

Promises Kept
Matthew 1:1-17

Why does Matthew begin his account of the life of Jesus with a summary of His genealogy? Well we southerners don't have to ask that question, do we? We understand the importance of family, handing down names from generation to generation. And especially at this time of year, we love our family gatherings, sharing stories and repeating traditions.

But what can we possibly learn from these verses, from just this list of names? Remember, Matthew was writing his gospel mainly for Jewish believers. For them, this list wasn't just Jesus' family but theirs as well. As they studied the Old Testament Scriptures, they knew these people and shared their stories, just as we share the stories of our own family members. So during this holiday season, let's take the time to remember and to share some of these stories as well. For when it comes right down to it, this list of names makes it clear that our God keeps His promises.

And He keeps His promises regardless of how much time it takes. After all, in verse 2 we learn that Abraham was the father of Isaac, but that didn't happen right away, did it? When Abram was 75 years old God first told him that he would have a son and an heir. But Isaac wasn't born until Abraham was 99 years old. It took almost 25 years for God to keep that promise, and yet when Isaac was born, his parents laughed with joy. That's what Isaac means in Hebrew – laughter.

In verse 2, we also learn that Isaac was the father of Jacob. But again, although most couples in those days had children soon after they were married, Isaac and Rebekah had to wait 20 years until their twins were born. That means that 45 years after God promised Abraham he would have as many descendants as there were stars in the sky, there were only 2 grandchildren – it wasn't until Jacob grew up and had 12 sons that God's promise to Abraham really got going, and by then, Abraham was long gone.

But lots of other people on this list had to wait for God to keep His promises, didn't they? For many generations after Judah was born – Matthew condenses the genealogy at various places throughout this list – the people were kept in captivity in Egypt. For 400 years they waited, but eventually God brought them, having become by that time a great multitude, into the land He had sworn to give to Abraham. God kept His promises, though many generations had to keep watching and waiting for that to happen.

But the Exodus didn't mean the end of waiting for God's people, did it? Verse 6 tells us that David was the son of Jesse, and it was while David was still a young man, keeping his father's sheep, that the prophet Samuel had anointed him and predicted that he would be the King of Israel. But even though that promise wasn't fulfilled until David was 30 years old, he never lost faith in God. As we read in so many of the psalms David wrote during those long years, He continued to trust God to keep His promises. And David eventually lived to see those promises kept.

And of course, Matthew's readers were no strangers to this sort of waiting on God. After all, ever since the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem in 586 BC, all the Jewish people had been waiting, longing for the Son of David, for their anointed Messiah to come and lead them out of captivity and into freedom. All during those long years, the years covered by verses 12 through 16, one pagan empire after another had come to power over the land we now call Israel: the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks had all come and gone, and still the people waited.

Now, the Jews had enjoyed a brief period of independence under the Maccabees, beginning with the cleansing of the Temple in 164 BC – that's the event that Hannukah celebrates during this time of year. But some 60 years before Christ was born, Herod the Great had seized power in the land of Israel,

ruling as a puppet of Imperial Rome, and oppressing the people as much as any of the pagan kings before him had done.

No, Matthew's readers knew all too well what it means to wait for God's blessings, and maybe that's where you are today too. Maybe you're waiting for God to answer your prayers for healing for yourself or your loved ones. Maybe during this time of family celebrations you're waiting for God to mend some broken relationships. Maybe you're waiting for the sorts of spiritual blessings you read about in Scripture and see in other people's lives – for the Spirit of God to produce love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control within you. Or maybe when you look at the incredible mess the world seems to be in these days, you're just waiting for Christ to return and straighten everything out.

Well, if there's anything we can learn from today's passage, indeed, if there's anything we can learn from the whole of the Christmas story, it's that God keeps His promises, no matter how long it takes. For in verse 16, we see that, even after all those years of waiting, Jesus was eventually born, the One Who would be called Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God. And all those who place their trust in Him become children of Abraham, heirs to all the promises God made to him so many years before.

And so even if we as individuals have to wait until we're 30 like David or 60 like Isaac or 99 like Abraham, even if we as a people have to wait hundreds of years, we can be sure that God hasn't forgotten us. If God has made a promise to us, we can be sure He will keep it – in His time.

And God will keep those promises, even when they appear to be impossible. After all, Abraham was 99 years old when Isaac was born, and that meant his wife Sarah had her first baby when she was 90. The writer to the Hebrews says she was "past the age" to bear children, and that's putting it mildly. But nothing's impossible for God, is it?

And think about David's situation. Sure, Samuel had told him when he was a boy that he would be king one day. But after he grew up, he spent years on the run from King Saul, who used all the forces of the Kingdom of Israel to try to destroy him. Eventually, David had to take refuge among the Philistines – but eventually God used those same Philistines to deliver the kingdom into David's hands.

And in the birth of Christ, God kept another promise that must have seemed impossible to Matthew's readers. After all, God had promised David that his descendants would reign upon his throne forever, and verses 7 through 11 summarize the hundreds of years of the Davidic dynasty's unbroken succession. But the Babylonian conquest meant that none of the people in verses 12 through 15 were kings. David's family continued, but at the time of Jesus' birth, none of them had reigned on his throne for over 500 years. And as the Jews of Matthew's day looked at the Roman legions, ruling much of Israel as an Imperial province, the hope of a Son of David to rule over them seemed quite impossible indeed.

And maybe that's where you are during this Christmas season. Maybe you aren't just waiting for God to answer your prayers – maybe you've lost hope in prayer because your problems seem to be impossible for anyone to fix. The threat of war in the Middle East and terrorism at home, an unimaginable Federal debt and plenty of financial problems at the local level as well, rural areas losing population, racial tensions rising and families falling apart, people in the grip of drugs or alcohol – who knows what to do about any of these things?

But isn't that what we learn from these verses? For if God keeps His promises, no matter how long it takes, He also keeps His promises no matter how impossible they may seem. For in verse 16 we learn that Jesus was the Son of David, through his adopted father Joseph the rightful heir to the throne of Israel. And by the power of His empty tomb, even today He rules and reigns not only over the land God promised to Abraham, but over everyone and everything. All power in Heaven and on Earth has been

given to Him, and He exercises authority even over those situations in our lives that seem to be impossible.

But maybe when you take an honest look at the problems in your life, you realize that many of them are, in one way or another, of your own making. Maybe you're the one who has made a hash out of your relationships. Maybe you have money troubles because of opportunities you missed or resources you've squandered. Maybe your health problems are as much the result of your bad choices as they are of your genetic makeup. Maybe it's your lack of prayer, your lack of study, your lack of faith in God that has led to so much of your discouragement or your disappointment or even your despair. Maybe the reason you aren't experiencing the grace of God in your life is because you've cut yourself off from all the ordinary ways He pours out that grace upon us.

Well, if that's the case, then there's one other thing you need to learn from these passage. For if we learn here that God keeps His promises no matter how long it takes and no matter how impossible they may seem, we also learn that God keeps His promises regardless of the sin in our lives.

Look, for example, at verse 3, where we learn that Tamar was one of the ancestors of David. Genesis 38 tells how Tamar was actually the wife of one of Judah's sons. When this son died, Judah was supposed to let another of his sons marry her, but he refused to do it. And so Tamar had to trick Judah into sleeping with her, and that's how Perez and Zerah were born. God continued the line that would eventually lead to David, even though Judah in his sin would have cut it off.

Verse 5 reminds us that Boaz was David's great-grandfather, and the book of Ruth tells us all about how kind and generous and gallant he was. But verse 5 also reminds us that Boaz' mother was Rahab – Rahab was the prostitute who sheltered the Israelite spies whom Joshua sent to investigate the situation in Jericho. God thus welcomed Rahab not only into the covenant community, but into the very line of David, in spite of her rather checkered past.

But verse 6 may contain the most shocking truth of all, for it reminds us of David's great sin with Bathsheba, who had been the wife of Uriah, one of David's closest friends and most trusted generals. Because David and Bathsheba were having an affair, and because Bathsheba as a result had become pregnant, David eventually murdered his friend in a desperate attempt to cover up his sin. Could anything any of us have done even come close to David's adultery and treachery and murder?

And yet verse 6 reminds us that, out of all of David's wives, God chose Bathsheba to be the one to continue the royal line, for out of all of David's children, it was her son Solomon who succeeded David on his throne. God used sinners like Judah, like Rahab, and like David and Bathsheba to keep His promises to Abraham and to David, promises that were eventually fulfilled as verse 16 says in the birth of Jesus the Messiah.

And of course it is in Jesus Christ that God has provided a perfect forgiveness, once and for all. He is the One Who was born, the Son of Abraham and the Son of David, so that we might not die the eternal death our sins deserve. He is the One Who has come to do the impossible, to give us new birth, to give us newness of life today and eternal life with Him forevermore. By dying on the cross, by making a complete sacrifice for all who trust in Him, He is the One Who reconciles us to God, bringing light into our darkness, no matter how long it takes, and no matter what we may have done or failed to do.

Yes, this Christmas season, we may keep on waiting for God to solve so many of our impossible problems. But even while we wait, we can rejoice that the Prince of Peace, the Son of Righteousness, our Emmanuel, our King has already come to save us from sin and death. Let's join the angelic host as we sing His praise.