

## **“The Mothers of Jesus”**

**Matthew 1:1-6**

**December 18, 2016**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Matthew begins his account of the birth of Jesus with a genealogy. It is tempting either to skim this list of names or even skip it entirely in order to get to “the good stuff.” A more careful look at it, however, rewards the reader with some significant insights into the nature of our salvation. For example, it is unusual for genealogies of this era to include the names of women. Matthew’s genealogy names four women explicitly and a fifth, Bathsheba, is referred to as “the wife of Uriah” instead of by name. The reference to Bathsheba in this way gives us a hint into the mind of the Spirit in including these women. Uriah was a Hittite, a Gentile people from north of Israel. The first three women named were also Gentiles. The clear message is that the salvation Jesus came to bring is intended for all nations.

In looking at the five women who appear in this genealogy, you may remember that all five of them had some kind of sexual uncleanness hanging over them. Tamar and Rahab prostituted themselves, while Bathsheba committed adultery. Though Mary and Ruth were sexually pure, Mary suffered the accusations of sexual impurity due to her pregnancy during her betrothal. Ruth was a Moabitess, a nation that arose as a result of Lot’s incestuous relationship with his daughter. According to Deuteronomy 23:3, no Moabite was allowed to participate in Israel’s worship for 10 generations. Matthew is sending the message that Jesus comes for sinners. We’re going to look more carefully at the first three women named, from whom we learn about the grace of God to Gentiles and to outsiders.

### **I. Tamar the Canaanite**

Tamar’s story appears in Genesis 38, where we read an account of Judah, Jacob’s fourth son, and his great sin. The story of Tamar shows us that not even the greatest sin can stop the grace of God. Though God would later transform Judah, he is an evil man in Genesis 38. He began to go off the rails in verse 1, where we read, **“At that time ... Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.”** Judah is leaving his father, Jacob, and his brothers, which meant that he does not believe God’s promise given to Abraham. He no longer believes, if he ever believed, that there was such a thing as a covenant people. He believes that his future lies with making alliances in the land with people like Hirah.

After leaving the covenant family, he falls into greater trouble. He gets married and has three sons, and in time it becomes clear that Judah is a failure as a parent. The oldest two sons are so evil that God judges them with death. God is a very patient God who puts up with a great deal before resorting to this. But these two are sufficiently evil that God's patience comes to an end and he puts them to death. Judah's second son, Onan, sinned by violating the practice concerning the levirate marriage. This was a marriage custom in the ancient near East which came into play when a woman's husband died before she had any sons of her own. In such a case, the brother of the now dead husband would take his brother's widow as a wife, with the result that any children born of this union would be counted as his brother's children who would then take care of their mother in her old age. After Er's death, his brother Onan agreed to perform the duties of a levirate marriage for Tamar, his sister-in-law, but did so in a way designed to prohibit conception. It's not hard to discern his reason for this. Any children resulting from his union with Tamar would be considered Er's children and would receive Er's firstborn inheritance. If Er has no children, then Onan would be the direct beneficiary. Who cares if Tamar is not cared for in her old age? God, the defender of widows, will not let this sin go unaddressed.

After God puts Onan to death, the duties of the levirate marriage would have fallen to Shelah, Judah's youngest son. But since he's not old enough yet to fulfill those duties, Judah promises him to Tamar at a later time. But what he's really thinking is, "There's no way I'm going to give my last son to this woman. She's bad luck. This is all somehow her fault." Like so many both before and after him, Judah blames the victim and pardons the guilty party. But he doesn't have the guts to tell Tamar his plans, so he lies to her and promises his son when he is old enough to be her husband. What's she going to do? She's just a woman without any power. Or so he thinks.

Tamar realizes eventually that Judah has no intention of keeping his promise to give his third son. So she devises a plan to get her rights. I find it telling that her plan is based on the assumption that Judah will be willing to hire a prostitute. She knew enough of his character to count on this happening. It was sheep-shearing season, which was something of a festival time in this culture. She is careful to negotiate the price for her services, paying special attention to securing Judah's pledge. She manages to get him to give to her two items of significance, which she agrees to return once the payment of the goat comes. The two items she takes as security are his seal and his staff, two personal items that would be easily identifiable as belonging to Judah. Judah was alarmed when he returned with the promised goat but didn't find the woman. He was trapped. He didn't want to press the issue too much, because people would find out that he had left these two very personal items with a prostitute, and he would become something of a laughingstock.

Three months later, Tamar turns up pregnant. As her father-in-law, Judah had certain rights in this case, including the right to assign her judgment. His verdict is swift and cruel, consisting of only two words in the original text—“Bring her, burn her.” It was as she was being brought out that she revealed the identity of the father. Judah was caught, and there was no escaping.

So here we have a man who abandoned the covenant family in order to make his own way among the Canaanites. He was a failure as a father, a man who could be counted on to commit fornication with a prostitute, and a man who was quick to judge someone else to the maximum of the law for a crime of which he too was guilty. Yet Tamar’s place among God’s people was dependent upon these very circumstances of Judah’s great evil. So great is the grace of God and the power of God that he can use even sin to bring about his good purposes of reaching this Canaanite woman who would seem from all human appearances to be the least likely to have a place among God’s people, not to mention being one of the five mothers of Jesus in Matthew’s genealogy.

The grace and power of God are so great that he uses even great sin to bring about his good purposes. There are two possible responses to this. Some will hear it as permission to sin. If you hear it that way, your heart is hard and you need to repent and call upon God for mercy. The other possibility is to let it bring you to fall down and worship this great God of ours, who will stop at nothing to bring his sheep to himself.

## II. Rahab from Jericho

Rahab was a prostitute and innkeeper living in Jericho when Joshua was leading Israel in their campaign to take possession of the Promised Land. Hebrews 11 highlights the faith of Rahab as the greatest thing about her. John Calvin says of her faith, “It hence follows that, those who are most exalted are of no account before God, unless they have faith; and that, on the other hand, those who are hardly allowed a place among the profane and the reprobate, are by faith introduced into the company of angels.”

Joshua sent two spies to Jericho, and it was no accident that they happened to knock on the door of Rahab’s inn. God had been preparing her for their visit by producing faith in her heart. Her faith was very basic, but real nonetheless. She had heard of the saving works of God on behalf of Israel in dividing the Red Sea, as well as the enemies they had defeated during their wilderness years. She confessed her faith to the spies when she said, **“the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath”** (Joshua 2:11). Her faith was born out of a fear of God. She believed in the reality of God’s judgment and her heart melted in fear. She could do nothing other than throw herself on the mercy of this God, and that is the essence of true faith.

Her faith produced effects in her life. The most immediate effect was to extend hospitality to the two spies, protecting them and helping them escape. She also stopped being a prostitute. Rahab secured their promise not to destroy her or her family when they conquered Jericho, and the promise was kept. She then joined herself to Israel and at some point after that met and married a Jewish young man named Salmon. The two of them had a son named Boaz, who appears in the story of Ruth.

### **III. Ruth the Moabitess**

Ruth enters the story of God's people when a Jewish couple named Elimelech and Naomi flee the Promised Land during a drought for what they think will be better prospects in Moab. But in doing so, they were disobeying God and trusting themselves instead of God. As is always the case, trusting self never turns out well. Tragedy strikes this family when all three men of the family, Elimelech and his two sons, die in Moab. Ruth was the Moabite woman who had married one of these sons, and now she is a widow. Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, repents of her sin in leaving Israel and determines to return, both to the Lord and to Israel. God has been working in Ruth's life, and she determines to return with Naomi. Despite Naomi's best efforts to persuade Ruth to return to Moab to look for a husband, Ruth refuses. The first words recorded of her are among the most often quoted verses from the book of Ruth. **"For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you"** (v. 16-17). These are strong words indicating both faith and love. We can see her faith in the statement, "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." This was an Old Testament expression of faith, using the covenant language common there. Ruth was doing something people rarely did in her day. She was changing her god from Chemosh, the Moabite god, to Jehovah, Israel's God. We can also see her faith in her statement that she would be buried in Israel. Presumably, she would outlive her older mother-in-law. But she doesn't plan to return to Moab when that happens. Her commitment is to Jehovah, his land and his people.

Whenever the true God of Israel is embraced in faith, the one trusting him becomes like him, and that can be seen in Ruth. God is a God who does *hesed* love, and now Ruth does as well. She commits herself to Naomi with no exit strategy. Naomi had earlier called out to God in a lament when she said **"the hand of the Lord has gone out against me"** (v. 13). She was still holding to the Lord in faith, but she was grieving her many losses and bringing her pain and confusion to the Lord. One of God's answers is to send Ruth to commit herself completely to Naomi. She doesn't offer easy answers or try to fix Naomi, but simply weeps with her and stands with her. Her commitment to Naomi was

a costly one. As someone has said, “There was nothing kosher about Ruth. She knew she would be about as welcome in Bethlehem as a ham sandwich at a bar mitzvah.” I like how Paul Miller summarizes the love of Ruth here. “Call it boldness, courage, or daring; Ruth goes right after life. She does not waver in her response to Naomi. In fact, she is so powerful that she leaves the ever-articulate Naomi speechless. And she’s an artist. The beauty of her love matches the beauty of her poetic response. Ruth sparkles when she loves.”

## **CONCLUSION:**

Let’s conclude by considering one truth from the last woman named in this genealogy, Mary. The pattern of her life once she heard the announcement from Gabriel is a pattern that is repeated in the lives of all these women. This pattern suggests to me an appropriate symbol for Christmas. This symbol is not as beautiful as the others, such as the Christmas tree, the Christmas wreath, the baby in the manger, or the star that guided the wise men. But what this one lacks in beauty it makes up for in theological accuracy. It’s the checkmark. It goes down, and then it goes up.

That was the experience of Mary. After Gabriel’s announcement to her that she would be privileged to bear the Son of God, she surrenders herself to God and submits to his will in this matter. After such an angelic encounter with such good news and such a positive response from Mary, you might expect everything to start heading in a good direction for Mary. But the opposite happens. She is a betrothed virgin who begins to show the signs of pregnancy, resulting in accusing “looks” for several months. A decree in far off Rome requires her to travel about 90 miles from her home town of Nazareth to Joseph’s home town of Bethlehem at the worst possible time, late in her pregnancy. She arrives to a town swelled with more people than can be accommodated and is forced to stay in the barn with animals. After the birth of her son, another angelic visitor warns them of Herod’s coming slaughter of the babies of Bethlehem in an attempt to kill her son. A long trip to Egypt ensues, after which she and her family become refugees, followed by another long trip back to Nazareth. She lives with a son she doesn’t understand, even concluding on one occasion that he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21). And then at the end she witnesses his cruel and unjust crucifixion as a criminal.

We’re now at the bottom of the checkmark, and things rapidly turn upwards beginning with the resurrection of Jesus and continuing to his ascension and current heavenly reign. And as the checkmark shows, they go up much further than where they started. This is the familiar pattern of death and resurrection that occurs throughout the Bible. It is a pattern that will occur with Mary’s son. So, like all these women, we surrender ourselves to the love of God and to the will of God, believing that his grace will find us, like it did all these women, and lift us to resurrection glory.