

Matthew 1:17

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[0 : 0 0] us. Lord, we confess that we come before you tonight with hearts that are full of distractions and cares and concerns. God, we come to you at the end of this week, at the beginning of this week, Lord, with a hunger in our hearts to hear from you and to be fed by you. Lord, so we pray that you would come through your word, you would speak to us, Lord, that we would see you again as our hearts desire, as a truly glorious one who can fill us with a fullness like none other that we've known. So, God, we come to you tonight asking that you would do this by your spirit.

Reveal Jesus to us, our Lord. Amen. So just by glancing down at Matthew chapter one, you'll see that he opens with this genealogy. And what we saw over the last couple of weeks, last week, and we'll see again tonight, is that this genealogy isn't just any old family tree. It's not like this is the Nick Lauer sort of family tree that we've got opening up the New Testament. No, this is the royal lineage of God's promised king. And like a great tapestry, Matthew's genealogy is weaving together a number of beautiful Old Testament strands. The threads that run throughout the Hebrew Bible, the covenants and the promises, the hopes and the dreams, Matthew's gathering them all up and showing how they all come together in Jesus. You know, if you travel to great palaces or great castles in Europe, you'll see that all the great rooms in these palaces and castles are lined with tapestries on the walls, right? If you've been there, you've seen some of these. You know, and of course, to the uncultured tourist, you walk in and it looks like they've just hung up a bunch of rugs on the walls, right?

What in the world? But when you pause and when you look, you see that these rugs are actually magnificent, carefully crafted works of art. I think sometimes we're tempted to skip over the beginning of Matthew's gospel. It kind of just looks like an old dusty rug hanging in the entryway of the New Testament. But if we do that, you see, we're missing out on a great work of art, on a deeply edifying opening to the New Testament. So we've been considering this tapestry. We've been looking at the strands to consider what each has to tell us about Jesus. Last week, you'll remember that we looked at Jesus as the son of David, as Matthew says right in the beginning in verse 1. We looked at Jesus as the son of David, as the long-awaited fulfillment of God's promise to be our king. And this week, we want to consider another strand of Matthew's opening from the same text, from this genealogy. And this strand is actually a bit more personal. It's a bit more gritty. It's a bit more in your face. And it's found specifically in verses 3 through 6. I won't read the genealogy again tonight, but we're going to look and just hone in on specific elements of this passage. And in verses 3 through 6, as Matthew is listing the male descendants leading down to David and on into the kings of Israel, he includes four women. Look closely with me at verse 3. Matthew writes, Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Now skip to verse 5. Salmon, the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.

Boaz, the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed, the father of Jesse, and Jesse, the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, who had been Uriah's wife. Last week, if you were here, Matt mentioned that when we're reading biblical genealogies, it helps to look at the extra details, at the editorial comments as a clue to what the biblical author is trying to get across.

And here, Matthew deliberately puts four women into a genealogy full of men. Clearly, he wants to tell us something, right, with the inclusion of these women. He wants to draw our eyes to a detail that otherwise we would have missed. These women all bring out something that, according to Matthew, they all bring out something that, in order to understand Jesus, you've got to understand this.

[4 : 32] Well, what is the point of these women? What's the pattern or the connection between these women that we simply must see? Well, first, in order to get there, we've got to remember their stories.

So, remember with me the story of Tamar in Genesis 38. You don't have to turn there. Maybe you want to look at it later this week. You remember there that Judah, one of Jacob's 12 sons, marries a Canaanite woman. And he has three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. Sweet names, right?

And Judah gets a wife for his eldest son, and that wife is named Tamar. She's probably a Canaanite too. Well, that marriage doesn't last too long because Er, the Bible tells us, is a wicked guy, and the Lord puts him to death. Now, here's where things start to get interesting with the story of Tamar. You see, it was the cultural custom of the time that if a widow was left childless, one of the brothers of the dead husband would have to step up, marry her, and help her produce an heir for the deceased family member. This was a practice that we now sometimes refer to as levirate marriage from the Latin word *levir*, meaning brother-in-law. So, the duty falls to Onan, Judah's second son. It's his job to step up, marry Tamar, and have a child. Except Onan doesn't follow through with it, and God strikes him dead too. So, Judah, fearing for his third and last son, tells Tamar to go back to her father to live with him until his third son's old enough to marry her. But Judah really doesn't have any intention of following through with his words, so time passes, and Judah never makes good on his promise to provide his third son, Tamar. And finally, one day, she hears that Judah is traveling to shear some sheep in Timnah, to do some business in Timnah. So, she comes up with this ingenious plan. Tamar takes off her mourning clothes, takes off her widow's clothes, dresses up like a prostitute, puts a veil over her face, hides her identity, and meets Judah along the way. And Judah, not knowing it's Tamar, makes her a proposition. He says, I'll send you a goat if you let me sleep with you. And as a promise that he's good for the payment, he leaves her his seal and staff as a pledge. Okay, long story short, Judah unknowingly sleeps with Tamar. Tamar gets pregnant. She doesn't stick around to wait for the young goat, but she hangs on to Judah's seal and staff. Three months later, word gets back to Judah that his daughter-in-law Tamar is pregnant. People are saying that Tamar is guilty of prostitution, a very ironic phrase, given what we know from the story. And Judah, being the caring and compassionate guy that he is, says, bring her out and have her burned to death. So, as they're bringing her out, she produces Judah's staff and seal and says, I'm pregnant by the man who owns these. Busted.

She proves that her pregnancy is actually legitimate. And Judah, immediately recognizing his things, realizes what has happened and admits, she's more righteous than I. Tamar eventually gives birth to twins, Perez and Zerah, and it's through Perez that God's great promise of a king will be fulfilled. So, what are we to make of Tamar? Our initial reaction is to be a bit scandalized by this story, I think. After all, she dresses up like a prostitute and tricks her father-in-law to sleep with her. That's not exactly what you'll find in most manuals of discipleship in the Christian life, right? Step one, dress up like a prostitute. Step two, convince your father-in-law to sleep with you.

Step three, get pregnant. You know, it's not, you're not going to find it. It's not exactly what we expect. But as unconventional and as scandalous as her actions may seem, they were actually actions of great courage and great loyalty. After all, think about it, Tamar could have just rejected Judah and his family. She could have got on with her life, married a good Canaanite guy, and forgotten the whole mess. But instead, she stays loyal to Judah's family, even though Judah isn't loyal to her. She produces an heir and preserves the family, even though the family was hell-bent on destroying itself and forsaking God.

[9 : 21] You see, in the midst of scandal and brokenness, God uses this powerless Canaanite woman, an outsider, a nobody, to move his saving plan forward. Out of the mess, God brings hope, and he uses, of all people, Tamar.

But what's the thread that Matthew wants us to see about Jesus, right? That's what we're ultimately after. Well, the next woman that Matthew mentions is Rahab. And with Rahab, we start to see a pattern taking shape. Rahab's story is found in Joshua chapter 2. The people of Israel, having been liberated from slavery in Egypt and having wandered through the wilderness for many years, are finally about to enter the promised land under Joshua's leadership. But their first obstacle, as they're about to do so, is the city of Jericho. So two spies go in to scope out the city, and they find refuge in none other than the house of a prostitute named Rahab. Rahab harbors the spies, and when the authorities come looking for them because they've caught word that Israel's on the move, about to invade the land, she risks her life by hiding them in her house and lying to the authorities that they're not there.

You see, Rahab tells the Israelite spies that she's heard all that the Lord has done for them, and she's convinced that the Lord has given them the land. So she devises a plan for them to escape from the city safely, and the spies agree to spare Rahab and all her family when they come back with the army. And that's exactly what happens. God allows the Israelites to defeat Jericho, but Rahab, along with all her family, is spared, and they're welcomed to live among the Israelites. Do you see the connections? Like Tamar, Rahab isn't an Israelite.

Ethnically and culturally, she's an outsider. She's a Canaanite. And like Tamar, their stories are a bit of a scandal. Tamar dresses up like a prostitute. Rahab actually is a prostitute. But both show incredible faith. Rahab risks her neck to save the spies and commits her whole family to the Lord's mercy.

Again, here we see God using a powerless Canaanite woman, an outsider, a nobody, to move his saving plan forward. And not just by saving the spies. Remember, Matthew tells us that Rahab actually becomes part of the Davidic lineage. According to Matthew, she marries Salmon, a member of the tribe of Judah, and it's through Salmon's family that Boaz, Obed, Jesse, and finally King David will come.

[12 : 08] So this former prostitute turned political conspirator becomes a piece of God's plan, not just to get the Israelites past Jericho, but ultimately to save the whole world.

The third woman in Matthew's list is Ruth. And with Ruth, the pattern connecting these women starts to crystallize. The story of Ruth takes place during the Judges. We actually preached the whole book of Ruth this past summer. So I'll be really brief. Ruth, like Tamar and Rahab, is not an Israelite.

She's from Moab. But she marries into an Israelite family. You see a man named Elimelech, along with his wife Naomi and their two sons, they move to the land of Moab because there's a famine in Judah.

So they move to Moab to escape from the famine. And while they're in Moab, Elimelech dies, and Naomi's left with her two sons. They stay in Moab. The two sons marry Moabite women. And then after 10 years, tragedy strikes, and both of the sons die. While one of those Moabite women that one of those sons married was a woman named Ruth. So here's Ruth. Her husband has just died. Her brother-in-law has just died. She's a widow. And on top of that, she's got an aging, widowed mother-in-law that she now feels responsible to take care of. You see, at this point in Ruth's story, the sensible thing for her to do is to go home. To go back to her family. To marry a Moabite man. To try to put the pieces of her life back together in the safety and the comfort of her natural surroundings. But instead, for the sake of her mother-in-law, she decides to leave her home and her people in Moab and return with Naomi to Judah. And in one of the most moving expressions of steadfast loyalty probably in the entire Hebrew Bible, Ruth tells Naomi, where you go, I will go. And where you stay, I will stay.

Your people will be my people and your God, my God. So she goes to Judah with Naomi. She becomes a total outsider, a foreigner, nothing but a poor widow. And since she's got this elderly relative to take care of, she starts doing the only thing really that she can do, working in the fields. But the Lord grants her favor by landing her in the fields of none other than a man named Boaz. And Boaz, it turns out, is actually one of Naomi's relatives. In fact, Boaz is one of what the Bible calls a kinsman redeemer, one of Naomi's kinsman redeemers. That is, Boaz is a close relative with the family duty, not just to purchase Naomi's land, but also to ensure that Naomi's whole family will continue by producing an heir. He was bound by familial duty to ensure the safety and the restoration of his family. And that's where Ruth ends up, providentially by God's grace. After a season of working the fields, Naomi comes up with this risky and courageous plan. Naomi advises Ruth to meet Boaz at night on the threshing floor after the day's work to see if he'll act on their behalf as their redeemer. Now, this is a bold move. We don't quite get this, you know, reading the story 3,000 years later, but this whole plan is a bit scandalous.

[15 : 46] You see, threshing floors had a reputation for being places of sexual promiscuity in the ancient world. You know, they were places where you kind of went for a tryst if you were looking for one. And here would be a young woman approaching a man in the middle of the night. Scandalous.

But Ruth goes, risking her reputation, risking her safety. She finds Boaz all alone and calls on him to act as their kinsman redeemer and to take her in marriage. And at the climax of the story, Boaz agrees. He says, I'll do it. So the next day, he settles the legal issues surrounding the inheritance and redemption rights and takes Ruth to be his wife. And then the book of Ruth ends with a genealogy. And in that genealogy, we discover that Ruth becomes nothing less than the great grandmother of David, the king. Again, she was a nobody, an outsider, a poor widow with an aging and embittered mother-in-law to look after. And yet God uses her to bring about his saving plan.

The patterns come together now. Do you see it? It's the same with Bathsheba, or as Matthew poignantly refers to her, Uriah's wife. Bathsheba married to Uriah, a Hittite, a Gentile, nothing but a soldier's wife. And to make matters worse, David takes her, commits adultery with her, and she becomes pregnant.

And David, trying to cover up his guilt, has Uriah killed on the front lines of battle. And Bathsheba gives birth to David's illegitimate son, only to have the baby die within the week. She's a powerless outsider, embroiled in scandal. And yet, and yet, it's through Bathsheba that God will continue the kingly line. Her second son is Solomon. And it's Solomon who takes the throne after David.

Do you see what Matthew's saying? Four women, four stories, but a single thread. Out of the mess of human brokenness and sin, out of the margins of society, it's there where God chooses to work.

[18 : 01] It's there where God chooses to bring his plans to completion. It's there where the royal family starts to take shape. God's always used the marginalized and the outsider, the unexpected, to accomplish his purposes in the world. And finally, when the fullness of time comes, it's into the mess and into the margins where Jesus comes.

After all, there's a fifth woman in Matthew's genealogy, isn't there? There's a final strand to complete his picture. And it's Mary. Now, who would have believed that Mary was actually the mother of the Messiah? She was a nobody. A poor girl from the north engaged to a common laborer. She might as well have been a Gentile for all anybody cared. And who would have believed that the scandal of her pregnancy was even more scandalous than all the rumors could conceive? That the child she bore wasn't the product of teenage promiscuity in the backseat of a car, but the work of the Holy Spirit, the very word become flesh. What could be more of a scandal? At last, God has come, but not to the high and important, not to the pure and the powerful, but into the mess and into the margins. A scandal to end all scandals. The Messiah born in a feeding trough to a teenage girl.

Here's the point. Jesus has come to inaugurate a kingdom. But it's not a kingdom of the powerful or the beautiful or the perfect. It's a kingdom for the humble and for the outcast and for the sinners.

That's who Jesus welcomes into his family. It's always been that way. And Matthew's genealogy is masterful in showing us this very point. God doesn't just use the big people, right? The Abrahams, the Davids, the Solomons. God uses the Tamars and the Rahabs and the Ruths and the Bathshebas.

God uses people just like you and me. It's interesting to note that King Herod, who is actually the sort of functioning king of Judea when Jesus was born, King Herod was known to have burned up Jewish genealogical family records so that no one could challenge his kind of shaky claim to the throne. You see, King Herod was actually half Jewish and half Gentile. He was of a mixed pedigree, so his claim to the throne was always a bit shaky. So what he did was he just started burning people's family records to whitewash the history. Too many stains on the family tree. Burn them away.

[21 : 13] But with Jesus, you see, it's the exact opposite. All the stains in his family tree, he's not burning them away. He's taking them on.

John Calvin, in his commentary on Matthew, puts it well. He says, He therefore did not refuse to admit a stain into his genealogy.

It was the design of God to show that in establishing this kingdom, nothing depended on human merits. Jesus, therefore, did not refuse to admit a stain into his genealogy.

In establishing this kingdom, nothing depended on human merits. Or as the Apostle Paul puts it, God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

So what about you tonight, friends? Do you doubt that Jesus would welcome you into his royal family? Do you doubt that he would have a part for you to play in his plan for the world?

[22 : 47] What comes to your mind right now as a disqualifying factor? Is it because you're not impressive enough? You didn't finish top in your class?

You aren't the pretty girl or the star athlete? You're not the life of the party? But look at what God can do with someone like Ruth. You know, she wasn't the pretty girl, after all.

Think about it. Here's a woman who was able to work all day in the blazing Middle Eastern heat. At one point, the narrative of Ruth says that she carried about 80 pounds of grain back home to Naomi.

There's no way that Ruth was some paper-thin model waif movie star, right? Think about it. She must have been a pretty thick, healthy, big girl to be able to do that kind of work.

Ruth didn't fit the mold. She didn't turn heads. In the world's eyes, she wasn't impressive. And yet God chose her, and God loved her, and God used her in a massive way in his saving plan for the world.

[23 : 53] Maybe you think Jesus wouldn't welcome you and use you because you're not influential enough. Yeah? You don't know the right people. You don't have the right degrees.

You don't come from the right family. But think about Tamar or Rahab. Here are two women who were so socially disenfranchised that prostitution was their only means of surviving in the world.

Think about it. If Tamar came from a powerful family, if she had any kind of social connections, do you think she would have dressed up like a prostitute to sleep with her father-in-law?

Probably not. But though these women were utterly on the margins of worldly power, though they had really no chance of being high-impact players on the global scene, God chooses them, and God loves them, and through them, God altered the very course of history.

Finally, maybe you think God wouldn't welcome you and use you because you're not good enough. There's some repeated moral failure that plagues you. Some past sin that haunts your conscience.

[25 : 06] You think you've blown it. You think, how could God ever use someone as messed up as me? But look at what God can do with someone like Bathsheba. How many times do you think Bathsheba played it over and over again in her mind?

I should have said no. Even if the king would have killed me, I should have said no. How long do you think she struggled with the guilt of her adultery? How long do you think she blamed herself for the death of her husband?

And yet God chose her, too. And God loved her. And God used her for his kingdom. Friends, if you doubt that Jesus can welcome you and use you, here's a great comfort.

Your abilities or your background and even your moral record are no barrier for Jesus. He's come to build a royal family out of people just like you and just like me.

Because at the end of the day, you see, it's Christ who's perfect. Such that we don't have to be. Though Jesus' lineage is full of sin and brokenness, Jesus comes not just to identify with his people, but to break the pattern of brokenness and sin.

[26 : 23] You see, there's one last detail that Matthew includes with these women. It's very subtle, but it's very profound. Glance again at Matthew's genealogy.

You see, for 16 verses, Matthew writes, so and so begat so and so, and on and on. So and so begat so and so, et cetera, et cetera. And as you're reading it, you wonder, when is it ever going to end?

But then he comes to Jesus, and the whole grammatical pattern gets broken. He ends with Joseph was the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

The verb tense changes, was born. And the word whom is grammatically feminine. It's not referring to Joseph, it's referring to Mary. The whole thing takes a turn.

It's like a blip, a whole new blip on the radar screen of humanity. Here at last, in the midst of the mess and sin, in our repeated history of sin and suffering, something new comes down.

[27 : 29] Of course, Matthew here is pointing us ahead to Jesus' virgin birth. That's what he talks about in the next section. In 118, he says, Mary was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

Yes, Jesus was a descendant, through Joseph, legally, of David. But he was not Joseph's son biologically. Matthew couldn't say it more clearly. He was born of Mary.

And Jesus' virgin birth means not just that he's fully human and fully divine, but that the pattern of sin has finally, at last, been ruptured and broken into.

You see, we've all inherited a sin nature. We've all been implicated in the world's rebellion against God. Even in this royal lineage, especially in this royal lineage, it's nothing but a mess of sin and fallenness.

But the virgin birth is a miraculous start of something new. The eternal God becomes a human being, but without sin. And what does that mean for us?

[28 : 33] Does it mean that in order to get into Jesus' family, now we have to be pure too? Jesus hit the reset button, so now we've got to try to measure up. Not at all. It's just the opposite.

You see, we still come with our sin, with our stains, and with our shame. And Jesus covers us with his purity. He's the head of a new humanity.

And all of us are welcome to join. Jesus came to welcome the outsiders, and adulterers, and prostitutes, and even murderers into God's family on the basis of his pattern-breaking perfect life.

And the entrance requirements for this family aren't your good deeds, or your good birth, or your unbounded potential to change the world. Jesus is looking for humble sinners who will admit their powerlessness and come to him for grace.

He wants to raise up the lowly and welcome them in. He wants to take the things that the world pushes aside and put them in the center of his affections and plans for the world.

[29 : 39] You see, friends, in the end, there's only one thing that will keep you separated from Jesus and the kingdom of God. And that's self-sufficiency.

If I think that my power, or my prestige, or even my good deeds are going to suffice, then I will find myself on the outside of this new humanity that Jesus has come to claim and to create.

But if we trust in him, and if we rest in his perfection and in his power, then he'll take us and make us part of his plans for the world.

No matter what our background, no matter what our history, out of the mess, out of the margins, that's where Jesus delights to be the king.

Let's pray together. Jesus, we see that in your kingdom, the way up is the way down.

[30 : 47] Lord, that those who humble themselves are exalted, but those who exalt themselves are humbled. And Lord, what good news this is. Because when we take an honest assessment of our lives, we don't have the ground to stand on.

But Jesus, you've come with your pure and your perfect life to lift us up, to raise us up, if we'll humble ourselves and rely on you. Lord, thank you for taking people like us, putting us in the center of your kingdom plans, and using us as your ambassadors in the world.

God, would you use us tonight? As we go forth this week, as we look forward to the coming of a new year, Jesus, would you remind us that you're gathering a people, not who are impressive, but a people who are humbly expectant on you.

Lord, thank you for the dignity that comes when we place our trust in you. God, would you change us, and would you use us for your glory?

Amen. So Joe's going to come back up, and we're going to sing a song or two together. Let me encourage you to use this time, now that we've been meditating on this passage from Matthew, to pray.

[32 : 10] You can sing along with the words. If you want to just pray silently, you can do that as well. If you want to use the kneelers, you can do that too. Thank you.