

“The Virgin Will Conceive”

December 4, 2016

While a hotly contested belief, I embrace the truth that Jesus was born of a virgin – and so do the believers of Ventura. But while many of us know and affirm the story of the virgin birth, I think that many of us do not understand the full implications of it. A few years ago before I preached a message on the Virgin Birth, I spoke with a friend of mine about this topic and that person said something like, "The virgin birth? Oh, boy. It's the same thing every year, 'A virgin had a baby!'" My first response was shock at what this person said. However, having thought through that statement, I understand what was being said, "We hear the same thing. Give us something more." You see, it seems that so often, the Christmas message in our day has been so sterilized or romanticized that we let tradition, Christmas carols and even personal nostalgia speak more about Jesus' advent than we let the Scriptures actually speak. So, we hear about the virgin birth, and we think, "Wow. God send Jesus to Mary on a nice, cool evening. There she was holding her baby who, no crying he makes. How sweet." But then we ask, "Why a virgin? Why does that even matter?" I wonder how many people know how to answer that question: Why a virgin conception? Many might just want to say, "It's just a miracle to prove he's special" or "It makes for a good story."

While there's no new revelation that's been given on the virgin conception. The Bible has stated the same message always. That said, I hope that I am going to delve more deeply into this topic. If you're like the friend of mine who said, "Again?!" I want you to see there's more to the Christmas story than the sentimentalized versions of the 21st century. The fact that Jesus was born of a virgin should amaze and enthrall your heart!

So, I have a weighty task this morning and it is my prayer that you too might be in awe of our mighty God as we seek to understand the glory of Jesus being conceived in a young woman almost 2,000 years ago. We will start today by talking about God's perspective on this, giving background as to *why* the virginal conception is so important. And then we'll move into the Christmas story itself and talk about Mary's perspective. By putting these two together, we will see just how practically strengthening this truth is even for us.

1. God is righteous and merciful, keeping all his promises.

In Genesis 3:15, we read: I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."¹ God is speaking here within the context of giving Adam and Eve consequences for their sins. We are all familiar with the story, right? God creates the entire world with great magisterium, and then on the final day of creation, he creates Adam and Eve. Both of them walk in the beauty of the garden – enjoying a perfect world that none of us can really fathom. This is a world where no rebellion exists and world which had greater potential for flourishing life. Enter Satan. He comes into the world as a serpent and begins to tempt Eve. According to Moses, the writer of Genesis, Adam was with Eve – listening to all of the ridiculous arguments of the serpent, and Eve buys into the lie and Adam never once seems to shut the serpent up or stop Eve. As one who was entrusted to have ruling authority over the animals, he failed the creation. As one who was to lovingly lead his wife, he failed. As one who represented humanity, he failed. And, in that moment of treason for both Adam and Eve, they were gripped with the knowledge of evil and ran in fear – hiding because they felt vulnerable and ashamed.

At this point, God makes His presence known to Adam and Eve. Then, upon the confession of their shame and then their blame shifting, God stops the charade and confronts each of them by pronouncing judgments on Adam, Eve and the serpent. In the midst of the pronouncement to the serpent, we read Genesis 3:15: I

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ge 3:15.

will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”²

Since the serpent has tried to destroy the human race, God has decreed final destruction of the serpent. But one of the most interesting aspects about this verse is when it says, "her offspring." The literal Hebrew is "seed." You might see that in your translation or even in a side note on your Bible. What this is referencing is the fact that a woman is going to possess seed. But, if you've ever taken a Biology class, there is no such thing as a woman having seed. Men possess seed; women possess eggs. How could a woman possess seed except by miracle of God?

In this punishment towards the serpent, God is giving hope to Adam and Eve (probably hope that they didn't even perceive): one day this seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. So, many years ago in a garden God promised not only a virgin conception, but the death and resurrection of Christ! As Hebrews 2:14 says, **“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil. . .”**³ God wants to rescue traitors! His glory is revealed not only in punishment, but that in the midst of punishment, he reveals his grace!

The coming of Jesus is proclaimed at the first treason of the human race. Praise his name for initiating his plan and declaring it. And, be in awe that one piece of information he decides to disclose all the way back at the beginning is that a woman will have a seed.

But why does that matter? Fast forward through the centuries after Adam and Eve's day. As we look at the virgin birth from God's perspective, many other prophecies have been proclaimed regarding this coming Messiah, but the virgin birth really has not been mentioned until we get to the 8th to 7th centuries BC. The prophet Isaiah reminds us of the importance of the virginal conception. Isaiah was in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. God calls Isaiah to a hard ministry to proclaiming the message of God's punishment and also God's rescue to a people who will (for the most part) deny the message.

In Isaiah 7, we have some interesting things happening. Isaiah was commanded by the Lord to take his newborn son to King Ahaz. Ahaz was a wicked man. He worshipped other gods and desired his own gain. Ahaz also ruled in a time of great fear. The people of Syria & Ephraim were, through military means, trying to pressure Judah into an alliance against Assyria, but Ahaz refused to make an alliance against Assyria. The reason is because Ahaz had made a secret alliance with Assyria already, which he should not have done. However, he trusted Assyria for protection.

As I explain this, we can see that there's political turmoil. In the midst of this turmoil, God commands Isaiah to prophetically speak to Ahaz, bringing his son and knowing Ahaz's plans full well. When Isaiah speaks to him, holding his son, Shear-jashub. His name means "a remnant shall return." This son is a physical picture of the promise of God. First, the promise is of punishment. Only a remnant will remain. However, it's also a promise of grace: He takes care of his people. Sounds similar to Genesis 3, right? Judgment and grace. Then Isaiah says that these problem kingdoms will be destroyed soon. The tension will all go away! Ahaz, and the people of Judah should be excited and comforted. Isaiah then says, "Ask whatever you want from God as proof." Ahaz seemingly piously says, "I will not put the Lord God to the test." While that could seem to be religious, Ahaz was acting out of unbelief. Instead of trusting in the Lord and being commanded by God to ask whatever he can think of for proof that the Lord is going to fulfill His Word, Ahaz says, "No, that's ok." Why

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ge 3:15.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 2:14.

does he do this? I think he either didn't want his sinful alliance to be known or maybe he was ashamed. Either way, he was trusting in another nation to give him victory, not the Lord.

As a result of this response, in glorious grace, instead of walking away, Isaiah gives not only Ahaz a sign, but the entire nation of Israel a sign, and that sign is revealed in verse 14: **Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.**⁴ I love this! In the midst of the sin, and in the midst of the fears, God essentially says, "If you're not going to ask for an impossible request when I command you to, I'm going to give you one. And, to add to this, God wants not only Ahaz to see this. He wants the whole nation to revel in the God who does miracles! A virgin will conceive.

Do you see any similarities to this prophecy and the prophecy to Adam and Eve? God uses sin to display His forgiveness. He uses people's hiding in their disbelief to display to all that He is working a plan of redemption. And, in those dark and sinful moments, God shows that He'll do the impossible, not only for the individuals He's speaking to, but for a nation and even the world!

Let's go back to verse 9. God says, **"If you are not firm in faith you will not be firm at all."** There is a definite word play in the Hebrew. The idea is that the people are wavering and scared because they will not trust in the Lord. The idea is that when we trust in the Lord, we don't have to fear what man can do to us. But, when we cease from trusting in the Lord, we will live based on a fear of others. We will seek to maneuver life in such a way to protect ourselves – all the while rejecting God. This is the situation in Israel. Verse 2 says, "So his heart and the heart of his people were moved as the trees of the woods are moved with the wind."⁵

What is the answer to this fear? Faith. Dependence on him. This is the call of God to Ahaz and the nation of Israel. But this is the call to us as well. How many of you have had fears within this past month? Week? Yet, you're probably like me in that many times when fears arise, you quickly try to figure out how you're going to solve it. You might pray the obligatory prayer, but in practice, you spend your time worrying over what's going to happen or what you need to do. And then, when you feel you've figured it out, you rest. Here is God saying, pray to me. Here is God saying, "Is there anything impossible for me to do?" And we're saying, "Yeah, but God I can't *just* pray." And yet, you come to church to worship with other believers. You look good on the outside, having spiritual answers like Ahaz, but you aren't truly trusting. Listen, if you will not trust Him, you will not stand firm at all. We're not that unlike Ahaz, are we?

Now, when I think of all the signs God could have given to Ahaz, I would not have imagined a birth of a child. I would think of stars falling from the sky or a person coming back from the dead. But, God gives the sign of a birth. Isn't that interesting? But in that prophetic statement, there is great hope. Ahaz was the descendent of David. He was a King who has been promised that the kingdom will continue to expand. He has no need to fear. If he had known the Scriptures and thought all the way back to Adam and Eve, maybe he should have even connected Genesis 3:15 with that moment in time. The one who will crush the serpent's head is going to come! God will be with us.

And, you know what? When we are tempted to hold on to our fears and worries, should we not also remember Genesis 3:15 and Isaiah 7:14? God's sovereign plan has unfolded! A virgin conceived and bore a son. This is no ordinary son. This is the God-Man. Jesus left the glories of Heaven and entered into the cesspool of this sinful world in order to live a perfect life and then take the punishment that sinners deserved so that people could have life!

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Is 7:14.

⁵ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Is 7:2). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Many people want to doubt the hope that is revealed in this passage. But, if God can bring about a virgin birth, is He limited to anything? For one moment, I want to comment on this prophecy. First, many people try to say "virgin" can mean something else in the originals; however, most translations, and even Septuagint (the Old Testament in Jesus' day) translated this as a literal virgin. When Matthew writes this prophecy, he quotes the Septuagint. So, we have to either agree that this is a virgin or that the Scriptures speak falsely. We cannot take this any other way.

So, let me ask you again. What fears take hold of you? What things are you trusting in? The virgin birth is to confront our fearful independence and lead us to rest in the God who is sovereign, powerful and gracious! God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, and He gives victory to those who believe Him. "If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all."

But there's more to this prophecy. He shall be called *Immanuel*. What does that mean? God with us. As we read in Matthew or Luke, we begin to see that Jesus was God in the flesh. This is the miracle. And, Isaiah clearly means for us to understand that this One to come is God because once we get to Isaiah 9:6, we read titles for the Messiah: **Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**⁶

As we put this all together, we should recognize that when Isaiah spoke to Ahaz, God wanted Ahaz's trust to be in greater things than his own kingdom of Judah. He wanted Ahaz to trust in the God who made promises, keeps his promises and promises to bring an eternal Kingdom that will never fade away. He wants Ahaz to get his mind out of his own palace and even his own century and see how people need to be restored with God because of their sin. He called Ahaz and the nation to see their need for a greater King and a greater rescue than what Assyria could provide. And today, the call is similar for us!

When we see that God could bring about a baby in the body of a virgin, we ought to believe God can do *anything* he desires. But grasp hold of this, too. God didn't merely create someone else to come down and rescue the human race. No, he called his Son to do that. Isaiah 9:6 says that the One to come is the Mighty God and the Everlasting Father who is also the Prince of Peace. This Messiah is One with the Father. He's of the very same essence.

Look at the beautiful holiness of God to reach into humanity while humanity is sinning and instead of merely sending an agent on His behalf, He leaves His throne to rescue the people. He comes in the form of a seemingly harmless baby, and in this baby, we see that God is with humanity to bring about its rescue. So, today, rejoice in a King who is not only at one point in time with us, but rejoice that because he is God, he is *always* with those who trust in him. We can be firm in our faith because our Savior, the Messiah, is God with us!

You can hear all of this and then say, "How is God with me when there are so many problems, pains and struggles?" Well, let's discover how the virgin conception affected the one who gave birth to the Messiah. As a result of looking at Mary, we'll discover how the virginal conception ought to affect us.

2. We can trust God because Jesus was conceived in a virgin.

One of the greatest weaknesses to movies and television is that it's so sensory. As a result, people can be so overloaded with their feelings that they don't know how to respond to real life. That said, that weakness is also a movie's strength. Through camera angles, music, lighting and backgrounds, you are helped to know how someone is feeling or even how you ought to be feeling in a given situation. We don't get those triggers

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Is 9:6.

when reading the Bible. You don't start reading Matthew 1 and, as you do, see the clouds moving away so there's light. You don't get to verse 18, and then hear this subtle-yet-tense music to let you know that Mary's going to experience issues because she's pregnant. As a result, many of us read the Bible emotionless. I don't believe God wants us to read without full understanding – both mental and emotion. We're to pray that our hearts are united with the truth. And when reading historical stories, we should seek to grasp what's *really* going on. We should, in one sense, put ourselves into the people's shoes. So, today, that's what we're going to do with Mary.

So, what do we know about Mary? As we compile biblical, historical and cultural data, this is what we discover: She was Jewish. She was young – probably in her teen years since the average girl was engaged in her teenage years. According to the book of Luke, we discover that she is clearly Jewish since her relatives are Jewish – having an uncle Zechariah who works in the temple. She also lived in Nazareth – a city that was looked down upon by many Jews because it was a town with a Roman army encampment. The derogatory view of people from Nazareth can be found when the one man is recorded to have said of Jesus, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” So far, we have a teenage Jewish girl who would generally be looked down upon by her own nation. There's a lot of probable difficulties or hurdles she's already experiencing. But to add to this, she was engaged to a man named Joseph. Now, the engagement time in that day was different than in our day. One major difference was that this time was to include a time of testing to ensure that the woman proved her sexual purity. Interestingly enough, people during this time period were called husband and wife. Verse 19 of Matthew 1 affirms that by saying Joseph was her husband (even though they were engaged). So, there was a strong bond between the two, but they had not officially married yet.

During this testing time, the two would still live with their families, but if the woman was unfaithful to the man the marriage would be annulled. If she was faithful, the man would have a great processional into the city and take his wife from her parent's home. This is a lot for a teenage girl, isn't it? Maybe in first century, people just expected all of these things to take place. Maybe Mary expected this all and learned to live with this. But put yourself in Mary's shoes. Looked down upon by your nation, being young and engaged to be married. I think about how many southern white Americans 50 years ago would have looked at someone in the black community. I can't know for sure how people perceived Mary, but with these dynamics, there were difficulties.

Yet, clearly Mary was a godly person. In Luke, we read her praise of God, much of it being Old Testament quotations. We also know she was graced by God. And, even practically speaking, she was a virgin. So, it seems to be accurate to say that her vertical relationship with God was full and her relationship towards others, Joseph specifically, was one of faithfulness. What would she have to fear? By God's grace, she's firm in her faith. Then comes Luke 1:26. Please turn in your Bibles there and we will read

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ And the angel

answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.”³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.”³⁸ And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.⁷

So, what just happened here? We might think, “Bombshell!” She just finds out that she’s going to be pregnant. When the angel first appears, she doesn’t understand the greeting. The greeting is to the “O favored one.” It actually has reference to being given grace. God says despite her circumstances in her life, she’s been chosen by God to receive his grace. God doesn’t look at her and say, “You’re a Nazarene. Oh, you’re too young.” He responds by giving her grace to do what He’s calling her to do.

Mary doesn’t know where to go with this. She’s fearful. She is confused. Which many people have been when confronted with angels. So, the angel, Gabriel, responds by saying, “Do not be afraid.” Then he explains his greeting. He says that she’s going to have a Son, and that this Son will be the Son of the Most High. “Son of” can have the idea of being identical to. Therefore, this human is also God. Now, can you imagine being told that? You’re going to give birth to God. He then explains that fact that this person (the Son of God) is the Messiah. I believe that she was putting all these pieces together in her mind, but she had one question. “I’m a virgin. How can this be?”

Gabriel responds by saying that the Holy Spirit will come to make this happen. Then Gabriel says, the proof of my saying is found in the reality that your relative Elizabeth is pregnant in her sixth month! Then the amazing statement, “**For nothing will be impossible with God.**” And Mary responds in faith.

Ventura, do you grasp what’s happening here? Nothing is impossible with God. This idea is similar to the response God gives to Ahaz. God does whatever He pleases! Nothing can stop His plans. In case Mary might wonder *how* God can do it, God simply responds by saying, “Look at that other miracle I’ve done in Elizabeth!” Now, how does this apply to us? Believers, whatever God promises to do, he will do! The virgin conception affirms this. So, let’s apply this practically. You might think, “I hate having this ‘besetting sin’ in my life. Will I ever make progress?” If Jesus could come in the flesh, then there is hope in your fight against sin! “Nothing will be impossible with God.” God promises that his children will persevere. He will do what he says he will do! Or, maybe you’re discouraged with circumstances in your life, but listen, “nothing is impossible with God.” He’ll either calm the storm or calm His child, but either way, He promises to work all things together for good.

Going back to Mary, what calming words these must have been. She could have bold confidence before God because He promised her that He will do what He said. The prophecies through the millennia are coming true, and if she could trust the prophecies, she could trust this too. She has faith and she is firm.

Mary then goes to visit Elizabeth for a time period. Elizabeth obviously believes Mary because her baby leapt in the womb in response to Mary coming to them. After some time, Mary returns home. You can imagine after that time, she looks pregnant. Mary’s parents aren’t mentioned. What did they think? Did they know? I would imagine that if John and Elizabeth believed, then her parents did, but that’s speculation. We simply do not know. What we do know is that her future husband, Joseph, thought she broke the engagement. Here’s a godly man who contemplated what to do.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Lk 1:26–38.

Enter Matthew's account in the first chapter of his book. Joseph didn't want to put Mary to shame. He did love her. He loved her so much that he thought he'd just "put her away." The term used here is "resolved." He came to a decision already. That would mean that he wasn't going to waver in his decision. But it is interesting how resolved we can be in our plans, but God's plans always trump ours, don't they? God had other plans for Joseph. An angel went to Joseph and explained everything to him. The angel even explains how she was miraculously pregnant. The angel reminds Joseph of the Isaiah prophecy. In 1:23, we read the angel saying: ²³ **"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).**⁸ This circumstance causes Joseph to change from his resolve and not only that, Joseph breaks usual engagement customs and has Mary live with him. I think he does this because he wants to protect her from others. But he goes against the normal customs of their religion to do this. Joseph is firm in faith. God made promises. God keeps his promises. And with God, nothing will be impossible. This baby to come is the One who will not only rescue one kingdom, but he will bring his Kingdom and rule as the Prince of Peace! Do you see how the prophecy of a virgin conception can cause us to trust God and even to call us to see that there are greater realities than what we see around us?

The conception of Jesus doesn't mean that all our circumstances will be a bed of roses. Nations may rise against us like in Ahaz's day. People might look down on us. We could feel afraid or confused by what's happening in our lives. But if God himself has promised to rescue you from your sin and then God the Son came in the flesh to be the rescuer, you can know there's a God who cares. But there's more. Let's not simply focus on ourselves here. The virgin conception isn't just some nice psychiatric pill to help encourage us. Jesus coming in the flesh shows us more of God!

God wants us to see his holiness in his justice, forgiveness and in his promise-keeping. In the book of Philippians, the apostle Paul talks about Jesus coming to earth. He talks about Jesus humbling himself by taking on the form of a human, but then he goes on and talks of a greater humiliation. He writes this, **"And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."**⁹

The rescue Israel needed, which God promised to Ahaz through Isaiah, the rescue that Mary rejoiced in. The hope for the whole world, is found in Jesus. And Paul writes that without Jesus becoming human, this would not have happened. But Jesus did come in the flesh, and at the cross, he took the punishment for our treason.

When we talk of Jesus' life and death, this isn't a small matter. Sin is heinous and costly because God is *that* perfect. Yet, this Savior came in the flesh to take the punishment. But not only that. In taking the punishment, the Savior purchased rescue for all who have trusted in him! Why would God want to save us? Because he's *that* glorious. In punishment and grace, he reveals his magnificence. Let the story of God's promise to Adam and Eve remind you that God delights in forgiving and saving people. In the midst of our knowing we should be punished, God comes in mercy. And today, if you haven't turned to Jesus, turn to him! If you're not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.

In this Christmas season, we can trust in things around us like Ahaz did – finding our joy in a new stereo, video game, family gatherings. And while we can be grateful for these things, let's remember that Jesus is not only the reason for the season, he's the reason for our eternal joy and gratitude! Let thoughts of the virgin

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Mt 1:23.

⁹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Php 2:8–11.

birth fill you with joy, confidence, comfort and assurance that God is with us. No matter the circumstances, we can have joy. He came in the flesh to rescue. Praise his name! The Messiah, Lord and Savior was born of a virgin. God keeps His promises! Our God is infinitely glorious.

And now, today, we're told that Jesus, because he came in the flesh and died in the flesh and rose again in the flesh, he is exalted on high as the King of kings and Prince of Peace. Let's raise our eyes higher than what we can see with our eyes. Let's revel in our Savior who even presently is Immanuel, God with us. Daily may we trust him and find firmness through dependence on him.