, then, in fulfillment of prophecy.

Now what is the theological significance of the virgin birth? Why does Jesus come this way? Why does Matthew tell it from the perspective of Joseph, Joseph's non-involvement? They are betrothed but they haven't come together, and even when they do live under the same roof, as it were, he takes her to be his wife, but knew her not. So the marriage is not consummated until after she has given birth. So at the beginning of the passage and at the end of the passage like bookends, and Matthew is writing to Jews and this is a very Jewish thing to do, to have this kind of bookend to the little narrative, insisting on Matthew's non-involvement.

What's the significance of the virgin birth? Well, first of all, it is a statement of the supernatural activity and sovereignty of God Almighty, God the Holy Spirit. He comes into the world as a preexistent being. He enters into the world at mankind's earliest point, the point of conception. Doesn't that say something about the evil of abortion? When does life begin? Do you want to say life begins at 26 weeks? Do you want to say that about Jesus, about the fetus that was eight weeks old, 10 weeks old, 12 weeks old, 15 weeks old, incapable of survival had it been born at that point? Yes, incapable of survival if it had been born. And do you want to say that it wasn't a life form? That it wasn't Jesus? Here is testimony, if you want biblical testimony as to when does life begin, it begins at conception. What was it that was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit? It was Jesus. It was Jesus and had Mary gone and undertaken a back street abortion, she would have aborted the Son of God. The Son of God.

Now notice something else here, that Mary is non-willing. I'm not saying she's unwilling, I'm saying she's non-willing. Let me try and explain. This is a little difficult. When the angel comes to Mary and in Matthew's account when Matthew is told of Mary's conception, Mary's willingness is not sought for. Joseph's willingness is not sought for. This is something that happens, it happens to Joseph. This is an event. This is a sovereign event of God. This is not an act of cooperation, as though Mary grants her consent, "Yes. Yes, Okay. I'm willing." No. The announcement is, "You will conceive." It's breathtaking, isn't it? It's staggering. As an act of sovereignty, I can imagine, I do myself, I find that somewhat difficult. What does it mean for Mary and for, in this passage, Joseph to yield and obey this? It's an obedience to sovereignty. It's an act of divine sovereignty. Mary is a non-willing partner in this. Her consent was never sought for and Joseph's consent was never sought for.

Notice something else here, that this conception is from the Holy Spirit, you see it there in verse 18, at the end of verse 18, and then again at the end of verse 20. Twice we are told it is from the Holy Spirit. What does that mean? Well, I understand that to mean, you know, half the DNA, half the chromosomes, the 23 chromosomes, are Mary's, half of them are from the Holy Spirit. That's how I understand it. I do not understand the

conception here as planting a fertilized egg in the womb of Mary. Jesus is ex-Maria, it is from Mary. Mary contributes to Jesus.

You know, if you saw the baby Jesus and you saw the little boy Jesus and he's...how old are you, Master Payne? Are you eight? Imagine Jesus being eight and you saw him playing in the street and I've every belief and faith that Jesus played in the street with other boys. He was a boy. He played sinlessly. He played fair. He didn't cheat. Not so much fun to play with maybe. But you know, people would look at him and they'd say, "He looks just like his mother." You know, same shaped jaw, same color hair, brown eyes, dark hair. He was a Jew with genes going all the way back. He was thoroughly Jewish but he looked like Mary. No one ever said, you know, that he looked like Joseph. They might have said that out of politeness, you know. One of the first lessons ministers learn about babies, you know, you don't enter into those things. They're all beautiful and they all look like their mother. That's the safest route to take.

Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit. Actually it emphasizes two things, it emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus from his conception to his ascension, and now in his session at the right hand of God. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He was baptized by the Holy Spirit. He grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and with men by the Holy Spirit. He was driven into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil by the Holy Spirit. He was upheld and strengthened and enabled by the Holy Spirit. What is the explanation for the uniqueness of Jesus? It's not that he plugs into his divine hard drive for power, it's that he's equipped by the Holy Spirit, he's energized by the Holy Spirit, he's gifted by the Holy Spirit, gifted to an extraordinary degree, to be sure. But he lives his life here on earth as a human being. He was two natures, two distinct natures, a divine nature and a human nature in one person, and that human nature must not be compromised at any point from the moment of his conception to right now at the right hand of God. That's humanity. That human nature, that human body, that human mind, that human soul, that human psyche, those human emotions must never be compromised and they're upheld and strengthened and enabled by the Holy Spirit.

Now theologians have suggested that the virgin birth is the explanation for Jesus not inheriting original sin but that is not an adequate theological explanation. Jesus is without actual sin but he's also without original sin. He has no Adamic sin. He's pure and spotless and harmless and undefiled and separate from sinners. He comes into the world as a pure being, without sin, without Adamic fallenness. But the virgin birth is an insufficient explanation for that because he still inherits from Mary and therefore the Holy Spirit must in some form or another overrule so that that which is conceived and that which is eventually born is free from Adamic sin. There is no imputation of Adamic sin. In the very nature of Jesus, he is perfect. He's perfect.

It was Augustine, it was the A-team, it was Augustine and Aquinas who advocated that original sin is associated with the act of procreation. There are children present, let me put it in euphemisms here. That there is something about the very act of procreation that is in itself sinful. I think Augustine was reacting to his early life, profligate life, and the whole notion of concupiscence and so on. And so the Catholic Church in 1854

pronounces, Pope Pius, I think it was the IX, I may be incorrect but I think it was Pope Pius IX in 1854 who passed the encyclical advocating the immaculate conception, and the doctrine of the immaculate conception is not the immaculate conception of Jesus, it is the immaculate conception of Mary, that in order for Jesus to be free from sin, Mary had to be free from sin. And that encyclical, papal encyclical was enacted 150 years ago and then in the 20th century, I think somewhere around 1950, the assumption of Mary. So both at the beginning and at the end of her life, there is this miraculous feature about it, all to secure, first of all, a place and privilege, greater privilege for Mary as the mediatrix but also to secure the sinlessness of Jesus. And of course, as Protestants we deny both of those ideas of the immaculate conception of Mary or the assumption of Mary.

Matthew tells us twice in this passage that the conception of Jesus was by the Holy Spirit. I do think and it's vital to think and understand that half of the chromosomes, I think, in the cell structure of Jesus' human body are Mary's so that he looked like Mary, had features that corresponded to Mary through that umbilical cord that tied him to Mary during that period of conception and growth to birth. Joseph has no part in this. He's just a bystander. Do you see what this is saying? It's saying it loud and clear to Joseph but it's saying it to you and me too, the world needs a Savior, his name is Jesus, he will save his people from their sins. The world needs a Savior but the world can't produce a Savior. The world needs a Savior and the world cannot produce that Savior. It is incapable in and of itself to produce the Savior that it needs. This is a judgment on humanity. The virgin birth is judgment on humanity. It says you need to be saved but you cannot save yourself. You can't produce the Messiah that would save you. The Holy Spirit, a sovereign intervention, a miracle, a supernatural, has to intervene.

Have you noticed at the beginning and end of Jesus' earthly life there are two miracles: the virgin conception and the resurrection? They're like two pillars. You know, the virgin birth says to you, "If you can't accept the virgin birth, stop, don't go forward. There's no point in reading anything else about Jesus because if you stop here, the whole story of Jesus is supernatural. If you balk here, if you tremble here, then the rest of the story will make no sense to you whatsoever." They're like two pillars on either side of the earthly life of Jesus that say salvation is of the Lord from beginning to end.

Well, what Joseph didn't do and then, secondly and more briefly, what Joseph did do, and I want to look at verse 19, "her husband," Joseph, "being a just man, and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him," we're not told whether it was Gabriel. He considered these things. My, what things to consider. What's going through a young man's mind as his fiance and the love of his life is found to be pregnant and it's definitely not by you? Shame. Anger. Disappointment. Frustration. That's only the start of it. You find out that the girl that you're engaged to is suddenly expecting a baby? And it's in the earliest possible stages of it so this has happened within the past few months? And who is it and how could you?

Then in verse 24, it takes your breath away, "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." You know, Joseph doesn't get such a good rap. We

give such a lot of attention to Mary, Joseph kind of disappears from the scene after Jesus is around 12 or so. We believe that tradition teaches us that Joseph died when Jesus was perhaps a teenager. Who taught the young boy, Jesus, the Old Testament scriptures? Who read him Bible stories? Who prayed with him? Who had conversations with him about life and relationships and what it means to grow up in a sinful world like ours? Well, Mary, to be sure but Joseph too. Hours spent together in carpentry talking about wood, talking about relationships, talking about life, talking about treasure. Yes, I think Joseph had all these conversations with Jesus.

And absolutely staggering here, he did, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. What do you think Joseph's friends were saying? You know, his fraternity buddies, what do you think they were saying? "Joseph, you're a fool. So your bride-to-be says the Holy Spirit impregnated her? Yeah, right. And you believe that? You're a fool, Joseph." And better be a fool for Jesus than to be a wise man for the gain of this world. What an astonishing, what a breath-taking response from Joseph. He did as the angel of the Lord commanded.

Turn to Luke 1 just very briefly, Luke 1:38. You know, Mary has been told the story, different occasion, and Mary is going to go to flee now to her aunt Elizabeth but verse 38, "And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.'" There it is, "I obey. I yield." Do you find believing difficult, you children, you teenage children off at college learning stuff causing them to question their presuppositions, their worldviews, meta-narratives? Ask all the questions you want, my dear friend. The Bible isn't afraid of your questions but, you know, there comes a point at which you will be asked to do what Mary was asked to do and what Joseph was asked to do, that it doesn't really matter whether you understand, at some point you just have to believe it. You have to yield. And which explanation of the world, which explanation of reality are you prepared to accept, the world's, ever-shifting meta-narratives of the world? Do you know how much that meta-narrative has changed since I was in college? It's staggering. It's staggering. Or are you going to accept the meta-narrative of the worldview of scripture that says there is a sovereign God who made the heavens and the earth and what is a virgin conception to one who simply spoke and brought the universe into being? It's nothing to him.

What Joseph didn't do and what Joseph did do and this is a passage that's saying to you, to me, sometimes God doesn't ask your permission, he doesn't ask your consent, he doesn't even ask whether you fully understand it, he asks you to believe it because he says it.