

A God Who Keeps His Promises

Matthew 1:18–25

We are finishing up a mini-series on the Matthew account of the birth of Christ. Today, we come to verses 22–23: “. . . all this was done *that it might be fulfilled* which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us.’” Note particularly Matthew’s phrase: “that it might be fulfilled.” Matthew is demonstrating that Jesus’ miraculous conception and birth is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, proving that he is indeed the long-promised Messiah.

In other words, Jesus’ miraculous conception was in no way random (if such could even be possible). Rather, from eternity it was the specific intention of a sovereign God who works *all* things after the counsel of his own will.¹ Certainly this reveals the wisdom of God in sovereignly placing Matthew’s gospel *first* in the New Testament canon. Not only does the New Testament begin with the words, “The book of the *genesis* of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham” (literal translation), it also connects particular events in the life of Christ with particular Old Testament prophecies, and shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of ancient prophecies revealed by God himself.

As I began to study this Scripture I discovered that Matthew is the *only one* of the four evangelists who uses the phrase “that it might be fulfilled.” He uses it nine times in all. Moreover, the words “that it might be fulfilled” occur only in Matthew. When I discovered this, it surprised me, but as I got to thinking about it I realized that it makes perfect sense that Matthew would be the one to use this phrase. Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience. The Jews were well aware that God had promised to send his Messiah (Messiah means *anointed One*—that is, the One specifically sent out and marked as God’s chosen Prophet, Priest and King).

Believing in *Christ* (the Greek word meaning *anointed One*) is not just a matter of taste or preference. In many areas of life God allows us to make choices on the basis of preference. I prefer shirts with collars. Others prefer tee shirts. Now God’s Word instructs us to dress modestly, but it doesn’t tell us we have to use a particular style of dress. His Word gives us much liberty in this matter. So it is with regard to food, drink, books, musical styles, etc.—with the caveat that *all things* must be done to the glory of God. But with regard to believing in Christ, God’s Word is very specific. There is only *one* Savior, and his name is Jesus. He is the only Mediator between God and men, the only way to heaven. Those who are not born again don’t like that, but God’s Word makes it quite clear that that’s the way it is. Jesus is *the* way, the truth and the life; no one can come to the Father but by

¹ Eph. 1:11

him. To the worldling, that sounds very narrow-minded, but this is God's world, and *he* makes the rules.

For centuries, the Jews had been expecting the Messiah, but when he came, they rejected him. Jesus wasn't the kind of Messiah that they wanted. They wanted a Messiah who would deliver them from Roman domination, who would make Israel the leader among the nations. They wanted a Messiah who would tell them how good they are and would not require them to make wholesale changes in their lives. They did not want to acknowledge their own sinfulness. They did not want a Messiah who would save from sin. "He came unto his own, and his own *received him not*" (John 1:11). How tragic! To get to see God's Messiah in the flesh with their very own eyes, yet reject him and perish in their sins!

Matthew, the author of this Gospel, was a tax collector. He was a Jew who worked for the Romans. To his fellow-Jews he was a turncoat. Then he met Christ, and his life was transformed. Jesus said to him, "Follow me," and he arose and followed him.² After he began to follow Christ, he wanted to see his fellow countrymen come to Christ. When he was inspired by God to write his gospel, his primary audience was the Jews. He wanted them to read about Jesus and follow him too. How could he influence them? Taught by the Holy Spirit, he wanted to prove to the Jews that Jesus fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures, with which the Jews were familiar, and thus was the true Messiah. Matthew's gospel was written to influence the Jews, so he takes pains to demonstrate that Jesus fulfilled prophecy.

First, the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph, who had contracted with Mary to become her husband. "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. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.'"

Notice that Matthew records that the angel specifically said, "Joseph, *son of David*." This reference to David would make an impression on the Jews, for they knew how great Israel had been when David was king. They were familiar with David's writings—at least half the Psalms—and considered them Holy Scripture. They would be very sympathetic to the idea of realizing a renewed Israelite monarchy under the sovereign rule of a Davidic king. But they did not want a Savior whose purpose was to wash away their sins! They did not want to acknowledge their need of a Savior who would save his people from their sins. And rather than consider the evidence for the virgin birth in the Hebrew Scriptures, they flat-out rejected it. When, in John 8, Jesus said, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham," the Jews were upset and retorted:

² Matt. 9:9

“We were not born of sexual immorality!” Make no mistake: they were implying that Jesus was a bastard—born out of wedlock.³

Do you believe in the supernatural conception and virgin birth of Christ? If Jesus had a biological father, then he, being no different than any of us, would have inherited the guilt of Adam’s sin, and he would have been disqualified from being our Savior. If that were the case, then there would be no hope for any of us. We would be lost—*dead* in trespasses and sins. Without the virgin birth, there would be no gospel—no good news. Do you know that you are a sinner with no hope of eternal life apart from Christ? If so, then there is hope for you, for Jesus is the Savior of sinners. Ask him to save you. He will not turn you down if you come in faith.

But notice specifically that the angel’s announcement of the virgin birth was included in Matthew’s narrative so “*that it might be fulfilled* which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel.’” Here is Matthew’s first use of the phrase “*that it might be fulfilled*”—a phrase that is found nowhere else in the Bible. Let’s briefly consider the other eight uses (the last four will have to wait until the next sermon).

The second occurrence of “*that it might be fulfilled*” is in Matthew 2:12ff. Matthew has just told the story of the wise men from the east—likely Persia—who followed the star and came to visit the young Child. King Herod heard about their visit and asked the chief priests and scribes where the Christ was to be born. They answered, “In Bethlehem of Judea,” citing the prophecy of Micah 5:2. King Herod sent the wise men on their way, instructing them: “Go and search . . . for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.” The star led the wise men to Jesus—at this time likely living up in Galilee with his family. The wise men gave their gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Afterward, they returned home another way, without notifying King Herod. An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.” The family immediately left for Egypt and stayed there until the death of Herod, “*that it might be fulfilled* which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, ‘Out of Egypt I called My Son’” (Matt. 2:15). There is the second occurrence of the phrase “*that it might be fulfilled*.”

The reference is to Hosea 11:1. There we read: “When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and *called my son out of Egypt*.” “My son” is a synecdoche, a figure of speech meaning *a part for the whole*, that is, the people of Israel. It is a reference

³ John 8:41

to the nation of Israel, from whom the Christ would come. Calvin writes, “Beyond all question, the passage ought not to be restricted to the person of Christ: and yet it is not tortured by Matthew, but skillfully applied to the matter in hand. . . . The nation was rescued from Egypt as from a deep whirlpool of death.” In Christ, the LORD’s “wonderful purpose was more distinctly seen, when light came out of darkness, and life out of hell.” Under divine inspiration Matthew teaches that, just as the whole people of Israel were brought out of Egypt, so, in a more wonderful way, God’s Messiah, the consummate Israelite, was likewise brought out of Egypt to be the Savior of the world. God’s people had been warned not to return to Egypt—that is, to adopt Egypt’s gods and depend on them for protection. But in the providence of God, Joseph would take the holy family to Egypt so that the Christ Child would come out of Egypt to be the Savior of the world. Again in Calvin’s words, “it serves rather to confirm our faith, that, as on a former occasion, so now again, the Church of God comes out of Egypt. There is this difference, however, between the two cases. The whole nation was formerly shut up in the prison of Egypt; while, in the second redemption, it was Christ, the head of the Church alone, who was concealed there, but who carried the salvation and life of all, shut up in his own person.” Hallelujah! The lesson for us is that God, by his skillful providence, can use even the darkest and most difficult experiences, in the life of his people, for his glory. No matter what trials we might be undergoing, they were appointed by our wise King for his own glory. It is this knowledge that gives meaning and purpose to life, particularly as we go through trials. They are never random and meaningless, but always have a divine purpose. Sometimes we are frustrated and think, *I am following the Lord; why is this happening to me?* But in Christ we can smile, knowing that at every moment, every day, our wise heavenly Father is working out all the events of our life for his own glory, according to his eternal purpose. God has not promised his people only health, wealth and prosperity—that’s the devil’s lie! Rather, the Christian in faith can say with Job, “Though he *slay* me, yet will I trust in him.”⁴

The third use of the phrase “that it might be fulfilled” is in Matthew 2:23. Joseph, bringing the holy family back from Egypt, had been warned by God in a dream not to return to Judea. So “he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, *that it might be fulfilled* which was spoken by the prophets, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene (Ναζωραῖος).’” Here, the reference is to Judges 13:5. There, speaking of Samson, the judge of Israel renowned for his great strength—still a fetus—the Angel of the LORD appears to her and says, “for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.” Matthew uses a play on words. “Nazarene” in Hebrew is נָזָרֶן, the

⁴ Job 13:15

word used in modern Hebrew for *Christian*. The word for Nazarite in Judges is נָזִיר, which sounds similar. Calvin explains: “Matthew does not derive Nazarene from Nazareth, as if this were its strict and proper etymology, but only makes an allusion. The word נָזִיר, or Nazarite, signifies *holy and devoted to God*.” Calvin explains that the words “the child shall be a Nazirite to God” “no doubt, were spoken with regard to Samson. But Samson is called the ‘Redeemer’ or ‘Deliverer’ of the people, only because he was a figure of Christ.”

God wants us, his people, to be Nazarites, as it were—holy and devoted. His Word says, “Be ye holy; for I am holy.”⁵ What this means is that we are to be conformed to the very character of God—perfect in every way. None of us measures up to this ideal, which is why the only way that we can be saved is to be credited with the perfect righteousness of Christ. But holiness is something we must strive after.

What about you? Do you earnestly desire to be holy, or are you more comfortable being conformed to this world? Are you a different person in the world than in church? Are you worried what your friends might think? Do they think that Christians are a little weird? Be honest with yourself: do you sincerely want to be like Christ or not? At its root, holiness means loving God with all your heart and loving your neighbor as Christ does. Romans 13:14 says, “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (ESV). The word for “put on” refers to the putting on of a garment—something that is seen by the world. We should put on the garment of a Christian: holiness.

The fourth use of the phrase “that it might be fulfilled” is in Matthew 4:12ff., where we read that after John had been cast into prison, Jesus departed into Galilee and lived for awhile in Capernaum, “in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali.” This was done, Matthew tells us, *that it might be fulfilled* which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned” (Isa. 9:1–2).

The phrase “Galilee of the Gentiles” is significant. Jesus “came unto his own”: the Jews (John 1:11), but his endgame was that his salvation might come to all the world—Gentile as well as Jew. Salvation in the Bible is never given on the basis of genetics but on the basis of faith. The Bible does not teach that any one people-group is closer to God than any other. In Romans 3 Paul argues that “both Jews and Greeks . . . are *all* under sin,” that “there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.”

⁵ 1 Pet. 1:16

Do you have a heart for the lost, as Jesus did? Do you desire to see your family, friends and neighbors come to Christ? Do you tell them about him? Oh, may God use each of us to carry his message of salvation into our own sphere of influence!

The fifth time we find the phrase “that it might be fulfilled” is in Matthew 8:14ff. There, we read that after Jesus had healed Peter’s mother-in-law of a fever, “when evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick, *that it might be fulfilled* which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: ‘He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses’” (Isa. 53:4). Amazing! He healed “all” that were sick. There were no hard cases that he failed to heal.

Calvin explains: “the Evangelist states not merely the *benefit* conferred by Christ on those sick persons, but the *purpose* for which he healed their diseases. . . . We must look at the design: for it would be idle to confine our view to a transitory advantage, as if the Son of God were a physician of bodies. What then? He gave sight to the blind, in order to show that he is “the light of the world,” (John 8:12.) He restored life to the dead, to prove that he is “the resurrection and the life,” (John 11:25.)”

Because of sin we live in a world where there is infirmity, sickness, disease and death. We are vulnerable to infection. We experience pain. The Lord Jesus cared for bodies as well as souls, fulfilling the words of Psalm 103, “Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases.” Clearly, forgiveness for our iniquities is more necessary than healing for our diseases. Sin, not disease, will take us to hell. All of us stand in need of God’s forgiveness, offered solely by Christ. When we experience acute pain, may it drive us to Christ! Pain and suffering are always for a reason. Amen!

Time does not permit us at present to look at the last four uses of the phrase “that it might be fulfilled.” We will consider them, Lord willing, in a another sermon.

Today we have examined the first five instances of events in the life of Christ that are specifically declared to be the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture. Together, they show us the great theme that *Christ’s coming fulfills Old Testament prophecy*. This is a powerful witness to skeptics and unbelievers. No mere man could have pulled this off. Rather, it was the LORD God himself who breathed the inspired words penned by the Old Testament writers. The fulfillment depended not on Jesus alone, but on the free and voluntary actions of his disciples and others—including people who had just met him, and did not know these prophecies—in real time. Here are allusions not just to big, dramatic prophecies but to the more incidental ones. Matthew draws attention to the way Jesus’ whole ministry was a fulfillment of centuries-old prophecies.

The lesson for us is that God is a God who keeps his promises: the virgin birth; the flight into Egypt; that Jesus would be called a Nazarene; his ministry in Zebulun and Naphtali, beyond the Jordan; that he would heal both bodies and souls—all these, and more, show that God's Word is true, that he keeps his promises. For what are prophecies but *promises*. Jesus didn't suddenly appear on the scene as a glib, smooth-talking self-promoter that made up all kinds of stories concerning himself and tried to get people's attention. No! The promises that he fulfilled are his *credentials*. Here is the man that God the Father sent into the world to save his people from their sins. Nobody else can save us. He alone!

God keeps his promises, and he wants us, his children, to keep *our* promises as well. He wants us to be men, women and children of our word. He wants our yes to be yes and our no, no. He wants us to keep our promises made to all kinds of persons—to wives and husbands; family members; close friends; neighbors; fellow church members; to old and young; people with authority and people without authority, whether uttered publicly or privately, whether uttered with an oath or simple declarative statements. He wants us to be trustworthy, like himself. If we fail, he wants us to confess it before God and men, make restitution and seek to take all necessary steps to restore our good name. He wants us to live lives of integrity and honesty and trustworthiness.

Our God is a God who keeps his promises. We, his people, must keep our promises too. Is this the kind of person you are? May we all be promise-keepers, to the glory of the God who saves us. Amen.