

FIVE WOMEN AND A BABY

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

To trace your personal family tree has become a popular past-time, in part because modern technology helps with the searches that need to be made. There's no doubt, at least from the point of view of biblical Christianity, that the most important family tree ever traced back in time is the one with which the New Testament opens.

Please don't be deceived into thinking this daunting-looking list of names is an introduction which can be skimmed over, or even worse skipped entirely, just so that we can begin with the compelling story surrounding the birth of Jesus, the Christmas story as many would call it. This family tree belonging to Joseph, as well as Mary's family tree given by Luke in his Gospel, is in fact essential reading.

Let me give you a reason for saying that – one which points up the difference between the two lists of names: the one in Matthew and the other in Luke. We've said Matthew gives Joseph's family tree and Luke gives Mary's. The next thing to notice is that although Israel's famous king, David, is common to both lists, Joseph's family tree is traced down through David's son, Solomon; while Mary's family tree is actually traced through a different son of David, a son whose name is Nathan.

If we read the two family trees casually we might never spot the difference – but the office of Jesus as Messiah hangs on it! That's because there was a time when the nation of Israel's disobedience

to God was so great that he used the Babylonian Empire to teach them, his own people, a lesson. Around that time, through Jeremiah, the prophet, he declared that one of Solomon's descendants (Jeconiah) would never have a son on the throne of Israel (Jeremiah 22:30).

'Even though [Je]coniah ... were a signet ring on My right hand, yet I would pull you off ... I will hurl you ... into another country ... there you will die. But as for that land to which they desire to return, they will not return to it ... write this man down childless, a man who will not prosper in his days; for no man of his descendants will prosper sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah' (Jeremiah 22:24-30).

This curse had been spoken before God swept his disobedient people away into captivity under the Babylonians for 70 years. Jeconiah had been one of the very last kings to reign in Jerusalem before it fell to the Babylonian invaders around 587BC. What happened to this king against whom God had spoken these strong words?

Well, he was indeed taken into captivity along with his remaining subjects. Strangely, his personal prosperity was restored, but despite that he died in Babylon. He did, however, have a son, Shealtiel. But his son Shealtiel never succeeded him to the throne. There was no opportunity for that because he too died, somewhat prematurely, and in Babylon. So the prediction is clarified: Jeconiah would be childless as far as the throne was concerned.

But still there's more to this intriguing personal history. Jeconiah had married the daughter of Neri. This woman was already a widow – already with a son, Pedaiah by her deceased husband - before re-marrying Jeconiah. Then Jeconiah (he's sometimes simply called Coniah, by the way) and his wife had a son together, Shealtiel, whom we've previously mentioned. In turn, Shealtiel married, but alas he died before fathering a son. According to the biblical custom applying then, it was the duty of his step-brother (See Deuteronomy 25), Pedaiah, to marry his step-brother's wife to raise up descendants on behalf of his step-brother, Shealtiel. This he did, and this resulted in the birth of Zerubbabel who was among those who returned from the captivity to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem.

So Jeconiah's descendants did return to Israel – those from his grandsons' generation. But the cursed bloodline ends with Shealtiel, and the blessing is restored upon Zerubbabel. 'I will take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel ... and I will make you like a signet ring' (2:23). It's easy to miss the full significance of this. This statement of blessing by God reverses the earlier curse made in the same terms. He was a legal descendant of the kingly line in the way we've described but was not a blood relative of the cursed Jeconiah. So the curse was upheld against Jeconiah, but graciously the ruling lineage returned to blessing under Zerubbabel.

Mary's bloodline was literally free of Jeconiah (Luke 3:27, note the mention of Neri, so it's the same Zerubbabel and Shealtiel featured in both these genealogies). The actual bloodline through Nathan, in combination with the (restored) legal title to the throne through Solomon, – as given by Matthew - are

brought together in Zerubbabel. This ensured, in turn, the Messiah's right to reign, clear of the curse which had once been pronounced on the kingly line in the time of Jeconiah. The unusual parentage of this man Zerubbabel is key!

Maybe I've said enough to convince you there's valuable instruction in the details of these name lists. I hope so. Because, I want to explore just a few of the names in this list. All the ones I want to talk about are included in the extract below. It's Matthew chapter one, from verse one to six:

“The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez was the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram. Ram was the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon. Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab, Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David the king. David was the father of Solomon by Bathsheba who had been the wife of Uriah.” (Matthew 1:1-6)

With this kind of introduction, there really can be no doubt that the New Testament is the sequel to the Old Testament. Really, the book of Matthew stands like a bridge connecting both Old and New Testaments. It plays a role like that of the city of Istanbul, which sits astride the two continents of Europe and Asia.

With his Jewish family trees and quotations, Matthew was clearly writing in the very first instance for a Jewish audience.

But did you notice that there were four women mentioned in that short section of the family tree list I read from? You can recognize them in that they're all preceded by the word 'by', as in 'Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar.' Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba are the four female names – the names of four mothers whom it pleased God to select for mention in this most important family tree. It's curious that out of all the mothers just those four get a mention.

And what an honour to be singled out for mention as playing a part in the human family tree of Jesus Christ! But what's truly amazing is that if we read the Old Testament background we find that each of them has a certain reputation or stigma attached to them. The family tree of Jesus Christ, as presented by Matthew, is, in this way, shown to demonstrate God's outrageous grace. If it'd been our choice of four qualifying women on which the spotlight should fall, it almost certainly wouldn't have been those four. But God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

This brings us to that other reason I wanted to give you for saying this list of names, or family tree, right at the beginning of Matthew is a must read. We aim to suggest that the inclusion of these four female names is a deliberate demonstration or illustration of the nature of the salvation Jesus was coming to provide.

The story begins with the first of the names: that of Tamar in verse three. We're going to see when we come to look up the Old Testament background, that the story of Tamar is a story of sin

and shame. But that's exactly where the story of salvation must begin. In order for us to appreciate what it means to be saved – and I mean saved from the penalty of our sins – we need to understand the depth of our own sin and shame before a holy God.

When we come down to verse six, we find two names, those of Ruth and Rahab. If we take Ruth first, it's plain to see the wonder of God's grace. For Ruth was an outsider. The Old Testament is dominated by God's dealings with Israel. But Ruth wasn't an Israelite. Not only was she not an Israelite but she was a Moabitess, a woman from the land of Moab. The people of Moab were a people whose origins were steeped in disgrace. What's more they had been actively hostile to Israel. So much so, that they were specifically mentioned as being under a curse or ban. Even down to the tenth generation none of their number was to enter in to serve among God's chosen people. And yet, here we find mention of Ruth – and of all places, in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the long-awaited Messiah. That's a testimony to the grace of God. It's purely by God's grace that we can be saved from the degradation of our sin and shame in his sight. What's more as the story of Ruth unfolds in the Bible book which bears her name, we learn the meaning of an important Bible word, 'redemption.'

There was no blemish mentioned regarding Ruth's character: the point was the stigma of her background. But it's a different story in the case of Rahab. Rahab was also a foreigner to God's people, but she's also a woman with a certain reputation. The Bible doesn't spare her blushes when it calls her 'Rahab the harlot' or prostitute. Even so, Rahab was not destroyed like the rest of her city when the Israelites began to conquer the land God had promised to give them. She testified of her faith in the true God,

not in the idols of her people, and that faith saved her. It's no different for us: salvation from sin and shame on the ground of redemption has to be received by us in personal faith.

Finally, the last name of the four is Bathsheba, notorious for her adultery with David, the king. Despite this, she did come to the throne with all the dignity and glory that went with it. All of this, we suggest, spells out God's wonderful plan in which he longs to bring us sinners to eternal glory by means of his grace when received by us in simple faith.

Now we'd miss all that if we but skimmed the opening to Matthew's Gospel. Sometimes it's worth reading the small print! In the chapters that follow, God willing, we'll aim to trace again this same pathway from shame to glory – only in more detail.

CHAPTER TWO: TAMAR

From the point of view of biblical Christianity, the most important family tree ever is the one with which the New Testament opens. There are four women mentioned in the first section of that family tree: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. These are the names of four mothers whom it pleased God to select for mention – despite the fact that each of them has a tainted reputation or stigma associated with them. The family tree of Jesus Christ, as presented by Matthew, is, in this way, shown to demonstrate God’s outrageous grace. That’s the point we want to emphasize: that the inclusion of each of these four female names is an illustration of the true nature of the salvation that Jesus was coming to provide.

Our story in this chapter concerns the first of those names: that of Tamar in verse three. We’re going to see today that the story of Tamar is a story of sin and shame. But, remember, that’s exactly where the story of salvation must begin – otherwise there’d simply be no need for it. In order for us to appreciate what it means to be saved – and I mean saved from the penalty of our sins – we need to understand the depth of our own sin and shame before a holy God. The story behind this first name, the name of Tamar, can help us do just that. But without saying any more at this stage, let’s find out about who Tamar was – and what she did - from the Book of Genesis, chapter 38:

“And it came about at that time, that Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. Judah saw there a daughter

of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her and went in to her. So she conceived and bore a son and he named him Er ... Now Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life ... Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up" ...

Now after a considerable time Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died; and when the time of mourning was ended, Judah went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. It was told to Tamar, "Behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep." So she removed her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in the gateway of Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah had grown up, and she had not been given to him as a wife. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, for she had covered her face. So he turned aside to her by the road, and said, "Here now, let me come in to you"; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" He said, therefore, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." She said, moreover, "Will you give a pledge until you send it?" He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" And she said, "Your seal and your cord, and your staff that is in your

hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him.

Then she arose and departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow's garments. When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite, to receive the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. He asked the men of her place, saying, "Where is the temple prostitute who was by the road at Enaim?" But they said, "There has been no temple prostitute here." So he returned to Judah, and said, "I did not find her; and furthermore, the men of the place said, 'There has been no temple prostitute here.'"

Then Judah said, "Let her keep them, otherwise we will become a laughingstock. After all, I sent this young goat, but you did not find her." Now it was about three months later that Judah was informed, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot, and behold, she is also with child by harlotry." Then Judah said, "Bring her out and let her be burned!" It was while she was being brought out that she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "I am with child by the man to whom these things belong." And she said, "Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?"

Judah recognized them, and said, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not have relations with her again. It came about at the time she was giving birth, that

behold, there were twins in her womb. Moreover, it took place while she was giving birth, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, "This one came out first." But it came about as he drew back his hand, that behold, his brother came out. Then she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" So he was named Perez. Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah."

Those names of Perez and Zerah, together with that of Judah, feature in Matthew's list of the human ancestors of the Christ, or at least of Joseph. And, of course, Tamar is also mentioned – that's the point at which we launched into this story.

When her family's future was placed in jeopardy, by her being left as a forgotten widow, Tamar felt she would have to take matters into her own hands. She lured her father-in-law Judah into an immoral union with what he thought was a temple prostitute. As a guarantee that he would send a goat for payment, he left her his staff and his seal (which hung suspended from a cord around his neck). When he tried to get them back, the girl was nowhere to be found. Once again the family of Jacob, the expert deceiver, found itself on the receiving end of deception!

Judah was later also seen to be a hypocrite, for when Tamar was reported to be three months pregnant, he condemned her to death as a prostitute. She then revealed - and proved by producing Judah's staff and signet - that he was the guilty partner. By her desperate and risky action Tamar seized the right to be the mother of Judah's children, though in a deceitful way.

God gave Tamar twins, but in the birth of the boys an unusual thing happened, reminding us of the births of Jacob and Esau. After one twin's hand came out the other made a breach and was actually born first, so he was rightly named Perez (meaning "breach").

Perhaps it's worth remembering that Judah and his brothers had sold their younger brother Joseph into Egypt, in an attempt to put an end to his dreams that he, the younger, would rule over his older brothers. But now in Judah's own family, God again confirms the principle that the elder would serve the younger. The line of the promised Messiah would carry on through Perez (Matthew 1:3).

But what's the lesson for us? We've seen how a desperate, woman called Tamar sunk to shameful deceit to gain her wish of a child. She got herself pregnant by her own father-in-law. Despite this, it's this son of Judah – a son he fathered by his own daughter-in-law - that's found to be in the line of descent to Jesus Christ, the Saviour. Doesn't this episode highlight precisely our need of salvation from sin and shame? Jesus was to be the Saviour who would save his people from their shameful lives of sin. Who among us has not deceived others or done things they're later ashamed of? Paul's letter to Titus reminded Christians then - and us now:

“... we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us,

not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy ... so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:3-7)

Tamar’s inclusion in the family tree of the kings of Israel, makes that same point in a very striking way that we who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ have been saved not on the basis of deeds which we’ve done in righteousness, but according to God’s mercy. The salvation God offers in Christ can make the foulest clean. Of course, we wouldn’t see ourselves as the foulest, perhaps, but then there’s the parable of a little boy in India who’d lots of nice marbles. But he was jealous of his sister’s bag of sweets. So he said to her, ‘Let’s do a deal, if you give me all your sweets, I’ll give you all my marbles.’

She thought about it and agreed to the swop. So he took her sweets, all of them of course, and went back to his room to fetch his marbles by way of exchange. But, the more he looked at them, the more reluctant he was to give them all up. So he took the best ones and put them under his pillow, and only took the remainder to give to his sister. Well, that night she slept soundly while he tossed and turned restlessly, unable to sleep – all the while thinking, I wonder if she gave me **all** the sweets. Equally, when we doubt others, could it be we’re really acknowledging our own deceitfulness? Every single one of us needs to know the Saviour in whose mouth no deceit was ever found and who bore our sins in his own body on the cross (1 Peter 2:22-24).

CHAPTER THREE: RUTH

The grace of God can be seen in the fact that he included several non-Israelites in the family line of David. As this was the line through which Christ came, this anticipated God's inclusion of Gentiles in the work of David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, four non-Israelite women are mentioned in Christ's genealogy in Matthew chapter 1 – they are Tamar (Matthew 1:3), Ruth (Matthew 1:5), Rahab (Matthew 1:5) and Uriah's wife, who was Bathsheba (Matthew 1:6).

Tamar was a Canaanite, who became the mother of Judah's children, Perez and Zerah. Ruth was a Moabitess who became the mother of Obed. Rahab was a Canaanite harlot in Jericho who became an ancestress of Boaz. And since Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon by David, had been the wife of Uriah, the Hittite, it's probable she too was a Hittite. And we want to support the suggestion that the inclusion of each of these four female names is a deliberate demonstration - an illustration - of the true nature of the salvation that Jesus was coming to provide.

Our story in this chapter concerns Ruth whose name is found in verse five. Her life story is told in the Bible book which bears her name. As a young woman she'd been tragically widowed. Ruth then emigrates from her home country of Moab to move to Bethlehem, in the land of Israel. In doing so she goes along with her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, who's now also a widow. Once there, Ruth helps out by harvesting the leftover grain in the field of a man called Boaz. This man befriends her, having heard of her faith and her kindness to Naomi, who in actual fact

is a relative of his. At Naomi's suggestion, Ruth lets Boaz know that she loves him and hopes he'd be willing to marry her. Boaz agrees to begin the legal procedures necessary to marry Ruth and to protect the family rights of her late husband, Mahlon, and her mother-in-law, Naomi. Finally, at the end of the story, the birth of Ruth and Boaz's first son, Obed, is a great consolation to Naomi. Later in the Bible we discover that Obed's grandson turns out to be none other than King David.

That, in brief, is Ruth's story. Now let's pick over some of the details. Ruth's life first changed when she first got to know a family who'd arrived from a foreign country. She married into that family and believed what they taught her about God. From then on, it seems, she was determined to do what she believed was right – even though her sister-in-law – chose differently. Her faithfulness to the God she'd only recently come to know showed itself in her commitment to Naomi.

Bethlehem is the place Ruth and her mother-in-law now find themselves after Naomi returns to her own country, and Ruth goes with her. Bethlehem is a light shining in a dark time of spiritual unfaithfulness which was all around then - even in Israel (Ruth 1:1). The people in the other towns and villages of Israel simply did as they pleased (Judges 21:25).

Standards outside of Bethlehem were very different from God's standards. But the Bible presents Bethlehem, and Boaz in particular, as an example of faithfulness (by his speech in 2:4, by keeping Leviticus 19:9,10 as shown in Ruth 2:8 in contrast to Ruth 2:22 and by keeping Deuteronomy 25:5 & Leviticus 25:25 as shown by Ruth 3:10-12 & Ruth 4:9,10). We're also given exam-

ples of Ruth & Boaz's purity (Ruth 3:14) as well as of their faith and responsibility (Ruth 2:15,16) – all of which contrasts with the background moral weakness and spiritual irresponsibility of the times.

Ruth also stood in stark relief against the dark background of her own Moabite ancestry. Moses records for us the shocking story of the origin of the nation of Moab in Genesis chapter 19 when the two daughters of Lot made their father drunk and each became pregnant by him. But Ruth had become a true believer in the God of the Hebrews, and she found her fulfilment as a mother through the righteous requirements of the Law of Moses.

Ruth again stands in contrast with Tamar in that she gained her son honourably according to the Law of Moses, whereas Tamar as we saw used disguise and seduction. However, without the births of Perez (to Tamar and Judah) and Obed (to Ruth and Boaz) the line from Judah to David would've been broken.

To understand what happens in the story of Ruth, we need to be aware that the Law of Moses required a man to marry the widow of his deceased brother (Deuteronomy 25:5-6), and to buy back property that a poor relative had sold to someone outside of the family (Leviticus 25:25). This was because the land of Israel belonged to the families of Israel and so it was important for each generation to have a son and to pass their land on to him.

Now we're in a position to understand how the willing action of Boaz in undertaking these duties placed him in contrast with his ancestor, Judah, whose failure to provide for Tamar as we heard

last week led to Tamar's own desperate measures to become a mother.

When, at the end of the book of Ruth, Naomi holds Obed, her grandson in her arms, her neighbors call it Naomi's "son" (Ruth 4:17), because in marrying Naomi's daughter-in-law, Ruth, who was of normal child-bearing age, Boaz had kept Naomi's family name alive in Israel. Ultimately, God rewards the faithfulness which both Ruth and Boaz showed to him (Ruth 4:17-21) – it's this faithfulness on their part which is what brings them together – and God rewards this faithfulness in fact with a historic place in the ancestry of the Christ – although I assume they'll not know about that yet! But all the same, it just shows it's worth sticking to our integrity!

Ruth and Boaz committed themselves to carry out their responsibilities in view of God's own faithfulness (Ruth 1:17; 3:13). In contrast to her sister-in-law, Orpah, who returned to her home and her Moabite gods; Ruth chose to follow Naomi's God and to care for Naomi (Ruth 1:14-17). And although a closer relative refused to play the role God's law demanded in these circumstances, the faithful Boaz acted responsibly in providing redemption (Ruth 3:12; 4:1-10). God does reward those who remain faithful.

Actually, Ruth had been barren for several years in Moab before her husband Mahlon died. Later, as the wife of Boaz, "the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son" (Ruth 4:13). This is one of the times we see God's superintending grace shining through.

Various forms of the Hebrew words "redeem," "redeemer," "redemption," and "kinsman-redeemer" are used 20 times in the book, making redemption one of the key words in the story of Ruth. For Boaz is surely a picture of the greater one who later came from his family - the Lord Jesus Christ. Boaz acted in grace to redeem Ruth; just as Christ acted in grace by giving himself as the redeemer to provide redemption for all who believe.

This brings us to the really good news of Christianity: that we who were spiritual slaves to sin can be made free through Jesus Christ. He is the one 'in whom we have redemption' (Ephesians 1:7), the Bible tells us. The word 'redemption' (apolutrosis) means 'liberation ... by payment of a ransom' (Thayer). The Christian believer now belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ since it was he who bought us at a price for himself (1 Corinthians 6:19-20):

“Do you not know [Paul asks the Corinthian Christians] that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body” (NIV).

All who repent and believe on Jesus Christ are set free from the guilt and penalty of their sins. This redemption, this forgiveness of sins, is 'through his blood' – for the ransom price paid for sinners was the death of Jesus, the Son of God, when he was crucified outside Jerusalem two thousand years ago. This was God's plan of salvation about which we hear in Ephesians 1:5-8:

“[God] predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will, to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.” (NIV)

And so, as we add the name of Ruth to that of Tamar, whom we considered in the last chapter, we see demonstrated that salvation from sin and shame in God's sovereign plan, is on the ground of redemption – something that's illustrated in the story of Ruth, being one of the few women whose names are mentioned in Matthew chapter 1.

CHAPTER FOUR: RAHAB

From the point of view of biblical Christianity, the most important family tree ever is the one with which the New Testament opens. There are four women mentioned in the first section of that family tree: Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba. God was pleased God to mention those four mothers only – despite the fact that each of them has a tainted reputation or some kind of stigma associated with them. Even the family tree of Jesus Christ, as found in Matthew’s Gospel, demonstrates God’s outrageous grace. And we want to support the suggestion that the inclusion of each of these four female names is a deliberate illustration of the true nature of the salvation that Jesus was coming to provide.

Our story in this chapter concerns the third of those names as I listed them before: the name of Rahab from Matthew chapter 1, verse 5. We need to look up the Bible book of Joshua to find her background way back in Old Testament history. Once again she’s not an Israelite, but lived among a people who served false, pagan gods. Although she’d never been given the Ten Commandments in the way God’s people had, she did have a sense of the true God, as we’ll see. Here’s what it says in Joshua chapter two, at the time the Israelites under Joshua are about to begin to conquer the Promised Land:

“Then Joshua the son of Nun sent two men as spies ... saying, “Go, view the land, especially Jericho.” So they went and came into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab, and lodged there. It was told the king of Jericho, saying, “Behold, men from the sons of Israel

have come here tonight to search out the land." And the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab, saying, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land." But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from.

"It came about when it was time to shut the gate at dark, that the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them." But she had brought them up to the roof and hidden them in the stalks of flax which she had laid in order on the roof. So the men pursued them on the road to the Jordan to the fords; and as soon as those who were pursuing them had gone out, they shut the gate. Now before they lay down, she came up to them on the roof, and said to the men, "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you.

"For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. "When we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth be-

neath. "Now therefore, please swear to me by the LORD, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father's household, and give me a pledge of truth, and spare my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters, with all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death."

So the men said to her, "Our life for yours if you do not tell this business of ours; and it shall come about when the LORD gives us the land that we will deal kindly and faithfully with you." (Joshua 2:1-14)

The testimony Rahab gave to the spies was remarkable. She'd greater faith than some of the Israelites had! There was no doubt in her mind they were going to sweep through the land of Canaan. According to the light of understanding she had, she believed, she trusted in the true God. And I mean she truly believed, for she was totally prepared to act on it. Think of it, here she was in a secure city, a city that was proud of its defences – those great towering walls of Jericho. But Rahab has more faith in the God of the approaching armies of Israel than in the king of Jericho and the gods of the city. The threat of the king's soldiers was very real if her actions in hiding the spies had been discovered, but her trust in the God who'd given Israel previous victories was even more real. Well, let's look at chapter six of Joshua to read the sequel. It's there we find that the Israelites:

"... utterly destroyed everything in the city [of Jericho], both man and woman, young and old, and ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword. Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the

land, "Go into the harlot's house and bring the woman and all she has out of there, as you have sworn to her." So the young men who were spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and her mother and her brothers and all she had; they also brought out all her relatives and placed them outside the camp of Israel. They burned the city with fire, and all that was in it. Only the silver and gold, and articles of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD. However, Rahab the harlot and her father's household and all she had, Joshua spared; and she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, for she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho" (Joshua 6:21-25).

Later in the Bible, in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, we read this comment about Rahab. "By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace." (Hebrews 11:31) Some have tried to soften the shock of finding this woman named among the other great heroes of faith whom we find in Hebrews chapter 11 – it's like a hall of fame for the Bible greats, with people like Abraham and Moses and Noah. They suggest that Rahab was really just an inn-keeper, not a prostitute. But there in Hebrews we have it very plainly 'Rahab the harlot'. She's not only a foreigner to God's people, she's been leading an immoral lifestyle. But this was like in Jesus' day when prostitutes and cheating tax-collectors went into the kingdom ahead of respectable people in the religious establishment who refused to repent. What Rahab

is commended for is the outstanding way in which she acted on her faith. That's always the mark of true faith.

In the 19th century there was a tightrope stunt artist known professionally as the "The Great Blondin." He was the one who invented the high wire act, and became famous for his death-defying tightrope acts. In 1859, he was the first person to walk the 1,100 feet (335 meters) across Niagara Falls. Ever the showman, he performed the walk several times, adding variety by walking the tightrope blindfolded, or with his manager on his back, or with his hands and feet manacled, or while balancing on stilts and while on a bicycle. He even once cooked and ate an omelette in the centre of the rope!

On one occasion, he asked the crowd, "How many of you believe that I, The Great Blondin, can walk across this tightrope to the other side?" Unanimously they responded, "We believe! We believe!" So he walked across the tightrope and came back again. Then he asked them, "How many of you believe that I, The Great Blondin, can not only walk back across that tightrope, but this time do it while I push a wheelbarrow?" "We believe! We believe!" Then he asked, "How many of you really believe it?" "Oh, we really believe it!" they shouted back. One man, a little more enthusiastic than the others, caught The Great Blondin's eye. Pointing to the man, he said, "If you really believe, then get in the wheelbarrow." The man quickly disappeared.

The difference between what we say we believe and what we really believe will always show up in our actions. Matthew as he opens his Gospel is giving us advance notice that the salvation which is in Jesus Christ – the salvation which is from our sin and

shame, as we saw demonstrated by Tamar – is a salvation based upon God’s redemption, as we saw illustrated in Ruth – and is a salvation which we can only receive through a definite, personal faith commitment to Jesus Christ, the Son of God who died to buy us back to God from our sins. The apostle Paul puts it all together in Romans chapter 3 like this:

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God [think of Tamar’s story], being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus [think of the story of Ruth]; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith [think of Rahab]. This was to demonstrate His righteousness ... so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:23-25).

This is the good news of the Bible. God promises to justify you – to make it just as if you’ve never sinned – if you put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who died for you and for sins on the cross. But remember, it’s not just by saying that we believe. Thinking back to Blondin, we could almost say that to cross the chasm from death to life you need to commit to ‘getting into Jesus’ wheelbarrow.’ Please do follow the excellent example of faith demonstrated by Rahab.

CHAPTER FIVE: BATHSHEBA

God's amazing grace can be seen in the inclusion of several non-Israelites in the family line of David, through which Christ came. This fact seems to anticipate God's inclusion of Gentiles in the work of David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, four non-Israelite women are mentioned in Christ's genealogy as found in Matthew chapter 1 – they are Tamar (Matthew 1:3), Ruth (Matthew 1:5), Rahab (Matthew 1:5) and Uriah's wife, who was Bathsheba (Matthew 1:6).

Tamar was a Canaanite, who became the mother of Judah's children, Perez and Zerah. Ruth was a Moabitess who became the mother of Obed. Rahab was a Canaanite harlot in Jericho who became an ancestress of Boaz. Since Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon by David, had been the wife of Uriah, the Hittite, it's quite likely she too was a Hittite. And we've been supporting the suggestion that the inclusion of each of these four female names is a deliberate illustration of the kind of salvation Jesus was coming to provide.

Our story in this chapter concerns the fourth-mentioned woman, Bathsheba, whose name is found in verse six. Her life story is told in the Bible book called The Second Book of Samuel. Of course, it's a story that features Israel's great king, king David. Someone said it takes a great man to make a great mistake. And perhaps that would apply here. It happened at the time when kings go out to battle, and yet David had not gone. He'd stayed behind in his palace - and in a mood to indulge himself, it seems. This is how the Bible tells it:

“Then it happened in the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle, that David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and they destroyed the sons of Ammon and besieged Rabbah. But David stayed at Jerusalem. Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king's house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance.

So David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said, "I am pregnant." Then David sent to Joab, saying, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." So Joab sent Uriah to David. (2 Samuel 11:1-6)

Kings often added additional wives to their collection whenever a young woman caught their eye. And Bathsheba had certainly caught his eye. Perhaps we can't help wondering if she'd intended to tempt David. Why the lack of modesty so near to the palace? But when David sent to enquire about her he was told she was already married. And that should've been the end of it. But instead David continued to pursue his desires now that they'd been aroused.

And there's no mention of Bathsheba offering any resistance. You might say, but who was she to resist the king? Well, others did it even if it cost them dearly. One small-time farmer refused to sell his family inheritance to a king who demanded it (1 Kings 21). He stood up for what was right. Bathsheba didn't.

Isn't it a curious thing that she should be so careful to purify herself afterwards, according to the requirements of the Law of Moses, when she and David had just broken the Law in a way that demanded that they both should be stoned to death? Later, when she sent to David to tell him she was pregnant, it's likely this was really an appeal to David to do something to prevent it becoming obvious to everyone else that they were worthy of death. David responds by making a plan to save their lives. He recalls Bathsheba's husband from the front-line. If he pays a visit home, it'll be assumed that he's the father of the child. But David hadn't bargained on the integrity of his soldier, Uriah.

“When Uriah came to him, David asked concerning the welfare of Joab and the people and the state of the war. Then David said to Uriah, “Go down to your house, and wash your feet.” And Uriah went out of the king's house, and a present from the king was sent out after him. But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. Now when they told David, saying, “Uriah did not go down to his house,” David said to Uriah, “Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?”

Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in temporary shelters, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? By your life and the life of your soul, I will not do this thing." Then David said to Uriah, "Stay here today also, and tomorrow I will let you go." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. Now David called him, and he ate and drank before him, and he made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his bed with his lord's servants, but he did not go down to his house.

Now in the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. He had written in the letter, saying, "Place Uriah in the front line of the fiercest battle and withdraw from him, so that he may be struck down and die" (2 Samuel 11:7-15).

This must surely be David's darkest hour. He goes through the formality of asking Uriah about the war, but it's all about telling him to go and enjoy the comfort of his home. Then, later, when Bathsheba had the baby it'd be assumed to be Uriah's baby. But Uriah doesn't do it, he lodges at the door of the palace instead. You've got to wonder if Uriah suspects. Were there rumours flying around? After all servants had been David's messengers to fetch Bathsheba.

In any case, David's plan is frustrated by Uriah's refusal to go home to his wife, and so he questions Uriah about it. Uriah's answer might as well have been calculated to have the maximum

impact on David's conscience. How could he enjoy the comforts of home life while the ark of the LORD was in a temporary shelter? Even when David made him drunk, he didn't return to his house. Finally, David writes Uriah's death warrant and has him carry it to Joab, the army general. This plan finally works, and Uriah was indeed killed. The way was then open for David to take Bathsheba to be his wife – with all the dignity and glory that would come with being married to the king.

This is the utterly unworthy way Bathsheba is raised to the throne (1 Kings 2:19). Just as we, unworthy as we are, have been raised to share eternal glory with Christ. First Peter 5:10 tells us that the 'God of all grace ... [has] called [us] to His eternal glory in Christ.' And Paul, writing to Timothy, talks about believers on Christ (in 2 Timothy 2:10): ... obtain[ing] the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory. There's no doubt that by God's wonderful grace we've been raised from the dust to obtain eternal glory with Christ, our Saviour – something we absolutely don't deserve.

And so the story of Bathsheba – which was prompted by the inclusion of her name as the fourth woman listed in the royal line down to Christ – completes our survey of God's wonderful salvation. Four women included in a family tree allow us to trace how we, too, have been saved from sin and shame, on the ground of God's redemption through the cross of Christ, which we avail ourselves of by faith – in order that, as we've seen, we be raised to glory and joined to the kings of kings on his throne.

Romans chapter 8 traces it all out from eternity to eternity in God's sovereign plan: how we who believe are foreknown, pre-

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destined, called, justified and glorified. “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? (Romans 8:31-32) What can we do but bow our heads and praise God for his amazing grace?!

CHAPTER SIX: THE CHILD AND MOTHER

In this little study we've checked out four of the women who are mentioned early on in the genealogy of Jesus Christ which is given at the opening of Matthew's Gospel. And we've suggested that our attention is meant to be drawn to them as serving as a deliberate illustration of the nature of the salvation that Jesus was coming to provide. Our story today concerns the fifth and last mentioned woman and her son. Of course, it's Mary, the mother of our Lord. Remember, this is how Matthew begins his gospel: "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham ..."

And this is how he brings it to the grand finale ... "Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah" (Matthew 1:16) We should allow Matthew to clarify this unique event in the first chapter of his gospel:

"... the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit ... Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us."

Luke, in the first chapter of his gospel, gives us more detail from Mary's point of view. He tells us that

"... the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ... "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.

"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God ... "For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her."

How fitting was Mary's response! When she asked 'How?' it was not by way of doubting God's message brought to her by the angel Gabriel, it was only a reverent and totally understandable request for more detail about how this would take place in the circumstances she was in. This is in contrast to the husband of her relative, Elizabeth, who disbelieved the advance announcement

of John the Baptist' birth. Mary's faith is so commendable, for she accepts that nothing is impossible with God, even though the event in question is the profoundest mystery of the Christian faith!

She says 'may it be done to me according to your word.' What humility, meekness and submissiveness to the will of God are found in that answer! It's a worthy example for us to follow. Mary in all these ways deserves our respect. But Mary herself, teaches us to keep things in perspective. For she continues in words which many have come to know as part of the Magnificat: "And Mary said: "My soul exalts the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47). That makes it clear that Mary saw herself as both needing and knowing God as her Saviour. Mary's own sins would be forgiven by her faith in the Child she bore. She would one day stand by his cross when he, and he alone, died for his creatures' sins (John 19:25). And beyond that, Mary would be found among the faithful followers of her son who came together under God to become the first Church of God, at Jerusalem (Acts 1:14).

But we're running ahead of ourselves – I want us to go back to the record of events surrounding Christ's birth, this time to Matthew chapter 2 "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him" (Matthew 2:1-2). Perhaps, it's worth interrupting the reading once again to say that's the first question recorded in the New Testament. The full answer in the New Testament will take us to Bethlehem in Judea, Nazareth in Galilee, to Jerusalem, the

cross and the tomb – no! He is not there, he is risen - and so the answer finally takes us to the right hand of the throne of the Majesty on high, and to the Living One (Revelation 1:18), once born to die, but now alive again forever and ever, a Prince and a Saviour to all who believe in him for the forgiveness of their sins. Yes, the question of the Magi is an all-important question for everyone, those who are wise still seek him - but back now to their quest all those years ago, as recorded in the second chapter of Matthew's gospel:

“After hearing the king [that's Herod], they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was ... After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh ...

Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord *appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." ...

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, "Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead." So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel" (Matthew 2).

In the space of those last 10 verses taken from Matthew chapter 2, we've no less than five references to 'the Child and His mother.' That's very important. Often in the religious world we encounter what's referred to as 'the mother and Child.' But that's not what we read about here. It's always the Child and His mother. In all things, the Bible teaches us, Christ must have the pre-eminence, in other words he must come first. It's not a trivial thing to turn the order of these words around. It can lead to very serious error.

God gave Mary the mother of our Lord a very singular honour that she should be chosen from among women to give birth to Jesus Christ, the Saviour. Truly, she is the most blessed among women. Down through all the generations of God-fearing women – ever since God gave the promise that the future deliverer would be 'the seed of the woman' (Genesis 3:15) – there must've been women who wondered and longed for it to be them – that they should be the mother of the promised one. This God-given honour was Mary's. Everything in the Bible presents us with the picture of a delightful and devout woman. She, herself, said:

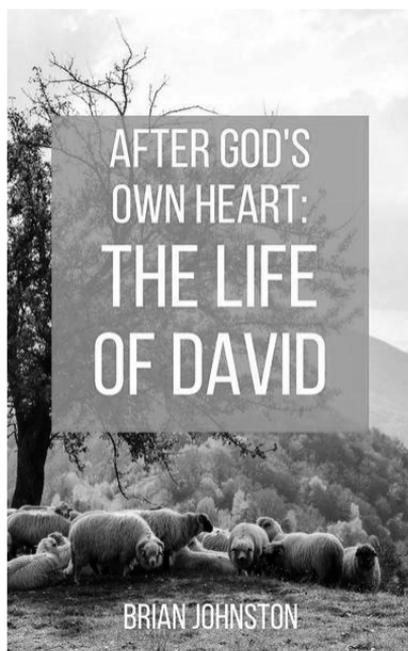
"For He has had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and holy is His name" (Luke 1:48-49).

Mary spoke with fitting humility and recognized the great thing God had done for her. Great things indeed! The eternal Word had become flesh (John 1:14). God had come among us as Immanuel: God with us. Mary, it seems, took every opportunity to treasure in her heart the things concerning Jesus her firstborn. Some memories would be bitter-sweet, as she would come to know the piercing hurt which the godly Simeon had predicted (Luke 2:35) as she later stood by her son's cross. Before that she would bear the slur of many, perhaps even some of her relatives, who looked upon the arrival of Mary's first child with suspicion (John 8:41; Mark 6:4). And there was also the grief of a divided home. For the Bible makes it very plain that Mary subsequently had other children conceived naturally with Joseph as their father. For example we read: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:3)

These, the half-brothers especially, didn't believe on Jesus at first (John 7:3-5). But when the reality of Jesus' resurrection sank home, his brothers did finally believe in him and were found, together with their mother, among the most devoted followers of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 1:14; Galatians 1:19) – their Lord and ours too, if we also believe in him. How fittingly, then Matthew repeatedly writes of 'the Child and His mother!' May

we always keep that biblical perspective, for 'there is ... one mediator ... the man, Christ Jesus' (1 Timothy 2:5).

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