The Seventh Seven

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On the Long Backstory of Joseph and Judah, the King to End All Kings, and the Holiday Table as the Place of Reconciliation

God's Faithfulness to Jacob

God made a covenant with Jacob, and God was faithful to that covenant despite the unfaithfulness of the very people he was trying to use. That is the single most important thing to remember as we approach the book of Matthew. And we can all take heart in it, because the same divine faithfulness that operated across the long unfaithfulness of Jacob's descendants is the faithfulness that operates across our own ordinary failures.

As we get ready to walk through Matthew together, I want to lay some groundwork. Sometimes you need to know the backstory. And the writer of Matthew was a Jew, writing for Jewish Christians, and there were things his original audience knew without explanation that we do not know without explanation. I am going to try to provide that backstory today without going full nerd. I will round it off where I can. But the story I want to tell is one of the most important threads running underneath every chapter we are about to read.

The Four Women in the Genealogy

Matthew opens with the generations of Jesus Christ: "the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1). And then he lays out the long list of fathers and sons, all men, with one striking exception: four women are named. Tamar. Rahab.

Ruth the Moabite. And Bathsheba, except Matthew cannot even bring her name to his mouth. He calls her “the wife of Uriah” (Matthew 1:6). That is pretty bad.

All four of these women were almost certainly Gentiles. Tamar a Canaanite. Rahab a Canaanite. Ruth a Moabite. And Bathsheba, given her marriage to Uriah the Hittite, was likely a Hittite herself. Four Gentile women named in the Messianic genealogy. And in each case, the woman took action at a moment when the Jewish men around her, the men who should have understood what God had promised to Abraham, failed to act. Each of these four women carries a backstory that, in the eyes of her surrounding culture, would have marked her as scandalous. And Matthew names every one of them deliberately, because the line of the Messiah carries the marks of every irregularity the people of God had been working through across centuries.

Fourteen, Fourteen, Fourteen

And then Matthew does something genuinely strange. He divides the genealogy into three sections: Abraham to David, David to the carrying away into Babylon, and the carrying away into Babylon to Joseph. And he announces that each section contains fourteen generations:

“So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, from David until the captivity in Babylon are fourteen generations, and from the captivity in Babylon until the Christ are fourteen generations” (Matthew 1:17).

Fourteen, fourteen, fourteen. And if you do your research in 1 and 2 Chronicles, you discover that Matthew has actually pulled some kings out of the historical list to make the count come out to fourteen in each section. Why would he do that?

Because Hebrew, like other ancient Semitic languages, does not have separate numerals, letters function as numbers, in a system called gematria. And the three Hebrew letters that spell David (dalet-vav-dalet) add up, in the gematria system, to the number fourteen. Dalet equals

four, vav equals six, dalet equals four. Four plus six plus four equals fourteen. David's name, in Hebrew, is the number fourteen.

So when Matthew announces "fourteen, fourteen, fourteen" at the end of his genealogy, he is, in a Jewish mind that knew the gematria system, announcing "David, David, David." The genealogy is rhythmically chanting the name of David three times, building toward the arrival of the great Son of David who would fulfill every Davidic promise.

And there is another numerical signal underneath the fourteen-fourteen-fourteen. Fourteen is two sevens. So three sets of fourteen is six sets of seven: six sevens of kings, from Abraham down through Joseph the husband of Mary. And the next name mentioned in the genealogy is Jesus. Jesus is the seventh seven. He is the king to end all kings. He is the king of kings. He is the one where the buck stops. The numerical architecture of the genealogy is announcing this before any of the narrative content has begun.

Joseph the Stepfather of Jesus

Now here is something interesting. Matthew's genealogy ends slightly differently from Luke's. Theologians have offered many explanations for the differences in the last few names, and you can pick your poison. But I want to offer one observation. Matthew is telling a particular story, and the names at the end of his list are arranged to tell it.

Matthew says: "Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:16). Jacob begot Joseph. Hold that fact for a moment. The stepfather of Jesus is named Joseph, and his father is named Jacob. The same pattern as the Genesis Joseph who was the son of the Genesis Jacob.

And what do we discover about Matthew's Joseph as the narrative unfolds? He is a dreamer of dreams. An angel appears to him in a dream and tells him it is safe to take Mary as

his wife, that the child conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. He is later warned in a dream to take the child and flee into Egypt to escape Herod's massacre of the infants. He is later warned in a dream to return when Herod has died. Matthew's Joseph is consistently directed by divinely-sent dreams.

Joseph carries Jesus (the Son of David, the Son of Judah) down into Egypt to save him. And that movement deliberately echoes the original Genesis Joseph carrying the descendants of Jacob down into Egypt to save them from famine. Matthew is composing a typological parallel. The new Joseph saves the new Israel (the body of Christ) by carrying him down into Egypt, just as the old Joseph saved the old Israel (the family of Jacob) by drawing them down into Egypt.

And the reason I emphasize Judah here is that when Jacob blesses his twelve sons in Genesis 49, he singles out Judah as the kingly tribe:

"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people" (Genesis 49:10).

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet. That phrase "from between his feet" means Judah will always have a descendant carrying the kingly scepter, a child seated on the throne. Judah was, by Jacob's deathbed prophecy, the kingly tribe. And so the new Joseph in Matthew is the caretaker of the new Son of David (which is also the Son of Judah). The patterns are deliberately layered.

Jacob and the Twelve Sons

Now let me drop back into the Genesis backstory itself, because the whole story of Joseph and Judah turns out to be the controlling narrative of the rest of the Old Testament.

Jacob and Esau were the twin sons of Isaac. Jacob received the promise and the blessing, through some genuinely questionable means, but he received it. And Jacob eventually had four

wives. Leah and Rachel were his two principal wives, and their handmaids Bilhah and Zilpah bore him additional children. Across the four wives, Jacob fathered twelve sons.

And Jacob loved one of those sons in a way that ran above the rest. Joseph was the firstborn of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife. And Jacob's preferential treatment of Joseph created the kind of family discord we should expect from preferential treatment in any household.

> Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him. (Genesis 37:3–4)

A tunic of many colors. And the brothers hated Joseph for it. They could not even speak peaceably to him. And then Joseph began to have dreams. He dreamed that his eleven brothers' sheaves of grain bowed down to his sheaf. He dreamed that the sun and moon and eleven stars bowed down to him. And he told his family the dreams. Which, you can imagine, did not improve the household dynamic.

One day Jacob sends Joseph out to check on his brothers, who were tending the flocks at a distance. And when Joseph arrives, wearing his tunic of many colors, the brothers see him coming and say:

> Then they said to one another, "Look, this dreamer is coming! Come therefore, let us now kill him and cast him into some pit; and we shall say, 'Some wild beast has devoured him.' We shall see what will become of his dreams!" (Genesis 37:19–20)

Here comes the dreamer. Let us see what will become of his dreams. They strip him of his coat. They cast him into a pit. They plan to kill him. Reuben, the eldest, intervenes and suggests they not kill him outright but leave him in the pit. Then Reuben steps away, I do not

know what Reuben was off to do, and while he is gone, the other brothers, led by Judah, propose an alternative:

> So Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother and our flesh." And his brothers listened. (Genesis 37:26–27)

Judah proposes the slave-sale. Why kill him for free when we can profit by selling him? And the brothers agree. They sell Joseph to a Midianite caravan heading down to Egypt. They take the coat of many colors, dip it in goat's blood, and bring it back to Jacob as evidence that some wild beast had killed his beloved son. Jacob mourns Joseph as dead.

Judah the Scoundrel and Joseph the Righteous

And here is what is genuinely striking about Genesis 38, the very next chapter after Joseph is sold into slavery. Genesis 38 interrupts the Joseph narrative to tell us what happened to Judah. And Judah's story in Genesis 38 is the story of a man behaving badly.

Judah leaves his brothers, marries a Canaanite woman, has three sons. The first son marries a woman named Tamar and dies before producing an heir. The second son, by the levirate-marriage custom, takes Tamar as his wife but fails to consummate the obligation and also dies. The third son is too young, and Judah sends Tamar back to her father's house with a promise that the third son will be given to her when he comes of age, a promise Judah has no intention of keeping.

Tamar waits. Judah does not deliver. So Tamar takes the action that gets her into Matthew's genealogy. She disguises herself as a roadside prostitute, intercepts Judah on a journey, and conceives by him. And when Judah cannot pay her at the moment of the encounter,

she takes from him his signet, his cord, and his staff, the equivalent of his identity documents, as a pledge.

Three months later, Tamar is visibly pregnant, and Judah is informed. His response is righteous indignation:

> Then Judah said, “Bring her out and let her be burned!” So when she was brought out, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, “By the man to whom these belong, I am with child.” And she said, “Please determine whose these are: the signet and cord, and staff.” So Judah acknowledged them and said, “She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son.” (Genesis 38:24–26)

She has been more righteous than I. That is the moment Judah is forced to confront his own duplicity. Tamar, the Canaanite woman he had wronged, turns out to be more righteous than Judah, the Jewish patriarch he was supposed to be. And the chapter ends with Judah’s confession of his own failure.

Meanwhile, in Genesis 39, the next chapter, we get an entirely different kind of story. Joseph is working his way up in the household of Potiphar in Egypt, and the text emphasizes that God is with him. Joseph’s righteousness is so visible that Potiphar puts him in charge of the entire household. And then Potiphar’s wife begins to proposition Joseph. Repeatedly. And Joseph refuses:

> “‘How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?’ So it was, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her or to be with her” (Genesis 39:9–10).

Joseph refuses to sin against God. One day Potiphar’s wife grabs his garment and tries to force the issue. Joseph leaves the garment in her hand and flees. He has a problem with leaving

coats behind, this Joseph. First the tunic of many colors, taken from him by his brothers. Now his outer garment, left in Potiphar's wife's hand as he flees temptation.

And here is the contrast Genesis is composing between Judah and Joseph. Judah left his signet and cord and staff behind because he had been sneaking into a roadside encounter he should not have been having. Joseph left his garment behind because he was fleeing a sexual encounter he refused to have. Two men. Two left-behind garments. Two diametrically opposite moral trajectories.

Judah's left-behind garments expose his hypocrisy. Joseph's left-behind garment becomes the evidence Potiphar's wife uses to falsely accuse him of attempted rape. Joseph ends up in prison for thirteen years on the strength of that false accusation. And in prison, Joseph continues to dream, and to interpret the dreams of others. The baker. The cupbearer. And eventually, after the cupbearer remembers him, Pharaoh himself.

Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream takes him from the lowest point in Egyptian society to the highest. From the prison floor to the throne-room. Second only to Pharaoh in the entire empire. And the empire-wide grain-storage program he proposes is going to save not only Egypt but every neighboring nation during the famine that is about to come.

Judah Steps Up

Meanwhile, back at Jacob's camp, twenty years have elapsed since Joseph was sold into slavery. And Judah has been doing some serious learning across those twenty years. He has lost his three sons. He has been shamed by the Tamar episode. He has been forced to confront his own duplicity. Something has been shifting underneath the surface of his life.

The famine arrives. Jacob's family runs out of food. He sends ten of his sons down to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph recognizes his brothers immediately, though they do not recognize

him. And Joseph wants to see whether anything has changed in the family across the twenty years. He accuses them of being spies. He demands that they return with their youngest brother Benjamin: the only other son of Rachel, who has now become Jacob's most beloved remaining child.

The brothers return home. They tell Jacob that the Egyptian official has demanded Benjamin. Jacob refuses:

"And Jacob their father said to them, 'You have bereaved me: Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin. All these things are against me'" (Genesis 42:36).

All these things are against me. Jacob will not part with Benjamin. But the famine deepens. The food runs out again. The family will starve unless they go back. And someone has to convince Jacob to send Benjamin.

Reuben tries first. He says, kill my two sons if I do not bring Benjamin back. Jacob is not moved by this offer, which is grotesque on its face. Reuben is not the man for this moment.

And then Judah steps up. The same Judah who twenty years earlier had been the ringleader of selling Joseph into slavery. The same Judah who had been shamed by Tamar. Something has happened in Judah across the twenty years:

> Then Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever." (Genesis 43:8–9)

I myself will be surety for him. Let me bear the blame forever if I do not bring him back. That is a different Judah than the Judah who sold Joseph into slavery. Something in Judah has been growing across the twenty years. Whatever it was (the loss of his sons, the shame of the

Tamar encounter, the slow inner work of repentance) something had been changing him. And the changed Judah was now willing to assume the personal cost of bringing Benjamin home.

And down in Egypt, Joseph wants to test whether the change is real. He sets up a final test. Benjamin is framed for the theft of Joseph's silver cup. Joseph announces that Benjamin will become his slave, and the rest of the brothers may return home in peace. That is the moment.

And Judah steps forward and delivers one of the most moving speeches in the entire Bible:

> For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father forever' . . . Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me, lest perhaps I see the evil that would come upon my father? (Genesis 44:32–34)

Let me remain as a slave in place of the lad. That is the moment of redemption. The same Judah who twenty years earlier had sold his brother Joseph into slavery now offers to become a slave himself in place of his half-brother Benjamin. The substitutionary instinct that had been entirely absent in the younger Judah is now the operating principle of the older Judah.

And Joseph cannot hold his disguise any longer. He sends all the Egyptians out of the room and weeps so loudly that the entire household hears him. And he reveals himself to his brothers:

> Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph; does my father still live?" . . . And he said, "I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life . . . So now it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made

> me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt." (Genesis 45:3, 4–5, 8)

Joseph and Judah are reconciled. And the entire family is brought down to Egypt and preserved through the famine. And just before Jacob's death, Joseph brings his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, to receive a blessing from their grandfather. And Jacob does something striking. He crosses his hands, placing his right hand (the hand of greater blessing) on the younger child Ephraim, and announces:

> As for me, when I came from Padan, Rachel died beside me in the land of Canaan . . . And now your two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; as Reuben and Simeon, they shall be mine. (Genesis 48:7, 5)

Ephraim and Manasseh are mine, as Reuben and Simeon, they shall be mine. Jacob is adopting Joseph's two sons as his own. Joseph effectively receives a double portion of the inheritance through his two sons becoming founding-tribes alongside Reuben and Simeon. And the tribe of Joseph splits into two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh, for the rest of Israelite history.

The Divided Kingdom

And from this point forward, almost the entire rest of the Old Testament is governed by the relationship between Joseph and Judah, or, more precisely, between Ephraim (representing the northern tribes descended from Joseph) and Judah (representing the southern tribes). Ephraim and Judah become the two dominant tribes of the divided nation, and the prophets address either the northern Ephraim or the southern Judah depending on which kingdom they were sent to.

When David became king, he initially reigned only in Hebron, in the territory of Judah, for about seven and a half years. Then the northern tribes came to him and acknowledged him as king over all Israel. The kingdom was united under David, and then under his son Solomon.

But Solomon, toward the end of his reign, drifted into idolatry through his many foreign wives. And when Solomon died, his son Rehoboam came to the throne and immediately made a strategic blunder. The northern tribes, led by a respected leader named Jeroboam, came to Rehoboam and asked him to ease the heavy taxation Solomon had imposed during his temple-building years. Rehoboam consulted his elders, who advised him to lighten the burden. Rehoboam then consulted the young men he had grown up with, who advised him to increase the burden as a show of authority. Rehoboam, foolishly, took the advice of the young men:

"'My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scourges!' . . . So the king did not listen to the people; for the turn of events was from the Lord" (1 Kings 12:14–15).

The northern tribes rebelled. They installed Jeroboam as king of the ten northern tribes, which thereafter were called "Israel" or "Ephraim." Only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained loyal to the Davidic line in the south, which thereafter was called "Judah." The kingdom split. And the rift never healed.

For the rest of 1 and 2 Kings, and for the rest of 1 and 2 Chronicles, the historians are tracking two parallel lines of kings, northern kings and southern kings, and the prophets are addressing either the northern audience or the southern audience. The brothers of Jacob's twelve-tribe family had become two competing kingdoms warring with each other across the divided land.

And in 722 BC, the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom and carried the ten northern tribes into captivity. They were scattered across the Assyrian Empire, what we now call

the “lost tribes of Israel.” No one could gather them back. The promise of Genesis, that the descendants of Jacob would be a blessing to all the nations, looked, by every observable standard, to be dead.

And about 130 years later, between 605 and 586 BC, the Babylonian Empire conquered the southern kingdom of Judah and carried them into captivity in Babylon. Now both kingdoms had been scattered. Joseph and Judah were both gone from the land. The covenant people, dispersed across the entire ancient Near East, looked like a corpse waiting to be buried.

Can These Bones Live?

And the question that surfaces in the Babylonian exile is exactly this, can the scattered descendants of Jacob ever be gathered back together again? *And Ezekiel, prophesying from inside the Babylonian captivity, receives one of the most pictographic answers in the entire Old Testament*. *Ezekiel 37*. The valley of dry bones.

I think Ezekiel 37 is one of the most hopeful chapters in the whole book. On the surface it looks like the bleakest possible scene: a valley full of dried-out bones, lying scattered and unburied. But the chapter announces a divine intervention that the bones cannot produce for themselves. Listen:

“Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’’” (Ezekiel 37:11).

Our bones are dry. Our hope is lost. We ourselves are cut off. That is the exiled nation’s honest self-diagnosis. And then Ezekiel prophesies to the bones, and as he prophesies, there is a sound and a rattling, and the bones come together, bone to bone. Sinews appear on them. Flesh comes upon them. Skin covers them. And then Ezekiel prophesies to the breath, and the breath enters the bodies, and they stand up, “an exceedingly great army” (Ezekiel 37:10).

The scattered nation will be re-gathered. That is the prophetic announcement. The promises made to Abraham, that his descendants would be a blessing to the world, will come true in the resurrected bones of the whole house of Israel. The scattering was not the end of the story. The resurrection of the dry bones was the next chapter.

The Two Sticks Made One

And then Ezekiel 37 continues with a second symbolic prophecy that is just as important as the dry-bones vision. *Listen*:

> Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "As for you, son of man, take a stick for yourself and write on it: 'For Judah and for the children of Israel, his companions.' Then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel, his companions.' Then join them one to another for yourself into one stick, and they will become one in your hand." (Ezekiel 37:15–17)

Two sticks. One for Judah. One for Joseph. Joined into a single stick in the prophet's hand. Ezekiel is being given a sign-act to perform, a physical demonstration of what God is going to do at the level of the divided nation. The two sticks that had been broken apart by centuries of inter-tribal warfare are going to be joined back together into a single staff in God's hand.

And God explains the meaning:

> "Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel, his companions; and I will join them with it, with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they will be one in My hand" . . . "and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again." (Ezekiel 37:19, 22)

One king over them all. No longer two nations. No longer divided into two kingdoms. And a few verses later, Ezekiel names the king:

"David My servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd" (Ezekiel 37:24).

David my servant shall be king over them. David himself had been dead for nearly four hundred years by the time Ezekiel prophesied this. But the prophet is announcing that a descendant of David, a future David, would come and shepherd the reunited people. The Davidic Messiah would be the unifying king, and his reign would heal the division that had broken the nation in two. The reunification of Joseph and Judah would happen through the future Son of David.

Behold, the Virgin Shall Conceive

And now let me drop back to Isaiah 7, because the prophecy of Emmanuel, God with us, that gets quoted in Matthew 1:23 was originally given in a very specific historical context that we usually skip over. Listen:

> Now it came to pass in the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up to Jerusalem to make war against it, but could not prevail against it. And it was told to the house of David, saying, "Syria's forces are deployed in Ephraim." So his heart and the heart of his people were moved as the trees of the woods are moved with the wind. (Isaiah 7:1–2)

Look carefully at what is happening politically here. Ahaz, king of Judah, is being besieged by an alliance between Syria (a pagan superpower) and Israel (the northern tribes, the descendants of Joseph). The northern brothers of Judah have allied themselves with their largest

pagan enemy to march south against their own brother Judah. That is how strained the relationship has gotten between Joseph and Judah by the eighth century BC. Brother is in league with foreign enemy against brother.

And in the middle of that political crisis, God speaks through Isaiah and offers Ahaz a sign:

"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

Behold, the virgin shall conceive. And the meaning of the sign, in its immediate Isaianic context, is that despite the alliance of Syria and Israel against Judah, the line of David will not be wiped out. A son will be born in the line of David. The Davidic dynasty will continue. The alliance against Judah will not stand, because God is with Judah. That is the original sense of Immanuel, God with us, God with Judah in the face of the Syrian-Ephraimite alliance.

But the prophecy is doing more than the immediate political situation requires. Isaiah 7's virgin-conceives sign opens into Isaiah 9's much grander Messianic announcement:

> Nevertheless the gloom will not be upon her who is distressed, as when at first He lightly esteemed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward more heavily oppressed her, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined . . . For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:1–2, 6)

The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. Those were the first of the northern tribes carried away by the Assyrians. They are the lands of Joseph that had walked in darkness. And Isaiah is announcing that those same lands (the lands of the brothers who had been scattered, the lands of the Joseph-half of the divided nation) would see a great light when the Son was given.

And when we get to Matthew 4, Matthew quotes this exact passage of Isaiah 9 as fulfilled in Jesus's early Galilean ministry:

> And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." (Matthew 4:13–16)

Matthew is announcing that Jesus's preaching tour in Galilee is the fulfillment of Isaiah 9. The Davidic Son has arrived. And the first place he announces the kingdom is to the lands of the northern tribes, the lands of Joseph, that had walked in darkness since the Assyrian captivity seven centuries earlier. Jesus is enacting the reunification of Joseph and Judah by carrying his preaching directly into Joseph-territory at the inauguration of his ministry. Israel's David is coming. And reconciliation between the long-divided brothers is already underway in his footsteps.

Three Thousand Saved, Not Slain

And then comes Pentecost. Acts 2. And the structure of Pentecost is deliberately echoing the structure of the original Sinai event in Exodus 19–20.

At Mount Sinai, fire came down on top of a mountain. The voice of God thundered. The law was given on tables of stone. At Pentecost, fire came down inside an upper room. The Spirit of God spoke through human mouths. The law was written, as Jeremiah 31:33 had promised, on the hearts of those who received it. Each of the 120 in the upper room becomes a Mount Sinai. The fiery finger of God is inscribing the word of God in 120 Jewish believers, not on stone, but on living flesh.

And then the 120 spill out into the streets of Jerusalem, where Jews from every nation under heaven are gathered for the feast. Why did Jesus keep exactly twelve apostles? Why not ten, or fifteen, or twenty-five? Why was it so important to replace Judas with Matthias in Acts 1, before the day of Pentecost arrived? Because they needed the full twelve-tribe representation. This was restored Israel. The new twelve-tribe community had to have exactly twelve apostolic foundations, just as the original twelve-tribe community had twelve founding patriarchs.

Peter preaches. He explains that the events of Pentecost are the fulfillment of Joel 2's prophecy of the outpoured Spirit: sons and daughters prophesying, dreams and visions, the Spirit on all flesh from the highest to the handmaiden. He preaches Jesus crucified and risen as the promised Messiah. And the response is one of the most theologically charged moments in the entire New Testament:

> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" . . . Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. (Acts 2:37, 41)

That day about three thousand souls were added to them. And the parallel to Sinai is exact, and the reversal is breathtaking. At the original Sinai, while Moses was up on the

mountain receiving the law, the people at the base of the mountain made a golden calf and worshiped it. When Moses came down and saw what was happening, he commanded the Levites to strap on their swords:

> Then he said to them, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.'" So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day. (Exodus 32:27–28)

Three thousand died at the foot of Sinai. Killed by their own brothers for the sin of idolatry. And on the day of Pentecost, three thousand were saved at the foot of the new Sinai: pierced through the heart by Peter's preaching (the same Greek verb suggests being stabbed at the heart) but instead of dying from the piercing, being added to the kingdom. Three thousand slain by the sword at the old Sinai. Three thousand saved by the Spirit at the new Sinai. The numerical match is deliberate. Luke is telling us, by the exact correspondence of the number, that the new covenant is the structural inversion of the old covenant. Where the old produced death for idolatry, the new produces life for repentance.

That is the kind of new day Pentecost inaugurated. Obedience now comes through internal transformation rather than external coercion. The Spirit writes the law on the heart and produces, from the inside, the kind of life the law had always been pointing toward. And the zeal of the Lord, the zeal Isaiah had announced as the engine that would accomplish the reunification, turns out to be the Spirit's zeal operating in transformed human interiors, not the human zeal that produced the Sinai bloodbath.

And Then the Samaritans, and Then the Gentiles

And after the three thousand Jews are added at Pentecost, the gospel keeps expanding outward in deliberate stages. Acts 8, the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit and are folded into the kingdom. Acts 10: the Gentiles (specifically, the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius) receive the Holy Spirit and are folded into the kingdom. And the pattern follows exactly the geography Jesus had announced in Acts 1:8:

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Jerusalem (Acts 2). All Judea (Acts 3–7). Samaria (Acts 8). And then the end of the earth, beginning with the Gentile centurion (Acts 10) and expanding across the rest of the book. And the reason four Gentile women were mentioned in Jesus's genealogy in Matthew 1 was that Matthew was winking at the point Jesus would later make at the end of his Gospel:

> "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Matthew 28:19–20)

All the nations. The Gentile women in chapter 1 anticipate the Gentile nations in chapter 28. The reach of the kingdom is global. The Davidic Son inaugurated his reign by being announced through a genealogy that already included four Gentile women, and he concluded his earthly ministry by sending his followers to all the nations. Jesus is the most unlikely king of the world. When you look at his genealogy (the scandalous women, the wicked kings, the marginalized Joseph-stepfather) he is the most unlikely figure imaginable to claim the throne of

David and the throne of the whole earth. But look what God did through him and his faithfulness.

Wherever you are, the kingdom is for you. Whatever you are made up of, whatever is going on inside your mind, whoever your parents were and whoever you descended from, the kingdom is for you. You are welcome. That is the structural truth Matthew has been signaling from the first verse of his first chapter.

The Coat of Many Colors

And let me bring one final detail back from Genesis 3 that ties this whole story together. Remember what God did when Adam and Eve disobeyed in the garden? He had warned them, "in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). But on the day they ate, they did not die. Instead:

"Also for Adam and his wife the Lord God made tunics of skin, and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21).

The Lord God made tunics for them and clothed them. And the Hebrew phrase used in Genesis 3:21, "He made him a tunic," is the same phrase used in Genesis 37:3 when Jacob makes the coat of many colors for Joseph. God's first act toward fallen humanity was to make them a coat. Jacob's first act of preferential love for his beloved son was to make him a coat. The pattern is deliberate.

We do not serve a God who wants to pound us into dust. We serve a God who wants to clothe us. He wants to deliver us. He wants to give to us. He wants every one of us to be the preeminent child, the child whose father makes the coat of many colors specifically for him or her. Hebrews 2 says it was the Father's pleasure that Christ would die so that he could bring many sons and daughters into glory (Hebrews 2:10). And the glory he is bringing us into is the

glory of being clothed by the Father's hand in the coat he has prepared for each of us specifically.

The Baby Peeking Through the Veil

And so we approach the season we are now entering, the Christmas season, with all of this backstory underneath us. The long animosity between Joseph and Judah. The scattering of the brothers across the ancient Near East. The promise of reunification through the Davidic Son. The fulfillment of that promise in the body of Jesus and in the Pentecost-inauguration of the multinational kingdom.

And the figure who solves all of it is, improbably, a baby. Not a warrior on horseback. Not a political genius with armies behind him. Not the kind of king the Syrians and the Pekahs and the Ahazes of the world would have understood. A baby. Peeking out from behind the veil of history. Innocent. Vulnerable. Saying: look at me. I am going to solve these problems.

We tend to want fire for fire and violence for violence and sword for sword. We tend to think the only way to handle the family enemy is to overwhelm them with greater force. But God's answer to centuries of inter-fraternal violence was a vulnerable infant. And the vulnerable infant ended up doing what no warrior-king ever could: reuniting Joseph and Judah at the foot of the cross, and then expanding the reconciliation outward to include every Gentile nation that had been outside the covenant household altogether.

The Holiday Table

And so as we enter the holiday season, as we anticipate the family-table encounters that are coming over the next few weeks, let me make one direct application. You are sitting at a table soon. You are about to eat the sweet potato casserole and the turkey leg, or, if you are vegetarian, the broccoli. And that cousin is going to bring up, one more time, the same topic that

has caused friction between you for years. X, Y, and Z, again. And you are going to have the choice every previous generation in your family has had to make: sword for sword, or vulnerable infant.

Try this instead. Say: “I am so sorry. There has been so much I have brought to our relationship that has failed to be what Christ has called me to be. And I hope right now can be the moment we put this behind us.” Somebody has to die. Somebody has to crawl up on the cross with Jesus. Remember what he said, take up your cross and follow me (Matthew 16:24). Somebody has to die in this family-table encounter, and the cruciform pattern is that the one who follows Jesus dies first. Not the cousin. Not the in-law. You. The follower of Jesus takes the death-position first, and trusts that the dying produces life that the dying-person cannot orchestrate on their own.

And then sometimes the Roman soldiers at the foot of the cross will say what the centurion said, truly this man was the Son of God (Mark 15:39). Sometimes the cousin or the in-law, watching you absorb the conflict rather than escalate it, will quietly recognize that something different has been operating in your interior than what they are used to seeing in family arguments. And that quiet recognition may be the beginning of redemption for them too, not because you converted them by being right, but because you converted them by laying down your right-to-be-right.

You are no more at odds with your family member than the thousands of generations of Israelites were at odds with each other across centuries of divided-kingdom warfare. You are no more at odds than all of Israel and all of the Gentiles have been at odds with each other since the beginning of time. And the same reconciliation Christ accomplished at the cosmic level is the

reconciliation he is now making available at the holiday-table level. Same gospel. Same cross. Different room.

The Reoccurring Dream

And let me close with one personal disclosure. I have a recurring dream. About one specific person. There is one person in my life with whom I have not yet figured out how to accomplish reconciliation. And I dream about this person again and again.

In one of the dreams, I was at a large entertainment venue, and the two of us happened to end up seated right next to each other in the crowd. And we both immediately realized that God had orchestrated the seating arrangement. And the moment of recognition broke my heart inside the dream, and I woke up sobbing. Yes, we got it. We got reconciliation in the dream. And the reconciliation was unmistakably an act of God (orchestrated, not engineered by either of us) completed in the moment of mutual recognition that neither of us had set up.

Let God be that reconciling power in your lives right now and forevermore. Because he is a forevermore King, sitting on his forevermore throne. And our lives are vapor. Let us do what we can in this short seventy years to bring peace on earth and goodwill toward humankind. And trust that God will make up the difference.

I do not have to be right. I am likely not right. And those who know me have been saying he is not right for a long time anyway. So let us go into this holiday season as God's people, as the descendants of the Joseph-and-Judah reconciliation rather than as the descendants of the Joseph-and-Judah feud. Let us be the seventh seven of God's people. Let us be the children of the King to end all kings. Amen.