

Christmas: What kind of birth is this? (2)

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[0 : 0 0] chapter of the New Testament and the same passage that we read last week. Very well known, verse 18. You'll be hearing this no doubt several times over Christmas if you listen to carol services or you come to carol services or if you're reading your Bible yourself.

Verse 18 of Matthew 1. 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 her 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 people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Behold, a 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.

[1 : 2 2] He took his wife, but he knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus. Now do keep that open in front of you, and we'll be looking at these verses.

What kind of birth is the birth of Jesus? We began by asking that question last week, and it's a question that we must ask, and we're going to ask it again this year.

Although it seems to be increasingly difficult, doesn't it, to even mention the name of Jesus at Christmastime. I don't know about you, I was reading my newspaper on Saturday about a school that is not allowed to have a nativity play this year.

It's got to have a winter festival with a mix of four religions. And they interviewed the local minister, and he was saying that he's no longer welcome in the school because it shows bias.

And I guess there's lots of schools like that now, isn't that right? I also read that three quarters of businesses, couldn't believe this, but you might think it's true, three quarters of businesses are banning Christmas decorations this year, in case they offend other people.

[2 : 2 9] And then I read that the job centres, I don't know if anybody here has been to it recently, or works in it, I don't know if it's true in Glasgow, but the job centres have banned decorations because of health and safety concerns, in case somebody falls off a ladder and soothes them when they're putting up the tinsel.

Sometimes it seems that the world really has gone mad. But you know, there is a serious point in this, because if Jesus' birth is not really any different from any other birth, then none of that matters, does it?

In fact, we'd be best to just forget Christmas altogether. We would be best just to have a straightforward winter bonanza. So everything actually does hang on this question.

What kind of birth is this? Who is Jesus of Nazareth? And why was he born at all? And if the answer is, well, he was just a good man, or he was a great teacher, or yes, well, he was one of many insights into a sense of the divine, or as I turned on my radio yesterday, as I was having my supper, I was listening to a programme about music, and somebody was talking about how music about Christmas developed, and he just said, it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Of course, this person, Jesus of Nazareth, was just a political dissident in the first century. He could never have guessed that his birth would have had such an effect on people. He would never have known anything of all the furore that took place.

[3 : 56] Never dreamed that he would become the focus of a world religion. Just said it as though it was fact. Well, if that is true, then, of course, we can ignore Jesus, can't we?

In fact, we should ignore him. We certainly shouldn't waste any time and effort coming to church or devoting our lives to him. That would be absolutely preposterous, wouldn't it? It would be no different from idolising and devoting our entire life to John Lennon, listening this week and the 25 years since his death.

Some people do do that, but we think they're batty, don't we? Or Elvis Presley. But it wouldn't be any different if that was all Jesus was. But somehow I doubt that if in 2,000 years we were all sitting here, we'd be talking about anybody devoting their life to John Lennon.

Maybe. But will half the world really know his name? You see, that's because the answer, according to the Bible, is that Jesus' life was not just like John Lennon's, not just like Elvis Presley or anybody else, that it was, as we saw last week, a supernatural birth.

A revealing, revelatory birth. We saw last time that this was a birth that was fully human. Jesus, it says in verse 18, is born of the Virgin Mary.

[5 : 21] He had a human mother. He was fully human. But also, it says clearly, he was fully divine, doesn't it? He was not the son of Joseph. He was born before Mary and Joseph had ever had any sexual union together.

No, verse 18, he was conceived by the Holy Spirit. That's why the Nicene Creed affirms that Jesus Christ, here it is again, is 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 Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man.

It was not an ordinary birth. It was a unique, supernatural, revealing birth. God himself taking human flesh to make himself known on earth and forever.

But that's not all it was. That line in the Creed, for us men and for our salvation, that leads us on to something else of vital importance.

It wasn't just a revealing birth, it was, according to Matthew, a saving birth. He came for a purpose, he came for us human beings and for our salvation, says the Creed.

[6 : 52] Now remember last time we said that it's not just the history of these things that's important. Matthew records the events, but he also gives us God's authoritative interpretation of these events.

Matthew's book is more than a history book, it's a gospel. It's a proclamation of good news. Because God tells us what it's about. Remember the structure of the story here, look at verses 18 and 19.

Remember it gives us this human account from Joseph's point of view. Joseph discovers the pregnancy, he decides quietly to divorce Mary. Then in verse 24, we've seen that there's a total turnaround.

No divorce. He takes Mary home to be his wife, after all. What causes that great turnaround? Well, it's the verses in between, isn't it? It's God himself intervening and speaking and saying what this history means.

That's what turns the whole story around. It's God's voice. God speaks into the situation in two ways, do you see? First of all, in verse 20 and 21, directly from the mouth of the angel.

[8 : 01] He gives new, fresh revelation, directly from heaven, saying this is what this means. And second, verses 22 and 23, Matthew tells us that this is what God had spoken about long ago, through his prophets.

We'll look at that next week, but just let's, today, think about the words of the angel. This is God's explanation of Jesus' birth. And the angel says two things, clearly, doesn't he?

First, yes, he says it's a supernatural birth, verse 20, it's from the Holy Spirit. This is the decisive revelation of God. This is the ultimate revelation of God.

Do you remember Hebrews chapter 1? In the past, God spoke in many ways, and in different times, by the mouth of the prophets, but in these last days, he has spoken, he has revealed himself in his Son, the Lord Jesus.

Jesus is the climax, he is the fulfillment of everything that the Old Testament Scriptures was speaking about and promising. And by the way, that's why contemporary Jewish people today, I believe, are so mistaken.

[9 : 12] Because although they share part of the Bible with us, they don't see that Jesus Christ, all along, was the goal that the Old Testament faith pointed to.

That faith in Christ is the goal, the end, the purpose of everything that went before, everything in their Bibles. But that's what the angel is saying here. This birth is the fulfillment of all of these Scriptures.

But second, in verse 21, the angel also makes clear that as well as, as well as Jesus being God's final word of revelation in history, in Jesus, we have God's final and climactic action in history. The question is, what is that action? Why did Jesus come? What did he come to do? Last year, one of my daughters came home from school one day and we were sitting at the tea table and, apropos of nothing, she just blurted out and said, the only reason, the only thing Jesus came into the world to do was to teach us to love one another.

I looked at her and said, now, I hope your Sunday school teacher didn't tell you that on Sunday. She said, no, my teacher at school. And she repeated it. The only thing Jesus came to do was to teach us to love one another.

[10 : 37] Well, that's not what the angel says here in verse 21, is it? Look at verse 21. What did he come to do? To save his people from their sins.

And according to God, through the mouth of his angel, that's the purpose of the birth of Jesus, the incarnation. To put that in theological language, it is the atonement that explains the incarnation. Jesus' birth took place in order that the sins of his people might be dealt with by him. And the rest of Matthew's gospel and the rest of the New Testament tells us that Jesus dealt with sins by dying on the cross for sin.

A death in which, as Matthew says, Jesus drinks the cup of God's wrath in our place so that we who trust in him can drink the cup of salvation and receive forgiveness of sins.

In other words, Jesus is born, says the angel, so that he may die a death that will bring salvation from the penalty and the power of sin for everyone who believes in him.

[11 : 52] That's why he came. That's the message of Matthew's gospel, it's the message of the whole New Testament. And that's exactly what the angel is saying here in verse 21 to Joseph.

And that's why Matthew is so intent on telling us that Jesus' birth is not just a human birth, it is a truly divine birth, that he is fully God as well as fully man because only, only thus can he forgive sins.

As man, and paying for man's sin, he makes atonement real. But as God, and only as God, can he make it effectual. You see, only God can forgive sins.

The Bible's absolutely clear on that. Just listen to some of the Old Testament quotes on the subject. Psalm 130, verse 8. Hope in the Lord, with him is plentiful redemption.

He and he alone will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. As I of 43, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake. I will not remember your sins, says the Lord.

[12 : 58] As I 45, for thus says the Lord, he who creates the heaven and the earth, I am the Lord, there is no other. Those who carry about wooden idols, they have no knowledge. They keep praying to a God who cannot save.

There is none beside me. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other. And the Old Testament is full again and again and again with statements like that. Only God, only the one true God of Israel, only he has power to forgive sins. That's why the religious leaders were right in Mark chapter 2 when Jesus healed the paralytic and said, I forgive your sins.

They said, who can forgive sins but God alone? Well, they were quite right. They were wrong, of course, not to believe what Jesus said. That in forgiving sins he was God standing in front of them. But you see, verse 21, only God can forgive sins. Everybody knows that. Joseph knew that. But this child, says the angel, this child, he will save from sins.

[14 : 09] And that's why you call his name Jesus, says the angel. The Hebrew, Yeshua. Yeshua means the Lord saves. And what Matthew is saying here, what he's giving us in the words of the angel, is just what Jesus himself says again and again throughout the gospel.

Matthew 20, the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many. Matthew 26, this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus. Why do you think Matthew emphasizes this right at the very beginning of his story about Jesus? Well, he does it because he wants to show, and he does it again and again, he wants to

show that the story of Jesus is the fulfillment of all God's promises to his people. God's promise to intervene at last once and for all for the salvation of his people. And what he's saying is that this birth is the beginning of that great promised salvation, that day of the Lord as the prophets called it.

The day of the new covenant that Jeremiah spoke about. The covenant that would be centered on forgiveness of sins, that would restore God's people to a right relationship with him forever.

[15 : 32] That, that above all else was the greatest need for God's people. and that's what the heart, is at the very heart of, of all the promises if you read the prophets in the Old Testament.

Do you remember Isaiah chapter 53? Promising God's servant who would come. What would he do? He would be wounded for our transgressions. He would be crushed for our iniquities.

By his stripes we would be healed. We all are like sheep that have gone astray, says the prophet, but the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of all of us.

And from that atoning sacrifice, from that substitution of our sins for his obedience, comes the great promise of eternal peace.

The vindication of God's people forever. The promise of a new age which would last forever. the new heavens and the new earth that Isaiah spoke about. The restoration of the whole cosmos.

[16 : 38] Everything in the whole world that had been ruined by human sins would be ushered in by that work. And that's what Matthew's saying.

This is the beginning of that. Because you see, that wasn't what the people of Jesus' day had become focused on in their thinking about the Messiah.

It wasn't what they were really longing for. They were longing for the Messiah, but they were longing for a saviour who would save them from the Romans, from political oppression, from economic oppression, from exploitation.

They were looking for somebody who would usher in a period of social and political utopia, the world that they longed for. In other words, they wanted a saviour for this world.

But no, says the angel, that's not the main problem at all. That's not what you need. And that's not why Jesus is coming.

[17 : 38] That's not what this birth is about. He's coming to save his people, not from the Romans, but from their sins. Now, do you see, that's a very, very important message today as well.

because there's so much confusion today, there's so much shrinkage of vision about what the gospel is all about, even in the church.

I was listening to a service on the radio on Sunday morning and it took the text about Jesus coming to bring release for the captives. And the sermon was all about how we should be doing our bit for reforming prisons. And that's a very common way of looking at it.

But no, says the angel, that's not what it's about. No, says God, himself. That's not what this birth is about. This birth is about something much, much, much bigger.

Much bigger. The Christian message, the Christmas message, isn't a message about politics. It's not a message about economics. It's not a message about getting rid of exploitation.

[18 : 44] It's not about making this world a better place. It's not about saving people from poverty or from homelessness. It's not about saving people from loneliness or low self-esteem or hopelessness or any of these things.

Now, don't misunderstand me. Don't misunderstand. Of course, the gospel makes a huge difference in all of these areas. of course, it has implications in all of these areas and the world should be a better place.

In fact, the world is manifestly a better, better place because of the Christian church. History tells the story quite plainly. You only have to look at what has happened in the realm of penal reform, the abolition of slavery, changes in the workplace.

All of these things came to this country at least in the light of the revivals that took place in the 18th century because of the church. But, these things are consequences of the gospel, not the essence of the gospel.

The essence of the gospel, the purpose of the birth of Jesus is the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. The death he died that deals with man's eternal predicament.

[20 : 01] The guilt of sins, the guilt that we bear against a holy God, an infinite God. He comes to save his people not from themselves but from their sins.

Sins against God. And that's what God has against us. That's why we need saved. It's peace and reconciliation with God first that is the desperate need of all human beings.

And that is what the angel said Jesus came to do. His birth is a saving birth. There's all kinds of people today even within the professing Christian church who would like to get rid of this verse. But to do it you have to chop out most of the rest of the New Testament. But you have to chop out most of the Old Testament too because that's what it's all leading to. That's what it's all about. There are people who find this whole idea of substitutionary atonement of Jesus dying in the place of sinners of God's wrath being appeased they find it offensive.

[21 : 12] But friends there's nothing new in that. This doctrine has been offensive right from the beginning. Paul calls it the offense of the cross. You see the stable in Bethlehem can be made very inoffensive can't it?

It can be made rather cuddly rather warm and fuzzy lovely little displays of the nativity scene and so on. But you can't do that with the cross at Calvary.

But God's interpretation of the birth of Jesus is absolutely plain. It is a birth for salvation from sins. And therefore it is a birth that led Jesus to death as a ransom for many.

That's his own words. A birth that offers salvation from sin as man's greatest problem and a birth that achieves salvation from sin for all his people.

And that salvation is not just a better life in this world although it is the best life in this world that anybody can ever have. No, it's salvation into a whole new world altogether.

[22 : 23] It's a recreation of the cosmos. It's a new beginning. It's a new heavens and earth. It's the home of righteousness. It's a transformed universe. This birth is the beginning of the new creation that the prophets promised.

It's a new genesis. We saw it last week. The birth of Jesus Christ. Literally the genesis of Jesus Christ. All begun when the Holy Spirit of God began to work hovering over the Virgin Mary.

Luke puts it very graphically in his gospel. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God.

And that's what this birth is all about. So friends, let me end with a question. How do you respond to what Matthew reports about the angel's message here?

I think there's only two options. You might think, well it's all nonsense. I can't accept that. I've just got no time for any of this stuff about sins and so on. Well if it really is nonsense then give it all up.

[23 : 41] Forget about Christmas altogether. Forget about singing carols. Forget about listening to the Christmas story and all the rest of it. It's absolute folly, isn't it? It's nonsense. Superstitious rubbish.

Don't do any of that stuff. Get rid of everything. Become an honest atheist. Strip it all away. Don't have anything to do with it.

Because you can't have a pick and choose approach. It's all or nothing. This is the claim of the gospel. There's no other version of this in the Bible. This is God's own interpretation.

And if it's rubbish, it's rubbish. It's nothing. Forget it. But if it is true, then you can't ignore it, can you? You can't pick and choose.

You've only got one option and your option is to do what Jesus commands at the very, very end of Matthew's gospel. When he tells his disciples to go everywhere and proclaim this good news, calling people to obey, obey, to follow him, to become disciples, to obey all that he's commanded because you've received from him the salvation from your sins that he promised.

[24 : 55] That's really the only two options, if we're going to be honest. Although there is a third thing to say, and that is that if you are already a follower of Jesus, if he is your Saviour and Master, then this Christmas you can rejoice.

You can rejoice in the assurance that because of this birth, because it was a saving birth, you have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, no matter what you've done.

And you can sing these wonderful carols and you can rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, as Paul puts it, no matter what has been upon your conscience. You can.

Only because this is a supernatural saving birth. Only because that first birth happened this way, as Matthew says.

If you believe him and if you trust him, then the angels' words are repeated this Christmas and every Christmas and every day of your life for you, no matter what your fears may be, no matter what your doubts may be, no matter what your terrors may be, about life ahead or death to come,

the angel says to you what he said to Joseph, fear not, do not fear.

[26 : 15] For that which was conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit. She did bear a son and called his name Jesus and he did save his people from their sins.

death. And if you have answered his call, the angel gives you that message today. Do not fear because Jesus' birth was a saving birth and nothing can take that away.

well, let's pray. Thank you, Heavenly Father, that you sent your only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to be born that he might die upon the cross and bear away forever all the sins and all the guilt and all the separation that was ours.

thank you that the Christmas message is one of joy and gladness and rejoicing, of the banishment of fear, all because this birth was a saving birth, a birth in which you were at work for our salvation. May that joy fill our hearts today, we pray, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen. Well, next week we look at the last little bit about this, the angels' words about the prophets being fulfilled.

[27 : 49] And we'll be singing more carols and eating mince pies, so don't miss it.