

Sent from Heaven

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[0 : 0 0] I wonder if you have sent any cards or parcels this Christmas, and if you did so, if you were very organized and did so, respecting the dates that are given by the post office, final day for sending such cards or parcels. I haven't sent anything, not a single card, not a single parcel, but then, well, that's just me, a miserable so-and-so, but that's the reality. I guess it's too late to do anything about that now. However, and I recognize how this is very undeserved, given my own lack of interest in sending cards or parcels, I have received cards and even some parcels sent by others. And I think to be at the receiving end of kindness, to be at the receiving end of undeserved love is, to use a very tired old cliché, is what Christmas is all about. The birth of Jesus

Christ is all about God graciously sending living gifts from heaven to earth. In Matthew, the account of Jesus' birth begins with these words, this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. There in verse 18, at the beginning of the passage that we read, this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. So, how did it come about? I want to try and answer that question, but from one particular perspective, namely, the gracious sending of the Father. How, in order that this might take place, the Father engages in sending. He sends from heaven. And we're going to think about three sendings. We're calling them sendings. And so, for each, we will have a heading. And seeing as it's Christmas, we're going to have a subheading as well for each of them. The first is, the Father sent His Spirit. Or as a subheading, to consider and to note the creative genius of the Holy Spirit. The Father sent His Spirit. But also, in the account, we see that the Father sent His Son. And in the sending of His angel, we identify the saving purpose of the Father. But then thirdly, the Father sent His Son. And in considering this sending, we will notice the reconciling mission of the Son who was sent. So, three sendings, all related to this matter of the coming of Jesus. And let's think of each of them in turn. First of all, the Father sent His Spirit. Now, the work of the Spirit in the birth, the conception and birth of

Jesus is spoken of in the account that we've read. In verse 18, we're told that Mary was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Now, in that reference, there's no mention of the Father sending the Spirit. I think we can speak in those terms. We can use that language of the Father sending His Spirit. And especially as we consider how the Spirit's involvement is spoken of in Luke's account, in Luke chapter 1 and in verse 35. And we'll just turn quickly to what we read there concerning the role of the Spirit as the angel foretells the Spirit's role in announcing the impending birth, conception and birth, to Mary. In verse 34, Mary is bemused. She asks a reasonable question, how will this be? Mary asks, the angel, since I am a virgin, how can I possibly have a child? And the angel answered, the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Especially that second part of what the angel says. And I think both of the things he says really are the same thing in different words, but very particularly these words, the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Now, God is the Most High. In the previous verse there in Luke, that is made very clear. Verse 32, we read, He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, the Son of God. And the power of the Most High, the power of God, says the angel to Mary, will overshadow you. God will overshadow Mary in the person of His Holy Spirit who He sends for this purpose. The Father sends His Spirit. Indeed, as we consider the Spirit's work as it's revealed to us throughout the Bible, we see how the Spirit performs this work. He is at the Father's bidding. He is sent by the Father, not as some servile inferior, but as one who willingly and gladly is sent by the Father. As we think of the work of the Spirit, sent by the Father, there's three aspects that I want us to notice. What the Spirit did, how the Spirit did it, and why the Spirit did it. Now, in this first sending, the sending of the

Spirit, we're going to detain ourselves a little longer than on the second and third, largely because it's more related to what we might call the Christmas story. Maybe in the grand scheme of things, the sending of the Son, we would say, is more significant. But this morning, we'll focus more particularly on this first sending, the Father sent His Spirit, and do so in this way, what the Spirit did, how the Spirit did it, and why the Spirit did it. Now, I should say that as I venture into the mystery of the incarnation, for this is what we are considering, we do so with some caution. One of the early Protestant reformers, Philip Melancthon, contemporary and colleague of Martin Luther, gave the following wise counsel. It was wise then, hundreds of years ago, and it remains wise. He said this, we do better to adore the mysteries of deity than to investigate them.

[6 : 58] And I think there's wisdom in that, and we do enter into this matter with due caution. That said, let's give some thought to the matter. First of all, what the Spirit did. The angel, in addressing Joseph, and indeed in addressing Mary, and in turn, the evangelists use language that is discreet and dignified in describing the action of the Holy Spirit. Let's just pick up on the language that is used. She was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit, we read in Matthew's account. Also in Matthew's account, we read, what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. And then we have the language of the angel addressed to Mary that we've noticed a moment ago in Luke's account. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And it's that last verb that we find there in Luke's account that I want us to just pause and consider. This verb translated overshadowed, the power of the Most High will overshadow you. I think the verb used here is revealing. It seems to echo the creative activity of the Holy Spirit at the very beginning, at the creation of the universe. In the first chapter of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 1 and in verse 2, we read of how the Spirit was hovering over the waters. And now, in the context of the conception of Jesus, the same Spirit hovers over Mary, overshadows Mary. And on both occasions, the activity of the Spirit is created, the creation of the cosmos. And as part of that creation, the creation of the first Adam, when the Spirit first, we're told, hovered over the waters. But now, in the account that we're considering this morning, we have the creation of the second Adam, tasked with redeeming the created cosmos.

This is what the Spirit did, sent by the Father to participate in this creative way, in this act of creation, as the power of the Most High overshadowed Mary. That's what the Spirit did. But also, we can think about how the Spirit did it. And really here, we don't want to think greatly about this.

We really are best advised not to pry into the how. The gospel writers, the angels, don't do so, so who are we to do so? But what I would say in relation to the question of how is declare what is so evident from our reading of the passages concerned is that the conception of Jesus was wholly supernatural. We don't go into the manner of it, but we can declare that reality, his conception, wholly, altogether supernatural. And in making that assertion, we have no need to make any apology for what the gospel writers plainly assert. This was a miracle of spectacular proportions.

It defies those who would demand what they might consider or describe as a rational explanation. So, somebody comes to me and says, well, give me a rational explanation of how it was that Jesus could be born of Mary when she had not engaged in any sexual intercourse. Well, I'm not going to give you a rational explanation. This is the realm of the supernatural. It is so presented, and that is what we believe.

The life of Jesus is, if you wish, bookmarked by the supernatural, the virgin birth at its outset and the empty tomb at its close. And if your faith struggles with the virgin birth, then you'll struggle with much of what follows in the gospel accounts. Some of you may have seen an article, be it in the paper edition or perhaps more likely online, in the Herald newspaper yesterday that commented on remarks made by a Church of Scotland minister in Glasgow. At Christmas and Easter, you have the predictable news stories of religious leaders questioning the veracity of the Bible. It's just standard that you always get these stories at this time of year, especially at Easter, but now seemingly at Christmas as well. And the headline of the article quoted the minister in question. The headline went as follows, it's time to lay to rest the fanciful fairy tale nativity story.

[12 : 15] And as part of the article, the journalist, obviously as a good journalist, was looking for an opposing point of view, and he approached none other than our own David Meredith, the recently minister at Smithton in Inverness. So David was asked for a response to this minister's view.

That we needed to take out all the myth from the Christmas story. It's just not believable. Nobody's going to believe that. We can't be telling people things that they just won't believe. And his response is as follows.

Reverend Freighter, for so the man in question is called, Reverend Freighter's offering of a Christmas without angels, a virgin, a bright star, and awestruck shepherds, reminds me of my early attempts at soup. It looked okay, but after 10 hours boiling, it had zero nutritional volume. And if you haven't quite picked up on his culinary illustration, there's another one. David continued with another illustration, and I quote, Just as children complain about their yogurt, Mom, I don't like the bits, so this is an offering of inert, gelatinous, non-offensive niceness. Indeed, this endeavor, and an endeavor that is made seemingly in the interest of making the gospel story more attractive, of taking out the supernatural, leaves us with nothing of any spiritual volume. The birth of Jesus is presented to us as wholly altogether supernatural, supernatural because it is wholly altogether supernatural.

How the Holy Spirit did it, I don't know, but I know that it's a miracle. But then one further aspect of this, as we think of the Father's sending of the Spirit and thinking about why the Holy Spirit acted in the way that He did. Why did God see fit to arrange the birth of Jesus by the creative activity of the Holy Spirit? Now, one perfectly legitimate answer to that question is that He just did. He just did.

It is God's prerogative to do things as He sees fit, and we are persuaded that He does all things well, and if that is how He chose to arrange the birth of Jesus, well, that's what He chose to do. He just did.

[14 : 58] And that's a legitimate and a reasonable answer. But I think we can, with care, note how the virgin birth or conception is in pleasing harmony with two central doctrines concerning the person of Jesus Christ.

And I'm thinking of His sonship, that He is the Son of God, and His sinlessness, that He was and is altogether without sin, untainted by sin. First of all, if we think, and we'll do this very fleetingly, the sonship of Jesus, in the absence of the virgin birth and the supernatural activity of God through the Holy Spirit, it's difficult to conceive of how the man Jesus could be described as the Son of God in the unique way that He is described. Indeed, the angel seems to present the sonship of the man Jesus as a consequence of the virgin birth. And here I'm thinking not so much of the passage in Matthew, but in Luke's account, in Luke 1 and verse 35, a verse we've already referred to, but we look to again for this purpose. 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. The angel seems to be indicating that the sonship of Jesus is, in a sense, a consequence, or in any case, related to the manner of

His conception. The Most High will overshadow you, so the one to be born will be called the Son of God. Christ is the eternal Son of God, and it seems altogether fitting and appropriate that in His becoming a man at a point in time in history, His eternal Father takes on what we might call a paternal role through the Spirit, even in His conception. But I mentioned that the virgin birth also impinges on, or is related to, our convictions concerning the sinlessness of Jesus. Now, we believe that Jesus is sinless not because of the virgin birth. The truth that He was without sin is a truth that is clearly presented to us in the Bible in numerous ways and on numerous occasions. But here, too, the virgin birth is in harmony with this crucial truth concerning Jesus. The humanity of Christ was created by the Holy

Spirit and as such shared in the essential character of all that God creates. It was, He was very good.

He was perfect. He was sinless. And it's also the case that by the virgin birth, Jesus, though holy human, stands outside the guilt of Adam. Adam, our fallen first father, did not beget Jesus. He was not involved in the begetting, the conception of Jesus. Jesus, therefore, can be and is the new, sinless, untainted, untainted, second Adam. And so, a suitable mediator between sinful man and a holy God.

[18 : 30] The Father sent His Spirit. But also in the account that we read there in Matthew's Gospel, we notice that the Father sent His angel. And we'll think about this much more briefly.

The Father sent His angel. And that's what angels are for. Angels exist to do God's bidding, to be sent by the Father.

And of course, on this occasion, the angel was sent to do the Father's bidding, to bring, to relay a message to those who had to receive that message. And let's just notice two truths that we can draw from the Father's sending of this angel. In Matthew's Gospel, and in the account that we've read in particular, we read there in verse 20, but after he had considered this, this is Joseph considering the reality that his wife is expecting a child. After he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. From the sending of the angel and from the message that the angel relays, I want to draw particularly this reality, and that is the Father's authority to name the child to be born, who decides the name of a newborn baby. I don't know if any of you picked up on the news item that was doing the rounds this week about the most popular names in Scotland in this year that is coming to a close. The end of the year, you always get the statistics. And for this year in Scotland, the most popular names have been Jack and Emily. Jack for the eighth year in a row. Go figure that. Jack's been the most popular name in Scotland eight years in a row. But who names a child? Who decides the name to be given? Well, we know that certainly ordinarily the parents it's their call. In the case of Jesus, it is God the Father, God his Father, who exercises his authority to name the child. And he sends his angel to inform Joseph that he is to so name the one to be born. Of course, the name is given, and the name that is given is the name Jesus. It was important that Joseph be involved in naming the child. It was important in order to secure that the child would be deemed legally a son of Joseph. And that was important in terms of the genealogy of Jesus as a son of David. Joseph, you'll notice, is identified very specifically in the passage as a son of David. But though in the legal process, if you wish, or the social conventions of the day, Joseph names a child, he does so under instruction. The authority to name, the name is given by God and informed to Joseph by the angel. But perhaps even more importantly, what we can draw from this angel that is sent and the message that he brings is the Father's purpose to save. The name itself, the name Jesus, declares that saving purpose. Jesus, or Yeshua in its Hebrew form, meaning the Lord saves, Yahweh saves. But the name does more, the message does more than simply declare a, you might call it a bald intention to save. The name, and especially the explanation given, establishes the Father's agenda in this matter of saving. It is the Father who decides both that we need to be saved to be saved from. You see, he's not simply given the name Jesus, but we're given the explanation. He will be called Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. And here the Father

is establishing the agenda. He's saying, this is the problem. Now, there would have been many in Israel who would have readily acknowledged their need of salvation, but their conception of what they needed to be saved from would have been very different. They needed to be saved from the yoke of Rome. They needed to be saved from poverty and misery and who knows what other ills that they might have said. Well, we need to be saved from. But the Father says, no, that's not what I deem to be of first importance. I set my agenda, and my agenda is that you need to be saved from your sins. And somebody says, well, I don't think I do need to be saved from my sins. Well, that's your opinion.

The Father is the one who set the agenda, and he declares that this is the matter of first importance. Not only does the Father declare his agenda, but he establishes the way, the only way in which we can be saved through the saving mission of his own Son. Which takes us on to the third sending. The Father sent his Son. He sent his Spirit. He sent his angel. But thirdly, we can consider how the Father sent his Son.

[24 : 19] Jesus was sent by his Father. Jesus himself uses that language. We'll notice that in a moment, of being one sent by the Father. But our concern now is simply to ask the question, why? Why did Jesus, or why was Jesus sent by the Father? Well, it's clear that he was sent to undertake a mission of reconciliation. He was sent as heaven's peacemaker. What I want to do is just comment on the character of that mission, the inevitability of it, and then finally notice the beneficiaries of the Son's mission, the one sent by the Father. First of all, the character of his mission. Well, it is, as we've already noticed very clearly in his name, his mission is to save. And we would say this, or we would put it in this way, his mission is to save and so reconcile. Not to think of them as two distinct things, but to save and, as a consequence, reconcile. And the two names that he has given, the name Jesus that we've already noticed, but then the next name that he will be called according to the angel, there in the passage in Matthew, Emmanuel. These two names, especially when considered together, are revealing in this regard as to his mission to save and so reconcile. Try and think of it visually in your mind in three steps or stages. Let's think of what stage one is. Stage one is where we all are by nature as sons of Adam. We are sinners far from God and enemies of God. Whether we perceive that to be the case, whether we feel that to be the case is a matter indifferent. That is where we are.

God is neither for us nor with us. That is the consequence of sin and of our sinful condition.

But stage two is Jesus, the sending by the Father of his Son to save us. As the children were singing, as his name means, Jesus saves. By his death on the cross, Jesus takes the punishment for and so deals with our sins. And that leads to stage three, which is really concurrent with stage two in time.

And it is this, that with our sins dealt with, there is no longer the root cause of our enmity or alienation from God. And so God is indeed now Emmanuel, both with us and for us. We could put it this way.

It is because Jesus is called Jesus that he can also be called Emmanuel. It is because he saves us from our sins, because he deals with the sin problem, that he then secures for us this reality of Emmanuel, God with us, God for us, something that was impossible in the absence of his saving work.

[27 : 59] This is the character of his reconciling mission. But in the language of the angel, we also notice what I'm calling the inevitability of his mission. I want you to notice the striking and emphatic language of the angel there in verse 21. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. He will save his people from their sins.

When God decides to save, he saves. How different, and how that stands in stark contrast to the plans and purposes of men, of the likes of you and me, and even of the good and the great. The news this week has been dominated. Well, in the beginning of the week, it was dominated by speculation, and then on Thursday, the fatal act occurred, and since then, it's been considering it. You're thinking, what's he talking about? Well, I'm talking about the sacking of Jose Mourinho, the special one from the manager's position at Chelsea. Now, Jose Mourinho returned to Chelsea a couple of years ago, and as recently as April, when he had led his team to secure the premiership title, Jose Mourinho was speaking of building a dynasty at Chelsea, and he spoke of a 10-year plan. This is a few months ago, a 10-year plan to convert

Chelsea into the greatest team on the planet, and I'm sure many of his loyal supporters were hanging on his every word, and they were sure this is what is going to happen, but of course, it didn't. A few months later, he's unemployed, sacked by the Russian oligarch, and I mention it simply to illustrate a reality that we know is so. We can plan, and we can purpose, and we can have great plans, and well thought out plans, and seemingly the resources to ensure that our plans come to fruition, but ultimately, we can never say of ourselves, of our plans, or indeed of the plans of others, this will happen.

We can't do that. We can't do that, but God can. And when God sends his Son, he declares through the angel that his Son will save his people from their sins. There will be no obstacle that he will not overcome. Nothing will frustrate his purposes. He will save his people, and of course, he fulfilled his saving mission, and by the Spirit is applying that victory won, that mission accomplished in the lives of sinners like you and me, even to this day. But then notice finally, as we think of the the mission, the reconciling mission of the one sent by the Father, who are the beneficiaries, well, the angel tells us he will save his people, all who receive Jesus and believe in his name, and as they do so, are given the right to become part of God's family, to be part of his people.

Sinners like you and me, with nothing to bring to the table, no negotiating chips to offer to God, but just as we are, recognizing our need, recognizing that we stand devoid of anything in ourselves that would merit God's acceptance, but as we trust in the one he has provided, his own Son to be our Savior, so we are brought in and adopted into his family and become part of his people. We are the ones blessed by his saving work. Is he your Savior?

[32 : 20] Is Jesus your Savior? Wouldn't it be a sad irony to, in some measure, participate in the celebration of Christmas, the coming of Jesus, the one who saves, if he's not your Savior? Is he your Savior?

Did the one born in Bethlehem die at Calvary in your place? What now? Christmas is about God giving and us receiving. The Father sent his Spirit, the Father sent his angel, and supremely the Father sent his Son. And we can and do, rightly so, look on in admiration and receive with gratitude. But is that all? Is it all about receiving? Well, let me close by asking you to listen to the one sent by the Father. After his resurrection, Jesus met with his disciples and commissioned them with words that we find recorded for us in John's Gospel, chapter 20 and verse 21.

He addresses his disciples, and he addresses you today. As the Father sent me, Jesus acknowledges, I'm here because the Father sent me. As the Father sent me, I am sending you. I am sending you.

Are you listening? And will you go? Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for your generosity. We thank you for your kindness towards us. We thank you for the undeserved love that we are the objects of. We thank you for your ascending of your Son, Jesus, to be our Savior. And we pray that by your Spirit we would know what it is to trust in and to deepen our trust in Him as our Savior, as the one who has paid the price that we ought to have paid, the one who stood in the breach, the one who died in our place. Help us to know Him and to trust in Him and to follow Him and to obey Him as He commissions us to go. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen.