

The Baby Changed Everything

Matthew 1:18-25

Introduction

The following words appeared in the December 1987 issue of Pulpit Helps Magazine. I think they are appropriate for the season.

What earthly monarch decreed or commanded, or even suggested, that all civilized people should date their calendars backward and forward, B.C. and A.D., from the birth of Christ?

History furnishes no clue to this question, for there never was such an edict. No such suggestion ever came from the lips or pen of any potentate.

There is an unsung miracle in the fact that the birth of a babe in a stable has changed the calendars of the world. Each time we write a date we testify to the importance of the event from which that date is reckoned.

Christ did something to time. Everyone is born in a certain era of time over which he has no control. But when Eternity came to this earth and established His beachhead in Bethlehem, time was split in two.

From that moment on, all the periods of history have been divided before Christ (B.C.) and the period after Christ (A.D.), Anno Domini, the year of our Lord.

The only event great enough to be a landmark and time-measure for all civilization is the incarnation of the eternal Son of God. The divine Christ has left His signature on the ages. Even those who lift their puny pens in attack against Him, when they date their works of straw, unknowingly testify to Him as Lord of history.

If a jury of historians had to explain, on purely historical grounds, the letters A.D. and B.C., which now serve universally as the point from which civilized time is reckoned, they must report that "some force," mysterious in origin and independent of human will, but with range and energy sufficient to affect all civilized nations and persistent enough to run through all the centuries, had "somehow" put the impress of Christ's hand on all history.

The Baby changed everything.

With many minds focused on the birth of Christ during this season, let's go to one of the birth narrative passages of the Bible and refresh our minds with what it says.

(Read Matthew 1:18-25)

As we go back through this passage now, along with explaining the text, I want to emphasize three great facts about Jesus that we all need to know and remember.

(Read v. 18a)

Matthew doesn't describe the actual birth of Jesus in this passage as much as he describes the circumstances surrounding it. He speaks of Mary and Joseph's betrothal, the miraculous conception of the child, the understandable hesitation of Joseph to finalize the marriage, and the important fulfillment of one of many messianic prophecies. Since we typically look upon the conception and birth of a person as the beginning of his or her existence, we do need to first clarify a very important truth about Jesus...

1. He Existed Before His Birth.

Though He was not referred to by the name "Jesus" prior to His conception in Mary's womb or prior to His birth, the Bible tells us that Jesus existed long before the events described here. For instance, in John 1:1, the apostle says,

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... "

Then in verse 14 John tells us what he means by "the word."

"...And he Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father...."

"In the beginning," John says, long before His birth when He "became flesh and dwelt among us," Jesus was "with God."

Paul underscores Jesus' pre-birth existence in Colossians 1:13-17 when he tells us that Jesus was present and active in the creation itself. Speaking of Jesus, the Apostle says,

"And He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. For by Him all things are created, both in the heavens and on the earth, visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created by Him and for Him."

So when we refer to the birth of Jesus, we are not talking about His beginning, as we would be with humanity. We mean his incarnation, that is, His coming to earth to take the form of flesh. Jesus existed before His earthly conception and birth.

Why is this important? Because the Bible claims that Jesus is full deity. Paul said in Colossians 2:9, "In Him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form." One of the characteristics of deity is eternity. If Jesus came into being at His conception like all of mankind, then He could not be God. This is one of the things wrong with Mormonism and other cults that reduce Jesus to the level of a mere humanity. All of the so-called "gods" in their doctrine of "eternal progression" had a beginning. Jesus, just like His father, had no beginning.

The familiar words of Isaiah 9:6 are appropriate here: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." (KJV) Some of the strange circumstances surrounding His birth come next in Matthew's description.

(Read v. 18b)

When a woman was "betrothed" in that day, she was, as we might say, "engaged to be married." But it went much further than that. Betrothal was a binding arrangement that could only be broken by divorce or death. If it were prematurely terminated, fines could be levied. The arrangement of betrothal was undertaken by a friend or agent representing the bridegroom or by the parents representing the bride. It was confirmed by oaths and was celebrated with presents given to the bride and sometimes to the bride's parents. A feast was held to honor the occasion. In some cases a ring was given to the bride as a token of love and fidelity. A couple was actually referred to as husband and wife during the betrothal period. You'll note that verse 19 calls Joseph Mary's "husband" even though they did not live together physically. Betrothal usually lasted one year. It served as a probationary period to insure the chastity of the bride – and that has immediate bearing on what Matthew records here. It was during this solemn period of probation that Mary's pregnancy was discovered.

(Read v. 18c)

There is a storm of unspoken turmoil behind those brief words. But before we talk about it, let's get a good description of the events that led up to the discovery that Mary was pregnant. We'll need to leave Matthew for a few moments and go over to Luke.

(Read Luke 1:26-37)

It was not a total surprise to Mary then, when she discovered she was pregnant, though it was amazing to her. Perhaps it was even hard to believe. But probably the hardest part was the dilemma of how she was going to convey this news to Joseph. No matter what she might say or how she might present the news, it was going to be very difficult for him to believe her story. In fact, at first he didn't believe it.

We don't know for sure how Mary informed Joseph that she was with child – whether she attempted to tell him right away or waited until it was more obvious. The Holy Spirit has spared us from that much invasion of the couple's privacy. Whatever she said, from Joseph's vantage, it was just too much for their relationship. As greatly as he loved her, this was more than he could bear. Dumbfounded, disappointed, feeling betrayed, Joseph decided that divorce was the only course of action.

Removed as we are from the couple's personal feelings and also knowing the whole story, it is easy to feel a little disappointed at Joseph's quick response for divorce. One would think trust would have been a bit more evident. But then again, it isn't every day that a man's fiancé claims she is pregnant by

miraculous conception! Yet feelings of betrayal weren't the only consideration motivating Joseph's decision. As a descendant of David, he was responsible for keeping the bloodline pure for the coming of Messiah. It may be that this was the final deciding factor that brought him to the decision to break it off. (Read v. 19)

Though divorce seemed the only thing to do, Joseph just couldn't bring himself to publicly disgrace Mary or expose her to ridicule. He loved her too much for that. According to the Law of Moses, the procedure for divorce was very simple.

The betrothed groom was to give his bride a written notice in the presence of two witnesses. Joseph decided to do this quietly so as to cause Mary as little heartache as possible. No doubt, later, he would be glad he did.

Joseph was living by the teaching of Proverbs 11:13: "He who is faithful of spirit conceals a matter," and Proverbs 17:9: "He who covers a transgression seeks love."

When you truly love someone there is no joy in exposing his or her sin before others. Indeed we see such love in Joseph trying to shield Mary even though he was deeply hurt.

OK. We've spoken of Joseph. What about Mary? How did she feel through all this?

Have you ever been accused of something you didn't do – or blamed for something that wasn't your fault? What if the situation were such that there was absolutely no way to defend yourself? No truthful explanation that Mary could advance made sense to the rational mind.

To the soon-to-be mother of Jesus it must have seemed that her whole world was caving in! How could she be at the center of God's will with things going so badly? Is this what you get when you submit to the will of God?

Perhaps we should pause here to note that difficult circumstances don't necessarily mean we are outside the will of God. If we have done what is right and suffer for it, it doesn't mean that God has turned against us or that we are outside His will. He still has a plan for us. We just need to hang on while He works through His plan.

That's just what Mary did. She committed herself to God and hung on. I think those words of Mary that we read in Luke bear repeating here: "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word."

"I will do your will, Lord, come what may."

Whatever her struggle during this difficult time, she was vindicated, at least in the site of her beloved husband – perhaps by the same angel that had brought her the news.

(Read v. 20-21)

Did Joseph fully understand that this child was the long awaited Messiah? I don't know. In fact, the Scripture gives up very few details about Joseph, and through it all, not a single word of his is recorded. Whenever I consider his contribution to the story of Jesus, I find that I come up with more questions than answers. I do know that he knew as much as the angel had told him: "She will bear a Son; and you shall call his name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins."

That brings us to the second great truth about Jesus in this passage...

2. He Came to Save Us from Our Sins.

Did Jesus come to show us how to live? He certainly did that when He walked the earth. Did He come to show us what God is like? He did that, too. Did He come to set up His church? Yes, he did that, too. But the one supreme purpose for which He came was to save us from our sins. That is what the angel said and that is also reflected in the name He was given. "Jesus" means "Savior." It is derived from a word that means, "to save." Jesus came to save His people from their sins. As the popular hymn goes: "Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled."

We need to be saved from our sins because God is a holy God and under His law, sin, even the slightest sin, always incurs the death penalty. Said another way; a life is due and payable whenever a sin is committed. That is what was behind the blood sacrifices of the Old Testament. The sinner was charged

with death because of his sin but an animal could be offered as a substitute – animal blood for human blood – the life of an animal for the life of a human.

The thought of an innocent animal dying for a guilty human is not a pretty picture. It was not intended to be.

But the animal's life wasn't really sufficient to take away human sin. That's because animal life does not have the same value as human life. Animal sacrifice was merely a temporary fix – a stopgap measure put into place until the fullness of time when God's real solution – Jesus - would come along. So when the animal died in place of the human, the sin wasn't really taken away. That was the situation all through the Old Testament until the birth of Jesus. And that was the purpose for which Jesus was born. He was, as we see here, above all else, born to save us from our sins, that is, to die on our behalf and be the sacrifice that would take away our sins. In God's world there is only one way to take away sin. Life must be forfeited. Blood must be shed.

Later, John the Baptist would refer to Jesus as, "...the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." So you see, Mary's little baby was really God's little lamb who was born without spot or blemish, who would continue throughout His earthly life without sin so that His sacrifice would be effective, and who would ultimately shed His blood to take away our sins.

Matthew now tells us how this marvelous birth story fits into the rest of the Scriptures.

(Read v. 22-23)

That brings us to a third great fact about Jesus in this passage...

3. He Had No Earthly Father.

Steven G. Cook relates that a few years ago, TV celebrity, Larry King of Larry King Live was asked, "If you could interview just one person in all of history, who would you like to interview?" He answered, "Jesus Christ." King was then asked, "What would you like to ask Him?" He answered, "Were you indeed virgin born?" Then he followed up his answer by saying, "The answer to this question would define history!"

It already has defined history, Larry!

But of course, not everyone recognizes this. In fact, the doctrine of the virgin birth is often ridiculed, not only by those who are ignorant of the content of the Bible but also by theologians in some leading seminaries.

I understand why people have trouble with the virgin birth today. Even Joseph and Mary had trouble with it. It took an angel to convince Joseph! The difficulty, of course, is with the supernatural. In the natural course of things, a virgin birth is impossible. Human life is conceived by a man and a woman, not by a woman alone.

Of course, once you start rejecting the supernatural you find you have all kinds of problems with the Bible. For instance, if you reject the idea that Jesus was born from a woman without a man, do you not also have to reject the teaching that Eve, the "mother of all the living," was produced from a man without a woman? And don't you also have to reject the teaching that Adam was produced without a man or a woman? And what about the existence of a God who had no origin at all? Once you make the decision to reject the supernatural, you find that you must reject much of the Bible's key teaching. In fact, you find that you can no longer accept the Bible as the word of God at all. And once you reject the word of God, how can you possibly hang onto the God of the Word?

Yet some folks claim that the Bible doesn't even teach a virgin birth. It's all a big misunderstanding, they say. The word translated "virgin" doesn't really mean "virgin." It means "young woman." According to this line of reasoning,

Matthew's quote of Isaiah 7:14 in this passage really should have been translated, "the young woman shall be with child."

So could it be true that this "virgin birth" idea is really just a misunderstanding? Let's plug that into the last two verses of this passage and see if it makes any sense.

(Read v. 24-25)

Now plug in "young woman" for "virgin."

"Joseph... took her as his wife, and kept her a young woman until she gave birth to a Son...."

Does that make any sense? Did Joseph have some magic remedy for aging so as to keep Mary a young woman? If he did I know a lot of women who would like to know about it! And why would the angel back in verse 20 appear to Joseph and tell him that the child conceived in Mary's womb was "of the Holy Spirit" if the child was really conceived by some mystery man other than Joseph? Was the angel involved in some kind of adultery cover-up? Perhaps you remember what Mary said in the Luke passage we read earlier after the angel told her she would conceive a child and name Him Jesus. She said, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" If "virgin" really means "young woman," what in the world was Mary asking the angel? "How can this be, since I am a young woman?" That doesn't make any sense! Young women conceive children all the time. Virgins don't.

Why stress this issue in our teaching? Why insist that those who deny it are wrong? Well, my friends...

Because if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then Matthew and Luke were grossly misinformed.

Because if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then the Word of God is not reliable.

Because if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then Mary was an adulteress and not the woman who the angel said, "found favor with God."(18)

Because if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then Joseph was a fool for believing Mary.

Because if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then He did not fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 and could not be the Messiah.

Because if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then He was merely the illegitimate son of a sinful woman.

Because if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then He either lied or was mistaken later when He told people He was the Son of God.

Because if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then He was not the Savior at all, but rather, He needed a savior just like all of us.

Because if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then you and I are still in your sins.

"A virgin birth? That's impossible!" Yes it is impossible, in the normal course of things. But this birth was anything but normal. That's why the angel clarifies, in Luke 1:37, "Nothing will be impossible with God."

Conclusion

Bruce Thielemann, in a sermon entitled, "Hark! The Herald Angels,"(19) shared the following story: Did you ever read Bret Harte's story, "The Luck of Roaring Camp?" Roaring Camp was supposed to be, according to the story, the meanest, toughest mining town in all of the West. More murders, more thefts - it was a terrible place inhabited entirely by men, and one woman who tried to serve them all. Her name was Cherokee Sal. She died while giving birth to a baby.

Well, the men took the baby, and they put her in a box with some old rags under her. When they looked at her, they decided that didn't look right, so they sent one of the men eighty miles to buy a rosewood cradle. He brought it back, and they put the rags and the baby in the rosewood cradle. And the rags didn't look right there. So they sent another of their number to Sacramento, and he came back with some beautiful silk and lace blankets. And they put the baby, wrapped around with those blankets, in the rosewood cradle.

It looked fine until someone happened to notice that the floor was so filthy. So these hardened, tough men got down on their hands and knees, and with their hardened and horny hands they scrubbed that floor until it was very clean.

Of course, what that did was to make the walls and the ceiling and the dirty windows without curtains look absolutely terrible. So they washed down the walls and the ceiling, and they put curtains at the windows. And now things were beginning to look as they should look. But of course, they had to give up a lot of their fighting, because the baby slept a lot, and babies can't sleep during a brawl. So the whole temperature of Roaring Camp seemed to go down. They used to take her out and set her by the entrance to the mine in her rosewood cradle so they could see her when they came up. Then somebody noticed what a dirty place that was, so they planted flowers, and they made a very nice garden there. It looked quite beautiful. And they would bring her, oh, shiny little stones and things that they would find in the mine. But when they would put their hands down next to hers, their hands looked so dirty. Pretty soon the general store was all sold out of soap and shaving gear and perfume. The birth of the baby changed everything... And so it was with the Christ Child. The baby changed everything.