

john 15:4  
**A b i d e** in **ME**



Bible studies for disciples who make disciples

Loudonville Community Church

Volume 5 - Number 6  
The week of December 8, 2019

**Sermon Series: *Advent Unobscured***  
**A Village Scandal**  
**Matthew 1:18-25**

**THIS WEEK'S CORE STATEMENT**

**Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9***

We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful man, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential and that a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

**Main Point:** God is able to remove the shame of the most disgraceful moments.

**Is the Virgin Birth Essential?**  
By Kevin DeYoung<sup>1</sup>

The accounts of Jesus's birth in Matthew and Luke are clear and unequivocal: Jesus's birth was not ordinary. He was not an ordinary child, and his conception did not come about in the ordinary way. His mother Mary was a virgin, having had no intercourse prior to conception and birth. By the Holy Spirit, Mary's womb became the cradle of the Son's incarnation (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35).

**With God, All Things Are Possible, Or Not?**

It's no secret that in recent history, the doctrine of the virgin birth (or more precisely, the virginal conception) has been ridiculed as fairy-tale make-believe by many outside the church, and by not a few voices inside the church. Two arguments are usually mentioned.

First, the prophecy about a virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14, it is argued, actually speaks of a young woman and not a virgin. Many have pointed out that the Hebrew word in Isaiah is *almah* and not the technical term for virgin, *bethula*. It is true that *almah* has a wider semantic range than *bethula*, but there are no clear references in the Old Testament where *almah* does not mean virgin. The word *almah* occurs nine times in the Old Testament, and wherever the context makes its meaning clear, the word refers to a virgin. More importantly, the Septuagint translates *almah* with the Greek word *parthenos* (the same word used in Matthew 1:23 where Isaiah 7:14 is quoted), and everyone agrees that *parthenos* means "virgin." The Jewish translators of the Septuagint would not have used a clear Greek word for virgin if they understood Isaiah 7:14 to refer to nothing more than a young woman.

Second, many have objected to the virgin birth because they see it as a fairly typical bit of pagan mythologizing. "Star Wars has a virgin birth. Mithraism had a virgin birth. Christianity has a virgin birth. Big deal. They are all just fables." This is a popular argument, and it sounds quite plausible as first glance, but there are a number of problems with it.

1. The assumption that there was a prototypical God-Man who had certain titles, did certain miracles, was born of a virgin, saved his people, and then got resurrected is not well-founded. In fact, no such prototypical "hero" existed before the rise of Christianity.
2. It would have been unthinkable for a Jewish sect (which is what Christianity was initially) to try to win new converts by adding pagan elements to their gospel story. I suppose a good Jew might make up a story to fit the Old Testament, but to mix in bits of paganism would have been anathema to most Jews.

3. The virgin birth parallels are not as strong as we might think. Consider some of the usual suspects.

*Alexander the Great*: his most reliable ancient biographer (several centuries after his death) makes no mention of a virgin birth. Besides, the story that began to circulate (after the rise of Christianity it's worth mentioning) is about an unusual conception, but not a virgin birth (Alexander's parents were already married).

*Dionysus*: like so many of the pagan "parallels," he was born when a god (in this case Zeus) disguised himself as a human and impregnated a human princess. This is not a virgin birth and not like the Holy Spirit's role we read about in the Gospels.

*Mithra*: he's a popular parallel. But he was born of a rock, not a virgin. Moreover, the cult of Mithra in the Roman Empire dates to after the time of Christ so any dependence is Mithraism on Christianity and not the other way around.

*Buddha*: his mother dreamed that Buddha entered her in the form of a white elephant. But this story doesn't appear until five centuries after his death and she was already married.

You get the drift. The so-called parallels always occur well after the life in question, well into the Christian era, and are not really stories of virginal conceptions anyway.

### **Does It Really Matter?**

But even for those who believe in the virgin birth, some question whether the doctrine is really that important. For example, Rob Bell famously argued more than a decade ago that it wouldn't be such a big deal if we found out Jesus had an earthly father named Larry. So what if the virgin birth was thrown in to appeal to the followers of Mithra and Dionysian religious cults? What if the word for virgin referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse? According to Bell, none of this would be catastrophic to the Christian faith. "What if that spring [the virgin birth] was seriously questioned? Could a person keep jumping? Could a person still love God? Could you still be a Christian? Is the way of Jesus still the best possible way to live?"

There are a lot of questions here, but the underlying one seems to be this: is the virgin birth really that essential to Christianity? The answer is a resounding "Yes!"

### **First, the virgin birth is essential to Christianity because it has been essential to Christianity.**

That may sound like weak reasoning, but only if we care nothing about the history and catholicity of the church. Granted, the church can get things wrong, sometimes even for a long time. But if Christians, of all stripes in all places, have professed belief in the virgin birth for two millennia, maybe we should be slow to discount it as inconsequential. In his definitive study of the virgin birth, J. Gresham Machen concluded that "there can be no doubt that at the close of the second century the virgin birth of Christ was regarded as an absolutely essential part of the Christian belief by the Christian church in all parts of the known world." Perhaps, then, we should not be so hasty in dismissing the doctrine as a take-it-or-leave-it element of the Christian faith.

### **Second, the Gospel writers clearly believed that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived.**

We don't know precisely how the Christ-child came to be in Mary's womb, except that the conception was "from the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20). But we do know that Mary understood the miraculous nature of this conception, having asked the angel "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). The Gospels do not present the virgin birth as some prehistoric myth or pagan copycat, but as "an orderly account" of actual history from eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-4). If the virgin birth is false, the historical reliability of the Gospels is seriously undermined.

### **Third, the virgin birth demonstrates that Jesus was truly human and truly divine.**

How can the virgin birth be an inconsequential spring for our jumping when it establishes the identity of our Lord and Savior? If Jesus had not been born of a human, we could not believe in his full humanity. But if his birth were like any other human birth—through the union of a human father and mother—we would question his full divinity. The virgin birth is necessary to secure both a real human nature and also a completely divine nature.

### **Fourth, the virgin birth is essential because it means Jesus did not inherit the curse of depravity that clings to Adam's race.**

Jesus was made like us in every way except for sin (Heb. 4:15; 7:26-27). Every human father begets a son or daughter with his sin nature. We may not understand completely how this works, but this is the way of the world after the fall. Sinners beget sinners (Psalm 51:5). Always. So if Joseph was the real father of Jesus, or Mary had been sleeping around with Larry, Jesus is not spotless, not innocent, and not perfectly holy. And as result, we have no mediator, no imputation of Christ's righteousness (because he has no righteousness to impute to us), and no salvation.

So, yes, the virgin birth is essential.

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**OBSERVATION**  
*What does the text say?*

~ Matthew 1:18-25 ~

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). <sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, <sup>25</sup> but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

1. Place a Δ over every reference to God the Father.
2. Place a † over every occurrence of Jesus by name, noun and pronoun.
3. Draw a symbol of a dove over each reference to the Holy Spirit.
4. In verse 18, write the word *genesis* above the word **birth**.
5. Place brackets around the phrase: **Mary had been betrothed to Joseph**.
6. In the right margin of verse 18 write: *The Three Stages of Marriage: Engagement, Betrothal, Ceremony*.
7. Circle each occurrence of **the angel of the Lord**.
8. In the left margin of verse 23 write the OT reference: *Isaiah 7:14*.
9. Draw a line connecting from verse 21 to verse 25.

**Complementary Passage**  
~ Isaiah 7:10-17 ~

<sup>10</sup> Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz: <sup>11</sup> “Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” <sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.” <sup>13</sup> And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup> For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. <sup>17</sup> The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father’s house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria!”

## UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

*What does the text mean?*

The commentary is intended to enhance your own study of the text.

<sup>18</sup> **Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.** Literally, “Now the genesis of Jesus Christ . . .” The word genesis refers to Jesus’ origin, descent, and lineage. The narrative focuses on the circumstances around Jesus’ birth and not just the birth itself. **Christ** [*christos*] means the anointed one, the Messiah.

**When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph.**

There were three stages in a first century Jewish wedding. (1) There was the engagement stage that was usually arranged by the parents when their respective children were still young and likely had never met one another. (2) There was the betrothal stage. It lasted for one year during which the couple were acknowledged as husband and wife, though the woman remained in her parental home. Once the betrothal period began, it possessed binding authority. It could only be terminated through divorce. (3) There was the marriage stage, which took place at the end of the betrothal year with a public ceremony. **Joseph.** This passage focuses almost entirely on the experiences of Joseph rather than Mary.

**Before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.** Sexual relations were not considered appropriate during the betrothal period. At some point during the betrothal, Mary’s pregnancy was detected. **From the Holy Spirit.** The power of God produced in Mary’s womb a unique and extraordinary miracle. However, Joseph was unaware of the Holy Spirit’s accomplishment as the next verse indicates.

<sup>19</sup> **And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.** Joseph did not discover Mary’s pregnancy by an angel, at least initially. The Law was clear about the consequences for a betrothed virgin who is sexually unfaithful (cf. Deut. 22:23). **Being a just man.** Joseph’s model of justice (derived from a faithful reading of the prophets) was not the mere imposition of a penalty. Instead, he was just because he was willing to show compassion to the outcast (cf. Isaiah 42:1-6) by pursuing a private divorce. “Joseph is . . . not a passive, mute figure. Rather, he acts as a strong, thoughtful person whose bold decision at a point of crisis saves the life of the mother and her unborn child” (Kenneth). The uncommon Greek phrase, **put her to shame**, is also used in Colossians 2:15 of Jesus’ making ‘a public spectacle’ over the demonic powers by His death on the cross. **Resolved to divorce her quietly.** Joseph wanted to avoid shaming Mary through a public trial.

<sup>20</sup> **But as he considered these things. He considered** [*enthymeomai*] can mean he *pondered*, but it can also mean *he became angry*. The actual text indicates that Joseph was not only disappointed but very upset. The

root of the verb used here is *thymos*. Its only other occurrence in the Gospels refers to the *angry* (i.e. *they were filled with thymos or wrath*) congregation in Nazareth that wanted to stone Jesus (cf. Luke 4:28). The verbal form of this same term is also used to refer to Herod’s *rage* when he realized that he was outwitted by the magi (cf. Matthew 2:16).

**Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife.** God guides Joseph’s steps through direct revelation. The **angel** [*angelos*] meaning messenger, appeared to Joseph between his resolution and implementing it. The angel’s **behold** redirected Joseph’s focus. The communication to Joseph in a **dream** is a vital part of the story of the conception and infancy of Jesus, all but one relating to Joseph (cf. Matthew 2:12, 13, 19, 22). To call Joseph **son of David** traces his lineage to Israel’s great king and Jesus’ incorporation into the Davidic line. **Do not fear to take** changes the focus from Mary’s pregnancy to their union as husband and wife.

**For that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.** Literally, “what has been produced.” The reference to the **Holy Spirit** reassures Joseph by implying the absence of a human father. The divine initiative in the conception of Christ is made clear.

<sup>21</sup> **She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.** The wording anticipates the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, as declared in verse 23. The precise naming of the son was a command and Joseph’s role in naming Him made Jesus his own son. “If a man says, ‘This is my son,’ he is to be believed” (The Jewish Mishnah).

**For he will save his people from their sins.”** Jesus [*Iesous*] is the Greek form for the Hebrew name Joshua [*Yeshua*]. The act of saving from sin was understood to be an act of God alone. Jesus would not fit the popular stereotype that the Messiah would be a political liberator. His mission would be altogether different.

<sup>22</sup> **All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:** <sup>23</sup> **“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son. All this** captures the full gamut from the pregnancy of Mary, the appearance of the angel, and the saving work of Jesus. This fulfillment of prophecy is the first of four quotations relating to the infancy of Jesus. [*Parthenos*] normally implies virginity and speaks of a virgin who will become pregnant rather than a woman who is a virgin at the time of speaking but will become pregnant in the normal manner. See the opening article by Kevin DeYoung.

**And they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).** The wording is almost exact to Isaiah’s prophecy, except in place of “[the virgin] shall call” Matthew says, “They will call.” This imparts to Joseph a share in naming the Child. **Immanuel** is not found in the original Isaiah passage but is supplied by the Greek translation (i.e. the Septuagint) of the phrase, “God with us.” Jesus never bore the actual name **Immanuel** which pointed to His true identity and His role in our salvation.

<sup>24</sup> **When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife.** Literally, “having risen...he took.” The emphasis is on Joseph’s complete obedience.

<sup>25</sup> **but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.** Mary remained a virgin at the point of conception through Jesus’ birth. She and Joseph, however, did go on to have other children. “There is no biblical warrant for the tradition of the ‘perpetual virginity’ of Mary” (Derek Kidner).

### STEP THREE . . .

#### EXPLORING the passage through discussion

1. Our sermon series this Christmas is called **Advent Unobscured**. In what ways do our customs and traditions obscure the meaning of Christmas? What steps do you and your family take to ensure the true Christmas story does not remain hidden?
2. **Read Matthew 1:18-25.** God chose an unmarried, pregnant teenager to be at the heart of the Christmas story. Describe the scandal that must have erupted in the small town of Nazareth.
3. Matthew described Joseph as **being a just** man. What other alternatives could Joseph have “justly” taken against Mary?
4. Matthew described Joseph as **unwilling to put her to shame**. In what way(s) does Joseph’s initial reaction to his personal crisis sound a gospel-note?
5. How would you describe Joseph’s emotional state as he pondered these things?
6. The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Why do you suppose the angel chose the medium of a dream rather than direct communication when Joseph was awake?
7. What might be the nature of Joseph’s fear(s) the angel addresses in v. 20? What would it cost Joseph to marry Mary? How would it remain costly even after obeying the angel’s command?
8. Can you recall a time when your obedience to God required counting the cost? How did it turn out? Are you still paying the cost?

9. The angel called Joseph a **son of David**. How did invoking Joseph's lineage have the persuasive effect of prompting Joseph to become Jesus' adoptive father?
  
10. Discuss Joseph's obedience to the angel's instruction. What stands out to you? If you were in Joseph's sandals, what would have been the most difficult for you to do in that situation?
  
11. What kind of Messiah did the average Israelite expect? How does verse 21 reframe those expectations?
  
12. The prophet Isaiah declared that Jesus would be Immanuel, God with us? In Paul's sermon he recommended meditating over each word God-with-us. As a group, give emphasis to each word and explain its practical significance.

**AN ADVENT PRAYER**

By Rev. Chas. Halle, NY, 1881

*O God,  
 by Your holy prophets  
 You promised that Your only Son  
 would come in the flesh for us  
 and be born of a virgin.  
 In these last days You have fulfilled your Word.  
 When He who came to redeem the world  
 comes to be our judge,  
 let us not be put to shame;  
 through the merits of Your Son,  
 Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**STEP FOUR . . .**

**REFLECTION**

*How is the text to be lived out personally?  
 Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the Word but doers ~ James 1:22*

You're encouraged to journal your answers to the following questions in order to apply what you've learned this week.

1. How is God making Himself known to you?
  
2. What is going on beneath the surface of your life that Jesus is trying to change?
  
3. How is God calling you to serve your family, community, and world?

## 10 CORE BELIEFS OF A DISCIPLE

### **Authority of the Bible** *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.

### **The Godhead** *2 Corinthians 13:14*

We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### **The Deity and Sinlessness of Christ** *Colossians 2:9*

We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life.

### **The Sufficient Atonement of Christ** *2 Corinthians 5:19-21*

We believe in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood.

### **The Resurrection and Return of Christ** *Acts 1:3, 9-11*

We believe in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.

### **Salvation By Grace** *Ephesians 2:8-9*

We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful man, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential and that a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

### **The Ministry of the Holy Spirit** *John 14:16*

We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life.

### **Unity in Christ** *Ephesians 2:14-17*

We believe in the spiritual unity of all believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Eternity** *Revelation 21:22-27*

We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.

### **Stewardship** *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

We believe that everything we have or own belongs to God.

## Memory Verse

~ Matthew 1:23 ~

<sup>23</sup> “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.”

Sermon Notes: *A Village Scandal*

Matthew 1:18-25

**A Bible Reading Plan for 2019**

Sunday, December 8 thru Saturday, December 14, 2019

Philippians 1-4; Colossians 1-4;

1 Thessalonians 1-5; 2 Thessalonians 1-3;

1 Timothy 1-3; 1 Timothy 4-6; 2 Timothy 1-4