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.”

Today we’re studying the genealogy of Jesus. This genealogy is full of hard-to-pronounce names of people we know next to nothing about. So why not just skip ahead to the “real” story in verse 18? It’s because if we give it a closer look, this genealogy will tell us some heart-moving things about God, about people, and about God’s purpose in sending the Messiah. The Christmas season is now upon us. Let’s all try to get past the mania over shopping, decorations and food, and focus on what the birth of Jesus really means. Through today’s Bible study may God open our hearts and help us receive his word personally.

Matthew wrote his Gospel for the Jews. So among the four Gospels, he has the most references to the Old Testament. And by starting with a genealogy, he’s out to prove that Jesus is the Jews’ promised Messiah. Let’s read verse 1. Everybody knew the Messiah had to be a descendant of David because of the promises God had made to David (2Sa7:12–13). Everybody also knew the Messiah’s coming had to fulfill all God’s promises to Abraham (e.g. Ge22:18).

So on the surface, this genealogy of Jesus seems very “pro-Jewish.” But if we dig deeper, we see it’s not. Let’s read verse 2. This seems like nothing special: Abraham, his son Isaac, his son Jacob, and his son Judah—pretty standard fare. The Jews had long called God “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (Ex3:15–16). But actually Abraham had two sons: Ismael and Isaac. Isaac also had two sons: Jacob and Esau. And Jacob had twelve sons. But in verse 2 only one son is highlighted in each case: Isaac, Jacob and Judah. They’re also known as “the covenant sons.” It means God’s covenant with Abraham was handed down only to them, not to their brothers.

What was God’s covenant with Abraham? And why was it handed down only to Isaac, Jacob and Judah? God’s covenant with Abraham is first stated in Genesis 12:1–3. Let’s read it. God promised to bless Abraham and make him a source of blessing to all nations on earth. It was a prophecy that through his descendants God would send the Messiah as the Savior King of the whole world. Abraham was special not because of his human abilities or character, but because he believed God’s promises and obeyed him. When he started out, he obeyed God’s calling, even though he didn’t know where he was going (Heb11:8). Over time, his life of faith had many ups and downs. But basically, his faith grew because God was faithfully helping him. Finally, he became the example of faith for all people because he was willing to offer his one and only son to God, out of complete love and trust in him (Heb11:17–19).

But why was God’s covenant with Abraham handed down only to Isaac, Jacob and Judah? Paul explains in Romans 9:6–8. Let’s read it. God chose to pass on his covenant not to merely physical descendants of Abraham but to those who learned Abraham’s faith. The Jews thought they were blessed simply because they were Abraham’s physical descendants. But that wasn’t ever really true. God blesses only those who learn Abraham’s faith. Paul explains again in Galatians 3:7–9. Let’s read it. God’s true people are those who learn Abraham’s faith. We can’t rely on our parents’ faith or on being in a church or Christian culture; we need to learn personally to walk by faith like Abraham did (Ro4:12). Anyone can, whatever their race or background, anyone humble enough to learn how. Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, whites, men, women—if we learn Abraham’s faith, we become God’s children.

Matthew continues to emphasize the importance of faith, not gender or ethnicity, by including the names of some women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah’s wife. Jewish genealogies usually didn’t include women’s names. And these ladies weren’t likely even Jewish. Yet they all had faith. And there’s even more to their stories. To fully appreciate them, we need to look at each one.

First is Tamar (3). Her story is in Genesis 38. Judah left God’s people and went to live among the Canaanites. He took a Canaanite wife and had three sons. Later, he got a wife for his first son, and her name was Tamar. But his first son was wicked in the Lord’s sight, so the Lord put him to death. Judah told his second son to marry his brother’s widow Tamar, to help his dead brother have an heir. But this second son was also wicked in the Lord’s sight, and the Lord put him to death, too. Judah was hesitant to give Tamar his third, youngest son, who was still too young to marry anyway. So he lied to Tamar, telling her to go to her father’s house and wait. Tamar waited, but found Judah wasn’t keeping his promise. So when she heard Judah’s wife had died and that he was in mourning, she disguised herself as a prostitute and got him to sleep with her. Then Tamar gave birth to twin sons, Perez and Zerah. And Perez was in the lineage of Jesus. Bizarre story, right? What’s the point? On one level it shows that God works graciously, even through sinners. But it also highlights Tamar’s faith. It was a critical moment, an opportunity, when things could have gone in a very different direction. Tamar could have just given up and stayed at her father’s house. But she acted by faith in God, and because of it, history took a very different turn. She not only had an heir for her deceased spouse but set also Judah on the path to repentance.

The next lady is Rahab (5a). She didn’t just dress like a prostitute; she *was* one. She lived in the walls of Jericho. In her life, too, there was a critical moment, an opportunity, when things could have gone in a very different direction. When some Israelite spies came to check out the land, Rahab hid them. Later that night, she told them that her people had heard how God had overthrown Egypt and delivered the Israelites, and that her people were melting in fear of them. She confessed her faith that God is “God in heaven above and on the earth below” (Jo2:11b). She asked them to promise that when God would give them Jericho, they would spare her and her family. The men kept their promise; Rahab was spared. The Bible describes her as a heroine of faith and a righteous woman (Heb11:31; Jas2:25). Rahab married among God’s people, and through her the Messiah was born. Why did Matthew include her name here? Matthew himself had been a tax collector when Jesus called him (9:9). No doubt he remembered how many self-righteous Jews had criticized Jesus for eating with “tax collectors,” “sinners” and “prostitutes” (9:10–13; 11:19; 21:31–32). By mentioning Rahab, Matthew shows how God has always worked: not through the moralistic and self-righteous but through humble people who act in faith and depend on his mercy.

The next woman is Ruth (5b). Not only was she not Jewish; she was a Moabitess, and Moabites were prohibited from being among God’s people down to the tenth generation (Dt23:3) because they had originated from Lot and one of his daughters (Ge19:36–37). But here Ruth is, a Moabitess, included in the genealogy of the Messiah. What happened? It all started with a man from Bethlehem named Elimelech. During a famine he took his wife Naomi and two sons and went to live in the land of Moab. He died there, and his two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. But these two sons died, too. So Naomi was left a widow without husband or sons. She planned to return to Israel and told her two Moabite daughters-in-law to stay in their own land and remarry. It was yet another critical moment, an opportunity, when things could have gone in a very different direction. But Ruth told her mother-in-law Naomi, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God” (Ru1:16). God honored Ruth’s decision of faith, led her to marry a man of God, Boaz, and she became the great-grandmother of David. Matthew inserted Ruth’s name to remind us that God isn’t legalistic. God broke his own rule, and a Moabite woman who learned faith is included in the genealogy of the Messiah.

Then there’s “Uriah’s wife” (6). Her real name was Bathsheba. But Matthew says she “had been Uriah’s wife,” reminding us of David’s gross sins of adultery and murder. Once, instead of going to war with his men David stayed in Jerusalem. One evening he got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of his palace. From there, he happened to see a very beautiful woman bathing. David sent someone to find out about her, and learned she was the wife of Uriah, one of his most loyal generals. Even though he knew this, David took her and slept with her, and she became pregnant. To cover it up, he sent for her husband to come back to Jerusalem. He tried to get Uriah to go and sleep with his wife, so that it would look like the baby was his. But Uriah was too loyal a soldier; he refused to enjoy his wife while the others were risking their lives in battle. So David secretly ordered that Uriah be placed in the fiercest place in battle, so that he would be killed. After Uriah died, David took Bathsheba as one of his wives (2Sa11). David, the best king Israel ever had, succumbed to the power of sin.

However, Bathsheba wasn’t a passive object; she herself exhibited faith. How? Let’s fast-forward. David is now very old and about to die. His eldest surviving son, Adonijah, is plotting to seize the throne, even though he seems to know that David wants his son Solomon to succeed him. If Adonijah succeeds, it’s likely he’ll have his half-brother Solomon and Solomon’s mother Bathsheba treated as criminals and killed. The prophet Nathan goes to Bathsheba and tells her about it, and challenges her to go to David to request that Solomon be made king, in accordance with David’s oath to her. It was another critical moment, an opportunity, when things could have gone in a very different direction. It was so dangerous, Bathsheba could have chickened out. But by faith she went to David and made her request. Through her act of faith God’s will was carried out.

Despite the inspiring stories of these women of faith, the real climax of the genealogy is King David (6a). At first it’s hard to understand why Matthew intentionally reminds us of David’s sins. But it’s because what David did afterwards is such a great example. David had covered up his adultery and murder, but God sent the prophet Nathan to rebuke him. Often, when a prophet rebuked a king, the king would have the prophet killed. But what did David do? He curbed his pride and confessed, “I have sinned against the Lord” (2Sa12:13). He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground. It was at this time that he wrote one of his most famous Psalms, 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” (1–2). David shows us all how to come to God, confess our sins and accept his grace of forgiveness in Jesus (Ro4:6–8; cf. Ps32:1–2). Even though David repented so sincerely, the baby Bathsheba bore died. David didn’t treat her like garbage; he comforted Bathsheba, went to her, and she conceived again and had Solomon. The Bible says the Lord loved this baby boy and named him Jedidiah. Despite his failures, the Bible repeatedly calls David “a man after God’s own heart” (1Sa13:14; Ac7:46; 13:22). What does it mean? The word “after” implies that David pursued God’s heart. He wasn’t interested in just doing the bare minimum or in keeping a bunch of rules. He wanted to know God’s mind and heart. He wanted to know what pleases God, and he wanted to do it with all his heart. As he pursued God’s heart, David himself also came to reflect God’s heart. He drew so close to God that he learned God’s mercy and love for sinful people and it became his very own. He became a real shepherd of God’s people (Ps78:72). This is why, out of all people, God made a special promise to David to send the Messiah through him. And because of this promise, even though some of David’s descendants did great evil, God preserved his lineage in every generation as a lamp in Israel (1Ki8:15,20,24–26; 2Ki8:19).

In verses 6–11 we find the kings of Judah. Solomon was famous for building the temple and writing the book of Proverbs. And then there’s his son Rehoboam (7). At the beginning of his reign, his people requested relief from the harsh labor and heavy yoke imposed on them by his father Solomon. But Rehoboam refused to listen to the advice of the elders and instead listened to the young men he grew up with. They told him to tell the people: “My little finger is thicker than my father’s waist.” It meant, “I’ll give you an even harder time than he did.” Then the ten northern tribes of Israel rebelled and broke off from Judah (1Ki12). From then on it caused a divided kingdom, much bloodshed, and idolatry. In verses 8–9 there are some good kings of Judah: Asa, Jehoshaphat, Uzziah, Jotham, and especially Hezekiah (cf. 2Ki18:5). But then, one of the most wicked kings of Judah ever is mentioned: Hezekiah’s son Manasseh (10; 2Ki21: 1–16). Manasseh, however, has a surprise in his story. After his extreme evildoing, when God began to punish him, Manasseh sought God’s favor and humble himself greatly before God. The Bible says, “And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea” (2Ch33:12–13). It’s another example of how God isn’t like self-righteous people; he shows grace to even the wickedest person, if only that person repents. Still, God’s punishment came. Matthew mentions “the exile to Babylon” four times (11,12,17). The exile to Babylon was a horrible time in Israel’s history, when Judah was finally destroyed, along with the royal dynasty of David. After the exile, Israel never had a king again. However, God was still quietly fulfilling his promise that through David’s line he would eventually send the Messiah (12–15).

Finally Matthew mentions Mary, the mother of Jesus (16). She, too, had once been in a precarious situation. She was pledged to be married to Joseph. But God sent the angel Gabriel to ask her to give birth to the Messiah while she was still a virgin. It would likely cause her to lose her fiancé, as well as bring the scorn of her family, friends and community. Nobody would believe her story. It was another critical moment, an opportunity, when things could have gone in a very different direction. God’s will wasn’t on autopilot, working through human robots. By faith Mary decided to entrust her life to God’s hand and obey his will (Lk1:26–38). And through her faith, the Messiah Jesus was born.

Let’s read verse 17. Matthew describes this genealogy’s three sections: Abraham to David; David to the exile; and the exile to the Messiah. He intentionally shapes it into 14 generations in each. Why 14? It wasn’t because there were literally 14 generations in each section. When we compare it to other Biblical genealogies, Matthew skips over quite a few people here. But he highlights 14 generations in three sections to make a point. It’s called *gematria,* an ancient Hebrew method of attaching a numerical value to each letter in the Hebrew alphabet, then adding up the values of letters in a word to get a number that means something. In this case, the numerical value of 14 represents the consonants in the name “David”: “DVD”=4+6+4=14. So three sections of 14 generations adds additional emphasis on David. David was just a shadow of the Messiah. Matthew’s main theme is that Jesus the Son of David is our true King.

Through this genealogy we learn that God’s history is different from human history. Human history is a bunch of random stories that don’t seem to make any real sense. But God’s history has a purpose. He works in human history to reveal himself and to reach out to people to save and restore them. Human history reveals human beings sinfulness and evilness, despite all our best qualities and intentions. But God’s history reveals God’s great faithfulness, as well as his mercy and grace. No matter how weak we are, no matter how much we may fail him, when we put our trust in Jesus, God remains faithful to us. He never gives up hope to restore us, because in every generation he’s faithful to his promises (Ps145:13). Most of all, the genealogy of Jesus shows us that all God really wants from us is faith, a faith that especially takes action at a decisive moment. This Christmas season may God help us to find new grace and hope for ourselves through the good news of the birth of Jesus.