

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE FAMILY TREE OF JESUS

Matthew 1:1-17

I don't know if it is true for you, but for a lot of people, the genealogy passages in the Bible, like Matthew's record of the family tree of Jesus, are probably the most boring parts of the whole Bible. Do you feel that way?

The first genealogy in the Bible is found way back in Genesis 4, where the genealogy of Cain is given to the sixth generation of his descendants (Genesis 4:17-22). Cain, of course, was not only the firstborn son of Adam and Eve, he was the first murderer in history, taking the life of his brother Abel. In Genesis 5 we are given the family tree of Adam through his son Seth, all the way to Noah and his three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth (5:1-32).

If you're looking for the longest genealogical passage in the Bible, check out 1 Chronicles in the Old Testament. Both 1 and 2 Chronicles were most likely written by Ezra the priest, sometime around 430 BC, or about 150 years after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, when thousands of Jews were uprooted from their homes and country, and taken into exile in Babylon. The first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles consist of genealogical lists. Essentially, they are the official family records of the nation of Israel. That is pretty much all there is in these nine chapters. In chapters 1-3, it is the ancestry of the nation from Adam through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (who is referred to as Israel in 1:34 and 2:1), through Judah, one of the 12 sons of Jacob, to David and his sons, and the royal line of David both before and after the exile, up to the time of Ezra. The ancestry of each of the 12 tribes of Israel is given in chapters 4-8. Chapter 9 lists the names of the first of the exiles to finally return to Jerusalem and resettle there (9:2-34), along with a genealogy of Saul, the first king of Israel (9:35-44). Unless you just love slogging through long lists of names, most of them strange (to us) sounding Hebrew names, it can be a challenge not to get bored.

So then, when we get to the New Testament and the good news of the coming to our world of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and His saving work on our behalf, what do we find at the very beginning of the Gospel of Matthew? Another genealogy. This time, a record of the family tree of Jesus. And, if you're familiar with the other Gospels, you probably know there is another list of the ancestors of Jesus in Luke 3.

In those moments when we may be tempted to pass over any of the genealogies in the Bible, or simply to dismiss them as unnecessary or irrelevant, it is good to call to mind 2 Timothy 3:16, which tells us that all of Scripture is "God-breathed (or inspired) and is useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way," as it says in *The Message*. All of Scripture – including the genealogies. It may not be clear to us in every case why the genealogies are important, but, as I was reminded recently in reading James Montgomery Boice's book *The Christ of Christmas*, God has a purpose for their inclusion of the Bible.

Even if we find them boring to read, I think we intuitively understand why genealogies are important. To one degree or another, we all have a desire to know where we came from. We want to know who came before us. If we find out we're related to someone famous or, famous or not, someone who did something worth remembering in their time on earth – that's pretty cool. There is a story of one kind or another in virtually every family tree. Sometimes there is a lesson of great value to be learned from your family tree.

A well-known preacher and author named Thomas Long learned one of those lessons from his grandmother. On the wall of the sitting room of her antebellum home in South Carolina was, as he described it, a constellation of family portraits – old pictures of uncles and aunts, cousins, grandparents and great-grandparents, a genealogy in photographs. In the center of the cluster, in the place of honor, was a portrait of someone Long did not recognize. It was a Civil war-era photograph of a striking young man dressed in the uniform of a Union army officer. Needless to say, this was not what you would expect – the portrait of a Union soldier in a place of honor on the wall of a proud South Carolina home. As a boy, when Long asked his grandmother who it was, all she said was: "I'll tell you when you're old enough to understand."

Years later, not long before she died, Long's grandmother saw him in the sitting room, all by himself, gazing at the picture. She came in, sat down beside him, and finally told him the story. He was a good man, she said, a minister, a chaplain in the Union army. In May 1862, after the smoke had cleared from the battlefield near Williamsburg, Virginia, this chaplain rode his horse out onto the field to see if there were any wounded troops who had been left behind. He came across a 19-year-old Confederate soldier, lying wounded and terrified in a ditch. The young man had taken a bullet which nearly severed his leg at the knee, and he was slowly bleeding to death. Feeling compassion for him, the chaplain lifted him out of the ditch, put him on his horse, and took him to the Union medical tent, where a surgeon amputated his leg at the knee, bandaged him up and stopped the bleeding, saving his life. When the young man was strong enough to travel, the chaplain got together enough money to see that he was sent home to his grateful and greatly relieved family in South Carolina.

Thomas Long, as you probably guessed, is a direct descendant of that 19-year-old Confederate soldier. He was Long's great-grandfather, and he became a minister himself, as well as a teacher and college president. The young Confederate soldier and the Union chaplain who rescued him and saved his life, bound together by this moment of mercy and compassion amid the ravages of war, became friends for life. They corresponded with one another throughout the rest of their lives.

The lesson Long learned? He said: "No one had to preach the parable of the Good Samaritan to my family. We had lived it." (From Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, pp. ix-x).

It may not be quite as dramatic (or maybe it is), but I wouldn't be surprised if, somewhere in your family tree, there is something of great value to learn and cherish.

The genealogy of Jesus is important because it shows that the story of Jesus doesn't begin with the birth of Jesus. He came into the world at a particular time in history, but He didn't just appear out of nowhere. He was born at a particular time and place into a particular family, a family with a long history. To say it in a slightly different way, the genealogical record of Jesus is important because it shows that Jesus was a real historical person with real ancestors.

Have you heard about the advertising campaign by a group called American Atheists trying to debunk Christmas? I haven't seen it in our area, but in the New York area at least, they are running a billboard ad with a depiction of the wise men on their donkeys following the star which will lead them to the Christ child. The message on the billboard reads: "*You know it's just a myth.*" They want you to believe the Christmas story isn't true. They want you to believe it didn't really happen in history. They want you to believe the story of the coming of the Son of God, the story of the incarnation, the story of the birth of the promised Messiah and Savior to Mary in Bethlehem is all made up.

No, it is not! It is not a myth. It is not made up. Jesus was a real man. He was a real flesh and blood person. He was just like you and me in every way, except that He was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18-21; Luke 1:31-35) without the involvement of a human father, and born to a virgin. And, as a real human being, He was like you and me in every way except that, unlike all of us, He never sinned (Hebrews 4:15).

It is not a myth. Jesus was a real person with real family ties to real ancestors who came before Him, going back through King David all the way to Judah, the son of Jacob, and Jacob, the son of Isaac, and Isaac, the son of Abraham, and Abraham, to whom God gave this promise in Genesis 12 when He called Abraham to follow Him:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.
(Genesis 12:2-3)

Blessed to be a blessing. Blessed to be a blessing to all the peoples of the world. Isn't that a mind-blowing promise? And it has been fulfilled in the fullest sense through the coming of Jesus, the offspring of Abraham, in history. Not only the physical descendants of Abraham, but all the peoples of the world have been blessed through the life and ministry of Jesus, through His saving work on the cross, through His resurrection from the dead and His ascension to the place of highest honor and authority at the right hand of God the Father in heaven – people from every race, every family, every nation and language who by faith have embraced Jesus as Savior and Lord of their lives.

It was the plan of God all along to send His Son, to give His Son, to save us from our sin and bring us back into fellowship with Him. God Himself prepared the way, through the family line of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, through David and his descendants, for the coming of the Messiah in history. And the genealogy of Jesus shows that He had the right pedigree to be the promised Messiah.

If you compare the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 with the genealogy in Luke 3, you will see some noticeable differences. They are not the same. Matthew starts with Abraham (Matthew 1:2) and ends with Jesus. Luke, on the other hand, begins with Jesus (Luke 3:23) and goes back in time not just to Abraham but all the way to Adam, the son of God (Luke 3:38). In addition, the two genealogies seem to follow different lines of the family tree from David to Jesus. Matthew's genealogy includes Solomon and all the kings who sat on the throne of Judah after him, while Luke traces the family line of Jesus through David's son Nathan instead.

Biblical scholars have tried to explain the differences in the genealogies in different ways. J. Gresham Machen, for example, one of the foremost Reformed theologians of the first half of the 20th century, theorized that Matthew's genealogy gives the "legal" descendants of David, that is, all of the kings and those who would have been king (heirs to the throne) if the political kingdom of Israel had continued. Luke's genealogy, on the other hand, gives the actual descendants of David leading to Joseph, the husband of Mary.

The view of James Boice and Warren Wiersbe, among many others, which makes better sense to me, is that what we have in Matthew is the family tree of Jesus through Joseph, His legal father, while Luke traces the family line of Jesus through His mother Mary, even though Luke does not name Mary in his genealogy. He says, instead, that Jesus was "the son, so it was thought, of Joseph" (Luke 3:23). It is not surprising that Luke would do this, since in that day women ordinarily had no legal standing in matters of heredity or inheritance. Both Mary and Joseph were descendants of David. As D. A. Carson points out, physically Jesus was Mary's son, but legally He was Joseph's son.

You don't have to dig too deep in either genealogy before discovering that the family tree of Jesus includes some true heroes of faith, and some pretty shady characters. I'm not going to name any names today, but between now and Christmas we'll take a look at a few of the characters to whom God gave the inestimable privilege of belonging to the family line of the incarnate Son of God.

I've got to tell you this, and then I am done. Some of you probably know the movie *A Knight's Tale* from several years ago, starring the late Heath Ledger as a young peasant named William Thatcher who poses as a knight in order to compete in medieval jousting tournaments and to pursue a better life for himself. In medieval England it was illegal for peasants to joust. It was a privilege reserved only for nobles. Even though he doesn't have a drop of royal blood in him, Thatcher persuades Geoffrey Chaucer, the author, to help him obtain fake "patents of nobility," false genealogy documents, to enable him to join the jousting circuit under the assumed name of Sir Ulrich von Liechtenstein, all in the hope of winning a famous tournament.

It was the custom at these tournaments for the knight's squire to announce his entrance, usually with a recitation of the knight's royal lineage. Sometimes, in an attempt to impress, this recitation might be a little over the top, as in the movie when Chaucer announced Sir Ulrich. He said:

“I cannot look upon my Lord Ulrich, for I weep to see his shining face. My lord is a gift to your eyes, for we shall never, ever see his like upon this earth again. I would list his lineage if it served to honor him. Most men here – it’s sad, but it’s true – they look to their past to prove their worth. They look to the deeds of their fathers.

“Now, Sir Ulrich has great ancestors, make no mistake about that. Sir Chirard von Richbach, Duke Guelph of Saxony, Van Misch IV out of Brunswick” (of course, he is making all of this up) – “but these great, great men pale into insignificance next to him. I do not list them to honor him; I list him (Sir Ulrich) to honor them!”

It is all hype, of course, but as Lee Eclov notes, that last line captures something of the essence of the genealogies of Jesus in both Matthew and Luke. It is true that Jesus has great ancestors, coming as He did from the family line of David and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But all of the distinguished ancestors of Jesus, important as they are in the history of redemption, pale into insignificance next to Him. So, we do not need to list them to honor Him. The greatness of Jesus is not due to them. Rather, in listing Jesus – the incarnate Son of God, the promised Messiah, the all-sufficient Savior of sinners – they are honored. *We* are honored. *We* are blessed, eternally blessed, that the eternal Son of God would humble Himself, take on our flesh and blood, come and live among us, and give us life as an atoning sacrifice for us *in history*.

It is not a myth. It is the gospel truth. And it is why Christmas is worth celebrating Amen? Amen.