

Why the Virgin Birth?

DAVE BAST

Does it matter if the virgin birth is literal or not? Advances in science always bring Christians back to the Bible to re-evaluate and reaffirm its truth. God became man in Christ and was born of Mary, a human; yet Matthew is careful to record that Mary had not yet had an intimate relationship with Joseph. So why is the virgin birth such an important fact in Matthew's Gospel, and does it still hold that same importance for us today? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Bob, let's talk about the Christmas story in Matthew, and how Matthew begins very matter-of-factly by saying that Jesus had no earthly father.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; you know, we talk about the virgin Mary, but I wonder sometimes if people really understand what a shocking statement they are making when they talk that way.

DAVE BAST

One of the classic scenes in Christian art is the Annunciation, and that is when Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her she is going to have a child. It is in Luke that that story is told, and Mary says: How can I? I don't have a husband. I have never known a man.

BOB HEERSPINK

This is a pre-scientific world, but they still know that to have babies you need a father.

DAVE BAST

Well, and that is what comes through in Matthew's version as well. Let me read it. It is from Matthew Chapter 1 beginning at verse 18:

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. (Very matter of fact beginning, incidentally. He just says here is what happened.) 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. ¹⁹Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. ²⁰But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a Son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill 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."

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, that is the basic Christmas story, and I think right there in that story you put your finger on the problem that most people have with Christmas. They love the celebration, they love the birth of this little child, Jesus;

but the notion of a virgin birth... I mean, people say: That is just too much. That is a bridge too far.

DAVE BAST

Yes, modern skeptics point to this and say: Look at the Bible. It is pre-scientific, it is written in ignorant times, and how can any modern person possibly accept this? This is obviously mythical.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; they will say: Look, in the Greek world – the Roman world of mythology, there are these gods and goddesses that are born through virgin births; that is just the same thing that is happening here.

DAVE BAST

I look at the story and I read a very normal reaction from both Mary and Joseph, you know. In Luke, as I mentioned, Mary says how can this be? And Joseph, being a decent sort of fellow, he finds out his fiancée is pregnant... and incidentally, in that culture the betrothal was equivalent to a marriage except for the fact that the couple did not yet come together, as Matthew says. So what is he going to do? Well, he could have had her stoned as an adulteress.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, if you look at what Joseph does, it says there he is a righteous man, and that doesn't mean he is going to push the letter of the law against Mary. He really takes some of the shame of all of this upon himself. He is going to bear some of the shame himself because he is going to, as it says, put her away quietly. It is going to be a quiet little divorce.

DAVE BAST

But he is still going to divorce her because he thinks she has been unfaithful. I mean, look at the story. These are people who know where babies come from. Can we acknowledge that?

BOB HEERSPINK

And Joseph knows that in his mind Mary is probably just covering this up. You know, she got pregnant with someone else and now she is spinning a tale to get herself off the hook.

DAVE BAST

But then God speaks to Joseph in a miraculous way and allows him or enables him to understand by an angel that this is a supernatural event. It is a unique, once-forever occurrence, and that it is God himself, the Holy Spirit, who has caused this child to be conceived in Mary's womb. Wow, what a miracle!

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and if you look at the story, yes, this is unique, but if you go back into the Old Testament, there are just these hints of this special birth, because God continually breaks into situations which seem to be at dead ends. I mean, just think of Abraham, okay? Abraham and Sarah... they are not going to have a kid. I mean, they are in their 90s, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes, they are as good as dead, Paul says.

BOB HEERSPINK

They are as good as dead. So, impossible situation... and here comes God and says: Hey, I am going to make a way; and you know, you see that happening in special births throughout the Old Testament, until finally you come to *this* birth of Christ, coming into the world, born of a virgin, I think is really the capstone to that whole way in which God works his will and works his plan throughout that Old Testament period.

DAVE BAST

But still, I think we need to emphasize the fact that it is not just that this virgin birth happened; that is the really important thing. It is what it means or what it points to. This is a fact, so all faithful Christians have always believed, and we accept it as a miracle; but the really important thing is that it is a sign of something greater, and that is the incarnation.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; it points beyond itself to who this Child really is.

DAVE BAST

Because, I mean, Muslims believe in the virgin birth.

BOB HEERSPINK

They do?

DAVE BAST

Well, as a fact, yes. It is in the Koran; but they don't...

BOB HEERSPINK

Not the incarnation, though.

DAVE BAST

They don't believe in the incarnation; that is the thing. Sure, they accept this because it was taken from the Bible and put into the Koran, but they don't accept what it is pointing to... what the underlying really big miracle is, and that is God becoming a human being.

BOB HEERSPINK

Okay; so they go with the sign, they just don't believe the message of the sign.

DAVE BAST

They don't believe the thing, and it is the thing that is more important, really, even than the sign.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Now, I think C. S. Lewis said somewhere that if you accept the fact of the incarnation, why would you quibble at the sign?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; the biggest miracle is going to be the incarnation.

DAVE BAST

Right; but if you accept that, that Jesus Christ truly is God in human flesh, then why would you quibble at a virgin birth? You know, that is the point; and if you don't accept the incarnation, well then, you are not a Christian. Then you've got an alternative explanation of who Jesus is. He is just some kind of...

BOB HEERSPINK

So for us, linking the message and the sign really becomes crucial at this time of year to really unpack the message of Christmas.

DAVE BAST

I think of that great... all the great Christmas hymns, really, if you think about it, emphasize this fact: That in Jesus Christ, the baby of Bethlehem, God has come to be one of us. In John's great, unmatched formulation: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. That is the miracle of the incarnation, and that is the truth to which the sign of the virgin birth points.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and there is more in this story because there are some names here that help us unpack who this Child is. Let's come back to that, Dave, after we take a break and dig some more.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

We are talking about the virgin birth. Hey, Bob, I don't want to quite leave that sign issue of the virgin birth without making a couple of observations that I think are really important. I mentioned that Muslims believe in the virgin birth but they don't believe in the incarnation; and the thing that is offensive to them is the idea that God would procreate – would impregnate a human woman – and they take that in a literal sense; but the Bible is very clear that this is *not* how the incarnation took place.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; this is not some kind of procreation of the gods with a human being like you find in mythology.

DAVE BAST

In fact, the ancients used to say – the Church Fathers used to say that the organ by which Mary conceived was her ear, which is a beautiful thought. She heard the word of the Lord and she assented to it and in that act the Spirit created new life within her, but there is nothing sexual about it. It is a miracle of faith and of hearing the word of God.

BOB HEERSPINK

But now, the reality of the one who is born of this miracle is defined by the name that is given to him: Immanuel – God with us; that is the typical translation; although I kind of like the translation: The with-us God. Not the with-it God, although he is with it, but the with-us God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; the God who is here among us; and that is a prophecy from Isaiah. In fact, that is the one thing Matthew does say about the meaning of the virgin birth. Another thing I think we need to avoid myself... I don't know how you feel about this, but arguments that say: Well, Mary had to be conceived as a virgin in order for Christ to be sinless. I don't really buy that. I don't know how you feel about that.

BOB HEERSPINK

No, that...

DAVE BAST

As though there is some sinful act involving sexual procreation.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; the miracle of the incarnation is also the miracle of Christ's sinlessness, but it doesn't hinge on the virginity of Mary.

Dave Bast:

Exactly. That is another point I think we need to make because sometimes people will say: Well, God could certainly have created Jesus as Immanuel – as the God in human form through Joseph and Mary coming together; he could have, but he didn't. He chose to do it this way; not that there is anything that would inherently make Jesus sinful if he had been born in the natural way.

BOB HEERSPINK

But the way in which Jesus enters the world, you know, really stakes out this identity as the God who comes beside us – who is with us.

You were talking about Islam, and it is interesting that in Islam Allah is the god who is above us. He is high above us, but the very notion of incarnation is going to be just offensive to a Muslim because it brings God too close. The Christian understanding of who God is, is that, yes, God is above us, but he has come to be *with* us; and that to me is just the beautiful, powerful message of Christmas.

DAVE BAST

I remember going to church one Sunday evening when I was a seminary student – so this is 35 years ago – and the pastor read a letter that had come from Christians in China, and the letter had been passed by the Chinese censors, you know, and so it had been allowed to be sent. This was during a real dark time in Chinese history; but the letter went on and on from these people in China saying: We don't want you in the West; we don't need you; we have nothing to do with you; we have our own church...

BOB HEERSPINK

Keep away.

DAVE BAST

Yes, keep away from us; and then at the bottom there was a one-word PS: Immanuel; and it totally changed the whole letter because you realized that what they were saying before was to get it past the censors, and the message they really wanted to send was: God is still with us. What a wonderful truth that is!

BOB HEERSPINK

And you think about people going through difficult times this Christmas, whether it is Christians who are being persecuted for their faith around the world or people going through tough times in North America; what is the message they need to hear? It is right there in that name. The with-us God; that no matter what you go through, no matter where you are at, no matter what pressure you are under for the faith, God stands beside you.

DAVE BAST

I have often thought that you could really summarize the whole Gospel with two forward phrases. One of them is from Romans 8, the other one is from Matthew 1. The Romans 8 one is: God is for us; and the Matthew 1 one is: God is with us; because God is for us and God is with us, you know, that is it. That is all we need.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and they are linked. You know, if you think about how God is working in the world, what is he going to do as Messiah? The very fact that God comes incarnate really hints at where the salvation story is going. This was not what the Jewish people expected. This is going to be a great shock and it is going to be a great scandal in Jesus' ministry. I mean, for the Jewish people... for Jesus to identify himself as divine is going to be offensive; and yet, it is hinting at the way in which God is already humbling himself in Christ to take upon himself the work that he is going to do.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think that is a really important point because when we say Immanuel – God is with us – we are not just talking in a spiritual sense; in some kind of vague, God is in my heart, or whatever. We are talking about the man Jesus. You know that great Christmas hymn: *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing* – it happens to be my favorite – but there is a verse that goes:

Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see,

Hail the incarnate deity.

Pleased as man with men to dwell,

Jesus, our Immanuel.

Jesus is our Immanuel; the man who was pleased to dwell as a man with us as one of us. So it is not just some sort of floaty idea that makes us feel warm inside. It is in this man, Jesus Christ, that we see Immanuel.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and I think what is so powerful in the story here from Matthew is that you have the one name, Immanuel, but there is another name, and that is Jesus. We have already used it, but as we think about what Jesus means, we really unpack why Immanuel came into the world; and we will talk about that when we come back.

DAVE BAST

I think we have to.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back. You are listening to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, we have been talking about the name of Immanuel – God with us – but you know, that name really explodes in terms of its significance when you look at the other name that is laid out here in Matthew 1; and that is a very common name, but very critical name for understanding who the Savior is, and that is Jesus.

DAVE BAST

The angel says to Joseph when he is explaining that Mary is going to bear this child without any human father that: You shall name him Jesus; and then the added explanation: Why? Because he will save his people from their sins.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; now, the interesting thing is, there were a lot of kids running around ancient Palestine with the name Jesus. It was a very common name. We think Jesus...

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

Was the only one.

DAVE BAST

And we don't use that name. Now in Hispanic cultures they do use it, but in English-speaking countries we don't name children Jesus; but back then, it was like Sam, Dick, Tom, Harry.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I mean, my name is Bob and when I was growing up there were about four Bobs in my class, and the teacher had to figure out a way to differentiate each of them. The same thing happened in the ancient world with Jesus. For the people of God – for the Jewish folk at this time – it was something of a confession of faith: The Lord Jehovah saves us. They were saying that by the way they named their kids.

DAVE BAST

The Old Testament form is Joshua. In Hebrew it came to be called Yeshua, but the Greek form is Jesus, and that is what has come over into English; and I don't think there is a real difference. We got an anonymous letter the other day, addressed to both of us, by the way, Bob... your name was on it, too; and there was some material in there that implied that unless you used literally the name Yeshua you weren't really being Christian; but I don't think there is a big deal there.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, the Lord understands who we are talking about whether we say Yeshua or Jesus.

DAVE BAST

The wonderful thing later in the New Testament is that this is the name that is proclaimed after the resurrection as embodying the core of the Gospel. Jesus saves us from our sins, not just a political champion – the kind of Messiah that most of the Jewish people were expecting – but a savior, first of all, in a spiritual sense.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well you know, you think about what it means; he saves us from our sins; it means that the salvation that Jesus brings isn't just a salvation that gets at other people around us or at political systems. When we come and confess the name Jesus, we are saying something very personal about our relationship with Christ – that our brokenness – our guilt – needs to be dealt with, and that is what Jesus does.

DAVE BAST

You just reminded me of a great story. I love this quote from G. K. Chesterton, the great Christian writer of the early 20th Century. The Times newspaper of London was having a sort of a correspondence section debate under the heading: What is wrong with the world? And people were writing in with their statements and ideas and opinions; and Chesterton wrote this letter: Dear Sir: I am. Sincerely, G. K. Chesterton.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, what's wrong with the world?

Dave Bast/

BOB HEERSPINK

It's me!

DAVE BAST

Yes, it's me!

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, it is like the cartoon character Pogo, who said: We have met the enemy, and he is us.

DAVE BAST

Us; yes, right. So, Jesus comes to save us from ourselves – from our own sin; from our guilt; and he will do that by bearing it himself on the cross; by atoning for it so that God then can justifiably forgive us; all that wonderful unpacking of the Gospel; and that is why Peter says later in the book of Acts, in Acts Chapter 4, of Jesus that there is no other name under heaven given among people by which we must be saved.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that is the big scandal, isn't it? That Jesus is the unique name; that there are not a lot of ways to God – a lot of names, but only one.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, in the ancient world, and you know this, too, from our study of the background of the New Testament, people were terrified of the spiritual powers...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

And one of the things they thought they had to do was learn the names of all of these multiple gods and powers and...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, if you knew the name you could control them.

DAVE BAST

Right; or maybe there was a password that you needed with the name, like logging on to somebody's computer, you know, to escape from the bonds of the world and one's own flesh and blood; but Peter says no. What Good News! You only need to know one name; meaning you only need to know one person and the saving significance of what that person did for you on the cross.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, today though it is almost like it is flipped around, and people think you don't need to know *any* names; hey, God will forgive us, that is his job – that is his business.

DAVE BAST

Everybody is in, yes; you don't really need faith in Christ; if you believe, fine; if you don't... A lot of Christians are thinking this, and I believe it is one of the fundamental, serious problems in the Church today; without trying to prejudice any individual – that is not our job either; but we have to proclaim the truth of the saving significance of Jesus; and one of the things I think it is important to say is you cannot really claim Jesus as Immanuel unless you know him also as Savior.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; they are linked together. The name Jesus just explodes – opens up – the significance of why God has come into the world; and to me, you know, we look to the cross, we look to what happened at the end of Jesus' life, and already here at the very beginning of his life, at his birth you are hearing testimony; not just from ordinary folks who say: Well, you know, I thought that maybe this would be the one, but from the angel of the Lord who comes and says this is the One for whom the world has been waiting.

DAVE BAST

We started with the virgin birth, and pointed out that it is a great sign. It is important not so much in itself, but of the truth that it proclaims that God has become flesh in Jesus Christ; and therefore he is Immanuel – he is with us; but he is with us as a savior, and let's never romanticize or sentimentalize Christmas to the point where we forget that it leads inexorably to the cross; and that is where the heart of the Gospel is seen.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is the great Christmas miracle.

DAVE BAST

Thanks, Bob; and thanks also to you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. Don't forget, please; it is listeners like you asking us questions and participating that will keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you have been hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Just visit us online at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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