

Series Apostles' Creed

This Message "I Believe in Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary"

Scripture Text Hebrews 2:10-17

In the previous lesson I outlined the seven statements about Jesus Christ which are in the middle section of the Apostle's Creed. In this lesson we will focus on the second of those statements which concerns His incarnation.

The circumstances associated with the incarnation of Jesus Christ were very unusual but they were the fulfillment of numerous Old Testament prophecies. The arrival of the Messiah was a long anticipated hope of the Jewish people. In the covenant promise to Abraham, God had said, "Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed" (Genesis 22:18). Moses announced to the Israelites, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him" (Deut 18:15). The Messiah was mentioned by David in several Psalms, and there were predictions by Isaiah, Micah, and other prophets. These prophecies described the Messiah as prophet, priest, king, Savior, and Redeemer.

The Bible states that Jesus Christ, the Son of God the Father, our Lord, both entered and left this world by acts of supernatural power. His conception was initiated by the Holy Spirit, and His entry was from the body of a virgin. His exit was by resurrection from death through the power of the Holy Spirit, followed by ascension to the Father in the heavenly realms.

These entry and exit miracles convey several special messages to us. First, they confirm that God initiated the actions concerning Jesus Christ. The promises of the Old Testament were announcements of God's sovereign purposes and intentions. God the Father sent His only begotten Son because He loved the people of the world. The Holy Spirit initiated the conception in the body of Mary. It was Jesus Christ Himself "who emptied Himself, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." Angels explained and confirmed what was happening both before and after His birth. And all of this was "according to [the Father's] eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (*Ephesians 3:11*).

Secondly, these entry and exit miracles indicate that Jesus was fully human even though He was God. The Apostle John was among those who affirmed the humanity of Jesus. He wrote: We have heard Him, we have seen Him with our eyes, our hands have touched Him (*1 John 1:1*). The group of Apostles to which John was referring had been with Jesus almost every day for more than three years. They recognized and acknowledged the humanity of Jesus. Even Jesus' enemies acknowledged His ordinariness as a man. "They said, 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven?'" (*John 6:42*). They tried to stone Jesus for blasphemy on several occasions because, in their opinion, He was a "mere man," claiming to be God (*John 10:33*).

The miracles of entry and exit also were proof of Jesus' freedom from sin. He proved that humanness doesn't have to be the equivalent of sinfulness. We must remember that humanity was originally created in the image of God, and that the sinfulness in our lives is the distortion of what was originally truly human. Jesus came to earth as God, with the intrinsic purity and holiness of the Godhead. Because He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, His manhood was untainted by what is described by theologians as "original sin" — that condition of spiritual estrangement from God which was inherited from our original parents, Adam and Eve. As a result of His conception by the Holy Spirit, God begetting God, Jesus came into this world totally holy and righteous and spiritually flawless.

However, this did not mean that He was immune to the temptations of sin or could live untouched by the pains, needs, distresses, and daily pressures of human life. Scripture explains that God the Son "emptied himself" of His glory when He left heaven. This does not mean that He gave up His deity. It means that He voluntarily and willingly set aside His prerogatives, privileges, inherent rights, and powers as God in order to live on earth as a human. As the perfect man, Jesus lived in total dependence on the Father, just as the first humans were created to live. He always did those things which pleased the Father and never gave in to the temptations to disobey the Father. He lived by faith just like every believer is supposed to live.

Finally, we can say that the entry and exit miracles provided visible proof that Jesus was qualified to be the perfect sacrifice for human sin. Scripture declares that Jesus was the second Adam, and His life is contrasted with the first Adam. Because of the disobedience and sin of the first Adam, humanity has been in need of redemption throughout history. However, Jesus Christ was the gift from heaven which brought justification to sinners. Scripture states:

“Through the trespass of one man, death reigned on all mankind,” but “those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.” “Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.” (*Romans 5:12-19 summarized*).

The first Adam by his sin brought universal ruin on the human race. Jesus Christ, the second Adam, the man who did not sin, through His death on the cross, brought back the possibility of forgiveness of sins and reconciliation between God and mankind.

Throughout His years on earth, the human Jesus lived in complete uninterrupted unity with the Father. There was no disobedience and therefore, no blemish or defect in His life which would make Him unacceptable to the Father. John the Baptizer introduced Jesus to the world as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (*John 1:29, 36*). Scripture declares that “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men” (*Romans 1:18*), and that there will be a day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (*Romans 2:5*). Scripture also declares that “there is no one who is righteous in God’s sight” (*Romans 3:10*) which leaves every person who has ever lived in a helpless condition.

Fortunately, it was into this helpless situation that the grace and love of God were revealed through the incarnation of Jesus. “God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement. ... He did this to demonstrate his justice, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (*Romans 3:25-26*). The Apostle Paul also wrote: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (*II Corinthians 5:17*).

The incarnation revealed the love, mercy, and grace of God. The resurrection revealed the victory of Jesus over death. Remember the Scripture reading? “He shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (*Hebrews 2:14-15*).

That is the big picture of the human experience of Jesus Christ. In the remaining time I would like to focus on the four Scripture passages which most contribute to our understanding of the virgin birth of Jesus.

The first passage is in the third chapter of Genesis. This is the chapter which describes the disobedience of Adam and Eve. They had been given incredible privileges and freedom in their ideal environment. There was only one prohibition — they were not to eat the fruit of one of the trees in their garden. Unfortunately, they did not resist the temptation of the devil, they ignored the instruction and warning of God and, as a result, their relationship to both God and creation changed suddenly and drastically.

God immediately put the devil on notice of judgment. God said,

“Because you have done this, cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel”
(*Genesis 3:14-15*).

These verses provide the initial hint of what God was going to do to counter the challenge to His sovereignty. God was going to use the offspring of the woman to crush the head of the evil one but, in accomplishing this, the offspring would himself be bitten on the heel. Satan was defeated but Jesus died on the cross. The word translated “offspring” is more accurately the word “seed.” It will be the “seed of the woman” who will crush the serpent. The wording is unusual. When we think about matters of birth, we usually identify “seed” with the male with the female receiving the seed. The full meaning of this was not clear until the New Testament, but there is definitely a clue in these words to a future conception of the person who will restore and set right God’s plan for His creation.

Another important and well-known prophecy concerning the birth of Jesus is in Isaiah chapter 7. Let me give the context. King Ahaz and the people of Judah were under attack. Verse 2 in the chapter states that “the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.” The LORD sent the prophet Isaiah to Ahaz to encourage him, and to give a sign to strengthen his virtually non-existent faith. Isaiah said, “the LORD himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (*Isaiah 7:13-14*). Isaiah also said that while the boy is still very young, “before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right,” the threat against Judah would be removed.

The word translated “virgin” is the Hebrew word “alma,” which doesn’t necessarily mean a woman who has never had sexual relations with a man. It most commonly means “young woman.” Many Bible translations, in fact, state, “A young woman will bear a child and will give birth to a son.” In the context, “young woman” is the obvious better translation because chapter 8 explains that “Isaiah went to the prophetess,” his wife, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. The prophecy was repeated concerning this boy: before he would say “my father” or “my mother” the enemies of Judah would be destroyed. The name “Immanuel” means “God is with us.” In the context of the circumstances in Judah, it was the presence of God which gained the victory.

When Matthew wrote his gospel, he took this particular story completely out of the Old Testament context and applied it to the virgin birth of Jesus. After Matthew described the visitation of the angel to Joseph assuring him that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, he wrote in Matthew 1:22-23 “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means God with us.’” In these verses Matthew used the Greek word with the narrow meaning of “virgin.”

Obviously the interpretation of Scripture can sometimes be a little thorny and awkward. Depending on the context, there can be two meanings to a prophetic statement, a near term fulfillment and a future ultimate fulfillment. Although there is a difference in meaning between Isaiah and Matthew, we must believe that both were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and that the inspired Scriptures can be applied correctly in different ways in different contexts.

The announcement of Mary's pregnancy to Joseph prevented him from divorcing her.

“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because 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. But 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. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins’” (*Matthew 1:18-21*).

According to these verses, Mary and Joseph were pledged or betrothed to each other. In the marriage customs on the first century, betrothal meant that there was a binding legal commitment but that the wedding had not yet occurred and the couple could not yet live together. When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, he knew that her pregnancy had nothing to do with him. Hence his intention to break the legal commitment between them. Joseph, because he was a man of good character, was willing to divorce her quietly, but the angel clarified the situation, so Joseph went through with the wedding and took Mary home as his wife. However, verse 25 informs us that he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.

The announcement to Mary was by the angel Gabriel. “The angel went to her and said,

‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’
“Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end’” (*Luke 1:28-33*).

When Mary was told that she would have a son, she asked, “How will this be since I am a virgin? The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, so the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (*Luke 1:34-35*). In her response, Mary said she was willing to be the Lord’s servant.

God revealed Himself to humanity through Jesus Christ. The Apostle John wrote, “No one has ever seen God, but God the only Begotten One, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known” (*John 1:18*). The good news of Scripture is that God moved into our helpless lives through His Son in order to redeem us and to restore a relationship between us and Himself. God wants to overshadow us with His Holy Spirit, just as happened to Mary, so that we will give glory to Him. He wants us to be as obedient to Him as were Joseph and Mary, and Jesus.

When we say, “I believe in Jesus Christ ... who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary,” we are making a very powerful statement about our beliefs. We are saying that He became one of us so that we might become like Him.

Special Notes

In the New Testament there are two accounts of the virgin birth, Joseph's story in Matthew 1 and Mary's in Luke chapters 1-3. There are some differences in the two passages which has puzzled some readers. For example, there are two genealogies for Jesus. This particular difference is easy to explain. Luke's genealogy is that of Mary, although it begins with the statement that "Jesus was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph" (Luke 3:23). Matthew gave the lineage of Joseph because the genealogical records of Jews are only through male descendents. Matthew began his genealogy with Abraham because he wanted to emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus.

Two quotations which relate to the birth of Jesus Christ.

These quotations highlight the fulfillment of some Old Testament prophecies and also highlight the significance of the incarnation. The first quote was spoken by Mary, after the angel announced to her the unusual circumstances of her forthcoming pregnancy. Mary offered these prophetic words of praise:

"He (the Lord God) has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendents forever, even as he said to our fathers" (Luke 1:51-55).

The second quotation was spoken by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptizer. John was, of course, the one who introduced the Messiah to the world. John's birth, like that of Jesus, was supernatural. It was, like the birth of Jesus, announced by an angel. John's parents were old and they did not expect to have children, but one day an angel appeared to Zechariah to announce the special responsibility that his son John would have. After John was born, his father "was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied," giving this description of the Messiah:

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he said through his holy prophets of long ago, salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (Luke 1:68-75).