

**Matthew 1: 18-25; “The Mighty Work of the Virgin Birth”, A Sermon for
the Christmas Season, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on December 17th, 2017, in the Afternoon Service.**

In just a little more than a week now, we will celebrate Christmas – the day selected by men to remember our Lord’s physical birth into this fallen world of sin. It is appropriate for us to look into His birth as the Scripture records it. I believe that it is important to even establish a family tradition of reading the narrative out loud to the family at this season if you can. For each of us needs to see the greatness of what God did in His goodness, love, wisdom, and grace, in sending His Son – of having Him to be born of a virgin. It is a peculiarly glorious work of wisdom and power, and it goes far beyond man’s ability to comprehend it. We stand in wonder and awe of it. It is, for us, a work which is wonderful to contemplate because it is certainly one of God’s mightiest and most mysterious of His works, but certainly it is to be contemplated with joy and with reverential awe.

Let us consider 1st that the Virgin Birth was a mighty work of Purity.

(Verses 18 and 19)

“After Jesus’ mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.” And so Joseph, thinking that there must be some impurity here, was minded to put her away; that is, that he would privately divorce her. We should take notice of the fact, here, that there are many things that God does, which men reject because their minds are not capable of taking in what God is up to, or even that He is at work at all. But as it is the glory of God to conceal a matter, let us do what kings would do, consider it our glory to search it out. Joseph was a good man, he was a just man, and yet he did not understand the great things that God had chosen to do in Mary’s womb, and for him. Mary was betrothed to this man; that is, she was contractually engaged and legally married to him. That’s how it was in those days. He was considered, according to the custom of that day, already to be her husband. This betrothal was commonly an interval of 10 to 12 months of time between the time when the contract was made and the time when the nuptials, or the wedding celebration, and consummation of the marriage afterwards took place. At this later time the bride was brought to the groom’s house to live, and they would come together and become one flesh. This betrothal was the legally binding promise made before witnesses, and it embodied the essentials of the marriage vows. It was considered so binding that if there was unfaithfulness on the part of either person it was considered adultery.

It was in this time of betrothal, before they came together, that she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. This conception took place after the betrothal, and was probably noticed by Joseph, or it was told to Joseph when Mary returned; back from her visit to her cousin Elizabeth. In Luke it says that Mary went to visit her in the hill country of Judea and no doubt related to her all that the angel had spoken to her. She stayed there about 3 months. But whether the phrase, “she was found to be with child” means that only Joseph and Elizabeth knew of this pregnancy, or whether others knew, we are not told. But, it seems that from the next statement, that few knew because Joseph was “minded to put her away secretly.” Joseph was thinking divorce because he was a just man; he was righteous in the same way that Elizabeth and Zacharias were; “walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly.” This word, “just”, refers to the heart as well as the conduct, Lenski says. As a truly religious Jew, Joseph could not think of consummating his marriage with Mary under these circumstances. We can understand this, can’t we? Joseph hadn’t heard the words, “she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit.” He had only heard the words, “I am with child”. And so, even if Mary had tried to relate to him what had happened, how difficult it would be for him

to draw the right conclusion, or to verify that this was a child conceived by the Holy Spirit. It was too much for his righteous heart to take in. He had believed Mary to be good and righteous, pure and chaste, but the fact of her being with child was undeniable and the explanation could not be proved.

But we find something of grace, something beautiful about Joseph's character, just at this point. And that is that he was merciful and thoughtful, as the outworking of his being a just man. You know that it would have been entirely within his Biblical rights to have divorced her, and even to have made a public example of her, if she really had committed adultery. An angry or self-righteous man, or a hasty man, would have done so, and it would have been legal, Biblically, according to Deuteronomy 22: 13-22. But Joseph was a man who thought on these things. There is not one hint of anger in his thoughts or actions. Instead he shows his true concern for his wife, and his love for her. He still wanted to protect her life and her reputation. He didn't understand how this could have happened, but he did love her enough to show her this mercy.

I'm quite sure that Mary couldn't have explained what happened to her, sufficiently, to convince this carpenter's mind. She had to leave her integrity in God's hands and commit her way to God in prayer. He couldn't have an unchaste wife, and he couldn't prove her story was true, but he could put her away secretly, and thus protect her from those who would cry for her death. Is it not amazing that the greatest privilege awarded to any virgin should be so easily be misconstrued as immorality and unfaithfulness? When great privileges are given to us as believers, we ought to expect great and humbling providences to accompany them as well. Joseph needed the truth, and on a matter of this significance God would not leave him to his own thoughts. God would persuade him of the truth. God would persuade Joseph to take Mary as his wife. And He would do it by giving him assurances that this blessed work in Mary's womb was of His doing.

2nd – The Virgin Birth was a mighty work of power by the Holy Spirit. (Verse 20)

“But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.’” As Joseph thought about putting Mary away secretly, he fell into a sad and troubled sleep. And as he dreamed, an angel of the Lord appeared to him telling him not to be afraid to take Mary to wife, for “that which was conceived in her was of the Holy Spirit”. What wonderful sweet words these must have been to this righteous man's heart. This was God's work and not Mary's sin at all! It was a tremendous blessing to him to realize this! The angel says to him – Do not be afraid Joseph; Mary is still a virgin. I love what Matthew Henry says about this. “That which is conceived in her is of a divine original.” “He is so far from being in danger of sharing in an impurity by marrying her, that he will thereby share in the highest dignity he is capable of.” (end of quote) He must have exclaimed in his heart – Stand in awe and marvel, my soul, at the mighty power and wisdom of God, that another man's sinful nature and propensities shall not be passed on to this child, and that even my own sinful nature and propensities will not be passed on to this child. This child by the power of God will be a holy child! This child will not be an illegitimate child; this child will be a special creation of God by the Holy Spirit; not a man solely, but a God-man.

Listen to Thomas Boston on this. “The human nature is so united with the divine, that each nature retains its own essential properties distinct.” “And this distinction is not; nor can be lost by the union.” “The humanity was indeed changed by a communication of excellent gifts from the divine nature; but not being brought into an equality with it: for it was impossible that a creature should become equal to the Creator.” “He took upon Him the form of a servant, but He lost not the form of God.” “He despoiled not Himself of the perfections of deity, by taking upon Him the humanity.” “The glory of His divinity was not extinguished or diminished, though it was eclipsed and obscured under the veil of our humanity, but there was no more change in the

hiding of it, than there is in the body of the sun, when he is shadowed by the interposition of a cloud.” “And this union of the 2 natures in Christ is an inseparable union, so that from the first moment thereof, there never was, nor to all eternity shall there ever be any separation of them.” (Works, Vol. 1, p. 399)

Joseph didn't understand all this theology, but he did perceive the greatness and the glory of this work of the Spirit. He was persuaded by the words of the angel that this was a work too wonderful to reject. Now, let us ask ourselves whether we perceive the greatness and the power and the wise love of God in this mighty work of the Spirit in Mary's womb? Do you see that this great work was done in order that you too may have Christ formed in your heart as well? And that faith and holiness and a pre-eminent love for God might be formed in you as well?

3rd – The Virgin Birth was a Mighty Act of Perfection related to Justice. (Verse 21)

“And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” I hope that we can all see clearly the connection between the virgin birth and our salvation. It is absolutely essential to it. Without the virgin birth there could be no holy Savior. And without a holy Savior there could be no holy people for God to possess. Mary had to be a virgin in order for Jesus to be sinless. How could Jesus be the Redeemer of all of God's Elect and offer Himself to God, and in the gospel, to all the world without being a perfectly spotless lamb and an unblemished sacrifice? Would our God have accepted it and forgiven our sins? Would a mere man's life be of the infinite dignity and worth required to satisfy the justice of God? Would the righteous offering of a mere man satisfy for all sinners whose souls are hanging in the balance and are in danger of eternal punishment? No, we must have a Savior who is God. Psalm 49: 7-9 says, “No man can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him.” “For the redemption of their souls is costly and he should cease trying forever; that he should continue to live eternally and not see the pit.”

Even though this is true that it was absolutely essential that Jesus Christ be God, it was also true that He must be a man. This second Adam must have a true human body; flesh and bones and blood. He must have a reasonable soul as well; a man who has all the faculties of reason, possessing sound judgment, and the good ability to reason. He must have real feelings, feelings consonant with everything that a true human nature would feel in all the various situations of life. We find this in our Lord Jesus Christ. In Matthew 26: 38 Jesus' soul was exceedingly sorrowful even unto death. In John 12: 27 He said – “Now is my soul troubled.” This was not His deity speaking; it was His humanity. Thomas Brooks says this. “Then Christ had a true human soul; neither was his Deity to him for a soul, as of old, men of corrupt minds have fancied, for then our bodies – only – had been redeemed by Him, and not our souls, if he had not suffered in soul as well as in body.” “In Isaiah 57: 7 it says, ‘Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him, He has put Him to grief, when You make His soul an offering for sin.’ Sin has affected and infected the souls and bodies of men, and it has corrupted everything. The way that Jesus could expiate sin, the way that He could draw out its venom, was to voluntarily suffer the terrible sorrows and troubles in His soul, as well as the torture of His body on the cross. His greatest sorrow of heart was the Godhead hiding itself from His humanity's sense of His Father's presence and blessing. And in its place, He felt very keenly the apprehension and horror of God's wrath against His people's sins, as it would be received by His Person. This is how Jesus would save His people from their sins. And so we see, that the Virgin Birth was a Mighty Act related to the fulfilling of all righteousness, and the satisfying of God's justice.

4th – The Virgin Birth was a Mighty act of fulfilling Prophecy. (verses 22-25)

Verse 22 says – “Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ‘Behold a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which is translated, ‘God with us.’” This name Immanuel is never specifically referred to anywhere else in the New Testament, or used by the Apostles in their writings. But the concept is frequently used in such places as John 1: 14. “And the word became

flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.” When our sins are forgiven and our reproach and shame removed, then God is pleased to be for us, and to be with us. And by the sanctifying power of His Spirit working within us, we are saved not only from the guilt of sin, but also more and more from its power. The power of our remaining sin and corruption is greater than our natural abilities to overcome, but Christ’s grace and presence with us are greater still. It is God with us that assures us that the work of sanctification will be progressive and that His kingdom and cause will triumph through us.

Joseph saw it all now. He was persuaded. He may never have fully understood the mystery of the Incarnation, but he believed in the reality of his virgin, his dear wife Mary, who had conceived by the Holy Spirit’s power.And then in verse 24 we find that he woke up! It had been a dream, but it had been just as real as being awake. And he went and did as the angel commanded him, and took Mary to him for his wife. How precious is purity and chastity, and clarity of conscience! They had it all! Joseph was so persuaded by the angel’s message that he had no sexual relations with Mary until after Jesus was born. What about you? Do you believe that Mary conceived the God-man in her womb, when she was still a virgin? Your whole salvation rests upon the truth of it. This Jesus will take away all your doubts, all your fears, all your sins, if you will simply trust in Him. Don’t divorce yourself from Him as though He were illegitimate. He is indeed the One who saves His people from their sins. Why remain in them any longer? Let Jesus take them all today.