THE GENEALOGY OF JESUS

Matthew 1:1–17

Key Verse: 1:1

“This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:”

A political hot button issue in this election cycle has been immigration. Soon the U.S. may actually have a wall going up along our southern border. But many have pointed out that America is really a nation of immigrants. The only legitimate people here may be the native Americans, like those at Standing Rock. Looking at things this way turns everything on its head. On a TV show “Who Do You Think You Are?” celebrities trace their ancestry and find out shocking things about their roots. We all have so many assumptions about who we are, where we came from, and, based on that, what we deserve. Throughout my life people have looked at me strangely because of my last name. Several years ago I researched my ancestry and found that I’m a direct descendant of at least five men who fought in the American Revolution; earlier, two of my ancestors were in the original Jamestown colony; one even came over on the Mayflower. So I guess I’m more American than most. Supposedly I’m even related to some kings of England. Does it change who I am? Will people respect me more? Hardly.

For most people history and genealogies are so boring. In two places the Bible actually warns us not to waste time on genealogies (1Ti1:4; Tit3:9). But Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy. Many just skip over it and would never devote a whole lesson to it, because it looks like just a list of strange names nobody ever heard of. So why are we studying this genealogy? It’s because as we look at it more closely, we learn some important things. It shows us that Jesus’ birth as the Messiah is good news. It reveals God’s faithfulness. It’s not really a human ancestry; it’s a spiritual lineage of faith. In Jesus’ genealogy we even find the names of some scandalous women. And we begin to see why David is such a key figure. Through this study may we learn more about God, about ourselves, and about how we can be used by God today.

**First**, the Messiah. Read verse 1. Here the word “genealogy” in Greek is “genesis.” It means beginning or origin. Where did Jesus come from? In his time some people thought Jesus wasn’t even Jewish (Jn8:48). Matthew is saying Jesus came from David, and from Abraham. And he repeats that Jesus is “the Messiah” (1,16,17) Who’s that? “The Messiah” means “the Anointed One.” In the Old Testament, prophets, priests and kings were all anointed. But the Messiah is a special One. God made special promises to Abraham and David that he would send the Messiah through them. God told Abraham, “…all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Ge12:3). God told David, “…I will establish the throne of [your offspring’s] kingdom forever” (2Sa7:13). Many Old Testament prophets also predicted the Messiah’s coming (Lk24: 26,27,44; Ac3:18; 17:2,3; 26:22,23; Ro1:2; 3:21; 1Pe1:10,11). Among them, Isaiah may best capture the meaning of the word “Messiah.” Isaiah 9:6 says, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” The Messiah isn’t just a king; he’s “everything to everybody.” He satisfies our souls and meets our deepest needs. People hold onto false messiahs, be they people, ideas or objects. But knowing Jesus as my true Messiah changes everything.

**Second**, human unfaithfulness and God’s faithfulness. As we read through the names in this genealogy we notice some things. Firstly, the list of men after King David (6–11) are only the kings of Judah; the northern kings aren’t mentioned. It calls to mind how Israel was divided into two. That painful division happened because of David’s son Solomon’s sin of idolatry (1Ki11:9–13). Especially, Matthew repeats in verses 11,12 and 17 “the exile to Babylon.” Those 70 years were the most humiliating. The Northern kingdom had already been destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. God punished them for their idolatry. During the Babylonian exile, the southern kingdom Judah was destroyed for the same reason; they “were taken captive to Babylon because of their unfaithfulness” (1Ch9:1). Their hearts turned away from God and turned to idols (e.g. 1Ch5:25; 2Ch29:6). The Jews were proud of their heritage as God’s people. But this genealogy shows that they were unfaithful to God. God alone was faithful to his promises. Despite their unfaithfulness, God kept his promises for 42 generations to send the Messiah through the descendants of Abraham and David. God never lies or changes his mind; he never makes a promise and doesn’t keep it (Nu23:19). We’re all unfaithful, but God is faithful (Ro3:2,3). This gives us hope (La3:21–23).

**Third**, a spiritual lineage. If Jesus’ genealogy were just a list of people literally descended from Abraham and David, it wouldn’t have much to do with us. But we find that it’s actually a spiritual lineage. Read verse 2. Abraham had more children than Isaac; Isaac had more children than Jacob; Jacob had more children than Judah. But only these three descendants—Isaac, Jacob and Judah—are mentioned because they inherited the covenant promises God made to Abraham (Ro9:6–8). Why did they inherit God’s covenant promises, and not their siblings? It was because they learned personal faith. Galatians 3:7–9 reads, “Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” No matter who we are, if we learn Abraham’s faith, faith in Jesus, we too are included in God’s redemptive history, in the spiritual lineage of God’s people.

**Fourth**, scandalous women (3,5,6,16). Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus mostly lists men’s names. But surprisingly, he includes the names of five women. He could have chosen more honorable women, such as Sarah, Rebekah or Leah. But instead, he purposely chooses some pretty embarrassing women. Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah (3a). The only way she was included in this genealogy was because she dressed up like a prostitute and tricked her father-in-law Judah to sleep with her. What a weird faith! Tamar’s faith exposed Judah’s sin, but also set him on the road to repentance (Ge38,45). Rahab didn’t just dress up; she *was* a prostitute. And she was a Gentile. So much for racial purity! The only way she was included in this genealogy was because by faith she protected Israel’s spies when they came to Jericho. Because she did so, her life was spared, she came to live among God’s people, and even married into the lineage of Jesus (Heb11:31; Jas2:25; cf. Jos6:25). Ruth was a Moabitess, a descendant of incest between Lot and his daughter, and God had said the Moabites were not supposed to live among his people down to the tenth generation (Dt23:3). The only way she was included in this genealogy was because she learned faith from her mother-in-law Naomi. When their husbands died, Ruth by faith went back to Israel with elderly Naomi, to take care of her. And by faith she listened to Naomi and boldly asked Boaz to marry her. In verse 6 there’s this woman “who had been Uriah’s wife.” Her name was Bathsheba, but by writing she “had been Uriah’s wife” Matthew is intentionally exposing King David’s great sins of adultery and murder. The only way she was included in this genealogy was because by faith she listened to the prophet Nathan and asked David in his old age to make her son Solomon king (1Ki1:11ff.). Finally, there’s Mary the mother of Jesus. In history people have idolized her, and many still pray to her. But actually, her story was also scandalous. She got pregnant while engaged, and it wasn’t even with her fiancé Joseph. Though she was innocent, people imagined the worst about her. The only way she was included in this genealogy was because by faith she obeyed God’s will for her to be the mother of his Son (Lk1:38). Five scandalous women. Why does Matthew include them in this genealogy? In his former life as a tax collector Matthew probably knew some prostitutes. Later he tells us that during Jesus’ ministry many prostitutes had repented and accepted God’s grace (Mt21:31,32). It wasn’t anything new. God has always worked through repentant people who had faith.

**Fifth**, Manasseh. Read verses 9,10. There were many kinds of kings of Judah. David was known as the gold standard of kings; everyone else was compared to him. The second best was probably Josiah; the third, Hezekiah. The hands down worst was Manasseh (2Ki21:1–18). Though he was king of God’s people, Manasseh was a blatant idol worshiper. He even brought idols into God’s temple and sacrificed his own sons in the fire. He led the whole nation astray. God sent the king of Assyria to put a hook in his nose and shackles on his feet to drag him off to Babylon. But something amazing happened. 2 Chronicles 33:12,13 reads: “In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God.” Manasseh’s story tells us that God has always worked through repentant sinners, even really wicked ones. So much for human self-righteousness.

**Sixth**, David. In this genealogy Matthew mentions David repeatedly in verses 1,6 and 17. Look at verse 17. The three sections of 14 generations is a Hebrew *gematria*, which attached a numeric value to each Hebrew letter. David’s name in Hebrew has three consonants, DVD, and their numeric values are 4, 6 and 4, which adds up to 14. The point is, this entire genealogy has a strong focus on David. Jesus the Messiah is “the son of David.” In verse 6 we already thought about David’s great sins of adultery and murder. So why would God put so much emphasis on David? David’s story shows us that even the best people are mere sinners, in desperate need of a Savior. David also shows us what may be, to Matthew, the most exemplary faith. Why is David’s faith so exemplary? It was because David had faith to repent and believe God’s forgiveness. When the prophet Nathan came and rebuked him for his sins of adultery and murder that he’d been hiding, David didn’t lash out at Nathan with his kingly power and have him executed. Instead, he said, “I have sinned against the Lord” (2Sa12:13). Then David wrote one of his most famous songs, Psalm 51, which begins, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.” What great fait—not to despair, but to come to God and ask for his forgiveness and cleansing! Apostle Paul lists David’s faith as an example for all Christians when he writes: “David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them” (Ro4:6–8; cf. Ps32:1,2). David shows us what Jesus the Messiah really came to do: forgive our sins (Mt6:12,14,15; 9:2,5,6; 18:35; 26:28). He also shows us all how to come to God, confess our sins, and accept his grace of forgiveness in Jesus.

Today we learned that Jesus is our Messiah. Even the best people are unfaithful, but God is faithful. God uses men and women who have personal faith, regardless of who they are. God wants to include all kinds of people among his people. Most of all, God sent Jesus to forgive our sins. May God grant us the faith to receive his grace personally this Christmas.