

# THE "GENIE" IN THE GENEALOGY

Sermon, December 4, 2016

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-9, Matthew 1:1-17, Romans 15:4-13

To quote a lyric from a rather, um, bawdy Christina Aguelira song of the '90s (*a song, by the way, that was redone and cleaned up a bit a few months ago by Dove Cameron for the Disney Channel's program, "Stuck in the Middle"*), "I'm a genie in a bottle, baby, You gotta rub me the right way. I'm a genie in a bottle baby come, come on and let me out!" Well, at first glance this old, dusty genealogy from Matthew may not seem like it holds much, but we got to rub it the right way! Let's turn this passage over, let's look closer, let's inspect it a bit more thoroughly, and I think we'll find a wonderful gift contained within. By the way, the derivation of Genie comes from "jinn" in Arabic; as I understand it, the Koran tells of three types of sapient beings: humanity, the angels and the jinn. This got carried over into the Latin, the plural form in Latin is "genii," and, interestingly, the singular form is "genius" ... back in the day, people who were intelligent, creative and/or full of wisdom were thought to have a personal "genius," a benevolent spirit that gave them insight and enlightenment ... well, to mix metaphors, we'll ask the Holy Spirit of God to be our "genius" and give us insight to show us the "genius" of this genealogy in the opening of the New Testament, as we seek to *"rub it the right way, baby."*

The Bible is made up of sixty-six different books, written over thousands of years, with many wildly different authors from all walks of life and a wide range of cultural backgrounds: kings, shepherds, soldiers, lawyers, scholars, ex-slaves, fishermen. What makes this Bible such a beautiful work of art and literature is that there is a remarkable **unity** in its diversity. I tell the confirmation classes this every year, that the central theme, the central message, of the Bible can be rather radically narrowed down to two simple words: JESUS CHRIST. This Book is about Him, and about what God is doing through Him. He is the central figure in this sixty-six book, millennia-long drama of redemption. The Old Testament sets the stage for His arrival. The New Testament reports of this central event, and also points toward the **climactic** event in human history, when He returns to this world and the curtains of human history will close as the Director sets foot on the stage. Right from verse one, the New Testament affirms He is the One about whom the Old Testament prophets spoke and wrote. Matthew underscores that Jesus fulfilled Messianic prophecy by being a descendant of Abraham, through Isaac, through Isaac's son Jacob, from the tribe of Judah, from the family line of Jesse, of the House of David. In the next chapters, Matthew will call attention to other fulfilled prophecies: The Messiah was to be born of a virgin (*prophesied in Isaiah*), born at Bethlehem (*Micah*), He was to be called out of Egypt (*Hosea*), preceded by a messenger (*Malachi and Isaiah*), and so on. Matthew is saying, *"THIS IS YOUR GUY! This is the central figure of the Scriptures; this is the One you've been waiting for!"*

I think, though, Matthew had other purposes than just affirming Jesus' pedigree. I think he wants to proclaim Jesus' *mission* from the very start, which is a mission of redemption, and Matthew uses an attention-getting literary device to do so. Matthew has a background as a tax collector; he knows something about accurate record keeping and genealogical connections and attention to seemingly unimportant, but significant, detail. He includes something unusual in this particular genealogical listing, something as best we can tell that was not found in any listings of any families from that general era and location. He includes something in his record that would immediately grasp the attention of any Jewish reader, causing the reader sit up and take notice. He includes the names of five women. Women's names were never included in genealogies. The Jewish reader would wonder, *"What's going on here? Why the ladies?"* Well, let's "rub" a little bit, and look at the women he included. Verse 3, Tamar. Verse 5, Rahab and Ruth. Verse 6, one he apparently doesn't even want to call by name; he just refers to her as "the wife of Uriah." Finally, Mary is mentioned. Each of these five has an interesting story about her entry into the family tree of Jesus.

**First, Tamar** (v. 3). Tamar was originally the daughter in law of the great-granddaddy of the tribe of Judah, Judah himself. Tamar's story can be found in Genesis 38, and it's not a pretty story for reading to the kids at bedtime. Without going into all the PG details, we read in that chapter that after her husband died, the widow Tamar eventually devised a rather desperate scheme. According to the Levirate law of that day, Judah had an obligation to provide for his daughter-in-law, an obligation he irresponsibly failed to fulfill. He neglected that duty and Tamar was without a provider. It was not easy for a widow to survive in that world, so Judah's irresponsibility was the catalyst that led Tamar to force Judah's hand. She dressed herself as a temple prostitute, covering her face and loitering by the road where she knew her father-in-law would be traveling, and when Judah came by, he propositioned her. What a guy. The Bible doesn't cover anything up about its heroes; all are a mixture of sinner and saint, and quite often the "sinner" side prevails. To be sure, the Bible does not condone the at-times ungodly and even vile behavior of the godly people; it simply tells it as it is and also allows us to see the destructive consequences of such action(s). I'm getting ahead of myself a bit, but the Bible wants to make clear from the earliest pages that, while sin has grievous consequences, God's grace can and does forgive even the worse treachery when His grace is sought. Anyway, Judah went in with her and paid for her services with one of his kid goats. She went on to become, as the Bible would say, "with child" ... actually, with TWO children, as she conceived twins. When the patriarch Judah heard his daughter in law was expecting, he flew into a self righteous rage and wanted to have her punished, until she confronted him with incontrovertible evidence of his paternity (*and hypocrisy*). *"Hey Dad ... you're the Dad."* As chapter 38 closes, Judah

acknowledges his reprehensible acts, acknowledges Tamar is more righteous than he (*conniving though she is*), and agrees to take care of her. Thus, by this desperate scheme she entrapped her father-in-law into doing his duty. Out of that union twin sons were produced; Perez and Zerah are listed there in verse 3.

**Verse 5, Rahab.** The story of Rahab can be found in Joshua 2. She was an actual prostitute (*not a prostitute in disguise like Tamar*) in the city of Jericho. Time won't allow a full recounting of the story, but Rahab came to believe in the God of the Israelites, and she acted on her faith by hiding the two spies from Joshua's army who had come to scout the city. Recognizing her act of faith and grateful for her assistance, Joshua's army spared her and her family when they conquered the city after Jericho's walls came a-tumblin' down. Rahab became a part of the Jewish community, and eventually entered into the lineage of Jesus by marrying Salmon, son of Nahshon (*mentioned in verse 4*). By God's grace, you might say she was thoroughly "Rahab-ilitated." Rahab became the mother of Boaz, who went on to become the grandpa of King David, because he married the next woman on Matthew's list, Ruth.

**Ruth.** Like Rahab, Ruth was an "outsider," a foreigner; she was from the country of Moab. There is a whole book of the Bible about her. She was especially noted for being a woman of loyalty, integrity and principle; though not part of the religious community, she seems to have been a genuinely decent person. All of us know people like Ruth, people who may not be part of any church community, but who are just as decent (*sometimes even more decent!*), considerate and dependable people of integrity as any in the church. Ruth was intensely loyal to Naomi, her Jewish mother-in-law; after both their husbands died, Ruth left her country and her home to accompany Naomi back to Israel, telling her those immortal words, "*Where you go, I will go; where you stay, I will stay. Your God will be my god, and your people my people.*" And Ruth meant what she said; she came to faith in the God of the Israelites and joined their faith community. Like Rahab, Ruth was a foreigner, an "outsider," who married into the lineage of Jesus. Her new husband was Boaz. We can see in the book of Ruth that Boaz was godly, kind, moral, gentle and principled ... remember, this was the son of the ex-prostitute from Jericho. God had worked such a miracle of redemption in Rahab's heart that she went on to raise a godly, principled, decent and gentle son, a man of integrity and honor.

**Bathsheba.** Matthew does not even deign to refer to her by name, but you can read about "the wife of Uriah" in II Samuel 11 and 12. King David saw her behaving in a rather exhibitious manner by bathing on the rooftop of her house (*in full view of the palace*) while her husband was off at battle; David sent for her, and you know the rest. Again, the Bible doesn't cover anything about its heroes; it is quite clear David sinned greatly by taking the wife of another man (*and Bathsheba apparently wasn't guiltless in this affair*). Upon discovering she had conceived, David compounded his adulterous crime by egregiously arranging for the murder of her husband, Uriah. By not naming her, Matthew wants to underscore this point ... *She was the wife of Uriah, and David did great wrong by taking her and murdering her husband.* David, Bathsheba, their families and the whole nation of Israel suffered greatly because of the consequences of all this. But again, I think Matthew wished to remind his readers that God really does forgive and redeem broken, repentant people, even people who have committed the most egregious and treacherous acts, if those people will turn back to Him in genuine sorrow and humility. David and Bathsheba **did** earnestly repent ... and one of their sons went on to be one of the most powerful kings of Israel, if not one of the most powerful kings of history, a king whose name became synonymous with wisdom; that son was Solomon.

The fifth woman, of course, is **Mary**. Gentle, faithful, quiet and obedient Mary. Note that she, too, like Bathsheba and Tamar, was with child before marriage; but hers was not conceived deceitfully or in secret. Her son was truly conceived by God Himself. Strictly speaking, there was no male who could be named as the father since God Himself conceived this child; hence, Mary's name is listed.

The New Testament wants to make clear from the very start that in and through Jesus Christ God is in the business of redeeming broken, hurting humanity, and has been doing this from the beginning. Matthew wants to make clear from the get-go that this Gospel, this *good news*, is for everybody. The Gospel is certainly for those who are part of the religious community, like Tamar and Bathsheba, who perhaps should have known better but (*and sometimes with the complicity of godly people acting in rather ungodly ways*) made a mess of things with desperate actions and rash decisions. The Gospel is also for those who, like Rahab, may be outsiders to the religious community who may have been living self-destructive lives perhaps because they **don't** know any better; that's all they knew how to do to survive until they learned a better Way. And the Gospel is certainly for those who, like Ruth, may be outsiders to the religious community who may not be familiar with God and His ways but are basically decent and principled people; such people welcome a Savior as well, a Savior who will take them to new heights of goodness and service. And the Gospel is certainly for those who, like Mary, have quietly and faithfully tried to live faithful and obedient lives in the religious community all along ... note that she, in fact, is the one who received the greatest blessing.

**The "Genie" in this genealogy is the gift giving Spirit of God's "genius," God's grace.** Matthew wishes to make clear from the start that this grace is for women and men, Jew or Gentile, queens and ex-prostitutes, perpetrators and victims, natives and foreigners ... it is for **all** who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to come into the Family of God. There is not a person who is not a potentially redeemable recipient of God's grace.