



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Various

“The Messiah’s Birth, part III”

TRANSCRIPT

[Audio begins] Our theme in this series of studies is the New Testament revelation of the Messiah and we are studying the Messiah’s birth. And today is our last of our studies on Messiah’s birth and we’re turning to Matthew chapter 1 verse 18 through verse 25, and Luke chapter 1 verse 26 through verse 28 we will be referring to. In our last study we considered objections to the virgin birth of the Messiah; we looked at the account itself. And then we want to consider in this study particularly the credibility of the virgin birth account.

By all accounts the birth of Jesus Christ was and still is a remarkable event. In the words of Malcolm Muggeridge, “It was on any showing the most momentous event in the history of our western civilization.” The story is inexhaustible. To gather it up in film would take countless miles, to write it up would consume scores of books. In the 19th Century in the quest to discover the real Jesus the historical Jesus and not the Jesus of the Christian theologians, liberal protestant theologians produced some sixty thousand biographies of him. Trying as hard as they could to push past the dogmatic element in Jesus’ teaching, these idealists, rationalists, socialists, and romanticists produced highly subjective and fanciful portraits of themselves. The Jesus who emerged Albert Schweitzer said, “Turned out to be one who is to our time a stranger and an enigma.”

His birth was remarkable in that it was doubtful that any child born into his world at that time could anticipate poorer prospects, an infant in a manger in an obscure hamlet born to a carpenter with a few shepherds about. Apart from a few scattered references in historical literature, he made no impact on his world. To the media of our day the tribe of chroniclers and commentators, he is still a non person, and yet seen through the facts of the gospels, even the stars of heaven run in new orbits for his sake. Who would ever have thought that the mighty Augustus’ role in history would change places with his. Today Caesar Augustus awaits the final judgment and lies forgotten in our history books while Jesus of Nazareth lives in the hearts of millions and at the right hand of the Majesty on High.

He was born a real baby, no unwanted child destined for the containers of hospital waste, although Mary knew the gossip, misunderstanding and scorn of apparent illegitimacy both she and he would face. Later the Jews reproached him with, “We be not born of fornication, we have one Father, even God” John 8:41. It might have seemed wise for the Christian church to have deemphasized the virgin birth of Jesus, since to any thinking man it was bound to provoke countless questions. That a God might appear in human form was a very common concept in Greek mythological thought, but Christianity and Judaism were steeled against that. The idea of a man God was current, fostered by the government to encourage the citizens to revere the emperor. The God man idea however, is totally different, the initiative resting with the Lord God, not man.

The story of the coming of such a one is the story of the Old Testament with more than a hint of his coming by virgin birth, as Isaiah chapter 7 and verse 14 and Micah chapter 5 and verse 3 suggest. Thus the church was forced by prophecy in history to include the virgin birth in the message of the Messiah. Further, the church regarded the virgin birth as important. It is found in the Apostle’s Creed and in view of the brevity of the creed, the inclusion of the virgin birth in it is important testimony to the high place it had in the thinking in the early church.

What can be said further about its credibility as a biblical doctrine? Well to this question we turn now. This is the third of the parts of our study and it’s entitled The Credibility of the Account of the Messiah’s Birth. Is the virgin birth of Jewish derivation, we might ask. It is important to remember that belief in the virgin birth by the early church is a fact. That is impressively documented. Now those who deny it therefore have the responsibility to explain the fact of the church’s belief. Two attempts in general have been made, one that the belief is of Jewish derivation and the other that it is of pagan derivation. We look for a moment at these attempts.

An insurmountable difficulty with the theory of Jewish derivation is that the Jews did not believe in a virgin birth. There is no evidence in Jewish Messianic expectation of a virgin birth. And specifically, Isaiah chapter 7 and verse 14 is not among the passages regarded by the Jews as Messianic. We may ask is the virgin birth then of pagan origin. Hardly, the Palestinian Judaism of the 1st Century was passionately opposed to pagan influences. It’s impossible to think of a pagan idea finding place in the beautiful Semitic birth narratives of Luke 1 and 2 and Matthew. The barrier between paganism and Palestinian Judaism was too high.

Well is the virgin birth then a fact? The early literature supports the factuality of the virgin birth. It’s found in the Old Roman Symbol, ancestor of the Apostle’s Creed, traceable to the latter part of the 2nd Century. It’s found in Justin Martyr, who places it among the cardinal items of the faith. Ignatius, whose letters were written in the earlier part of the 2nd Century emphasized its reality. The New Testament literature, of course, supports the virgin birth with two clear and independent accounts in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. In fact, since it was common to relate a Jewish man to his father, rather than to his mother, Paul’s statement in Galatians 4:4 that he was born of a woman, may be an implicit acknowledgment of the virgin birth.

Those who seek to deny the historicity of the even have the burden of explaining how the church came to believe in the virgin birth. One cannot simply deny the

documentary evidence. If it cannot be traced to pagan or Jewish influences then the credibility is established. It seems particularly fitting that Luke has one of the accounts, for when one wants a reliable birth report one does not go to a fisherman or to a blacksmith; one goes to a doctor. Every effect must have an adequate cause, and therefore a unique life must have a unique origin. In fact, Alva McClain, the first president of Grace Theological Seminary, once said in a Bible conference platform, “A sinless man is a greater miracle in the moral order than a virgin birth in the biological.”

It’s sometimes said that the virgin birth account was interpolated into the Semitic sources of Luke’s material very early. For this there is no evidence at all. And the claims for it are destroyed by some words spoken by one well known defender of the virgin birth. He wrote, “Very often the best and only refutation of an interpolation theory is the refutation which Dr. Francis L. Patton is once said to have applied to theosophy.” A lady is reported to have asked Dr. Patton, who was of Princeton University, after one of his lectures, to give her the strongest argument against theosophy, “Madam” said Dr. Patton, “the strongest argument against theosophy is that there is no argument in its favor.”

Occasionally one will hear the argument that since Paul does not mention the virgin birth specifically it must be discounted. One popular American preacher expressed this view, claiming that Paul does not even distantly allude to the virgin birth. This is surprising since most liberal ministers do not like the theology of Paul. They consider it too doctrinal, too dogmatic, finding the center of their theology in the ethical teaching of Jesus. So it’s strange for them to say in effect, if it’s good enough for Paul it’s good enough for them. If we follow this out however, we have some difficulties. Where, for example, does Paul teach their revered golden rule? Further, the argument from silence is of limited value. It becomes significant only if it can be shown that had the writer in question known and accepted the point in question, it would have been necessary for him to mention it. It’s dangerous to argue from silence to ignorance. One of my old New Testament teachers once said, “Would we say that since Matthew, Mark, and John say

nothing of the birth of John the Baptist and its significant details that they had never heard of it? One can see that this kind of argument is groundless.”

Now we turn to the importance of the Messiah’s supernatural birth, and first, in relation to the word of God. Long before Mary’s pregnancy had reached its climax God had begun to prepare for the birth. “The King’s heart is in the hand of the Lord as the rivers of water:” Solomon has said, adding these significant words, “he turneth it whithersoever he will” Proverbs 21 and verse 1. The machinery of the vast Roman Empire’s bureaucracy had been harnessed by the God of providence to fulfill his will. A census was ordered so that the child, although his parents lived in Nazareth, might be born in the place ordered by the divine word, Bethlehem, the city of David.

Many modern theologians regard the virgin birth as either incredible or unimportant. For example, one of the most prominent of 20th Century theologians considers it theological meddling to concern oneself with how the divine became human. Is that not however just what Luke concerns himself with, in his description of the angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary. And does he not say that his gospel is the product of considerable research, and in fact, does he not claim to have carefully investigated everything from the beginning. Look at Luke chapter 1, verse 1 through verse 4, for Luke’s claims.

William Barclay, the widely read Scottish interpreter, considers belief in the virgin birth unnecessary. “This passage” he says in his discussion of Matthew’s account, “tells us how Jesus was born by the action of the Spirit. It tells us of what we call the virgin birth. The virgin birth is a doctrine which presents us with many difficulties, and it’s a doctrine which our church does not compel us to accept in the literal and the physical sense. This is one of the doctrines on which the church says that we have full liberty to come to our own belief and our own conviction. Those are the words of professor Barclay who no longer is with us. The church has told us no such thing as professor Barclay claims. In fact it tells us the opposite in its creedal statements. Later Barclay calls the virgin birth a crude fact, which gives the reader an insight into his attitude toward holy Scripture.

A careful reader of Luke’s story of the entrance of John and Jesus and into the world will notice additional evidence of Luke’s sense of the greatness of the Son. Both John and Jesus are heralded by an annunciation. Both come from Gabriel and the opening words to Elisabeth and Mary are very similar, both being called great. John called great, and Jesus called great. With only this important exception; that the words to Zacharias “bear a son to thee” are simply “bear a son” to Mary. Zacharias is the father of Jesus by generation. Mary’s child is from conception by the Holy Spirit. And so the announcement is not made to Joseph that a son would be born to him, but rather to Mary that a son, that she would bear a son. It’s clear that Luke’s account is built on the great contrast between the births of John and Jesus, and if one were to illuminate the miracle of the virgin birth from it then the account itself would end in a disappointing anticlimax.

As it is however, John is the great Nazarite, prophet and preacher of repentance, born to a natural father, and a barren mother by divine promise and full of the Spirit from his mother’s womb. But Jesus is the great Son of the Highest, prophet and universal Davidic King who shall reign forever and ever. And as Zacharias in his benedictus later in the chapter declares, his son John shall take the servant’s place as prophet of the highest, and give the knowledge of salvation through the Lord who is to follow him. So John acknowledges the greater greatness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the light of these things one can perceived the depth of the meaning in the opening words of Gabriel to Mary, “Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women.” As an aside, we should mention here that the rendering of the Latin Vulgate *gratia plena* is a distortion of the biblical sense. The Greek participle of which this is supposed to be the proper translation is in the passive voice. It is not “hail Mary full of grace” but “Hail, thou highly favored one.” The words “blessed art thou among women” found in the Authorized Version, are probably not genuine in verse 28. They are however found in verse 42. These words too are passive in force, as

one can see. As the Lutheran commentator R. C. H. Linsky has said, and is grammatically correct in noting, “Mary is a vessel to receive, not a fountain to dispense.”

Having said that however, it’s important to realize that Mary was indeed highly favored by God in being chosen to be the mother of our Lord. And further, her blessedness is indeed enhanced through the miracle of the virgin conception, so that she is the source of the Davidic human nature of our Lord. For that we can be properly thankful and grateful without necessarily buying all of the assumptions and divinations of the Roman church about her. The word of God makes plain that Mary was a godly maiden, submissive to the Lord, and knowledgeable in the Scriptures. But she herself, in her godliness, confesses that the Lord is “God my Savior.” Those are the words that she uses in Luke chapter 1 verse 48 in which she acknowledges that she too needs a savior. Henry Burton put it well, “And so the mother designate takes her place in the firmament of Scripture silently and serenely as a morning star, which indeed she is, for she shines in a borrowed splendor, taking her glories all from him around whom she revolves, from him who was both her son and her sun” s-u-n of course.

In the prologue to Luke’s gospel the evangelist claims that he investigated everything carefully from the beginning, that Theophilus “might know the certainty of the things in which he had been instructed” Luke 1:1-4. The evangelist then proceeds to relate the accounts of the unusual birth of John the Baptist and the virgin birth of Christ. Now suppose he is wrong on the very first important matter investigated. What confidence can we place in the remainder of the story? One can see that the account of the virgin birth is directly related to the trustworthiness of God’s Word.

Now the importance in relation to the Son of God. Emil Bruner, the Swiss theologian to whom we referred earlier, asks, “Is a man who is born without a human father a true man?” In justice to professor Bruner we must add that he accepts the divinity of Christ and his true incarnation. He has however confused sex and nature. Our Lord received his human nature from Mary and it was a complete human nature, for she

possessed a complete humanity although female, just as Joseph did although male. A human father is not essential to humanity, as the cases of Adam and Eve indicate.

A further thing ought nevertheless to be mentioned. If we accept the historicity of the gospel accounts, and we ought to, then the choice that faces us is not the choice between a virgin birth and an ordinary birth. The choice is that of a virgin birth as over against an illegitimate birth. It is clear from the record in Matthew that Joseph knew he was not the father of Jesus by generation. The term “son of Mary” found in Mark 6:3, we have pointed out, indicates that the Jews also did not regard Joseph as his father. Jews and believers then unite in this affirmation. The taunt of the Jews, we be not born of fornication, probably represents the common knowledge of the claim of a virgin birth. In other words, the virgin birth is a necessary refutation of illegitimacy. It is also the means by which our Lord was preserved from the sin of his mother’s nature. When the Holy Spirit came upon her and the power of the Highest overshadowed her that which was conceived was called a holy thing, the Son of God, and our Lord was preserved from the sin of Mary, who confesses that she needs a savior. He possessed then his holy nature by virtue of the Spirit’s conception and not Joseph’s, nor any other man’s for that matter.

And then the importance of the virgin birth with reference to the salvation of God; it should be obvious to any thinking Christian that the virgin birth has ultimate connections with the cross. Helmut Thielicke has said, “Crib and cross are both of the same wood.” In a different context we may say that if Jesus possessed Joseph’s nature he possessed his sin, and if he possessed his sin he could not become our savior by the blood of Calvary. He would have needed a savior himself.

And finally, the importance of the virgin birth in relation to the kingdom of God; great stress is laid in both Matthew and Luke upon our Lord’s right to sit upon the throne of David in the kingdom of God. When you have an opportunity look at Matthew 1:1 and 1:17, and Matthew 2 verse 2, and then Luke chapter 1 verse 31 through verse 35. It’s sometimes not realized that this right is directly related to the doctrine of the virgin birth.

Jesus received legal title to the throne through Joseph and Solomon, but upon his ancestor, Jeconiah, or Coniah, who was in that line, there was pronounced a curse of great magnitude. Jeremiah wrote about it, “Thus saith the Lord: Write ye this man” he’s speaking of Coniah, “Write ye this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days, for no man of his seed shall prosper sitting upon the throne of David and ruling anymore in Judah” Jeremiah 22:30. While not deprived of legal title, the direct line of descent was smitten with a curse. The line could hand on to another that from which it could not profit itself. And this vacant title had passed on down from Jeconiah to Joseph, legal title being Joseph’s, but by virtue of the curse, Joseph unable to sit upon it. It might have seemed impossible to solve the problem that faced the fulfillment of the Davidic promises, its resolution lay in the wisdom and power of God. Jesus, genuinely a son of David through Mary, according to the flesh as Paul points out in Romans 1:3, by reason of the virgin birth and none participation in the seed of Joseph, qualifies to receive the title without coming under the curse. Oh the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out, we confess.

In our Lord there centered then, by his miraculous birth, exclusive title to the throne of God’s kingdom, and dying without a seed, as Isaiah says in chapter 53 and verse 8, he carried the title to the right hand of God. Ever since the destruction of Jerusalem it has been impossible to reliably reconstruct the Davidic genealogy. The most reliable records we have are the genealogies of Matthew and Luke, and they point incontrovertibly to Jesus of Nazareth as the divinely proclaimed King of the Jews. The superscription of the cross flashes its light over the centuries and proclaims far and wide that he was God’s King. In this man, this Davidic man, also Emanuel, God is moving to the throne of royal universal sway over the affairs of men. And if we have any doubt about whether this will come to pass, Isaiah’s text puts it away. He said, “The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will perform this” Isaiah 9 and verse 7.

Ultimately our response to the teaching of the virgin birth will hinge upon our view of Christ’s uniqueness. If we regard him as a mere man, or even as *primus inter pares*, first among equals, we shall probably reject the virgin birth. But if we by God’s Spirit sense that he is unique; unique in history, unique according to his own consciousness, in his relation to God and man, and unique in his redemption, will we not reason that it’s credible that he be unique in his origin? We will confer with professor Denny, “He came from God, all the apostles believed, in a sense in which no other came. Does it not follow that he came in a way in which no other came?” We say professor Denny is right. The Lord Jesus is truly the Son of God, born of a virgin, the only Savior, and the only Davidic King.

As an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ, I must call upon you to reflect upon this, and if through the Holy Spirit the conviction that the word of God is true has come and further, if there has come to you the conviction that you are a sinner, that you are under divine guilt and condemnation, separated from God, and that you desire to have the forgiveness of sins, you may have the forgiveness of sins through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who offered the atoning sacrifice for sinners, we invite you to come to him, at this very moment to bow your head and receive the Lord Jesus as your own personal Savior, casting all of your burdens, like Bunyan’s Christian did, upon him and rejoicing in the salvation of God with us. Come to Christ, believe in him.

Next week we’ll begin our first of a few studies on the Messiah’s baptism. And if you have a Bible and you can study ahead of time, read...

[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]