

## A Surprising Family Tree

Matthew 1:1-17

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December 2-3, 2017

Our text for today comes from the opening verses of the Gospel of Matthew: ***“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.***

***<sup>2</sup> Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup> and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, <sup>4</sup> and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, <sup>5</sup> and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup> and Jesse the father of David the king.***

***And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, <sup>7</sup> and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, <sup>8</sup> and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, <sup>9</sup> and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, <sup>10</sup> and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, <sup>11</sup> and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.***

***<sup>12</sup> And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, <sup>13</sup> and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, <sup>14</sup> and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, <sup>15</sup> and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, <sup>16</sup> and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.***

***<sup>17</sup> So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.”***

OK. Let's be honest. How many of you spaced out while I was reading? This section of Scripture, along with the other genealogies in the Bible, is often skimmed or skipped entirely. I normally work hard at finding an introduction that catches your attention but some of you just checked out.

Let's see if I can bring you back...

The names in this passage make up Jesus' family tree. Actually, we could say that this is the very first "Christmas Tree." Have you noticed there's a renewed interest in genealogies today? I went on ancestry.com this week and read a testimony from someone who found out that she's related to George Washington! Here's part of their promo: "*The more you know about your past, the more you'll have to celebrate.*" That's not always true, is it? I heard of one man who spent \$500 to get his genealogy report and then \$2500 to suppress it when he found out who his relatives were.

As we jump into Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1 that contains close to 50 names, we're going to see a surprisingly dysfunctional family tree. Next weekend we'll focus on "An Unusual Peace" as the children and adult choirs, along with the brass ensemble, lead us in worship. In two weeks, our topic will be "A Strange Sense of Timing" from Galatians 4:4. On Christmas Eve weekend we'll consider Christmas through the eyes of Joseph in a message called, "An Unplanned Pregnancy." By way of reminder, all four services on the eve of Christmas Eve and Christmas Eve will be identical. We'll wrap up "Upside Down Christmas" the last weekend in December by addressing "The Post-Christmas Blahs."

While some people, like the Krank's want to skip Christmas, many of us are tempted to skip at least the part of the Christmas story that begins with this long list of hard-to-pronounce names. You would think Matthew would begin the exciting news of Immanuel's birth with more of a bang.

Let's be reminded that there is great benefit in studying *every* part of the Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "**All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.**"

### The Genius of Genealogies

Here are 8 things to know about biblical genealogies.

1. **The word *genealogy* is the Greek word "genesis," which means beginning or origin.** Genesis 5:1 begins with the family tree that Adam started and sounds very similar to Matthew's introduction: "***This is the book of the generation of Adam...***"

2. **Genealogies substantiate historical accuracy.** The Bible doesn't begin with, "once upon a time" or, "in a galaxy, far, far away." Our faith is rooted in history, not in myth or legend.
3. **Genealogies were records of family history and were often memorized because ancient people did not have access to written records.** Even today it is not uncommon for some middle easterners to be able to recite a list of ancestors from memory for an hour without any mistakes.
4. **The Bible contains numerous lineage lists.** The Book of Genesis alone has nine different genealogies; 1 Chronicles has 17 chapters devoted to family trees; Ezra and Nehemiah record the names of people nine different times. All told, 51 chapters in the Bible contain genealogies. That alone tells us they are important.
5. **Not all genealogical lists are complete.** Some have been shortened for ease of memorization or for symbolic symmetry. We see this in verse 17 when Matthew condenses the lists into three main sections of 14 generations: "***So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.***"
6. **Genealogies were used to prove one's identity as a Jew, to decide inheritance rights, to make land allotments, and to organize censuses.** That's what's behind Luke 2:3: "***everyone went to his own town to register.***" Joseph traced his heritage from David and his family was from Bethlehem, the city of David. The only way to be sure of your ancestral hometown was to know your genealogy. In the biblical world, a man had to know his tribe to survive. To not know one's genealogy would be like someone today not having a birth certificate or Social Security number.
7. **Priests were determined by genealogy.** They had to be from the tribe of Levi and the house of Aaron (see Nehemiah 7:64).
8. **Royal succession and the credentials of the Messiah are linked to King David's lineage** (see 1 Kings 11:36). This shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and promises.

Having said all that, this genealogy is not typical. Most biblical lists focus only on men; this one highlights five women. Typically, they contain only Jewish names; this one has Gentiles in it as well.

That leads us to Matthew 1:1: "***The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.***" Matthew makes it clear that Jesus Christ is the main character in his gospel.

- **His name is Jesus.** *Yeshua* means “Jehovah is salvation!” and is explained more fully by the angel who appeared to Joseph in Matthew 1:21: “***She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.***”
- **His title is Christ.** This is not Jesus’ last name but means that He is the “anointed one,” the one qualified for the task of saving sinners. In Hebrew, the word is “Messiah” and is also found in verses 16 and 17.
- **He is the Son of David.** Interestingly, David is listed before Abraham, even though Abraham came first in history. In fact, David’s name is mentioned five times in this genealogy because Matthew is establishing that first and foremost, Jesus Christ is a direct descendant of David and therefore qualified to be the eternal king. Every king has to have a royal lineage. We see this promise of a forever kingdom in 2 Samuel 7:16: “***And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.***”
- **He is the Son of Abraham.** That means that Jesus was Jewish. Galatians 3:16 makes it clear that the offspring of Abraham was Jesus: “***The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ.***”

Jesus is connected to the two great covenants in the Bible – the Abrahamic and the Davidic. Abraham places Him in the nation, and the line of David puts Him on the throne. BTW, the Jewish leaders often questioned Jesus’ paternity. One example is when they said they had Abraham as their father, implying that Jesus didn’t. Matthew makes sure to emphasize that Jesus is the son of David *and* the son of Abraham.

### Who God Uses

As we look at this surprising family tree, there are three types of people hanging from the branches – the *faithful*, the *failures*, and the *forgotten*.

**1. God uses the faithful.** There are at least ten names that stand out.

- **Abraham.** Hebrews 11:17: “***By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice.***”

- **Isaac.** Hebrews 11:20: *“By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.”*
- **Jacob.** Hebrews 11:21: *“By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.”*
- **Ruth.** Ruth 1:16: *“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”*
- **David.** 1 Samuel 13:14: *“The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart...”*
- **Solomon.** 1 Kings 3:12: *“Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.”*
- **Asa.** 1 Kings 15:11: *“And Asa did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as David his father had done.”*
- **Jehoshaphat.** 2 Chronicles 17:3: *“The LORD was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the earlier ways of his father David.”*
- **Josiah.** 2 Kings 23:25: *“Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him.”*
- **Hezekiah.** 2 Kings 18:5: *“Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel.”*

God has always searched for devoted people to do His work as 2 Chronicles 16:9 states: *“For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.”*

God loves to use faithful people but if you look close enough, you will see that none of these individuals were perfect. In fact, some were greatly flawed. Abraham lied (Genesis 12:13), Jacob was a deceiver (Genesis 27:36), David committed adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11:3-21), Solomon slacked off spiritually (1 Kings 11:3-4), Asa bailed on God at the end of his life (2 Chronicles 16:12); and even Hezekiah became proud and was judged by God (2 Chronicles 32:25).

Here’s the lesson: Even the “good” need God’s grace. Actually, the Bible declares that no one is good or fully faithful. Romans 3:12: *“All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”*

**2. God uses failures.** As we continue to look at this family tree, I'm reminded of a statement: *"Families are like fudge. Mostly sweet with a few nuts."* Matthew makes no effort to spruce up this tree. He's not hiding the sorry spots or the twisted twigs. Most genealogists skipped over the scoundrels and focused just on the saints. Only the good guys made most lists, and if they had a bad reputation, the historian would often try to clean them up.

That reminds me of a very prominent family who commissioned a professional biographer to record their family tree. They gave him very careful instructions about how to deal with a certain Uncle George, who in a drunken stupor, had committed murder and was subsequently sent to the electric chair. The biographer assured them that he could handle it. This is what he wrote: *"Uncle George occupied a chair of applied electronics at an important government institution. He was attached to his position by the strongest of ties, and his death came as a real shock!"*

There are names in the lineage of the Lord that are shocking, and what some of them did can make us blush. Matthew's genealogy is filled with "Uncle Georges," but he makes no attempt at disguises. We don't have time to go through all the bad apples and loose nuts in the tree, so I'll pick just a few.

- **Judah.** Jacob had 12 sons, but for some reason, the lineage of the Lord ran through Judah, the fourth son. This is very interesting because he wasn't the oldest like Reuben was, nor was he necessarily the favorite – that would have been Joseph or Benjamin. Genesis 49:10 states that the ruler would come out of Judah: *"The scepter shall not depart from **Judah**, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."*

This is traced all the way to the end of the Bible as seen in Revelation 5:5: *"And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold, the **Lion of the tribe of Judah**, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'" At the climax of history, Judah's offspring is the only one that was found worthy.*

Judah must have been a godly guy, right? Not so much. In another largely ignored section of Scripture, Genesis 38 describes his depravity [parents, you might want to take your child out at this point]. His first step down the slippery slope of sin happened when he married a Canaanite woman. Their

children become spiritually schizophrenic and the older one was so wicked that the Lord took his life. This son was married to a woman named Tamar, leaving her a widow and without children. According to their customs (Deuteronomy 25:5-10), his brother was to marry the widow and give her children but he refused, so the Lord took his life as well. Judah promised his third son to Tamar but he procrastinated. Tamar realized her wedding was never going to happen so she took things into her own hands.

The story goes from bad to worse at this point. She hears that her father-in-law Judah is going to take a trip so she decided to disguise herself as a cult prostitute and waited alongside the road. Judah, not knowing it was her, offered to pay her a young goat for her services, and gave her a deposit before the goat could be delivered – his signet ring, a cord, and his shepherd's staff, which is the ancient equivalent of a Driver's License today. Tamar becomes pregnant with twins and when Judah finds out about her immorality, he is ready to burn her in the fire because of the disgrace she has caused his family. As she was dragged away to be killed, and the flames crackled in the background, she calmly identified the father of the twins by holding up Judah's personal property. Judah is humiliated and admits in verse 26: ***“She is more righteous than I.”***

Joshua Harris once brought home a dramatic Bible reading on CD for his kids. The next morning his daughter started using some anatomical terms and her mom raised her voice and said, *“Where did you hear that?”* She says, *“From the Bible CD dad gave us.”* The wife glared at her husband and Josh turned to his kids and said, *“Uhhhh...that's it. No more Bible. You kids go watch TV.”*

BTW, doesn't it feel like our culture is imploding under the weight of widespread depravity right now? With numerous sexual sins coming to light in what many view as the cultural epicenters of our society – politics, entertainment and media, located in key cities (Washington, Hollywood and New York), I've been praying for healing for those who've been wronged and for the gospel to penetrate hard hearts. It's true that if you choose to sin, you choose to suffer. Numbers 32:23: ***“Be sure your sin will find you out.”***

As we were discussing this in our Growth Group Wednesday night, Vikki Huisman made a few observations that I thought were spot on. I have her permission to share them:

- ✓ *It's almost like society telling everyone to do whatever they want and follow their own path leads to people selfishly taking advantage of others.*
- ✓ *Our culture is asking questions about sin, redemption, consequences, grace, and forgiveness without actually using these words.*
- ✓ *I think this is a unique opportunity for the church as a whole to speak to this and to be bold.*

If there were a tawdry tale like that of Judah and Tamar in your family tree, wouldn't you want to cut off that branch? This seamy story is in the Bible to help us see that God uses failures. The genealogy of Jesus not only goes through Judah and **Tamar**, but also travels through **Perez**, the child of incest. Listen. Through the broken, God breaks through! Through the twisted twig of Tamar, God's upside down grace continues to grow.

- **Rahab.** Drop down to verse 5: ***“and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab.”*** Rahab was the prostitute, who provided protection to the Hebrew spies in Jericho. Her most famous deed is the telling of a lie. She is mentioned eight times in Scripture, and in six of those times, she's referred to as “Rahab the prostitute.” Because of her faith, she is listed in Hebrews 11:31. Amazingly the Redeemer comes through Rahab as well.
- **Bathsheba.** She is not mentioned by name, but is called, ***“the wife of Uriah”*** in verse 6. She is the woman David committed adultery with. The son of their illicit union dies. Eventually David marries Bathsheba and they have another son named Solomon. The family tree of Jesus has Bathsheba as one of its branches.
- **Rehoboam.** This king, listed in verse 7, was the son of Solomon, who because of his love of pride and lust for power was responsible for the dividing of the kingdom (1 Kings 12:19). And yet, the Redeemer comes through Rehoboam.
- **Ahaz.** Verse 9 mentions ungodly Ahaz, who worshipped pagan gods and eventually self-destructed. It was to King Ahaz that Isaiah initially made his prophecy of the promised Immanuel that would be born to a virgin (see Isaiah 7:14). When he died he was buried without honor. Immanuel traces his earthly origin back to Ahaz.

- **Manasseh.** This king mentioned in verse 10 reigned 55 years, longer than any other, but was Judah's most wicked ruler. He was an idol-worshipper, sacrificed his own son to the pagan god Molech, worshipped the sun and stars, and killed anyone who disagreed with him. 2 Kings 21:9 gives a stunningly sad summary of his life: *“Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel.”* Thankfully, after being deported to Babylon, he humbled himself and returned to the Lord (see 2 Chronicles 33:11-13). Manasseh is an ancestor of the Messiah.

The Savior of the world came from people that most of us would want nothing to do with. These individuals, who we could call failures, are in this upside down family tree, not for what they have in common with Christ, but for what they share in common with each of us. We are like them in so many ways...but isn't that why Christ came? It's as if God is saying, *“Murderers, adulterers, idolaters, abusers, prostitutes, cheaters, and liars are all in the very line of my Son to show that nothing can thwart my purposes.”* Jesus can take our failures and turn them into something fruitful.

**3. God uses the forgotten.** God uses faithful people with flaws, He uses those who feel like failures, and He never forgets those who fear that they are forgotten. Look again at this list. There are some names here that we know nothing about. Have you ever heard of Hezron or Ram? One had a pickup truck named after him but we don't know if they were saints or scoundrels. Abiud, Azor and Akim? Zadok? Good choices for baby names, right? They might not make the headlines but they are known in heaven.

Do you feel forgotten today? Do you wonder if God even notices you? Don't despair. You are never out of His mind.

The lion of the tribe of Judah is about deliverance, not condemnation. He takes what feeble faith we have, coupled with our failures and redeems them for his glory, and in the process, never forgets us.

### **Lessons From the Tree**

**1. History is “His Story.”** The hero of this story is God himself. Everything that has happened in the past, what takes place today, and what is yet to come, is part of

His glorious and grand plan. David Platt puts it like this: *“God saves only by His sovereign grace for His global purposes.”* As we look at the lineage of the Lord, we see the Lord weaving His ways through the faithful, the failures, and the forgotten, in order to accomplish His purpose of bringing salvation to the world through the son of David. God is in the business of salvaging sinners and recreating those who He created. Alistair Begg says, *“We learn that God uses people we wouldn’t choose, experiences we wouldn’t want and events we wouldn’t plan to achieve His purposes.”*

Remember too that the Bible teaches that history is moving toward a point of conclusion. At some definite point in the future, God will send His Son to this earth a second time as the triumphant King and will turn what is upside down right side up. Are you ready for that?

**2. Get in His tree today.** None of us can appear in the blood-line that stretches back from Jesus through David to Abraham, but the good news is that the blood-line flows the other way too. No matter if you’ve been fairly faithful, or find yourself a failure, or feel forgotten, there’s a place for you in God’s tree today. You can join the family of faith by receiving the gift of forgiveness. John 1:12: ***“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”*** Jesus died on a tree in order for you to have a place in His eternal tree. Remember our assignment – *every time we look at a Christmas tree, let’s remember that Christ died to make us free!*

Joanne Shetler spent years in the Philippines with the Balangao people, translating the Bible into their language so she could tell them the good news of the Savior. But it was slow going. One day a man named Ama picked up an English New Testament from her desk, opened it to this genealogy on page one of Matthew, and stared at it. He could read enough English to realize what he was seeing. Amazed, he asked her, *“You mean this has a genealogy in it?”*

She said, *“Yeah, but just skip over that so you can get to the good part.”*

But his eyes were still riveted to the page. *“You mean this is true?”* he asked, as he struggled through the long list of names.

Shetler got some shelf paper and wrote out the entire genealogy of Jesus, from the ceiling down to the floor. Ama took it all over the village, explaining, *“We always thought it was the rock and the banana plant that gave birth to people. But we*

*don't have their names written down. Look, here are all the names—written down!”*

The Balangaos loved Matthew's written genealogy because it proved the Bible was true. Ama came to believe in Christ as his Savior and became an enthusiastic evangelist, church leader, and Bible translator (from *And the Word Came with Power*, Joanne Shetler with Patricia Purvis [Multnomah Press], pp. 81-82).

**3. The glory of this genealogy is the grace of God.** Jesus' relatives could have been the Cleaver's; instead they were more like the Simpson's. God loves to give grace to the “Uncle George's” of life. Jesus came not to redeem those who think they're righteous, but to save those who know they are sinners. Luke 19:10: **“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”** God demands not perfection, but contrition. God saves not by our merit but by His mercy.

I like how one pastor puts it, *“The worse you are, the better candidate you are for the grace of God.”* Maybe the reason Matthew includes this genealogy is because as a former tax collector, he knows what it's like to be an outcast. The glory of God's grace extends to the faithful, the failures, and the forgotten because grace glows through the branches and twigs of this Christmas tree. Through Jesus, the prostitute and the priest sit together with kings and commoners as equals.

This genealogy of grace uses the phrase, **“the father of”** 39 times. The King James renders it, **“So and so begat.”** Suddenly the string of 39 “begats” is broken in verse 16: **“And Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.”** Every person in this list was born by the begetting activity of a male parent except for Jesus.

Do you see how Matthew is careful to establish the virgin birth of Jesus right at the beginning of his gospel? Joseph is the husband of Mary, but not the natural father of Jesus. The word **“whom”** is feminine in Greek, showing that Joseph was the foster father, not the physical father of Jesus. Jesus is no ordinary man. He is Savior and Christ and Son of David and Son of Abraham...but He is also God incarnate. He can identify with us because He is one of us but He is not identical to us because He is separate from us.

Do you know what it means to be *upside down* on a car loan? It means that you owe more than the car is worth because you have negative equity. Listen. We're

all upside down because we owe a debt we can't pay. Aren't you glad that Jesus paid a debt He didn't owe?

### **Closing Prayer**