

## **A purpose driven birth. Matthew 1:18-25**

### **A Man with a Mission.**

*“And you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save His people from their sins.”*

The story that unfolds in the gospel of Matthew, this book which we are going to be looking at over the next few months, is there in v. 21, in the reason given for naming Mary’s unborn baby Jesus.

Here you have the purpose of His coming, life and ministry

“He will save His people from their sins.”

### **But Mission Irrelevant?**

And that is a little unfortunate.

For while believers might think his successful completion of that mission is the cause of His continuing greatness and importance, and of their hope and joy

For many in our world this talk of saving from sin brands Jesus as irrelevant and His story as at best a curiosity. Saving from sin doesn’t bring that thrill of excitement.

Sin is part of the religious language of the past that like an unloved pot plant has been left, neglected, to wilt and wither in a dark corner, forgotten and unlamented.

It’s not that we don’t think we have problems – personally and as a society

It’s just that sin, if it rates at all, is low down on the list.

I mean if it was said that Jesus will save His people from cancer, or Covid – that would get our attention.

Or if He was going to save us from poverty, or ignorance, or rescue people from the effects of broken families

Or just make people and nations get on

That would excite our interest

Or if the angel had said you will call his name Felix because He will make His people happy – we are all into happiness

But sin?

Sin inevitably has the stamp of God on it – it is missing the mark of God’s standards for living, not honouring or acknowledging the true God, disbelieving God’s word and disobeying His commands

And so for many of us sin is not something at the forefront of our minds,

In our public life, our public conversation, as a society we have a sin problem – and that is that we don’t think of sin as a problem

And so a story about being rescued, being saved, from something we don’t see as a danger – doesn’t grab us

Which is strange because when we are sinned against, that gets our attention.

When we are wronged, when people miss the mark, the standard, of how we expect to be treated, we feel it.

When we are robbed or defrauded – as well as the financial loss there is that sense of personal affront, being treated as if you just don't matter

When we are the object of someone's unjust anger

OR the victim of their assault

The victim of their careless driving

Or Slandered

Or Deceived

We feel it is not right

And we want it dealt with

Often we want it punished and the wrong put right

We want the money paid back, the truth to be told

We want the behaviour to stop

We want that apology, the wrong acknowledged;

We think sin against us is a big issue

That the government, or the law, or right thinking people – and sometimes even God – should put an end to it.

Why is it that we can be so disturbed, even outraged, when we are wronged, sinned against, when people fail to treat us as we expect, as we think we deserve –

and yet don't see, don't feel, sin generally, sin as disobeying God, wronging God, as a problem,

see it as something that could imperil and impoverish our lives for, unlike us, an outraged God has the power to enforce his standards, punish our falling short of them and put a stop to our contemptuous treatment of Himself?

Why the difference?

Because we are a society where God is not big in our thinking, and people are

There is Constant secular propaganda that casts doubt on his existence - Not really there

Expresses Doubt about His necessity - world gets on ok without him, He's not needed, not really involved

Sows Doubts and confusion about His character as it makes all views of God equal and denies truth to any of them

The settled conviction is that we don't need to consider God when thinking about what will make our society prosper

In fact a right thinking society excludes God and what pleases or displeases Him from consideration

In public life we not just can but should live as if HE doesn't exist, is uninvolved, and can't be known

And as public life dominates our news, common life and conversation, shapes our shared convictions, God grows small in our consciousness, awareness and conviction of His importance is eroded.

God has been shrunk in our imaginations and sin becomes a non-issue

At the same time people have grown to fill His place

If God's will doesn't need to be considered in governing our public life – whose will should? People's.

If God doesn't determine our prospering, who does? Just luck? No – we do

We run things –

We make the rules, we make the decisions, and we enforce them,

our authority matters

Life is all up to us and all about us, people, humans – rulers of the world

While it doesn't matter what people think about God and how He is treated, except to the extent it effects the way other people are treated, it matters a lot how we are treated

So because people are big and God is small being saved from sin, from the consequences of our wronging God – is not at the forefront of our thinking or concern

And there are two other consequences of people being big that makes being saved from our sins a message easy to disregard

Where people are big, we have a strong incentive to believe people are basically good.

We almost have to believe that because

You wouldn't want to be entrusting yourself, your safety and security, to someone who is essentially flawed, who can't be trusted to do what's right

And if you are going to be boss of your own life, you want to believe you can be entrusted to use your authority well.

But talk of sin, sin against God who is the source of life, the creator of life, suggests that – that at the heart of human life there is something that disqualifies us from ruling well by ourselves the universe He has made, that left to ourselves we will make choices that don't promote life, but death

And who wants to think that?

And We are a society fixated on the present and not encouraged to think about eternity.

Just as we have lost sight of God by inflating our own importance we have also lost sight of our own uniqueness

Creatures with eternity in our hearts, with a longing for a beauty, joy and love that last, finite spirits made for infinite spirit

We have become Like some cyclists – do you know that cyclists sometime run into parked cars, especially when they are going uphill!

It is because they are Just focused on the wheel in front, or that little bit of road in front

And many of us are, through busyness, necessity, or conviction, are just focused on this life, living as if this life is all there is

And thinking about God and eternity – is off our radars

A story where the central purpose of the central character is to save people from sin is up against it in our society

Sin, that desire in our hearts to be our own god, to rule our own lives our own way, to decide what will be right for us, has deceived us into thinking sin – our rejection of the rule of true God, the Creator, is not a problem

I am drawing your attention to our society's sin problem – that we don't think we have a sin problem

Not only so you can think about why your friends and neighbours are not excited about the gospel message

But also because living in this society believers can start to think sin is not the big problem

We might give it lip service, use the language of sin more readily

But we Lose the excitement of being saved from sin, our hearts cease to thrill at the name of Jesus, the name that speaks of His purpose in saving us from our sins

When that happens we can start to make secondary things primary, and so distort, and diminish Jesus.

The real problem, we say, is ignorance – so Jesus must serve education, a teacher, not a Saviour

The real problem is sickness – so Jesus must serve our getting and staying healthy

The real problem is economic injustice – so Jesus must serve our redistributive goals

The real problem is social isolation – Jesus must serve our connection, our development of loving community

The Saviour and Lord becomes the servant of our own goals – making a better life or society for ourselves, and only to be valued to the extent he serves those goals

Where we stop thinking Jesus saving us from our sin is the big deal, where we stop feeling the wonder of that, we lose the gospel focus – start making the fruit of believing the gospel more important than the gospel itself. So we preach reformation of morals, or an improved family life – not salvation from sin

And we lose gospel urgency – for while there is no other saviour from sin, people can find other ways to improve their family life

Where Jesus came to save His people from their sins,

Sin has deceived us into thinking sin is not the problem

And that is a tragedy

### **Mission Essential.**

For sin is the problem, something we need saving from, and only Jesus can do that

Sin is real, for God is real, and we were made to know and love God, who is the source and sustainer of our lives.

And sin is a Problem all humanity has had from the time of Adam, and Adam's story illustrates the nature of our sin and its consequences

God gave Adam a command – Don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and warned him that on the day he ate of it he would surely die

And then along came the tempter

Remember what he said to Eve with Adam listening on.

'You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'

And Adam and Eve acted on the lie of the tempter, ate, and brought death upon all their descendants

What was the character of that first sin?

Adam chose to think God did not tell the truth, that His word would not be fulfilled.

That God was holding back something good from him by wanting him to live by faith in and obedience to His word

He chose to believe that he, a creature of dust given life by God, could be like God, could exercise the privilege of God to decide right and wrong in creation

That he could live independent of God

That is the character of all our sin

Choosing not to believe God's word, to believe that we can decide for ourselves what is right and wrong without God, and that life is found in doing what seems right to us and disobeying God

But it is a disaster

There is no life for creatures independent of God. Our life is sustained by the word we reject

We are always trying to be what we cannot be – for we don't have the wisdom and power to be god, to know the right and achieve the right

Made to love God and live by heeding His word, we now resent God, see His rule as a threat to ours, His life that sustains our life as a threat to our life

And we compound our misery by misdirecting our love away from God to love created things in His place

We crush created things with the weight of our expectation

We idolise them, whether that is a human love, or a career, or a family, or wealth, or sporting fame, to be disappointed and betrayed by them,

We look to them for the meaning, the purpose, the love – we were made to only find in loving the God who made us, and are left empty, thirsty

We all sin against God by disbelieving, disobeying, and loving created things in His place

And our sin has far reaching consequences.

Sin is not just an isolated religious idea, but our lived experience.

It is not just something that might give us problems at some final judgement, but is at work to create misery now.

Our determination to be god, to be the ruler and judge of our own lives

Our determination to put created things in the place of the Creator God

Works through every aspect of our lives

Whether it is violence to establish our rule over others – violence in our families, violence in our workplaces, violence between societies

Or confusion in relationships as our lives are disordered by idolising created things

It is sin, our love of self and created things in place of God, that lies behind those broken families, the economic injustice, the social alienation, behind the ignorance and addictions

And it is sin that leaves us condemned, like Adam, to death

The sentence of God stands - you will surely die

And we die, and our lives are characterised by fleetingness, loss, and grief

We die eternally

Created, we cannot uncreate ourselves, will ourselves into non-existence

Existence Continues – restless, dissatisfied, empty

Weeping and gnashing of teeth, a darkness that envelopes

For God upholds the judgments of His word

Sin is our problem, our deadly problem, at the root of the grief and pain, the frustration and emptiness, the grief and death that dogs our race, each of our lives

To be saved from sin – wonderful, if it could be

But why should you agree to a truth so alien to our culture?

I know this is not a question for all.

Some of you need no convincing. You know sin's reality and feel or have felt its seriousness

Perhaps you have found that where you were seeking to do good, you have done harm

Where you were claiming to love, you were in reality damaging the one you loved

You have been forced to admit to yourself that you have done wrong

And you have given up excusing it, justifying it

When you reflected on it you saw at its heart – your pride, your determination to do what you thought right in defiance of, in disobedience to, what you knew God, or even what your parents or tradition, had said was right

You need no convincing of the seriousness of sin

Some of you are sure sin isn't a problem, or at least not a problem for you

You live up to your standards

Always try to do what's right by others – and that's the most important thing

Not perfect, but you are convinced you are basically good

You think talking about sin is the problem

It is so negative, guilt producing

So distracting from real issues

For you Talk of sin embodies Everything wrong with religion

done well to keep listening

And then some of you are considering

perhaps attracted to Jesus, and the gospel story, but puzzled by this focus on sin

You know you do wrong, but who doesn't

You might know you don't give God much thought

And you are wondering, is sin that serious

Let me give you four reasons to believe that sin is that serious

Firstly the Gospel itself

It is A stubborn witness – both to the reality of human rebellion, and to God's reality

Gospel shows us good people hating god, the climax of Adam's sin in their killing  
Jesus

But it also shows us the Resurrection – God's reality and power witnessed

A resurrection that confirms the Truthfulness of Jesus, who came to deal with sin

The Jesus of the gospel thought sin was a problem so serious that He would have to die to deal with it

#### Secondly The witness of human nature

Why are we the way we are? Capable of such good, possessed of such powers, and so capable of misusing them to harm others and our environment

Why do utopias, attempts to create an ideal society, always fail, and the attempt to create them always accompanied by grief and injustice?

Why do we need so many laws, if not to restrain human evil?

When we look at the way people behave, the bible's description of human nature as created and then fallen, makes sense. It is not our environment but our hearts, our wills, that are the problem. We carry the seeds of our own misery in ourselves.

Thirdly, God's judgments remind us that sin is serious, whether that is his giving us up to the folly of our idolatry and rebellious choices, or his actions in drought and famine, fire and pestilence, to limit the effects of our proud folly.

And finally there is the witness of our Consciences, and that voice in your own heart and mind speaking of eternity

Sense that there is something wrong – fundamentally.

That sense that there is a standard, and you are accountable to someone or thing outside yourself – near universal, unless you work hard to silence it

Sense that there is something more – that the fleeting joy you have, that leaves you longing for more, points to an eternal joy

That the love you experience makes you long for a lasting love

And you cannot convince yourself that the materialists are right, and this is all there is, and that longing is an illusion

The bible's description of our creation, made to live loving the living, eternal God, and our sin, now dying as we love created things in place of God, makes sense of our experience, of our lived reality

Just as it's witness to the works of God, in judgment and salvation, remind us that He is big, not small

#### **Mission Impossible?**

We have a sin problem – serious, pervasive, deadly



a problem we cannot solve ourselves – for it involves the God we have wronged

We can't undo what we have done

We can't overturn God's word – and it would be outrageous if we could, for that word is the source of all life and sustains the order of the universe on which our lives depend

We can't make up for what we have done. There is nothing we can offer God to recompense for the wrong we have done, for we already owe God all our obedience, and He needs nothing from us

We can't persuade God to believe our lies about ourselves, to acknowledge our rule, our power to decide truth for ourselves

We can't save ourselves from sin and so

And every member of our race will die, for her or his sin

And then Receive what many say they want – to be separated from God, and realise then that God was the source of all the good they found in life, that it was all from Him, His gift

Be left with the darkness of their own lies for ever, a tormenting darkness, know hell

But the gospel story starts by saying that what no one member of our race can do, Jesus will do, and that he is uniquely equipped to do for this task.

It says this in the record of His unique birth

### **A Unique Man v. 20, 22-23**

The gospel is very open about Jesus' irregular birth, that Mary was pregnant before she married Joseph

It is a problem for Joseph

<sup>18</sup> *Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.*

But as he is grappling with what to do he is assured that while the birth is irregular, it is not immoral

<sup>20</sup> *But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*

<sup>23</sup> *"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel"*

*(which means, God with us)*

Jesus' birth to Mary, the betrothed of Joseph who is a son of David will make him legally son of David

But it will do more

It will make him the one in whom the prophecy of Isaiah 7 is fulfilled

That prophecy, given to faithless King Ahaz more than seven hundred years before, of a child who would be both a sign of God's sure salvation and judgment, was not fulfilled at the time in Isaiah's children or Hezekiah

Isaiah points to its fulfilment in the one he speaks of in chapter 9, the son who would reign on David's throne forever, who would be called wonderful counsellor, almighty God, the everlasting father, the prince of peace.

These prophecies, fulfilled in Jesus' birth, speak of Jesus' reality, - God with us - a reality that equips Him to be Saviour

By His birth Jesus is a true human, truly a man from conception, but a unique man

For He is truly God's Son, His life from God alone – conceived by the Holy Spirit, the eternal Word become flesh

Truly God, and truly man

Now when we come to the Virgin birth we may have all sorts of questions

Questions about process, or questions of being, or questions about genetics

The gospel gives answers to none of those

And Joseph asks for none of them.

He knew, like Mary, that God's Spirit is the source of all life

And that, as the LORD says to Mary, nothing is impossible for Israel's God.

Creation is no limit on God doing whatever He wills

It is made by and for the Word, the eternal Son, not to constrain but to express His glory.

The gospel does something better than to seek to explain to us what we as finite beings are incapable of understanding – for we cannot grasp the reality of God's infinite spiritual being let alone its union with our humanity

Instead of process, it gives us a demonstration of the truth that Jesus is God with us,

a demonstration of the power, purpose and character of the living God in Jesus, in His words and works, His death and rising, His giving of the Spirit, His saving

For being unique, he can do what no one else can do but which must be done if we are to be saved

A true human He can die the death God's judgement on sin demands, but not for His own sin, not a death he deserves – for He has no sin. –

He can die that death for others, the death of every person

*Hebrews 2:<sup>9</sup> But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

He can, as Hebrews says, taste, experience, death for everyone.

*Hebrews 2: <sup>14</sup> Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, <sup>15</sup> and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*

By taking flesh and blood He can, Heb. 2:14, destroy the devil who had the power of death, and offer a sacrifice for sin of infinite worth

A worth that comes from the infinite worth of His person as the sinless Son of God

And Jesus knew He had come to taste death for everyone

He said He had come to give His life as a ransom for many

*Matt. 20: <sup>28</sup> even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Knew He was dying to do that

On the night before He died He spoke of His blood being poured out for the forgiveness of sins

*Matt. 26: <sup>28</sup> for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*

Jesus, born of a virgin, can alone die for our sin in our place

More, Jesus alone can bring us to love God truly, as we are caught up in His relation to the Father when we repent and believe the gospel, as we are given the Spirit of the Son as the Spirit of our new life

a new life no longer ensnared, enslaved to the lies of rebellion against God, but freed to love and serve our living Creator

Jesus, and He alone, can do what He is sent to do and we need done— save His people, those who will believe the gospel, from their sin

His birth is great good news

But we see even at the beginning of the gospel that to believe this good news will cost us in a world that loves its sin

### **A Costly Mission**

We see that In Joseph

These first verses in Matthew are all about Joseph, his experience and his acceptance of Jesus

And for him it was personally Costly

When he hears that Mary is pregnant, he assumes what we would all assume – she has been with another fellow.

And that was serious. There was no acceptance of illegitimacy.

In Joseph's world the betrothal, the engagement, was as legally binding as marriage, and it was public. The engagement could only be terminated by divorce or death, in which case the engaged girl would be reckoned a widow.

And in rabbinic law you had to divorce adulterers.

Joseph knew a public divorce and an illegitimate child would have been great shame to Mary and her family, and would prevent any chance of subsequent marriage.

It would have been financially beneficial to Joseph, for he would have been able to retain the dowry and have the bride price returned.

But a righteous man he decided he would not inflict the maximum pain and shame he could on Mary, not get legal revenge. He would divorce secretly

Then the angel appeared, and after the angel's revelation he resolves to keep Mary as his wife, and to accept her child as his own, his own legal heir.

That obedience would mean a home for Mary and Jesus, but for Joseph it meant the sacrifice of his reputation in his community for a pregnancy is public.

He would have to suffer the embarrassment of being thought to be someone who at best had abused his privileges as the betrothed and lacked self control, or at worst was someone who was too weak to honour custom and right in the face of his intended's unfaithfulness.

That is a demanding obedience of a righteous person in a small community, a community with long memories.

And after that there were other costs

The cost of being newly married and exercising self control until after Jesus' birth, so that a virgin birth would leave no doubt about the origin of Jesus' life.

The cost of frequent movement – to Egypt and then Judaea and then back to Nazareth, as he shared in the world's hostility to his son.

But this child God said was God acting to save His people from their sins

A child who would be his saviour

To know the salvation of the living God was worth paying a cost for

<sup>24</sup> *When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife,*

<sup>25</sup> *but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

There is a Cost to us of being committed, of believing Jesus saves us from our sins

First it is the cost to our pride of accepting the verdict on ourselves that we are sinners

That we deserve death for what we have done

That we are helpless to save ourselves

The cost of being humbled, and learning to depend on the living God every day for mercy and grace

Then there is the cost of being out of step with the society around us, of testifying against their self deception that we are big and God is small just by our very existence, by our commitment

to honour the living God by believing and obeying His Saviour Jesus

The cost of being thought sometimes anti human because of that commitment

And then there is the cost of being aware of a great danger all around us seek to ignore, of not being able to walk by unconcerned as people are perishing

The cost of the grief of seeing those you love in danger of eternal death

The cost of persevering prayer

The effort of loving and speaking, of intentionally seeking

But sin is real

And it is our problem, our chief problem

The source of our misery, grief and death

And Jesus is really God with us

HE alone can save. There is no one else like Him

God and man, the eternal word become flesh

The son, who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven to save

And who does save all who will repent and believe the gospel, save by the death only He can die

If you know that, you will know that cost is worth paying

Believer – in a world that does not think sin is an issue, keep honouring Jesus and speaking of Jesus as nothing less than He is – God with us, the Saviour of sinners

Don't lose focus, don't stop thinking sin, your sin, your neighbours sin, is the issue

Don't know that Jesus saves from sin - read on

See Jesus demonstrate the reality of His being, the successful accomplishment of His mission, in the gospel

And when you know that – you will know He is worth everything

Reputation, comfort, wealth, life

Worth everything to trust and follow

Don't wait – read on now your self, or read on with us – get in touch