

A Reflection  
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## **Jesus' Family Tree, and Yours**

Matthew 1:17-25

You're probably not surprised to come to church on Christmas Day and hear Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus. But you may be a little surprised to hear me start our reading with chapter 1, verse 17: "Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ." Before we get to Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus, and from there to the arrival of the magi and the enraged Herod's attempt to manipulate them, we turn back the clock. Before Matthew takes us to Bethlehem, he takes us way back in time, forty-two generations to be exact. He gives us Jesus' family tree.

I realize that Matthew 1:1-17 isn't the most scintillating Scripture passage to read. In the Gospels, we're more accustomed to hearing miracle stories, parables, collections of teaching, resurrection accounts, and so forth. But here in Matthew, we're greeted with a long sequence of generations. It's as if I were to stand up and say, "Today's reading comes from Ancestry.com." So-and-so, the father of so-and-so, the father of so-and-so, the father of so-and-so. Or as the King James Version renders it, so-and-so "begat" so-and-so, who begat so-and-so, who begat so-and-so. By the time you reach the end of verse 17, that's a lot of begats.

Today, more and more people have a growing interest in finding out from where, and from whom, they've come. I mentioned Ancestry.com. A few years ago, the company's website summarized its purpose this way: "Simply start with yourself and we'll do the searching for you. Find your ancestors' stories. Discover yours."

Discover your story, and by discovering your story, discover who you are. That's sort of the approach Matthew takes in his opening chapter. He wants us to know who Jesus is. And to know who Jesus is, we need to know Jesus' story. And Jesus' story doesn't just begin in the manger. Jesus' story begins generations earlier. Jesus' story actually begins with Abraham. Jesus is "son of Abraham." He's the heir to whom God's promises, made to Abraham, apply. Put simply, God had promised Abraham, the ancestor of the Israelite peoples, that all humanity would be blessed through him. And Jesus is the way that God's promise to Abraham has been fulfilled.

This may sound like an old, familiar truth to many of us. But it's important that we come back to it and reflect on it. Jesus isn't merely a spectacular individual, a remarkable human being whose life and teachings have affected millions. He is that, but he's so much more. Jesus' story is part of the story of God's saving work in the world, which began with Abraham and Sarah (or better yet, began with the creation itself) and extends all the way to the end when Jesus will come again to finish God's work of new creation. In fact, the opening of Matthew's Gospel, which reads, "The record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ," translates the Greek that actually reads, "The book of the genesis of Jesus the Christ." So Matthew is signaling that a new creation story, the renewal of God's creation as God had

promised, is now underway through Jesus the Messiah. This means that in her arms, Mary cradles the fulfillment of Israel's purpose and hopes, the destiny of humankind.

Speaking of Mary, she is one of five women who show up in Matthew's genealogy. This is no minor thing. Ancestry and inheritance were usually traced through the father's line, so a reference to women in a genealogy, though not unheard of, was certainly uncommon. We might not be as surprised if women like Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah, were listed in the genealogy. But these aren't the ones who get mentioned. Instead, four women, some of whom are remembered for their questionable behavior, show up in Jesus' family tree. There's Tamar, who dressed as a prostitute and tricked Judah into having sex with her in order to get him to do his fathering duty. There's Rahab, who ran a house of prostitution. There's Bathsheba (identified as "Uriah's wife"), who had an affair with David. Ruth is also mentioned, remembered primarily as a Gentile, a non-Israelite, an outsider.

It brings to mind a storyline from the sitcom *Frasier*, which aired for over a decade on NBC. In one episode, Frasier, his brother Niles, and their father, Martin, take one of Martin's heirlooms to have it appraised on "Antiques Roadshow." It's an old pewter bear clock, which turns out to be Russian, from the mid-18th century, belonging exclusively to the Romanoff family (The Russian royal dynasty), and easily worth at least \$25,000.

Based on this discovery, Frasier and Niles are now convinced that they're descended from Russian royalty. They become obsessed with finding out the truth about their heritage, dreaming about the possibility of titles, invitations to state dinners, and a story to tell at parties. Their excitement grows when they find out that their great-grandmother, sensing revolution, emigrated from Russia, taking the antique clock with her.

But eventually, after consulting an expert from the Russian embassy, Frasier and Niles discover that their family tree isn't as impressive as they thought. Their great-grandmother wasn't a princess after all. She was actually a scullery maid, the lowest of the low when it comes to household servants. What's more, before she married their great-grandfather, she had worked as a prostitute in New York City. She had stolen the clock, which the Russian government now takes back. In the meantime, Martin, anticipating at least \$30,000 for the clock, has gone out and purchased a Winnebago. So in the end, Frasier and Niles find out they're not Romanoffs, and they each owe their dad \$15,000.

Like Frasier and Niles, who discovered that their family tree was more of a mixed bag than they had hoped, Matthew reminds us that Jesus' descent doesn't come exclusively through the high and the mighty, or the exceptionally holy. Jesus' lineage can actually be traced through a wide assortment of individuals. Some quite extraordinary and some very ordinary. Some famous and some hardly known. Some Jewish and some Gentile.

So even before we get to the actual birth of Jesus, Matthew's genealogy puts us on notice that the story he's going to unfold—from cradle to cross to crown—is the story about the fulfillment of both Jewish and Gentile hopes, a story about God's desire to bless the whole world. The scope of God's grace means that the branches of Abraham's family tree are expansive, extending into the lives of people everywhere, including people like us.

You see, whatever your own personal heritage, whatever your family roots, this text isn't meant to be just a list of Bible people. It isn't just their genealogy. From a spiritual standpoint, it's also your genealogy. It isn't just their family tree. It's also your family tree. It isn't just Jesus' story. It's also your story. It's the story of how Jesus has appeared so that a faithful and merciful God could bring you into his family, the people of God, through faith in Jesus the Messiah.