

Luke 1:34-37

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 December 1984

Preacher: Alex J MacDonald

[0 : 00] Now let's turn to some words in Luke's Gospel, Luke chapter 1, verses 34 to 37. Reading in the passage that we read this morning, from verse 34.

How will this be, may he ask the angel, since I am a virgin? The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible with God.

Well, I'd like to think this evening for a little while about what we generally call the virgin birth. Now the doctrine of the virgin birth is something that is common to all Christian churches.

It is a belief that is held throughout the whole of Christendom, and only perhaps in recent times has it really come to be challenged seriously as a basic Christian doctrine.

[1 : 27] It is in all the basic creeds of the Christian church that would sum up what basic Christian doctrine is. We may first of all ask the question, what exactly do we mean by the virgin birth?

We need to ask that question because there are some differences as to the understanding of what's meant by that expression.

For instance, in the Roman Catholic Church, when that expression is used, it does not mean the same as what we mean by it.

When Roman Catholics talk about the virgin birth, they are thinking not only about what we call the virgin conception, that is the conception of the Lord Jesus in the womb of the virgin Mary, but also they are thinking about the actual birth itself, which they also believe was miraculous in the sense that Jesus was not born, did not come forth from the womb in the normal way, but rather that it happened in a miraculous way so as to preserve the actual physical virginity of Mary.

Now that is wholly unbiblical. There is no basis for believing it whatsoever. Rather, we are told that Jesus was born. The time came for Mary to be delivered and Jesus was born.

[2 : 58] In other words, Mary went through the natural process of labor and birth. But what is held and held most strongly by Reformed churches on the basis of Scripture is the virgin birth in the sense of the virgin conception.

In other words, that the Lord Jesus was conceived in the body of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit and not by the normal means.

In other words, there was no part played in the conception of Jesus by a human father. Now we hold to that doctrine simply on the basis of Scripture.

It is emphasized in the two passages that we read. First of all, in Matthew, where it is quite clear that the passage in Isaiah, talking about the virgin conceiving and giving birth to a son, is referred to Mary and the birth of Jesus.

And also to this passage in Luke's Gospel, where it is quite clear that Mary recognizes that she is a virgin.

[4 : 15] And she wonders how on earth it is going to come about that she is going to have a baby when she is not yet married. So in both Gospels, it is quite clear that Mary is a virgin, yet she is told that she is to become the mother of the Lord Jesus and to become the mother of Jesus in a most miraculous way.

We are told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.

Now that is precisely what we mean by the virgin birth. In other words, that Jesus, the Son of God, comes into this world in this unique and special way.

But I want this evening to think about that truth and to ask some questions about it in the light of recent ideas that people have about this emphasis of the Bible on the virgin birth.

This belief goes back, as we've seen, right to the Bible itself, and we get some very early references to it in the history of the Christian church. Some people may try to give the impression that it was something that was thought up much later on.

[5 : 36] But in fact, it goes right back into the Gospels and also into the very early history of the church. For instance, we have some early writers in the 2nd century AD.

That's within 100 years after the death of Jesus. And these writers clearly show that they hold that Jesus was born of a virgin, born of the Virgin Mary.

For instance, a Christian writer called Ignatius and Justin Martyr and some others of these very early writers, they clearly show that they believe this truth, that Jesus was conceived in the Virgin Mary and born in this most miraculous way.

But then we discover, not much later than that, in fact, some of these writers are actually writing to combat other ideas that are being put forward, we discover that there are denials of that truth.

In the beginning, they, of course, were coming from outside the Christian church, from the Jews or from some of the pagan writers of that time when they heard about this belief that Jesus was virgin born.

[6 : 53] And these denials, we discover, interestingly enough, are all based not upon some firm historical tradition of any kind, but they are simply based on philosophical assumptions.

In other words, based on the belief that miracles do not happen. It is not possible for a virgin to bring forth a child without any part being played by a man.

Now that, of course, is exactly the basis upon which the virgin birth is denied in our own day. And the virgin birth is one of those doctrines that is, of course, being very seriously challenged nowadays, along with others like the resurrection and also like the divinity of our Lord Jesus.

In fact, any element in Christianity, any element in the Bible that lays an emphasis upon the supernatural, upon God intervening in history to do something that is inexplicable in purely natural terms, that is challenged today.

And challenged today not by those outside the Christian church in the first place, but challenged by people from supposedly within the Christian church.

[8 : 13] People who are ministers or professors or bishops within the Christian church, challenging these beliefs and saying that that is not necessary to Christianity, to believe that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, for instance.

And these challenges are based not upon any evidence in the sense of historical evidence that they can bring forward, an explanation of what the Gospels have to say in any other way than by what the Gospels themselves say, but rather is based simply upon the philosophic assumption that there can be no such thing as the miraculous.

There cannot be miracles. So then let's look at some of the ways in which we need to treat this subject to present the truth of the Virgin birth against these views that are being propagated today. Well, the first thing we need to notice is that the birth narratives are integral parts of the Gospels. When you read Matthew's Gospel, when you read Luke's Gospel, you discover that what they say about the birth of Jesus and what they say about the virgin birth of Jesus, they're integral parts of the whole of their narrative.

There is no sign of this being a sort of bit that can be taken out and the rest of it left undisturbed. In fact, if you really take out any reference to Mary being a virgin, the whole thing begins to make very little sense at all because why is there such a fuss being made about the birth if in fact there is not something very, very unique about it.

[10 : 11] So these are part and partial of the Gospels. And of course, every manuscript that we have of the Gospels, these are there as part of the Gospels.

So the question arises, if we are to accept the trustworthiness of the Gospels, then we are to accept the trustworthiness of what they say concerning this virgin birth.

But of course, if we're not going to accept the trustworthiness of this, then can we accept the trustworthiness of any of it? Because the Gospels are really the only reliable accounts we have of the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus in existence.

And if we don't accept them, then we have nothing left. We have nothing left but maybe our own fancies concerning what Jesus was actually like, and therefore we're left with nothing.

So if we do not accept what the Gospels say, we cannot have Christianity at all. Let's look then at the alternatives, the alternative explanations that people have attempted to put forward, to try to explain the evidence that we have before us in the Gospels.

[11 : 31] There is, of course, the effort by rationalism to explain away the virgin birth. Rationalism, the belief not in using the mind, using the reason, we all do that, but rationalism meaning simply starting from man and from his own ideas, not starting from God's revelation.

Now, the person who does that seeks to explain away the virgin birth, perhaps, for example, by saying that Jesus was quite simply the son of Joseph, that in fact Joseph was his real human father.

And this other thing was thought up sometime later on about Jesus being born of a virgin. Or, even worse than that, and this was something that again was put forward in the ancient world, when they heard about Jesus being virgin born, they said that he was, in fact, an illegitimate son of Mary, that there was someone else who was the father of the Lord Jesus.

And, of course, that was a slander that was put about by the Jews at a very early stage. In fact, there may be some reference to that very slander in the Gospels themselves, when they refer to Jesus as the son of Mary, which seemed to be a very strange expression to use of anyone in those days.

Usually, a person was thought to be the son of their father. You normally refer to a person as the son of Joseph, and not as the son of Mary. Perhaps that was a kind of insinuation about Jesus.

[13 : 09] Also, there's the reference where they say quite clearly that we are not illegitimate children, when Jesus has been talking to them in terms that God is not their father.

They say, we are not illegitimate children. Our father is God, implying, perhaps, that they thought that he was. At any rate, that is an explanation that people have put forward at various times.

Also, there have been attempts to try to explain the whole thing as some kind of myth, just a kind of story, a kind of fairy tale, laying particular emphasis upon things like the appearance of angels, and things like this, saying that, well, all of that, of course, none of us have seen any of that, so therefore, it couldn't have happened.

It must be just some kind of invention, some kind of fairy tale. But the question that has to be answered by all such ideas is this question.

If these explanations, or any one of them, is correct, then how do they explain the origin of this story itself?

[14 : 20] In other words, what the Gospels have to say about the birth of Jesus? How did it come about? Why would anyone create this story?

If it was an invention, why would anyone invent this story concerning the birth of Jesus? And no one has given a satisfactory explanation as to that.

No one has been able to answer that question as to how this originated simply as a story, if in fact it is not true.

First of all, there have been attempts to try to explain it in terms of a Jewish background. For instance, they look back to examples in the Old Testament where there were what we may call miraculous births.

Women who may have been barren, who were unable to have children, and then God promised that they were to have children. For instance, we can think of a Sarah who was barren and had been promised that she was to have a child to Abraham, and that child, of course, was Isaac.

[15 : 30] Other examples, Samson in the Old Testament, or Samuel. Examples like that. And people say, well, there's this Jewish background to this kind of thing.

So they adduce that, well, this was just some kind of invention against that background of there being these Jewish traditions about miraculous births. But the simple problem that confronts us in each of these cases is that at every point there was a father involved.

There is no case in the Old Testament, there is no case in Jewish traditions of anyone being virgin born. And that is an insuperable objection to that suggestion that perhaps this idea of a virgin birth came from a Jewish background.

Also, the whole idea of anyone being the son of God and being born of a virgin in this particular way would be absolutely abhorrent to the Jews living at that time, those who held strictly to their own ideas of what the true religion was, because they were not really expecting God to come in human form.

They were looking for a great king like David only. And that really was all. So then, there doesn't seem to be an explanation along those lines.

[17:06] Perhaps also it's sometimes suggested that this was just simply an invention, a story invented to fulfill the prophecy given in Isaiah chapter 7.

But unfortunately, no evidence can be shown that the Jews were in fact expecting that prophecy to be fulfilled or expecting it to be fulfilled with regard to the Messiah.

And when you look at the passage very clearly and carefully, you realize why. Because it is not at all clear that that passage is in fact talking in the first instance about the Messiah.

It was only when in fact it happened, when the Lord Jesus was born in this particular way, that it was realized that that passage was in fact talking about him.

It's not one of those passages in the Old Testament that is absolutely clear cut in speaking about the Messiah. Rather, it is rather veiled and cast in shadows.

[18:07] And it's only as you look back at it with the light of the New Testament that you see that Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy. And Judaism at that time was certainly not expecting a virgin-born Messiah.

They had not tied that passage into the other passages relating to the ruler who would be born in Bethlehem, who would shepherd his people Israel.

So the prophecy in Micah chapter 5. They didn't tie it in with the prophecies concerning a greater son of David who would sit upon David's throne and establish his kingdom, an everlasting kingdom.

They didn't tie those things together. It's only the New Testament that ties these things together. So we cannot explain it simply from a Jewish background.

So then others have sought to explain the origin of this belief in the virgin birth from a pagan background, from the ideas of Greece or Rome, to see if in there we can find some background that would give a natural explanation of how this belief in the virgin birth arose.

[19:20] Now here, many scholars think they're on very fruitful ground because we discover in the ancient world there were many traditions and legends and stories concerning people who had very unusual or unique births.

And some of these people are famous. They're well known to us today. For example, Plato, the great philosopher, Greek philosopher, or Alexander, the great Macedonian general.

These are two that we could mention. And many others. And there were traditions or legends concerning their birth or their conception that they were in fact not conceived simply by the normal means, but rather there was some kind of intervention of a god in them.

Now, of course, in the idea of the Greeks and Romans, they had various gods. Gods of this and gods of that. Gods of war. Gods of love. Gods of harvest.

All the rest of it. And so, there was a belief that in some cases, these men were actually conceived under the power or influence of one of those gods.

[20:32] Gods, it may be said, that are merely the imaginations of the people who lived at that time. Nonetheless, scholars hold that maybe here there is an explanation of how this story arose in the New Testament.

Well, there is abundant argument against that being true. And the first part of this is that we see quite clearly in the New Testament that there was a great separation between Christian belief and Christian behavior and pagan belief and pagan behavior.

When someone became a Christian, they turned away from their past, their pagan past. For instance, Paul, in talking to some of these early Christians, they said that they had turned from idols to serve the living God.

And that's in fact what they did. They cut themselves off from those old beliefs and practices. And in the light of that, is it feasible or reasonable at all that they would seek to draw themselves back into that kind of slavery to these gods and these ideas that they had found broken systems before, that they would draw these back to themselves to try to form some kind of explanation of the coming of their savior, the one that they now discovered, was the one and the only one who could deal with their slavery to sin and set them free for all eternity.

And it's even more unlikely when we view it in this regard that those stories of the ancient world, although some scholars may say that there's a similarity between them and this gospel record of the birth of Jesus.

[22 : 27] There is absolutely no point of similarity except the similarity really of the words that we use, that these are called gods and that they had some part in these stories, in the conception of these famous people.

The difference lies completely in the actual details of what the stories say because those stories from the ancient world are really very grossly immoral and there is all the emphasis upon really what you would just call the physical lust of those gods towards the woman.

Now that, of course, is totally removed from the world in which we are moving here when we read of the birth of the Lord Jesus. We're reading here of something totally different.

We're reading here of the Lord God causing in this unique way the coming of his own son into this world who was truly divine and also truly human and coming in this most perfect and most pure way.

So then when we view it in that way, the two things belong to two different worlds of thought altogether. And there is no connection between them.

[23 : 52] But also, on top of that, there is the very destructive fact for these arguments that are put forward today. The very destructive fact that these stories are firmly in a Jewish context.

They have a Jewish background and the very language of these narratives is influenced by the Jewish thought and by the Jewish language which was Aramaic at that time.

In other words, it's quite clear that these narratives come from the background that they claim to come from. That is, from a Jewish background in the areas of Nazareth and Bethlehem among simple Jewish people.

And they are not the clever inventions of people who are wrestling with the ideas of paganism later on in the first century. So then, these are abundant arguments against there being any other explanation of how these stories have arisen.

Therefore, we are forced and forced more and more as we study this to the conclusion that what it says in the Gospels is the clear Gospel truth.

[25 : 08] In other words, it is God's Word, firm and clear, telling us exactly what happened, telling us clearly and simply so that even the youngest child can understand what happened.

that in fact, Jesus came into the world in a special way, not like any other baby. There was no role of a father involved, a human father involved.

Rather, he was born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. Well, we may ask the question then, why is this important?

Why is it important to stress these things we've been attempting to stress tonight? Why is it important that a Christian should believe and believe wholeheartedly and without reservation in the Virgin birth, that Jesus was conceived in the Virgin Mary?

Well, it's important, first of all, for the authority of the Bible because, after all, this doctrine is based not upon human ideas or human traditions.

[26 : 19] It's based on the Scriptures. Those early Christians I talked about, people like Ignatius and Justin Martyr, they believed in the Virgin birth simply because the Scriptures said so, because the Gospel said so.

And we believe it today for the same reason. Not because it may, to us, be easy or simple to understand, but because God says it is the truth.

And if we reject it, then we are left with the great difficulty of how do we accept anything that the Bible says. I would like to read a little bit from a book by Gresham Machen, who was a very famous Christian writer in America earlier this century.

And he has a book about the Virgin birth, and he has this to say about this particular thing we've been thinking about, the authority of the Bible. If, therefore, the Virgin birth be rejected, let us cease talking about the authority of the Bible or the infallibility of Scripture or the like.

Let us rather say plainly that that authority and that infallibility are gone. We may indeed hold that many things which the Bible says are true, even though this thing that it says is untrue.

[27 : 45] Many earnest souls, if we may for the moment speak in general terms and without reference to the Virgin birth, adopt such a mediating position. They hold that, although the Bible is wrong in many particulars, although it displays no supernatural freedom from the errors that beset other books, yet it contains some things that are true.

And upon those things, we can ground our hope for time and for eternity. Far better is it to say that these men are right to say that the Bible is not infallible, but only partly true, than to say that the

Bible is infallible in the sphere of religion and ethics, and that the external happenings that it relates are matters of indifference to our souls.

Many earnest Christians hold the former position, but a man who really holds the latter position cannot logically be a Christian at all. Christianity is founded upon the redeeming work of Christ, which was accomplished in Palestine 1900 years ago.

To be indifferent to the record that sets forth that work is to reject the gospel in which Christ is offered as our Savior from sin and wrath.

Now I think that quotation there puts what I'm trying to say as clearly as anything could. In other words, if you reject this truth concerning the virgin birth, you really reject the whole idea of the Bible being an infallible guide to us, that it is God's clear, inerrant word, without any mistake in it.

[29 : 31] And you're left in the position of those who Machen says who don't accept parts of it, but they do accept other parts being true. But the question that then has to confront them is how do you know those things are true?

If you reject the virgin birth, how can you accept the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus? Because it is only on the basis of these very same gospels, the same New Testament, these same scriptures that we come to believe in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ for sin and is rising again from the dead, victorious over death.

But Machen there is talking about another and an even more pernicious emphasis concerning the scriptures and concerning this whole question of the miraculous and the supernatural.

You see, there are many people and a growing number of people, scholars and preachers throughout the Christian church today who will not give up the claim to the great emphasis that the Bible is God's word.

They say the Bible is God's word. Yet, they will say that it is mistaken concerning items of fact or items of history or where it touches on things that may be called scientific.

[31 : 06] That it's mistaken in all these places, but it's true religiously. It's true in the area of religion or the spiritual. And therefore, it is God's word and that's what's important.

And Machen there makes the very cogent point that in fact that position is absolute nonsense because the truth of Christianity rests upon historical facts.

It rests upon the fact, the historical fact of Jesus' birth, of Jesus' life, of Jesus' death, of Jesus' resurrection. It rests upon those historical facts.

And its belief, its doctrine is based upon those being true. So true that if you'd been there that day when Jesus was born, you'd be able to pick some hay up in that stable where he was born.

Or you'd be able to rub your hand on the wood of the cross on which Jesus died and you'd get a stab of wood in your finger by doing so.

[32 : 10] That's how real the Bible is when it talks about those events upon which our faith is based. They are absolutely real. They are describing things that really happen.

And if they are not, then we can't simply say, well, we'll accept some kind of spiritual truth. We'll have to say the whole thing is rubbish and the whole thing doesn't make any sense at all.

There really can be no middle position concerning it. So then, the whole question of the authority of God's word is at stake here when we think of the question of the virgin birth.

The Bible asserts it and maintains it. And if it is true, if the Bible is trustworthy, then we have to receive this, not only have to receive it, but rejoice to receive it as another secret that God has revealed to us which otherwise would have remained hidden if he had not done so.

But then also, the virgin birth is important as a kind of test. A kind of test for us to see what kind of beliefs people really hold.

[33 : 23] Now, it's not wrong for us to have those kind of tests because we're told specifically in the New Testament in John's letter that we are to test the spirits.

And that really means testing human spirits because he goes on to talk about prophets, people who are actually going around teaching, claiming to teach the word of God.

And we have to test to see if what they're saying is in fact the truth, if it is God's word. How are we going to test? John says we've got to ask doctrinal questions of them.

And he gives an example. If a person does not believe that Jesus Christ came in the flesh, he is not of God. He is rather anti-Christ, against Christ.

Now here we're thinking of that very same thing, Jesus Christ coming in the flesh. And the great test of whether somebody really is teaching the word of God is whether they accept what the Bible says

concerning the virgin birth.

[34 : 31] Because you see today there is such a confusion of language and there is such an ambiguity concerning the teaching of many people in the Christian church that even things like the resurrection or the divinity of Jesus Christ, these are things which people may say, they may use those words, but they don't actually believe what the Bible teaches concerning them.

People may use the word resurrection and they say they believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but they do not mean the space-time rising of Jesus from the grave.

They mean some kind of spiritual renewal. Or they may use the expression the divinity of Jesus Christ, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. But they may not mean any different, may not mean by that anything different from saying that any one of us are sons or children of God.

In other words, they are not believing the unique truth the Bible teaches concerning that Jesus is the only, only begotten Son of God from all eternity.

But there is one point where it is absolutely clear what people really believe and what they don't believe. A person, no matter how much they may twist these theological words and try to claim them for themselves, they will not accept today this biblical truth of the virgin birth in any shape or form because it is so clearly the supernatural work of God and they do not accept that there is such a thing as the supernatural work of God.

[36 : 21] They do not accept the miraculous and the virgin birth by its very nature, by the very connotation of the words, is a miraculous event.

And so this truth concerning the virgin birth is a great test to distinguish who in fact today are preaching the word of God, who are teaching biblical and Christian doctrines because if a man does not believe that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, that the Son of God has come into this world and taken to himself a human nature and done so according to the scriptures by being conceived in the virgin Mary, then they cannot be said to be preaching Christianity at all.

They are rather in the class of those who need to be taught, who need to be instructed in the Christian faith and they are not to be accepted as teachers or having authority over the church of Christ.

But then also this truth of the virgin birth and this is the final point I'd like to think about. The truth of the virgin birth is important because our Christianity is so much less without it.

Our whole understanding of Jesus, of who he is and how he came into this world is so incomplete without this truth that in fact he was virgin born because we're left with all kinds of question marks when we hear that Jesus is the son of God and when we hear that he's a real man.

[38 : 00] We find it difficult to understand how this could have come about. We see what the gospels say concerning Jesus, we see that it describes him as being a real man.

He was hungry, he was thirsty, he was tired, he had all the characteristics of a real human nature and we also see quite clearly in his own person and his own words that he claimed the prerogatives of deity.

He claimed to forgive sin. Now, that doesn't mean he claimed to forgive people who sinned against him.

Any one of us can do that. If somebody offends you, if somebody does something to you, you can say, I forgive you. And that's a Christian thing to do. But when Jesus forgave sins, it wasn't sins against him that he was forgiving, but it was other people's sins against other people.

He said to a man who was brought into him, he may not have seen him before in his life, he said to him, your sins are forgiven you. That's why people's backs went up immediately and said, who is this man?

[39 : 10] It's all very well, one man forgiving someone else for their sin against that person. But this is ridiculous, a man forgiving somebody's sins, all his sins against everybody, X, Y, and Z.

It's absolutely ridiculous. But Jesus did it. And thereby, Jesus was claiming divinity. He was claiming that he had the right to forgive people's sins, even though they were committed against other people, because he is God.

And only God can forgive sins in that sense. So we have quite clearly the evidence that Jesus is truly human, but also truly divine, claiming to be the son of God, the eternal son of God, as well as the son of man.

Our question remains, how did this come about? And of course, we would never really figure out the answer ourselves, unless it was revealed that what actually happened was the virgin birth, that

Jesus came in this most unique way, a way that God thought and planned ages before and put into operation in the fullness of time when Jesus was born of a woman and born under the law. He had to be a true man so that he would be the second Adam, the God appointed representative before God and also he had to be not just a product of all that had gone before so that he was embroiled in the sinfulness of man's nature up until that time.

[40 : 57] His human nature, although it had to be truly human, yet it also had to be truly sinless and this was the way in which God appointed for it to happen.

Jesus, a real human nature inherited from Mary, but not an ordinary human nature because there was no inheritance from a human father.

And that is really about all that we can say about it as a Christian doctrine, but yet doesn't it tremendously expand our understanding of the greatness of God's gift to us in Jesus Christ that he came in this particular way.

He didn't come on the scene simply as one holy maid suddenly appearing as a ready made savior, nor did he come simply in the ordinary way like each one of us because if that was the case he wouldn't be any use to us at all.

How could he help us if he was just one just like ourselves, but yet he came in this unique way so he's truly man, but also truly sinless so that he could be the perfect savior.

[42 : 09] So in virgin birth there is involved a high doctrine of sin. In other words we treat sin as something serious, something that cannot be overcome simply by ordinary humanity, but also there is a high view of the person of Jesus Christ, that he is the one who is sinless, and he is the one who is therefore able to help us.

And all this has come about because Jesus came into the world born of a virgin. Let us pray. and if