

# *Truth for Today*

## **The Bible Explained**

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## **Matthew's Gospel, chapter 1**

### **The Genealogy of the King**

*[English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

#### **Introduction**

Today we start out on a new series, looking at the Gospel by Matthew. We're going to consider the first chapter in this talk, and I'm going to begin by reading it all, despite the fact that more than half of it seems, at first sight, to be no more than a long list of names.

“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. 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. Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the

Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.”

This chapter seems obviously to divide into two sections. Up to and including verse 17, Matthew records the genealogy of the Lord Jesus, tracing His ancestry back to Abraham. Then, in the rest of the chapter, he begins the story of the Lord’s life on earth, emphasising the miraculous nature of His birth.

This twofold division reminds me of the opening verses of Paul’s letter to the Romans, where he says that Jesus is the Son of God:

“...Who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness...”<sup>1</sup>

Paul, writing to the Christians at Rome, and Matthew, writing, in a sense, to the whole world, but aiming particularly at his own people, Israel, are both setting out, we might say, the Lord’s credentials. Both are proclaiming Him to be truly man and truly God. Both writers mention the Holy Spirit in connection with His Deity, and both mention David as His earthly ancestor.

We’re going to look in considerable detail at this genealogy, because it is full of surprises! It is very far from being a “normal” genealogy as biblical genealogies go, although you could easily just skim through it and not spot anything unusual. Finally, we will look at the detail Matthew provides about the birth of the One of whom it is said that, “He will save His people from their sins.”

### **A genealogy not to be ignored**

It is a wonderful thing, if God gives us the grace to do it, to free ourselves from the mindset of our age and carefully study the differences between the four Gospels. If, instead of looking at them as critics do, looking for discrepancies, we ask God to give us insights as to why those differences are there, we will often be filled with wonder at the many perfections of God’s word.

The differences between the genealogies given by the Gospel writers provide a good example of this. Only Matthew and Luke give us genealogies in the normal sense. Luke’s Gospel presents the Lord, first and foremost, as the perfect Man, and so, entirely in keeping with that, his Gospel traces the Lord’s ancestry right back to the very first man God created, to Adam.

But Matthew is setting out to proclaim the Lord Jesus as the true King, as the words of a hymn put it, as “great David’s greater Son.” He was the long promised Messiah, the one who came to fulfil all of the Old Testament prophecies and foreshadowings, which ever pointed forward to the great Deliverer who would come to save his people. And so Matthew, again entirely appropriately, traces His ancestry back to Abraham, to show Him to be a true Israelite, and emphasises the key place of David in the genealogy.

Mark, on the other hand, finds no place for a genealogy in his Gospel at all. Why? Because he is showing us the perfect Servant of the Lord, the one of whom Isaiah in particular prophesied<sup>2</sup>. And we may say, with reverence, that if we are looking on someone as a servant, then we are not interested in whose son or grandson he is. We are interested only in how faithfully he carries out

the task assigned to him, and this tireless, faithful devotion is what Mark so powerfully demonstrates.

And what, then, of the fourth Gospel, that oh-so-different portrayal of the Lord Jesus, from the pen of His beloved servant John? John supplies what we might call His heavenly genealogy, and proclaims Him as the eternal Word, who ever was with God and was God, but Who became flesh and dwelt among us<sup>3</sup>.

But let's return now to the mainstream of today's subject, and consider this genealogy in Matthew chapter 1. It is, as I've said, no ordinary genealogy, and I'm going to comment on two remarkable things about it. These are, firstly, the mystery of the missing kings and, secondly, the mystery of the random women.

### **The mystery of the missing kings**

Firstly, then, what is the mystery of the missing kings? If you compare Matthew's genealogy with the history recorded in the Old Testament books of Second Kings and Second Chronicles, you will find that the statement in verse 8 of today's chapter, "and Joram the father of Uzziah" skips over three intervening generations. Joram was not the father of Uzziah, as we would use the word "father" today, but was in fact his great-great-grandfather. The three intervening kings, Ahaziah, Joash and Azariah, have been, as it were, erased from the record.

Cynics might suppose that three names have simply been arbitrarily deleted so that the numbers of the generations would all fit the pattern of fourteens. But there is good reason for these omissions!

Let's just take in some background. The kings of Judah were, in general, a much better bunch than their counterparts in the northern kingdom, Israel, in terms of displaying at least some semblance of faithfulness to God and observance of His commandments. Some of them, such as the earlier kings Asa (called Asaph in our chapter) and Jehoshaphat, and the later kings Hezekiah and Josiah, were great heroes of faith.

But God had long ago stated a principle of His government, and God always acts consistently with the principles He has laid down. In Exodus chapter 20 verse 5, in the second of the Ten Commandments, God had forbidden the making of images, false gods, as objects of worship. He had said:

"You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me...."

The northern kingdom had been marked, from its very beginning, by flagrant disregard for this commandment, and its journey away from God seemed to reach new depths with King Ahab and his notorious wife Queen Jezebel. When God judged the house of Ahab, he appointed Jehu, the chief of the general staff, to be king in the stead of Ahab's son, and a specific promise was made to Jehu that his sons of the fourth generation would sit on the throne of Israel<sup>4</sup>.

This promise seems to recognise the long reach of the judgement of God, going as far as the fourth generation, but that judgement also had an impact on the southern kingdom, that of Judah. This was because King Joram of Judah had married Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab, and so the three generations missing from Matthew's genealogy did indeed, counting Athaliah herself, reach to the fourth generation from Ahab. We might say that although these three, and Athaliah herself for a period of several years, did effectively reign over Judah, God does not officially recognise them as being amongst the kings of Judah.

There is, however, another remarkable fact about these three missing kings. When the children of Israel first took possession of the land, one of the instructions God gave them concerned the sabbaths of the land. By this I'm referring not to the weekly sabbath day, which God had stipulated in the fourth commandment, but to the rule that, every seventh year, the land was to be given a year off<sup>5</sup>. They were not to sow and reap for that year. God promised them that if they trusted Him by respecting this rule, there would never be any food shortages. Instead, God would provide for them.

But for much of their history, the nation didn't trust God in this way, and so the land missed its sabbaths. When, finally, God acted in discipline towards His people, and Judah was carried off into captivity, the prophet Jeremiah prophesied that this would last for seventy years<sup>6</sup>. The reason it had to be 70 years is explicitly stated in 2 Chronicles 36 verse 21 which says:

“To fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfil seventy years.”

Clearly there had been a total of 490 years without sabbaths, and so one seventh of that, 70 years, was “owing.”

If you look at the lengths of the reigns of the three kings missed out of Matthew's genealogy<sup>7</sup>, you'll find that they add up to - guess what? - 70 years. It seems that in missing these three generations out of the inspired account given by Matthew, God is, as it were, “balancing the books” and compensating for the 70 years of history which the children of Israel had effectively stolen by failing to observe the sabbaths of the land.

### **The mystery of the random women**

The second thing I said I was going to comment on in this genealogy was what I called the random women. In the Bible, genealogies are always traced following the male line. The mothers are not normally included in these lists of names. But here, as Matthew takes us through the ancestry of the Lord Jesus, he inserts, every now and then, the name of the mother. Of course nothing in God's word is really random. The four women (not counting Mary herself) whose names are included are there for a very wonderful purpose. They are there because they send out a glorious message, a message which is central to the Christian gospel. It is the message of Grace.

John in his Gospel, chapter 1 verse 17, contrasts this with the system of Law:

“...The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

The Jews, to whom Matthew was primarily writing, were, in general, strangers to the idea of Grace, but were very familiar with the principle of Law.

God had singled out the nation of Israel for His special favour. As well as giving them His law, He had promised that, if they would keep it, He would protect them from their enemies and give them national prosperity. But God's expressed intention, right back to His promises to Abraham, was not that the other nations of the world should be shut out from His blessing, but that the other nations would be blessed **through** Israel<sup>8</sup>.

Sadly, however, being put into this place of special favour, far from giving the nation of Israel large hearts, eager to reach out to the other less favoured nations and share the knowledge of God and the abundance of His blessings with them, had led rather to an extreme form of national pride, in which they bitterly resented anyone else receiving God's blessing. An example of this in the Old

Testament is the story of the prophet Jonah, who at first refused to obey God's call to go and preach to the citizens of the great city Nineveh, warning them that God was about to judge them for their sins. He did this because he knew that, if they repented, God would spare them<sup>9</sup>. Jonah knew that God was gracious and merciful, and he resented it. He would rather have seen the judgement fall. This is the attitude of someone whose thinking is based on Law, rather than on Grace.

And in the New Testament a good example of this ultra nationalistic attitude is seen in the book of Acts<sup>10</sup>. Paul, the apostle, is being set upon by an angry crowd when a Roman officer intervenes with some of his soldiers. Paul asks the officer for permission to speak to the crowd. For a time, they listen quietly as he recounts how he had once persecuted the church, and then gives the account of his miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus. But then he mentions how God had told him to go and preach the gospel to the Gentiles, that is, the non-Jews. It's as if someone has thrown a switch. The crowd erupts and there is uproar, such that the Roman officer has to remove Paul for his own safety. Clearly the idea of doing anything for the benefit of the Gentiles is the last straw to this vehemently nationalistic mob.

But it was during the Lord's itinerant ministry, in His many encounters with the Jewish sect of the Pharisees, that we see most clearly portrayed the self-righteousness, the readiness to pass judgement on others, and the despising of all who were not of Israel which were so typical of the Jewish nation to whom Matthew was writing.

Another particularly noticeable feature of their mindset was the tendency to look down with extreme disdain on anyone guilty of sexual sins, especially if they were women<sup>11</sup>.

What Matthew is doing here, by drawing attention to these four women in Israel's history, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, is to show that the heart of God is always ready to embrace those whom the self-righteous, legal mind despises.

The complicated story of Tamar, which occupies the whole of Genesis chapter 38, is a tale of tangled sexual relationships, something so familiar to us in the modern world. Tamar was in fact Judah's daughter-in-law, but he ended up mistaking her for a prostitute and consequently fathering her twin sons.

The second of the four, Rahab, actually was a prostitute. Furthermore, she was one of the Canaanite inhabitants of the land, with whom the children of Israel had been strictly forbidden to intermarry<sup>12</sup>.

The third of these very special women was Ruth, who became the great grandmother of King David. Whilst morally, in every aspect of the way that she lived, she stands as a shining example of devotion both to God and to man, she was a Moabite, and there was a permanent ban on any Moabite being allowed to enter the community of Israel<sup>13</sup>.

Finally, Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, reminds us of the darkest episode in David's life, his adultery with her, which led to his coldly calculated murder of her husband, who, incidentally, was a great hero and one of David's most loyal and devoted subjects.

The stories of these four women were just the kind of material which the legalistic Jewish leaders would have wished to sweep under the carpet and pretend had never happened. To the legal mind they had no right to be mentioned. Yet here stand these four women, their histories inextricably woven into the genealogy of the Saviour, as a bright testimony to the truth of the gospel that:

"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..."<sup>14</sup>

## The birth of the promised Saviour

Finally, let's look at the last part of the chapter, in which we have Matthew's account of the events surrounding the birth of the Lord Jesus.

In Bible times, some marriage customs differed from our present day western ones. Verse 18 says that Mary had been "betrothed" to Joseph. If we think of being betrothed as the same as what we understand today as being engaged, we will be surprised to read that Joseph is described as her husband, and that when he learned that she was pregnant, and naturally assumed that she had been unfaithful to him, he made up his mind to divorce her. But being betrothed was in fact much more like a legal contract, which would have to be formally annulled.

Joseph, however, was misjudging Mary, and God intervened to tell him the wonderful reality, that this was God's miraculous doing. Most of us are keen to know what a new baby is going to be called. Joseph was the first to receive, by divine command, that information, expressed in those immortal words:

"...You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

The name Jesus, equivalent to the Hebrew Joshua, combines a shortened form of the divine name Yahweh or Jehovah with the word meaning "salvation" and so is often translated as either "Jehovah the Saviour" or "salvation of Jehovah." The message given by the angel, together with the prophetic scripture which Matthew quotes from Isaiah<sup>15</sup>, reminds us of the momentous implications of His birth. God was about to become Man, not in order to swallow up the whole human race in the judgement it deserved, but to take that judgement upon Himself as our Saviour, laying down His life for each one of us.

"There is a Name I love to hear, I love to speak its worth,  
It sounds like music in my ear, the sweetest Name on earth."<sup>16</sup>

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on the Genealogy of the King, in our series on the Gospel by Matthew - talk number 1264.

<sup>1</sup> Rom 1:3-4 <sup>2</sup> Isa 42:1-4; 52:13-53:12 <sup>3</sup> John 1:1-4,14 <sup>4</sup> 2 Kings 10:30 <sup>5</sup> Lev 25:1-7 <sup>6</sup> Jer 25:11-12,29:10 <sup>7</sup> 2 Chr 22:2, 24:1, 25:1 <sup>8</sup> Gen 12:3 <sup>9</sup> Jonah 3:6-4:2 <sup>10</sup> Acts 21:27 - 22:24 <sup>11</sup> Luke 7:39 <sup>12</sup> Deut 7:3 <sup>13</sup> Deut 23:3 <sup>14</sup> 1 Tim 1:15 <sup>15</sup> 1 Isa 7:14 <sup>16</sup> F.Whitfield 1829-1904.

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