

Father of Judgment
Ps 89:46-52, Matt 1:12-17

Brothers and sisters, at this time of year – during the Christmas season, when it's crisp and cold outside and the snow is softly falling on the ground, and the lights are twinkling and there is a warm glow coming from the windows in the houses along your street...

And when you're walking through the mall, and you hear bits and pieces of familiar, cheerful Christmas music coming from the stores and the restaurants and coffee shops, and you see children peeking eagerly into store windows looking at the displays, their eyes all bright and shiny at the prospect of what they might be getting for Christmas...

In the midst of all this... judgment, is probably the last thing that comes to mind – isn't it?

Because Christmas is all about being nice, being charitable to others, being giving, there's a spirit of goodwill to all men and so on... and so Judgment with its apocalyptic overtones and

its nuances of criticism and condemnation seems to be mean spirited and out of place at Christmas time.

We don't usually associate the Christmas season with judgment – but... if you look carefully you will find hints of it here and there.

What about Santa Claus? He keeps that list... So you better watch out, you better think twice – he's gonna find out who's naughty or nice... Santa Claus is coming to town.

And he's bringing presents for all the good girls and boys, but none for the naughty ones who have misbehaved... all they get is a lump of coal in their stockings.

And what about that classic story – 'A Christmas Carol' with Ebenezer Scrooge, who is warned by the ghost of his former business partner- Jacob Morley - about how his miserly ways in this life will bring him chains and misery in the next...

But Scrooge will not listen and it is only after he is visited by the ghost of Christmas future later that night and he sees his impending judgment – black and bleak and full of death – that he has a change of heart and embraces the Christmas spirit.

And what about some of the Christmas Carols? There really solid ones... like Hark the Herald Angels Sing.

Listen to these lyrics from the first verse *“Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled...”* and the third verse *“Mild He lays His glory by, Born that man no more may die...”*

So, while we don’t typically think about judgment at Christmas time, if you look closely you will find that it is there.

Now part of the reason why we don’t associate judgment with the Christmas season, and why we may not have really noticed it and/or overlooked it, is because we seem to have developed an aversion to the whole idea of judgment - especially divine judgment.

We really struggle with any suggestion or teaching that God is a God of judgment. We have a difficult time accepting that God has rules for us to obey and standards that He expects us to keep.

We react strongly to any notion that there may be consequences when we are disobedient... or that the scriptures reveal God has reserved an eternal punishment for some after the final judgment.

And even if we believe it to be true... we tend to downplay it, we prefer to portray God as a loving God, a God who is gracious and forgiving, who understands and knows how hard it is to be human.

Or – and we especially tend towards this at Christmas time – we present Jesus as the contrasting solution to the angry and judgmental God of the Old Testament, and that’s why we’re so glad that Jesus was born, is because Jesus is all about love and getting rid of rules and so on – and really... how judgmental can a little baby in a manger be??

Now brothers and sisters, we are not the first people who prefer to refer to God only as a loving and gracious God, nor are we the only society who focuses only on the cute and cuddly aspects of the Messiah.

The people of Matthew's day, for whom he wrote his gospel, also wrestled the notion that God was a God of judgment and they also had a skewed understanding of the promised messiah - preferring the promises and descriptions that the Messiah would come to make their life easier and they would be delivered from Roman oppression.

Isaiah 61:1-2 can certainly be read in this way *"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound..."*

But that's not a complete picture of the Messiah, and in so far as Christ is the most complete revelation of God to us – it's not a complete revelation of God either.

So as Matthew starts his gospel, as he is getting ready to introduce us to Jesus the Messiah, and tell us of the Messiah's birth;

He begins with this genealogy which functions as a quick and effective teaching device to remind us of who God has revealed Himself to be already – and quite literally connects the birth of Jesus to that revelation... so that Jesus picks it up and carries it on and reveals it more fully and completely.

And as we learned last week, Matthew does this by dividing this genealogy into three sections of fourteen generations, and in each section he makes some additions or alterations in the family tree – and these communicate specific things to us about who God has already revealed Himself to be.

Last week we learned how the inclusion of scandalous women married to passive or negligent men reveals God as a God of mercy.

Now – you may be wondering if there is anything significant about Matthew composing this genealogy in three sets of fourteen generations.

Well aside from the fact that for the original readers of his gospel it would have made a very effective literary teaching device... I think it communicates to us today that when it comes to fulfilling His covenant promises in history as we see it, God is.... as Gandalf says to Frodo Baggins.... *“never early or late, but He arrives precisely when He means to.”*

In other words it communicates God’s sovereignty over the development of human history and the history of the world.

So there was a specific time when God decided it was time to act... but at the same time God’s decision to send Jesus Christ when He did, was not necessarily dependent upon a particular set of historical circumstances having come about.

So no one can say, if only the Messiah had come earlier then.... Or if only the Messiah had come later then... as

Martha had said; *“Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died...”* (John 11:21)

Jesus was born neither late nor early but he arrived precisely when He meant to, because as Jesus revealed to His disciples when he learned that Lazerus was sick *“This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”* (John 11:4)

So why is it important for us to understand God is sovereign over history in this way because it means that Matthew is not bound by “historical precision”, as we understand it today, when he puts together the list of names we are looking at today in vs. 7-11.

In fact it is the historical “errors” in this list that stand out as the variations which Matthew has included in order to teach us something about God and carry that forward into who Jesus is as the Messiah.

Now if you were an Israelite history buff in the same way that some people are Star Wars nerds... these historical errors would jump out at you just as quickly as a Star Wars nerd might recognize the error of listing the 1977 Star Wars movie as the first movie, even though it was the first of the series to be produced.

Furthermore, you could list all seven Star Wars movies and it wouldn't really matter if you included the new Star Wars movie Rogue One in the list chronologically or not – because it's a side story line that does nothing to change the overall story as it develops from 'Episode 1 – the Phantom Menace' all the way to the most recent 'The Force Awakens'

So if you were an Israelite history buff you would know that King Abijah was the father of King Asa – it says so in 1 Kings 15:8, 2 Chronicles 14:1 – he was not the father of Asaph the psalmist.

And you would know that King Joram was not the father of King Uzziah – he was actually his great-great- grandfather.

Matthew has skipped over King Ahaziah, King Joash, and King Amaziah. *(And we covered why Matthew did this with regards to not being bound by historical precision)*

And you would know that King Manasseh was the father of King Amon – it says so in 2 Kings 21:18. King Manasseh was not the father of Amos – the farmer prophet from Tekoa who actually lived during the reign of aforementioned King Uzziah.

And... you would know that King Josiah was the grand-father of King Jeconiah, and Matthew has skipped over King Jehoakim.

So four alterations in this section of the genealogy, just like there were four inclusions in the previous section – what does it mean and what is it telling us about God.

Well, we need to remember that in this section of the genealogy, it is the Davidic Covenant which is at the forefront of God's sovereign work in history.

And if you remember from our series on the Christ of the Covenants a while back – the purpose of God’s covenant with David, the purpose for Israel having a King, was so that the King would lead them to be faithful in keeping their covenant responsibilities as God’s chosen people.

So these alterations in this part of the genealogy is all about contrasting those Kings who did well in this responsibility and those who did not – for example by taking liberties to change the name of King Asa to Asaph, Mathew recalls King Asa’s efforts to lead the people back to the right worship of Yahweh.

1 Kings 15:11-15 *“Asa did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as his father David had done. He expelled the male shrine prostitutes from the land and got rid of all the idols his ancestors had made. He even deposed his grandmother Maakah from her position as queen mother, because she had made a repulsive image for the worship of Asherah. Asa cut it down and burned it in the Kidron Valley. Although he did not remove the high places, Asa’s heart was fully committed to the*

LORD all his life. He brought into the temple of the LORD the silver and gold and the articles that he and his father had dedicated.”

So Matthew highlights this emphasis on correct worship and the temple – by changing his name to that of a famous psalmist who is obviously associated with the temple and worship... Asaph. See how that works??

And then when he changes King Amon’s name to Amos, Matthew is applying Amos’ prophetic announcement of the assured destruction the northern kingdom of Israel, as an indictment on the life of King Amon.

King Amon followed the ways of his father who is described in 2 Kings 21:11 *“Manasseh King of Judah has committed these detestable sins. He has done more evil than the Amorites who preceded him and has led Judah into sin with his idols.”* and vs.16 *“Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end.”*

And it appeared that Manasseh got away with this because he reigned for fifty-five years – but his son Amon, followed his ways and was assassinated within two years – certain destruction.

And Matthew uses this name change to show how soon the same fate would befall the line of David in Judah, and indeed Matthew quickly moves from King Amon to King Josiah and to King Jeconiah to the exile to Babylon – and he only has to skip one generation.

So, what is all of this telling us about who God is?

Brothers and sisters, it tells us that the God who has revealed Himself as a God of mercy... is also a God of judgment, who will enact the judgment of God.

And I say it like that friends because part of the reason we have such a problem with God's judgment is that we don't really understand it and we read far too much of our own baggage into it.

The kind of judgment that we see reflected in the backstory of this section of the genealogy, and indeed the only kind of judgment that God deals in is Covenant judgment.

And that is a far cry from the capricious, indiscriminate, out of control, raging destructive tantrum that God's judgment is often incorrectly characterized as.

It is not that punitive type of judgment - you lied and so I'll smite thee with sickness, you lied again so I'll punish you with a car accident..

Covenant judgment brothers and sisters is Yahweh holding his people accountable to the agreement under which He has shown them mercy and become their God, and they His people.

And the terms of the covenants can be summarized in that You worship only God, obey Him out of love and gratitude for His mercy, and treat others as He has commanded.

So – as Jesus summarized in Matt 22:37-40 *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

God’s covenant judgment is God warning His people... that unless they repent from their idolatry and their injustice, the covenant consequences will be enacted and He will remove His blessing and protection so they see the error of their ways and return to Him...

It is God finally... after hundreds of years of warnings, hundreds of years of Israel continually turning away in idol worship and injustice, finally saying enough – you have brought this upon yourselves and taking away ALL the covenant promises – they lose their king, their land, the temple, and they are sent away into exile.

That is God’s covenant judgment – do you see how it is different?

And friends – let us not presume to think that we can judge God’s covenant judgment.

We ought to know ourselves well enough by now to know that if anyone treated us the way Israel treated God, and we had God’s position and power... we would have blasted them off the face of the earth a loooooong time ago.

So, we have no grounds to be all high and mighty and acted so shocked and offended by the consequences that God’s covenant judgment brings to human beings for their sin against Him.

And finally friends – we need to learn, and accept that God’s covenant judgment is a part of the genealogy of Jesus Christ because it is what makes us aware that we need Jesus.

Last week we learned that God is a God of mercy and that is the starting point - but this week we learn that we don’t continue to get to know more of who God is and who Jesus

fully reveals Him to be without going through His covenant judgment.

It is God's covenant judgment that reveals the complete and utter failure of David's line to lead the fickle hearted Israelites to be faithful covenant partners with Yahweh.

It is God's covenant judgment that enacts the consequences of that continual unfaithfulness to show that God simply can't overlook the idolatry and injustice and let it slide – that would have God failing those who depend on Him for justice, and being unfaithful to His Word.

So it is God's covenant judgment which reveals the need for someone to come forward to be that faithful covenant partner with Yahweh... someone who will overcome our predisposition for idolatry and our propensity to injustice.

And it is God's covenant judgment which points out the fact that if those, who out of all the earth were His treasured possession (Deut 7:6) who received His law and instruction

and had His very presence among them... if these people failed...

Then where else will God's faithful covenant partner come from?? And what hope would any of us who are not part of God's chosen people have in thinking we could do better?? And what solution could we possibly offer??

Friends, if you are not yet desperate for the promised Messiah to be born after studying this section of Matthew's introductory genealogy – you don't know God's covenant judgment, and you won't know that you must put your faith in Jesus as our covenant substitute – our savior.

So brothers and sisters – this Christmas we better watch out and we better think twice because we already know who is naughty and not nice...

While our society might believe that the notion of judgment is incompatible with their sentimental notions of celebrating

Christmas, while they may choose to overlook or ignore the subtle indicators that it is really there... we must not.

To do so friends is to stare into the face of the spirit of Christmas future where our lack of judgment – and it really is that in both ways – our lack of judgment means that we will not know when we are being unfaithful through worshiping idols...

Our lack of judgment means that we will not know when we are treating others unjustly...

Our lack of judgment means that we will miss that which we need to put our faith in as we see Jesus laying in the manger on Christmas Eve.

It means that we will share the same fate as those Israelites who ignored God's judgment for generations and listened only to the prophetic promises of God's mercy and love, they were sent into exile – a future apart from God without His blessings, His protection or His presence.

So brothers and sisters, embrace the truth that God is a God of judgment – this is a good thing for us...

And embrace the truth that Jesus' birth fully reveals God's judgment on humanity as God himself becomes a human being in order to be a fully faithful covenant partner to Himself... right from conception and birth.

If we were capable of it friends – the incarnate Word born as Jesus would not be needed.

So I pray friends – that we will come to know God more clearly and intimately this Christmas as Jesus reveals Him as the Father of Judgment. Amen.