

## “HOW ON EARTH COULD GOD BECOME A MAN?” Matthew 1:18-25

Dr. John Crocker. Crossroads Church, Albert Lea, MN. 11/28/2010 (Advent #1)

When children play on merry-go-rounds and swings they're not thinking about pivots. They know diddly-squat about pivots.

A pivot is usually a small object, like a bar or a post or a pin, that is connected to a larger object and lets it turn or swing. The axle in a wheel or the center post in a merry-go-round serves a pivotal function.

So what?!

- The Christian faith has been going around the world for two thousand years. It is arguably the most powerful force in history to affect whole nations and their social structures.

And it all revolves around a pivot, a small object—a baby born in Bethlehem, Judea: Jesus Christ.

- Christmas is a grand celebration of a great historical event: God's entrance into our human condition. In Jesus, born in Bethlehem, Judea, God exposed himself to the world up close and personal.

“The astounding truth is that in Jesus Christ, humanity encountered God in a real, personal, historical, and tangible way. The ultimate significance of Christmas is that the infinite, eternal God left his glorious throne in heaven. He accepted life—and death—as a human to personally offer his love and forgiveness to sinners.” (Kenneth Samples, *Without a Doubt*. Baker books, 2004. p.133)

The doctrine of God becoming a man is at the pivot of the Christian faith. In the person of Jesus Christ we understand more about God and what he has done than we can learn in any other way.

This is what makes Christmas unique. It's the phenomenal intervention of Almighty God in our human predicament.

- But Christmas provokes a lot of questions. Our inquisitiveness drives us to ask, ‘How on earth could God become a man?’ As a God-man was he mostly God or mostly man? Why did God become a man? Was it really necessary?
- Matthew's Gospel Chapter 1:18-25 gives us answers to these questions.

<sup>18</sup> *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.*

<sup>19</sup> *Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

<sup>20</sup> *But 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.*

<sup>21</sup> *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."*

<sup>22</sup> *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:*

<sup>23</sup> *"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us."*

<sup>24</sup> *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.*

<sup>25</sup> *But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

To appreciate the wonder of Christmas we must ask three questions using three key interrogatives: How, What, Why. (The How, What, and Why of Christmas)

### I. HOW COULD IT HAPPEN? The Mystery. Matthew 1:18-20

How on earth could God the Almighty Creator become a human being like one of us?

It's practically impossible for us to apprehend the nature of an infinite Being who inhabits eternity. We can't get our brain cells to process something so far outside the boundaries of our existence. It's a mystery.

Both infinity and eternity are alien to our experience. We're limited to space and time.

- But Jesus Christ brought God near. He came among us, as one of us.

The Gospel of John introduces Jesus as the Word who was with God in the beginning and who made all things (John 1:1-5). This divine Word became flesh: *'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*

*We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.'* (John 1:14)

Without Jesus Christ we could never grasp who God is, as God wants us to know him.

- At the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451, the church set forth the orthodox doctrine of Christ. Here's a key part of the statement from the Council: *We all with one voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ to be one and the same Son, perfect in divinity and humanity, truly God and truly human, consisting of a rational soul and a body, being of one substance with the Father in relation to his divinity, and being of one substance with us in relation to his humanity, and is like us in all things apart from sin.* (Chalcedonian Creed)

The Creed declares that Jesus is both God and man, one divine person in two natures. But it doesn't explain how the two natures are put together in one person. To our finite minds that is a mystery.

- Before he came in human flesh Christ existed as God the Son in eternity with the Father. He did not become a different person when he was born in Bethlehem.

Before he became man, God the Son had only one nature—his divine nature. After his enfleshment he added a human nature; but without the sin of human nature.

Jesus did not become infected by sinful human nature. That's because he was conceived miraculously in Mary by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>18</sup> *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.*

It was the Jewish custom that for respectable people there were three steps to the marriage process.

First was the arrangement, or engagement. This arrangement was often made by the parents while the children were still quite young.

Second was the betrothal period. This happened when the couple was old enough to ratify the pledge publicly. Joseph and Mary were in this stage, as we read in v.18, *'Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph.'* The couple was then considered husband and wife, even though they still lived apart. Only a divorce could end a betrothal.

The final step was the marriage proper. After a suitable period of betrothal—usually about a year—they came together and lived as husband and wife (v.18).

But before Joseph and Mary came together, Mary became pregnant.

- This is the pivotal question: how did Mary become pregnant?

Somehow God the Holy Spirit intruded into Mary's body and caused her to become pregnant.

In Luke's Gospel we read that the angel Gabriel had told Mary, *'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.'* (Luke 1:35)

How Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit is a mystery!

- It had not occurred to Joseph that there might be some divine explanation for Mary's pregnancy.

<sup>19</sup> *Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

Joseph was expected to divorce Mary. He wanted to do so as privately as possible. But God stopped him.

<sup>20</sup> *But 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.*

- Our finite minds cannot comprehend how our infinite God became man in the one whose advent we celebrate at Christmas..

It is a mystery. It's beyond the reach of our abilities to explain it.

God's infinite nature took on a human nature, with all its characteristics, except sin.

The Apostle Paul probably said it best, *'Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great; he appeared in a body'* (1 Timothy 3:16).

This is not nonsense! It's a mystery.

Whenever we ponder the holy, infinite, eternal, sovereign God, we should expect to encounter mystery.

## II. WHAT IS THIS GOD-MAN? The Identity. Matthew 1:22-23

If Jesus was a God-man, does this mean he was part God and part man?

The Chalcedonian Creed I quoted earlier also states that Christ's divine and human natures "remain . . . without mixture or confusion so that the one person, Jesus Christ, is truly God and truly man."

- The Apostle Paul helps us to understand this divine-human man. Christ Jesus was in very nature God, *'but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming in the likeness of men'* (Philippians 2:7)

What does this mean? Does it mean that by his incarnation Christ emptied himself of his deity and became less than God?

No. The Bible contradicts such a notion: *'For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.'* (Colossians 2:9)

The full and complete nature of God took up residence in union with the human nature of Jesus Christ.

- How do we explain what this unique God-man Jesus Christ is?

He emptied himself of the glory and majesty that were his in heaven.

Jesus Christ did not surrender all the power of deity. In the Gospels we read about Jesus stopping a life-threatening storm on the sea of Galilee, so that his disciples exclaimed, *'What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!'* (Matthew 8:27) They asked the operative question, "What kind of man is this?"

But Christ did in fact set aside some of the prerogatives of his deity. In his human nature there were things he said he did not know—like the time of his coming at the end of the age, which was known only by the Father (Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32).

- Someone may ask how we explain Jesus' statement in the Bible that *'the Father is greater than I'*. (John 14:28) Did Christ mean that he was inferior in essence or in nature to God the Father?

Not at all! By assuming the role of a servant Jesus could say that the Father was greater in his position or role, but not greater in his essential nature.

On other occasions Jesus said *'I and the Father are one.'* (John 10:30)

- Since the time of the early church some teachers have rejected the doctrine that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man.
  - a. Early in the fourth century Arius, a church leader in Alexandria, taught that Jesus Christ was not equal with God the Father; he was similar but not the same. So Arius argued that Jesus was the first and greatest of God's creations.
  - b. At the other extreme was a group that became known as Docetists. They argued that Jesus was divine and only *seemed to be* human. Their name was derived from the Greek verb *dokeo*—"to seem." The Apostle John confronted the earliest expressions of this heretical view: *'Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.'* (1 John 4:2-3)

- The Bible tells us that even Jesus Christ's name reveals his true identity.

<sup>22</sup> *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:*

<sup>23</sup> *"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us."*

The baby in Mary's arms was fully God and fully man—one person with two natures, divine and human.

### **III. WHY DID IT HAPPEN? The Necessity. Matthew 1:21, 24-25**

Why would God do something so astounding as to take upon himself the full nature of his human creatures—without assuming their moral corruption?

- Was it something God needed to do? No. God doesn't need to do anything.

As sinful humans we needed God to do it, but we had no idea that there was a God who would do something like that.

The Apostle Paul explains, *'But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions'* (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Mankind was so out of touch with God our Creator that we were dead toward him. We didn't know what we needed.

- God came down to our level—he inhabited our predicament.

He did what was absolutely necessary so that we could be saved from the dreadful plight of the human race because of its moral pollution and the universal infection of evil.

The Apostle Peter expressed it clearly: *'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.'* (Acts 4:12)

- Because Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man, he alone could bring together in himself mankind's hopeless condition and God's merciful provision.

Only Jesus Christ could be the Savior to break the power of the devil's grip on the fallen human race.

- The angel told Joseph, Mary's espoused husband:

<sup>21</sup> *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."*

<sup>24</sup> *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.*

<sup>25</sup> *But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

The angel told Joseph that Jesus was *the one who will save his people from their sins.* (1:21)

Sin has infected the entire human race and corrupted us in every way, socially, emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

- The name “Jesus” means the Lord is salvation, or The Lord God saves.

How did Jesus save people from their sins? The apostle John says, *‘the blood of Jesus, his (God’s) Son, purifies us from all sin.’* (1 John 1:7)

It’s tacky to leave the price tag on a Christmas gift you give. But when God gave his gift of a Savior to us he left the price tag for all to see—it was the cross where Jesus Christ bled and died. God intends us to know what it cost for us to be saved.

When we speak of the blood of Jesus Christ, we understand that he died literally on the cross to pay the death penalty for our sins.

It’s all because of God’s mercy, kindness and love to helpless, fallen, lost human beings that Jesus Christ was born.

- How should we respond? Listen as I read the second verse of the Advent song, “O Holy Night”: *With humble hearts we bow in adoration before this child, gift of God’s matchless love. Sent from on high to purchase our salvation, that we might dwell with him ever above. What grace untold—to leave the bliss of glory and die for sinners guilty and forlorn: Fall on your knees! Repeat the wondrous story!* (John S. Dwight)

How could God become a man? It’s an unfathomable mystery. We cannot explain it.

We’re not in a position to fully explain God, nor can we explain how God could become man.

But if you believe that God is infinite and eternal and utterly holy, you can also believe that this sovereign, infinite, eternal God can enter into and inhabit human flesh any way he wants to do so.

What God can do and chooses to do is in no way limited by what seems credible to his human creation.

- It all comes together as a coherent whole in the life and work of Jesus Christ, God who became incarnate in the womb of a young Galilean woman and was born in a little town called Bethlehem.
- Jesus was not part-man and part-God. He was fully God and fully man. One person with both divine and human natures.
- Only the God-man could deal with the curse of sin in humanity, and only in Christ Jesus could the alienation between a holy God and sinful mankind be removed.

That was why Jesus came. He told Zacchaeus, *‘For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.’* (Luke 19:10)

- Jesus Christ is our only hope. There is no other way to God.

It was all because of God’s love, kindness, mercy that Christ was born. .

The Christian gospel is for everyone: *‘For God so loved the world that he gave his One and Only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’* (John 3:16).

This is the good news at Christmas and the whole year through. This gospel *is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.* (Romans 1:16)