

The Birth of Jesus: A Foretaste of What's to Come

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- [0 : 0 0] I want you to imagine it's a normal Sunday morning service. Everything is going as normal. You sit down after the third hymn, flick open your Bible to the sermon passage. When you hear the doors at the back open and someone come in, it's probably just someone in the welcome team coming in and finding their seats, so you don't bat an eyelid. But then at the corner of your eye, you spot something unusual. Making their way down this aisle here is a seven-foot-tall polar bear with a big sombrero, an orange and green stripy jumper, and a pair of big wellies. Yes. They come down the aisle. They sit next to Ian there, open up their Bible to the passage, and wait patiently for the rest of the service to unfold. You're not paying too much attention to the rest of the sermon, are you? I wouldn't blame you. I wouldn't be either. What is going on? It's good to welcome new people, and he's not eaten anyone yet.
- [1 : 2 6] So after the service, you muster all your courage and go and introduce yourself. Turns out his name's Freddy, and he's just moved into the area and is looking for a new church. He comes back in the evening, wearing the same outfit, sits in the same place. This time you manage to catch a few words of the sermon between the regular sideward glances. But Freddy comes back week after week. Comes back the next week, and the week after, and the week after that. And slowly, right, you get used, don't you, to having Freddy around. He's been coming along for two years now. And at this point, you don't even bat an eyelid. You give him a nod as he struts in, all this kind of ducking through the door so his sombrero doesn't get knocked off. You're on the welcome team, and someone new comes in. You give them a friendly welcome, take them in to help them find their seat. And they scream. Right?
- [2 : 3 4] They panic. They freeze with fear. And they turn to you and say, there's a seven-foot polar bear with a sombrero and an orange and green stripy jumper and some wellies sitting in your church. And you turn to them, slightly amused by their fear. Oh, yeah. That's just Freddy. I wonder what your reaction was when we read verse 18 of Matthew chapter 1 a few moments ago. Did you see a seven-foot-tall sombrero-wearing polar bear? Or did you think, that's just Freddy? When something becomes familiar to us, we start missing the shot, right? The surprise, the extraordinariness of it, don't we? If you were with us last week, you'll remember that Matthew opened his gospel with a genealogy that introduced us to Jesus, the Messiah, the son of Abraham, the son of David. It linked all the prophecies of the Old Testament with the kings of Israel and presented him as the fulfillment of them all.

[3 : 59] The Messiah is here, but there were a few breaks in the pattern, weren't there, through the genealogy. Where Matthew brought our attention to different things going on, to the Gentile woman brought into the line of Abraham, the son of David through his union with another man's wife.

But I wonder if you noticed that we left the biggest anomaly in this line completely untouched. In this repetitious genealogy of one man fathered another, look at what we get there in verse 16.

And Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

There's something very different there, isn't there? Matthew goes to great lengths to not say, Joseph, the father of Jesus.

But part of the reason we left that untouched last week is because it gets a comprehensive explanation, doesn't it, in today's passage. And the difference is made immediately clear when we get to the end of verse 18.

[5 : 26] 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.

That's not normal, is it? Jesus isn't the son of Joseph because Jesus is the son of God.

Jesus is the son of God. That's what verse 18 makes unmistakably clear, doesn't it? This was no ordinary man.

Joseph wasn't his father because he was conceived in the womb of the virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit. This was a human child, but this child is God.

It's a great thing that Christmas is such a major part of our calendars. But when we know the story so well, we can miss the shock of what's going on.

[6 : 44] Right? We get used to Freddy sitting here amongst us. But a seven-foot polar bear, being a regular attendee of Bon Accord, is barely, right, barely less astonishing than what we read in this account of Jesus' birth.

She was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. You're supposed to think, what? This isn't some biblical language that Matthew is using.

This is completely unprecedented and unexpected. The people were waiting for the Messiah, but they did not expect the Messiah to be God condescending himself to the flesh.

It might sound normal to people who have sat through 20 years of pre-Christmas Advent series in church. But to everyone else, including every original reader of Matthew's gospel, this is absolutely wild.

You tell me a virgin conceived a child through the Holy Spirit, the creator of heaven and earth. The infinite, eternal, omnipotent Son of God has confined himself to the womb of a virgin.

[8 : 08] And Matthew just brings it straight in there, doesn't he? I think that's kind of his point. He doesn't try and ease us in to his gospel narrative.

He doesn't try and present us with a reasonable, rational picture of Jesus that intellectuals can make sense of and then sneak in some of the harder-to-believe details later on.

If you measure it against every other case study of how people are born, this doesn't make sense. If you try and square with everything our species has learned about childbearing, this doesn't fit.

And that's exactly the point. Matthew fronts up with the most miraculous birth narrative this world has ever seen.

It is completely and utterly unique. There is nothing like it that happened before Matthew's time. Nothing like it has happened since. This isn't the son of Joseph being born.

[9 : 14] This is the son of God. And the beginning of Jesus' life on earth is a foretaste of what to expect from the rest of it. Here's a great quote by the late Dolan McLeod on the significance of where and why Matthew places the account of the virgin birth here.

He says, it stands guard on the threshold of the New Testament, and none of us must think of hurrying past it.

It is blatantly supernatural, defying our rationalism and informing us that all that follows belongs to the same order as itself.

And if we find it offensive, there is no point in proceeding any further. It's saying, if our faith staggers at the virgin birth, what's it going to make of the feeding of the 5,000, the stilling of the storm, the raising of Lazarus, the transfiguration, most of all, the resurrection, right?

Matthew begins his gospel with a virgin conceiving and ends it with an empty tomb. What's happening in this gospel is not here to be explained or rationalized by our finite little minds.

[10 : 43] It is to be marveled at in faith. And because God has become man from this moment, we can expect the unexpected.

If you're here this morning looking for a God that you can measure and contain and whose ways you can comprehend, you might as well close your Bible and go home.

If you want to be able to explain everything that Jesus does and everything that Jesus is, if you want to rationalize it, give up.

But if you want to stand in awe of who God is and what He has done for us, right? That is why I think Matthew immediately introduces us to this unfathomable miracle.

We're not supposed to get used to it. We're never supposed to think that's just Freddie. We're not supposed to make sense of it.

[11 : 52] We're supposed to stand in awe. Acknowledge that this is way beyond our understanding. And rejoice that God has chosen to become man, even if we are never able to fathom how.

Jesus the Messiah is God become man. So Jesus is the Son of God. But if you were with us last week when we looked at the first part of Matthew 1, that might raise a question.

If Jesus is God's Son, why did Matthew go to such great lengths in the genealogy to tell us that David's line got us to Joseph?

What's going on there? And that, I think, gets the heart of the real kind of big point that Matthew is getting across in these verses. Because I don't know if you noticed as we read through it, but these verses are mostly, aren't they, about what Joseph is doing.

I don't know if you picked that up as we went through. They're about what Joseph is doing. Because while Jesus is the Son of God, he is still the Son of David.

[13 : 18] Subheadings are not part of God's Word. So while they can be useful, take them with a pinch of salt. But the NIV's subheading here, right, nails the big picture of this section that we're dealing with this morning.

There's lots of amazing stuff in the details. But the story is mainly about Joseph accepting Jesus as his son.

I mean, Joseph's reaction to Mary being pregnant was exactly the same as anyone else's would be, wasn't it? The woman he is engaged to is pregnant.

And he knows he's not the father. There's only one reasonable, logical explanation, isn't there? Mary must have been unfaithful.

She might have pleaded her innocence to Joseph, but the evidence would have been quite literally growing in front of him. Not only is he within his right to break off the marriage, but he would have been expected to do so.

- [14 : 31] He wasn't a naive fool who just assumed a miracle must have occurred. He was a righteous and kind man who, in the face of overwhelming evidence, resolved to justly divorce Mary, but to kindly do it quietly.

And so that is what he had determined to do, right? This is the plan Joseph has set his mind on. If you look at the end of verse 19.

But then something changes, doesn't it? Something or someone changes his mind.

And that someone is none other than the angel of the Lord appearing to Joseph in a dream. The words of the angel completely change Joseph's mind, don't they?

He was set on doing one thing, and now he is determined to do another. This was obviously no kind of vague dream where you wake up and try and stitch the pieces together.

- [15 : 32] This was a message from God telling Joseph the information we've already been privy to in verse 18. And so Joseph, he embraces the social stigma that would have been inevitable.

He's going to get laughed at, mocked, ridiculed for his decision. But Joseph knows what he's heard from the angel. And so he takes Mary as his wife.

But that's not the only thing that the angel tells Joseph to do, is it? Just look at the end of verse 21 there. What's the instruction Joseph is given?

You are to give him the name Jesus. You are to give him the name. That matters, and it comes three times in just the next few verses.

You are to give him the name Jesus. End of verse 22. They will call him Emmanuel. End of verse 25. And he gave him the name. We'll get to the significance of the names in a moment.

- [16 : 47] But the emphasis is as much on who is doing the naming, isn't it? Take note when things are repeated in the Bible. Biblical authors, they don't waste their words.

So if they're repeating something, they want you to take notice. Three times Joseph, or at least Joseph and Mary together, are naming the child.

What's the big deal? What's the big deal? Well, if you name a child, you are accepting them as your own. I mean, we all name things that belong to us, don't we?

Not just our children, but our pets. People name their cars, their toys. I once had a friend who named their toothbrush. If I walked into your house and renamed your pet, you probably and rightly wouldn't take too kindly to it, would you?

You name it because it belongs to you. The only difference in Jesus' day was that the act of naming carried with it legal weight.

- [18 : 00] So Joseph, and look at how he's described in verse 20 by the angel. Joseph, the son of David, is taking the child in Mary's womb as his own.

That's not just some sort of sneaky way of slipping Jesus into the promised line. Jesus is as much the son of David as you are a child of God.

You're not a child of God because you share his DNA, but because he has taken you as his own. So here's a child born like no other, but here also is a child in whom we see the promises of God find their fulfillment.

That's what Matthew is desperate that we see. In being the son of David, in fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament, right? There's one there in verse 22 and 23, isn't there?

We'll see many more as we go on through the coming chapters. Jesus is the fulfillment of everything that has come up to this point. He has come to fulfill the Old Testament, and that means he is coming to save his people.

[19 : 24] He is the son of God and the son of David, and he has come as the savior of his people. I don't know if you know what your name means.

Most names have a meaning of some description, don't they? I had a quick Google, and apparently Donald means ruler of the world. One of my namesakes doing his best to carry that burden for the rest of us, isn't he?

The same website, actually, that gave statistics on the popularity of names. And let me tell you, Donald is a dying breed. It's also the 900th most popular name in America in the 1940s for girls.

So if there are any women here bemoaning their name, it could have been worse. We got down that rabbit hole, right? Because I had to Google what my name meant. Now, we don't often attach a whole lot of meaning to our names, do we?

But that wasn't the case back in Jesus' day. Names meant something, and we see that in the names Jesus has given here in Matthew 1. All right, just look there again at verse 21 with me.

[20 : 40] You, Joseph, are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. The name Jesus literally means the Lord saves.

The Lord saves. That is what he has come to do. Specifically, to save his people from their sins.

His people from their sins. But that's not the only name Jesus seems to be given here, is it? Look at what Matthew does here. Verse 21, you are to give him the name Jesus.

Verse 22, this took place to fulfill what the Lord said through the prophet. They will give birth to his son, and they will call him Emmanuel. End of verse 25, and he gave him the name Jesus.

All right, which is it, Matthew? Jesus or Emmanuel? Jesus, which means the Lord saves his people, or Emmanuel, God with us.

[21 : 53] I think what's going on here, right, is it's the meaning that matters. It's the meaning that matters. And to Matthew, they're quite obviously communicating exactly the same thing.

God with us means the Lord saves. The Lord saves means God is with us.

Emmanuel, God with us, and Jesus, the Lord saves. God with us means God saving us. I say us.

I mean, God's people. That's who he's come to save, isn't it? Jesus came to save his people. The implication is that he didn't come to save people who weren't his own.

This is where Isaiah 7, that chapter that Edna read so well for us earlier, comes in. The Emmanuel prophecy of Isaiah 7, right, that Matthew quotes, is offered to King Ahaz.

[23 : 10] I don't know if you picked that up as we were reading through it earlier. King Ahaz, right, he finds himself sort of sandwiched between two foreign kings marching on him. And Ahaz is offered a sign, the sign of Emmanuel, God with us.

But Ahaz refuses it, right? Ahaz refuses the sign. It actually goes okay with him initially, but only for a short while before the Lord, his help having been rejected, promises to come again, but this time in judgment.

And so Emmanuel comes again a chapter later in Isaiah chapter 8. But this time it is not an offer of salvation. It is a sure sign of judgment.

What does that all mean for us? We'll see it time and again, but Matthew, right, doesn't bring in verses of the Old Testament as sort of random proof texts. But to communicate a bigger picture with just a few words, what we learn in Isaiah 7 and 8 is that Emmanuel, right, God with us, is not a religious option for those who choose it.

It is the truth. Whether we choose to embrace it or not.

[24 : 47] And whether we embrace it or not is the difference between God being with us in mercy and God being with us in judgment. Matthew 1 heralds, doesn't he, the first coming of Emmanuel, like we see in Isaiah 7.

And it is an offering to all of salvation from our sins. It is a good and gracious coming of a good and gracious God who comes to save his people.

But don't think, right, that this is an optional event in history for you just to do as you please with. Some people respond, don't they, to the birth of Jesus with indifference.

Much like Ahaz was indifferent to the promises of Isaiah. Maybe that's you, right? You see it as a nice tradition, a curious tale that some people choose to believe, but it's not really for you.

God has come, whether you like it or not. God has come.

[26 : 04] We are all in the sin that Matthew speaks about that we need saving from. And if we accept that we are sinners who need saving and embrace the promises in person of Jesus Christ for ourselves, Emmanuel is the most wonderful promise.

This is great news. Because that means God is with you, not just in the sense of being nearby, but of being for you.

Like when a friend tells you they'll be with you every step of the way, they're not just telling you about their presence, are they? But their comfort and care, their support, their strength, their assurance, their friendship, their love, their kindness.

That, if you are in Christ, is what Emmanuel means for you. But if you are not in Christ, Emmanuel is still true.

But it is a terrifying prospect. Whether you choose to believe or not, God has come and he will be with you.

[27 : 15] But if you reject the saving work of Jesus, God with you ought to be a fearful thought. I do hope and pray that Emmanuel, right, is a truth that every one of us here can rejoice in and give thanks for.

There's an unfathomable mystery that God has come amongst us. But it is the most wonderful truth that God has come amongst us to save.

So long as we make sure to be his people. And all of this, isn't it, is a sign of what we can expect to see unfold as we go through Matthew's gospel together.

In this birth narrative, Matthew is laying the foundations for what we can expect as he takes us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can expect to see the unexpected.

This is God incarnate. We can expect to see the son of David fulfill all that has come before him. We'll see how the prophets point to him.

[28 : 33] We'll see how he teaches the Torah. We'll see how the writings look forward to the true son of David who David himself calls Lord. But most of all, we see a savior coming for his people who will not lose a single one of his sheep without searching for them day and night.

A savior who will lay down his life for his own, bearing the punishment they, we, deserve. Like the original Emmanuel prophecy in Isaiah 7, what we have in the virgin birth is a sign given to us, assuring us of what is to come.

But you don't need to get to the end of Matthew, do you? To put your hope and trust in Lord Jesus Christ. We've seen enough even just here this morning to know that it is not to be ignored.

God has come. He is with us. And for those of us in him, that is the most wonderful thing. Well worth rejoicing over. Let us pray as we close. Amen.