

A Virgin Giving Birth

Isaiah 7:1-17 & Matthew 1:18-25

A few months ago we had a holiday overseas. We travelled to France, Spain and Morocco. The planning for our holiday started more than a year before. We studied guide books and websites and planned where we wanted to go. We told people about our plans and arranged to meet some people on our travels. Then we had to book plane tickets, tours, accommodation, and cars. When that was all done we left and had our holiday. So going to these places and doing the things we planned was the fulfilment of all that planning, preparation and of the things we told people we were going to do.

1. Fulfilment

You see the idea of fulfilment? It is bringing into reality all that you have planned and have spent time preparing for and have told people you will do. Jesus fulfils all God's plans and preparation over centuries of history and the things God announced that he would do through the prophets.

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."* (Matthew 5:17) The "Law and the Prophets" means the whole Old Testament. Jesus is not just fulfilling a few occasional predictions, a few words. He is bringing into reality all that God has planned, all that he has prepared for and announced. He fulfils the Old Testament sacrificial system; he fulfils all that the temple stood for - God presence with his people; he is the ultimate King; the ultimate priest; and ultimate prophet who brings God's word.

It would be easy to think God had plan A to make Israel a holy people for himself. But that plan failed so he went to plan B and sent Jesus. NO. Jesus is the fulfilment of plan A. All God has been doing. With our holiday, it is not that I got sick of looking at Trip Advisor and talking to travel agents and decided to take a holiday instead! All of that was necessary preparation for the holiday.

If we want to understand Jesus we need to understand the Old Testament and how he brings what God has been preparing to reality. So here Matthew says, ²² *All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet...* (1:22)

Jesus' life fulfils about 60 prophecies written hundreds of years before he came. Fulfilling all these prophecies proves that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of God. Who else could fulfil so many of these predictions? But it also helps us understand what Jesus has done for us. These fulfilments are much more than just proof texts.

2. Fulfilling Isaiah 7:14

Today we look at these words about Jesus' birth. Matthew says, ²² *All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet:* ²³ *"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").* (Matthew 1:22-23) These words are taken from Isaiah 7:14.

But what was Isaiah saying? Remember after King Solomon Israel split from Judah. Now Israel has joined with Aram (Syria) and they were attacking Judah. Ahaz, the king of Judah, planned to ask the superpower of the time, Assyria, to come and help him. Isaiah tells him not to rely on Assyria but to trust God to rescue them. Ahaz refuses to listen and does ask Assyria to help. So these words are Isaiah's response to King Ahaz.

¹⁴ *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.* ¹⁵ *He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject*

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the wrong and choose the right, ¹⁶ for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. ¹⁷ The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria.” (Isaiah 7:14-17)

The sign for Ahaz is:

- A virgin - the Hebrew word means “young woman of marriageable age” rather than specifically a virgin. One would expect in those days that she would be a virgin. However the word in the Greek Old Testament does mean “virgin”.
- Will give birth to a son
- He will be called “Emmanuel” (which means God with us)
- Before he is 12 years old Aram and Israel will be laid waste (see verse 16)
- AND Assyria will attack Judah. Curds and honey are food when agriculture has been destroyed as 7:18-25 makes clear.

Assyria will destroy Israel and Aram and carry their people into exile, but then they will attack Judah because Ahaz did not trust God.

We see here the failure of Old Testament kings. They did not trust and obey God. So we see the need for a new righteous King, a Messiah, as we saw last week. We see God’s judgment on his Old Testament people for unfaithfulness. Soon they also will be taken into exile by Babylon.

But we see an ongoing hope; the boy, Emmanuel, is a sign God is with us. It is not clear who this boy was in Isaiah’s time. The name appears twice in the next chapter of Isaiah.

*“The king of Assyria with all his pomp...
will sweep on into Judah, swirling over it,
passing through it and reaching up to the neck.
Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land,
Immanuel!”* (Isaiah 8:7-8)

Assyria will devastate much of the land of Judah. The land is called “Emmanuel’s land.” But then we are told that God will save his people.

⁹ *Raise the war cry, you nations, and be shattered!*

Listen, all you distant lands.

Prepare for battle, and be shattered!

Prepare for battle, and be shattered!

¹⁰ *Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted;*

propose your plan, but it will not stand,

for God is with us. (“Emmanuel”) (Isaiah 8:9-10)

The passage looks forward to a time when God will save, time when it will be clear that God is with us. The prophecy is fulfilled by the birth of a boy in Isaiah’s time, a boy they name Emmanuel as a sign to King Ahaz. But it is fulfilled in a much greater way in the birth of Jesus. Jesus is not just a sign of God’s presence; he is in fact God come into this world to be with us. And he was in fact born of a virgin, his mother Mary.

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3. Virgin birth

I guess you have all had this happen. You are in a sound sleep in middle of the night then there is a thump or some noise. You wake up with a start. Perhaps you aren't sure what woke you. You are now wide awake listening for any noise. Is someone trying to break in?

We had it happen a few weeks ago. We were sound asleep when there was a thump. We were wide awake, but we immediately knew what it was. We had the grandkids at home for a sleepover. One of them had fallen out of bed. We put her back to bed and everything was all right.

But it is something startling, it wakes you up. It makes you alert, attentive to what is happening.

We know the story of Christmas so well we tend to take it for granted. We can easily sleep through it. Matthew wants to wake us up. He wants us to be attentive to these startling facts. The coming of Jesus into the world is incredible but it is something real - God has broken into history.

Can we really believe that Jesus was born by a virgin? We know how babies are born. They aren't brought by stork! Nor are they found under a cabbage leaf! You need a father and mother. Is a Virgin birth possible?

A strong piece of evidence for his virgin birth is the fact they would not have made the story up. In America 40% of births are to unmarried women. Today so many children are born outside of marriage we aren't shocked when it happens.

But in Jesus' time it was a terrible scandal. We see that when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant he sought to divorce her. He decided to call off the marriage. It is out of kindness that he doesn't haul her before a court. He plans to divorce her quietly not publically. It is too shameful a thing and would bring great disgrace.

You would never invent this story if it wasn't true but Matthew emphasises that this is what happened. He says it fulfils prophecy: *The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son* (1:23), and he tells us Joseph *"did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son"*. (1:25)

How did it happen?

Matthew 1:18 tells us, *This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.* Then Joseph is told, *"What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."* (1:20) The conception is by the power of God's Holy Spirit. The God who created all life in the beginning has brought about this new life in Mary's womb.

Here is the first startling fact. This is no ordinary birth. It is a supernatural event. We need to sit up and ponder what is going on.

Why is it important to believe in a virgin birth?

a) It means that Jesus has a divine nature. He is indeed Emmanuel, God with us. If it had been a natural birth Jesus would be just a man. But he is more than just a man, a king descended from David, he really has a divine nature, so that salvation is from God, not a human achievement

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b) But it is important that he was born of a woman. This shows that he is truly human as well. He has a real human nature. He came to share our life and he came to represent us to God. He is the perfect bridge between God and humans.

c) Being born of the Holy Spirit means he is sinless. He didn't inherit our fallen nature which would have happened if he had had a natural birth.

This all means he is the perfect Saviour. The virgin birth shows he is true God and true man who can offer a perfect sacrifice for our sin.

4. God with us

In the Old Testament the enormous and glorious temple built by Solomon was the symbol of God's presence with his people. The temple with its ritual of sacrifices and priests was the way people connected to God. But Jesus has fulfilled all that. He is not just a symbol of God's presence; he is truly God with us, Emmanuel. The disciples experienced that as they walked and talked with Jesus. Just imagine it!! ...walking with God on earth.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel Jesus promises, *"Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* (Matthew 28:20) We are no longer in the time of planning and preparation. We are now in the time of fulfilment. We are on the way. The holiday has begun.

His presence is not limited to a building. He is with us wherever we are, whatever situation we are in - he is there. He is with us as we gather in his name. He is with us always, for all time.

He is Emmanuel, God with us.