

THE
Unlikely
Mothers
OF
CHRIST

REV. ANDREW LANNING

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*Faith Protestant Reformed Church
Evangelism Committee*

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Book design by Jeff Steenholdt

Printed in the United States of America

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Series of Sermons on
“The Unlikely Mothers of Christ”
2010
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Foreword

Matthew 1

- 1** The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.
- 2** Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren;
- 3** And Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram;
- 4** And Aram begat Aminadab; and Aminadab begat Naasson; and Naasson begat Salmon;
- 5** And Salmon begat Booz of Rachab; and Booz begat Obed of Ruth; and Obed begat Jesse;
- 6** And Jesse begat David the king; and David the king begat Solomon of her that had been the wife of Urias;
- 7** And Solomon begat Roboam; and Roboam begat Abia; and Abia begat Asa;
- 8** And Asa begat Josaphat; and Josaphat begat Joram; and Joram begat Ozias;
- 9** And Ozias begat Joatham; and Joatham begat Achaz; and Achaz begat Ezekias;
- 10** And Ezekias begat Manasses; and Manasses begat Amon; and Amon begat Josias;
- 11** And Josias begat Jechonias and his brethren, about the time they were carried away to Babylon:

12 And after they were brought to Babylon, Jechonias begat Salathiel; and Salathiel begat Zorobabel;

13 And Zorobabel begat Abiud; and Abiud begat Eliakim; and Eliakim begat Azor;

14 And Azor begat Sadoc; and Sadoc begat Achim; and Achim begat Eliud;

15 And Eliud begat Eleazar; and Eleazar begat Matthan; and Matthan begat Jacob;

16 And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations.

The following sermons were preached as an advent series at the occasion of the celebration of our Lord's birth. Because the eternal Son of God was born in our flesh, He has a human ancestry, a human genealogy. For this advent series we looked at some of the ancestors of the Lord Jesus Christ recorded in Matthew 1.

The genealogy in Matthew 1 is unique, because in this genealogy of men we find the names of five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. All of these women had the great honor of being mothers of Christ.

To be sure, God honored these women by making them mothers of Christ. The great honor of Old Testament women in general was that of bearing the promised Seed. In fact, the first name of Jesus in Scripture is "the Seed of the woman" (Genesis 3:15). These five women in particular had the special privilege of being in the direct line of Christ.

God still so honors women in the church today. That honor is obviously not to bear Christ anymore; but that honor *is* to

bear Christ's church. They give birth to and raise the covenant seed of the Savior. There would not be a church without, as a rule, the godly mothers that bear and raise and train them. God gives great, great honor to women in the church today, as He did to women in the church then, by giving them the privilege of bearing the promised seed.

There is something striking about the five women in Christ's genealogy. They are unlikely candidates for mothers of Christ. The King of kings would come from them, and yet not one of them appears to be worthy of such honor by any human standard. Although they were children of God, they were weak, sinful, and foolish. There is Tamar, a Canaanite, and the sordid history by which her twin sons were born. There is Rahab the harlot. There is Ruth the Moabitess. There is Bathsheba, one through whom the great type of Christ fell into sin. And there is Mary, the young virgin from whom Christ came, unimportant in the eyes of men. If it had been up to us to choose the mothers of Christ, we would have chosen honorable women, queens and princesses, those who were unspotted and blameless, pure and holy women. But God's way is far different than ours. It was exactly the Tamars, the Ruths, the Rahabs, the Bathshebas, and the Marys that God ordained as the mothers of Christ. Our Lord is not ashamed of His ancestry. He is not ashamed of the mothers from whom He came. Therefore He sees to it that their names are recorded here.

This plan of God underscores the truth that nothing is impossible with God. If the coming of the Seed of the woman depended on these women, the Seed would have perished, because it was humanly impossible that the Seed could come from them. The coming of Christ, however, did not depend on these women, but on the promise of God. The Seed *must* come, because God said so. These unlikely mothers of Christ demonstrate that although with man Christ's coming was impossible, with God nothing is impossible.

This plan of God also underscores the truth that our salvation is a work of God's sovereign grace alone. It is through Christ that His church is saved. Because God alone could send Christ, God alone also saves through Christ. Just as we could not contribute anything to the coming of Christ, so also do we not contribute anything to our salvation through Christ. The genealogy of our Savior teaches that our salvation is purely of sovereign grace. Each woman in this history, in her own particular way, shows an aspect of the graciousness of salvation.

As we study these mothers, they themselves recede into the background, and the Son that they bore comes into focus. The Lord Jesus Christ, whom they were privileged to bring forth, receives all the glory and the honor as we study His birth from these unlikely mothers.

Chapter 1



Tamar: Apostasy and Redemption

Matthew 1:2-3a & Genesis 38

“Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; And Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar.”

Introduction

The story of Tamar is one of those passages of God’s Word that we almost cringe to read because it deals very frankly with sins that we consider rather embarrassing. Yet Jesus Christ, whose history this is, is not embarrassed. Though Tamar is an unlikely mother of the Savior, the Lord was pleased to come into the world through her. And because He is not ashamed of this mother, we may be sure that He is not ashamed of us, His brethren.

The characters in this story are Judah; his friend Hirah; his three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah; and his daughter-in-law Tamar, the unlikely mother of Christ. Through the story of Tamar we learn how God turns the sins of His people to His sovereign purpose in redemption and salvation.

Tamar lived at a time when the church was at one of her lowest points, represented by the life of Judah recorded in Genesis 38. By this point in the history of the Old Testament, Judah was almost completely apostate in his personal life, having separated himself from the people and promises of God. Inasmuch as Judah represented the church of his day, his story—and that of Tamar—provides an example of how God can and does redeem His people from the depths of spiritual depravity by means we would consider unthinkable.

Genesis 38 is a chronicle of Judah's personal apostasy. The chapter begins with the statement, "And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went down from his brethren." This means that Judah had effectively left the visible, instituted church. The text does not simply tell us that Judah went down and turned in to a certain Adullamite, but rather that he went down *from his brethren*. This statement indicates that Judah intentionally chose not to associate with his believing family anymore. Instead, he went out by himself to live on his own. The equivalent today would be a letter to the consistory in which a member writes, "Please send my membership papers to my home. I am not going to come to church anymore." That was Judah—he had left the church and gone down from his brethren.

Not only had Judah left his brethren to live in isolation, but he had also befriended an ungodly and worldly man. Genesis 38 states that, having left his brethren, he turned in to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. This Hirah was a Canaanite and was not a child of God. We know this because a little later in the history we find that when Judah wanted to make payment to the woman he supposed was a harlot, he sent Hirah to go make that payment. Hirah agreed and went to deliver the payment, thus willingly conniving at Judah's fornication. The Word of God emphasizes that Hirah was no mere acquaintance of Judah, but that he was a *friend* (Genesis 38:12, 20). Judah clearly had joined himself to this Hirah in a close—but ungodly—friendship.

As if Judah's forsaking of the church for a worldly friendship was not bad enough, we also find that Judah looked around at the Canaanite women of the land to find a wife for himself. He was not interested in having a God-fearing wife who would serve Jehovah with him. Rather, Judah was interested in having a Canaanite wife who would live with him in the new lifestyle that he had adopted—so he took a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shuah, to wife. This was perhaps the worst of all Judah's sinful mistakes, bringing great ruin upon his family. The ruin of Judah's family life is evident from the fact that his three sons were not children of the covenant—they were children of Canaan. They did not love the Lord, and they did not obey His commands. In fact, the oldest two, Er and Onan, were so desperately wicked that God could not stand their presence on earth, and slew them.

The ruin of Judah's life holds important applications for the church today, especially for young people coming to the age of confession of faith and marriage. First, Judah progressed in his disobedience and personal apostasy. One sin led to another, until Judah was left in spiritual ruin. His departure from the church led him to fall in with ungodly Hirah. His ungodly friendship led to his marriage to an unbelieving Canaanite. His unequal yoking in marriage led to godless children. Let every young person who is tempted to "go down from his brethren" and leave the church take the warning of Judah's life to heart.

Second, Judah's history teaches an important truth about marriage. One of the worst mistakes a young believer can make is to marry an unbeliever. When a believer marries, he or she *must* marry in the Lord. That means someone who is one in the faith once delivered to the saints, who agrees with the articles of the Christian faith, and who wholeheartedly confesses the truth that God has revealed in His Word. The result of Judah's ungodly marriage is a clear warning—a calling for young people to marry in the Lord.

From the ruin of Judah's life we learn the importance of marrying in the Lord especially with regard to the raising of children. If spouses are not one in their beliefs about God and His Word, what will they teach to their children? Who wins the battle of worldviews? Rarely the God-fearing spouse, it would seem. The necessity for a husband and wife to be one in the faith is crucial on this point, and Judah's marriage to Shuah's daughter makes this crystal clear. When Judah married an ungodly Canaanite woman, his children were raised to be ungodly too, which they showed by their wicked refusal to obey the law of God. While we don't know the sin of Judah's first son Er, it was so great that God slew him. We do know the sin of Judah's second son Onan, who refused to perform the duty of Levirate marriage required by the Mosaic Law in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). This law determined that if a man died before he had children, his brother or some other close relative must marry his wife for the purpose of conceiving children on his behalf. This law was crucial to the Old Testament church because it emphasized the critical need for continuing the line of covenant seed—seed that would one day be the Messiah of promise. By his refusal to fulfill this covenant obligation, Onan showed what he thought of this Messiah. And for the sin of despising the Christ, God slew him.

Remarkably—and sadly—the sin of Onan also belonged to his father Judah. After seeing that Er and Onan had died in their marriages to Tamar, Judah decided it would be best to keep his third son Shelah from the same fate. Instead of saying so directly, however, he contrived a story to convince Tamar to go back to her father for a little while, until Shelah was “old enough” to marry her. But from the text, it is clear that Judah had no intention of ever giving Shelah to Tamar. He was done with this woman, and through this he showed that he had absolutely no regard for the Christ of promise. This is Judah that we are talking about. This is the man from whom

the scepter of David would come. This is the man from whom Christ would someday be born. And where is he? Living in the sphere of the Old Testament covenant? Carefully teaching his children about the promises of this covenant? No, instead Judah is off in Canaan among the wicked of Canaan, marrying an unbeliever and showing absolutely no regard for the Seed of the woman, the Christ who was to come. Judah was almost completely apostate at this point.

Judah in his apostasy represented the spiritual weakness in the church of his day. Recall that Judah's extended family was the Old Testament church of the day. They were the literal children of Israel, and would grow into the nation called by his name. That Judah represented the church is evident from his being the preeminent son of the family, despite not being the firstborn. Although Jacob's prophecy that the Messiah would come from Judah's line had yet to be uttered (Genesis 49:8–10), the truth nevertheless remains that the Seed of the woman would spring from Judah. Furthermore, the apostasy of the entire church of the day is evident from the immediately preceding history of the sale of Joseph into slavery by his brothers (Genesis 37). The hatred of Jacob's sons for their righteous brother makes it clear that the church was in the process of being swallowed up in apostasy.

Interestingly, the great danger for Israel was not the attacks of the enemy seeking to annihilate them. Jacob and his family did not have to take up sword and shield to defend themselves from extermination. Rather, the great danger was that they were being swallowed up spiritually among the worldly Canaanites of the land. They could not survive there, immersed in the temptation and sin of the Canaanite culture. At this time, God Himself—through Joseph—was preparing a special place in Goshen where they could dwell alone in spiritual safety. Before He delivered them, however, God allowed the church to drift deep into the throes of spiritual ruin.

We ought to take warning concerning the tactics used by Satan in the days of Judah, because those same tactics are aimed at the church of Christ today. In some places today, Satan's tactics include open persecution. However, for much of the church today, that is not the greatest danger. Rather, Satan tries subtly to absorb the church into the modern world in the way that Judah was absorbed into the culture of Canaan. Satan uses that tactic in our own families and marriages. With craftily disguised attacks, he tempts our families to leave the public worship and fellowship of the church for the pleasures of the world. When believers choose this pathway, figuratively "going down from their brethren" as Judah did, they open themselves to all kinds of spiritual dangers.

Not the least of these dangers is the temptation to remain in the church in name, while establishing friendships and unions with the Hiraahs of the world. These friendships can be with the imaginary "friends" of pop culture with whom we are entertained each and every week in television shows and movies. Or, more importantly, these friendships might be with real friends that we come across in our everyday life, unbelieving men and women of the world with whom we are close. The danger in these friendships can be very hard to discern, because many believers spend forty or fifty hours a week in the workplace with unbelievers who often share many of the same professional and personal interests. The line between friend and colleague easily blurs in these situations, making the calling to antithetical living a great struggle for the child of God. In the face of such temptations, we must remember fellow believers in prayer, especially those who face the daily difficulty of discerning proper friendships in their work life. And for those in that position, remember to recognize why God has put you there: that you may shine as a light in the world, not that you may become part of it. Be careful lest you be swallowed up in the temptations of our day.

If this were the end of the story of Judah, we might be tempted to conclude that there is no hope for the church when it is confronted by the pleasures of the world. However, even though the church in Judah's day was in a most desperate—even hopeless—plight, God came in mercy and delivered that church in a wonderful and almost unbelievable way. The way that God chose, however, is far from the way we would have chosen. We would not have suggested that God deliver His people through the conversion of a Canaanite, and certainly not through her incestuous plan to continue the covenant line. We would not have picked *that* way as the way for God's church to be saved; but that is exactly the way God chose to save His church—He used even the means of sin.

God saved His church by converting Tamar. That was the first step in salvation. Tamar, who came into the story of Judah as an unbelieving outsider to the covenant, was converted and became the strongest member of that covenant. Though we don't read of her actual conversion or the moment when she first believed, we can be sure that Tamar was a believer. Judah himself testified of this fact when he said about Tamar, "She hath been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son" (Genesis 38:26). That is a strong statement—an inspired statement. So strong, in fact, that it implies that Tamar was one whose sins were forgiven by washing in the blood of the Lamb. But it also means this: that the goal of her heart was to live according to the precepts of God. She was more righteous than Judah because although he did not obey the law of God or care about the covenant seed, she sought to obey by continuing the line that would produce the Messiah.

Tamar's concern for the line of Christ is also demonstrated by the names that she gave to her twin boys. She called one of them Pharez and the other Zarah. And although Tamar actually got things backward when she named her two sons, the names she chose nevertheless indicate that she was thinking in a covenant sense about the line of the promised Messiah.

The name that Tamar chose for her firstborn son was Zarah, which means “arising” or “rising one”—the son expected to give rise to the chosen line of generations. Because Zarah’s arm came out first during the delivery process and was marked by a cord tied around the wrist by a nursemaid, he was considered to be the firstborn. However, it was actually Pharez who was fully delivered first and was given the name meaning “a breach” to describe his usurpation of the birth order. The key here is to notice how Tamar was concerned about knowing the identity of her firstborn son so that the promises of the birthright could be given to him, and so that he could be the “rising one.” And although in God’s sovereign plan the Christ would come from Pharez, not Zarah, the names that Tamar used show that she was concerned about the identity of her firstborn because she believed he would be the child of promise. In everything she did, she was seeking the seed of the covenant. Tamar did not do that in the right way, and her disobedience is not condoned by Scripture; but even in her disobedience, she demonstrated that her motive was an interest in the covenant line from which the promised Christ must arise.

The sin of Tamar through which God wrought salvation was also the means by which He restored the church of the day. Through the exposure of Judah’s and Tamar’s sin, God brought salvation to His people, restoring Judah and converting his heart. Judah had been walking in astounding sin, but God confronted him through Tamar, so that he repented and desired to live in the paths of righteousness again. This repentance and restoration is evidenced by Judah’s response to being exposed in his incestuous sin with Tamar. When Judah saw that Tamar alone had been concerned with the line of Christ and had been more righteous than he, he repented and “he knew her again no more” (Genesis 38:26). God restored His child Judah and turned him away from the sexual sin and apostate living that had characterized his

life. Now Judah sought the paths of righteousness again. This change of heart is strikingly obvious later in history, when Judah willingly pledged his life for that of Benjamin in Egypt, not knowing that the man to whom he spoke was Joseph, the same brother he had sold into slavery (Genesis 44:18–34). Now concerned for the lives of his elderly father and younger brother instead of the pleasures of Canaanite life, Judah demonstrated the work of grace in his heart.

The wonderful spiritual lesson the Holy Spirit teaches us by the story of Tamar and Judah is that God performs His work of salvation despite—and even sometimes through—all of the sin and wickedness of His people. In God’s perfect plan, Christ *would* come from Judah, though He would not come through the sons Judah acknowledged as his own. Instead Christ would come from Judah by Pharez of Tamar, the son he did not intend. Even though Judah had not been interested in the covenant Seed of the woman, God sovereignly preserved the line of Christ through Tamar and her sins. And He does the same for us today. Despite our weaknesses and shortcomings, and despite our daily sins and wanderings from righteousness, God saves—sovereignly, graciously, and unexpectedly!

We also learn from this story that our sin, no matter how great, is never too much for Christ to overcome. Even the sins that we are embarrassed to admit before others, Christ is not ashamed to forgive. Consider if Judah and Tamar had been ancestors in our family tree. Would we own up to it? Would this be the story that we would tell company when they come over and asked about our family? We might be ashamed to admit coming from the sordid history of Judah and Tamar, but Christ was not. In His divine nature Christ saw to it that His human genealogy would be recorded in the eternal Word of God, so that all people throughout history would know that His ancestors were Judah and Tamar. He was not ashamed to be called the son of Tamar and Judah. And what is more, He is not ashamed to call us His brethren, even though we know

ourselves to be the chief of sinners (I Timothy 1:15). We need to know that Christ is not ashamed of us, that He does not stand in heaven trying to distance Himself from us. Instead, He stands in heaven before the throne of God saying, “They are mine, and I will not lose one of them, because I shed my blood for every one of them.” That is why Christ came to the earth in the humble form of a man—to save us and to redeem us from our sins. And in His compassion He is not ashamed to call us His brethren.

The compassion of Christ is also that He knows and understands the weaknesses and infirmities of His brethren. Born of a sinful woman into this sin-cursed world, He knew what it was to have weakness and infirmity. He even knew what it was to be tempted. He knew the appeal of Satan, who came in guile to swallow Him up before He could arrive at the cross (Matthew 4:1–11). He was tempted the same way you and I are tempted, with the one exception being that throughout the temptation He never sinned. But because Christ knew what it was to be tempted, He is able to give us grace to help in our time of need (Hebrews 4:14–16). From Judah and Tamar came Christ, the most compassionate Mediator and High Priest that there could ever be. And knowing that He cares for us in our temptations and will give us the grace we need to overcome them, our response is to fall down in thanksgiving before this Seed from an unlikely mother.

Chapter 2



Rahab: Consecration to the Lord

Matthew 1:5a & Joshua 2, 6:17–18
“*Salomon begat Booz of Rachab.*”

Introduction

The theme begun with Tamar—that each of the mothers of Christ highlights a different facet of salvation by grace alone—is continued in the life of Rahab, another of the unlikely mothers of Christ. While the story of Tamar illustrated how God preserves His church despite their sin, the history of Rahab illustrates that salvation is an undeserved gift of God’s grace. Rahab’s story makes clear that all who are saved, though they deserve to be destroyed in their sin, are instead the recipients of God’s sovereign mercy. Rahab’s story, therefore, is the story of salvation: she was worthy of destruction, but was wonderfully and graciously saved from her sin, and even raised to honor by God’s gracious work.

Rahab lived in the city of Jericho, a powerful and prominent city in the land of Canaan at the time of Israel's conquest. Jericho was a very strong city surrounded by walls so great that houses could be built upon them, as was Rahab's own dwelling place. And Jericho was filled with wicked and ungodly people. Despite being a godless city in the midst of Canaan, Jericho had heard the gospel many years before the Israelites arrived. The people of Jericho knew about Jehovah. They had heard about His works, His ways, and His people. When Israel arrived at Jericho's gates, Jericho trembled, for she knew the God who had led them there.

Knowledge of the gospel had not come to Jericho in the normal way or by the means that we would expect. We never read that God sent a prophet to Jericho to proclaim the message of Jehovah's salvation throughout the city. Rather, the gospel had come to Jericho on the wings of rumor and in the reports of travelers who followed the progress of Israel from the land of Egypt through the wilderness of Sinai. The gospel came from travelers who knew about Israel's passage through the Red Sea and from those who had witnessed their victories over the kings Sihon and Og just outside of Canaan. By word of mouth these reports found their way to Jericho, so that by the time the spies infiltrated the city, Rahab already knew about Israel—and Israel's God.

It was not only Rahab who knew about the spies; the gospel that had come to Jericho had been spread throughout the entire city. Rahab herself told the spies, "Your terror is fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red sea for you, when ye came out of Egypt; and what ye did unto the two kings of the Amorites, that were on the other side of Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom ye utterly destroyed. And as soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any man" (Joshua 2:9–11). *Everyone* in Canaan knew about Israel and

her God. Furthermore, this was no recent knowledge among the inhabitants of Jericho; they must have known about Jehovah for a long time. Israel had crossed the Red Sea more than forty years before, and had just recently destroyed Sihon and Og. For decades, the inhabitants of Jericho had been hearing about the nation that had left powerful Egypt in ruins, had crossed the Red Sea on dry land, and had destroyed every enemy before them. They grew up following the progress of Israel and hearing about Jehovah—the God of Israel—who led her in victory through the wilderness. Everyone in the land of Canaan knew about them.

The knowledge of Jehovah and His people terrified Jericho. It terrified them, because the gospel that came to Jericho was not the message of salvation. It was not a gospel of peace and safety under the rule of Jehovah. Rather, the gospel that came to Jericho was one of judgment. In every report, Jericho heard this: “I am Jehovah, and I am coming for you. The I AM is coming to uproot you and make a home for My people.” The arrival of the spies confirmed that Israel’s destination was Jericho, and that the holy God of Israel was coming for them.

This is the same gospel word that the unbelievers hear yet today. Every time an earthquake shakes the earth; every time a volcano erupts; every time a mudslide or a typhoon causes massive loss of life, the wicked hear the same word of the gospel carried by the winds of rumor in the headline media—“I am coming for you. There is only destruction for you, and what you see in the present destruction is just a small taste of the destruction that I will visit upon you.” This message always belongs to the gospel. The Lord says in Isaiah that the *full* gospel is not only that Zion shall be redeemed, but that Zion shall be redeemed *through judgment* (Isaiah 1:27–28, 4:3–4). Through the judgment and destruction of the unrighteous—both within and without—the church is saved.

Lord’s Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism also teaches that this word of destruction belongs to the full message of the gospel.

In answer to the question, “How is the kingdom of heaven . . . shut by the preaching of the holy gospel?” the Catechism answers, “When it is declared and testified to all unbelievers, and such as do not sincerely repent, that they stand exposed to the wrath of God, and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted: according to which testimony of the gospel, God will judge them, both in this, and in the life to come.” The inhabitants of Jericho heard this message and knew that they stood in the way of the people of God. They knew they were the enemies of that chosen, precious possession, and therefore they heard this message clearly: “I am after you to destroy you.”

Through its destruction, Jericho would be consecrated to God. We read in Joshua 6:17, “And the city shall be accursed . . . to the LORD.” The juxtaposition of these two ideas is unusual. We would rarely put “accursed” and “to the Lord” together in the same sentence. We might say “accursed from the Lord,” but not “accursed to the Lord.” The Holy Spirit uses the word “to” here to indicate that Jericho belonged to God. While it is certainly true that they belonged to God in the general sense that they were His creation (Psalm 24:1–2), there is more implied in the text. Jericho belonged to the Lord in a special way. They belonged to the Lord in the way of being devoted or sanctified to Him. Jericho was to be gathered up and given to the Lord as His own consecrated possession.

Belonging to the Lord as His possession is a strange way to think about Jericho. How could wicked Jericho be devoted—or consecrated and sanctified—to the Lord? This is not the way we think about a people destined to suffer God’s fiery judgment, because we normally associate the ideas of consecration, sanctification, and devotion with the elect of God. Yet the text clearly says about Jericho that they were accursed to the Lord.

The key to understanding this unusual wording is to see that Jericho was not sanctified to the Lord as His beloved

people, but that Jericho was sanctified and devoted unto the Lord in the way of their being utterly destroyed. Remember, *everything* belongs to and is devoted to God. Everything serves His purpose and the glory of His name, and therefore everything is consecrated to God. But there are two ways to be consecrated to God. One way is to be consecrated by being gathered to Him as His people—that is the elect. The other way is to be consecrated to Him in the way of utter and complete destruction—that is the reprobate. And that latter way of consecration was Jericho. Jericho *would* serve the Lord, not in willing submission, but by means of their destruction.

Joshua 6 describes the extent of the curse that was upon Jericho and the destruction that would come upon them. Every living thing had to be killed—man, woman, and child. All of the animals had to be killed. There could be no living thing left alive, because Jericho had to be devoted unto the Lord through destruction. Even the inanimate things that were allowed to be rescued from Jericho—the gold and the silver and the precious vessels—were to be devoted to the tabernacle and used in its service. All of Jericho had to be devoted to the Lord, either by destruction or by service in the worship of Jehovah. In this way, the destruction that befell Jericho is a picture of hell. Every person condemned to hell is literally accursed to the Lord. They are consecrated to Him, not in the way of salvation, but in the way of their being destroyed by Him eternally.

Like the other inhabitants of Jericho, Rahab deserved this judgment. She deserved to be cut down by the swords of Israel and to open her eyes in the pit of hell for eternity. Rahab deserved that because she was a member of the idolatrous, ungodly race of Canaan that lived in Jericho, a race that God had determined to destroy from off the face of the earth for all of its sin. Rahab also deserved to be destroyed by God because of her *personal* disobedience. Rahab was a harlot. She did not

live in Jericho as one who protested the evils of that city, or as a lone voice crying out that the city should repent and walk in the way of the Lord. Rahab lived as a harlot in the city, and as such, she uniquely contributed to the lewd wickedness of Jericho. The viewpoint of Scripture in Proverbs 7 is that the path that led up to Rahab's door was a path that led to destruction—a path that led to hell. Rahab had willingly made her door a portal into hell through which the men of Jericho had been brought to swift destruction. For this sin, Rahab deserved utter destruction at the hand of Jehovah.

Rahab is not alone in what she deserved. In fact, she keeps company with every person—excepting Christ—who has walked the earth. We read time and again in Scripture: “There is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Psalm 53:3). From this we know that we too deserve to be consecrated to the Lord for destruction. No matter what family or what ethnic background or what church we come from, we all deserve to be accursed to the Lord simply because of who we are. Every one of us is born with a sinfully depraved nature, totally incapable of doing any good. Every one of us is born guilty in Adam, who represented all of humanity when he willfully chose to rebel against the direct command of God in Eden. Because of this original sin and fall from perfection, we can do nothing that pleases God of ourselves. The only thing we can do by nature is walk in sin and rebel against Him. Simply because of who we are as humans, we deserve to be accursed unto the Lord.

Like Rahab, we also deserve to be destroyed because our own personal sins condemn us before the law of God. We all know the nature of Rahab's sins; Scripture recounts them for us in plain terms. But if we truly and honestly consider our own daily thoughts and actions, we know we are just as guilty as Rahab. By God's grace we may not walk in the kind of public sin that Rahab committed, but we nevertheless fall into that sin and many others simply by the corrupt thoughts that pass through our minds day by day. Christ Himself made this

plain when He addressed the sins of the heart in Matthew 5. He stated, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:27–28). We might be able to claim holiness in the eyes of men, but before God our hearts are black with corruption.

Despite the curse that was due to Rahab for her sins, God graciously delivered her from the destruction that she fully deserved, and instead gave her an inheritance in glory and a name among His chosen people of Israel. How could this be? Why would God spare *her*, of all people? The simple answer is that Rahab did not only hear the gospel that came to all of Jericho, the gospel of destruction; but she also heard a side of the gospel that the rest of the inhabitants of Jericho did not hear. Rahab heard this side of the gospel: “Zion shall be *redeemed*. And Rahab, that redemption is for you and for your family.”

When did she hear this gospel? It is apparent from the text in Joshua 2 that when the spies arrived at her door, Rahab was still an unbeliever and had not yet been converted. This is evident from the fact that when Rahab talked to the two spies about the fear that had fallen upon all of the land, she included herself in those who feared. She said, “Your terror is fallen upon *us*” and “*our* hearts did melt” (Joshua 2:9,11). It is also evident that Rahab was an unbeliever when the spies arrived at her door because when the soldiers of Jericho were turned away from Rahab’s home and still failed to find the spies, there was no suspicion cast back on Rahab. There was no question on the part of the soldiers about whether Rahab was lying; they assumed that she hated Jehovah just like them, and was just as afraid of Him as they all were. There was apparently not even a flicker of doubt in their minds that Rahab had been telling them the truth when she said, “The men are gone out a different way.” Before the spies came to her door, Rahab was an unbeliever.

After the arrival of the spies, something in Rahab changed. She makes the beautiful confession at the end of Joshua 2:11, “For the LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath.” This change was brought about because she had heard something that she had not heard before. She heard this: “The Lord is coming for you, Rahab—but not to destroy you. The Lord is coming to *redeem* you.” Rahab heard *that* message of the gospel, because the spies who came to her door were not merely there to search out the land, but to preach the gospel to her. In Joshua 6:17, the spies are not called *spies*, but *messengers*. That is the same word used in James 2:25, where we read that Rahab received the *messengers* with peace. That word “messengers” is a word used in Scripture to refer to the office of prophet and preacher. That is what the spies were—they were preachers. They were not merely spying out the land, but they came with the message of salvation from Jehovah to Rahab and her family.

This answers what otherwise is a perplexing question: why did the spies go to the house of Rahab, a harlot? What business did they have there? Naturalistic explanations have been proposed. For example, some claim that the spies chose a harlot’s house to hide in because they assumed that she would be more discreet than the proprietors of the public inns in Jericho. They assumed that if anybody came asking about them, the woman would know how to be discreet about who was in her house and would thereby preserve their cover. The Word of God indicates that the one reason they came to Rahab’s house was because they were *messengers*. They came to her house as preachers. God somehow indicated to the spies that they should turn in at Rahab’s house to bear witness to the gospel of salvation in Jehovah. Therefore they did not come to Rahab’s house to hide; they came to Rahab’s house to *preach*. Rahab heard the gospel, and Rahab believed that salvation was for her.

The result of Rahab's hearing the gospel was that she found deliverance from her sin and full, free salvation. She now knew that salvation was for her and for her family. Rahab's work in hiding the spies and extracting from them a promise that they would show her kindness was not merely some shrewd business deal, or a simple earthly calculation that if she was kind to them and saved their lives, then they would be kind to her and save her life in return. No, Rahab's actions were performed in the confidence that salvation was for her and for her family. She was sure that they were going to be saved from the imminent destruction of Jericho, which she realized they deserved. Why? Because she had heard the gospel of salvation from Jehovah. In thankful response, Rahab was showing love for Jehovah Himself by protecting the spies. These spies were not ordinary men—they were Israelites. And not only that, they were hand-picked by Joshua, the leader of the Israelites, to come into the land (Joshua 2:1). As such, these spies were representatives of Jehovah God. Rahab emphasized her understanding of that fact in Joshua 2:11, when she declared, "For the LORD *your* God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath." Because the spies were representatives of Jehovah Himself, by sparing them and refusing to give them up to the soldiers, Rahab was manifesting her love for Jehovah.

If the passages in Joshua were all we knew of Rahab, someone might ask how we can be *sure* that Rahab acted out of love for God. That is a good question. How can we know for certain that when Rahab saved the spies, she was not merely acting out of self-preservation? How do we know that she actually *did* love Jehovah, and really hid the spies because of this? Besides her own words in our text, we also find the evidence in two New Testament passages where Rahab is held up for us as one of the pillars of faith. Rahab is listed in Hebrews 11, the chapter on the heroes of faith, and in James 2, the chapter that describes what a living faith is. In both of these chapters we read that Rahab did these things *by faith*.

In addition, James makes the point that her faith was not merely an external show, but that it was *alive*. Rahab proved her faith by her works, for it was *by faith* that she hid the spies and sent them out another way. Rahab believed in God. She loved Him and would do His servants a kindness in sparing their lives.

Perhaps an even more pressing question, however, is how it was possible for Rahab, a heathen Canaanite, to be saved. How could Rahab, prostitute from the filthy, wicked city Jericho, possibly find salvation? How is it possible that she was not destroyed? There is only one possible answer to this question, and it goes like this. When God came to destroy Jericho and drew His sword of justice, he entered into Rahab's house. But when He broke open the door to exact His divine justice, He did not find Rahab in her home—He found the Lord Jesus Christ instead, standing in her place. Like the rest of Jericho, Rahab's house was accursed unto the Lord, but not because Rahab and her house were *personally* accursed to Him. Instead, God fell upon the Lord Jesus Christ in place of Rahab and her family, and accursed Christ to Himself. He hung the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross and poured out upon Him the curse that was due to Rahab. When it came time for Jericho to be destroyed, the Lord stood in Rahab's place to be accursed and destroyed for her. God's curse against the sins of Rahab and her family, in its entirety, was exhausted as He poured it upon the Lord Jesus Christ. "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (II Corinthians 5:21).

It would be a mistake, though, to imply that God was surprised to find Jesus standing there in Rahab's house. It did not surprise God that Christ was going to take the place of Rahab in the destruction of Jericho. How could it? For Rahab's salvation was by God's own design. Here we gaze back into the eternal counsel of God and retrospectively see His choosing of Rahab in the decree of election—and not just choosing her

in some general or abstract way, but choosing her to give to His own Son Jesus Christ, so that Christ would stand in her place and be destroyed instead of her. This is the gospel we see in Rahab. Like her, every believer deserves to be destroyed in his or her sin. And like Jericho, they deserve to be accursed unto God for destruction. But like Rahab, every believer can also know that God will find the Lord Jesus Christ standing in his or her place when He comes with His sword drawn. And because of Christ, the believer can no longer be devoted to God through the curse of destruction. That curse was borne by Christ, so that the believer can only be consecrated to God through the blessing that He earned on the cross.

If this were the end of Rahab's story, we would be satisfied. What more could she possibly ask for? She was given the gospel. She was spared destruction. She was adopted into the family of God in Israel. But in God's amazing grace, there was more. In addition to being spared destruction, Rahab was crowned with honor. In time—we are not told how long—she married a man named Salmon. And in time she gave birth to a son whom she named Boaz. In a few short generations, David would come from this line, and in time, Christ. Rahab was crowned with the honor of being named in this line as one of the mothers of Christ. An unlikely story, is it not? The very Christ who would one day stand in her place on the cross was descended from Rahab—the harlot. But we see her now not as a harlot, but as a hero of faith redeemed by God and consecrated unto Him, crowned with honor.

Chapter 3



Ruth: Saved by Grace

Matthew 1:5b–6a, Ruth 4

*“And Boaz begat Obed of Ruth; and Obed begat Jesse;
And Jesse begat David the king.”*

Introduction

We turn our attention in this chapter to Ruth, the third mother of Christ listed in the genealogy recorded by Matthew. Ruth lived during the rule of the judges, a time in the history of Israel when the people of God were going astray. During this period in Israel's history, there was no king. The book of Judges in general shows that God's people needed a ruler to lead them and to enforce the laws of God. The book of Ruth focuses on one particular family during that time, the family of Elimelech and Naomi. Through this family we see the working of God to bring the royal line of Christ to Israel in a most unexpected way. This way was the merciful grafting of Ruth, a Moabitess, into the covenant line to become the great-grandmother of King David.

There is more here than a simple story about the unexpected lineage of Christ. Through Ruth we learn about the graciousness of salvation—both hers and ours. That graciousness is revealed in the Savior in Israel, who took Ruth to Himself, who made her His own, and who gave her all of the blessings that she stood in need of. As such, this mother of Christ is a type of our own salvation by the Son that she would bear in her generations.

The book of Ruth begins with a sad description of unbelief on the part of a family in Israel. Though sorrowful, this is where the story of redemption must begin: with the sin and misery of the people of God. Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, lived during the latter part of the history of the judges, when there was a severe famine in the land of Canaan. To escape this famine, Elimelech and Naomi moved their family into the land of Moab, where they could find sufficient food for their needs.

Elimelech's and Naomi's move was not an innocent attempt to find food, but an act of unbelief. By leaving Israel, they were attempting to escape the chastising hand of God. The famine that was sent to the land of Canaan was the chastisement of God upon His people for their sins. That chastisement was intended to work repentance in their hearts, and thus restore them to obedience. Such was the pattern of God's dealings with Israel during the time of the judges. The people would fall into sin; God would send pain and chastisement; the people would repent; and God would deliver them. Catechism students learn this pattern as the four S's: sin, suffering, sorrow, salvation.

During the days of Elimelech and Naomi, God's chastisement took the form of a drought. However, instead of submitting to the hand of God and repenting of their personal or corporate sins, Elimelech and Naomi tried to escape the judgment of God by leaving for the land of Moab. God in His justice followed them to Moab. Although Elimelech and Naomi thought that Canaan was a land of misery and death, they instead found

that Moab was truly the land of death. First Elimelech, and then Mahlon and Chilion, were taken by the Lord in death. Naomi was left alone in a strange land, with no one but her two Moabite daughters-in-law to share her grief.

Naomi was bitter. In her bereavement and bitterness, she tried to push her two daughters-in-law away. She told them, “Go, return each to her mother’s house” (Ruth 1:8). In response, one daughter-in-law, Orpah, left her; but Ruth clung to her, and in her well-known words of faith told Naomi that “thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16). Despite this faithful confession by Ruth, Naomi remained in the throes of bitterness. When she returned to Israel, she told those who met her, “Call me not Naomi,” which means “pleasantness,” but “Call me Mara,” because that name means “bitterness.” The hand of God was heavy on Naomi, chastising her for the unbelief that she showed in going to the land of Moab, where she found nothing but death.

But in Israel there was a redeemer. In Israel that redeemer was found in the person of Boaz. The second chapter of Ruth introduces Boaz as a relative of Naomi. While not a close relative (at least not the nearest of kin), Boaz was apparently related to Elimelech. In addition to being a relative, Boaz was a godly man. Even his greeting to his laborers reflected his love for the Lord. Boaz greeted the workers, “The LORD be with you,” to which they would respond, “The LORD bless thee.”

The holiness of Boaz is especially revealed in his love for the law of God. Boaz apparently was a wealthy man who owned many fields. With this property he was careful to abide by the laws of gleaning that the Lord had given to Israel through Moses (Leviticus 19:9–10; Deuteronomy 24:19–22). Through this action, Boaz revealed his heartfelt concern for the poor in the land, and for his kinsmen who did not have enough to eat from day to day.

Another evidence of Boaz’s holiness is his kindness toward a stranger, Ruth, who had no natural claim to his kindness.

Upon seeing Ruth in his field one day, Boaz noticed that she looked different than the rest of his workers. Knowing that she was not an Israelite, he asked his overseer, “Who is this?” When the reaper explained who Ruth was and that she had requested to glean in that field, Boaz immediately showed her kindness, despite the fact that Ruth was a Moabite. He went to her and insisted she stay in his fields. He welcomed her to take meals with his workers and offered her food for the day. Thus assured and strengthened, Ruth was ready to glean again for that afternoon and thereafter. In this kindness to a stranger in Israel, Boaz revealed himself to be a godly man.

We must understand, though, that Boaz represented more than just a kind, godly man in the book of Ruth. Boaz also had an office—the office of *redeemer*. And a redeemer really was a *savior*. The Lord gave to Naomi and to Ruth a savior in the land of Israel. Death was all they could ever expect in the land of Moab, and in reality, it was all they could have expected coming back to the land of Canaan as well. Both of their husbands were gone. There was no one to provide for them. They could only expect to receive the consequences of Naomi’s unbelief for the rest of their lives. But God provided for them a redeemer, a man willing and able to save them. Boaz would save them in the way of redeeming them to himself.

Chapter 4 of Ruth provides a record of the transaction by which Boaz redeemed Ruth to be his wife, and by which he took charge of Naomi’s care. There were two particular laws in Old Testament Israel that governed the redeemer and the work that he would do. The first of those laws, given in Deuteronomy 25:5–6, concerned marriage:

If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband’s brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband’s brother unto her. And it shall be, that the firstborn which she beareth shall succeed in the name of

his brother which is dead, that his name be not put out of Israel.

The term given to this command is the law of *levirate marriage*. Simply put, it meant that when a man in Israel died before he had children, his unmarried brother had an obligation to marry the widow. This is where the word *levirate* comes from; the Latin word *levir* means “brother” or “brother of a husband.” The purpose of this law was to ensure that a man would have his line carried on in Israel, which was vitally important to the people of God in the Old Testament. The Old Testament saints longed to have children. The promises that God had made to His people were promises about children. He had promised salvation through a child, the Seed of the Woman (Genesis 3:15). He had promised to give Abraham so many children that he would become a great nation (Genesis 12:2). A man’s inheritance was preserved by being passed down to his children. Therefore the Old Testament saints longed for and delighted in children. The law of levirate marriage was intended to provide an heir for a dead man, so that his name would continue in the land of Israel among the people of God. And although the law was that the *brother* marry the widow, the Israelites apparently expanded it to allow for other kinsmen to play the part of redeemer. It therefore did not have to be a brother who married the dead man’s widow, in this case Ruth, but the closest relative of Mahlon, her deceased husband.

The second law of interest in Ruth 4 is the law of property, recorded in Leviticus 25:23–25.

The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the land of your possession ye shall grant a redemption for the land. If thy brother be waxen poor, and hath sold away some of his possession, and if any of his kin come to redeem it, then shall he redeem that which his brother sold.

The law of property stated that Israelites were not allowed to sell the particular parcel of land that God had given to them. Their individual plot of land was a picture of their inheritance and place in the heavenly Canaan. Therefore the land given them had to remain in the family throughout their generations. In the law of property redemption, God gave one exception to this rule: a man was allowed to sell his land (for a time) if he was poor and needed money or food to provide for his family. Even then God provided a way for such destitute Israelites to regain their land. The way provided was that a brother or relative would buy the land from whomever had purchased it from the poor man, with the intent that it would be returned to the original owner. It was also possible for a relative to redeem the land directly from the poor man. In this way, land that had been lost to them for a time was returned through the gracious intervention of a kinsman-redeemer. Through this law governing redemption of property in Old Testament Israel, the poor Israelite not only had his land returned to him, but also retained the precious picture of his place in heaven.

The two laws explained above came together in the history of Ruth when Boaz realized that he was a kinsman to Mahlon and Elimelech. At the same time, he also understood that there was one closer in relation to Elimelech than himself, and so he went about performing the duties of both laws regarding the redemption of Mahlon's wife and property. In going to the gate of the city, Boaz approached the elders of the city, who acted with authority much like the consistory of our day. This action placed the transactions that would occur under their authority, and provided a witness for their authenticity. With this wise and authoritative council in place, Boaz approached the closer kinsman and presented the facts of the case to him. Though this man was apparently willing—and likely even delighted—to redeem the land of Elimelech from Naomi for his own in the absence of an heir, he showed no interest in raising up seed to inherit that land for Mahlon. And since the proper

execution of the transaction required that this man redeem the land *and* marry Ruth, he declined and allowed Boaz to fulfill the requirements of the law. And so Boaz redeemed Ruth, and in that way also redeemed Naomi. There was salvation for Naomi and Ruth in the person of Boaz.

It is important to see that this salvation was utterly gracious—a redemptive work of pure grace. Boaz was under no obligation to redeem Ruth. He wasn't a brother to Mahlon, and was therefore not bound by the laws of levirate marriage. Boaz was simply a relative of the family who was concerned for Ruth and Naomi. Though there was no obligation by law, Boaz did not look away from his family, regardless of how distant they may have been. Nor did he turn away because of Ruth's Moabite lineage. Instead, Boaz chose to marry her and redeem her property so that she would have a covenant inheritance in the land of Canaan.

The actions of Boaz are typical of the redemption that we too have in Israel. In this wicked world—our Moab—there is only death. Because of our sinful nature and daily sins, we deserve only death. The hand of God ought to be heavy upon us because of our transgressions. But there is for us a Redeemer in the land of Israel. That Redeemer is not a mere earthly man who has some earthly kindness for us, but that Redeemer is the Lord Jesus Christ. Like Boaz, He bought us to be His possession and His wife, and the price that He paid to purchase us to Himself was not gold or silver that perishes and corrupts, but His own blood, which never perishes or corrupts. That is a price which cannot be measured, a priceless payment that very really makes us His bride. Though we were by nature strangers with no inheritance, we are now His wife. By that marriage He gives us an inheritance not on this earth, but an inheritance in the land of promise, the heavenly Canaan. Boaz's redemption of Ruth is typical of the redemption that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you see the graciousness of God's salvation? Do you see the history of the mother of

Christ showing that graciousness? That is the grace shown to us every day.

There is still one problem in the narrative. Ruth, though she was redeemed, was still a Moabitess. The book of Ruth is emphatic about this point. Her identity in the book is “Ruth the Moabitess.”

This appears to be a problem because by the laws of Israel, the Moabites *could not* have a place among the people of God. Deuteronomy 23:3, 4 states:

An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD for ever: Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee.

The Moabites were absolutely forbidden to be part of the people of God. Though the passage speaks of the tenth generation, it does not mean to imply that there was a statute of limitations, so that after ten generations a Moabite *could* become a part of the people of God. Rather, that “ten generations” simply means a *complete* number of generations, that is, forever. In their sins against the children of Israel, the Moabites had shown themselves over and over again to be enemies of the people of God. For that reason, God shut them out and cut them off from being part of the congregation. This is the problem with the history of Ruth; she was emphatically a Moabitess. Even the Egyptians, who enslaved Israel, could have a place in Israel after three generations—but not Ruth. By law she ought to have been excluded.

And yet we find that Ruth had a place in Israel. This place cannot be explained as disobedience on the part of Boaz, the man who redeemed her when he ought not have done so. Instead, we see that Ruth’s place in Israel was the work of God Himself. It was not Boaz, but Jehovah, who gave Ruth

her place in Israel by giving her a true and a living faith. The description of Ruth's faith in Ruth 2 is one of the most beautiful descriptions of faith in all of the Word of God. This is what Boaz says to her: "The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, *under whose wings thou art come to trust.*" That was Ruth's faith. She had come to trust under the protective, saving wings of Jehovah.

The evidence for Ruth's faith is further seen in her confession, which is one of the most beautiful confessions in the Word of God. When told by Naomi to go home, Ruth replied, "Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me." Ruth made a beautiful confession of her faith.

Through this history of the gracious engrafting of Ruth into the covenant, we learn that God counts His children not according to the flesh, but according to election. That is the only explanation there can be for the inclusion of Ruth in the covenant. Ruth is not an *exception* to the rule, but rather, the rule doesn't apply to Ruth. Why? Because spiritually she was no daughter of Moab; she was a daughter of Abraham. The Lord counts His children according to election. What a comfort that is for us! The Lord does not count His children according to the strength or position they have upon this earth, but He counts them according to His gracious and sovereign choice.

As an elect member of the covenant, however, Ruth paid an enormous price—let us not forget that. It was painful for Ruth to be a member of the covenant people, because it required her to leave behind everything she had known in her former life. She left behind whatever possessions she might have had in Moab to come into Israel. And not knowing that Boaz was going to marry her, she left behind any reasonable expectation

of having a husband or children. And almost certainly, she left behind family in Moab. Even Boaz marveled at this when he first met Ruth in the fields of Israel (Ruth 2:11). Ruth had to leave behind *everything* that belonged to Moab in order to be a part of the people of God.

Do you see what this means for the believer? Not only have we by God's grace been engrafted into the spiritual Israel; not only have we been taken out of the Moab that is this world and been made children of Abraham; not only are we the objects of His redemptive work; but we too must be willing to leave behind everything that belongs to this world. Yes, *everything*. This is painful, but the Lord Jesus Christ Himself made this perfectly clear in Luke 14:25–27 to those who would follow Him.

And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them, If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

The sacrifice entailed in leaving members of our earthly family to become part of the family of God is perhaps one of the greatest trials endured by the believer. What happens when a son or daughter goes astray from the Word of God? What happens when a brother or sister lives unrepentantly in divorce and remarriage and will not hear the Word of God concerning this sin? What is our reaction when parents are unbelievers, or no longer worship in the faithful church they once attended? These are all difficulties that the child of God may face, which really come down to this one, simple question: "Do you love Christ more than anyone else?"

This is the cross Jesus spoke of in Luke 14:27. Forsaking everything for the sake of Christ is part of "counting the cost" of following Him. And yet, the cost is worth it! It was worth it for Ruth. Yes, she probably wept as she left her father and

mother behind, but look what she was given in return: a place and an inheritance in Israel; the love and the mercy of Jehovah God Himself; and marriage to a type of Christ in Boaz. It was *worth it* for Ruth to be a disciple of Jehovah, and it is worth it for us when we are able—by grace—to truly see what we are given in return for leaving everything for Christ's sake.

There is one more thing about Ruth that we need to see, and that is the fact that she was mother to a king. Let us step back for a moment and remember that Ruth belonged to the day of the judges, and as the book of Judges makes clear, the people of God *needed* a king. There were all kinds of problems in the nation of Israel because they did not have a king, or rather because they were not following their spiritual King, Jehovah. Had the people of Israel asked for a king to represent Jehovah to them, they would have done well. But by asking for a king *like the other nations*, who would be mighty and strong, glorious and powerful, they showed a mere earthly understanding of the leadership they needed. Nevertheless, they truly needed a king to guide them, even more than they knew or acknowledged. Because every man did that which was right in his own eyes in this time, the people of God needed the discipline that a king would bring.

The book of Ruth, which represents a snapshot of the history of Judges, zooms in on just one family instead of looking at the whole nation of Israel. Yet through this small aperture of history we see how God would provide the king that the whole nation needed. The king would be provided through the marriage of Boaz and the Moabitess Ruth. God gave to that couple a son, Obed. And Obed was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David. The book of Ruth ends with the name of David, showing that the whole book aims our view not merely at a nice love story between Boaz and Ruth, but at *the King*. No, not just David the king, but Jesus Christ the Son of David, who is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Do you see what honor was given to Ruth in her being included

in the covenant people? She was given the privilege of bearing David, and in so doing, bearing the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

In the end we can only say, “It is all grace.” It is *all* grace. Ruth’s redemption, her inclusion in the covenant people, and her privilege of bringing forth the king: all grace. And when we turn our eyes from Ruth to ourselves, we make that confession too. We are redeemed by the blood of Christ. We are brought into the covenant of God. And we are made subjects of the King, and children of the Father. To Him be the glory for His grace in our salvation.

Chapter 4



Bathsheba: The Way of Restoration

Matthew 1:6b, II Samuel 11, 12

“And David the king begat Solomon of her that had been the wife of Urias.”

Introduction

Bathsheba is perhaps the most difficult of the mothers of Christ to deal with because there is just not that much in the Word of God about Bathsheba. Even when she is introduced in II Samuel 11, she recedes almost immediately into the background. There are a few things that we know about Bathsheba, a few little windows into her own experience as the mother of Solomon. We read of those experiences in her finding that she is with child by David, and then later, a widow. There is enough in those experiences alone for a lifetime worth of sorrow for Bathsheba. But even in these experiences, Bathsheba recedes into the background. As such, the story of Bathsheba is not so much about Bathsheba as it is about David, the prophet Nathan, and her son Solomon.

In some ways it would seem that Bathsheba serves only as a kind of introduction to these other main characters in the story.

But when one considers the other mothers of Christ in Matthew 1, all of them ultimately recede into the background. The story of these mothers is not so much about them as it is about their sons, most importantly Jesus Christ Himself. The purpose of the genealogy is to point us to the Lord Jesus Christ; it is Him that we are interested in. As it was with the mothers of Christ, so it is with us. The life and family, the station and calling, and everything else given to us by the Lord are not first of all for ourselves. Very simply put, the lives that we live are not about us—at all. Everything about our lives should recede into the background as mere means that the Lord uses to glorify Himself.

This is the way we are going to deal with the life of Bathsheba as we know it. This chapter is mainly about David during his sin with Bathsheba, but also about Nathan and Solomon. As such, both Bathsheba and the characters in her life are really a testimony to the means by which God restores His wayward children, and thus are a testimony to the glory and the grace of God in His sovereign work of salvation.

II Samuel 11 introduces us to David during a time of devastating spiritual weakness in his life. The setting was the time of year when the kings went forth to battle. This year something was different in the host of Israel. Instead of David riding at the front of the army, we find that the captain of his host, Joab, was riding at the front of the army—and David was staying at home. By this action, David failed to fulfill his calling as the king of God's people. David was spiritually weak at this time in his life.

We read about weaknesses of the flesh that plague God's people from time to time in the Canons of Dordt. In Head 5, Article 4, David is cited as an example of one who underwent a lamentable spiritual fall into sin.

Although the weakness of the flesh cannot prevail against the power of God, who confirms and preserves true believers in a state of grace, yet converts are not always so influenced and actuated by the Spirit of God, as not in some particular instances sinfully to deviate from the guidance of divine grace, so as to be seduced by, and comply with the lusts of the flesh; they must, therefore, be constant in watching and prayer, that they be not led into temptation. When these are neglected, they are not only liable to be drawn into great and heinous sins by Satan, the world, and the flesh, but sometimes by the righteous permission of God actually fall into these evils. This the lamentable fall of David, Peter, and other saints described in Holy Scripture demonstrates.

Because of his own weakness and his own foolishness, David was not merely seduced by the lusts of his flesh, but fell into grievous adultery. The Bible is instructive regarding how the sin of adultery worked in the life of David. David did not fall into adultery all at once, so that one moment he was pure and upright, and the next moment he had plunged into the depths of that sin. David fell into that gross sin in small steps, each of which led him deeper into sin.

There are at least three steps in David's fall that the Word of God reveals to us. The first of those steps was that in the evening he walked out upon the roof of his house, and looking over the city, spied in the distance a woman washing herself—and then failed to turn away. His look lingered on this woman, who “was very beautiful to look upon” (II Samuel 11:2). The second step in David's fall was that instead of tearing his gaze away and repenting of his lust, he asked his servants, “Who is that over there?” Having thus discovered that the woman was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, David took the third and final step of sending his messengers to bring her to the palace. By then the physical sin of adultery, which subsequently took place in the palace, was almost a foregone conclusion.

We can almost see Satan there beside David, pulling him along step by step as he falls into his sin. And how this rings true in the life of the people of God too! When we are in a state of spiritual weakness, we can be likened to David, being pulled along by Satan. The heart desires; the flesh lusts; and instead of turning and repenting at each of those steps, we say, “Just a little more. Just a little further,” until we fall into a great sin.

Instead of repenting of his fall, David fell even further by trying to cover up his sin, at least from the eyes of the other people in Israel. After Bathsheba had gone home and a certain amount of time had passed, she sent a messenger back to David, saying, “I am with child.” In response, David did not confess his sin and repent, but tried to blot his sin out on his own.

At first David tried to make it look like the child he conceived with Bathsheba belonged to Uriah. But finding this child of God to be faithful and true at every turn, unwilling to take respite while the ark and the army of Israel were out in the fields, David resorted to darker plans than the cover of deception. With his own secret death sentence in hand, Uriah was sent back to Joab and the walls of Rabbah to die. And though David did not raise his own sword against Uriah, through his scheming he effectively took the sword of the Ammonites himself and slew Uriah with his own hand. In trying to cover his sin of adultery *by himself*, David compounded his sin and fell into the sin of murder as well. Instructive for God’s people in this Word is that when we take it upon ourselves to cover our sins or seek our covering in something other than the blood of Christ, we will inevitably fall into more sin. Attempting to cover a sin ends up compounding that sin, as in the case of David.

Child of God, there is only *one* covering for your sin! And that covering for sin is not to be found in your own hands. When you fall into sin and think that you are strong enough and wise enough to cover it up so that no one will

ever find out, then you too will compound your sins. One sin leads to another, except you repent and seek the *only* covering that can be found—the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ’s blood, and Christ’s blood alone, covers our sins in the sight of God. Therefore, you and I must confess our sins and seek the righteousness that can be found in Christ alone.

The fall into sin that David experienced had grave consequences for him and his family, and for the nation of Israel too. The Canons of Dordt (Head 5, Article 6) call David’s fall a “melancholy fall.” That word “melancholy” is a perfect description of David’s fall. It means “something that causes sorrow”—not just some fleeting sorrow, but something that plunges us into sorrow. The idea of depression is contained in the word “melancholy.” Melancholy suggests that a situation is such a sad, depressing thing that it robs one of the will or the ability to go on. David’s sin was a melancholy fall, and not only for him, but for all of the people of God. The people of Israel in his day were affected by the sin, because one of the consequences was that the sword never departed from David’s house (II Samuel 12:10). But more importantly, the sin committed in secret did become public to all Israel and gave the enemies of God opportunity to blaspheme (II Samuel 12:14). It was a cause of shame for the entire church of David’s day.

We can also rightly say that the effects of David’s fall are still felt in the church of Jesus Christ today. We may look at David’s sin and say, “Who is that? Is that David? Is that the man after God’s own heart? Is that the shepherd of Israel? Is that the one who slew Goliath? What is he doing home during the war, and what is he doing with Bathsheba in his house? And what is he doing with Uriah’s blood on his hands? *Who is that?*” These questions are a source of melancholy for us, as the Canons describe it, because there is not one of us who is spiritually stronger than David. David was a spiritual giant. David was an outstanding Old Testament type of Christ.

In contrast, we are just regular people of God and saints in His kingdom. Not that the office of believer is to be despised (it is quite something to be a regular child of God and a saint in His kingdom!), but we don't measure up to the spiritual stature of David. And if David was capable of adultery and murder, then you and I are capable of it too. We learn from the fall of David that every single one of us is capable of the most heinous transgressions.

However, the purpose of knowing this Word of God, which reveals our total depravity, is not to leave us despondent of even trying to live a holy life. The purpose of hearing this Word of God is that we are warned to be vigilant. This Word of God says, "Be diligent in searching the Word and in prayer. Be faithful in using the means of grace that God has given you!" Do you want to continue to taste the grace of God and live in His favor? Then beware, lest you fall as David fell. There is a warning to us in David's melancholy fall that we must be vigilant in our spiritual Christian life—because Satan, the roaring lion, is ever seeking spiritual stragglers whom he can devour.

Another key purpose the Holy Spirit has in revealing the history of David's fall is to remind us that David was only a *type* of Christ—he was not the real Messiah. David wasn't the one who would bring salvation to the people by his own strength. David was only a shadow of Christ. He was only a picture—an outstanding picture in the Old Testament, but in the end only a picture. His grievous fall into sin showed the children of Israel that they could not put their trust in David, but must put their trust in Jehovah God alone. And for us, the children of the new dispensation, David's fall is a reminder that our trust is not in ourselves or in any mere man, but in Jesus Christ. He alone is our salvation.

David's failure to trust in Jehovah for his forgiveness and covering leaves us with a chilling message. II Samuel 11 ends with these words: "But the thing that David had done

displeased the LORD.” David thought he had everything covered. He apparently believed that no one was going to find out. But God in heaven knew—and this thing displeased the Lord. That is the worst thing that a child of God could ever hear. When we read this close to chapter 11, it is difficult to continue reading, because we know what *has* to come next. When the Lord is displeased, when His anger is kindled, the only possible result is the punishment of hell. The difficulty in reading this passage of God’s Word is that every believer—and really every person—knows in his or her heart that the things they have done displease God. It is hard to read this passage because we know what it is we deserve. When this is said about us, “The thing that you did displeased the Lord,” then what has to come next, by rights, is hell and destruction.

But the amazing wonder of God’s grace is that what by all rights *should* happen is not what comes next in the story of David’s fall! Chapter 12 is not about David’s destruction. Chapter 12 is not about the eternal curse of God that you and I must bear. Chapter 12 is about restoration! Chapter 12 is about salvation and the forgiveness of sins! Yes, there is great pain in that way of forgiveness. There was great sorrow for David in the chastisements that he had to bear—that is there in chapter 12 too. But chapter 12 is not essentially about punishment and destruction—it is about David’s salvation. If the end of chapter 11 is chilling—“The thing that David had done displeased the LORD”—then the beginning of chapter 12 is glorious and wonderful: “And the LORD sent Nathan unto David.” Nathan, who would bring David to repentance and show David the way of forgiveness.

As a prophet of Jehovah, Nathan brought the living Word of God to David. This is always the first step in spiritual restoration: the sending of the Word of God. The heart of Nathan’s message to David was the Word of God, which bore this accusation: “Thou art the man!” “David, you are guilty.”

Nathan brought this accusation to David in the form of the well-known story of the rich man and the poor man. There were two men, and they were neighbors. One man was very rich and had many flocks. His neighbor was very poor. This man had no flocks; in fact, he only had one little she lamb. But he loved that one little lamb, and raised it as if it were one of his own children. It lived with him in the house with his children, and was precious to this man. One day a visitor came to the rich man's house, and wanting to provide a meal for that visitor, the rich man sought out a tender lamb. But rather than taking one from his own flocks, he went to his neighbor's house and took his little lamb and killed it for the meal. Despite having many to spare, he took the one beloved lamb from his neighbor, who had none other.

This story made David angry! In his "righteous" anger he declared, "As the LORD liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die!" (II Samuel 12:5). Having heard these heated words of judgment from David's own mouth, Nathan brought the accusation that David had been blind to: "*Thou art the man.*"

Such a word of accusation is not an easy word to bring, especially when the accusation must be delivered to a close friend or relative who has strayed from the Word of God. Nevertheless, it is this word of accusation that a parent is sometimes called to bring to his children: "My son (or my daughter), it is *you* who has displeased God. The Word of God is that *you* are walking in sin." Nor is this an easy word for the elders to bring in the work of discipline, when they have to go to the home of a member of the congregation and say from the Word of God, "It is *you*. You are the one who is guilty before God. *Thou art the man.*" Nor is the word of accusation an easy word to deliver from the pulpit. But the gospel message must at times contain accusations that bring a congregation to its knees: "People of God, *thou art the man*, and *I am the man.*" That is the Word that has to be brought.

Let us not lose sight, however, of why the word of accusation must be brought. The purpose of God was not to cut off David in his sin, but to restore his relationship with God. This restoration is accomplished in the way of repentance. And repentance can only be achieved when—by the grace of God—the word of accusation is brought to cut through all of the defenses and hardness of heart that we raise to justify our sins. When we walk in the way of unrepentant sin, we make ourselves hard against God. We put up defenses against Him and His Word, convincing ourselves that we are right. That was the case with David. For a long time—almost enough time for his first child with Bathsheba to be born—he convinced himself that everything was okay. For almost a year, David walked unrepentantly in his sins of adultery, lying, and murder. He was hard against the Word of God until Nathan came to him with the accusation, “*Thou art the man.*” Then, finally, David’s defenses were all thrown to the ground. This is the word that we are called to bring from time to time to each other, so that our defenses are thrown to the ground, and so that we can be restored in the way of repentance and faith in Christ.

To preserve David in the way of faith and obedience, God sent consequences for David’s sin. We must not think of these consequences as punishments, as if we or David are able to pay for our sin, even in part. Instead, these consequences are chastisements, intended to turn us from hardness of heart and to instruct us that the way of sin is death. For David, those consequences were severe. The first consequence for David was that his child with Bathsheba died soon after birth. In addition, the sword of strife would never depart from his house.

If II Samuel 12 is a glorious record of David’s restoration, then chapter 13 is a lesson in the consequences of sin that plagued his life thereafter. In II Samuel 13 we witness the horrible consequences of the sword in David’s house almost

immediately after his affair with Bathsheba. The sickening story of Amnon, Tamar, and Absalom is one we might hesitate to read at the dinner table with little children around. In this story we see the sins of lust and murder perpetuated in David's own family, and we find the seeds of rebellion and civil war that would soon follow. These consequences of David's fall into sin, ordained by God, were severe.

Let us not forget that the consequences for our sins can oftentimes be severe as well. But never forget that these chastisements are given in love by a heavenly Father who is working restoration. The consequences of sin are not a mark that we have ceased to be God's children, but are rather evidence that we are beloved of God and cherished by Him. Nevertheless, consequences for sin—even upon the children of God—can be terribly severe.

But why this means? Why must such *hard* consequences befall the repentant children of God as part of restoration? The simple answer is that consequences must be hard because hard consequences are the best teacher. Remember the purpose of chastisement: to teach. When God comes with the accusation "*Thou art the man,*" He also adds to that word a consequence to drive home His command, "*Thou shalt not.*" Consequences are a constant reminder to us to hate our sin. Those consequences spiritually shake us awake, as it were, so that our eyes are forced open to see "The way that I have been living has not been pleasant. It has been miserable! It brings more misery." God in His wisdom knows how to apply His own rod of instruction, a rod that drives home His Word and brings us to repentance.

Notice what the hard consequences for sin—along with the word of accusation—did for David. He repented! See the confession that he makes in II Samuel 12:13. David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." That is marvelous! For the first time in almost a year, David acknowledged his sin. His confession marks his true restoration, though he was

pained in heart and laid exceedingly low. See in David's brief statement of contrition the true repentance that is required of us. First of all, true repentance does not blame another. True repentance acknowledges one's own sin. David did not say, "It was partly Bathsheba's fault. What was she doing, washing herself out in the open anyway, where I could see her?" Nor did David blame his sin on his palace servants, who revealed Bathsheba's identity, or Joab, who enabled him to kill Uriah. David simply admitted, "It is my fault. I am the one that has sinned."

True repentance, in the second place, makes a *full* confession of sin. Even though David's repentance is very brief—"I have sinned against the LORD"—in that word "sinned" is included all of his transgressions in this whole matter. Nathan had just laid them all before him, and with those transgressions lying before him, David exclaimed, "I am guilty of every one of them." That is a full confession of sin. He was not trying to hide it anymore; David confessed it all. "I have sinned before the Lord in the way you have laid out, Nathan."

In the third place, true repentance acknowledges that the worst part of sin is that it is against God. David confessed, "I have sinned against the LORD." There is something remarkable in that confession. Nathan had just told David of the most awful things that were going to happen to his family, yet David's concern was for the *Lord*. "I have sinned against *Him*." David's sorrow was not merely because of *consequences*, but his sorrow was because he had violated the Word of Jehovah God, whom he loved. His true concern was for his sin against his God, and for the occasion he had given to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme (II Samuel 12:14). This is the way of true sorrow and repentance. Though God may use consequences to make us sorry the right way, our foremost sorrow is not for these consequences. True sorrow lies in our consciousness that we have sinned against our Father, and that we have displeased Him alone.

We end this chapter on Bathsheba and David by looking beyond the consequences—which were for this life—to the final restoration of David. The end of David’s restoration is glorious, because the end is full forgiveness of all of his sins in the blood of Jesus Christ. Two brief sections in II Samuel 12 point to this fact. In verse 13 we read: “David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, *The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.*” Then, in verses 24 and 25, we read: “And David comforted Bathsheba his wife, and went in unto her, and lay with her: and she bare a son, and he called his name Solomon: *and the LORD loved him.* And he sent by the hand of Nathan the prophet; and he called his name Jedidiah, because of the LORD.” That name Jedidiah means “beloved of the Lord.” This was the end for David: a full and complete pardon of all his sins, and provision of a sign that he had been graciously restored to the covenant promises.

This end to the story of David and Bathsheba is the very Word of the gospel to guilty and repentant sinners in the church of Jesus Christ. “The Lord also hath put away thy sin.” That sin does not stick to you anymore; it does not count as yours anymore. It is gone! And furthermore, that sin is not simply plucked off and then hidden by God, but it is forgiven and completely washed away. Notice the guarantee that David had—and that you and I have—concerning forgiveness. This guarantee came through the son born to David and Bathsheba, whom they named Solomon. What do we find out about him? “*The LORD loved him.*” That is the name that God gave him through Nathan: Jedidiah, beloved of the Lord. And that is the guarantee that our sins are indeed forgiven. They were all put upon Jesus Christ, who is the true and beloved Son of God. And because God loved Him, He would not leave Jesus Christ in the guilt of those sins. Instead He would raise Jesus from death, having once paid for all our sins.

And then He would put the risen Christ Jesus at His own right hand, where He now reigns in glory.

Our hope lies in the knowledge that the real Jedidiah, Beloved of the Lord, reigns in glory today. Our hope lies in the knowledge that we are His, and that if He is beloved of the Lord, if He is truly Jedidiah, then you and I must be Jedidiah as well. This is your name in Christ, and mine. You are *Jedidiah*, beloved of the Lord. And in that love is the guarantee that all of our sins—no matter how heinous—are forgiven. So it turns out that the history of Bathsheba is not so difficult after all. It is the history of salvation in the Savior revealed in this unlikely mother.

Chapter 5



Mary: Blessed Art Thou!

Matthew 1:16, Luke 1:26–56

“And David the king begat Solomon of her that had been the wife of Urias.”

Introduction

We turn our attention in this chapter to Mary, the final mother in the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ. Of all the five mothers of Christ listed in Matthew 1, she was perhaps the most unlikely mother of them all. Mary stands apart as an unlikely mother not because of her lifestyle, or her sins, or her race, as the other mothers we have considered; but because Mary was a virgin. With the other mothers, at least there was a man involved; but for Mary it was *impossible* for her to be a mother of Christ, at least humanly speaking. And yet here she is at the end of the genealogy, a virgin giving birth to Jesus, who was called Christ.

Therefore Mary, just like these other mothers of Christ, demonstrates the complete grace of God in our salvation.

What was humanly impossible for this mother—to bring forth a son—with God is possible.

Honor belongs to Mary, because Mary was blessed. The angel Gabriel said to her, “Blessed art thou among women,” and Mary herself sang the words, “From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.” However, Mary’s honor is not due to anything in her. The story of Mary *must* begin with Mary’s own unworthiness. Mary was nothing as the world counts honor. There was no earthly prestige or importance attached to a lowly woman from Galilee. Mary confessed as much in the song she sang upon seeing her cousin Elisabeth. She says in Luke 1:48, “He hath regarded the *low estate* of his handmaiden.” That was all that she had: a low estate. Nobody took note of her. Nobody attached any special importance to her. In fact, when she and Joseph would come to the inn a little later, as recorded in Luke 2, there would be no room for her there. This was especially because there was no room for the Son she was carrying, but there was no room for Mary there either, because there was nothing significant about Mary. She was nothing as far as the world was concerned.

The wording of the passage in Luke 1 emphasizes the insignificance of Mary as well. Notice that throughout the passage she is entirely passive. It was not Mary who decided “Now I am going to bring forth a son.” It was God who decided “Mary, you are going to bring forth a Son.” Mary stood before the angel and received the news without any authority to say “yes” or “no” to that news. Even Mary’s acknowledgement of the Lord’s word to her, “So be it unto thy handmaid as thou hast said,” was a passive acceptance of what the Lord had declared unto her. This was evident to Elisabeth who, understanding the extent of Mary’s role, exclaimed to her, “Blessed is she that believed.” In the passage, Mary was entirely passive. She did not take the initiative in the bringing forth of the Son of God, nor did she give her approval that she would be the mother of the Christ.

What is more, from a spiritual point of view, Mary was nothing. Spiritually she was a fallen human, by nature dead in trespasses and sins. We do not read much about Mary's sin in the Word of God, but the Word does indicate that Mary sometimes focused on the earthly. She pondered many things in her heart, and so perhaps she had a clearer understanding of the heavenly purpose of Christ, her Son, than others did; but she nevertheless clung to the earthly. Jesus had to rebuke her a couple of times for that—once when he was twelve years old and Mary was upset with Him for staying behind in Jerusalem after the feast without His parents' knowledge. At that time Jesus said to her, "How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" (Luke 2:49).

A similar incident is recorded in John 2, at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Again Mary came to Jesus, this time when the hosts ran out of wine, and said, "They have no wine." From Jesus' response we can understand that implied in this simple statement was an earthly command: "Perform a miracle so that everybody knows now who you are, so that you can take the throne of David in Jerusalem." Jesus had to turn to her and say, "Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come" (John 2:4). Mary clung to the earthly. That was a mistake—a spiritual weakness—which was an evidence of her totally depraved nature.

From every point of view, Mary, according to spiritual and earthly considerations, was nothing, and no honor is due her whatsoever for what she was in herself. That truth exposes the folly of the worship of Mary practiced by the Roman Catholic Church. As Reformed (Protestant) Christians, we have a controversy with the Roman Catholic Church yet today. That controversy is not only concerning the way of salvation and justification by faith alone, but that controversy also has to do with the place of Mary in the worship of the church. The Roman Catholic Church prays to her with this idea in mind: Jesus Christ is so high and so exalted—and fierce in His

anger against sin—that He is not going to take the time to listen to *me* if I would pray to Him. In fact, He might destroy me. But He will listen to His mother! So I will pray to Mary, and Mary will bring my petition to her Son, and then Jesus will hear me. Before long, members in the Roman Catholic Church begin to seek their salvation not in Jesus Christ, but in His mother, Mary. That is foolish! There is nothing about her—in and of herself—that deserves the honor or worship of mankind.

Nevertheless, though Mary had no worth and no honor in herself, and though she does not deserve our worship, she is the most blessed among women. Both the angel (“Blessed art thou among women,” Luke 1:28) and Elisabeth (“Blessed art thou among women,” Luke 1:42) make this clear, as does Mary herself (“From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed,” Luke 1:48). But Mary’s blessedness was attached to her Son. Her blessing was that God had given her the privilege to bring forth the Christ: to bear Him in her womb, to bring Him forth into the world, to nurture and raise Him, and to be with Him for 33 years or so of her earthly life. Mary’s blessedness was that she brought forth the Christ.

The blessedness that was Mary’s was such a privilege because it meant that God, from all eternity, had chosen Mary as the setting for the greatest miracle ever. The central wonder of salvation happened *in* Mary, the wonder of the incarnation. This miracle is the mystery of godliness that Paul speaks of in I Timothy 3:16: “Great is the mystery of godliness: *God was manifest in the flesh.*” This is the great wonder of all the ages. Mary was privileged to be the setting in which the greatest miracle that ever occurred took place. What happened in Mary is the subject of the wonder of the church of all ages. Still today the church beholds the incarnation of the Lord with awe. The incarnation is *the* central wonder of salvation.

In its essence, the incarnation was this: the eternal God, the second Person of the Trinity, who is and remains most

blessed; who is eternal, who is infinite, who is omnipotent and omniscient, and who is God Himself; took to Himself a human nature, as real as ours, so that He was and is at the same time both fully God and fully man, united in one Person.

That the church refers to the incarnation as the “central wonder” means first of all that it is the greatest and most powerful miracle ever performed. Can we see that, that the birth of Jesus is the *greatest* miracle ever performed? There are all kinds of miracles that we might pick out as the greatest. Perhaps your pick might be the creation of the world in the beginning out of nothing—that was a great miracle! Maybe mine would be the raising of the dead in Scripture—Lazarus and others. Or perhaps for another the restoration of sight to the blind would be the greatest. But all of the miracles in the Word of God pale in comparison to this wonder: that God Himself became man. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). The incarnation stands head and shoulders above all of the miracles in Scripture.

That the incarnation is the central wonder of salvation also means this: that it is the wonder that gives meaning to all of the other miracles. The birth of the Lord is *the sign* of signs that interprets and explains every other sign and wonder done in Scripture. In some ways all of the miracles point to this one fact: that God has come in the flesh and has united us to Himself. All miracles point to the result of the incarnation, the salvation of God’s elect people. In this way we see that the dead are raised to live with Him, that the blind receive their sight to see Him, that the lame walk to follow Him. Every wonder finds its center in the incarnation of the Lord. And Mary was privileged to be the setting in which this great wonder took place.

The incarnation is also the greatest wonder ever from a personal point of view, because the result of the incarnation is very literally “God with us.” When the angel told Mary, “He shall be called Emmanuel,” he was simply telling her that her

Son would be “God with us.” Still today God lives with us in personal, intimate fellowship. As Emmanuel, He does not stay far away from us in heaven, sending down a few commands for us to follow, moving and directing our lives by His providence in a cold, impersonal way. That is not how God is *with* us. God is our Father by coming and uniting Himself to us in the Son. He took to Himself a human nature so that He would be one of us. This is how He lives with us. This is how He is Emmanuel. He united the divine and the human in His own divine Person, and lives with us that way.

So from a very personal point of view, that is the greatest miracle of all. Is it a miracle that the blind can see? Is it a miracle that the dead are raised? I know one greater: that God lives with me, and that He dwells with me! That is the greatest miracle because we know ourselves. We know our own unworthiness. We know our sin. We know our depravity. We know what we deserve. By nature we deserve to be cast out. By nature we deserve not Emmanuel, but by nature we deserve God *against* us! And yet the Lord, in His mercy, was pleased to send His only begotten Son to dwell with you and to dwell with me. Emmanuel: God with us.

The incarnation, therefore, is why Mary is blessed. It was her privilege to bring forth this child, who would save His people from their sins. It was for this purpose that Gabriel told Mary that her Son must be named Jesus. Gabriel said to Mary, “Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS” (Luke 1:31). Notice that this name is in all capital letters in the King James Version of the Bible. The translators of this version have done us a favor in this respect, so that that name jumps out at us. When you open to Luke 1, that name *should* stand out: JESUS! That name is the most beautiful name of all names on the earth; beautiful because it reveals to us the possibility of His other name, Emmanuel.

The name Jesus reveals the name Emmanuel because salvation is the only way that it is possible that God *can* dwell with us. Back up for a moment to the name Emmanuel, God with us. We know what we deserve. Because of our sins and our trespasses, we cannot have any place in heaven with God. We may not have any fellowship with Him. We may not be His friends, and certainly not His children. By nature we are children of the devil. By nature we ought to be cast out into outer darkness. But the name Jesus reveals the possibility of God dwelling with us. The possibility is that all of our sins are removed by this Jesus. He came to give His own life on our behalf, that all our sins might be washed away. And now who will dwell in God's tabernacle? Who will ascend into His holy hill (Psalm 24:3)? We shall, because our hands are pure and our hearts are clean by the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in washing away all our sins! The word *Savior* is in Jesus' name. Je-sus is the combination of Jehovah-Salvation. This Jesus is the Savior! The name Jesus is sweet, because it reveals the possibility of our dwelling with Jehovah God.

The name Jesus is also sweet because it reveals the *certainty* of our dwelling with God. "Salvation" and "Savior" are not the only meanings wrapped up in that name; there is also the name "Jehovah" in the name Jesus: Jehovah salvation. This one who was born of Mary is God Himself. He is the great I AM. He is the second person of the Holy Trinity. And therefore the angel announces to Mary, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Jesus is God Himself, and therefore our salvation is not left in the hands of a mere man. He had to be a man, but He had to be more than a man. He had to be God as well, because only one who is Himself divine can bear God's wrath. And because He is Jehovah, our salvation is sure.

That makes the name of Jesus the sweetest, most wonderful, and most beautiful name that there is. Consider the power of that name. Consider where that name has gone. That name is known in almost every language of the earth. That name is spoken quietly by those who are weighed down with burdens and afflictions so that they are able to bear them with patience. That name Jesus is whispered by those who stand before the waters of Jordan, before they depart this earthly sojourn in the wilderness to enter into their Canaan in heaven. The name Jesus, shouted aloud in victory, has comforted and consoled the hearts of God's people ever since He poured out His Spirit on the church. Jesus is the name of our salvation!

The victory that is Jesus' reveals something more about this Son: that He would have the kingly office. The angel Gabriel also revealed this to Mary in Luke 1:32–33: "He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end." In this prophecy we see the full purpose of Jesus' work in saving and in dwelling with us. The purpose of His dwelling with us is not that He would come down from heaven into our misery and stay here. Nor was the purpose that He bring Himself down to perish here on earth as a man. Instead, the purpose of His dwelling with us is that He takes us out of our misery and raises us into His kingdom. He is, after all, *the* great King. He is the Son of David. He is the one that the people of God had been looking for ever since the days of David, and really, ever since the days of Adam and Eve, when the Seed of the Woman was promised. They were looking for the one who would be *the* mighty King, whose arm was strong to bring them salvation and rule His people with righteousness and justice.

Citizenship in the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ is one of the greatest blessings of being a child of God. Why? Because being a citizen of His kingdom changes everything

about this earthly sojourn. If we were not citizens of His kingdom, then the only joy that we could possibly have is the fleeting pleasure of a few earthly things. Without the kingdom and its all-powerful King, all those earthly things would perish, and we would open our eyes in hell. All those who are not citizens of the kingdom of Christ must end up in eternal misery in hell—and even now in this life already begin bearing the wrath of God against their sins. But for the child of God who is a citizen of the heavenly kingdom, this earthly sojourn is not merely about earthly things. In fact, it is not at *all* about earthly things and the treasures that we can lay up here, because as citizens of the heavenly kingdom, we are only pilgrims and strangers. The hope of dwelling with God in eternity and living with Him in perfect fellowship changes the whole worldview of the child of God. This is why having Jesus, the King of kings, as our Lord is such a blessing!

Let us focus for a moment on the extent of this blessing, which is also revealed in Gabriel's message to Mary. In telling Mary that her son would be the Son of David and would sit upon David's throne, Gabriel foretold that "Of his kingdom there shall be no end." The kingdom of heaven is eternal, so that from now until the end of the ages and into all eternity, we will dwell with God. Emmanuel will be the reality forever—God with us. That truth gives us comfort in our present afflictions, which can be heavy. In any affliction, it is natural that we look for an end. Whether it be a severe illness or any other trial of the flesh, we long for an end to our misery. But take all of those trials and put them to one side. Then take an eternity of Emmanuel—an eternity of life with Christ!—and place it on the other side, and then weigh these two against each other. You will find that the afflictions of this life don't even deserve to be compared to the life that we have with God, because His kingdom has no end.

Does this seem impossible to you? Does the promise of eternal life with God seem so far off that you think it cannot

be true? Then read in Luke 1:37 what God reveals to us through the incarnation of His Son: “With God *nothing* shall be impossible.” What was happening in Mary was impossible. She did not know a man. It was biologically impossible that she should be with child. But the angel showed Mary—and us—the possibility of the impossible when our sovereign God is involved. “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.” As if to prove his point that all things are possible with God, the angel told Mary, “And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.” Do you want proof, Mary? If the Lord can give a John the Baptist to a barren Elisabeth, then the Lord can give Jesus the Christ to the virgin Mary. Do you want proof, child of God? If God can bring His Son from a virgin mother, then he can bring you into eternal fellowship, free of sin and misery, with him. With God *all* things are possible.

What is crystal clear from this Word of God is that the incarnation of Jesus bears directly on our comfort and our salvation. Not only was it impossible for Mary to have a son, but it is humanly impossible for you and for me to be saved. It is humanly *impossible*. There is nothing in me that I can rely on to take away my sins. There is nothing in me that I can rely on to change my heart. By nature you and I are dead in trespasses and sins. By nature we are corrupt. There is no possibility from our side to bring salvation. But with God *nothing* is impossible. God sent His only begotten Son through the virgin Mary that we might have life.

And so we come to the end of the unlikely mothers of Christ in the same place where we began: by lifting our eyes from these mothers to behold their Son, and by lifting our eyes from their Son to behold our God, who has given us Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

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