

# Big Surprise

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Matthew 1:1-7

Sermons Series:  
In Christ Together  
for the World

*And that is why he begins with a genealogy. For a Jewish reader, the “real story” begins right here with the family tree.*

Openings of novels and short stories and such are meant to attract attention—to grab the reader and pull him into what the author wants to say. But Matthew’s Gospel begins with a list of names that is the duller opening of any of the four gospels—and perhaps the duller in the entire Bible.

Now, I may have already lost some of you who are thinking that was about as interesting as reading VCR instructions. You may be wondering what could possibly be said about these verses. At least that’s what I thought years ago when I first heard an Advent sermon on this passage while visiting my husband’s family and church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I am indebted to Scott Hoeszee for that powerful and memorable message. Much of what I share today I first heard that day. All these years later, that sermon still stands out to me because of the big surprises. Let’s take a closer look.

Like many, you may have skipped over this part of Matthew in your devotional reading. The “real story” after all begins with verse 18, with Joseph and Mary. But remember, Matthew is not writing

primarily for you but for a Jewish crowd. Most scholars believe that Matthew composed this gospel to help convince Jews that Jesus of Nazareth was their long-awaited Messiah. So he wrote his gospel carefully, selecting and highlighting the points, events and sayings of Jesus that would be of particular interest to a Jewish reader. And that is why he begins with a genealogy. For a Jewish reader, the “real story” begins right here with the family tree.

We find a lot of genealogies in the Old Testament. Because of God’s covenant promises to Abraham and David, the family line of Abraham and David was considered vital. God promised childless old Abraham that he would become the father of a mighty nation, as numerous as the sand grains on the seashore and the stars in the sky. God promised David that he would forever have one of his descendants ruling on Israel’s throne.

So, those family lines were scrutinized and observed with great care—after all, one of these days the Messiah would be a child from somebody’s family. Keeping track of people’s lineage was worth doing. In fact, it was a logical

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and necessary place to begin, considering Matthew’s goal was to help fellow Jews discover in Jesus their true Messiah.

But Matthew is up to something bigger than the ordinary, common task of tracing someone’s family line; Matthew wants to preach the gospel *through* this family tree. The pattern of listing sons and keeping the balance of 14 generations would be noticed and appreciated by his Jewish audience. But there are some surprises, some irregularities, and some people whose names cause us to stop and ask, “What is that doing there?”

The first surprise comes in the fact that four women are mentioned. That fact alone is noteworthy and would have caught the attention of a Jewish reader, as usually only men’s names were mentioned. If a woman’s name was included, it was for a reason and would automatically indicate the need to pay attention. Women’s names were usually added only if they would ensure the purity of the line or enhance its dignity. I assure you, that is not the case here.

Jewish readers wouldn’t have been surprised to find the matriarchs included—Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel. These women were the wives and mothers of Israel’s key founders: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the twelve sons of Israel. But instead of mentioning these matriarchs, Matthew

includes four other surprising women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba.

The next surprise—an even bigger one—is to learn that these four women were Gentiles, or non-Jews. Most genealogies in the late Old Testament period have the very purpose of showing that a line has been kept pure from Gentile contamination. But this first genealogy in the New Testament has a big surprise—the line that led from Abraham to Jesus, the Son of David, was intersected again and again by Gentile blood. That may not be a big deal to us, but to a first-century Jewish reader, that would be a big surprise.

Why is this important? Matthew wants the church to know that from the start, God’s work has been interracial, and that God is no narrow nationalist or racist. The bloodline of the Messiah—from Abraham himself, who of course was originally Gentile—has been extended through history by Gentiles, as well as by Jewish parents. And all this by the overruling providence and sovereignty of God, not by human impulse. God’s work is inclusive and universal as the genealogy shows, and so the people of God should be interracial, intercultural and international too.

A third surprise is that each of these women had some unorthodox feature about her. And three of the four had

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questionable moral backgrounds:

- Tamar is known for posing as a prostitute in order to trick her father-in-law, Judah, into sleeping with her and thus keeping his promise to her to continue the family line (Genesis 38).
- Rahab “the harlot” is best known for assisting the spies in Israel and being rescued by Joshua from the city of Jericho.
- Ruth is morally the least questionable of the four women, but she was a Moabite, a descendant of Lot (Genesis 19), and thus low on the social and spiritual register of some of the racially proud and protective people of God. Nevertheless, this Gentile became the literal great-grandmother of King David.
- The fourth woman Matthew blushes even to name directly. He calls her “the wife of Uriah,” indicating that she was not the lawful wife of David. We know this woman as Bathsheba (II Samuel 11). Her adulterous affair with David led to David’s murder of her husband, Uriah.

All of these women are distant great-grandmothers of our Lord. In three of the four

cases, there is a questionable moral and sexual history—not only for them but for the key male figures associated with them. From an orthodox point of view, these four women might be considered “skeletons in Jesus’ family closet.”

I have to confess that when I was writing the Advent devotional some months ago, I had initially included the Old Testament texts with the backgrounds of these women. But as I began to read them again and write the questions, I realized how disturbing these texts were, so I chickened out and decided not to include them.

But that’s just the point. Matthew knew including these Gentile women with their sordid pasts would be disturbing to the righteous Jew. And that’s why they are there. Matthew wants to conjure up some of the darker incidents in Israel’s history. Why? Because he wants to preach a sermon on the Gospel of Grace. This is the good news: God can overcome and forgive sin and can use soiled but repentant persons for His great, redemptive purposes in history. Matthew is making the otherwise dry family tree into a rich proclamation of the Gospel of Grace!

The beginning of the Gospel of Matthew makes clear that this gospel is not “For Jews Only.” For a time in history God focused His work of salvation within the nation of Israel. But the covenant

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promise to Abraham always echoed through the pages of Scripture: "You will become a blessing to all nations." In Jesus, salvation by grace would come to all. It would begin with Israel but then go forth from there to the four corners of the earth.

The good news of salvation is that the Gospel of Grace has *always* been for *all* people. Jesus can trace his history back to adulterers and prostitutes and Moabites and Hittites and Canaanites. The very people who had once been enemies of Israel were also related to the King of Kings.

These four scandals remind us that Jesus came not only *for*, but *through*, sinners. God did not begin to stoop into our sordid human story at Christmas only; He was stooping all the way through the Old Testament. The mercy of God is the deepest truth of Hebrew Scriptures and in Jesus, and so Matthew uses these women to point to God's amazing grace and to make clear that the Good News is truly for all people. It is not only for good, upstanding, morally pure Pharisee types. It's not just for those who can trace their heritage directly back to David and Abraham. No, it's going to be a gospel for sinners, for prostitutes and tax collectors and Samaritan women, and for Greeks and for avid Jesus-haters like Saul of Tarsus.

The inclusion of these four remarkable women from the Old Testament demonstrates and illustrates what grace is all about. They could easily have been left out, but Matthew's desire was to present the good news. The kingdom of heaven is at hand, and it has not been inaugurated by people's willful best efforts but by the grace and mercy of God.

We're not done yet, because there is another big surprise in this family tree. Look at how it ends. For fully fifteen verses, this genealogy proceeds as you would expect. It is one long string of "the father of" lines, until verse 16 where we read, "Matthan was the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Joseph, and Joseph the husband of Mary." *Joseph the husband of Mary*. The standard format for writing a family tree was snapped at the very climax of the genealogy. Joseph is not the father of Jesus; he is the husband of Mary.

Here's the point: Jesus is a true son of David and a son of Abraham. Jesus stands in continuity with his ancestry. And he is a real human child of Mary. But he is first and last the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, whose origins do not lie in this world. While the beginning of John's gospel makes this very important point about Jesus' divinity, as we saw last week, Matthew hints at all of this

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through this remarkable and holy irregularity of calling Joseph not *father* of Jesus, but simply and succinctly “the husband of Mary.”

Matthew's genealogy picks up all the covenantal strands of history and braids them together into the cord of Christ. Jesus is finally more than history could produce. Jesus finally does a work, which fulfills history's promises and so creates a new sacred history in which we all must now take our places.

So what? So what does the beginning of this gospel, written primarily to first-century Jews, have to say to me right here, right now? I think there is great comfort in this passage. First, there is the comfort that we belong to God. I think of the words of the Heidelberg Catechism: What is your only comfort in life and in death? I belong body and soul to my faithful savior Jesus Christ. Not only do we belong to God, but we belong to his family. I am reminded of this every Advent as my family and I use the Jesse Tree devotions that take us from creation to the coming of Christ. It is a great comfort to know that my life is part of God's big story. The good news of God's love and grace has been passed through the millennia to come to me, and now I have the joy of passing it on to my family and others. My life is a part of God's eternal and redemptive plan for the world.

There is also comfort and encouragement in knowing that there is nothing in our past that cannot be redeemed by the love and grace and power of Christ. It is not by our own effort that we become members of Jesus' family. We come into this family the same way that Rahab the prostitute and Bathsheba the adulterer did—by grace through faith. It is a big surprise to see that Jesus is related to a lot of disreputable people, and, through Jesus, we are, too. The truth is, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” The gospel of grace is for people like you, me and great-great-grandma Rahab. It's for people like us that Jesus came in the first place.

In fact, if we are surprised or ashamed to see prostitutes and tax collectors and Christian persecutors in our extended Christian family, then the odds are good that we are not in touch with who we really are. Let us not be like the Pharisees in Jesus' day, who assumed that because their heritage was all in order their name would automatically appear on the family tree. Those who think they need God's grace least usually need it most. The truth is this: we need the grace of Christ no more and no less than any of these other folks. And that, my friends, was Matthew's whole point.

The question is this: How will we respond to this Gospel of Grace in Jesus Christ our

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Lord? If you have been reading the Advent devotionals, then you are already familiar with how the first disciples responded to Christ's coming.

Mary and Joseph were the disciples of Jesus. They let go of their own agenda and plans to willingly surrender to the love of God and align their lives with the will of God. They made room for Christ in their hearts and in their family. It was not easy, or painless, or convenient for them to do so. Will we make room for Christ in our hearts, our homes, and our lives?

Or, will we hang onto our agenda and even resist Christ. King Herod is a disturbing person. His position, power and prestige were his idols, and he was not willing let go of anything or do anything to bow down to another king—not even the long-awaited Messiah. Not only did he resist Christ, but he arranged his life and his kingdom to choke the literal life out of Christ. What are the idols in our lives that are taking the place of Christ? Are there ways we are resisting Christ and his purposes?

Then, there are those Gentile magi, who went out of their way to follow the star and worship the Christ and to bring him the very best gifts that they had to offer. These unlikely outsiders give us a model of the journey of discipleship and what pleases God. How will we

go out of our way and arrange our lives to follow Christ and to love and serve the Lord this Advent and in the New Year? Will we make room around the table of the Lord and in our fellowship for those outsiders who are seeking Christ?

It's easy to romanticize the Advent and Christmas texts that tell of us Christ's birth by making them a sweet story about a baby being born. But they are really a call to discipleship—to recognize Christ for who he is—our Savior, Lord and King, and to arrange our lives to worship him and follow him. And they are a call to take this good news—this wonderful joy—to the whole world.

The Big Surprise is not just that God came for sinners or through sinners. The Big Surprise is that we are a part of His Big Story and that He wants to use us sinners for His redemptive purposes in the world. God is calling us to align our lives with His kingdom purposes. May it be so. Amen.

