

The Birth of Christ Announced - Part 2

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 1, and we'll read from verse 29 as we introduced this last week, starting in verse 26. But this morning, we'll read from verse 29 to verse 38.

Hear the word of the Lord. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary.

You have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end. How will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin?

And the angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age, and she who has been unable to conceive is in her sixth month, for no word from God will ever fail.

[1 : 13] I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word be to me. May your word to me be fulfilled. Then the angel left her. This is the word of the Lord.

Let's pray and ask God's blessing on our time in the Scriptures. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for your word opened before us, and we ask now, Lord, that you would open our eyes, O God, that we will see wonderful things in your word.

Open our hearts, Lord, that we will receive what we see, Lord, and help us, O God, to not only be of those who see and hear, but also of those who do, Lord.

And so we ask now your blessing on these few moments in the Scriptures. Speak to us, Lord, as we ask you these mercies in Jesus' name. Amen. So this morning, I want us to consider the subject of the virgin birth.

It is a subject that we emphasize, of course, during this time, during Christmas time, and it is a very important matter in the Scriptures.

[2 : 14] And so I want us to think about what it means, why it's significant and important. And so the big subject this morning is the virgin birth that is announced by the angel Gabriel.

There's a famous New Testament scholar who is incidentally an agnostic and an atheist at the same time. His name is Bart Ehrman. And he begins a blog post on the virgin birth by writing, quote, A few days ago, I raised the question of why anyone should think that you have to believe in the virgin birth in order to be a Christian.

The reality is, of course, that many Christians do not believe in it, but recognize that it is a story meant to convey an important theological point, a point that could be true whether or not the story happened, that Jesus was uniquely special in this world, not like us other humans, but in some sense the unique Son of God.

Just as the moral of a fairy tale is valid or not, independent of whether the tale happened, so too with stories like this in the Gospels, says Ehrman, whether you choose to call them myths in a non-derogatory sense, legends, tales, or simply stories intending to convey a theological truth. We spoke last week about how the account of the virgin birth in verse 26 does not begin like a fairy tale, but an historical record.

[3 : 49] There's no once upon a time in Luke chapter 1 verse 26, but there's in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. So I want us to consider the virgin birth in its biblical and theological sense this morning, and hopefully at the very end show why Ehrman's assessment cannot be and why the virgin birth as an actual occurrence is essential for us to believe.

As is seen with Ehrman, the person I quoted at the beginning, the virgin birth is most commonly treated as a mystical account with some deep, hidden meaning of purity and newness and so forth. If we are to be honest though and charitable in our reading of the sources, in the reading of the New Testament authors, the least we must say is that for the biblical writers, for Luke, for Matthew, for those who give us the account of the virgin birth, for them it was not a myth.

It was not symbolic fable. For instance, Luke, as we have seen, he couches the truth of the virgin birth within time, six months of Elizabeth's pregnancy, within a place, Nazareth of Galilee, in common custom of marriage between Mary and Joseph and among a real people.

Whatever we may think of the virgin birth, if we are honest with the sources, namely the gospel accounts, the least we have to say is that the authors relating these truths believed it to be actual, historical, and a real occurrence.

[5 : 36] And in this passage this morning, we have two major points regarding the virgin birth that we want to consider. Firstly, the nature of the virgin birth, the what question, what's going on, the what question, and then the manner of the virgin birth, the why, or I should say, how question.

So let us explore these two points this morning. Firstly, the nature of the virgin birth, the what question, the question that baffles us, the question that leaves many to scratch their heads, the question that leaves many to shout out nonsense, the what of the virgin birth.

Well, firstly, when we look at the nature of the virgin birth, we have to identify that the virgin birth is not something that comes out of the blue in the biblical narrative. And in God's redemptive story, it should not, if we've read from Genesis, it should not catch us off guard.

This is not an insertion or an interjection that should surprise us. In the angel's first message to Mary, we see him allude to the Old Testament.

And so the first thing we need to note about the nature of the virgin birth is that it is fulfillment of prophecy. It is fulfillment of the Old Testament promise, the Old Testament expectation.

[6 : 53] It is the realization of the people of God's dreams in the Old Testament now becoming a reality. We see the allusions to the Old Testament in this passage in Luke 1.26.

There's a reference and an allusion to Isaiah 7.14. There's a reference to the throne of David.

They're speaking about Jacob's descendants. What is about to happen now in the virgin birth is in continuity with what was said before.

It is the fruition and the fulfillment of these Old Testament promises. The same God who in Genesis 1 created the world out of nothing will work about the virgin birth of Christ.

Christmas is always a special time with a special feeling and I cannot help but catch that when I think of the prophecy of the Old Testament. The hopes and the dreams of God's Old Testament church being realized in the ordinary town of Galilee to an ordinary couple in an ordinary evening.

On an ordinary evening. It's like the Puritans, the 17th century English ministers, it's like the Puritans put it, heaven is about to kiss earth. The meeting of God with man is about to come about.

[8 : 15] Notice first that Mary, the virgin, we read in the angel's response, verse 30, will conceive and give birth to a son. That's what the angel tells her.

Will conceive and give birth to a son. Now immediately the wording here takes the Jewish readers back to the Old Testament, especially to the prophet Isaiah because the wording and she will conceive and give birth to a son.

It is almost identical to what's happening in Isaiah 7.14 and the virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son. And so the Old Testament allusion is on here and immediately Mary herself and then readers subsequent, looking at this, they're going, wait a minute, this was said by Isaiah.

The prophet Isaiah 700 years before had predicted that the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son. Almost identical in wording that the message is continued on the truth that God became flesh.

One of our historic reform confessions, the Belgic Confession, puts it this way and helps us make sense of it. It reads, so then we confess that God fulfilled the promise which he had made to the early fathers by the mouth of his holy prophets when he sent his only and eternal son into the world at the set time is what's happening here is the fulfillment of God's promises.

[9 : 40] The virgin birth is God being true to his word. Isaiah not only said that the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, but also that you shall call him Emmanuel.

And when Matthew gives his account in his gospel, he writes and he makes it clear that Emmanuel means God with us. God with us. The virgin birth made Emmanuel possible.

The virgin birth made God with us a reality. Not only in a physical proximity, but also in fleshly likeness.

Not only in nearness of his person, but in nearness to our nature. Not only did God come to us, but through the virgin birth, God became like us.

Became like us. So then he comes near to us, not only in presence. It's not only a spatial separation that is now bridged. It is only Emmanuel, it's not only God with us close, but it's God with us like us in our nature.

[10:52] This becoming like us, we call it the incarnation, is of utmost importance. The early church father Gregory writes and he says, what he did not assume, he did not heal.

What he did not assume, what he did not take upon himself, God, what God, what the son, did not take upon himself, he did not heal. He has to take upon himself all of Adam's nature, so that he would redeem all of Adam's nature.

It cannot be a fairy tale. The virgin birth is the fulfillment of expectation, of promise, of prophecy, that God will send us a savior. That's why the Christmas carol goes, veiled in flesh, the God heads see, hail incarnate deity, pleased with us in flesh to dwell.

Do you understand the absolute significance and wonder that pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.

dwell. And so it's a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. It's also an underscoring and a lining underneath of the incarnation of Christ.

[12:07] The incarnation of Christ, the becoming flesh, that's what that word incarnation means, that the Son, who has no form, body, passion, or parts, lives in eternity, for all eternity, in unapproachable light, no man has ever seen, in the incarnation, he takes on human nature, he takes on flesh and blood.

That's what the incarnation means, and the virgin birth underscores this for us. It is how God became man. God became man, not somewhere in secret, in the sky somewhere, the incarnation did not just take place in some celestial part or corner of the universe, somewhere in heaven, man, but historically speaking, technically speaking, God became man in the womb of Mary.

When we think of such an important theological truth, we will do well again to draw from our historic confessions to avoid error and wrong ways of thinking about the incarnation. So again, from the Belgian confession that I quoted just now, it tells us the following, it says, the Son took the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of man, truly assuming a real human nature, with all its weaknesses except for sin, being conceived in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit without male participation.

Now there are two matters to be noted and distinguished here in the section of the Belgian confession. The subject of the statement is the Son, the Son did this, the second person of the God head, he who is God of very God, light, very light.

In the incarnation, what did he do? He took on the form of a servant. He was made in the likeness of a man. He assumed a real human nature with all its weaknesses.

[14:07] Now the person existed before he took on the human nature. We have to understand that the Son subsisted within the one divine essence before time, before the world began, he was there.

God as a triune God, our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is eternal, so the Son has always been there. However, in the incarnation, in the virgin birth, the Son of God, God of very God, who is without body, parts, or passions, a body was prepared for him, fashioned, conceived, in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary.

The 17th century Irish minister James Usher, he writes and he says, Mary's womb was the bride chamber with a spirit knit that indissoluble knot between our human nature and his deity.

This is why the writer of Hebrews tells us, listen carefully, the writer of Hebrews, he draws from the Old Testament and he says, when Christ came into the world, he said, sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.

A body you prepared for me. This is the virgin birth. This is Advent. This is Christmas time. The eternal son, God, a very God existing in all of eternity has now a body prepared for him, conceived in the womb of Mary.

[15:38] what was brought into being through the virgin birth was not the son of God, he is eternal, but what was brought into being was his real, true, human nature, which he assumed, which he took upon himself, which was joined to his divine nature.

Without confusion, without mixing it, the properties of each nature still retained, and from the moment of conception until forevermore, the son of God will always be the son of man.

He will be the one person of the son, one person the son with two natures. Again, the Belgic Confession reminds us, and he not only assumed the human nature as far as the body is concerned, but also a real human soul.

In order that he might be a real human being, for since the soul had been lost as well as the body, he had to assume them both to save them both together.

Do you see why the virgin birth matters, the incarnation matters, the assumption of a real human nature being conceived in the womb of Mary matters? Why did he assume the human nature?

[17:02] Well, since the soul and body had been lost, he assumed them both so that he can save both soul and body. So it's a fulfillment of prophecy, it is also underscoring the incarnation, and also it's the means of our salvation, as I've been alluding to.

It is for our salvation that he did it. Our sin and our transgressions against a holy God demanded it. Our sins demand satisfaction, satisfaction, of God's justice.

We are guilty of breaking God's law and must stand before the righteous judge of all the earth to face his wrath. Now, for God to save us, satisfaction needed to be made of his righteousness, of his justice, of his wrath.

If God is just, he can't sweep them under the carpet. If God is righteous, he can't ignore iniquity. If God is to uphold his honor and his truth, he can't be false about our transgressions.

For God to save us, satisfaction needed to be made. For God to rescue us, his wrath needed to be suffered. God in love wills to do this for us.

[18:21] Take our burden, if I can use that broad word, summarizing everything I've just said, he wants to take our burden upon himself. However, God as God cannot suffer.

God as God cannot suffer. There are no passions in God. When we say he is perfect, let me just put a bit of a thinking cap on very quickly. When we say God is perfect, when we say that he is immutable, that means he doesn't change, we say also that when we ease or feels, oh, I hope everybody's okay there.

is that the thunder, the fire and brimstone kind of preaching that's causing all of that? I hope not.

Well, I've seen there's some people going over there. Okay, for God to save us, satisfaction needed to be made.

But God cannot suffer. There are no passions in God. There are no ups and downs in God. God is eternal, he's unchangeable. There are no changes that can take place in God. His feeling can't go up and down, little or less.

It can't be diminished or grow. There can be no action taken against him that changes him in any way. James says this, that he does not change.

[19:38] He's not like shifting shadows. So God as God cannot suffer or feel a fluctuation of variations of emotions. He is what the old medieval writers used to call, he's pure act.

Everything that he is, he is constantly, there's no diminishing, increasing, he is pure power, pure act, pure feeling, pure will, there's no variation in God, no suffering can enter in him.

God cannot receive judgment. judgment and wrath are legal measures enacted on appropriate subjects. God is not an appropriate subject to be acted for guilt and condemnation to be acted upon.

God cannot be guilty, he's holy. God cannot be a transgressor, he's the divine lawgiver. So then God in his wisdom and in his power, God is born in human flesh, takes on a human nature so that the sins of human beings can be imputed, reckoned, accounted to him according to his human nature because it cannot be accounted to him according to his divine nature.

But God in his wisdom willed this divine plan to come into this world for his human nature to be conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary so that he can assume that human nature, take upon himself that human nature so that our burdens he can receive but so according to his human nature.

[21:12] In the virgin birth the son assumes the appropriate nature to be our substitute, our fitting substitute. This is why it cannot be a myth with just nice theology attached to it.

It had to be true. So that's the what of the virgin birth. It is a fulfillment of prophecy. It's the incarnation of the son and it's the means by which God will save the world.

Well, what's Mary's response to all of this? Verse 34, how will this be? Okay, I get the theology. It's a fulfillment of prophecy. Throne of David, descendants, son of God, son of the most high. It's great. But Mary's response, verse 34, how's this going to happen? Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin, how's this going to work? So now we're looking at the second point, the manner of the virgin birth.

The manner of the virgin birth. Now the short answer is, this will happen miraculously. It's a short answer, right? Amen. Let's close our Bibles, we pray, we go home and have lunch.

[22 : 16] This will happen miraculously. as the Belgian confession again says, without male participation. And as the scripture teaches us, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, when we hear objections to the virgin birth, and we respond that it's a miracle, that's not a cop-out answer. It is what the Bible teaches.

It's a miracle. God, with whom all things are possible, made the virgin birth possible. I think the Christian apologist Glenn Shrivina is on to something when he observes Christians believe in the virgin birth of Jesus.

Materialists, that's people who don't accept the Christian faith, materialists believe in the virgin birth of the cosmos. Choose your miracle. Choose your miracle.

So how did this happen? How is this going to happen? Well, the angel ventures and answers in verse 35, the angel answered, the holy spirit will come on you and the power of the most high will overshadow you so the holy one to be born will be called the son of God.

[23 : 25] The angel's answer can be summarized as this will be the work of the triune God. Notice the triune God right there in the angel's response. The holy spirit will come upon you, the power of the most high will overshadow you, and the holy one to be born will be called the son of God.

This is a work of our God, the eternal triune God. Do you see the three distinct persons of the Godhead? The spirit, the father, and the son.

It isn't one person appearing in different modes as the father, and then as the spirit, and then as the son. No, three distinct persons who subsists in one divine essence, and who works out our salvation, for all eternity.

The work of the Holy Spirit in the virgin birth was to conceive without male participation, right, the work of the Holy Spirit was to conceive without male participation the human nature of Christ, to which the person of the son will be joined, and keep this human nature pure and holy.

The Dutch theologian Louis Berkhoff, he puts it this way, the spirit sanctified the human nature of Christ in its very inception, and thus kept it free from pollution of sin.

[24 : 47] What we receive by ordinary conception is a sinful nature. What the son Jesus received by miraculous conception was a human nature free from sin, without male participation.

In other words, a virgin birth gives you a human nature without the stain of sin, without the DNA of spiritual decay, but it's a human nature, real and true.

This is why the virgin birth matters. It grants the son a human nature in which he can now take upon himself our frailties. God can't take upon himself your frailty.

He's God. but God assuming your human nature is able to take upon himself your frailties, your weaknesses, your ailments.

He's able to suffer. He's able to go hungry. God is God can't go hungry. God is God can't go tired. But God assuming a human nature can go hungry according to his human nature.

[25 : 59] He can be tired. he can be forsaken. He can be lonely. He can suffer all of those things we endure in this world. And so when it says in the scriptures that he sympathizes with us in our weaknesses, it's true because he had a real human nature that he assumed.

With its limitations, with its weaknesses, and he's able to relate to you. he's able to relate to me. He assumes our sicknesses, our sins, but because he had this human nature free from sin, he becomes our fitting stand-in, our spotless sacrifice.

This is what Peter writes, right? Peter says in 1 Peter 1.19, 1 Peter 1.19, for you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed.

right? It was not with perishable things, from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

The virgin birth, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, in purifying the human nature of Christ, without mal-participation, in a miraculous conception, securing that it is free from the burden of sin, Christ assumed this real, true human nature.

[27 : 27] So that he can be that lamb without blemish or defect. And so, how, Mary? Through the work of the triune God. The Holy Spirit will overshadow you, the power of the Most High will come upon you, and the Son to be conceived will be born.

Also, the second manner is through the Word of God. The manner of the incarnation is accounted for by the power of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. Notice how the angel ends the explanation, in verse 37, for no word from God will ever fail.

For no word from God will ever fail. God promised this, God ordained this, God willed this, God said this, and His word does not return to Him void. God has promised to send the seed of the woman to crush the head of the serpent.

God has promised the virgin would conceive and give birth to a son, and He will call His name Emmanuel. God had promised that He would send a Savior, and no word of God will fail. the virgin birth is made possible by the infallible word of God.

How powerful is God's word that it brings about this miraculous virgin birth Christ? And then finally, or lastly, how will this happen?

[28 : 46] The infallible word of God, the triune work, and then also a believing soul. A believing soul. Now, very importantly, a thing is caused by many things.

I think it's a very basic principle of basic metaphysics. A thing can be caused by many things. For instance, your presence here this morning is caused by your heart not stopping, your car working, and that little voice in your head saying you must go to church.

So, voila, you're here. A thing is caused by many things, right? Well, we understand that a thing, or I should say so too, the virgin birth is caused by many causes.

Yes, the efficient cause, the powerful cause, is the work of the Holy Spirit. Yes, the word of God, as we've mentioned, is a cause, it's what we can call the formal cause to this happening.

But, there's another cause that explains how the virgin birth is made possible. Mary. Mary, she's a cause. We can call her the material cause.

[29 : 55] Mary's response, I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled. It's going to happen through her. She's a cause to this. In Mary, we see what faith looks like.

She could have been overwhelmed with doubt and anxiety. In Mary, we see what trusting God looks like. She could have been in stubborn resistance to all of this, out of fear.

She could have ran away. The virgin birth required a believing, humble soul. And we see that in Mary. Young Mary.

This girl, Mary's response to the announcement of the virgin birth was faith, obedience, rejoicing, and praise. Now, we are a reformed church.

Our confessions are very clear. We've recited the Westminster Confession of Faith. We're not a Roman Catholic church, but the scriptures do, that does give a position to Mary that we often fail to note.

[30 : 57] She is blessed. She is blessed. She's called by Elizabeth, the mother of my Lord. the mother of my Lord. Why is she blessed?

Notice chapter 1, verse 46. And Mary said, my soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble estate of his servant.

From now on, all generations will call me what? Blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. In fact, if we just go up to Elizabeth, her family members' interaction with her in Luke chapter 1, verse 41, we read this, when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

In a loud voice she exclaimed, blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear. But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

The mother of my Lord. Blessed is she. Mary. Often, we, out of fear of overly venerating and ending up in the other side of the era, the Roman Catholic era, by venerating Mary and making her partly responsible for our salvation in the sense, we often diminish also her role.

[32 : 22] She was a believing, humble instrument, vehicle, through which God brought about our salvation. She had no part in it, in terms of efficiently, but she had a part in it in so far as God used her.

Christ's human nature was not conceived in a vacuum. It was not conceived somewhere up in the sky or in some celestial place in heaven. It was conceived in her womb. And so, why is she blessed?

She says, for the mighty one has done great things for me. We will never share the same kind of blessedness of Mary as the mother of our Lord, because she was the only one to do that. However, we can also live and share in the blessing of God because through Christ, like with Mary, through Christ, the mighty one has done great things for us.

Is the virgin birth a fictional account to explain a greater theological truth? Can't be. We need more. We need God to take on human nature that is free from sin, kept pure and sanctified, joined to his person without confusion between the two natures so that our burdens, our sin, weakness, all of that can be placed on him according to his human nature.

[33 : 47] And so that it can be atoned for fully. So that Christ can have a body to go to the cross. So that he can have a body to receive the wrath of God upon him.

So that he can have a body to die. The wages of sin is death. So that he can have a body to die. But also by the power of the Holy Spirit so that he can be raised to life again for our justification. The virgin birth is an historical occurrence that really took place in a small town in Nazareth when the angel announced to Mary that Jesus will be born in her.

It is real, it is true, it cannot be fiction or myth. Christ needed a body prepared for him because sacrifices and burnt offerings were not enough, were not sufficient.

God did not desire them for satisfaction, but a body without spot or blemish was prepared for him in the womb of Mary. This human nature he assumed. So I want to end with the truth we confess week in and week out, at least every couple of weeks we confess this from the Nicene Creed and we read these words and often time it can be lost on us because of over familiarity, but hopefully this morning after hearing this from Luke chapter 1, these words that we recite regularly will have a greater meaning and appreciation to us.

[35 : 08] So I want to read these words and you should recognize it because as I say we recite the Nicene Creed regularly and part of the Nicene Creed include what I've just spent the last 25-30 minutes unpacking and we'll end with this.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all the ages, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, the same essence as the Father, through Him all things were made for us and for our salvation, He, this God, this God from God, for us and for our salvation, He came down from heaven, He became incarnate, by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made human.

He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, He suffered and was buried, the third day He rose again according to the scriptures, He ascended to heaven and He seated at the right hand of the Father in that very body, He did not cast aside that body in the grave, He took that body up into the highest point of the universe, the very right hand of the Father, glorified now in heaven is a human body that Jesus possesses.

To say many things to us but this also that one day when He returns, when He calls us home, He will change our bodies so that it will be like He's. So the confession ends, He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead.

And as the angel told Mary, so our confession adopts that words, His kingdom will never end. What a great hope we have. So may we embrace this, may we find encouragement in this, may we cherish these truths that really occurred, not scoff at them, not look down on them, but the very God who created everything out of nothing, brought about the virgin birth for us and for our salvation.

[37 : 12] Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Our Father, we thank You this morning for Your Word and for these precious truths, Lord, that we could reflect on.

Thank You for Your work, Lord, in giving us a Savior. Thank You for Your wisdom and Your power, Lord. Thank You that it was possible with You for how You have given us the Savior.

And now, Lord, during this time of the year, in Your providence, Lord, we celebrate and remember the birth of Christ. But not only that a cute baby was born, but that the Son took on a pure, true, real, human nature, conceived in the womb of Mary, and He did this for us and for our salvation.

So as we celebrate, Lord, as we remember Christ, as we enter into the festivities that come along with Christmas time, may we join in the spirit of Mary who said, my soul rejoices in God, my Savior. So may we too, Lord, rejoice in God, our Savior, as we ask You these mercies in His holy name. Amen.