



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 1:18-25

“The Messiah’s Birth, part I”

TRANSCRIPT

[Audio begins] Our theme over our past series of studies for about the last dozen sessions together has been the Old Testament anticipation of the Messiah. We’re coming now to the New Testament revelation of the Messiah and that will be our theme for some time in the future. And the first of our series of studies under the general theme of the New Testament revelation of the Messiah is the Messiah’s birth, and we’ll spend several sessions on the Messiah’s birth. This is the first of the sessions. And we’re turning particularly to Matthew chapter 1, verse 18 through verse 25, the Messiah’s birth.

To a world prepared politically, economically, morally, and spiritually, Jesus came. “There is a tide in the affairs of men” wrote Shakespeare, “which taken at the flood leads on to fortune.” His time was God’s time. Paul sensed this, for he wrote, “But when the fullness of time was come God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law.” Not only were the circumstances of the entrance of the Messiah providentially arranged, but his birth also was a miracle. Matthew, who has written the royal gospel has taken pains to point this out. There must be no question that the words of the superscription above the cross, a climactic note in the sweep of the gospel’s thought, are true. He really was Jesus the King of the Jews.

The accounts of the birth of the Messiah are written from different standpoints, but they each agree in the fact and in the manner of his birth. In the Matthean narrative it is stated twice that Mary’s conception was of the Holy Ghost, verse 18 and verse 20. Luke, who gives more detail concerning the birth itself, writes, “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee; therefore, also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” Luke 1:35. Both accounts unite in the affirmation that he was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, as the Apostle’s creed has it. While Mark does not expressly assert the virgin birth, his gospel is in harmony with it. He opens his narrative by referring to Jesus as “the Son of God.” Later, one comes across the term “the son of Mary,” but Mark never calls him “son of Joseph.” John too agrees, for we hear our Lord saying in his gospel, “Ye are from beneath, I am from above. Ye are of this world, I am not of this world” John 8:23.

Matthew, the gospel upon which we are centering our attention in this study, has often been called the royal gospel because of its special interest in Jesus Christ as the predestined King of Israel. For example, in the opening verse we have these words, “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the son of Abraham.” Jesus is David’s son and thus heir of the Davidic royal promises. When he made his entry into Jerusalem, as Israel’s promised King, he was greeted with shouts of “Hosanna to the son of David, blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest.” And after coming to the temple and healing the blind and lame there, even the children were shouting, “Hosanna to the son of David” to the displeasure of the chief priests and scribes. And to cap his presentation, the evangelist mentions the superscription, but shortens it a bit to stress our Lord’s royal station. He has simply, “This is Jesus the King of the Jews.” He will go on now to show that the manner of his entrance into human life that is by virgin birth bears the authentic stamp of deity.

But let us consider first, some objections that have been raised to Messiah’s supernatural birth, and first of all, the mythological objection. It has been asserted by

some that the miraculous birth of Christ was a story invented by the early Christians to dramatize the origin of their Lord. If this were so then it is doubtful if the church succeeded very well. One also wonders how an account in which a babe is born in a manger, in the presence of a carpenter and a few shepherds, could have survived the competition with the story of the birth of Pallas Athena, who born of no mother sprang out of the head of Zeus, full grown and in full armor, or would one really want to compare the myth of the conception and birth of Augustus Caesar, how his mother was visited in the temple of Apollo by a serpent, the issue of this union being Augustus, with the sacred and lovely narrative of the birth of Mary’s son. There is not a grain of truth to this objection, nor can we accept the view of others, such as Stendahl and Filson, who while not expressly affirming that the story of the virgin birth is a fabrication, nevertheless feel the teaching is not to be stressed.

A second objection that has been raised could be called the biological objection. With some, the chief problem of the virgin birth is its violation of natural processes. This seems to be the problem of the earlier Malcolm Muggeridge, who’s astonishing conversion to a personal relationship to Christ, astonishing at least to me, for I have always found it difficult to believe that an editor of the *Manchester Guardian* could embrace any form of genuine spirituality, is so detailed in his book *Jesus Rediscovered*. Mr. Muggeridge writes in this work that Christ’s mother “Mary conceived him out of wedlock.” In a later volume, however, he writes very movingly of the matter and appears to have come to trust the reliability of the accounts. Listen to his words, this is a lengthy quote, “To a 20th Century mind the notion of a virgin birth is intrinsically and preposterously inconceivable. If a woman claims, such claims are made from time to time, to have become pregnant without sexual intercourse no one believes her, yet for centuries millions upon millions of people never doubted that Mary had begotten Jesus without the participation of a husband or lover. Nor was such a belief limited to the simple and unlettered.

The most profound and most erudite minds, the greatest artists and craftsmen found no difficulty in accepting the virgin birth as an incontestable fact. For instance, Pascal, who in the versatility of his gifts and the originality of his insights, was regarded as the Aristotle of his time. From a contemporary point of view, this is the more surprising in that little effort would seem to have been made to achieve consistency or credibility in the account in the gospels of Jesus’ birth. Thus the genealogical table, purporting to establish Jesus’ descent from King David in accordance with a Messianic prophecy, is traced through Joseph with whom, if the virgin birth really happened, he had no blood relationship. Are we then to suppose that our fore bearers who believed implicitly in the virgin birth were gullible fools, whereas we, who would no more believe in such notions than we would that the world is flat, have put aside childish things and become mature? Is our skepticism one more manifestation of our having, in Bonheoffer’s unhappy phrase, come of age? It would be difficult to support such a proposition in the light of the almost inconceivable credulity of today’s brainwashed public, who so readily believe absurdities in advertisements and in statistical and sociological prognostications, before which an African witch doctor would recoil in derision. With Pascal it was the other way around. While accepting with the same certainty as he did the coming of the seasons a New Testament account of Jesus’ birth he had already seen through and scornfully rejected the pretensions of science.

Now three centuries later his intuition has been amply fulfilled. The dogmatism of science has become a new orthodoxy, disseminated by the media and a state educational system with a thoroughness and subtlety far exceeding anything of the kind achieved by the inquisition. To the point that to believe today in a miraculous happening like the virgin birth is to appear a kind of imbecile. Whereas to disbelieve in an unproven and unprovable scientific proposition, like the theory of evolution, and still more to question some quasi-scientific shibboleth like the population explosion is to stand condemned as

an obscurantist, an enemy of progress and enlightenment.” That’s the end of the quotation from Mr. Muggeridge.

If we accept the inspiration and authority of the word of God we must be prepared to face the contravention of the natural and the acceptance of the supernatural. If one were to say that no human being was ever born without a human father and mother, the creation of Adam and Eve might be advanced, which was the more difficult for God, or the greater miracle, the creation or the virgin birth. As a matter of fact, there are four ways for God to make a human body. First, he may make a human body with a man and a woman, just as he had made each of us. Second, he may make a human body without a man or a woman, Adam was so made. And third, he may make a human body without a woman, as he made Eve who was created through the body of Adam. And finally, he may make a human body without a man, as he made the human body of our Lord Jesus Christ through the wife of Joseph by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible itself is not unaware of the common biological objection to the birth of our Lord through a virgin, and it asserts its solution in the power of God. Gabriel, in answering Mary’s question regarding the manner of her son’s birth, senses her perplexity and replies, “For with God nothing shall be impossible” Luke 1:37. God is able to do that which appears impossible to men, that which is contrary to natural processes. In fact, the greatest miracle of our Lord’s life is not the biological one, it’s the moral one. A sinless life, such as Jesus Christ lived, is a greater miracle in the moral realm than is the virgin birth in the biological realm.

A third objection that has been raised could be called the Scriptural objection. In addition to casting doubt upon the origin of the tradition of the virgin birth, some students have laid great stress on certain phrases which seem to refer to Joseph as our Lord’s natural father. For example, in Luke 2:33 we have the words, “Joseph and his mother” and in chapter 2 and verse 48, “thy father.” In Matthew 13:55 the question is asked, “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” There is however, no difficulty with these clauses and

phrases if we simply bear in mind that Joseph was indeed the father of Jesus in the purely legal sense. Joseph bowed to the miracle of God, took Mary into his house as his lawful wife, legitimizing and admitting Jesus in a formal legal sense, to the house of David.

Matthew then is not in internal contradiction with himself by affirming that he is both of David, because he is of Joseph legally, and of the Holy Spirit. The account of Matthew is beautifully harmonious and instructive if taken simply and believingly. Let’s look at the account now, and I’m going to read it through. Matthew 1:18-25,

“Now Jesus Christ’s birth was as follows: After his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a just man, and unwilling to make an example of her, determined to divorce her privately. But after he had conceived this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to bring home Mary your wife, for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will give birth to a Son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Now all this has come to pass that the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and will give birth to a Son, and they will call his name Immanuel,” (and Matthew adds) which signifies, “God with us.” And when Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and brought home his wife, but did not begin to live with her as husband until she had given birth to a Son. And he gave him the name Jesus.”

Matthew 1:18-25. Now looking at verses 18 and 19, Matthew records Joseph’s realization of Mary’s condition. In the days of Augustus Caesar, the man whom some wish to make God, two Hebrew men, the father of Joseph and the father of Mary, contracted a marriage between a young carpenter, a son of David, and a pious maiden, also of David’s family, from whom would come the God who became man. Some time

after the engagement, which was legally binding, knowledge came to the young man that the maiden was pregnant. The full circumstances are clothed in silence. Did Mary tell Joseph the story of her conception? Luke’s account of the visit of the angel to Mary antedates Matthew’s account here and provides further details of God’s working. The angel Gabriel revealed to Mary that she had found favor with God adding,

“and behold you will conceive in your room and bear a Son and you shall name him Jesus. 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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever and his kingdom will have no end.”

That’s Luke chapter 1 and verse 31 through verse 33.

“When Mary, puzzled over the manner of the birth asked, How can this be since I am a virgin? The angel replied, 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”

Luke 1:35. If Mary told Joseph of the visit of the angel Gabriel, and it certainly seems that she would have, he evidently still found it hard to embrace. The natural question arises, did he find it so perplexing that amid his love for her his faith waivered. Did he determine upon divorce because he felt she had been unfaithful, or because he felt it somehow unsuitable to marry her now? It does appear that a struggle went on in the heart of Joseph, a conflict of righteousness, which appeared to demand a public disavowal and love which ranked from embarrassing the object of his affection. And therefore he made up his mind to put off the marriage now, feeling it somehow unsuitable to marry her under the circumstances at the moment. But if Joseph was in

doubt over the origin of the maiden’s pregnancy, the Scripture is not. Twice Matthew says that the child was conceived in her “of the Holy Spirit” a phrase which refers to a secret we can never really fathom, only adore. As Campbell Morgan put it, “It’s the holy mystery, the touch of God upon the simple life that made it forever sublime.” Finally Joseph made up his mind, and determined to divorce Mary privately with the minimum number of two witnesses.

In verse 20 and verse 21 through 23, of Matthew chapter 1, we have the account of the angel’s revelation to Joseph. During a restless night amid the tossing and turning of disturbed and fitful sleep, as the just man contemplated the distasteful task he must undertake, there came to him the angel of the Lord. The heavenly messenger informed the son of David that the maiden’s child was “of the Holy Spirit.”

We shall have no problem with the divine conception if we remember at least two things. First, the Lord Jesus did not have common human parentage as we do, although he was completely human. He had no human father by generation as we have. His human nature came from Mary by the conception of the Holy Spirit. He was son of David by Mary, through the Holy Spirit. As the divine Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, he possessed eternally a divine nature.

And second, he was not a new original creation, a kind of hetero-human. While fully God he was also truly, fully, and completely human apart from sin. We must not fall prey to any kind of docetism, by which the divine nature of Christ overshadows and overpowers the human. His humanity was and is not a camouflaged humanity. He possessed no phantom body. His side could be pierced and there flow out “blood and water,” John 19, verse 34. A fact John pointed out in his gospel for just such heretics as those who denied the reality of his humanity.

Muggeridge, who declares that he is a quote, “theological ignoramus and likely to remain one to the end of his days,” unquote, finding theology similar to algebra and thermo dynamic, nevertheless expresses some perceptive theology in his comment, “As

man alone, Jesus could not have saved us. As God alone, he would not. Incarnate, he could and did.”

Thus, although we are certain that the Son of man is Son of God, and light of light, we also draw him deeply into the flesh, resting our eternal hope upon the heavenly messenger who is Christus unser bruder, Christ our brother, the man with the crown of thorns. Finally, within the union of the two natures there can exist no sin. As Paul put it, “God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.” Paul did not say in sinful flesh, for he had none. Nor did he say in the likeness of flesh, for his flesh was real, but in the likeness of sinful flesh. He came in flesh, but only in the likeness of sinful flesh. Paul was no docetic. He writes, as if he had studied at an evangelical seminary.

Now a few words by way of conclusion; we conclude this first installment of the study of our Lord’s birth with the observation that it’s clear that Joseph is an early believer in the virgin birth, probably the first, outside of Mary herself. Those who have believed, and those who believe today, follow in his steps and in her steps. The credibility rests ultimately upon the miraculous. God is not imprisoned within natural processes, he created them. From Job who confessed, “I know that Thou canst do all things” Job 42:2, to Gabriel who declared, “For nothing will be impossible with God” Luke 1:37, and on to John the Apostle who writes of his vision of the throne of the Lord God Almighty, Revelation 4:8. The sovereign omnipotence of the triune God is celebrated in the divine revelation. We celebrate it too. Admit a God, that mystery supreme, that cause uncaused, all other wonders cease. Nothing is marvelous for him to do, deny him, all is mystery besides.

Many years ago Clarence Edward McCartney, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, wrote a little book about the Christian faith. And in it he had some words to say about his sentiments concerning the virgin birth. After he had discussed it and argued it, he said this, “But I would rather bow and adore than debate and argue. Let us go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass. Come,

and with the shepherds and the wise men let us bow down before him who came that we might become the son’s of God. Shepherds, with your staves and shaggy coats, move over. Wise men with your gifts, your gold, frankincense, and myrrh, move over please. Wondrous star, with your guiding radiance, move over and make room for me.” I think I want to say, after McCartney’s words, move over and make room for me too.

Well this is the first of our series of studies on the general theme of the New Testament revelation of the Messiah that is the fulfillment of those studies that we’ve been giving on the anticipation of the Messiah in the Old Testament. And we’re going to spend a good bit of time on the highlights of our Lord’s life, highlights of the greatest life. This is the first of the studies on Messiah’s birth, and we’re going to pick up the account in Matthew chapter 1 verse 18 through verse 25, in our next study at our next session. So I hope you’ll be studying Matthew chapter 1 verse 18 through 25 and we’ll...

[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]