

A King is Coming #3: A Crooked Lineage

Matthew 1:1-21

Introduction

God is faithful to His promises through history. Matthew begins his account of the birth of Christ (and the whole of his gospel) with a reminder of those promises. Jesus Christ was the Son of David, the Son of Abraham (v. 1). And he was named Jesus because He would save His people from their sins (v. 21). He was the promised King whose reign would be forever (2 Sam. 7:12-16), and He was the promised Seed of Abraham who would bring blessing on all the nations (Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:8). Yet, “God draws straight with crooked lines” (Wilson). Matthew draws attention to this in his presentation of Jesus’ genealogy. There are all kinds of ways we could see this as you read the stories of all of Jesus’ ancestors, but Matthew draws particular attention to four stories by mentioning not just the fathers but also the mothers involved. In each story, we see God working through mess and sin and scandal to pave the way for the King whose rule knows no end and who draws all peoples to Himself (cf. Matt. 28:18-20).

Tamar (Genesis 38)

The first woman mentioned in the genealogy is Tamar (v. 3), who bore to Judah the twins Zerah and Perez. Tamar was not Judah’s wife, but rather the wife of one, and later a second, of his sons. The Lord kills both of those sons, and, instead of providing an heir for Tamar, Judah keeps his third son away from her. Tamar dresses like a harlot and tricks Judah into giving her a child (or rather, twins). So, the royal line of Judah (Gen. 49:10) would stem from illegitimate sons. “But the astonishing goodness of God strove with the sin of both [Judah and Tamar] to accomplish His purposes (Calvin). At the birth of the twins, the midwife identifies the firstborn, Zerah, with a scarlet thread around his outstretched hand. But, he draws it back in, and his brother, Perez, pushes out past him. So Zerah was in a way supplanted by Perez, and this is related to the next story.

Rahab (Joshua 2, 6)

The second woman mentioned is Rahab (v. 5), a Canaanite prostitute from Jericho who hides two Israelite spies from the king of Jericho. She tells the two spies that she knows the Lord has given them the land, and she confesses that Yahweh is the God of heaven and earth (cf. James 2:25). Because of her kindness, the spies tell her to mark her house with a scarlet cord, and Rahab and her all in her house are spared and brought into the people of Israel. The cord shows both God’s mercy to her (like the blood over the doorposts at the Passover in Egypt), and also is important when we look again at some genealogies.

Matthew indicates that Rahab married Salmon, the great-great-great-grandson of Perez (1 Chron. 2, Ruth 4), the son of Tamar. Salmon’s father, Nahshon, had been the commander of the army of Judah (Num. 1:7), indicating that Perez’s line had achieved some prominence. But then, Rahab, identified with a scarlet cord, is given to Perez’s descendant. In contrast, the entire family of a descendant of Zerah, Achan, is wiped out just after the destruction of Jericho because he took the accursed things (Josh. 7). It is as if the scarlet thread of Zerah is transferred to the line of Perez. We see here a Gentile prostitute, with a sordid past, repenting and being wrapped into the covenant and the line of the Messiah, while another son of Judah is cut off because he rejected the word of God.

Ruth (the book of...)

In the time of the judges, we have the story of Ruth (v. 5). Ruth is a Moabitess who forsakes her own family and gods and instead confesses faith in Yahweh, moving back to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi. However, there is a stigma about her. The Moabites were sprung from the desperate and incestuous design of Lot's daughters after they fled from Sodom (Gen. 19). They seduced the Israelites to such immorality that the Lord sent a plague killing 24,000 (Num. 25). As such, Moabites were forbidden from entering into the congregation of Israel (Deut. 23:3). Yet, Ruth clings to Yahweh. God provides a kinsman-redeemer for her. Boaz marries her, though this too is under somewhat scandalous appearances. Ruth visits and courts Boaz's favor while he was sleeping after feasting and drinking, and the Hebrew text is full of innuendo and double entendre. When Boaz redeems Ruth, the people bless the union, praying that his house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah. Boaz, in fact, is the son of Salmon and Rahab. Here again, we see a Gentile repenting and being drawn into God's people, and we see God at work in these messy circumstances for the salvation of the world.

Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12)

Bathsheba is the fourth woman in Matthew's list, though not named. King David, the great-grandson of Boaz, was at home shirking his kingly duty of leading the army into battle when he sees a beautiful young woman bathing and has her brought to him. He commits adultery with this woman, Bathsheba. She conceives, and so to cover it up David has her husband Uriah the Hittite killed (note: Bathsheba, too, is connected to Gentiles by marriage). He then marries Bathsheba but is confronted by Nathan the prophet. David repents and is forgiven, but the consequences of his sin follow him for the rest of his reign. David had disgraced Bathsheba, killed her husband, and was responsible for the death of their child. And yet, it is through Bathsheba that God establishes the kingly Davidic line, for another of her children would later become king after David's death: Solomon (1 Kings 1). Calvin notes that David alone in Matthew's list is marked as "the king," probably because David was set up so clearly as a type of the Messiah to come. Yet, even this great king was guilty of a great sin, but a sin through which God would still work his good purposes.

Conclusion

God draws straight by means of crooked histories. As we look back at history, we see God's faithfulness to His promises. He was able and willing to accomplish His Word through stories of those like Judah & Tamar, Salmon & Rahab, Boaz & Ruth, and David & Bathsheba. These stories are part of the great story of Christmas, the story of the announcement and birth of our Savior. Is He able to bring about His purposes through you and your situation? Is He able to redeem your story? He came to turn harlots into wives and mothers, bastards into sons, adulterers into faithful spouses, liars to truth-lovers, murderers to life-givers. He came to turn His prostituting Church into a beautiful, spotless Bride. Christmas is a season of grace because of the gospel of grace, that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). He came for you, and He came for all nations.