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Matthew 1:1-18

Third Message

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JESUS CHRIST, SON OF DAVID, SON OF ABRAHAM

SERIES: THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE NEW, AND THE PERFECT

Two months ago, I left you with the question, “How do we get back to the garden?” and told you that you would have to wait till the next week for the answer. But that week I flew over the handlebars of my bike, broke my elbow and landed in the hospital. Thanks to the many of you who have expressed your care and concern during these past two months. But I owe you an apology for leaving you in the wilderness for so long, with my question unanswered.

In my first message we saw that God carefully formed and filled a world that was very good. Into this world he placed man to rule as his earthly representative. In the second message we saw that God planted a garden into which he placed man. This garden was God’s sanctuary, a piece of heaven on earth. Here man was to be God’s faithful and obedient servant, enjoying God’s bounty. But man and woman took matters into their own hands, deciding and doing what was right in their own eyes, not in God’s eyes. For this act of moral autonomy, of acting as God who alone can decide what is good and evil, God expelled them from the garden, from his sanctuary.

Today I am going to attempt to present the story from then until now—thousands of years of history and 99% of the Biblical timeline. For many weeks I pondered what to use as my text. I was spoiled for choice, for I had almost the entire Scripture to choose from. I finally decided to take what may seem to you a most unlikely text—the genealogy in Matthew 1. What were you doing when that genealogy was read for us a few minutes ago? Did you nod off? Did you squirm in your seat and feel uncomfortable? Did you get indignant? We don’t know what to do with the genealogies in Scripture. Or rather, we do know what to do: we hit the fast forward button and skip right over them.

Not all cultures treat the Biblical genealogies this way, as Joanne Shetler relates in her book, *And the Word Came With Power*.¹ Joanne went to the Philippines with Wycliffe Bible Translators. When she arrived in the tribal village which was to be her home for the next many years, the village headman invited her to live with him and his family. Joanne was single, and this headman took her under his protective care. But he never showed any interest in the gospel. Joanne labored away faithfully, learning the language, teaching the people to read, and translating the Bible. The first book that she translated was Matthew’s Gospel. Shortly after Joanne had finished Matthew, the headman picked up the finished booklet and said he wanted to see the fruit of her labors. He opened the booklet to the first page and started to read. Joanne, knowing what was on that first page, urgently suggested that he skip to the next page. But it was too late. The headman had started reading chapter 1, and he was hooked. After reading the genealogy he said to Joanne, “Why did you never tell me this

was in here?” He was soon converted, and immediately wanted to take the gospel to the neighboring villages. He became an energetic and successful evangelist. He had a single evangelistic tool. With Joanne’s help he wrote out a genealogy on a long sheet of paper. When he explained the gospel he would hold up this sheet and explain the people’s genealogy, starting with Adam, through Abraham, David, Jesus, and down to themselves.

Joanne didn’t know what to do with a genealogy, nor do we. But this “primitive” headman knew what to do with it. He understood that a genealogy places you into a bigger story. He placed himself and his tribe into that story, into the genealogy. This is why Alex Haley’s book *Roots* was so popular. Millions of people placed themselves into the story of Kunta Kinta. But the Christian gospel is usually presented without any roots, without any genealogies. As a result, we don’t understand our story. We’re orphaned and adrift in time with no anchor to the generations that have gone before.

Matthew understood the significance of roots. He started his gospel with a genealogy to firmly anchor Jesus in a broader story. He entitles this:

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham. (Matt 1:1 NIV)

Matthew considered it vital that his readers see Jesus as the son of David and the son of Abraham, that is, that they place him within the broader story of David and Abraham. If we are to understand Jesus, therefore, we need to understand Abraham and David. But to understand Abraham, we need to understand the events that preceded him.

From Abel to Babel

In the eight chapters between the expulsion from the garden and the call of Abraham (Gen 4:1–11:26), mankind goes from bad to worse. These chapters can be conveniently divided into three cycles of sin, judgment and grace. In the first cycle, Cain slays Abel. God responds in judgment by cursing Cain, consigning him and his line to futility, but he also responds graciously by giving Adam and Eve a replacement son, Seth. In the second cycle, the sons of God marry the daughters of men. Just what this means is beyond my scope today, but the key issue is that the sons of God see what is good and they take (6:2), whereas God sees that this is evil (6:5). God responds in judgment by undoing Creation with the Flood waters, but he also responds graciously by remembering Noah (8:1), driving back the waters, accepting Noah’s offering, and making a covenant. In the third cycle, mankind gathers to build a mighty tower. God responds in judgment by confusing men’s language and scattering humanity across the face of the earth.

What is the point of these chapters, other than to give us interesting stories to teach our children in Sunday School? Two things. Firstly, they show the inability of mankind to find its way back to the garden. Indeed, humanity wanders further and further east of Eden (11:2). Secondly, they show God's repeated grace in the face of human wickedness. This grace is evident even in God's judgment. In each cycle God intercedes in judgment to limit the spread of evil. It is because he cares so deeply for his creation that he acts to restrain evil. It is the same way with parents and children. Parents discipline their children not because they don't care, but because they do care. Wise parents set boundaries for their children, and intercede when they stray beyond those boundaries. Children who grow up without boundaries are profoundly insecure, and often act up in a desperate attempt to get some sign from their parents that they care. Ultimately the problem of theodicy, that is of why God allows the continuation of evil, is hidden within his inscrutable will, but the clear message of Genesis 4-11 and of the rest of Scripture is that God sets bounds beyond which he will not allow evil to progress.

It is one thing to restrain evil, but how is evil to be reversed and ultimately eliminated? How is mankind to find its way back to the garden if it persists in wandering further and further east of Eden? By the end of Genesis 11 it has become clear that mankind cannot save itself, and that the only hope is for God to intervene.

Abraham

The way that God chooses to intervene is to summon an old man to head west.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

**"I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."** (Gen 12:1-3)

Abraham was a moon-worshiper in Ur, a cosmopolitan city in what is today southern Iraq. God intervened in this man's life and told him to leave everything and head west to an unknown land. God laid out his plan in a seven-line statement of intent, in which the verb "bless" and the noun "blessing" occur five times. Hitherto, God's world had labored more under curse than under blessing. But God was not content for it to remain so. He was determined to restore blessing to the world that he had formed and filled, and to the humanity that he had created to bear his image. Remember that for God to bless something is to ensure that it functions in accord with his will; for him to curse something is to consign it to futility. God told Abraham that he would bless him, that is, that he would restore him to be the sort of human he had created him to be.

God chose Abraham to be the recipient of his blessing, of his grace. Abraham was the beneficiary of God's election. At the

mention of election, people frequently object that God is unfair. But the previous chapters have shown us that without God's intervention there is no hope. Furthermore, God chose Abraham not just to bless him, but to pour blessing through him to all peoples on earth.

God's plan to restore blessing to humanity through Abraham had two main components: a seed and a land. God said that he would make Abraham "into a great nation." Though Abraham was an old man and his wife Sarah was barren, God would give them descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, as the sand on the seashore (15:5). God's plan was that this great company would be his people and that he would be their God (17:7). And this people would have a land, the land to which God had brought Abraham, the Promised Land (12:7).

But there was a delay before Abraham's seed would gain this land. Three generations later, the descendants of Abraham found themselves in Egypt, where eventually they were subjected to harsh slavery. But God raised up Moses and sent him to Pharaoh with the demand, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me" (Exod 7:16; 8:1; 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). These oppressed Israelites, these children of Abraham, were the people of God. The Lord destined them not for a life of slavery but for a life of worship. And so the Lord went into battle against the Egyptian gods and against Pharaoh. He defeated the forces that held the Israelites in bondage, brought them through the Red Sea and the wilderness and brought them to Mount Sinai. Here he said to them,

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exod 19:4-6)

God had delivered the Israelites so that he might bring them to himself and make them his treasured possession, the personal treasure of the King of Heaven. The Lord redeemed Israel to be nothing less than the new humanity, the people restored to fellowship with God. God had the people build a tabernacle so that he could dwell with them. He was bringing them through the wilderness to a land flowing with milk and honey, a land that was to be a recreation of the garden of Eden.

God's purpose for these children of Abraham can be best summed up this way: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you."

David

Under the leadership of Joshua, God brought his people into the Promised Land, into this new Eden. But to take the land, the people needed to be faithful and obedient, which they ceased to be after the death of Joshua. The end of the book of Judges summarizes it this way: "everyone did as he saw fit" (Judg 17:6; 21:25). Do you hear the echoes? The Israelites strayed so far from the Lord that he allowed the ark of the covenant to be captured by the Philistines (1 Sam 4). Since the ark represented God's presence among his people, God was essentially going into voluntary exile, saying that he would rather live with the Philistines than with his own people! The Israelites had a solution; they told Samuel:

“We want a king over us. Then we shall be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.” (1 Sam 8:19-20)

But God had called Israel to be unlike all the other nations. God gave them the sort of king they were looking for, Saul, and he proved a disaster. But then God gave them his idea of a king, David, a man after his own heart. David did what earlier generations had been unable to do: he completed the conquest of the land. As soon as he became king of all Israel, he defeated the Philistines, captured Jerusalem, and brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. God thereby returned to live in the midst of his people. In Jerusalem were enthroned two kings: God, the heavenly king, and David, his earthly representative. A king lives in a palace, so after David built his own palace, he thought it appropriate that he build God's palace, the temple (2 Sam 7:1-2).

Through the prophet Nathan God told David that it would not be he, David, who would build the temple, but a son that the Lord would raise up for him (2 Sam 7:13). Furthermore, he, the Lord, would adopt this son: “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (2 Sam 7:14). It initially seemed that Solomon would be this promised son. He was unparalleled in his wisdom as a ruler, and he did indeed build a temple for the Lord. The glory of the Lord filled this temple as God took up residence in his earthly palace, enthroned in the midst of his people. Israel was a colony of heaven on earth. The kings of the earth sent their representatives to this colony, seeking blessing (1 Kgs 4:34). The most famous visitor was the Queen of Sheba. She “was overwhelmed” at what she saw and praised the Lord (1 Kgs 10:5, 9).

Exile

“King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women” (1 Kgs 11:1). Solomon lost his passion for the Lord. Israel, the colony of heaven, began to fall apart. Eventually God withdrew his glory from the temple (Ezek 10) and sent the people into exile to Babylon. The echoes of Genesis 3 are unmistakable. In each case, the people that God had created to be his earthly representatives were expelled east of Eden.

Matthew takes the Exile of Israel to Babylon as the third defining moment of Israel's history. Though some Israelites did come back to the land seventy years later, the Jews of Jesus' day viewed themselves as still being in exile. They were ruled by Rome. They had a king who had built a magnificent temple, but this man, Herod, whom Rome acknowledged as King of the Jews, was not a Jew himself, and certainly not a son of David.

Jesus

Matthew concludes his genealogy by noting

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ. (Matt 1:17)

There were three periods of fourteen generations, or six periods of seven generations. Matthew thus prepares his readers to expect the inauguration of the seventh period, in which Jesus will fulfill the promise of each of these earlier periods. He would end Israel's exile. He would be the true son of David who would build the temple as God's earthly palace, and would rule Israel, heaven's

colony on earth. He would be the son of Abraham who would restore Israel to its status as most favored nation, living in the Promised Land.

If you don't understand this genealogy, then you can't really understand what Jesus' ministry was all about. Jesus walked into this ongoing story, but he played his part in ways that defied everyone's expectations. He redefined all the terms.

Jesus redefined exile. The Jews saw Rome as the problem, as the enemy that enslaved them. But Jesus saw that the enemy was not Rome, but Satan, the strong man whom he had come to bind. Not only were the Jews in bondage to this strong man, but the Jewish leaders were behaving as his agents, opposing God's will. These Jewish leaders were holding the people in as much bondage as the Romans. Jesus delivered people from exile by healing the sick, the lame, the deaf, the dumb, the blind, the leper, the demon-possessed. He bid all who were weary and burdened to come to him and find rest (Matt 11:28).

Jesus redefined temple. The Jews expected a Messianic King, a son of David, to build a magnificent building in Jerusalem to serve as God's Temple. But Jesus said that he himself was the Temple.

Jesus redefined kingdom. The Jews wanted to throw the Romans out and re-establish Israel as a strong and independent nation. But the kingdom that Jesus talked about, the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, had nothing to do with throwing the Romans out.

Jesus redefined the children of Abraham. The Jewish leaders boasted of their genetic descent from Abraham. But Jesus said that the true children of Abraham were those who did the things that Abraham did, namely to respond in faith to God and his promises. By their behavior, the Jewish leaders showed that they were children of the devil (John 8:44). These leaders prided themselves on their orthodoxy and saw themselves as worthy of being God's people. They excluded all those whom they saw unworthy: tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers. Jesus made a point of mixing with these excluded people, healing them and eating with them.

If Jesus' ministry took people by surprise, then even more so his death. There's no getting away from this death. Each of the gospels focuses on it, devoting much space to the final week, the final night, the final hours. Many people admire Jesus as a teacher and healer, but if that is all you see Jesus as then you completely miss the point. His ministry in Galilee was the prelude to his journey to Jerusalem, to meet his death.

Why did Jesus die? In human terms, he died at the hands of the Jewish and Roman leaders who entered into an unholy alliance. But in God's broader economy why did Jesus die? Paul came to understand that to answer that question you have to go back not just to exile, or to David, or to Abraham, but all the way back to Adam. God created Adam to be his faithful and obedient servant. Through his disobedience not only did Adam die, but all who are descended from him also died. Jesus did what Adam failed to do, and what Israel failed to do. He lived out his life on earth in faithful obedience to God. Theologians talk of his active and passive obedience. He was actively obedient in all that he did and said. Because of this active obedience, Jesus is the only man

who has not deserved death. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Cor 5:21). In passive obedience, Jesus then bore the punishment that should have been ours—death. Through that death Jesus paid the price so that we might live. Paul develops this argument at length in Rom 5:12-21.

But there is more. By raising Jesus from the dead, God showed that he accepted Jesus’ sacrifice, and that the power of death was broken. Forty days later, Jesus ascended to heaven, where God enthroned him in glory at his right hand. Ten days after that, on the day of Pentecost, God sent his spirit to birth the church.

The Church

What then is the Church? It is not a building or an earthly institution. Peter described the church using the language of Israel:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet 2:9-10)

The church is God’s people. It is made up of the last, the least, the lost, and the dead, who have been redeemed from slavery, brought back from exile, called from the wilderness back into the garden. God is calling a people from every nation, just as he told Abraham.

The church is God’s kingdom on earth. It is the realm in which God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Our king is Jesus, son of David, enthroned at God’s right hand. It is a kingdom that cuts across all national borders. Other kingdoms have tried to stamp out this kingdom, but they pass away, while God’s kingdom endures.

The church is God’s temple, his dwelling place on earth. While true that God resides in each believer, it is the church as a whole that forms the temple. It was the Corinthian church, the most messed-up church in the NT, that Paul told was the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16).

The church is a colony of heaven, populated by people whose citizenship is not in the USA or any other earthly kingdom, but in heaven. In this colony we walk to the beat of a different drum, living life the way God intended it to be lived, living as people set free. Within this colony we live now the life of heaven—this is what eternal life means; it’s literally the life of the age to come. When the church lives this sort of life, people in the wilderness outside will see heaven and want in.

The Communion Meal

One of the ways in which we place ourselves in the larger story is to eat a meal together. Once a year the Jews gathered to eat the Passover meal. Around the table they told the events of the Exodus as if they had happened just yesterday, and as if they themselves had been present. On the night that he was betrayed Jesus ate a Passover meal with his disciples, but midway through the meal he expanded the story. As we eat the Lord’s Supper we rehearse that larger story. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. (1 Cor 11:23-26)

Firstly, we are to think of God. When Jesus broke the bread, he gave thanks to God for his provision. So we give thanks to God for his provision not just of our material needs, but of our much greater spiritual needs.

Next, we are to think of Christ. The bread and the cup, though simple elements in themselves, represent the body and blood of the Lord Jesus: the body which was broken for us, and the blood which was spilled for us. We look back two thousand years ago, remembering that he went to the cross for us, and paid the price we could not pay, so that we could be reconciled to God.

Thirdly, we are to think of ourselves. We examine ourselves, acknowledging that it was for our sins that Christ went to the cross, and that we have an ongoing need for forgiveness.

Fourthly, we are to think of those around us. Though the bread represents the body of the Lord, we also are the body of the Lord. We have been redeemed not to be isolated individuals, but to be the corporate body of Christ, the people of God. When we take communion together, we acknowledge that we are part of one family.

Finally, we are to look ahead, for there is more of the story still to come. In eating this bread and drinking this cup, we proclaim that the Lord will return. Then we will cease to be a colony of heaven on earth, for at that time heaven and earth shall be joined together. But that part of the story is for next time.

1. Joanne Shetler, *And the Word Came With Power* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1992).

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