

The Apostles' Creed

Part 5

Conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary
John 1:18; John 3:16; John 3:18; John 5:17, 18; John 13:13

With Study Questions

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Matthew 1:20, 21; Isaiah 7:14

But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:20, 21).

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).

Introduction

This morning we will examine the phrase in the Apostles' Creed, addressing Jesus, which reads: **“Conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary.”**

I have witnessed a humorous dynamic when it comes to kids and sports; they don't always have a strong sense of what constitutes a fair, well-played out contest. At our church camps, for example, a team of ten or eleven year olds will be organizing a game volleyball or basketball and see an athletic adult standing by the court. At this time they have no problem seeking to recruit a 30 year old athlete to help them defeat their ten year old opponents.

I have occasionally found myself in this situation (though I'm well over 30). I might even allow myself to be influenced into entering the contest. The kids often learn at this juncture that I am not quite as good as they thought. And even if I am good enough, I generally won't (to the chagrin of my team-mates) bring the full force of my efforts upon my four foot nine, 85 pound opponents. I might just try to make the game fair, close and interesting.

Other things my young team-mates have discovered (especially if they're a little older than ten – say 15 or 16) is that along with my lack of

ability, I am not always as patient or kind or gentle as I would like (I try to be, but we're all subject to the flesh and I am no exception). There is an assumption (not entirely unwarranted) children make that having an adult on their side means things will always turn out best for them in sports – that may or may not be the case.

Now if I can push this forward with a bit more intensity – there is a time when the adult (especially a parent) will bring all they have to the table.

In the case of an intruder or a predator threatening their child, the adult will not hold back. He or she will exercise everything in his/her power to protect the little ones and defeat and disarm those who seek them harm. Not to make this too scary, but in this scenario it is not uncommon for the children to be paralyzed with fear, trusting the adult entirely for their deliverance. This may be to the child's advantage since they may only get in the way of their own deliverance.

Universal Enemies

As members of the human race we contend with some universal enemies. Boiled down they reduce to the world, the flesh and the devil. The goal of these enemies is to steal, kill and destroy (John 10:10), both in this life and the next (by which I mean our eternal souls and the second death – Revelation 20:6).

Through the centuries there has been no shortage of efforts made by man to battle these universal enemies. The obvious examples being fig leaves (Genesis 3:7), towers (Genesis 11), religious observance (Galatians 5:11, 12), righteous living (Romans 3:19-26), philosophy (1 Corinthians 1:20, 21), etc. Every last effort by man has been a dismal failure.

Fortunately God remembers that we are dust:

For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;¹² As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

¹³ As a father pities *his* children, So the Lord pities those who fear Him. ¹⁴ For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:11-14).

In Our Midst

Knowing from the beginning our sinful and dust-like ways, God, like the adult entering the child's contest, made a promise to be with us – to dwell with us. This promise to dwell among us as the one who would overcome our enemies is found throughout the entirety of Scripture – even the Old Testament. **“I will walk among you”** we read in Leviticus 26:12 **“and be your God, and you shall be My people.”**

In Exodus we read that God will meet and speak to His people at the **“door of the tabernacle.”** He promises to **“dwell among the children of Israel and be their God.”** (Exodus 29:42-46)

Similar promises and accounts of God's presence among His people are found throughout the Old Testament. It is not without good cause that we understand many Old Testament passages to speak of preincarnate (before the birth of Jesus) appearances of Jesus – as with Abraham (Genesis 18:16-33), Jacob (Genesis 32:24-32), Joshua (Joshua 5:13-15), Gideon (Judges 6:11-13), Manoah and his wife (Judges 13:3), Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 3:25).

Someone Might Ask

Two questions might be asked: 1) if God is already dwelling with His people via the law and the tabernacle, why would He need to come in the form of a man? Or 2) if Jesus did in fact appear in the Old Testament, why would He need to appear again in Bethlehem? Could He not have made the necessary sacrifice when He appeared to Jacob or Abraham?

To the first question, the ceremonies associated with the tabernacle served to foreshadow Christ to whom the eyes of the faithful are to always look:

For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, *and* not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. ² For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. ³ But in those *sacrifices there is* a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For *it is not*

possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins (Hebrews 10:1-4).

It is important for us to realize that of all the blood spilled in the Old Covenant sacrifices – not one drop of it actually removed sin any more than taking communion this morning will accomplish the remission of sins apart from a true saving faith in the one to whom those element point. The author of Hebrews goes on to explain,

And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. ¹⁴ For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified (Hebrews 10:11-14).

It might be said that even God’s promise of His presence in the Old Covenant temple system had an anticipatory nature to it. The fulfillment of that promise being the day that Jesus was born.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1).

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

The final phrase of John 1:1 may be worth a look at in the Greek since it is a text people like to putty up. It reads: *theos en hos logos* or, literally, **“God was the word”**

To the second question, the preincarnate appearances of Jesus do not satisfy the need for the Savior, as our Mediator, to be fully immersed in humanity. Jesus grew in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:52), He had limited understanding (Mark 13:32), hunger (Matthew 4:2), thirst (John 19:28) sorrow (Mt 26:37) was baptized in identifying with His brethren, was tempted (Matthew 4) and perfected through suffering as the captain of our

salvation (Hebrews 2:10). This portion of the Apostles' Creed speaks to the critical nature of this issue – conceived and born.

Conceived and Born

“Conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary” addresses at least two major issues quite central to the Christian faith.

One is that the birth of Jesus was the result of no normal conception. We are informed in the first of this morning's passages that that which is conceived in Mary is of the Holy Spirit. In a parallel passage we read:

And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35).

The miraculous nature of this event is highlighted in the words “and the power of the Highest will overshadow you” signifying, what amounts to be, the inability of man to have a look. The physiology of this event is simply not for human evaluation any more than chemists can make sense of water fermenting into wine in a single moment.

But I would like to make a few sub-points:

First, what we're looking at in the in this event is the eternal Son of God becoming flesh. We are regenerated and made anew by the same person by whom we were created (John 1:3 Colossians. 1:16) He who is the son of God by nature makes us sons of god by grace.

Second, when God the Son became flesh, divinity did not change into humanity like in Percy Jackson when a Greek god goes to Brooklyn and starts throwing lightning bolts at people. It was not the confounding of two natures (humanity and deity) into some superhuman Jew in first century Palestine. What we observe in Christ are two distinct natures found in one Person.

Third, it is a conception. Jesus, as a man, was not created ex-nihilo (out of nothing). He was a human being like all others but without sin. It can truly be said of Christ that was He the Son of man and a kinsman redeemer.

Finally, up against what came to be known as Docetism (that Jesus and His sufferings were more an idea or an inspirational imaginary event) this was not another preincarnate appearance. He became flesh. It is in this event that the full force of God's promise is realized. He has entered our game to assure us the victory through His own sacrifice.

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage (Hebrews 2:14, 15).

Finally, why a virgin birth? This subject alone could be the topic of many sermons. A couple of brief comments should give us an idea of the significance of a virgin birth. Similar to other miraculous births (Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Samuel) it was a sign that the power to save was something God alone provides. To this day the human race is still in major conflicts because Sarah and Abraham thought God needed help providing the promised seed.

But unlike the other miraculous births where the women involved were barren, Mary was a virgin; so one can also make the argument that the sin of Adam did not extend to Jesus.

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned (Romans 5:12).

Sometimes you'll hear that the idea of a virgin birth was not unique to Jesus – that prior to Christ there were religious allusions to a virgin birth. Since false religions almost always borrow from true that should not be a surprise. Hundreds of years prior to the birth of Jesus we read:

How long will you gad about, O you backsliding daughter? For the Lord has created a new thing in the earth – A woman shall encompass a man (Jeremiah 31:22).

Also in Isaiah:

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).

The conception of Jesus in the Virgin Mary was a sign that God was fulfilling His promise to be with His people and deliver them from that which they could not deliver themselves. Two chapters later Isaiah would go on to explain in greater detail that which this child would accomplish.

For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of *His* government and peace *There will be* no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this (Isaiah 9:6, 7).

Questions for Study

1. What are man's universal enemies and what do they seek (page 3)?
2. Can you think of ways people have tried to battle these universal enemies. How have they done (page 3)?
3. What does God remember (page 3)?
4. How was God in the midst of His people in the Old Covenant? What are the limitations of how God dwelt with His people in the Old Covenant (pages 4, 5)?
5. What is the full effect of God's promise of dwelling with His people (page 5)?
6. At the conception of Christ was divinity changed into humanity? Was Jesus created ex-nihilo? Was Jesus merely an idea (page 6)?
7. Why was a virgin birth necessary (page 7)?
8. What was the virgin birth a sign of (page 8)?