

A Family Tree With Lots of Knots

Last January the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Society announced that it had reached a conclusion that there was a “high probability that Thomas Jefferson fathered Eston Hemmings, and that he most likely was the father of all six of Sally Hemming’s children.” This admission came after two centuries of denial and cover-up which was motivated by a desire to protect the reputation of one of our Founding Fathers. The idea that someone of his stature would have an illicit affair and several illegitimate children is scandalous. The idea that he would have a relationship of this kind with an African-American slave would be even more scandalous.

There is an old saying, “An apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” That may explain why we can be so curious about our own family tree. If I learn something about my ancestry, I might learn something about myself. Why do I hunch over? Why am I such an introvert? Why do I struggle in math? Maybe the answer to these questions can be found in my family tree. “An apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” Maybe that’s also why we can be pretty protective of our lineage as well. Something scandalous in our family background is a black mark on us. It’s almost as if we participated in the misdeeds of our forefathers.

Perhaps that’s why when we read the Christmas story in Matthew’s Gospel we don’t start at the beginning. We usually start in the middle of the chapter with the angel’s command to Joseph to take Mary as his wife. But Matthew begins the story of the birth of Christ with a record of the family history of Jesus; we call it a genealogy. I guess you can’t blame us for skipping it. The genealogies of the Bible don’t make the most stimulating reading, and most of the names we can’t even pronounce. But there may be another reason we’re tempted to skip it. The genealogy of Jesus Christ is about as scandalous as they come. If an apple

doesn’t fall far from the tree, then the character of Jesus Christ might even be called into question.

Why then does Matthew let this family secret out of the bag? Why not cover it up?

I. JESUS WAS THE LEGITIMATE SON OF DAVID

In order to understand that, it may help to understand a little about how genealogies were used back then. Genealogies were used to legitimize a person in one way or another. There were laws that said property couldn’t be bought and sold across tribal lines so your genealogy was required to validate the simple sale of property. Furthermore, the entire priesthood depended on genealogies. All Israel’s priests had to prove they were descendants of Levi. Perhaps most importantly, genealogies traced the royal line of Israel. God had promised King David that one of his descendants would always be on the throne (2 Samuel 7:16). Any one who claimed to be king had to prove from his genealogy that he was from the house of David.

This is why Matthew begins this genealogy by saying that Jesus was “the Son of David, the son of Abraham.” Not only does Matthew want us to know that Jesus was a Jew, a son of Abraham, he also wants us to know that Jesus had royal bloodlines. He was a son of David. Of course there were other descendents of David, but at least he had the right to rule. Jesus was questioned on many things throughout his life. People questioned his motives, his associations, his theology. His enemies even said he got his power from the devil. But no one ever questioned that he was a son of David. He had the right to rule. Everyone knew that.

Legitimacy is important to us as well. Think of our

recent Presidential election. Everybody wanted to know who was the legitimate winner. Some people even still wonder if we have one. What if we could be absolutely sure that every vote across the country was counted exactly as it was intended by the voter? There were no dimpled chads, pregnant chads, hanging chads, chad build-up. Maybe these people would feel better. In essence, what Matthew is saying here is: "According to the way we Jews determine legitimacy, after every vote was counted just as it was intended. Jesus Christ had a legitimate right to rule."

II. JESUS CAME FOR ALL PEOPLE

The scandal of Jesus' genealogy is not about his right to rule. The scandal is seen as we look a little closer. There are four names on the list that should surprise us. Four women are named: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. The typical Jewish genealogy didn't include women. Just as in our culture, for better or for worse, most women take their husband's name, so in Jewish culture the legal rights ran through a man. So to find four women mentioned is surprising. Even more surprising is the fact that three of these women were non-Jews and one of them was married to a non-Jew. Tamar was an Aramean. Rahab was a Canaanite. Ruth was a Moabite. Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah the Hittite. If Matthew wanted to mention women, he could of at least picked Jewish women. He could have picked Abraham's wife, Sarah, or Isaac's wife, Rebecca. Why choose these Gentiles? To the Jews, this was like polluting the pure waters of Jesus' ancestry.

But if we know anything about Jesus, we probably aren't that surprised. Even the Christmas story reveals that Jesus came for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. The angels said to the shepherds, "**Peace on earth among men with whom he is pleased**" (Luke 2:14). He wasn't just talking about Jews. Eight days later, when Jesus was brought to the Temple for circumcision, an old man named Simeon took him in his arms and called him "**a light of revelation to the Gentiles**" (Luke 2:32). A few months after that, some wise men from the east followed

a star and came to Jerusalem looking for a new-born king. Herod, the Jew, wanted him killed. But when these Gentiles found Jesus in Bethlehem, they worshipped him.

Throughout his ministry Jesus showed that the kingdom he came to establish would include men and women from every race and from every nation. He was the fulfillment of an ancient promise made to Abraham. God told Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. But that's not all. He also said one of his descendents, one of his seed, would bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. Jesus was that seed. That's why the Apostle Paul could say, "**There is neither Jew nor Greek...neither slave nor free man...male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**" (Gal. 3:28).

Have you ever been excluded from something that you really wanted to be a part of? You wanted to be a part of the basketball team but you weren't tall enough. You wanted to get into a certain college but you weren't smart enough or rich enough. You wanted to be a part of a certain group but you weren't pretty enough. Those kinds of rejections hurt. There is a built-in need for all of us to belong somewhere. The family that Jesus came to create doesn't turn away anyone for the color of their skin or the size of their bank account. Jesus came for all. His genealogy tells us that.

III. JESUS CAME FOR SINNERS

But to us, including Gentiles is not much of a scandal. We'd expect God to act without prejudice. But there is something more here. As you look closely at these women and their stories, you can see that they're not the kind of people you would expect to be in the bloodlines of the Son of God. They were outcasts. They were sinners. Don't get me wrong. They're no different than the men on the list. Jacob was a liar. Solomon was a philanderer. Mannaseh was an idolater, just to name a few. Jesus came from a long line of sinners. The women are no worse than the men. Their stories make that clear.

Take Tamar. Judah had chosen Tamar as a wife for his son. His son died and left her childless. The law required that his brother should marry her so she could

have children, but he refused. So Tamar, desperate to have a child, concocted a scheme where she dressed up as a prostitute, put a veil over her face, and waited by the roadside until her own father-in-law, Judah, strolled by and paid to have a little fun. Twin sons were conceived. One of them was Perez, a forefather of Jesus. What a story to have in your family tree! Try explaining that to your children!

It doesn't stop there. When we first meet Rahab in the Bible, she is a professional lady of the night. After wandering around the wilderness for forty years, Joshua sent spies into the Promised land. They came into the city of Jericho, and somehow these "nice, innocent guys" ended up in the red light district at Rahab's house. It was providential because Rahab protected them and later came to be a follower of God, but still, whenever Rahab's name is found in the Bible, she is called "**Rahab the harlot**" (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25).

And then there is Ruth. Ruth wasn't a harlot, but she was a Moabite. The Moabite race was a product of incest. They were descendants of Lot. Lot was living in a cave with his two daughters after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. His daughters were afraid there would be no one left to marry them and give them children. So they got their father drunk and seduced him. One of their sons was named Moab. The Jews found the Moabites repugnant. God's law even said that none of the descendants of Moab could ever enter the house of the Lord (Deuteronomy 23:3). Though Ruth married Boaz and became a Jew, she was one of those descendants.

The fourth woman mentioned is the wife of Uriah. Her name was Bathsheba. Her story is not pretty either. She had an affair with King David. They tried to keep it a secret, but their union had produced a child, and David had to knock off her husband and then marry her to cover it all up. That child died in infancy, but she had another son, Solomon, who became the next link in the royal line.

Put these stories together and the genealogy of Jesus makes Thomas Jefferson's look rather tame! We

have prostitution, incest, adultery, murder. I mean, who needs Hollywood? This stuff could keep the National Enquirer in business for years! This is not the Hall of Fame, this is the Hall of Shame. What's going on here? What's the point?

The message of the family tree of Jesus shows something about why he came. He came to rescue the kind of people we find in his genealogy-weak, broken and sinful people. You see, most of us have a misconception about the Bible and the Christian faith. We think the Bible should be a book of virtues; a book of role models that we should emulate in order to be good Christians. We have this idea that God is at the top of a ladder. He dropped this ladder down between heaven and earth, and he's standing at the top calling down to us: "Perform, do good, live right, imitate the heroes." And so we muster up all the spiritual willpower we possibly can and we try to climb the ladder. We read books about it. We go to seminars on ladder climbing. But the scandal of Jesus' lineage reminds us that our God, the Christian God, is a God of grace. He does not stand at the top of the ladder and tell us to perform. He knew that no one could climb that ladder. So he sent Jesus down the ladder to live the life you and I couldn't live, and to die the death you and I should have died, and to invite us to climb on his shoulders as he climbs the ladder. That's why the angel said to Joseph, "**You shall call him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins**" (Matthew 1:21). That's why Jesus was called a "**friend of sinners**" (Luke 7:34). That's why he said, "**I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners.**"

It's hard news for some; it's good news for others. Some of us have a spirituality of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. No matter how much we may talk about the grace of God, we're still trying to climb the ladder; still trying to emulate the heroes. The Gospel of Jesus Christ confronts us over and over again with the utter inadequacy of our own willpower. It shatters the myth that we can pull up our spiritual bootstraps. The fact is we can't add a single inch to our own spiritual stature. "Any spirituality that furnishes a do-it-yourself kit plants the seeds of discouragement and disappointment" (Brennan Manning).

It's good news though, for those who could very well see themselves on this list of names and who dare to believe that Jesus really did come to carry them up the ladder. Could you think of anything better than that? A God who says, "I'll take care of everything. You just trust in my Son. You just climb on his shoulders."

But there is one more thing here to see: the scandalous family tree of Jesus is not just about why he came, it's also about how he works. Notice that there is another women in this genealogy who I haven't said much about - Mary. At the end of the genealogy, right when we would expect to read, "Joseph the father of Jesus," instead we read, "Joseph, the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus." Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, yet Mary really was his mother. And this had to create quite a scandal. A young girl, pregnant. She and her fiancé say the Holy Spirit did it. Would you believe them? Who could believe the Son of God would come from an unwed mother? But this is where Mary's story intersects with the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. Despite the scandals surrounding their unions, God chose them and their offspring to continue the royal line. Now he was doing the same thing through Mary. By including them, we're reminded that God in his grace works in the most unusual, even scandalous ways, through the most unlikely people.

And this is good news, too. It's good news for anyone caught up in thinking God only works through saints and the good things they do. He can take even your shameful scandals, and turn them into something beautiful; something usable. He comes to each of us and says, "Don't be afraid. I understand your failure. I've never expected you to have it all together. Just give me your life as it is, and I will make it into something meaningful."

CONCLUSION

Over a hundred years ago in a Scottish seaside pub, a group of fisherman were relaxing after a long day at sea. As the waitress was walking past their table with a pot of tea, one of them swung his arms out wide to describe the size of the fish he had just caught. His hand collided with the teapot and sent it crashing against the whitewashed wall, where it left an ugly stain. The innkeeper examined it and said, "That stain will never come out. The whole wall will have to be repainted."

"Perhaps not," said a stranger.

All eyes turned on him. He said, "Let me work with the stain. If my work meets your approval, you won't need to repaint the wall."

He brought a box over to the wall and took out a few pencils, brushes and glass jars filled with linseed oil and pigment. He began to sketch lines around the stain and fill it in here and there with color and shading. Soon a picture began to emerge. The splotches of tea had been turned into a beautiful image of deer with a great rack of antlers.

At the bottom of the picture, the man signed his name. Then he paid for his meal and left. The innkeeper was stunned and examined the wall. "Do you know who that was? That was Sir Edwin Landseer, the greatest wildlife artist of his generation."

The glorious grace of Christmas is that not only did he come to forgive us for making the stain, but he came to take the stains and scandals of our lives and turn them into something beautiful and meaningful. Only Jesus Christ, the master artist, can do that.

You see, it's true, an apple doesn't fall far from the tree. When you give your life to Jesus Christ, trusting him to take up the ladder, he makes you into a new creation and you can trace your lineage back to him. Slowly but surely, without even knowing it, you become more him, and that's the good news of Christmas.