

Luke 2:41-52 ⁴¹ Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. ⁴³ And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, ⁴⁴ but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, ⁴⁵ and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ And when his parents¹ saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." ⁴⁹ And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. ⁵¹ And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man.

“Whose Child Is This?”

Would you like to know a little family secret? Well, Benson is not my real surname. This has nothing to do with my history as a Covert Operations Specialist in the CIA nor am I part of a witness protection plan nor have I changed my name for some kinky reason. Let me give you a hint. My great-grandfather, Clarence Alexander Benson, Sandy as he was called, was born sometime between the late 1870's to early 1890's and, as I understand it, he was born in the state of Missouri and not long after came to live in Virginia. My great-great-grandmother, Sandy's mother (whose name I've never known other than her last name was Benson) was born and raised in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in Augusta County or maybe Rockbridge County. They lived on a farm on the border. In her late teens or early twenty's she made a trip to Missouri and came back a year or so later with a child. Have you figured it out yet? My great-grandfather was born out of wedlock. He took his mother's name and as far as I know she never took a husband.

Whose child was he? Well, no one knows. As far as I know my great-great-grandmother never told. The guesses are that he could have been one of the young men on either of the two neighbouring farms. If we had pictures we could probably tell. There were also soldiers passing through heading west to war with Native Americans. No one knows if he was a love child or a child of rape. The only thing we can know for sure was that he grew up with the stigma of being a bastard, an illegitimate child, and his mother would have been seen as a woman of easy virtue. I take it that she continued to live with her parents and Sandy's grandfather would have been the primary man in his life. Nevertheless, my great-grandfather grew up as a second class child. That stigma took its toll on him and set in place certain emotional and behavioural patterns in the family that affect his descendents even today. Whose child was he?

Well, that was 120 years ago. It hasn't been too long ago that families sent daughters who were pregnant out of wedlock away somewhere for the child to be born and then to return with some sort of story to explain it. The lies to cover everything up, not to mention the rumours, abounded. Even though the truth was not publicly known, the stigma of being illegitimate did and does persist. I can't imagine what it would have been like for Jesus, Mary, and Joseph back in the first century in that small Jewish town of Nazareth. Archaeology shows us that at the time of Jesus there were only about fifty homes in the hamlet; that would have meant 300-400 people. I've lived in a town of 900 and gossip alone could have served as the police force. The whole town would have known that Jesus was conceived out of wedlock and would have thought that he and Mary just couldn't wait for the wedding. The more malicious folk would have spread rumours otherwise. Joseph knew for sure Jesus wasn't his and Mary's story that God was his father would have sounded blasphemous to a Jew.

Moving twelve years ahead to our passage in Luke, Jesus, the precocious child, snuck away from his parents and a convoy of pilgrims to go and sit in the temple and after a three day frantic search, that's exactly where Mary and Joseph found him. He was having a rather impressive conversation with the teachers there who were probably grilling him to see if he was ready for Bar Mitzvah. Mary tries to scold Jesus and Jesus in turn makes the brief exchange center on the issue of who his father is. Mary said, "Son, why have you treated us so? Look, your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." And Jesus said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" Those listening had two choices as to what he meant: either Jesus was claiming that a temple priest was his real father or he was committing blasphemy by saying God is his father. Fortunately, Luke says they didn't understand what he meant. Of course, we know what he meant and we know it because Luke tells us at the beginning of his gospel that an angel appeared to Mary to tell her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her and she would bear a child who would be called holy – Son of God. Jesus was literally the Son of God, God the Son become human as Jesus of Nazareth born of the Virgin Mary and for our sake suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He was raised and then ascended to the right hand of his Father and from there he will come as judge to right the world with New Creation on the Day of Resurrection.

Today many people look into the manger and ask the question whose child is this? Many cannot fathom that he was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. They say virgin birth is contrary to reason and the natural way of things. I would say that it is contrary to science, but now in the day of Quantum Physics most scientists would admit that in our universe of infinite possibilities virgin birth is possible. They would say the probability is very low, but it is

indeed possible. If you go to the religious book section at Chapters and start reading at random you will find that those who do speak of the virgin birth say it was a belief made up by the early church to make Jesus appear equal to other gods of the Greek and Roman pantheons, the Greek god Apollo the son of Zeus in particular; and, in turn, they then say that he was simply the son of Joseph or worse, a child resulting from rape – anything to debunk that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

That denial has consequences. Denying the virgin birth of Jesus is denying salvation by grace through faith. Denial of the virgin birth destroys the pattern of grace in that God of God's own will and initiative has invaded his fallen Creation to unite himself to it and thereby save it. Because of the Father's staggering love for us, he sent the Son to become human by means of a new Creation work of the Holy Spirit. God the Son became fallen sinful flesh and managed to live a life of obedience to the Father that was consistent with who he was as a person whose personhood was a union of God the Son and fallen man. He shared our human nature of having a human will that flees from God, rejects God, denies God, and even blames and hates God. But he managed by prayer and by living according to the Spirit as we are now able to do to survive that horrific inner turmoil that far surpasses the turmoil that we suffer having been born anew. We desire and try to live according to the will of God yet our own wills still are powerfully self-deceptive even to the extent of thinking our own will is God's will. If you want to know how important your prayer life is and worship, Christian fellowship, and Bible Study are, just think about how insidiously deceptive your own will is. We don't need Satan to deceive us. We do a good enough job of it.

God brought the Incarnation of the Son about in such a way as that it was free of human autonomy, free of the human will, and made it dependent on his own grace aided by a response of faithfulness. The angel did not come to Mary to ask her permission. He came to proclaim to her what God was going to cause to come about in and through her. He did not tell her just believe it and it will happen. He told her she was blessed, and most favoured. That word of love sparked the faith necessary for the faithfulness needed to be the mother of the Son of God. The angel did not come to Joseph to ask his permission or to tell him to go sleep with Mary to conceive a child that God could invade. The angel told Joseph how to respond faithfully to what God had done in Mary. That Word sparked the faith of Joseph that brought forth proper faithfulness from Joseph.

Finally, the virgin birth of Jesus ultimately demonstrates that God does not work in supernatural ways. That's a word that I wish we could strike from our vocabularies. He works within nature. By his grace God gets right into the nitty gritty of our lives to bring forth salvation for us, to make us into the image of his Son. God doesn't stand aloof on a boat while we are in the water drowning trying to fish us out with a life preserver. Drowning people are usually too frantic with panic to be able to realize there is even a life preserver there. He jumps into the water, pulls us to shore while we pummel and fight against him, and he dies saving us. That's the pattern of grace. So, what does this mean for us? Well, pray and enjoy and grow through worship, Christian fellowship, and Bible Study. You will find that he is in the water with you, and you will pummel and fight against him less. Yet, he has still died to save you. Amen.