

Christmas: What kind of birth is this?

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[0 : 0 0] Testament, page 807, that's Matthew's Gospel, chapter 1. And we're asking the question over these next few weeks, what kind of birth is this?

And we're going to read the very well-known words in Matthew 1, verse 18 to 25, the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. And here's what Matthew says, verse 18, page 807.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put it to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his peoples from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

[1 : 1 9] Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. Well, now, do keep that open in front of you.

We'll be looking carefully at it in just a moment. What kind of birth is this? I suppose that today, if you went out to ask the man in the street what Christmas is all about, you'd get a number of different answers, wouldn't you?

Some would say, well, it's a season of festivity and indulgence, full of good food and good wine and so on. Somebody might say, well, it's a good break from work. It's terrific. You get a bit of extra time off in the middle of winter.

Somebody might say, well, it's a time for lovely presents, as well as all those, you know, socks and horrible jumpers and handkerchiefs and those sort of things. Maybe that's a man's perspective.

[2 : 2 8] What about the woman in Buchanan Street? Well, I guess she'd say pretty much the same, wouldn't she? Christmas shopping. Relatives to feed. In-laws. To visit.

Stress. But, would the man in the street or the woman in the street, would they have anything to say about the birth that's actually at the heart of Christmas itself, the birth of Jesus?

Well, they might have. Somebody might say, well, yes, Jesus was a remarkable man, a great moral teacher. Somebody else might be, well, say, somebody might be a Muslim walking down the street and he might say, well, yes, we revere Jesus as a great prophet.

Somebody else, I don't know, might be a Buddhist. I sometimes come across Buddhists in the street. They might say, well, yes, he's a great moral teacher. One of those who can lead us part of the way towards enlightenment.

I guess many, if we ask the question, would say, well, it's just irrelevant. Probably that would be the majority today in our secular world.

[3 : 3 4] But, whatever the view of Jesus and of his birth, I guess that most would be united in one thing. Jesus of Nazareth was, whatever he was, just a man.

Perhaps he was remarkable. Perhaps he was a very good man. Maybe he was to be admired. But, he was no more than a great human being. And so, his birth, although it's a great excuse for a midwinter party, it's not really in a different category from, well, let's say, the birth of Shakespeare. Or, I don't know, Isaac Newton or Einstein. Or Winston Churchill. Or somebody else who's made a great difference in history. But, it's just a man.

Now, as many of you know, the church today, the institutional church, at least in the West, is seeming to be in a bit of trouble.

It's facing great decline. That's just the reality. And, it's trying very hard to reach out to the man in the street. And the woman in the street, don't forget. It seems to be having difficulty, though, in getting hold of the floating voter.

[4 : 44] Stopping this decline. And, so, it needs to do a bit of a David Cameron. It needs to rebrand the church to, hopefully, become much more popular with the man and woman in the street.

And, Christmas time, Christmas time is a great time for us to do that. Because, at Christmas, we do actually have some things that people seem to like. We've got candles. And, we've got Christmas carols.

And, we've got choirs. And, in the middle of winter, at Christmas time, people like a little bit of that old Dickensian myth, don't you? I don't know if you've noticed, but I've always noticed, that the shop called Past Times is always chock-a-block at Christmas time.

There's never anybody in there in June. Because, we like that, don't we? At Christmas. So, it's easy for folk in the church to say, well, let's capitalise on this. Let's capitalise on the things that people like, and let's quietly get rid of the things that people, well, they don't really like.

The theology stuff. And, so what we often seem to get now, is churchmen, and at this time of year, you see them sometimes on the television, on the radio, in the papers, doing a sort of reworking of the theology of Christmas.

[5 : 58] The bits that people don't seem to like, to accept too much. Things about the incarnation, to change the emphasis, and change it, so that, well, it's a bit more acceptable to the person in the street today.

A bit more relevant. I have to chuckle, because I find it really rather ironic, that often, these folk who are so determined to try and make the church more relevant, they appear on the television, wearing all these funny clothes, and these robes and things, looking as if they've actually lost their way out of the cast of the Mikado, or something.

Or maybe they ought to be, you know, one of the ugly sisters in the pantomime, or something like that. And they're telling us to try to make Christmas relevant. It's really quite amusing. But, what they do want to do, what they do want to do, is they want to make the message not cause offence. And you see, to the modern mind, let's say, to the scientist, the miraculous, it's just ridiculous. It's an offence. So, you see, we want to ditch that.

To the so-called post-modern person today, the relativist, the person like that, the claims of exclusive uniqueness about Jesus is very offensive.

[7 : 09] You can't say there's just one way to God. That's nonsense. So, we want to just ditch that, you see. So, we get in the TV programs and so on, re-examining the Christmas story, and re-interpreting it to make it more relevant, more palatable, less offensive.

And, one of the things that is often done is we use the language of myth. It goes like this. Yes, of course, these stories are true, but in a profoundly mythical way.

You see, it's not at all the way that it seems to be at first when you take this rather simplistic, literalistic view of the Bible. No, no, no. We need to be much more sophisticated than that.

And that sounds very good, doesn't it? Especially coming from somebody dressed like the Mikado. But, let me ask you this. Try that on your bank manager. Yes, sir, my overdraft is very large, but only in a profoundly mythical way.

Why must you be so literalistic and fundamentalist in your view? Does that ever work with you and your bank manager? Let me know afterwards, because I'm coming to join your bank. It doesn't work with mine. But, you see, that's what the modern theologian who claims to be within the Christian church, but wants to make the Christmas message more relevant.

[8 : 27] That's what he's saying. Here's one. Listen. He says, the only thing the New Testament can tell us is that, quote, a metaphorically pre-existent being of somewhat uncertain status has been sent into the world by God.

See? No miracle, just myth. Here's another. Quote, the revelation of God's love in the human life of Jesus is just one of many mutually supporting pointers to God.

See, nothing exclusive, nothing to offend the postmodern person. By the way, both of these came in books that were recommended reading for me as I trained for ministry. I wasn't recommended, however, reading the book of Hebrews.

I only have to read to the third verse and it says this, Jesus is, quote, the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. There's nothing metaphorical or uncertain or vague in that verse, is there? So, it seems that this third way, this way of wanting to have something called Christianity, along with nothing that conflicts with all these other views, nothing that causes any offence, that third way is just not actually possible.

[9 : 45] It's that, in fact, that is a myth. There's a great gulf between these two possibilities. See, for the modern revisionist theologian, the birth of Jesus is simply revealing something very vague about ourselves, about our religious consciousness, our quest for meaning, and so on.

But for the Bible, the birth of Jesus is revealing something utterly profound about God. And those two things are very, very different.

So, thank God, he has given us theologians, that is, those who speak logia, words, about God, theos, theologians, who speak the truth. And Matthew, that we read just now, is one of those. He's written a book for us, and the book is there to lead us, not into myth, but to lead us out of it, to lead us out of fog and darkness, into the light. And the great thing is, that unlike so many of the theologians of today, everyone can actually understand what he says.

You don't have to have a PhD to understand Matthew. In fact, even with a PhD, you can't understand a lot of what modern theologians say. But here's Matthew. By the way, Matthew was a tax man at one time, and yet he seems to speak with great clarity and plainness.

[11 : 06] That's another difference. Tax people today don't seem to be able to understand at all Mr. Brown's tax regime. I don't think even he does. But anyway, Matthew was a tax man, but he learned to speak plainly.

Look at verse 18. It's very plain, isn't it? The birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. No other way, no ambiguity, no myth, this way.

So, over the next few weeks, we're going to listen to Matthew plain speaking, telling us what kind of birth this was. I want you to notice something very important.

Are you listening? Wake up. Matthew is not just telling us the story of Christmas. he's not just recounting the events of that first Christmas 2,000 years ago.

He is doing that. He's doing it accurately. But also, he's giving us the interpretation of those events. He's telling us what they mean. He's a writer who's moved and inspired and controlled by God himself.

[12 : 07] and he is giving us in the Bible God's authoritative interpretation of what Christmas means. Of what kind of birth this is.

The Bible interprets the story for us. That's why it's revelation. It's God speaking to us. It's the events of the story and God's interpretation of them together that makes it revelation for us.

That's very, very important because it means that we've got no authority to give our own interpretation that differs from God's interpretation. So beware of people who say well no, I don't want any of that theology we just love the Christmas story.

No, the Christmas story on its own without the interpretation just leads us into sentimentality. Fairy stories. But no, the Christian message is more than just a story.

It has a meaning. It's not just any old meaning that we might fancy. It's the meaning that God himself has spoken in scripture. The events plus God's divine interpretation is what it makes it into a gospel.

[13 : 19] It's what it makes the Christian faith. And nothing else does. So let's look then very carefully at the word of God and see what God's own interpretation is about the meaning of this birth.

And this week I want to say the first thing is that it is unequivocally a supernatural birth. Matthew presents to us this birth of Jesus as a direct divine intervention.

It's an invasion into time and into history of God the infinite creator himself. There's absolutely no doubt whatsoever that that's what he means.

There's mystery of course. There has to be mystery doesn't there if the infinite God can take human flesh in a world of time and space. There is mystery but there's no myth.

Let's look at Matthew's story here. First of all he tells it from the human standpoint. Do you see verses 18 and 19? It's very matter of fact isn't it? Very easy to relate to. Just smacks of an authentic human story.

[14:22] There's absolutely nothing unlikely in the reactions that are presented. Here's Mary and Joseph they're betrothed. That means that they're living in a year of legal and public acknowledgement of their marriage.

In the first century in Palestine what happened was you would get engaged and then there would be a year when you are betrothed so you are legally belonging together as married but you're not yet actually living together.

At the end of that year of betrothal the bridegroom would come to the bride's house and take her back to his own house to live with him and that would be the beginning of the marriage proper. By the way that explains why Jesus calls the church his bride and why the New Testament speaks of the bride awaiting the bridegroom to come. We're in the betrothal time as the church and we're waiting for the day when Christ the bridegroom will come and bring us to his father's house to live forever.

That comes from this this idea of betrothal. So they were legally joined together but yet in that year when they weren't yet living together. And so Joseph's reaction in verse 19 is quite understandable isn't it?

[15:30] He must assume that well there's been an extramarital affair here and so he he can't possibly go on with the marriage. He could have publicly disgraced her but verse 19 says he was a just man he he wanted to show mercy and compassion to keep it quiet.

No doubt it was a very very heavy hearted Joseph who made the decision you can understand all the pain in that can't you? Both sides and you'd read verse 19 and think well that's the end of a once happy but now tragic story.

But then look down at verse 24 total turnaround Joseph in fact is taking Mary home to be his wife. What's going on? Well that turnaround is explained isn't it by the verses in between by the divine view of the story and that is that this is not a normal pregnancy it's not a case of adultery it's a case of the work of God verse 20 that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit the Holy Spirit of God.

Now there's a very interesting allusion here do you see verse 18 the birth of Jesus Christ look back up to verse 1 the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ both of those words are the same it's the word genesis and we all know don't we that the first book of the Bible is called genesis the book of beginnings and it opens with these words in the beginning in the genesis what was there in the beginning there was darkness and nothingness and void but the spirit of God hovered over the darkness and that began the whole work of creation and Matthew is saying to us here this is the beginning of a new creation the Holy Spirit of God overshadowing the person of Mary the power of the Holy Spirit is at work it's there in verse 18 again in verse 20 this child is from the Holy Spirit it's all the initiative of God here now Matthew doesn't explain it it's a great mystery he doesn't even argue it he just presents it as fact it was a known fact there were people alive when Matthew was writing who could have refuted this what Matthew is saying though is clear as day isn't it it's what one theologian calls the central truth of the Christian faith let me quote that the eternal Son of God took upon himself our humanity not that the man Jesus acquired divinity it's very clearly and carefully stated isn't it so there's no misunderstanding look at verse 18 there was no sexual intercourse prior to this conception it happened before they came together it's repeated in verse 25 there was no sexual intercourse prior to the birth Joseph knew her not until she had given birth you see the emphasis is on a unique a divine origin of this child this baby was born was incarnate by the [18:46] Holy Spirit here's a birth says Matthew that is fully human look verse 18 he's got a human mother Mary is his mother she's an ordinary woman nothing in the rest of the New Testament talks about her being a perpetual virgin or being taken up into heaven or anything like that it's quite clear Matthew himself tells us Jesus later on had other brothers and sisters but this was very different but she's a real human woman but also this birth is fully divine nowhere in the account do you see Joseph is called father look back at verse 16 Joseph is the husband of Mary and Mary is the one of whom Jesus is born all the way through Matthew's gospel all the way through all the gospels the only one who's ever called Jesus father is God this is a supernatural birth it's a unique birth it's an incarnation of God himself that's what

Matthew's telling us why is that so important why do we have to be taken up with theology like that this isn't an age for dogmatism surely we can just agree with Jesus and his message and get on working together and bring this message to the world why do we need to fight over doctrine about things like this the virgin birth why can't we just join forces with Jehovah's witnesses or Mormons or

others who believe that Jesus is very important but that he's not fully divine fully God of God and equal with God that might seem to be a fair question don't you think but you only need to look into church history to see the battles that have raged from the very beginning over that very question in the fourth century the century when that hymn was written the whole worldwide church risked splitting over exactly that question this was a time before there were denominations or any of these things and the unity of the church was deeply deeply treasured and precious but this question was more important even than that why is it so important why is it vital to say not only that Jesus is divine but that he is fully and completely co-equal with the father and of one essence with the father why is that so important well let me put the question the other way around what if we were to do away with the incarnation to say yes it was just a myth this isn't God in the flesh it's just an idea of God it's a manifestation of the love of

God or even it's just one of many possible incarnations one of the many ways to God what if we were to say that what would we be left with well we would be left with confusion and ignorance and fear we're left with no assurance of what God is really like if in Jesus we don't really have the light of the knowledge of the glory of God if in Jesus we don't have the image of the invisible God where do we find that can we find it anywhere at all or maybe not and we're left with an unknown God and an unknowable God either Jesus actually was God or we don't yet have a full picture of who God is and what he's like and we can't be sure that God really is like the Jesus we know at all if Jesus isn't fully God how do we know that behind Jesus and what he does reveal of God there isn't a whole lot of other things that are quite different a dark side a demonic side the answer is we don't know and we're left with terrible anxiety and dread and fear of a God who in himself might be quite different from the God that we think we've known in

Jesus Christ isn't that terrifying you see that means that like all man-made religion we've got to live our lives in fear and dread desperately trying to impress this unknown God and wondering if we can ever really do enough that in fact he will be pleased with us terrible but no says Matthew this is a supernatural birth this birth is unique the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way God through the power of his Holy Spirit made his eternal son incarnate of the Virgin Mary to become man so that we could see God in the flesh the one God the true God as he really is and Jesus said if you've seen me you've seen the Father and because that is so it follows that this revelation is unique he transcends all cultures he transcends all peoples he is the ultimate revelation of God to humanity not just one of many ways that's why

Acts chapter 4 says there's no other name by which we can be saved but also it means that because the birth of Jesus did take place in this way as a unique and a supernatural revelation of God it means that the message of Christmas is verse 23 Emmanuel God is with us forever and it means God can be found by anyone John begins his gospel by saying in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God in him was life and that life was the light of men and Jesus said I am come that you may have life from me I am the light of the world you see because of the kind of birth that Jesus birth really was it means that the meaning of life can be found in Jesus it means that the source of eternal life can be found in Jesus

[25 : 05] Christ only because his birth is supernatural only because his birth is unique God becoming man to reveal the one true eternal God to man and to do it forever that is the central fact of the Christian faith and that's why that great creed that was formulated by the church in the 4th century the Nicene Creed says this I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ the only begotten Son of God begotten of his Father before all worlds God of God light of light very God of very God begotten not made being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary and was made man and because that is true and only because that's true

Christmas means something in fact it means everything because the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way well next week we'll look at something else that Matthew says here about Jesus birth but let's pray as we close Heavenly Father we praise you for the birth of Jesus Christ we praise you that in your infinite love and mercy you sent your own Son the light of life who by the power of the Holy Spirit was born of the Virgin Mary and became man that we might know you and that we might find you help us we pray to rejoice in the glory of this birth and in the message of Christmas for we ask it in Jesus name

Amen well happy Christmas shopping this week and come back for more good news next week