

The King Comes According to God's Plan
 "What Are These People Doing in Jesus' Family Tree?"
 or "Women and Gentiles and Sinners, Oh My!"
 Matthew 1:1-17

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

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

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

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

¹⁷ 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. – Matthew 1:-17, ESV

Strange Characters in the Family Tree

Do you have any strange characters in your family tree?

In 1900, American educator Albert E. Winship published a study of the descendants of Jonathan Edwards and Max Jukes. This very famous study has been cited by many people. In fact, I referred to it when I preached on Psalm 34.

Here's an example of a common way this book's study is cited:

Jonathan Edwards, one of the greatest minds that God has given America, lived in the state of New York. He was a Christian and believed in Christian training. He married a girl of like character. From this union men have studied 729 descendants. Of this number came 300 preachers, 65 college professors, 13 university presidents, 60 authors of good books, 3 United States congressmen, and one vice president of the United States; and barring one grandson who married a questionable character, the family has not cost the state a single dollar.

Max Jukes lived in the same state. He did not believe in Christian training. He married a girl of like character. From this union men have studied 1,026 descendants. Three hundred of them died prematurely. One hundred were sent to the penitentiary for an average of 13 years each. One hundred ninety were public prostitutes. There were 100 drunkards. The family cost the state \$1,200,000. They made no helpful contribution to society.

Sounds clear enough, right? And certainly there's some truth and insight to be gained here. However, Jonathan Edwards didn't really "live in the state of New York," except for a very brief period of time. Also, this isn't really telling the whole story. Here's what the quotes and references to this famous study hardly ever mention: The one vice-president who came from Jonathan Edwards' family line was Aaron Burr, one of the most selfishly ambitious and unprincipled men to ever hold high office in America, who shot and killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. And, more importantly and sadly, many people used this family tree study to justify eugenics in the early 20th Century.

Every family tree has a few bad apples or a few crooked branches. Yet Jesus' family tree here in Matthew 1 is very unusual – intentionally so – in three distinct ways: by the inclusion of women and Gentiles and by the exclusion of others. In this intentional structuring of the genealogy, we see a proclamation of the Gospel for all who believe.

In Jesus' day, Jewish male would begin each day with the daily liturgy, something which is still said by orthodox Jews each day (but not on Shabbat) – "Blessed are you O God, King of the Universe, Who has not made me a Gentile, a slave or a woman."

To this mindset – a mindset which expected a male Jewish Messiah to bring victory and glory to his fellow Jewish males, Matthew presents the genealogy of the Messiah, Jesus, which at the same time proves that He is rightly qualified to be Messiah, as Son of David and Son of Abraham, but also that He had come to bring salvation to all who trust in Him.

A. Five Women

Matthew includes five women in Jesus' genealogy, though not all of them are explicitly named. The fifth woman who is named is Mary, and the other four are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and unnamed Bathsheba. Some people have claimed that it was absolutely unheard of to include women in genealogies. This is not really true. If a famous or notable woman was part of your family history, she might be included. It was exceedingly rare, however.

What is perhaps even more important to note is which women are included and why –

I. Tamar (Gen. 38) – “and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar” – v. 3

Judah, one of Jacob's 12 sons and the patriarch of the Tribe of Judah, married a Canaanite woman and had three sons. He then had his oldest son marry Tamar. Judah's oldest two sons, Er and Onan, were wicked and God struck them dead, so Judah promised Tamar she could marry his third and youngest son, Shelah. But he failed to keep his end of the bargain. This was a huge deal because a

woman without a husband or sons had no rights and no defender in the world. Once Tamar's father died, she would be completely helpless and vulnerable.

So, she took matters into her own hands and dressed up like a pagan prostitute. She enticed Judah to lay with her and she became pregnant. When it was discovered that she was pregnant, Judah was going to have her stoned to death for unfaithfulness, until she produced his staff, signet ring and cord (or robe), which he had given her as collateral when he thought she was a prostitute.

Is this the kind of family story you'd want to remind people of? And yet, Matthew includes Tamar. Interestingly, Tamar is the most faithful and believing person in the whole story. Many Bible scholars have noted the significance that Tamar ends up with Judah's staff, signet ring, and cord (or cloak) – as these would have been symbols of rule and authority. The promised Messiah would come from Judah and would be “the lion of the tribe of Judah,” but Judah himself was a very shady character who broke his promise to his daughter-in-law, got drunk, went into a prostitute, and was about to execute the mother of the Messianic line before her clear-headed courage intervened.

2. Rahab: A Canaanite prostitute who believed in God (Joshua 2) – “*Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab*” – v. 5

Several generations later, after the sojourn in Egypt, when Israel came out in the Exodus and was preparing to enter the Promised Land, we meet Rahab. Rahab was a prostitute who lived in Jericho, the first city the Israelites encountered when they crossed the Jordan River. She welcomed the two spies Joshua sent and hid them from the men of Jericho who were looking for them. So, she is an immoral woman belonging to an immoral people, and yet she acts courageously by faith and becomes an ancestor of Christ.

3. Ruth: A faithful Moabite? (Ruth) – “*and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth*” – v. 5

Ruth is perhaps the most admirable and faithful woman of the four named in the genealogy, and she was Moabite. Now this is a remarkable statement in and of itself, since the Moabites were descended from Moab, the child born to Lot and his oldest daughter. In Deuteronomy 23:3-4, God said through Moses: “*No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD forever, because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.*”

Ruth was just a couple of generations later, as Matthew indicates that Rahab was her grandmother. But she was given grace and was ingrafted into the family line of Jesus and the people of God. The story of Ruth begins with a famine in Israel and Elimelech leading his family out of the Promised Land and into Moab, where his sons marry Moabite women. When all of the men die – Elimelech and his sons – Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, sends her and Orpah, the other daughter-in-law, away to find their own husbands among the Moabites. Orpah leaves, but Ruth will not. She clings to her mother-in-law, determined to keep her commitment to her –

Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

– Ruth 1:16-18, ESV

Ruth’s courageous faithfulness led to redemption for both Naomi and for her.

4. Bathsheba: The unnamed woman, an adulteress (2 Sam. 11)

Bathsheba is actually unnamed in Jesus’ genealogy. In verse 6, we simply read, “*David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah.*” I think it’s significant that Bathsheba is not named, when Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth are. Bathsheba was an adulteress whose husband was murdered to cover up her adultery with King David.

But even more significantly, the focus here is not on Bathsheba but on Uriah, who isn’t even an ancestor of Jesus. Uriah isn’t even in the Messianic genealogy, but here he is named anyway.

B. Gentiles

Which brings us to the second category of unusual inclusions in this genealogy – Gentiles. Naming five women – including Mary – is strange enough, but Rahab is a Canaanite (the people the Israelites conquered), Ruth was a Moabite (the people who hated Israel and whom Israel fought for generations), and Uriah was a Hittite (a people who controlled Canaan in the days of Abraham).

In the sordid story of David and Bathsheba, only one person clearly shines as noble and faithful, and that’s Uriah. So, to a Jewish audience waiting for the Son of David to deliver them from oppression at the hands of the wicked Gentiles, Matthew includes Uriah the Righteous Hittite, who was more righteous than David and was, in fact, the innocent victim of oppression and murder at the hands of David.

David had led the armies of Israel into battle against her enemies, the Philistines and others who oppressed her. Yet the deeper truth is that David was not the Savior David himself needed a Savior. It’s not the opposition of Philistines, Canaanites, Moabites, Greeks, or Romans that bring the deepest bondage but our own sin.

C. Slaves and Sinners

And we do see plenty of sin in Jesus' family tree, don't we? We also see slavery here. Remember the third category of person that the Jewish male thanks God for NOT making him – "Blessed are you O God, King of the Universe, Who has not made me a Gentile, a **slave** or a woman."

So, where do we see slavery? Between the lines, in the background of verse 2: "*Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers*" Judah and his brothers. What did Judah and his brothers do? They abused their younger brother, Joseph, and then sold him into slavery in Egypt. And yet, it was Joseph's slavery which led to their deliverance as a people. So, Jewish men could thank God for not making them a slave, but when Joseph was made a slave, he was actually the most honorable of all of the sons of Israel, the heads of the tribes of Israel, and his slavery brought about deliverance for all of God's people.

Now, back to the sin, and there's plenty of it. "Judah and his brothers" is a reminder of a time of great sin, but so is so much of this genealogy. One of the remarkable things about the Old Testament – about the whole Bible, really – is the clear and unmistakable accounts of the great, grave sin of the "heroes" of the story – Abraham's unfaithfulness, Judah's sin, selling Joseph into slavery, prostitution, adultery, murder, and so much more.

Why? Because the story of the Bible only has one hero. The rest of us are sinners in need of a Savior.

D. But Some Are Excluded

The other interesting thing to note about Matthew's genealogy is that some people are excluded: Six kings of Judah are omitted from Matthew's account: three consecutive kings - Ahaziah, Jehoash, and Amaziah, and three other kings, who were brothers - Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. These exclusions were intentional. Ahaziah, Jehoash, and Amaziah were from the bloodline of Ahab and Jezebel through their daughter Athaliah, and the other three were the sons of Josiah and reigned at the end of the Kingdom of Judah, right before the Babylonian captivity. They were all very wicked, heavily involved in idolatrous practices and "*did what was evil in the sight of the Lord*". By omitting these names, Matthew indicates that these men were not considered as belonging to the bloodline of Jesus or counted among His forefathers.

In Deuteronomy 29:18-20, God gave a warning to His people:

Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.' This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. The Lord will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the Lord and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven.

This gives us a sobering reality check. Just as it is wrong to exclude some people because of their gender or ethnicity, so it is also wrong to assume that some people belong to the people of God and share in the blessings of Christ. We're all sinners and we all need a Savior. And we must trust in Jesus, for salvation comes by faith alone in Him alone, and not by bloodline or heritage.

Good News of Great Joy for All the People

Matthew's genealogy confronts our prejudices, just as the whole Christmas story does. The fact is that all of us have biases and preferences based on our heritage and our upbringing. We're all tempted to look at certain people and think they're excluded from God's story for whatever reason – wrong skin color, wrong language, wrong educational background, wrong income level, wrong political persuasion, too many tattoos, not enough tattoos, whatever.

The Christmas story is a confrontation story. Shepherds in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night are confronted by an angel who brings them a message that confronts everyone with the most unexpected and wonderful news –

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” – Luke 2:10-12, ESV

Good news of great joy for all the people. But who are “the people”? The people of God. The coming of Jesus into the world, the long-awaited Messiah, is good news of great joy for all of God's people – no one is excluded, not even filthy, shifty shepherds out in the fields, mistrusted by most. And yet, not everyone is part of God's people. Not everyone sees, understands, and receives the coming of Jesus as the good news of great joy that it is.

So, the message of Christmas really is the ultimate confrontation story:

- Jesus, the Light of the World, comes to confront the darkness of our world.
- Jesus the Righteous One comes to confront sin and reverse the curse sin brought into the world. The coming of sin meant sorrow for the world, but the coming of Jesus is “Joy to the World!”
- Jesus the Lord of Life comes to confront death and defeat this great enemy of God's people.
- The announcement of Jesus' coming birth confronts both Mary and Joseph with hard choices – Will they trust God and joyfully embrace His plan by faith or walk away in unbelief?
- The announcement of the birth of the King of the Jews also confronts Herod, who reacts not in faith but in fear and anger and jealousy.

Of all the things confronted by Christmas, Matthew makes sure our prejudices are confronted by us women of great courage and decisive action, Gentiles of great faith, faithfulness and moral integrity, God's people acting in sinful cowardice, and then those who are not truly God's people and yet were pretending they were.

And yet, it's not enough just to have our prejudices confronted, is it? They must be replaced by another way of seeing the world, by faith in God and in His promises. In the Gospel of John, He tells us of the confrontation of Jesus' coming in His opening Prologue, verses 1-17 of chapter 1, which functions as John's Christmas story –

⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. – John 1:9-12, ESV

So, the first question for you to be confronted with is – Have you been born of God? Have you received Jesus – that is, do you believe in His name and do you know that you have life in none other but Him?

If you do, have you allowed His perspective – seeing the world through Christ - to replace your cultural and personal prejudices. Here's how being confronted by Christ on the Road to Damascus changed the Apostle Paul's perspective –

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. – 2 Corinthians 5:14-17, ESV

For Paul, of course, his prejudice had been rooted in a Jew vs Gentile perspective of the world. After Christ confronted him and changed his view of life in the world, he writes things like this –

For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. – 1 Corinthians 7:19

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. – Galatians 5:6

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. – Galatians 6:15

It's not that Paul stopped making any distinctions and became a universalist, but he set aside his prejudiced nationalism and made the right distinctions that matter – Who obeys God? Who has faith in Jesus Christ and sees that faith working in their lives through the love of God? Who is a new creation in Christ?

Or, as John says in I John 5:1: “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.” So, it’s not those who look like us, think like us, live like us, or vote like us, but those who believe that Jesus is the Christ who have been born of God and who are our brothers and sisters.

Do you believe in Jesus this Christmas? If so, are you willing to allow Him to confront and change your prejudices, replacing them with faith working through love?