

From the Manger to the Cross

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Bible Text: Matthew 1:18-25
Preached on: Sunday, December 23, 2012

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As we come together this morning to remember the birth of Christ and the death of Christ all in the next 45 to 60 minutes, what we have in front of us today is really beyond the capacity of the greatest human intellects to be able to comprehend and yet at the same time, it is within the grasp of the simplest child who trustingly believes. To contemplate the incarnation of God and to contemplate that God in human flesh went to a human cross, an instrument of torture and death, to contemplate that he did that on behalf of his people, his sinful people, in order to save them from their sins, to put all of that into our minds in a short time like this is really beyond the capacity of humans to grasp it all and so we must come in a manner that is dependent upon the Holy Spirit, dependent on God to enable us and to help us somehow appreciate something of the magnitude of what it is that is before us as we come to this passage in Matthew 1:18-25. In our English Bibles, it's really the opening statement of the entire New Testament and the opening statement of the entire New Testament is that God became a man to save his people from their sins and those of us that know Christ are the direct beneficiary of what happened in time and space so many years ago. It's important to remember that, to remember that we're talking about actual historical events. Christianity is based on historical events that happened in time and space and the New Testament interprets the significance of those events for us. We're not simply following myths or cleverly devised tales, the Scriptures say, and we're not following a mere philosophy or a system of ethics as Christians. We are following, as we sang earlier, we are worshiping the Son of God who was the babe in the manger in Bethlehem. We are serving the God who came to save his people from their sins. The themes that are before us today our lofty and magnificent and what I want you to be mindful of as we hear the word of God here this morning is that we are moving toward a climax as we take the Lord's table together in a short while, that the remembrance of the birth of Christ this morning is designed to lead us to a remembrance of the cross which was the price of your soul and that's what we're going to remember here this morning.

We're going to look at this passage in Matthew 1 around three main points this morning, each one would be the proper study of months of teaching, but we're just going to try to summarize it here quickly in the time that we have here this morning. If you're going to take notes this morning, the first point that I want you to see quite simply as we contemplate what it is about the coming of Christ that we are to remember, we remember, first of all, that Jesus came to forgive our sins. Jesus came to forgive our sins. This was no random birth in Bethlehem. This was the direct outcome of the eternal plan of God;

his redeeming purpose was now being set into action with the birth of Christ because Jesus came to forgive our sins. That's the most fundamental thing that we can remember here this morning.

Look back at verse 18 at the passage that we read just a moment ago, verses 18 through 21.

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.

There you have already the supernatural indication of this birth, a child conceived in the womb by the Holy Spirit. Verse 19,

19 And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. 20 But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

And here in verse 21 we see the point, the focal point of the passage.

21 "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for [because, for this purpose] He will save His people from their sins."

The angel stated the purpose of this miraculous birth: he will save his people from their sins. Beloved, let the clarity of that statement sink deep into your hearts here this morning, the understanding, the recognition, the remembrance that you and I, the nation of Israel, men throughout the world without exception, need to be delivered from their sins. This was the purpose of the incarnation. The Bible teaches clearly, unambiguously, that men throughout the world go about life with insanity filling their hearts: the insanity of rebellion against God; the insanity of being unable to comprehend divine revelation; the insanity of ongoing conflict and sin and disregard for God in his word and that is no small matter. It's not a matter of small consequence. The Bible teaches that our sins separate us from God and that places us under his judgment.

Write this verse reference down if you're taking notes, Isaiah 59:2. Isaiah 59:2 says that "your sins have made a separation between you and your God, And your iniquities have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear." It is not true that there is this general disposition of kindness of God toward humanity, what I mean by that is humanity can approach God on their own terms and in their own way and in their own righteousness. God is good to men who are even his enemies but there is a separation that is caused by sin because of the holiness of God and the sins that you and I have committed throughout the course of our life and the very nature of our sinful hearts make it such that a holy God cannot receive us into his presence. Men cannot come to God on their own merit at all.

You and I have broken God's law and there is guilt that is attached to the human soul as a result of that rebellion and it creates a barrier. That guilt creates a barrier that forbids access to God. That's what we remember here today, that there is this barrier of sin, the guilt, the stain of sin on your souls that you could never erase, that no launderer could ever make white on your behalf, that no tears could wash away, that no works could reestablish some kind of merit before God. You and I were utterly, totally, hopelessly lost, blind, deaf, mute, helpless. Scripture goes so far as to describe it as dead in trespasses and sins. And so when we come to this passage this morning, beloved, and hear that the Lord Jesus Christ came to save his people from their sins, I trust that the Spirit would open to your mind and make you appreciate fresh all over that that is the most precious thing that could ever fall on human ears; that there are no sweeter words to the lost soul to be heard than the fact that Jesus Christ came to save his people from their sins. Nothing else really matters. And beloved, if you're here today as a believer in Christ, you know that the Lord has redeemed your soul, that your sins are forgiven, then you have the most precious gift that could ever be received and the impact that that should have on your thinking, on your affections, on the way that you carry your disposition is one of great, profound, wondering gratitude toward the God who made that initiation toward you and on your behalf. Jesus came to forgive us of our sins.

Let's step back and look at it from a different direction here. Remember that we're talking about events that happened 2,000 years ago, long before you were here, long before I was here. Remember that when Jesus came to earth, that God was God, a holy offended God, offended by the very rebellion of man dating back to the garden of Eden; that that holy offended God was taking the initiative of grace toward undeserving sinners. Two thousand years before you were born, God had taken the initiative to secure your eternal salvation; 2,000 years before you and I were born, Christ had acted on our behalf, acted to save us from our sins. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ came to save sinners, you and me, from the judgment of God. And beloved, do you see, is your heart humbled under the reality that this was God taking the first motion toward you, not you taking the first motion toward God? That is fundamental to the disposition of the Christian life is to understand that and have your heart humbled underneath the truth that God took the initiative, not you toward him. That's fundamental.

Turn back to the book of Isaiah, to chapter 53, and to just understand that this magnificent Lord Jesus Christ, God from before time began, came to relieve you of your guilt. Beloved, I've got to tell you: I never get tired of that thought, do you? This should never grow old in the heart of a Christian. This should always be fresh and animating to your heart to realize that God took the initiative on your behalf. Look at Isaiah 53:5 and let there be no doubt about where the only place for forgiveness of sins can be found. Isaiah 53:5, prophesying of Christ, the statement that will one day be made in the future by Jews looking back on their Messiah, saying in a way that applies to us today as well, those of us who are Christians, we can say these words with full confidence based on the authority of the word of God. Isaiah 53:5, "He was pierced through for our transgressions," looking to the cross, pointing to the cross of Christ, "He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have

gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him." As we look back on the birth of Christ, we realize we can look back with kind of a telescopic perspective on it and realize that the birth of Christ was heading directly toward the cross and there at the cross your guilt would be placed on a sinless substitute and he would be smitten by God, the wrath of God poured out on him as he hung nailed to a human cross by wicked men, so that your guilt, iniquity, sins and transgressions would be placed on him and he would receive the stroke which was due on you so that one day you would be set free from your sins; that the guilt and the eternal punishment that that deserves, that should have fallen on your head and mine, would be removed, placed, as it were, on Christ and the wrath of God satisfied in him so that one day you could hear the Gospel and receive the forgiveness of your sins.

This is magnificent. This is the most holy truth that we could ever hear. And in a group of this size, I'm so happy that so many of you are here; I know so many of you are visiting with us here today. It bears repeating and it needs to be said that if that doesn't somehow animate and move your soul, you need to ask whether you're a Christian at all or not because a true Christian who has the Holy Spirit abiding in him or her, never tires of this. This thrills the regenerate soul. This thrills the redeemed soul over and over and over again. This is an ever flowing fountain in our hearts that drives us to worship in gratitude for this Lord Jesus Christ who came to forgive us of our sins, and if your experience of Christianity over the years has been one of mere formalism, of mere morality that has never driven you to love Christ in response to this saving work of incarnation, death and resurrection, if it has never come to your heart with what you know to be power, you've got to step back and ask and examine yourself as 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, examine yourself to see whether you're even in the faith because these truths are precious to true Christians. These truths are what men throughout the ages of the church and the ensuing 2,000 years have spilled their blood for, spilling their blood in response to the one who spilled his blood for them.

So I ask you here this morning, pleading with you, as it were, through the word of God: do you love this Christ who came to forgive us of our sins? Mary's baby was destined to become the sacrifice that made forgiveness real to the people of God. Mary's baby was the one who broke down that wall of separation doing what no one else in the universe could do. There was no one else. It was Christ alone appointed to do this work on behalf of sinners and there was no one else who could do it. Your parents couldn't do it for you. We're not born of flesh. The greatest, noblest, highest philosophers, teachers throughout the ages were helpless to accomplish what we most needed. I want you to see, I want you to feel the weight and the glory of the reality that Christ alone could do this for you and that's what we remember here today. And beloved, that's why we worship him. That's why we give him our affection. That's why we gladly give him our loyalty, our allegiance, our obedience. That's why we gladly follow him wherever he leads us to go because he paid a supreme price that no one else could pay and his blessed willingness to serve us that way is what secures our eternal blessings. Oh, what we remember here today that Jesus came to forgive our sins is the most blessed fact that men could ever speak.

If you're not a Christian today, I invite you to Christ. If you're not a Christian here today, this is exactly how you should be thinking: you should be thinking that God in his grace and mercy brought you to this very place today so that you could receive Christ today; that there is an urgency to the Gospel message that appeals to your heart and that you need to receive him today for salvation at this very moment through his word. I can say on the authority of God's word, the Spirit of God is pleading with your heart through his word at this very moment, "Repent. Come to Christ for eternal salvation," because this is the whole reason he came. He came to forgive our sins.

Turn back to Matthew 1 with me. Jesus came to forgive our sins. There is a second aspect that we see in this passage about the coming of Christ, the richness and the depth of the genius of God is shown that he has these accomplishing multiple things in everything that he accomplishes. It wasn't just for the forgiveness of our sins but, point 2 here this morning: Jesus came to fulfill prophecy. Jesus came to fulfill prophecy. His birth was like no other and his birth had been predicted throughout the centuries by the Jewish prophets of old. Going back centuries. Look at verse 22 and 23 with me, looking back on these statements that the angel made to Joseph, looking back on this statement of the purpose of the incarnation that Christ would save his people from their sins, with all of that in mind in these simple words of verse 22 and 23, look at this, "Now all this took place to," there's a purpose there. This is a statement of purpose. Why did this happen? Why was it that this manger scene was unfolding and what would come after? Why was it that the angel was speaking to Joseph in this manner about his bride, Mary? Why was it? Verse 22, "all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God with us.'" A statement from Isaiah 7:14 back in the Old Testament.

Did you ever stop and think what that means? Do you realize when Isaiah conducted his ministry? Seven hundred years before Joseph and Mary were on the scene. Seven hundred years. Do you realize that to give that some perspective from our position in life that that would predate the coming of Columbus to America? Seven hundred years ago was roughly 1300. Do you have any idea what was happening back in 1300? Don't feel bad, I don't either. I just know that that's really distant history to us. We think about that as being pretty distant history. We don't know anyone by name, you and I, we don't know anyone who lived at that time. Oh, some of you history buffs might have a speck of a name from that time frame but 700 years ago those people are gone and forgotten to us here today. And yet as the angel spoke to Joseph, God was carrying out a precision, a fulfillment of the word of his prophet from 700 years ago that was more certain to be fulfilled than what you think you're going to do later today. There was no doubt that when Isaiah called forth that there would be a child born to a virgin, there was no doubt that that would be fulfilled. And while there is no way for us to think about this in any manner that appreciates the insane complexity of making sure that happened, oh, generation after generation after generation being born, world ruler after world ruler rising and falling, rising and falling, the heaving waves of the passing of time throughout centuries, and yet there was an utter certainty that this prophecy would be fulfilled because that prophet was speaking under the inspiration of God and this speaks to us and

shows us the absolute perfect control of every detail that God has over the unfolding of human history. Words spoken 700 years ago were certain in their fulfillment and that's what we see here in verses 22 and 23.

Now, of course, this was not the only prophecy that was made of Christ. Turn back, if you can find it in your Bibles, to the book of Micah which is in the middle of the last 12 books of the Old Testament. If you get back to Ezekiel, you've gone too far; Micah just before the book of Nahum, just after the book of Jonah. Micah 5:2, about the same time as Isaiah, some 700 years before the birth of Christ, speaking to the little village of Bethlehem 700 years earlier said, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity." That's a prophecy about where the Messiah would be born. There was no way to orchestrate this. There was no way for men to orchestrate the ensuing events of 700 years in the ensuing generations of some 50 to 60 generations of people that followed after that prophecy. There is no way you can generate that. This is simply a statement that God was totally orchestrating every detail of it to accomplish his purpose and so when Jesus came, he wasn't only coming to forgive us of our sins, he was coming to fulfill and uphold the word of God and these and many other prophecies like them remind us here at this time where we remember the birth of Christ, this points us back and reminds us, fulfilled prophecy shows us – get this – that God is working out his eternal plan on his timetable and the fulfillment of that is certain and cannot possibly fail. God is in perfect control and – mark this – even the rebellion of man against him cannot hinder the fulfillment of what he intends to do. The loving intentions of God toward his people have always been at work. The loving intention of God to save your soul has been operative from the course of history from the beginning of time.

Listen, just think it through with me. Just think it through with me. Your salvation depended entirely upon this work of Christ that we are going to remember briefly at the Lord's table and God planned that from the beginning so that throughout the beginnings in Genesis and throughout the Old Testament and the 400 years of silence that followed after the Old Testament and into the New Testament and working through the subsequent 2,000 years in the history of the church as the Gospel was proclaimed with varying degrees of outward success through the years, all of that being done under the sovereign superintendence of a holy, omnipotent, omniscient God that somehow in reasons that only he knows, for motives that only he could animate, somehow a plan that, as magnificent as that all is, somehow included you. This great eternal plan that Christ was fulfilling with his birth, that was the fulfillment of prophecy, points us to the sovereign oversight of God. Not only of the big picture but of the details, and if you are in Christ, you can rightly say that you are included in that eternal plan that somehow God included your soul in his saving purposes which he had before time began.

Where do you find words to describe that? What words are sufficient to honor the God who is that great? That's that great? And not only great but has been that gracious to his people? Has been that gracious to you? Oh beloved, what I want you to do this morning is to think beyond, to think about your salvation beyond the context of your own little life

and put it in the context of the eternal plan of God which was being worked out to perfection without possibility of fail in the town of Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. There is no doubt, there is no doubt that the church today has lost sight of the magnificence of this or the worship and teaching that we see all around us would not be so trivial and superficial and empty and powerless. These are the greatest themes that could ever engage the human mind. Jesus came to fulfill prophecy and that speaks to the eternal plan of God; freely, sovereignly, magnificently, riding above the storms of human history, always working through it to accomplish exactly what he wants. It's humbling, isn't it? It makes us feel tiny by comparison, doesn't it?

Beloved, do you understand that that's exactly what it should do to your heart? You see, we worship because God is so much greater than us and to the extent that you see him as greater and greater, there is going to be a greater depth and greater profundity to the way that you worship him. It's not about candles and incense that promote worship. It's about the understanding of who the greatness of God is and bowing and humbling your human soul before his feet and honoring him according to the great truth which his word speaks about his great character and his great plan. Humble gratitude is the mark of someone who understands these things.

Point 3, it's not just that Jesus came to forgive our sins that makes this magnificent, it's not just that he came to fulfill prophecy that makes this even more magnificent, this just continues to get incomprehensibly more magnificent with each passing verse. Point 3: Jesus came in the fullness of deity. Jesus came in the fullness of deity. Honestly, honestly, who is adequate to speak to this, Paul said? Who is adequate for these things? The God who fulfills prophecy like that, the God who superintends the unfolding of history to make sure that his eternal plan is perfected in utter detail, that God who does that and planned it from before the beginning of time, that God is the God who was the baby. That was the God who was with us.

Look at verses 23 through 25 with me. "The virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us." There is only one God, you know that. There is one God and he was with us in the manger. Verse 24, "Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus." God with us. The statement couldn't be any plainer. Mary's baby was God in human flesh. God the Son took on humanity in order to achieve this work of redemption in order to fulfill prophecy.

Beloved, there aren't many people that we know in human history, maybe a few, who give up great prerogatives of royalty in order to humble themselves for the sake of someone else. Whatever the best human example of that could be pales into utter insignificance by the recognition that the holy ruling one of the universe abandoned the prerogatives of heaven, abandoned the glories of heaven for the sake of becoming a child. And not only becoming a child, you can't plumb the depths of this, not only to just become a child of God and kind of hang out with humanity and then go back, he came to die on a cross to give his life for sinners. For rebels. What kind of God is this? Oh

beloved, do you see it? You can't exhaust the majesty, the glory and the depth of worship that this Lord Jesus Christ is worthy of. No one does that. Paul alludes to that in Romans 5, doesn't he? Maybe there is a man, a righteous man who would give his life for his friend but that's a pretty extreme thing, but God demonstrates his own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. This God who had, with utter prerogative, with utter sovereignty, with utter holiness, with the utter complete right to judge and incinerate humanity for their rebellion against him, rather than exercising that prerogative and vindicating his holiness in that way, in grace, in kindness, in love, came and gave himself for you. This was God who is doing this, not a delegate, not a surrogate. One of the most appalling, damning aspects, the theology that drives Jehovah's Witnesses and things like that, is that God created Christ and then sent him to do the work. Do you realize how that robs Christ of his glory? Do you realize how that robs God of his glory to think that God made someone else to do the work? That's not true. That's utterly false. God himself did that and that magnifies the glory and grace of God infinitely more than the false lies of those who say Christ was the first of his creation and then Christ came and did the work. When you understand the difference between those two out-workings, you realize that to say that Christ was not God is a damnable heresy. It's not a matter of a difference of theological opinion, it goes right into the throne room of God and brazenly tries to rob him of his glory. And their judgment will be severe and their judgment will be just because no man should ever assault the glory of God in that way. No. No. No. When we come to this table in a few moments, we're going to remember that what is in front of us is a remembrance of a work that God did on our behalf and it was a work of utter humility and self-sacrifice on behalf of Christ and that's why we love him. That's why we would give our lives for him. That's why we get animated collectively, together as a body of believers together; we get animated over these things because the themes are too great to treat casually or flippantly. God was with us to forgive our sins and to fulfill prophecy. Jesus is God himself acting to save us and deliver us from sin, from Satan, and to secure our eternal blessedness.

I ask you, beloved, don't you love him? I do. The story began in the throne room of heaven, it's swept down to Bethlehem in a manger, it went to a cross and it ascended back into glory. One day he's going to come again, finish the work, as it were, and you and I won't get lost in the process. He's not going to lose sight of you. The certainty with which he went to the cross and carried your name, as it were, on his shoulder when he shed his blood, it's just as certain that as he fulfills his purposes for the ages and brings this present world order to an end, you're not going to get lost in the process. He's not going to forget about you. We have a magnificent Savior. We have a glorious Christ. We have one that is worthy of all of our devotion, love and worship. The Gospel of John said, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." As we come to the communion table, remember, he didn't just dwell with us, he died for us.

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