

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah (Part 1)

Matthew 1: 18-25

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Well, in light of the fact, that we gather this week to celebrate Christmas with our families, I decided to step away this week and next from our study of Paul's letter to the Romans. We'll return, Lord willing, in the new year, but I want us to study one of the more famous passages about the birth of Christ and see what we can learn about the amazing reality of the incarnation.

As I was thinking about Christmas, I was reminded of the fact that every year around this time television and the internet, newspapers, magazines are all filled with articles quoting some scholar who is either doubting or outright denying that Jesus of Nazareth even existed at all. Perhaps you've already been exposed to some program like that or some article that makes such a point. You need to understand that while there are a few vocal scholars who tried to argue that they are hugely outnumbered and outgunned by even pagan historians and pagan archeologists.

In fact, this last week I got the newest issue of a magazine I receive; it's not a Christian publication. It's called *Biblical Archeology*. But it's not evangelical by any stretch. And there was an article in the magazine entitled, "Did Jesus Exist?" The scholar who wrote the article is also clearly not an evangelical, and yet, this is what he writes,

As far as we know no ancient person ever seriously argued that Jesus did not exist. Referring to the first several centuries of the Common Era even a scholar as cautious and thorough as Robert Van Voorst freely observed.... [so he's quoting another scholar on the first centuries of human history post Christ, and he says], ... no pagans and Jews who oppose Christianity denied Jesus' historicity or even questioned it. If anyone in the ancient world had a reason to dislike the Christian faith, it was the rabbis. Yet all Jewish sources treated Jesus as a fully historical person.

In fact, the article goes on to say that those who were opposed to Christianity used the facts from the life of Christ that we all believe and embrace against them. They certainly didn't deny His existence. There is a huge body of data that supports His existence. There are of course the New Testament documents; a vast trove of information that documents His life beyond that of any ancient event. There are even a number of secular and antagonistic sources from the first century that admits about the life that acknowledges His existence and many of the facts of His life.

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So, understand then, you cannot legitimately deny the historicity of Jesus Christ. The real issue is who *was* Jesus of Nazareth? Was He more than merely a man who lived in Palestine in the first century? On that question much of the debate about the person of Jesus begins with His conception and His birth. The birth of Christ has been a consistent target in the attacks of those against our faith. There have been many theories floating on how Jesus came to be in the womb of Mary. But when you clear the air, and you get down to the basic ideas in the end, there really are only three possibilities.

One option is that Jesus was the normal offspring of the marriage of Mary and Joseph. But immediately that option is discounted because both Jesus' friends and His enemies deny it. It is unanimous that Jesus was born outside of wedlock. So that leaves only two options.

The second option is that Jesus was illegitimate. That Mary became pregnant outside of marriage either by Joseph or by some other man.

And the third option is that Jesus was born of a virgin as the biblical record asserts. Now there are two gospel writers that deal with the birth of Christ, Matthew and Luke, they both deny that Jesus was illegitimate. They also both deny that He was the offspring of Mary and Joseph. They both assert instead the third option that He was born of a virgin conceived by a virgin.

Now I want us to examine that in more detail and of those two accounts of course Luke's is the most familiar, the most common. We'll read it on Wednesday night, Lord willing, at our communion services. You'll probably read it with your family. But I want us this Christmas to examine the other record of the birth of Christ, Matthew's account. Because the record of Matthew, unlike Luke who focuses on Mary's perspective, Matthew focuses on Joseph's perspective. And a lot of that has to do with the reason Matthew wrote. Just to remind you each gospel is written to argue a certain truth about Christ. To give us certain perspective about who Jesus was.

Matthew wrote in order to show that Jesus was the king, Israel's Messiah. And because that is his purpose, he constructs his material to make that point. Now what is the heart of a monarchy? It's succession. A monarchy means that to rightly be the king, you have to be in the royal line of kings. You have to have the inherent right to ascend to the throne because you have the right pedigree; you have the right ancestry. And so that's where Matthew begins. Notice verse 1 of chapter 1, the record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, and He is the Son of David and ultimately the son of Abraham. And then Matthew begins to lay out the details of that genealogy.

His point is that Jesus of Nazareth is in fact qualified by His lineage to be the Messiah, to be Israel's king.

Now once He has shown Jesus' pedigree and established that, then he goes on in verse 18 to record the events surrounding His birth. And he wants us to see that those events too were unique. In fact, as he records Jesus' conception and birth he really intends to highlight for us how those events prove again Jesus' qualification to be the king. Let's read it together, Matthew 1:18 – 25,

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. And Joseph, her husband, being a righteous man not wanting to disgrace her planned to send her away secretly. But when he'd 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. She will bear a son and you shall call His name, Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Now 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." And 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.

Now in this paragraph Matthew is still proving to us that Jesus is qualified to be the king; that He's qualified to be the Messiah. And he buries here in this paragraph five unique characteristics of Jesus that qualify Him to be the Messiah. Five unique characteristics that I want to look at together. Now, let me just warn you ahead of time we're only going to get through the first of them today. We'll cover the other four, Lord willing, next Sunday. But the first one is where Matthew concentrates most of this passage.

The first characteristic of Jesus that shows His qualification to be the Messiah is His unique conception. His unique conception. Look at verse 18, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows...." First of all, I want you to know that the word "birth" is the very same Greek word used up in verse 1, the record of the genealogy. The word genealogy is the same word. The word really means "origin". So, in verse 18 he is saying, "Now the [origin] of Jesus Christ was as

follows....” of course not His deity. He preexisted as the Son eternally, but when it comes to His humanity, here’s how His origin can be described. “When His mother, Mary, had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.” Now here is this young couple. Scripture doesn’t tell us how old Mary and Joseph were at this point, but we know from documents outside the New Testament that most Jewish men in that time period were married before the age of 20. And most Jewish girls were betrothed just after puberty sometime around 13 to 15 years old. So, it is possible at this point that Mary is in her late teens, but it’s unlikely. This is a young couple. Their families have undoubtedly arranged this marriage. They’re moving toward that happy day as these events unfold.

Now to really understand what’s going on here, you have to know a little bit about how Jewish marriages in the first century took place. The typical first century marriage consisted of two separate parts. The first part was the betrothal period. It was called the “kiddushin”. It was more serious than our engagement. We often speak of this being their engagement. In one sense that was true, but it was far more serious than the engagements we’re familiar with. It was a binding contract just like marriage. In fact, during this betrothal period, typically the kiddushin lasted about 12 months or a little less. During this betrothal period the man was referred to as the husband as Joseph is in verse 19. The woman was referred to as the wife already as Mary is in verse 20. In fact, the kiddushin could only be ended in two ways. It could be ended by a divorce, or it could be ended by the death of one of the spouses. In fact, during this period if the man died, the woman was considered a widow.

And during the kiddushin the couple didn’t live together. The wife lived in her parent’s home. The husband lived in the home that he was creating and building for him and his wife to live in together, and they were expected to keep themselves sexually pure. In fact, any form of sexual sin during the kiddushin was considered adultery. And the guilty party could actually be stoned as the law prescribed in Deuteronomy 22:23 - 24. This is the first part of the Jewish marriage, the kiddushin.

The second part of the Jewish marriages was called the “chuppah”. This part took place about a year after the engagement. And this is when the husband, with the home where he and his wife would live fully complete, would leave his home with great ceremony, great fanfare with all of his friends following along and march ceremonially through the streets of the village or the city until he arrived at his wife’s home where she and her parents lived. And there he would take her as his wife. That’s where that expression comes from. He would take her from her home, and they would march back through the streets of the town with all of the family and all of the guests

in tow until they arrived at the home of the husband, and there the wedding would take place, and a feast would happen. In fact, it wasn't uncommon for there to be a feast lasting up to seven days. And you fathers thought your daughters' weddings were expensive. A seven-day celebration, and then, of course, as part of that the marriage was consummated.

The word that Matthew uses here in verse 18 tells us that the events described unfolded not during the second part, not after Joseph had taken Mary back to his home but during the first part, the kiddushin, the betrothal period. And notice Matthew adds in verse 18 it was "before they came together". That's a Jewish euphemism for the fact that they had not yet had sexual relationship. At some point during the kiddushin something remarkable happens. Notice verse 18, "... she was found to be with child..." literally out of ... "the Holy Spirit" meaning the Holy Spirit was the source of the child that was growing in her womb. The miracle we call the virgin birth is better called the virgin conception. I mean it's true that Mary was still a virgin when she gave birth to Christ, verse 25 makes that clear.

But the actual birth of Jesus was not miraculous. It was the same as any other human birth. If you have been a mother, you experienced exactly what Mary experienced after conception and on. She carried Jesus in her womb for nine months just as you did. She then gave birth once they arrived in Bethlehem to report for the census. She gave birth in the same way after conception and on. She carried Jesus in her womb for nine months just as you did. She then gave birth once they arrived in Bethlehem to report for the census, she gave birth in the same way that every other naturally born child has ever been.

What was unique about Mary's child was not His birth, it was His supernatural conception because no human father was involved. Now let me just say you will find no evidence anywhere in Scripture for the Catholic doctrine for the immaculate conception. That Mary was somehow born without original sin. And that's how Jesus was sinless. What does Mary say in her Magnificat? She says she puts her trust in God *my* Savior. Only sinners need a Savior. She was a sinner just as you and I are. Instead, the Bible teaches a virgin conception. The humanity of Jesus was produced by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary by a supernatural work of creation. Now, let me be very clear, and let me speak very frankly because of the influence of Greek mythology and even because of the influence of Mormonism. No sexual union of any kind happened natural or supernatural here. The virgin birth was instead a special creative miracle of the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary.

But all was not well, verse 19. “And Joseph, her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her planned to send her away secretly.” Now it’s clear in Luke’s gospel that Mary was already betrothed to Joseph when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and announced that she would become pregnant. And that betrothal period usually lasted as I mentioned somewhere around 12 months. So, it must have been a short time only a few months before Mary discovered she was pregnant, still during that betrothal period. Now if we put the timeframe together, we can kind of piece together what happened here.

After Gabriel told her about the birth of her son, she left Nazareth where she lived, and she went to the hill country where her cousin Elizabeth lived who was already six months pregnant with John the Baptist. You remember the story. And according to Luke 1:56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth those final three months of Elizabeth’s pregnancy until Elizabeth gave birth to John. So, in other words, after the annunciation Mary left Nazareth and was gone for about three months. It’s likely by the time she returned, after the birth of John, she was already nearly three months pregnant.

Now, we’re not told exactly how Joseph found out about her pregnancy although the Scripture’s clear there was no effort on Mary’s part to deceive him or to hide this condition. It likely unfolded something like this. Some day after she arrived back into Nazareth from the hill country where she had been with her cousin Elizabeth for those three months, she asked to speak with Joseph. She asked to speak privately with him. She met with him, and she explained to him the shocking news of the angel’s visit and that she was pregnant and that this was the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now, like most first century Jewish couples, Joseph had been faithful to his betrothed spouse, and he expected Mary to be as well. So, it is very hard for us to imagine the shock when Joseph heard this news. He obviously knew the child wasn’t his, and he really didn’t know Mary that well. I mean they’d grown up in the same town, Nazareth, and historians tell us that Nazareth at the time of the first century was about the size of the number of people that will fit inside this auditorium in terms of the number of people in the town about 500 people. That was the total size of the town.

And so, clearly, they had known each other as they’d grown up. They had interacted at some level, but once they had reached maturity, once he had become a son of the commandment he had reached his bar mitzvah, and when she had reached puberty, it was inappropriate in those days for the opposite sexes to mix, and so they had not known each other much in the last several

years since they had reached maturity. But their families had known each other. He knew of her virtue. He knew that she was spoken highly of, and so I'm sure that as he heard this story, he was confused because it seemed totally out of character for the girl he knew and had committed himself to marry. Her explanation was incredible as well. You know we misuse that word. "Oh, that's incredible." This is really incredible. Impossible to be believed.

I mean after all, it had been four hundred years since God had spoken to anyone, and yet that's exactly what his fiancée is claiming. It had been seven hundred years since God had interjected Himself into human history to work a miracle, and yet that is exactly what his wife to be is claiming. Imagine yourself in Joseph's shoes. What would you think if the one you were betrothed to was pregnant? You knew the child wasn't yours, and that person is telling you that an angel showed up, told me that I was going to get pregnant by a work of God and by the way, Joseph, I have been nothing but pure and chaste. What would you think?

Well, that's exactly what Joseph thought. And the situation was even more difficult because notice verse 19 says, "He was a righteous man." In other words, he was an Old Testament believer. He had come to embrace the grace of God in the coming promised Messiah. And he wanted therefore, in light of his relationship to God, to be careful to keep the Old Testament law, and he's trying to figure out now how to apply the law of God to this situation that has just been dumped into his lap, that he's just been confronted with. I'm sure that initially his response was shock, and then, as always happens with us as human beings, the next response is a sort of numbness; this really can't be happening. I've looked forward my entire life to my wedding day. Now for many months I've anticipated my marriage to Mary this woman of exceptional reputation and virtue, and now my wife to be tells me she's pregnant. As anyone would at this point, he has to begin to think about his options. What do I do? And he only had three options.

Option number one is he could marry her, but that wasn't really an option at all because it simply wasn't done. Roman law actually treated a husband who failed to divorce an unfaithful wife as a panderer exploiting his wife as a prostitute. That was Roman law. And the Jewish Mishnah, the rabbi's interpretation of the Old Testament, absolutely forbids a man in this situation to marry the woman. So, that would have been his understanding of how to apply God's law to his situation. This wasn't an option, and besides that if Joseph had married her, it would have been a tacit admission that the child was his. And it would have stained his reputation in that little village for the rest of his life. So that wasn't an option.

His second option was he could disgrace her. Notice verse 19, “He did not want to disgrace her” The same Greek word translated disgrace is used in Colossians 2:15, and there it’s translated to make a spectacle of. He didn’t want to make a spectacle of her. In other words, Joseph, this was his second option, Joseph could make a public spectacle of her by taking her to public court and making a public accusation against her of adultery. But such a public proceeding would shame him and his family. You know what’s remarkable is that’s not how Joseph was thinking. Notice Matthew tells us that Joseph wasn’t thinking about himself when he made this decision not to disgrace her. He didn’t want to make a public spectacle of *her*.

You see in that culture premarital pregnancy had already ruined any chances for future marriage, and Joseph was concerned about her. You know we would assume that Joseph was a good man, a righteous man in the fact that God chose him to be the earthly father of His only Son. And you just see some of Joseph and some of his heart leak through here. I mean, Mary has just broken his heart. She has just humiliated him. This is going to be public in a small town like that. She’s just, in some ways, ruined his life as he had imagined it unfolding. And yet, he’s concerned about her.

In Moses’ day if it had been proven in court that a betrothed wife was unfaithful, she would have been put to death, stoned. But in the first century that was rarely if ever done. Instead, there was divorce. Now if Joseph had taken her to court, in a public way disgraced her, accused her of adultery and that was found to be true, the divorce would have been granted.

Secondly, Mary’s dowery would have been given to Joseph. The assets that she brought to the marriage would have been given to Joseph, and probably Joseph would have also been permitted to recoup the bride price if he had paid one at the beginning of the betrothal as was typical. In other words, if Joseph had chosen this course, he would have left that public proceeding with a perfectly clean reputation, and he would have recouped any financial loss. And yet, out of concern for her, he decides not to do it.

Now before we leave this second option let me just say that it is clear that our culture does not expect young people who aren’t married to keep themselves virgins. In fact, the exact opposite is true. You’re laughed at in our culture if you’re still a virgin going into marriage. But understand this, this has always been God’s expectation of His people. And it always will be. In fact, God takes this so seriously that when He was king in Israel, He made it a law that someone who became sexually involved before marriage was to be stoned to death. This was God’s law.

Listen to me, young people, if the person you're dating tells you that if you really love him or her, you'll get involved sexually in some way. It's a lie. Let me tell you. Two things are true. One, at least in that situation they're not really demonstrating love at all. They are only consumed with themselves. And secondly, at that moment that person is not a righteous person. That's not behaving righteously.

Now I also need to say what if you have already sinned in that way even as you hear me speak this morning, this is where the beauty of the grace of the gospel comes in. If you've already sinned in that way, if you are truly repentant, and you will seek the forgiveness of God, you will turn from that sin, there is grace from God for you. There is grace from God's people for you. In fact, there are people seated in this auditorium who made these sinful choices when they were younger, and by God's grace and the work of the gospel they've overcome that reality. So don't lose hope.

So, there was a third option. Joseph had only one other choice. And that was to send her away secretly. Notice verse 19, "He planned to send her away secretly". Notice the NAS has a foot note, a marginal note, for "send away" and it says, "or to divorce her". That's because the Greek word translated "send away" is the same word translated "divorce" in Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 where Jesus teaches about divorce. So, Joseph here has decided to privately divorce Mary.

Thanks to the influence of the Roman culture, and especially thanks to a loose interpretation of Deuteronomy 24 the Old Testament passage on divorce, men, Jewish men of that day could easily divorce their wives even without stipulating a reason. According to Rabbi Ben Judah all a man needed to do was simply in the presence of two witnesses give his wife a document that said this, quote, "Let this be from me your writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation. That you may marry whatever man you want" end quote. In addition, the Jewish Mishnah allowed for a private divorce with just two witnesses especially in the case of suspected adultery. Matthew tells us that is exactly the course that Joseph had decided to take. Notice verse 19, "... he planned to divorce her secretly."

Now at this point Mary can't defend herself. I mean think about it. What can Mary say to convince Joseph that she's innocent? Absolutely nothing, and so God defends her. He sends His angel to Joseph, verse 20 "But when he'd considered this behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream." The writer of Hebrews says that before the canon of Scripture was closed God used to speak to people in a variety of ways. One of these was dreams. And that's exactly what happens here.

Now, there was undoubtedly some way that God's revelation in a dream could be distinguished from the ordinary dreams that you and I have every night. And that undoubtedly happened with Joseph. There was some way for him to know for sure this was in fact God. "And the angel said to him, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife....'" Literally he says do not be afraid to take Mary your wife. That comes from the language of the "chuppah", the second stage of the Jewish marriage.

Don't be afraid to go to her house and take her back to your house as your wife. In other words, the angel tells Joseph to proceed with finalizing the marriage. And then the angel confirms what Mary no doubt has already told Joseph. Verse 20 says, "... the child who has been conceived in her is out of the Holy Spirit." The source of this child is not some man; the source is a creative miracle of the Holy Spirit.

You know what's remarkable to me about this is that from the very beginning the birth of Christ was scandalous; even to Joseph Mary's husband. Later Jesus' enemies will throw this in His face. You remember in John 8:41, Jesus says to them, "You are doing the deeds of your father..." meaning your father, Satan. "They said to Him, 'We were not born of fornication. We have one Father: God.'" It's likely that the implication in that line sort of veiled beneath the surface is, your parentage is uncertain, but ours isn't.

But the Bible speaks with one voice that the coming Messiah would be born of a virgin. The evidence is overwhelming. It starts in Genesis 3:15. There is a hint of it even there where the prophecy is that the coming Messiah would be of the seed of a woman. That's an incredibly unusual expression. It hints that something is up with this child. And then of course you get to Isaiah 7:14 and Isaiah says explicitly "The virgin will be with child." Matthew 1:16, "[Out] ... of Mary, ... [was born] Jesus". Verse 18, "... before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit." Verse 20 we looked at, "... [That which] has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."

Next week we'll look at verses 22 and 23 where the angel says that Jesus' birth will be the fulfillment of the virgin prophecy in Isaiah. Luke 1:27 says that Gabriel came to a virgin "... and the virgin's name was Mary." Luke 1:34 Mary responded to the prophecy saying, "How [is this going to happen] ... since I am a virgin?". Verse 35 of Luke 1, "The angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the Holy Child will be called the Son of God.'" Luke 3:23 "... Jesus was as was supposed, the son of Joseph...." Galatians 4:4, ... [Christ was sent forth, commissioned, and

He was] born of a woman. Literally the text says He became out of a woman. As Jay Gresham Machen, the great scholar, in his excellent defense of the virgin birth writes,

It is perfectly clear that the New Testament teaches the virgin birth of Christ. About that there can be no manner of doubt. There is no serious question as to the interpretation of the Bible at this point.

Listen you can believe it, or you can deny it, but you cannot deny that it's what the Bible teaches. It is the unanimous testimony of the early church fathers. If I had time, I could give you quote after quote. It is the unanimous testimony of all of the great creeds of the Christian church: The Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Council of Chalcedon, the Athanasian Creed, the Augsburg Confession, the Belgic Confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the 1689 London Baptist Confession, the 39 Articles of the Church of England ... ALL make a huge point of the virgin birth.

So, the question is why? Why is the virgin conception so important? Why is it crucial to our faith? Well, I want to answer that for you, but first I want to tell you what it did not accomplish.

It's important to understand that the virgin birth is not the cause of Jesus' deity. There have been some in the history of the church who have mistakenly, a few, who have mistakenly argued that. Most of us understand that so I'm not going to belabor that point. The second misconception is more common. Jesus' virgin birth was not the cause of His sinlessness. There are some who argue well He had to be born without a father because human sin is passed down through the father, through the male. There is no evidence biologically or biblically for that position. In fact, what does David say in Psalm 51:5 when he's speaking about the original sin in which he was born. He says, "In sin my mother conceived me." I got my sinfulness from my mother, he said. It was from the beginning. So, Christ's humanity was real. And since he had no human father, His humanity was made of the substance of Mary.

And because Mary was sinful, the Holy Spirit had to act upon Mary so that what was born of her was sinless and pure. In other words, the Holy Spirit had to miraculously protect the humanity of Jesus even from the sinfulness of Mary. So, it wasn't, the virgin birth wasn't about the sinlessness of Christ. So, what is the reason for the virgin birth? Have you ever thought about that? You might say well, it's because that's what was prophesied. Isaiah 7 says a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son. Well, that begs the question why? Why a virgin birth? Why did God prophesy that? What was the point?

There are two primary reasons for the virgin birth. I'm going to give you one today because it fits into these verses we've just studied together. I'm going to give you the other one, the second one, next week because it fits into the verses we'll study in the rest of this passage. The primary reason for the virgin conception (and I think this was the primary reason) is the virgin birth, note this, was the only possible means of uniting the pre-existent second person of the trinity with a human nature. The only possible means. It was the only way that the Son of God Who already existed could add to Himself full humanity.

Now, I know it's near lunch time, and your thinking is probably waning, but stay with me. Think about this, ok? What happens when a man and a woman conceive a child? That child becomes a unique person. The Son of God was already a person. He already existed. If He had added humanity through the conception of Joseph *and* Mary, He would have been united to a second person. But instead, the virgin birth allowed Him to continue to be just one person who retained His divine nature which He already had but added to Himself the person that He was. He added a human nature as well. Now, once you understand that it helps you get the main point Matthew's making. Don't miss the main point of verses 18 to 20. Jesus' conception was unique. Yes, that's true. But it was after all a conception; a human conception. That's the real miracle.

The point Matthew doesn't want us to miss is that God's eternal Son, the pre-existent One was to become a real man truly and thoroughly human. In the virgin conception the second person of the trinity allowed our human nature to be united to His divine nature so that He became a real human being. Let me give it to you in the classic words of the Council of Chalcedon. This is the classic definition written by the leaders of the church in 451 A.D. to explain the relationship of the two natures of Christ. Here's what the Council of Chalcedon wrote: "He, meaning our Lord, is of the same reality as God as far as His deity is concerned. And of the same reality as we ourselves as far as His humanness is concerned. Thus, like us in all respects sin only excepted."

Now, if you've been in our church any length of time you have heard me say many times something like this, "Jesus is just like you except for sin." That's my paraphrase of the Council of Chalcedon, the most important part of the Council of Chalcedon's definition. When it comes to His humanity, He is just like you except for sin. That's the point of the verses we've studied together. He was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary. He took upon Himself full and complete humanity. He has a body like your body. He has a human soul like your human soul and that didn't last just for the 33 years He was on this planet. He's still just like you except for sin, and He always will be. That's the miracle we celebrate. The question again has to go one step farther. Why? Why did He have to become just like us?

Turn to Hebrews 2, Hebrews 2. The writer of Hebrews is clear on this point. Hebrews 2:14, “Since the children ...” [that’s us] “... share in flesh and blood ...” [that is, we’re fully human] “... He Himself likewise also partook of the same so that He could deal with sin and death ...” verse 14 goes on to say. But go down to verse 17, Hebrews 2:17. “Therefore, [Jesus] ... had to be ...” [literally was obligated to be “... It was necessary for Him] to be made like His brethren ...” [I love this] “... in all things ...” This is where the statement of Chalcedon comes from. “He was made like us in all things except for sin.” Why? “So that ...” here’s the purpose “... [it was necessary] ... so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God....”

You see God has always required that the one representing people be one of them. And He goes on to explain it further. He says to make propitiation, to make satisfaction for the wrath of God for the sins of the people. Do you understand what the writer of Hebrews is saying? It was necessary for Jesus to be just like you except for sin so that He could represent you before God. So that He could offer for you a sacrifice that God would accept. And the writer of Hebrews says in 9:26, That sacrifice was “... the sacrifice of Himself.”

As you gather with your family and friends this week to celebrate Christmas remember this is what you celebrate. Don’t let the meaning of Christmas get lost in the clutter; in the secular clutter around us. What you celebrate is the profound event in which the eternally existing Son of God willingly took on a human nature and the only way that could happen was through the virgin birth. So that He could be just like you except for sin. And so that He could make an acceptable sacrifice on your behalf to God. One that God would accept, and that sacrifice was Himself. That’s what we celebrate. Just like you except for sin. So, He could represent you. So that He could offer a sacrifice on your behalf that God would accept.

Let’s pray together.

Our Father we are overwhelmed by the truth we have studied this morning. We so often are. We find ourselves swept along by the majesty of the story, by the beauty of our Lord, by the incomprehensibility that someone would be willing to do this for us. Father, thank You for Your love and grace. Thank You, our Lord, for being willing to become just like us. To become fully human, a tiny little embryo in the womb of the virgin Mary miraculously created there by the Holy Spirit growing ultimately to be a man just like us.

Father, I pray that in this season those of us who know and love You would truly worship You. We would be filled with joy this week. That we would worship and adore our Lord Jesus Christ. That we would cut through the clutter around us and truly understand what our Lord did in becoming one of us. Oh, Father, receive the worship we offer You. It is with all of our hearts.

And at the same time, Father, I pray for those here, and I'm sure there are a number who may be attached to the church but who are not truly attached to Jesus Christ. Father, may this be the season when You open their eyes, when You remove the spiritual blindness. Help them to see the slavery of their sin. That it's not freedom it's slavery. And the only freedom is found in Jesus Christ. And Father may they run from their sin to embrace Jesus Christ as Lord. We pray that even in this season that would be true.

In Jesus' name, Amen.