

LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 1:18-25

To understand the importance of the virgin birth, and the impact it has on the Gospel.

A Baby Changes Everything, Pt. 2

I remember when I was in college, a book came out by a popular author (who eventually fell out of orthodoxy and is now looked at as a false teacher) that talked about the Christian faith is sometimes looked at as a brick wall. His premise was that, the Christian faith shouldn't be like a brick wall, where if you take some of the bricks out, the whole thing comes crumbling down. It should be, in his mind, way more flexible.



It sounds like a nice premise, and one that does in some way make sense. There are many differences between denominations that are not, “deal breakers.” This author, however, used the virgin birth as an example, and for him it was a problem if this one doctrine was a make or break issue. “Is the virgin birth really that important,” is in essence, what he is asking. And I imagine that this reflects the thinking of many Christians in church today, and for understandable reasons. At first glance it seems like a neat but otherwise non-essential part of the story. Today, however, we will examine the importance of this event further.

She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21).

Did Virgin Really Mean Virgin?

One of the contentions that are sometimes made centers around the quotation of Isaiah 7:14. The argument goes something like, “Matthew was quoting Isaiah, and the original word for virgin in Hebrew doesn’t mean an actual virgin.” However, you’ll recall last week’s discussion on Typology, and the rule of escalation, that in a typological fulfillment the future fulfillment will be greater than the original fulfillment. While it is true that the Hebrew word (*‘almāh*) does not mean an actual virgin, the Greek Old Testament that Matthew quotes employs the Greek word “*parthenos*,” which does mean an *actual* virgin. So the near view fulfillment in Isaiah 8 rests on the Hebrew understanding of a non-virgin, but the far view fulfillment escalates to an actual virgin birth.

What Is At Stake, Exactly?

It seems like a minor detail in the narrative, but there are as it turns out, several reasons why the virgin birth actually matters. Listed below is by no means an exhaustive list, but one that captures at least some very important things that are at stake if we reject the virgin birth.

THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE

For starters, we must call into question the validity of the Scripture as a whole if we question any part of it. We do, after all, believe in the inerrancy and infallibility of Holy Scripture. If this is the case, then we must accept all of it. The Scripture attests to the virgin birth. Matthew and Luke believed that Mary was an actual virgin not only when she conceived, but when she gave birth (Matt 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-45). It is the testimony of the Word of God that she was a virgin. This alone is enough for any Christian to believe.

THE DEITY OF CHRIST

We cannot say dogmatically that God can’t enter through world except through a virgin, but surely the incarnation event is a supernatural event if anything. The Psalmist writes, “I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You.’” This is later applied to Jesus in Acts 13:22. To eliminate the supernatural from the birth of the Son of God is to inevitably compromise the divine dimension of it.

THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

One aspect that is often overlooked regarding the virgin birth is that it did actually happen by a human mother. The history of the church tells us that one of the major issues pastors faced in 2nd-4th centuries and even on was the humanity of Christ. This is an old view known as, “Docetism,” a precursor in some ways to Gnosticism. John began refuting this as early as 1 John, when he wrote, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life” (1 John 1:1). The testimony is clear: Jesus was really human, touchable, seeable, hearable in every way. The church father Ignatius (35-108 AD) and other second century fathers held this to be very important in their writings as well.

The importance of this cannot be overstated, because without the humanity of Christ, the act of redemption is not possible. For example, Leviticus 17:11 tell us that from the beginning, blood sacrifice has been the way for the cleansing of sin. Hebrews 9:22 reinforces this saying, “In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” Without the humanity of Christ, the blood sacrifice for the atonement of sin cannot happen.

Jesus, the Son of God, also functions as our mediator and High Priest before God the Father (Heb 4:14). Just as in the Old Testament under the law, the people of God needed a High Priest to make atonement for their sin, Jesus is the final and greater High Priest. His humanity is emphasized in the book of Hebrews. Verse 15 says, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” He cannot sympathize with our human weaknesses nor be tempted if He does not share in our humanity.

THE SINLESSNESS OF CHRIST

The testimony of Scripture regarding humanity is that we are all under the curse of Adam, having inherited his sin nature as a result of the fall (Gen 3:1-19; Rom 3:23, 5:12-14). Thus, if Jesus were born of two, regular human parents, it is very difficult to conceive how he could have been exempted from the guilt of Adam’s sin and become a new head to the human race, and yet, Jesus’ sinlessness as the new head of the human race and as the atoning lamb of God is absolutely vital to our salvation (2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:22-24; Heb 4:15, 7:26; Rom 5:18-19). To reject the virgin birth is to reject the sinlessness of Christ, a *testimony* crucial to the Gospel.

Beyond that, the birth narrative gives more convincing details. In the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel speaks to Mary concerning the nature of the birth, saying, “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 (Luke 1:35, emphasis added). No child can be called holy because of Adam’s curse, unless that child is born apart from the line of Adam. While the birth of the Son of God only makes sense to be supernatural, there is also a very real theological purpose to it that affects the whole redemption story.

THE NATURE OF GRACE

Finally, the virgin birth is a reminder to the church that God Himself is the one orchestrating the story of redemption, not us. God had promised that the “seed” of the woman (Gen 3:15) would crush the serpent, and in the virgin birth, God brought it about by His own power, not through natural, humanistic ways. The virgin birth of Christ tells us that God is for us, that He accomplishes the seemingly impossible, and that nothing we have done could earn His gift of grace that allows to become a part of His family (Gal 4:4-5).

More Than a Myth

The story of the virgin birth according to Scripture is not merely an interesting detail or a myth that may or may not be true. The virgin birth is purposeful and the importance of it cannot be overstated. There are topics on which Christians are free to disagree, but this is not one of them. Christians are to stand firm against false teaching (1 Tim 1:3-4, 6:3-5), and during the holiday season there is perhaps no greater example of false teaching than teaching the virgin birth is unnecessary.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Acts 13:26-41. Recall back to the study on Matthew 1:1. How do the titles given to Jesus in Matthew 1:1 connect to this passage in Acts?
2. Acts 13:26-41 is an incredible testimony to an unbelieving crowd about the work of Jesus as Savior. How important is the virgin birth to this passage? How would Jesus *not* being born of a virgin change the details of Acts 13:26-41?

Day Two

1. Read Genesis 3:1-19. Note the effects of the curse for all three who receive it (the serpent, the man, the woman). Write down all of the details of each curse, and note anything that you don't understand.
2. Paying close attention to Genesis 3:15, what strikes you as odd about this verse? How does Jesus fulfill this promise of God? Use New Testament verses to reference your answer.

Day Three

1. Read Leviticus 17:11 and Hebrews 9:22. Why do you suppose the shedding of blood is necessary for the forgiveness of sins? Why is Jesus' humanity necessary for Him to fulfill this in His sacrifice?
2. What does the necessity of bloodshed say about the gravity of sin in God's eyes? How does this change the way you view your own sin?

Day Four

1. Read the Luke 1:5-2:20. How is Zacarias' and Elizabeth's experience similar to Mary and Joseph? How is it different? Why is this birth account also significant to the life of Jesus? Use New and Old Testament passages if possible.
2. Read Matthew 1:25. There is a lot of discussion about the virgin birth, but then usually what is emphasized is the virgin conception. Why do you think verse 25 is so significant? What would have been the point of Joseph keeping Mary a virgin until after the birth?

Week 3 Discussion: The Virgin Birth

For Matthew, establishing Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of David, and the son of Abraham was important for various reasons. The mere task of tracing Jesus' lineage is impressive, and yet, Matthew was able to do it. This week, we will consider the heritage of our faith. This is an aspect of our faith that is often not discussed, and yet was very important for our spiritual ancestors.

1. Be honest! Before this study, how important did you think the virgin birth was to the Gospel? Has your opinion changed since finishing this lesson? Share with the class.
2. Put yourself in the shoes of a nonbeliever (or if you came to faith more recently, try and remember what you thought prior to faith) and consider how crazy the virgin birth is. Why is this such a hard detail for people to grasp? Or is it a hard part of the story to accept?
3. How does the story of the virgin birth change in light of a culture that is so accepting of abortion? Is childbirth still special in our modern age?
4. Consider a nativity scene. What does it make you feel when you see the young Mary holding her baby? Try and modernize the scene, and talk about what people would say if this story took place today.
5. How does learning about the virgin birth equip you to share your faith over the holidays?

Takeaways:

1. The virgin birth is not merely a neat detail that may or may not have happened. The virgin birth of Jesus is important for a number of reasons, and rejecting it creates a ripple effect of theological problems.
2. Jesus is born both fully God, and fully man. His birth of a human mother is necessary for Him to be fully human, and His humanity is necessary for Him to lay His life down as a sacrifice in the way that He did.

PRAYER REQUESTS: