



JESUS' BIRTH

Part 7 of Luke's Gospel: Investigating the Man Who Is God

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Luke 2:1-7 | November 08, 2009

LUKE 2:1-7

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

INTRODUCTION

Alright, Mars Hill, we continue "Luke's Gospel: Investigating the Man Who Is God." If you're new, my name is Mark, one of the pastors here at the church. We like to go through books of the Bible and so we picked the enormous book of Luke and we're gonna take a few years and go through it. Today we're in chapter 2 verses 1 through 7, looking at the birth of Jesus. Yes, we can examine that on times other than Christmas and we'll do that together. The truth is no one knows exactly when Jesus was born. The Bible says that the shepherds were in the fields, that probably indicates it wasn't in December. Christians didn't know when Jesus was born and there was a really popular holiday called Saturnalia. It was a pagan feast and festival, think Super Bowl-esque kind of holiday. Everyone had the day off. The dip was already made. So the Christians decided, "Well, we'll just make that Jesus' birthday. That will work just fine." And we've been celebrating it at that time ever since.

Today as well-I'll let you know a little bit about where we're going. I'll lay over Luke 2 a taxonomy that I think fits over the whole Scripture, and we'll start with that which is historical, what did God do and say in history? And then theological, what does it mean? And then biographical, how does that change us? And then doxological, how do we worship, who do we worship, why do we worship in light of the historical, what God says and does, the theological, what that means, the biographical, how that changes us. This is will be the four-fold process we'll layover Luke chapter 2. I'll pray.

Father God, thank you for an opportunity to teach. God, I confess I really love to teach theological doctrine about Jesus and so I am really thankful that I get to teach today. I hope that I will be able to serve our people well. God, I ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to enable me to be affective in articulating biblical truth. I ask, Holy Spirit, that you would help those of us who are privileged to study together and to be the church to learn and to live in light of what we learn so that this would be for us not just information but transformation. In Jesus' name, amen.

THE PROMISE AND FULFILLMENT OF JESUS' BIRTH

Well, as we get into the story of the birth of Jesus, I want to tell you that there really are two threads that weave together the whole Bible: promise and fulfillment. Much of the Old Testament would simply fit under the category of promise, and then the New Testament is the recording of fulfillment in the person and the work of Jesus. And so the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of a series of promises, also called prophecies, that were given hundreds sometimes thousands of years in advance; God, who is sovereign over and foreknowing of the future, telling us in detail exactly what his plan is for human history and the coming of Jesus into human history. A number of prophecies could be shared, promises that God makes. I'll share with you two that are particularly pertinent to our examination of Luke chapter 2. The first is in Isaiah 7:14, written roughly seven hundred years before Jesus was born: God says through the prophet Isaiah, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

God says, the answer to the human sin problem is Immanuel. It's a title, a designation, which means what? God is with us. So God is coming into human history. God is coming to visit our planet and to be with people. How will we know who this Immanuel is, this God come to be with us? Answer: look for a virgin mother. The virgin will give birth to a male son.

The second prophesy that I want to share with you is in Micah 5:2, written about four hundred years before the birth of Jesus: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days," in the Hebrew a literal rendering is "from eternity."

And from these and other promises, the expectation and anticipation was: a savior is coming. A deliverer, a redeemer, a hero, he will be God among us. He'll be born of a virgin as a male son in the little town-dozens or hundreds of people-of Bethlehem. And everyone was anticipating and awaiting this

miraculous visitation from God. All of that is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus in Luke 2:1-7.

THE HISTORICAL FACTS OF JESUS' BIRTH

Luke was a very well-educated and articulate, intelligent man. As we've examined, he was funded by a generous donor named Theophilus to do a historical examination, investigation of the person and the work of Jesus. And he records for us the life and works of Jesus from the eyewitness testimony of those who were actually present for certain events. And so he would have interviewed Mary and he would have interviewed others who were present and grew up with the Lord Jesus. And as he tells us about the birth of Jesus, he introduces us to a number of people who are present and living in that day, showing us that this is historically rooted fact, that the issues surrounding Jesus are in fact historical.

And the first person that he introduces us to is Augustus Caesar. He was a real historical figure. Luke says that Jesus was born when Caesar Augustus was ruling. Let me tell you a little bit about this very significant political leader. He ruled over the Roman Empire, one of the most prominent, longstanding, far-reaching empires in the history of the world. It incorporated multiple nations and languages and people groups. He was the adoptive son of Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar was actually his granduncle and he adopted Caesar Augustus to confer on him all of the political capacity to succeed him as a ruler. His title "Augustus" means "the majestic or highly revered." During his rise to power he was ruthless but once he assumed power he was benevolent. He was a fairly gracious ruler compared to the others in his day, far more so than people we've met previously in the story, like King Herod, who was just a maniacal man through the totality of his life. He wasn't a godly man though. He didn't love the God of the Bible. In that day there was not a separation of church and state as there is in our day, so to be a true Roman you would worship the emperor as the embodiment of all that it meant to be among his people. And so what Caesar Augustus did is he jettisoned receiving worship as God because it wasn't politically expedient. It had cost some of his predecessors greatly and rather than that he accepted the title of "highest priest," making him the senior religious leader in that day. It meant as well that he could open temples and he could sanction religions and he encouraged the worship of the then-deceased, Julius Caesar. So he's not a godly man but he is a better ruler than many.

Working under him is a governor called Quirinius. He is a man who works under Caesar Augustus. And the way their political system is ordered is very different than ours, but just think, comparably, Caesar Augustus is like the President and Quirinius is like a cabinet member and so he is enforcing and executing various policies and decisions that are made by the senior leader. And one of the things that Luke tells us is that a census was to be taken. And a census is not something that is particularly godly in motivation in that day. It's really for two reasons by the emperor, one is for wealth and the other is for power. If you find out exactly how many citizens you have, you can make sure to tax every one of them and get as much money as possible. And you also know how many adult males you have so that you can have as many soldiers in the ready to defend your kingdom as possible. So this is, generally speaking, politically and financially motivated. That's what is going on with the ruler, Caesar Augustus, and Quirinius, his right-hand man.

Luke also introduces us to Joseph and Mary. They are completely antithetical to Caesar and Quirinius. They're rural, not urban; poor, not rich; powerless, not powerful; worshipers of God, not being worshiped as gods; antithetical. Joseph and Mary, as we've examined, were likely teenagers, think junior high or high school age kids. You could be betrothed as young as twelve, which was their equivalent of engagement, married as young as thirteen. They lived in a small rural town—dozens or hundreds of people—called Nazareth.

Joseph is a man who works as a carpenter. Think of a guy with calluses on his hands, swinging a hammer, working an honest job, hoping to marry the girl of his dreams. Marries a simple peasant gal and God showed up through the angel Gabriel and announced to them previously, "Mary you have been favored of God, the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 will be fulfilled. The Holy Spirit will allow you, a virgin, to conceive by a miracle."

She was despised. Many thought that she had made up this crazy story. They called Joseph a fool and an imbecile and mocked him. Nonetheless, they loved one another, they trusted in God, loved God, worshiped and served God and they were accepting of God's call on their life. And so she is pregnant, they have not yet consummated their marriage. The Bible says that she remained a virgin until Jesus was born. She then went on to have other sons and daughters and they had a normal family.

And it comes to pass that the census requires that they travel to the town of their birth. Now Mary's husband, Joseph, is of the family line of David. As we read in Samuel, David grew up around Bethlehem, tended sheep around Bethlehem. His family settled around Bethlehem and ultimately their family reunions would happen around Bethlehem. And so being a descendant of Bethlehem, when the census is taken, everyone is forced to go to their hometown to register by kin and clan, so it's a bit of a family reunion. And the problem is, depending upon how you journey from Nazareth, where Mary and Joseph reside, to Bethlehem, where they are supposed to travel in obedience to the government, the journey is about a hundred miles. And Mary, one translation says, is great with child. Right? She is ready to have a baby. Now any of you women who have been at that point, ready to give birth, the last thing you want is a hundred-mile walk across the wilderness, maybe on the back of a donkey, to give birth to God, perhaps by the side of the road with no doctor or medical care, on your own. That's a terrifying prospect. But God, in his providential sovereignty, needs to get this couple from Nazareth to Bethlehem to fulfill the prophecy and the promise of Scripture that he would be born in Bethlehem.

So they make the journey and they don't give birth along the way, despite all the bumps in the road. They actually arrive in Bethlehem. Lo and behold, Mary gives birth to Jesus. The whole city is filled with people and so there is no room for them to rent and so they end up, as the story is told, in a manger, in a stable, that place where animals are kept. Jesus is born. He's wrapped in swaddling cloths. Think of a baby that's all bundled up. There is no bassinet for him, so he is laid in a feeding trough. He is ruling as God in his first throne among the animals, very humble in every sense.

In that day it was common for stables to be in caves, and we don't know for certain, but shortly after Jesus was born, the locals in Bethlehem began to flock toward one spot where it was reported that Jesus had been born. In the days when Christianity was legalized under the Roman Emperor Constantine, his mother oversaw the construction of a church at that site so that today there is still a church that meets and has been meeting on that site.

for over a millennium and a half. This is a very amazing thing-that Christians have been worshiping there since about 300 or 400 A.D. The church was at one point damaged. A larger church was built over it. Multiple denominations meet in that building. And what is curious is that at one point the Persians came and they destroyed all the Christian churches in that region, but when they got to this particular church that was built over the alleged birthplace of Jesus, they saw markings and drawings out front of the three wise men and they thought, "Oh, it must be a pagan temple. We won't destroy it." And so it still remains to this day. And it is a cave and it is under the church, and that is, by all accounts, in as much as we are able to ascertain, likely the place that Jesus was born.

So those are the characters: Caesar Augustus, Quirinius, Joseph and Mary, Jesus Christ, and behind all of this is God at work. God's behind all of this. And it reveals to us his providence and sovereignty. His sovereignty-that God rules over all nations and kings and kingdoms, that God is above all, that he is Lord.

Now Caesar wants more money and soldiers, and God wants Scripture fulfilled, and so Caesar makes a decision out of greed and pride and God uses it for the fulfillment of prophecy. This doesn't mean that God does evil or is evil, but his providence means that not only is he sovereign over everyone and everything, but that he's good and he's working out everything for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose. That God could take what is even evil and use it for good. That's what Joseph says, what is intended for evil is often used for good and the saving of many lives. That's our God. He takes bad things and he does good things with them because he's altogether good.

And so behind all of this, God is working it out so that the virgin would give birth to Immanuel, God with us, in Bethlehem. Reflecting back on Luke 2, Galatians 4:4-5 says this through the pen of Paul: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."

"In the fullness of time," at just the right time, God in his providential sovereignty worked out everything so that prophecy would be fulfilled. That the male son, Immanuel, God with us, would be born of the virgin in Bethlehem as his mother and father obeyed the governmental decree to register in their hometown. And all of this happens in the fullness of time when there's Pax Romana, Roman peace, when there are highways that connect nations, when there is common language and information and people can travel widely. So Jesus is born at the time when the news of him can spread, unlike any other time in history.

Now, that is the historical truth. Christianity is rooted in the person and work of Jesus and in historical facts. These are historical facts. They are summarized and recounted by even those who are not Christians but are faithful historians. And my guess is that most of you, if not all of you, are familiar with these historical facts. If nothing else, every Christmas you watch the Peanuts cartoon and you hear Linus do his thing and all of these words come into your mind and you say, "Yes, we had a nativity scene. I've heard something about Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus in the manger with all the animals." We see this every Christmas.

THE THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF JESUS' BIRTH

These historical facts are very important but they aren't most beneficial unless we proceed from the historical to the theological. What do they mean? What is God doing? What is God accomplishing and achieving through the birth of Jesus? Why did Jesus come? Those are the theological questions that interpret the historical facts. For that I'll give you a word: incarnation. It's a Latin word that means, "in flesh." So we'll do a little bit of seminary now. Incarnation, in flesh.

Now, Larry King was once asked, "If you could interview anyone in the history of the world, who would it be?" He said, "Jesus Christ." Good answer. When they asked Larry, "If you could ask him one question, what would that be?" Larry said, quote, "I would like to ask him if he was indeed virgin born. The answer to that question would define history for me." Larry King is right, not often, but in this occasion. [Laughter] And Larry King says, "I want to talk to Jesus and I want to know if his mom really was a virgin, that would define history." Larry's right. That's the issue. If so, he is unlike anyone and everyone who has or will ever live.

And we mean by that, incarnation, in flesh. It is the Christian doctrine that God, who is spirit, took upon himself human flesh and came as the human being, the Lord Jesus Christ. It comes from John 1:1 and 1:14. "In the beginning was the Word," that's the second member of the Trinity, one God, three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. "In the beginning was the Word. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," if you jump down to John 1:14. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." He was with God in the beginning, John 1:1. Jump down to verse 14, the Word, the one who was eternally face to face with God the Father, he was with God the Father and he was God and he was Creator God. He was there in the beginning where Genesis says all was made. The one who is the second member of the Trinity, face to face with the Father, eternally existing as God, became a man, the man Jesus Christ. That's what incarnation means. The second member of the Trinity entered into history. The Creator entered creation. God who is spiritual took upon himself human flesh, became a human being, entered into life on the earth among us. That's what it means to call him Immanuel, God with us.

Now, in saying this, I know that it raises a number of questions and I want to answer I think the seven most common questions. I wrote a book, Vintage Jesus, that answers all of these and more, but I'll give you a short summary of the common questions about Jesus' incarnation and incarnation in general.

1. DID A PERSON BECOME GOD?

Number one, some will ask, so with Jesus, did a person become God? That's a very common question. The answer is no. There's a difference between a person becoming God and God becoming a human being. In fact, a great difference. Now, the first lie that was told to our first parents in Genesis was

that they could be God. And so any religion that teaches you you can be God-Mormonism teaches you that. Hinduism and many Eastern religions say that through karma and cosmic progress you can pay off your karmic debt so that you are one with the divine. That is another way of saying that you become one with that which is divine. You're in effect divine. You're godlike. Some of the New Spirituality or New Age, Oprah, Eckhart Tolle, Marianne Williamson, will say essentially that there is a spark of divinity within us. They don't believe in a personal God with a name. They believe in pantheism and panentheism, that all of creation is imbued and endowed with this divine cosmic force and that we don't go out to God, we go into self through prayer and yoga and meditation and centering and we connect with the divinity within us so that we can connect with the cosmic power with the divine consciousness. It's another way of saying you can be godlike or divine.

That's not what the Bible is teaching at all. There's really only two ways that everyone answers the question, how do we connect to God: everyone else's way and the Bible's way. Everyone else's way is: the distance between us and God, particularly exacerbated by sin, is closed by us ascending toward God through morality, reincarnation, good works, paying off our karmic debt, trying harder, doing better. It's pride. We rise up to God. We become closer to God, more like God through our own effort. Christianity is about God coming down to be with us. We don't go up to God. He comes down to us. It's not about pride. It's about humility. It's not about what we do. It's about what he does. It's not about the favor we merit. It's about the grace that he gives. The whole doctrine of the incarnation is not that a person became God to show us how we can be godlike. It's how God became a person because he loves us and he came to be with us.

2. DID JESUS COME INTO EXISTENCE AT HIS BIRTH?

Perhaps another question that some of you may have, number two, did Jesus come into existence at his birth, meaning, did he not exist before his birth? Some religions will teach that. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, will say that Jesus is not eternally God; that he's a created being who came into existence at a point in time. Well, we already read in Micah 5:2 that Jesus' origins would be from ancient times, literally, from eternity past. Great theologians like Don Carson, my dear friend, have done the work on this and they summarize it by saying, this is calling Jesus eternal. Eternal. When it says in John 1, "in the beginning was the Word," it's echoing Genesis 1:1, the first day of creation, and what it's saying is, before creation, Jesus was there with God the Father as eternal God. So no, Jesus didn't come into existence at his birth. But here's what happened. The second member of the Trinity entered into human history as the man Jesus Christ. That's what happened at the birth. There was not the creation of Jesus but the entering of Jesus into human history as a man. So the Son of God became the man Jesus Christ.

3. IS THE INCARNATION BORROWED FROM PAGANS?

Number three, is incarnation borrowed from pagans? If you have taken a religion course in college, I apologize, and one of the things you've probably heard is that Christianity borrows its ideology of things like the virgin birth from pagan mythology. So let me unpack this for you. It's not true. In part because Scripture and its teaching of the virgin birth predates pagan mythology like Greek mythology. You could read in some Greek mythology and some Hindu mythology some concept that perhaps one of the gods or goddesses came down and visited the earth. Usually it's more speaking of something called an avatar, which actually is not an incarnation. It's very technical, but let me even say why I don't believe any of this. It's because Scripture predates any of those mythologies. The first intimation of the virgin birth of Jesus is in Genesis 3:15, where our first parents sinned against God, God comes down and talks about the consequences of sin, and he promises the coming of Jesus as Savior. And he says that Jesus would be born of a woman and it mentions nothing of a father.

And as you read Genesis forward, Genesis (and the rest of the Old Testament) is a patriarchal book tracing family history through the male line, so it always says this man had these children and then this man had these children. And in Genesis 3:15 it says and Jesus will have a mother no dad. It's the first intimation that Jesus would have an earthly mother but not an earthly father. Joseph was his adopted but not biological father. You proceed forward to Isaiah 7:14 that I shared with you, "the virgin will be with child." Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, predating mythology.

In addition, the concepts of pagan mythology were just that, mythology. I was in Greece this past summer and there are still temples and monuments to Zeus and to various gods and goddesses, Athena, after which the city of Athens is named, and no one actually thought these people really lived. It's like Wolverine and Spiderman, right? [Laughter] They are sort of fanciful beings and interesting stories and, you know, people build monuments to them. They called them temples. We call them theatres. But no one ever thought it was real. Like, kids weren't growing up going, "Mom, where's the guy who does the web slinging?" Mom didn't say, "Well, he's in Ohio." [Laughter] "Really?" "No, not really." It's a mythical being. We know that Spiderman isn't real, or at least most of us. [Laughter] We know that Superman isn't real. We know that Wolverine isn't real. And they knew that Zeus wasn't real and they knew that Athena wasn't real. These were essentially the superheroes of their day. And the story of Jesus is not that a mythical superhero was really interesting but that a man was actually born of a virgin. It's a historical fact evidenced by eyewitness testimony. So, first of all, the story of Jesus' virgin birth is very different than pagan mythology and it predates it, so if anything, the pagans stole their ideas from the Bible, we didn't steal the concept of the virgin birth from them.

4. DID JESUS CEASE TO BE GOD WHEN HE BECAME A MAN?

Number four, did Jesus cease to be God when he became a man? The question is, when Jesus came into human history, when the Son of God came as the man Jesus Christ, did he cease to be God? No, he did not. He says repeatedly, "I am God." One of the reasons they put Jesus to death, here's the quote, "because you, a mere man, claim to be God." Jesus was put to death because he emphatically, repeatedly, succinctly, clearly, unapologetically said, "I am the only God," so they killed him. Additionally, Jesus does what only God can do, like forgive sin. There's an occurrence in Mark where a man is told by Jesus, "your sins are forgiven." And all the religious leaders are bewildered. Their concept is right: we sin against God; only God can forgive us. And then they get it wrong asking, "So what business does Jesus have forgiving sin?" And the answer is, "Well, he is the God we've sinned against so he's the God who can forgive sin." He does other things like miracles and commanding creation to obey him, which it does. Jesus was God

fully while he was alive on the earth. Augustine the church father says it this way, "Jesus didn't lose his divinity, he added to it humanity." That's what happened. So Jesus Christ is not God-minus, he's God-plus. Spiritual, eternal God, plus human flesh in human history. That's who he is.

5. IS JESUS GOD OR MAN?

How about this one, is Jesus God or man? This is usually where everyone gets hung up, lots of debates around this. What do you think? Is Jesus God or man? Yes, he's the God-man. He's both. He's God become a man so he's the God-man.

Now, the liberals will look at Jesus and emphasize the man part. Good teacher, good leader, helped the poor, looked after the widow and orphan, a really good guy, kind of like a Gandhi, you know, a Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa kind of amazing life example. Is he God? "No." Did he live without sin? "I don't think so." Did he die on a cross as a substitute for our sins? "No." Did he resurrect from death? "I don't think so." Just a really great guy, one of the greatest guys who's ever lived. They deny his divinity. They reduce Jesus down to just a really great guy. Something that he himself refuses to accept. He repeatedly says that he's God.

Now, the fundamentalists on the other side, the real hard-core Christian-types in sometimes the wrong way, they'll so emphasize the divinity of Jesus that his humanity is almost lost. So when it says that Jesus was tempted, they'll say, "Ah, not really. When he was suffering, "Well, not totally." When he was crying because Lazarus died, "Well, you know, he knows what's gonna happen. He's not really that upset." When he's suffering and getting beaten and sweating drops of blood, "Well, I mean, it hurts, but not totally because he's God." The portrait is, he's like Clark Kent. On the outside: humble, Galilean peasant; underneath, you know, red leotard, "S" on the chest, cape flapping in the wind, indestructible. Just during the day he walks around as a mild-mannered peasant. But he really doesn't suffer and is not truly tempted as we are.

And both are true. Jesus is fully God, fully man. He is God who also suffers and is tempted. Christians debated this, discussed this, dialogued this, it culminated in something called the Council of Chalcedon at 451 A.D. They got together, the theologians, Bible teachers, and pastors, and they created and articulated the Chalcedonian Creed and they came up with this ideology of the hypostatic union, that Jesus is one person, two natures, fully God, fully man. We believe that, all Christians do; Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox Christians all believe that. And so Jesus is not God or man. He's God become man. He's the God-man.

6. DID GOD HAVE INTIMATE RELATIONS WITH MARY?

How about this one, number six, did God have intimate relations with Mary? If you have Mormon friends, this is what they believe. That God the Father is a flesh-and-blood physical being who had actual intimate relations with the teenage girl Mary and that he impregnated her through intimate relations. The Bible doesn't teach that at all. The angel Gabriel said, "It will be a miracle, the Holy Spirit"-not God the Father, the Holy Spirit-"Mary, he will allow you to conceive." And what they tend to do then is they tend to miss the subtlety of literary form. There's something called anthropomorphism in the Scriptures, where John Calvin called it baby talk. That God knows some concepts are a little tough for us, so he speaks in language we can understand like we do to children. And so when the Bible says that God sees with his eyes and reaches out with his arm, it doesn't mean that God has a physical body. Jesus comes as a man but God the Father does not have a physical body. In John 4, Jesus says that the Father, God the Father, he is a spirit being, he's spirit. The Bible says elsewhere, "God is not a man." And they miss the subtlety. They'll say, "Well, it says he has an eye and an arm," but it also says at one point that God gathers his children unto himself as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. God's not a chicken either. [Laughter] It's literary creativity. That's what it is. Right, it's God using anthropomorphic language to give us an understanding of who he is. And the Mormons will miss that. They'll say God the Father is a physical flesh-and-blood being who had intimate relations with Mary and impregnated her. And she says repeatedly that she's a virgin. And Joseph, this godly honorable man, has been waiting to have any consummation of his marriage with his wife, and it would be a horrendous thing to think that God himself violated Mary, fornicating with her to give birth to Jesus, dishonoring Joseph. That's a horrible heresy.

7. IS THE INCARNATION OF JESUS A SECONDARY ISSUE?

Number seven, is the incarnation of Jesus a secondary issue? Some in church history have argued that it should be. In our day, even some well-known pastors and Bible teachers, not good ones, have said that it is a secondary issue. It's primary. We believe at Mars Hill there are closed-handed primary issues that all Christians need to believe to be Christians, there are open-handed issues that we can discuss and debate but we need not divide over. This issue goes in the closed hand. Some say, "Why?" Some would ask, "What do we lose? Well, maybe Jesus' mom wasn't a virgin."

Well, number one, the Bible is not true if that's the case. It keeps saying that the virgin would be with child. Gabriel says that Mary was a virgin. Mary says that she was a virgin. The Bible is not true.

Number two, it would mean that Scripture is unfulfilled. We're still waiting for the virgin to give birth to the messiah in Bethlehem and our sins aren't forgiven.

Number three, it means Jesus' mother is a lying tramp. That she was running around on Joseph or she was messing around with Joseph and she concocted this crazy idea that now billions of people believe and actually call Christmas and we should get rid of all of that.

And number four, it would mean that Jesus is just a normal guy. It's not the virgin birth of Immanuel, God with us, in fulfillment of Scripture. It's two teenagers messing around, one getting pregnant and then creating a crazy story. It changes everything. It changes everything.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL IMPACT OF JESUS' BIRTH

So that's the theological. The historical is: Jesus is born. The theological is: and this is all that it means for God to enter into history. Thirdly then, the

result is biographical. We've moved from the historical to the theological to the biographical. What does this mean for you? What does this mean for me? What does this mean for us? What does this possibly have to do with our life? And there's much that could be said. I'll give you three ideas.

1. JESUS IS LIKE US

First, Jesus is like us. This is how it changes our life. Hebrews 4:15-16 says, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Jesus is like us. John Stott, a great British theologian once said, "In a world filled with suffering and pain, I could not fathom worshiping a God who was immune to it." See, in other religions, the concept of God is that he is transcendent. He is far away. The life of sin and sinners on the earth is just a mess and it's uncomfortable and it's painful and deplorable so maybe God will send an angel or he'll drop some commands but he's certainly not going to come down and get involved.

The story of the incarnation is that he did. His name is Jesus. What this means is none of us can look at Jesus and say, "You don't understand. Jesus, you don't understand what it is to grow up, to be a teenager, to have your family sort of turn their back on you and your friends betray you. You don't know what it's like to work a dead-end job. You don't know what's it like to be homeless and you don't know what it's like to be poor. And you don't know what it's like to be mocked or lied about or beaten or abused or harmed or suffer or die." Jesus would say, "Actually, I do. I'm your high priest." The high priest was the holy man, the mediator between God and his people. Bringing people's sins to God and bringing God's love to people. Jesus is our great high priest, one of the great themes of Hebrews. That's why we don't have a priesthood. We have a high priest. He's the only one we need.

What he says is he can sympathize. See, when you're suffering, talk to Jesus. When you're hurting, you can talk to Jesus. If you're struggling, talk to Jesus. If you're tempted, you can talk to Jesus because Jesus has been tempted. See, in his humility entering into history, Jesus became like us. See, we have a God who, unlike any other concept of God, he gets it, he understand it. Unlike the force of pantheism and panentheism, we have a real God with a name and a face, Jesus. What he says is we can run to him any time we have need and he gives grace and he sympathizes with us. He understands us.

2. JESUS IS UNLIKE US

So the first comfort is, Jesus is like us. But if Jesus was just like us, that in and of itself would not be helpful. Some of you have friends that are like you, they're like, "I totally understand. I feel your pain." What are you gonna do? "I don't know. There's not much I can do. You're on your own. I sympathize, empathize but I'm equally unable to affect change." Jesus is encouraging because he's like us. He's also encouraging because he's unlike us. Think about that. Jesus is also unlike us. Hebrews 7:26-27 says, we "have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens," that's where he's at today, ruling and reigning, "He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins."

Here's how Jesus is different than us: he never sinned. Was he tempted? That's what it says. You'll see it later in Luke. He was tempted. Did he sin? No. This is where he's different than us. Every time he was tempted he remained holy. He said yes to the will of the Father and no to the temptation of the world. So, what this means is when we're tempted to sin we can run to Jesus and he can say, "I know how to get you around this. I avoided this one myself." And when we do sin we can run to Jesus. And what Jesus doesn't do, like some of our friends, is say, "Hey, nobody's perfect. I understand. I did the same thing. I'm no better than you. Let's do it together next time." Jesus instead says, "I said no to that sin and I died for your sin and I'll forgive you, get you out of the mess you're in, change your whole life so you don't go back and do it anymore." That's what he does. He changes people. He's unlike us in that he is without sin. Jesus lived the life we should have lived and haven't, and he died the death that we should have died and won't, if our faith is in him.

3. JESUS CAME TO MAKE US LIKE HIM

So, it's all about, the historical, what happened, the theological, what does it mean, the biographical, do you believe it? By faith have you connected with this Jesus? If so, you enjoy this wonderful experience that Jesus came to make us like him. Jesus is like us in that he was fully human. He was unlike us in that he was without sin while on the earth and still is without sin to this day and he came to make us like him. To take away our sin, to give us his righteousness; to take away our condemnation, to give us his salvation; to take away our separation from the Father and to give us his reconciliation with the Father.

Here's what it says in 1 Timothy 2:5, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." There are not multiple gods, there's one God. There are not multiple ways to God, there's one way to God, the man Christ Jesus. God became a man to reconcile men and women back to God by dealing with the sin problem, taking away sin. All Paul is doing here is he's echoing Jesus, who said, "I am the way, the truth, the life, no one gets to the Father but by me." It's not about morality, spirituality, good works, reincarnation, trying harder, doing better. It's about Jesus. You'll hear it all the time at Mars Hill, it's all about Jesus. You need Jesus. He's your mediator. You don't rise up to God. God descends down to you. It's not about pride, self-actualization, self-esteem. It's about humility and repentance. It's not about what we do. It's about what he does to make us acceptable in the sight of the Father.

THE DOXOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO JESUS' BIRTH

See how this all works? This is amazing. Look at all that Jesus did. Historical: Jesus is born in Bethlehem to the Virgin Mary. Theological: incarnation,

God is with us. Biographical: we believe this by faith and we're reconciled to the Father and we're connected to life with God and our sins are taken away and our eternal life begins and our resurrection is guaranteed in the end.

This all culminates fourthly in doxological, worship. We're excited about Jesus. We love Jesus. We want other people to meet Jesus. We want to live like Jesus, for Jesus, through Jesus, to Jesus. And it works itself out in adoration and action. Adoration is praise, thanksgiving, prayer, trust, enjoyment of the person and work of Jesus. We can do that individually in moments of Spirit-filled joy in our life. We do that when we gather corporately to sit under the preaching of God's Word and respond, taking communion-Jesus' body broken, his blood shed, his incarnation for our atonement. We celebrate all of that in communion. It's adoration. We sing to Jesus cause he's high and exalted and he's worthy of all praise and gladness.

It's adoration and it's also action. See, in so many religions, the holiest men and women are the most disconnected and separated. Monks living in temples, caves, and retreat centers, and convents, and people separated. No televisions, you don't want to see the evil in the world. No music, oh, you don't want to hear the evil of the world. No traveling, you don't want to participate in the evil in the world. Live separated, live far away from everyone and everything. Completely guard your piety and holiness. Don't be stained by the dark, sinful, fallen, corrupted world. We'll see people like that. They dress in such a way that we know they're the holy ones.

Jesus isn't that way. Jesus gets in it. He comes to the world, to the culture, to the sinners, to the pain, to the hardship, to the idolatry, he goes to the demon possessed, the outcast, the poor, the marginalized, the fornicators, the adulterers, the alcoholics, the abusers, the proud, the arrogant, the rich, he gets in it. He's not a God who stands back and says, "Oh, I don't want to get involved. I might have to really see what sin does. And this could be a lot of work for me." Instead, he enters in.

And so part of our worship is the adoration of Jesus, but it's also, by the Holy Spirit's enablement, following the actions of Jesus, why we love justice and mercy and generosity and truthfulness and concern for the unborn and the poor and the marginalized and the needy and the single mother and the widow and the orphan and the elderly. The reason why we do good works and we want to serve and we want to love and we want to pray and we want to speak and we want to care is not so that we'd be acceptable in God's sight but because Jesus has already made us acceptable in God's sight. He is Immanuel, God with us, and by grace he is Immanuel in us. And it is the life of Christ through us that we want to show forth to the earth.

And that kind of life is not one where we separate ourselves from the world or we enter into the world to participate in its sin and folly. But like Jesus we enter into the world to be a redemptive agent for the world on behalf of the kingdom of God. That's what it means to be a missional Christian. That's what it means to live as a missionary. To, like Jesus, get involved. Too many Christians stand back and just live simply halfhearted lives of partial worship, adoration. They pray and love the books and sing the songs and enjoy the Lord and cheer at the events and when it comes to doing anything, like getting their hands dirty or being involved in the community or serving others in need or giving generously, it's like, "I couldn't, I was too busy reading books about the rapture. My hope is just to leave." No, that's not how Jesus lived. Jesus didn't come to the earth, go to the woods, read books about the rapture and just wait till it was all over. It cost him his life. He gave it all. And we enjoy the benefits, and so we adore him and we have action.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father God, I pray for us as a people. I pray for those, Lord God, who do not know you. They know religion. They know morality. They know spirituality, but not Jesus. I pray, Holy Spirit, that you would open their understanding, that this history would now be commingled with theology that would result in biography, a changed life. And that today they would join us in doxology, the worship of Jesus as God and Savior. I pray, Lord God, for those of us who have information but not transformation. Maybe we know something of Jesus, we've heard this story of his birth, but it's not fully worked itself out in a worshipful life. God, by your grace, may it begin to accomplish its achieved end to that affect today. Jesus, as we partake of communion, we remember the incarnation, body broken, blood shed. We remember your humiliation. We remember your substitution. We say thank you. It's all we've got, but we say thank you. Lord Jesus, may we adore and enjoy you and may we have lives filled with Spirit-empowered action for you until we see you face to face. Amen.

[End of Audio]

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.