**The conception of Jesus Christ**

Text: Matthew 1:18-24

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**Scriptures:** Isaiah 7:10-14; Luke 1.26-38; Matthew 1:18-24

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 238, 349, 139, 249, 136

**Series:** Advent (#2)

**Theme:** The supernatural conception of Jesus, Immanuel, within the virgin Mary who was betrothed to Joseph, a descendant of David.

**Proposition:** From the smallest of beginnings, God does great works.

**Introduction**

There’s an old riddle or paradox about which came first: the chicken or the egg. The Greek philosopher Aristotle applied his learned mind to this question back in the fourth century B.C. We know that chickens lay eggs, but also that chickens hatch from eggs. The ‘chicken and egg’ question is about origins and seeks to find the initial cause of, in this case, domestic poultry. Did you know that all sexually reproducing species make eggs? That is 99.9% of all organisms that have cells with a nucleus.

In human beings, ordinarily, a fertilised egg results from the union of a female egg (or ovum) and a male gamete (or sperm). Each one of us, like almost all human beings, begin life as a single cell; a fertilised egg from a woman called a ‘zygote’. We don’t remain long as zygotes, but after about four days from conception, our single cell rapidly divides into two, then four and so on, ordinarily growing within a mother’s womb as her child. However, there have been three people in history whose origin is certainly different from everyone else.

Adam began his life as a fully formed adult male. God supernaturally formed him from the ‘*dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature*’ (Gen 2:7). Adam came before the human egg. Eve began her life as a fully formed adult female. God supernaturally formed her by taking one of Adam’s ribs when He had put him to sleep and from this living material, he made the woman (Gen 2:22). Eve came before the first fertilised human egg.

The third human being with a completely unique origin is Jesus Christ, as God reveals in His Word, today from Matthew 1:18-24. We’ll look at this truth today under three headings:

1. Mary was pregnant
2. Joseph was righteous
3. God was at work
4. **Mary was pregnant (v18)**

Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy, showing the family line of Joseph going back to Abraham. The words in 1:1 ‘the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ’ could equally well be translated ‘the book of the origin of Jesus Christ’. Similarly, the word ‘birth’ in verse 18, could also be translated ‘origin’. Matthew writes: “*Now the* ***birth*** *(origin) 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*”.

These words likely have much less impact on us than they did on Matthew’s first Jewish readers almost 2,000 years ago. Most, if not all, of us are familiar with the true story of the conception and birth of Jesus. Also, in our 21st century western world it is by no means as shocking and socially unacceptable now for a woman to be pregnant when she is not married. By this, I do not mean to imply that pregnancy outside of marriage is now somehow more acceptable to God than it was previously (His will has not changed), just that our culture is not the same as that of the community in which Mary and Joseph lived.

Also, what we understand by an engagement of a man and a woman is not the same as the betrothal of Joseph to Mary. For first century Jews, betrothal was a much more serious and binding commitment than engagement-to-be-married is today. Back then there were two major events for a couple joining together in marriage: the betrothal and the wedding. These were separated by a period of time during which the two individuals were considered to be effectively husband and wife although they did not live together and did not have any physical, that is sexual, relationship. During this period of time they were under strict obligations of faithfulness towards one another. In Israel’s Old Testament civil law, unfaithfulness by a betrothed woman was punishable by death (Deut 22:23, 24). On the wedding day the groom would come for his bride, and take her back to his house for the marriage feast.

We see this pattern mirrored in God’s unfolding plan to redeem His chosen people. Through the prophet Hosea, the Lord says to Israel: *"I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, In lovingkindness and in compassion, And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD”* (Hosea 2:19-20). In the future, as we, brothers and sisters come into the Lord’s dwelling place in the New Heavens and New Earth, then will come the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9).

Mary’s pregnancy would have seemed to indicate her unfaithfulness to Joseph, but it was most certainly not, as Matthew writes ‘*she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit*’. A single celled zygote had presumably arisen inside her as a result of one of her eggs becoming a human being, but without any involvement from Joseph or any other man. Matthew doesn’t provide us with any more detail other than that the conception of Jesus was ‘from the Holy Spirit’, but Luke records the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary **before** she became pregnant.

The angel Gabriel had appeared almost 600 years previously - to Daniel (8:15-27; 9:20-27). An angel is a heavenly messenger who either delivers revelation from God to humans, carries out God’s will in other ways, praises God or guards His throne. Gabriel said to Mary “*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).

Through the supernatural, creative action of the divine person of the Holy Spirit, Mary became pregnant with the human and divine person of the Son of God. For about 1900 years after this event, most Christians accepted this virgin birth without hesitation or doubt. Since that time, some have debated and questioned this unique event precisely because it is not the way that this natural creation works. Now, although the gospel writers and Christians over most of the past 2,000 years have not had access to the depth of scientific knowledge about human biology that we have today, they were not stupid and they wanted to know the truth. The gospel writers recorded historical events. They could talk to Mary, and likely others who had known Joseph. They knew that Mary’s pregnancy was not due to her unfaithfulness, but was the fulfilment of God’s plan through a godly woman who was willingly submissive to the Lord’s will for her life. For Joseph though, at first, his betrothed’s pregnancy was deeply troubling, which brings us to our second point.

1. **Joseph was righteous (v19-21, 24-25)**

Matthew doesn’t record how, and exactly when, Joseph found out that Mary, the woman he was betrothed to, was pregnant, he simply writes ‘*before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit*’. By this stage, the human cells of baby Jesus would have divided many times so that he was large enough for it to be obvious to others that Mary was pregnant. In the small township of Nazareth the conception of a child out of wedlock would have caused a great scandal. There would have been no anonymity in such a close community, once word got out about Mary’s condition, everyone would know.

It’s clear from Matthew’s account that Joseph did not know what had happened to Mary; presumably she had not told him about the visit she had received earlier from the angel Gabriel. In that culture, in a situation like Joseph’s, a man could readily publicly expose a betrothed bride, presumed to have been unfaithful. He could have brought a lawsuit against her or issued her with a bill of divorce before witnesses.

Joseph was a kinder, more loving and gentle man than that. Matthew writes ’*And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly*’ (1:19). Joseph was a righteous man, not perfect like Jesus, but a virtuous man of good morals and good reputation. He would most likely have met the Biblical requirements for elder or deacon; ‘above reproach’, ‘respectable’, ‘gentle’, ‘dignified’ (1 Tim 3:1-8). He didn’t want to harm Mary, but he saw the need to divorce her in keeping with the law of Moses (Matt 19:1-9). This would have likely been a heart-breaking, extremely difficult decision for him to make.

Joseph clearly thought about this deeply. He was not a rash man, instead he wisely thought things through carefully before he acted (ref. Prov 22:3). Matthew writes: “*But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream*” (1:20). As he was pondering his difficult situation, presumably at night, an angel appeared to him in a dream and said “*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*”. These would have been stunning, but also very comforting, words for Joseph.

The title given to Joseph; ‘son of David’ indicates that it would be through him that the son Jesus would legally be a rightful descendant of King David. Because of this, Jesus would be able to fulfil the Lord’s covenant promise made to David through Samuel 1000 years before: “*I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever*” (2 Sam 7:13). Humanly, Jesus would inherit the right to become the promised Davidic King, but without also inheriting the corruption of sin through the male line down from Adam (Rom 5:12). The angel confirms Mary’s honourable faithfulness. She had not been with another man; her pregnancy was a result of the supernatural creative work of the Holy Spirit.

What should Joseph do now with this amazing information? The angel instructs him ‘*do not fear to take Mary as your wife*’. The obstacle to the righteous man Joseph was removed. He would not be acting unjustly to proceed with his planned marriage to Mary. He could do so with a clear conscience. I can only imagine the wonder, the joy and the relief of Joseph when he woke from his dream.

Before he did so, though, the angel had one more thing to reveal to Joseph, saying about the boy who was yet to be born: “*you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*” (1:21). We know that Joseph obeyed the angel of the Lord, because Matthew tells 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*” (Matt 1:24-25).

Joseph’s righteous character is further revealed later in his sharing with Mary in the circumcision and dedication of Jesus at the Jerusalem Temple (Luke 2:22-24). It is also seen twelve years later in his distress, together with Mary, when Jesus remained in the Temple after they started to return home to Nazareth without him (Luke 2:41-52). After that time, Joseph does not appear in the gospels. We do know enough about him to be confident that he was a righteous man, a devoted husband and father. It is likely that he died before Jesus began his public ministry. Through the lives of both Mary and Joseph, God was at work, which brings us to our third point.

1. **God was at work (v22-23)**

There are patterns that the Bible reveals in the different ways that God has worked in His creation over history. One of those patterns is that He is often pleased to use small, seemingly insignificant, people and circumstances to do really big, important and remarkable things. For example, when the Israelite exiles returned to their homeland from captivity in Babylon, the Jerusalem temple was broken down and they faced life in a very small remnant of the much larger kingdom that Israel had once been under David and Solomon.

As the foundation of the temple was being laid Ezra records that ‘*old men who had seen the first house wept with a loud voice*’ (Ezra 3:12) – things were so much smaller than before. Through the prophet Zechariah, the Lord said “*whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel*” (Zech 4:10). Zerubbabel was a royal descendant in the line of David, being the grandson of Jehoiachin who was taken away to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 597BC. Whilst he was governor of Judah (Hag 1:1) under the Persian King Darius, there is no evidence that he was ever crowned king (even though Zech 6:9-14 may reflect the Israelites’ wish to do so).

Earlier in the history of Israel, the evil King Ahaz reigned for 16 years, even burning his own son as an offering at one point (2 Ki 16:3). It was to this ruler, whose only seeming significance was the extent of his evil, that the Lord sent a puzzling prophesy through Isaiah. Even though you may not know much about Ahaz, you have likely heard these words of that prophecy: “*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel*” (Isaiah 7:14). Nobody is really sure who these words referred to for the time of Ahaz. Biblical prophecy often has both a near fulfilment closer to the time and a further, later, fulfilment or even multiple further fulfilments over time. Perhaps the ‘near’ fulfilment referred to Ahaz’s wife and her child Hezekiah (2 Ki 18:2)? Or perhaps Isaiah’s wife and her child Maher-shalal-hashbaz? Neither of these suggestions fit the prophesy well. This foretelling of the future seems like a small, insignificant, enigmatic detail embedded in the midst of Isaiah’s ministry.

It is only when we come to Matthew’s gospel that the monumental significance of these few words becomes clear. Remember that helpful phrase “*The New Testament is in the Old concealed, the Old Testament in the New is revealed*”. These words of Isaiah to King Ahaz ultimately refer to Jesus, the son of the virgin Mary. Within this small prophesy, the unique person of Jesus Christ is revealed. He is a human being, conceived in the womb of a woman. He is the long promised ‘seed of the woman’ who would conquer Satan (Gen 2:15) without the ‘seed of a man’. He is ‘God with us’ – the meaning of the name Immanuel – as Matthew explains in verse 23. Later, John will reflect in his gospel on the astounding revelation of God in the person of His Son when he writes: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14).

Mary and Joseph were both godly people who desired to be obedient to the Lord they loved; but they were, in and of themselves, quite ordinary. We could say they were ‘small people’ of little apparent significance in themselves yet the Lord used them to bring about His mighty work of sending His Son to become a human being in a human family. At His second coming, Jesus will dramatically ‘*come with the clouds*’ (Rev 1:7) appearing to all people has he comes to this earth out of the heavens. In contrast, at His first coming, He came invisibly as a single living human cell, supernaturally created in a woman’s womb as the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary. God often begins His great works from the smallest of beginnings. Remember this as you serve the Lord in what at times may seem like insignificant ways.

So, before I finish, what came first, the chicken or the egg? I’d say the chicken, based on Genesis 1:21: “God created …every living creature that moves…every winged bird according to its kind”. Like Adam and Eve, the first two chickens were likely specially made by God – without needing to hatch out of eggs. God is most certainly able to work **both within** the natural order of this world, but **also outside** of those patterns when He does things supernaturally, as He did with the conception of Jesus Christ.

From the smallest of beginnings, God does great works. The greatest work of all is that of saving His people from their sins through His son, the unique God-man Jesus. Come to Him in repentance and faith and you will be saved. “*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him*” (1 John 5:1).

AMEN.