

Matthew 1:18 - 2:12

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[0:00] One of the best things about Christmas is surprises, isn't it? You've got a bed on Christmas Eve, you know what your main present will be probably or you think you might know but very often it's the little presents that are so much fun and you had no idea what you were going to get and you had no idea that the person who got you the gift was so thoughtful.

And you've not thought about it and you get the present and you just say, oh that's fantastic, I wasn't expecting, it's a great surprise. I didn't even know I wanted it but now I see that I do want it now that I've got it.

And there are some people out there, they've got the gift of giving gifts. They're just brilliant at it. And those surprises in lots of ways make Christmas. And I hope as we look at this passage that we might get a surprise. People come with their own idea of Christmas, with their own sentimental idea of Christmas.

And as Christians we want to be surprised again and again as we go to what is a familiar story. So the first surprise is this, that the birth of Jesus was supernatural, not normal.

The birth of Jesus is supernatural, not normal. And I think that's worth pointing out because in many people's minds what we've just read must just, they just think well the birth of Jesus, the conception of Jesus, it's just normal, it's just like everyone else and the kind of manger that's been embellished.

[1:33] And I guess for many people the reasoning goes like this, there was a person named Jesus 20 centuries ago and he was born in Bethlehem. But in the end he's just like us.

Maybe he does some special things and the story has grown. But he was a normal man, born in the normal way, conceived in the normal way. But let's just go back to Matthew 1 and let's see that God was acting in a very, very special way.

Look at verse 18, chapter 1. Before they came to Galilee, that's Joseph and Mary. She was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Look at verse 20. As Joseph 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 what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Same point again. Then he was 23. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name the mother.

[2:46] She was a virgin. Mary was a virgin. It's made really clear in the text. And virgin births don't just happen, do they? And Joseph knew this.

And so when Joseph finds out that she is with child, as her fiancé, he is absolutely horrified. In his mind, there is only one possible explanation.

And that may be the same for you. There's only one explanation for pregnancy. Of course, they didn't have medical technology that we now have. But they're not naive, and they're not deaf.

Pregnancy does not just happen. So Joseph, he resolves to divorce her. He is a compassionate man. He doesn't want to put on his chain. He wants to do it quietly. But he's told by this messenger, by this angel, not to do it.

But can you see what this section of God's word does for us? It says right at the start of Jesus' story, there is a God.

[3:48] And there is a Holy Spirit. And there are angels. There are unseen messengers from God. There's a whole unseen realm. There is a living and a true God.

Who, with this birth, is doing something very, very special. And this birth happened because God acted supernaturally. God intervenes.

At one level, it's a great surprise, isn't it? But then at another level, it shouldn't surprise us at all. That when God came into this world, it was a little bit different.

That's what you'd expect, isn't it? If God is going to enter into his creation, surely he'll do that in a different way. When he left this world, well, it's a little bit different as well.

And we would expect the entry point of God into the world to be different, and its exit point to be different. So when you think of when the President of the US comes to the UK, it is different, isn't it?

[4:52] I might have flown back from Edinburgh on Sunday afternoon. There was no pomp. There was no ceremony. I just walked through Terminal 5 to get on the Piccadilly 9. But when the President of the US comes, regardless of what you think of the current one, he is someone special.

When he comes to the airport, it's different. He doesn't come cramped up in economy class, queuing up to get his own bags, does he? He doesn't have to go through security and all the hassle.

He comes as the special one in the special way. And when he leaves, he leaves in a special way. And so here we have in Matthew chapter 1 and 2, an account of a supernatural baby who was fully man, but also fully God.

And God acts to enter into his world. The first surprise is supernatural birth, not a normal woman.

The second surprise for some of us will be that this is truth, not myth.

It's truth, not myth. And so you might be thinking, God came to earth, it's just not likely. The Greeks have their myths.

[6:06] The Greeks have their gods. A myth is a made-up story. It is a legend without any basis in history or fact. And it's easy just to say it's a myth. The stuff about God coming to earth, that is your story, you might say.

It's a story that your community has made up and adopted. And there's no real reason why I should adopt your story. Why I should believe about the supernatural conception and his birth.

Of course, there's long answers to that, and there's short answers to those sort of questions. But let me just point you to a couple of things as you think about it. Firstly, what you have in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is basically a record of eyewitness accounts.

It is written like an eyewitness account. And we know that it was written by those who were very close to the events. And so a few weeks ago in Brentside High School, Noah came home wide-eyed, and he said that there'd been a stabbing in the school, and that a teacher had been stabbed.

And there were police and there were ambulance there. I said, did you see it? No, but I heard about it. Did your friends see it?

[7:28] No, they'd not seen it. Did anyone you know had seen it? No, but everyone was talking about it, he said. Everyone was talking about it. And an hour and a half later, we had an email from the head teacher, saying that there were some rumours going around with the school and on social media, and one of the dinner lady staff had fainted, and an ambulance had been caught to take her to hospital.

And had anyone seen it? The stabbing? No. Had anyone you know seen it? No. But everyone was talking about it. And we know what that's like, don't we?

We know what it's like with schools or any closed communities. If there are eyewitnesses, they've probably got truth on their hands.

If there is somebody who has seen it with their own eyes, it gives you a different level of confidence in the information. And so what you've got in Matthew and Mark and Luke and John is you've got eyewitness accounts.

You've got something written by people, or spoken by people who were living at the time. The second thing to think about, of it being truth, not myth, there's a striking bit of evidence in the text.

[8:45] So in Matthew chapter 2, you've got this whole issue of where Jesus was born. So the Magi, these wise men astrologers, they come looking from the east, the star that they followed had got them so far, and they knew that there was going to

be a king of the Jews who'd be born.

And the star had informed them of that. They did the logical thing, they thought, where will the king of the Jews be born? Well, he'll be born in the capital, won't he? And so they come to Jerusalem. He'll be born in Israel. The king of the Jews, well, obviously, where does a king get born? He gets born in a palace, and so they end up talking to Herod. And you can sense in these verses, I think, the commotion that's going on in Jerusalem.

So these visitors, they come from the east, they're a very wealthy man, and they ask the question to the current ruler, where is the king of the Jews to be born? And so King Herod calls a conference of the wise men of Jerusalem, the pundits, and he asks, where is the Christ to be born?

Where will he be born? And they don't have an answer, verse 6. They have no answer. There in verse 6, well, they have an answer.

[9:59] Where will he be born? They told him, verse 5, in Bethlehem of Judea, because it's written about that on the prophets. And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means the least among the rulers of Judah.

But from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people, Israel. You see, they say to him, no, that there is a prophecy, there is a declaration that he will be born in Bethlehem.

Now, why do they say that? Because they knew that 700 years prior, the prophet Micah had spoken. It had been predicted, God was speaking through Micah, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

And they knew that God had said, that is what would happen. 700 years earlier, that he'd be born in Bethlehem. And they knew he'd be born in Bethlehem, and that is exactly where he was born.

The extraordinary accuracy of the Old Testament. These prophecies come true. In history, and in real time, you can't easily be dismissed.

[11:01] And so we're dealing with truth, and not myth. The third surprise is that Jesus is essential, and not optional. It was a supernatural conception.

Do you remember? It wasn't a normal birth. You're dealing with something that is true. It's not a myth. That's a second surprise. But it still leaves a great question.

And the question is, so what? Big deal. Maybe it's true after all. Maybe there is a supernatural birth. But what's that going to do with me? And so can we ask the question, do I need this?

Do I need it? And we need to think for a moment about the importance of this. And again, we're not left guessing. Look at Matthew chapter 1, and include it in the name that Matthew is given, that Jesus is given.

So, and parents today, and like parents today, pretty much parents down through the ages, Mary and Joseph have no choice as to the name of their son.

[12:03] The name of their child is given. And so we have, don't we, the great mystery of when a child is born, what will the name be? And we ask parents, have you thought of a name yet?

And we hope that those children that are born that we know will be gifts of God, won't they? But Mary and Joseph are told that they are to give this child a name, and you are to give him the name Jesus.

For he shall save his people from their sins. Jesus is the Greek name of the Hebrew Joshua. Jesus means the Lord saves, the Lord rescues.

That is the name that he is to be given, because that is exactly what he will do in verse 21. Verse 21, she will bear a son, and Joseph, you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

The name he was given is the very thing that he would do. he would rescue his people from their sins. He would be a saviour.

[13:12] So you see a tragedy on your TV screen, and you see it happening. And you just want to run in and save, or dive in, or save them.

But there's no point to that, because it would be suicide to do it. But Jesus, the rescuer, he dives in, he runs into the burning building. He comes into this world and would die upon the cross to save you, not from burning building, or not from drowning, but to save his people from their sins.

That tells you that you and I have a problem from which we need saving. King Herod, he illustrates the sin problem, he wanted to be in charge.

King Herod, I think, understands Christmas very, very well. He didn't want Jesus to be in charge, and so he was rid of Jesus. He said, I just want to run my life my way.

I want to be the one that is in charge, not Jesus. And that is sin. And so saying no to God and saying, I want to run my life my way, that brings God's just condemnation.

[14:39] And that is a real problem. We don't feel it's a real problem. But when we say no to God and we say, I'm in charge, not you, that brings us into a collision course with God for judgment.

But Jesus came to save you and I from that sin problem. Jesus came to save you and I from the condemnation by dying on a cross for us, by taking the judgment we deserve upon ourselves. Jesus came into this world and didn't say, I'm in charge, I'll do exactly what I want and God, no way. He lived God's way.

And yet, he was crucified for our sin, for our rebellion, for our punishment. Each one of us are sinners and we all face the judgment of God and so we all need the rescue that Jesus provides. That rescue is open to us. And so how will he respond? How will he respond to this Jesus who was born in the most remarkable way, who came to earth, who is true and not a mess?

[15:52] How do you respond? Well, there's a number of responses. So let's just look at Herod in chapter 2. He is furious and he tries to get rid of Jesus. And he won't have anyone challenging him.

And people do respond to the news like that. I think an authentic response when people understand who Jesus is, is fury. They can't stand him.

They can't stand the thought of a God with whom they have to give account. And they want to get rid of him. No, thank you. I don't want him interfering with my life. Well, that's the first response, isn't it, Harry?

Then there's the other common reaction of the people in Jerusalem. And the Magi come to Jerusalem and they say, where is the King of the Jews to be born?

And there's a big conference, isn't there? There's other people in Jerusalem who get involved in the discussion and they work out, they say, yes, the King of the Jews is going to be born in Bethlehem. But as far as we know, the only people who actually go to Bethlehem are the Magi.

[16:58] Isn't that extraordinary? There's people who travel from the East because they say, where is the King of the Jews to be born? But the people that give them the information of where he's to be born, they can't be bothered.

They won't travel ten miles down the road. They can't even be bothered to go and check out Bethlehem and see whether it's true or not. They can't be bothered to see whether our King has been born.

Don't be like these people. Don't be like the people in Jerusalem who frankly couldn't be bothered. The third reaction is that of the Magi.

They come from the East and they went and they looked and they found Jesus. And how did they react to this time and the 11th? Going into the house they saw the child, he's probably a toddler at this point, but Mary, his mother, and they fell down and they worshipped him.

They opened up their bags and they give treasures. They offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrour. They searched for him, they found him, they worshipped him.

[18:08] They bowed their knee to him. The one thing that Herod would not do, they do. They recognised that Jesus Christ is Lord and King and so they fall down in reverence and worship.

That's the right way to recognise Jesus God. Christ is God and Christ is God's Saviour and he is worthy of our worship. And the only real response and true response is to come to him and say, I need rescue.

And I see that he is the Saviour who died on the cross for sinners and I cannot save myself and so I need his salvation. And so I am going to trust him and I'm going to follow him as my King.

To recognise that he came to die for sinners like you and like me. and to cry out to him and to put your trust in him and to bow your head before him and follow him as your King.

And it's at that point that you leave, don't you, with the most amazing gift. The most surprising gift of all, the gift of forgiveness, of peace with God and of salvation.

[19:32] and we know, don't we, if we do that, well, we will have the most blessed Christmas despite all the restrictions.

Let's pray. Thank you.