Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Hands up if you know what the initials BVM refer to? They refer to the Blessed Virgin Mary. They are most often heard in the Roman Catholic Church, because of the place she holds in their theology. And the title recognizes two things about Mary: First, after Mary found out that she was with child, she visited her relative, Elizabeth, and when she told her what had happened, she said, “*For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed*.” And a vital part of the accounts of Mary’s pregnancy in the Bible is that she was a virgin when she became pregnant. And this means that she had not had sex with a man. So, this is why she is sometimes spoken of as the Blessed Virgin Mary.

But is the *virgin* birth really that important? Some say that it is not. For example, one survey of Americans found that they are three times more likely to believe in the virgin birth than in evolution. And commenting on this statistic, one author said, “The faith in the Virgin Birth reflects the way American Christianity is becoming less intellectual and more mystical over time.” So, in his view, belief in the virgin birth is for people who do not like to use their brains. The heretic Anglican Bishop John Spong calls the virgin birth the "entrance myth" and the resurrection the "exit myth" of Christianity. He believes that the virgin birth is a made up story about how Jesus arrived and the resurrection is a made up story about how He left. And I couldn’t help but agree with the person who referred to Spong’s views in an article and said, “If only Spong were a myth”! But the question is, Is the virgin birth an essential part of the Gospel that we must believe?

Last Sunday we read the Athanasian Creed together. And the Creed says, “It is necessary to everlasting salvation that [a person] … believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ… This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.” And the Creed teaches the virgin birth. But do we really have to believe this in order to be saved?

Well, some of you will have heard Pastor Alistair Begg’s hilarious and delightful account of the thief on the cross arriving at heaven’s gates for his entrance interview. He never went to a Bible study, he never got baptized, he never did a church membership class. And when the angel asked him if he was clear on the doctrines of Scripture and justification by faith alone, he said he had never heard them in his life. And I am sure his response would have been the same if he was asked about the virgin birth. “Don’t know what you are talking about.” So, the angel asked him, “Then on what basis are you here?” And the thief replied, “Well, the man on the middle cross, He said I could come.” Now, Begg’s key point is that salvation is by grace alone, not by any of our works. And the thief did believe in Jesus, even if he knew nothing about the virgin birth. So, a better way to ask our key question today is: **Can a person, once they know the Bible's teaching about the virgin birth, reject it and still be saved**? And the answer to that question, as we shall see today, is no. If you know about the virgin birth, you cannot reject it and be saved. And that is because **the Salvation of Sinners Requires a Sinless Saviour. And this makes the virgin birth vital**. And we will see the vitality of the virgin birth in relation to **theology**, **biology**, and **soteriology**. They will be the three points of the sermon

1. So, first of all, the vitality of the virgin birth in relation to **theology**.

* 1. And by theology we mean the fulfilment of Old Testament Prophecy. When the wise men who followed the star arrived in Jerusalem, they went to the royal palace to ask where the child born King of the Jews was. And King Herod summoned the Jewish scholars and asked them where the Christ was to be born. And do you remember their answer? They said that according to the prophet, the Christ would be born in Bethlehem. So, it was vital that Jesus be born in Bethlehem. If He was not, the Bible would be lying. And where was Jesus born, boys and girls? In Bethlehem. But there are other prophecies about the birth of Jesus in the Old Testament. We read one of them earlier. It is that rather strange episode where King Ahaz was given a sign that a prophecy of invasion would certainly happen. And that sign was that a virgin would conceive and bear a son, who would be called Immanuel.
     1. Now, when we have looked at Old Testament prophecy before, we have talked about the concept of **multiple or more than one fulfilment**. And this prophecy of Isaiah is one example of that.
        1. For it was, first of all, a sign for King Ahaz. When he saw a virgin birth it would show him that the Lord’s word would come true.
           1. And if you look over at **chapter 8:3-4**, you read what is generally viewed as the first fulfilment of the prophecy. Isaiah says there, “*And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said to me, ‘Call his name Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz,’ for before the boy knows how to cry 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria*.”
           2. And according to Bible scholars, **the prophetess** of verse 3 may well have been known as ‘the virgin,’ because she was not married.
           3. And you might know, also, that **when the Bible is talking about sex** it usually uses terms like “lay with,” or “went into,” or even “knew,” but it all it says here is that Isaiah went to the prophetess, and she conceived.
           4. And notice also that the words of **verse 4** are very similar to the description of the sign-son back in 7:16 – “*before the boy knows*…” etc.
           5. And also, if you look down at **verse 8**, you see another reference to “Immanuel,” and in **verse 10**, “*For God is with us*,” which is what Immanuel means.
           6. So, one way or the other, this was an unusual pregnancy, a virgin birth. And this made it the *first* fulfilment of what Isaiah prophesied in chapter 7.
        2. But while the birth of that child fulfilled, in part, what Isaiah had prophesied, it was not a true, physical, virgin birth. And God was not truly with His people, in the fullest sense of the Word. And that is why the second and fullest fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy is the virgin birth of Jesus. And Matthew states this in verse 22: the virgin birth of Jesus “*took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.*” And then he quotes Isaiah 7:14. So, the virgin birth of Jesus was *necessary* or vital to fulfil Isaiah’s prophecy.
     2. And while we are on this, it may interest you to know that if you ask a religious Jew today about Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:22-23, he or she will tell you that the word translated as virgin in Isaiah most commonly just means an unmarried woman. And so, they view Isaiah 8 as the *only* fulfilment of the Isaiah 7. They say that the virgin birth of Jesus is just a made up story that is read back into Isaiah 7. But you know what? When the Jews translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek, which they did about 150 years *before* Jesus was born, they used the Greek word that literally means a physical virgin! They knew exactly what Isaiah had in view. It was only after the Gospel accounts of the virgin birth of Jesus were written that they began to empty Isaiah 7:14 of any notion of literal virginity in favour of just an married woman!
     3. But again, our key point here is that in order to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah, the virgin birth of Jesus was vital.
  2. But there is a second aspect of the vital theology of the virgin birth that we have already explored in earlier Lord’s Day sermons. In Lord’s Days 5 and 6, we saw that the mediator we sinful human beings need must be **truly human, truly righteous, and true God**. In order to represent us as humans, He must be truly human. And if he was sinful, he would not be able to pay for his own sins, let alone the sins of others, so he must also be truly righteous/sinless/perfect. And also, because the penalty of sin is God’s *eternal* wrath, the Mediator cannot be just human; he must also be true God.

1. So, let’s now, in the second place, think about the vitality of the virgin birth in relation to **biology**. For it is the biology of the virgin birth, the actual process by which Jesus was conceived, that satisfies or fulfils the theology we laid out in the first point.
   1. And I will try and be as delicate as possible here. But most of us will know that for pregnancy to occur, there needs to be sperm from the father and an egg from the mother. This is basic biology. But our text is explicitly clear that Joseph and Mary had not come together, which means they had not had sex. And yet, Mary was pregnant. So, how was that possible? Well, Matthew explains in verse 18 that she was “*with child from the Holy Spirit*.”
      1. And we are given **more information about this in the Gospel of Luke**. And do you boys and girls remember what Luke’s job was? He was a doctor. So, he knew about babies and biology. And probably having spoken to Mary himself, he learned that after the angel told Mary that she was with child, she said to the angel, “*How can this be since I am a virgin?*” So, Mary also understood basic biology. And the answer of the angel is beautifully mysterious but also wonderfully important to what we are considering; He said, “*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*.”
         1. Now, I have called this point the biology of the virgin birth. And I have done that to emphasize Mary’s virginity. But what we are talking about here is not just biology; it is also miracle and mystery! Somehow, the Holy Spirit produced life in Mary.
         2. And this should not surprise us in any way. In the very **opening verses of the Bible**, we are told that God created the heavens and the earth. And initially the “*earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep*.” But then we read that “*the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*” And soon after that, life was created! Because that is what the Spirit does; He creates life, physical and spiritual. It says this also in **Psalm 104:30**. When we sing it a few moments ago, we sung, “Your Spirit, O Lord, makes life to abound.”
         3. And so, as the Holy Spirit “overshadowed” or “hovered over” Mary, one of her eggs was miraculously fertilized by the power of the Holy Spirit, with the result that a living embryo was implanted within her womb. And that living embryo was Jesus.
      2. And this meant that Isaiah’s prophecy was fulfilled. And it also meant that because His mother was Mary, He was truly human. Flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood. **Hebrews 2:14** says, He is like His brothers and sisters “*in every respect,*” except for one thing, which is sin. And that is because He did not have a human father but was conceived by the Holy Spirit. So, the link with sin was interrupted; He was also truly righteous. And, we have seen in recent weeks that Jesus existed, eternally, as the Son of God, before He was conceived in Mary’s womb. So, here He was adding a human nature to His already existing divine nature. Therefore, He remained true God.
      3. And all this required the virgin birth. It is because of the virgin birth that Jesus Christ is true God and true man, and truly righteous. Take the virgin birth away and the whole structure of salvation falls apart. Or, to put it another way, if you have a problem with the virgin birth, then nothing that comes after it will make sense.
         1. In his book ‘*The Person of Christ*,’ Donald Macleod writes,

*The virgin birth is posted on guard at the door of [the New Testament]; and none of us must think of hurrying past it. It stands on the threshold of the New Testament, blatantly supernatural, defying our rationalism, informing us that all that follows belongs to the same order as itself and that if we find it offensive there is no point in proceeding further.*

* + - 1. And another commentator puts it like this:

*If we do not hold to the virgin birth despite the fact that the Bible asserts it, then we have compromised the authority of the Bible and there is in principle no reason why we should hold to its other teachings. Thus, rejecting the virgin birth has implications reaching far beyond the doctrine itself.*

* + - 1. You see, if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then He had a human father and He was not sinless and He was not God. And therefore, He was not the fulfilment of Isaiah 7 and not qualified to be our Mediator. And further than this, if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then the Bible teaches a lie.

1. But what the Bible teaches is the truth. Jesus *was* born of the virgin Mary. His birth *did* fulfil Scripture and He *is* truly human, truly righteous, and true God. And that means that He is able to save us sinners! And that is what we want to consider thirdly and briefly, as we look at the vitality of the virgin birth in relation to **Soteriology**. For soteriology is the study of how we are saved.

* 1. Our Lord’s Day says that as our Mediator, Jesus “removes from God’s sight my sin – mine since I was conceived.” And that is a really helpful way of explaining salvation. You see, God is perfectly holy. And that means that He cannot allow even the tiniest speck of unholiness into His presence. So, if we have any unholiness in us, it must first be removed from us. But the problem is that we cannot remove our own unholiness.
     1. It’s kind of like the time I was **working under my car**, and I dropped a blob of grease onto my shirt. So, I thought, if I just carefully put my fingers under the blob and picked it up, it won’t leave a big stain. So, that’s what I did. But because I was under the car and couldn’t see very well, I didn’t realize that my fingers were covered in grease. And that meant I just spread the grease around and made the stain much worse than it was.
     2. And that is our problem with sin. You see, sin is not just about the wrong things that we do; it is also about our nature. And we have a sinful nature eve before we commit sinful acts. In **Psalm 51:5**, David said, “*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me*.” And we looked at this in connection with Lord’s Day 3. Because Adam and Eve are the ancestors of all of us, the fall into sin “has so poisoned our nature that we are born sinners – corrupt from conception on.” From them, and our sinful father and sinful mother, we inherit a sinful nature, just like we inherit our looks and parts of our personality. And then on top of that is the huge pile of the sins we commit, all the commandments that we break or fail to keep, perfectly. And that is why we cannot remove all our sin.
  2. But the good news of salvation is that there is a way for our unholiness to be removed! Look at **verse 21**. That is where the angel said to Joseph about the baby in the virgin Mary’s womb, “*You are to call His name Jesus because He shall save His people from their sins*.” Because Jesus was truly human and true God, He was able to suffer God’s eternal wrath at our sin while He was on the cross and survive. And in so doing, He took the ‘glob of grease’ that is sin away from us and He turned away God’s anger toward us. And He could only do this because of the virgin birth *that made Him truly human as well as true God.*
  3. But that, by itself, was not enough. And here is where I have to mix up my cleaning metaphors :-). Those of you with **swimming pools** will know that the water gets dirty. And you test the water by putting a chemical strip in it. And I can’t remember the exact colours and chemicals, but there are some chemicals you do not want in the water and there are other chemicals that you do want in the water. So, if your chemical strip turns red, then there is too much acid, and the water is dirty. And if your chemical strip turns blue then there is not enough chlorine in the water. And there is no point telling the water to fix itself, because the water has an unclean nature. Someone else must add chemicals that remove the acid and add chlorine, so that the water is clean.
     1. And this is the other part of what Jesus has done to save us. For not only was He truly human and true God, He was also truly righteous. He was able to do what we cannot do, which is to keep all God’s commandments, perfectly.
     2. And the theological terms for this is **the active obedience of Jesus** – His choice, every second of every day, to resist temptation and to fully obey the law of God. What we fail to do, He did.
     3. And so, we were the spiritual equivalent of a dirty swimming pool. And the sacrifice of Jesus removed our ‘acid’ sin stain. And then He puts His perfection into us, as ‘spiritual swimming pools,’ to make us righteous or perfect.
     4. And this **double exchange** is what is in view in **2 Corinthians 5:21**, where we read, “*For our sake [God] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin [So, He got our sin], so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God [We get His righteousness]*.” He takes our sin away and gives us His righteousness. So, now we can stand before God!
  4. And for you to have your sin removed and to receive His righteousness, you must believe that Jesus lived a perfect life, died on the cross, and rose again for the forgiveness of our sins. And this is only possible because of the virgin birth. It is why, once you know the Bible's teaching about the virgin birth, you cannot reject it and still be saved. The virgin birth is *vital* for salvation.

And earlier in the service, I heard you all say in the creed that you believe that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Did you really mean that? Well, we will soon praise the Lord for His virgin birth in our hymn of response! But His love for you, as seen in His virgin birth, is further reason also for you to show your love to Him with your obedience. Amen? Amen.