

Jesus' Family Tree

by Joel Beeke

Genealogies are hardly spellbinding. Perhaps, like me, you are tempted to skip them in your Bible reading. Yet genealogies are a significant part of God's infallible Scriptures. They, too, are "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16 kjv and hereafter).

Matthew's genealogy is a family tree of Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God incarnated as the Son of Man. Matthew wrote his gospel primarily to the Jews. Strictly speaking, the purpose of this genealogy is to prove to Jewish readers that Jesus of Nazareth as the seed of Abraham and the son of David was the long-awaited Messiah.

The genealogy further teaches us that Christ entered the stream of humanity for all people — Jews and Gentiles alike. The Creator became incarnate. He fully took on flesh, made Himself of no reputation, and humbled Himself, submitting to the death of the cross (Phil. 2:7-8). The mystery is that He took on human flesh and human nature and yet did not sin.

As a covenant document, Matthew's genealogy reveals the faithfulness of God in keeping His promises from generation to generation to Abraham and his seed, to Judah and his tribe, to David and his house, to the Hebrews bowed down under the yoke of bondage in Egypt, to the children of Israel dwelling in the land of promise, to the Jews languishing in captivity, and even to sinners of the Gentiles by nature. Likewise, it reveals God's mercy "unto all, and upon all them that believe," no matter how weak their faith may have been, or how greatly they have sinned against God, or how late in time they came to repentance and faith. A study of all the names in this genealogy confirms the Gospel promise that "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21).

Depravity is clearly evident in the genealogy of Matthew 1. Christ's forefathers were deeply fallen descendants of Adam. If the genealogy listed only such heroes of faith as Abraham or King Asa, we might say, "What a noble ancestry!" But the genealogy of Jesus also includes Judah and Tamar, Rahab the harlot, David and Bathsheba, Joram and Manasseh. The Holy Spirit wants us to know that Jesus' family history includes wicked men, prostitutes, and other notorious sinners. The sinless Lord of glory was willing to descend from notably sinful forebears.

The Holy Spirit inspired Matthew to include Judah, Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba, and Manasseh in Jesus' genealogy. He could have left their names out. After all, this list is not complete; several names, including at least three kings, are missing. The undesirables in Jesus' ancestry are included to show us that no sinner is beyond the saving reach of Jesus. Matthew records that, by divine command, His name was to be called Jesus — a contraction of "Jehovah saves" — "for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). We learn from Jesus' genealogy, virgin birth, and saving name that He is able and willing to save sinners.

All of us, without exception, are depraved, corrupt, and full of wickedness. When the Spirit opens our eyes to this, we will confess, “I am no better than Rahab or Manasseh.” We are all sons of fallen Adam — and heirs of corruption. Christ’s genealogical register is a record of our guilt, our shame, our lost state, our origin, our humiliation. It raises the question, who can break the terrible cycle of sin? “Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Rom. 7:24).

Thanks be to God, Jesus broke the repeating cycle of human sin by identifying with and saving wretched sinners like us. Jesus is not ashamed to have Rahab or Manasseh or any other sinners in His family tree. Likewise, He is not ashamed to receive us into His family. Out of love He rescues us, makes us holy and acceptable in God’s sight, renews and transforms us, and will never let us fall away again and be lost to Him. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15).

Christ became like us in all things but sin. His name is Immanuel, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). He was and is God the Son from eternity past, at every point in His earthly ministry, and unto eternity future. He was God even as He hung on the accursed cross and was broken as our substitute and atoning sacrifice. Having taken our sins upon Himself, He became a curse for us, and endured our punishment, so He is God for us. Having taken our nature upon Himself and having lived in the world as we must live, tempted at all points as we are, He is God with us. He understands and knows us; He humbled Himself so completely that He became both our Savior and our elder brother. Graciously He offers Himself to us and asks of us no more than that we believe in Him and seek Him with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.