

Incarnation

Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas

Have you noticed how each of the Gospels begin in a different way? They are all accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, so you might expect that they would all commence roughly the same way. But they don't. In fact there are some stark differences.

The beginning of John's Gospel presents us with that amazing description of the eternal existence of Christ and His incarnation and entry into our world. Luke begins his Gospel with a very long first chapter explaining how the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus were both foretold. We are introduced to Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary and then we read those two beautiful 'songs' from Mary and Zechariah. It's not until chapter 2 that we see the birth of Jesus.

Mark takes a totally different approach and completely skips the birth of Jesus and most of His life! The Gospel of Mark begins with John the Baptist declaring the coming of the Messiah and the next thing we see is Jesus being baptised, led into the wilderness to confront Satan and then He calls His disciples and commences His ministry.

These three different approaches demonstrate a different priority and purpose for each of the authors. So what about Matthew – the first and longest Gospel we have – what was his approach? Well Matthew decided to begin his Gospel with arguably the most boring 17 verses in the New Testament. He commenced his wonderful story about Jesus with a family tree! Before Matthew tells us about the wonder and the miracle of what we call Christmas, he goes back in time to secure the credentials of this baby who is about to be born. He wants to make sure that this birth in Bethlehem is clearly linked and secured in the historical reality of God's plan and purpose down through the ages.

So before we celebrate another Christmas; before we focus on the birth of the Christ child once more; we need to understand the powerful reality of the incarnation – that miracle in which God stepped out of heaven and into a Jewish teenager's womb – to be born as a human being. It won't be long in this narrative before we encounter the divinity and special calling of this Jesus, but first and foremost, Matthew wants us to have no doubt whatsoever that this child is fully human, and fully connected to an extensive and colourful family tree.

Of course most of us are not really into genealogies, especially not someone else's genealogy! That's why we have probably skipped over these verses many times when reading Matthew's gospel. When we do, we miss something very important. So let me suggest you read Matthew 1:1-17 right now, or better still, turn up your sound and click [HERE](#) and let someone else read it for you.

We need to understand that there is a very good reason for Matthew to commence his account of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ with this long list of names we can't pronounce. You may not have realised all those times you skipped over these verses that in this genealogy is everything you need to know about Christianity. All the essentials are in there.

As I've studied this passage over the years I have learned so much diving into commentaries and listening to other pastors teach on this. I've realized that Matthew is trying to teach us some important truths through this simple list of names.

Let me highlight some lessons I have learned from this passage.

1. The gospel is not good advice, the gospel is good news

Most stories or fairy tales start out with "once upon a time" or "somewhere, in a galaxy far, far away" or something like that. But Matthew doesn't start out that way. He starts the greatest story ever told with a genealogy, which is his way of saying, *"What I am about to tell you actually happened in time and space. This is not folklore. This is not a fairy tale. This is not fiction. This really happened."*

One of the most important aspects of Christianity is that it's inextricably linked to actual history. At the very core of Christianity we don't find a set of principles that Jesus taught us, but rather something Jesus did for us. All of the world's religions, when you peel back the layers, are built on teachings and principles that, really, would be true whether their religious founder ever lived or not. The religious founder was just a mouthpiece for those teachings.

For example, the principles of Buddhism don't depend on Buddha being an actual person. Those principles, Buddhists believe, undergird the universe and Buddha was just the mouthpiece. The same is true for Islam: Islam is a pattern for how Allah wants us to live. Mohammad was just the mouthpiece for that teaching. Muslims, of course, will tell you Mohammad was an actual person, but the principles and teachings of Islam do not depend on him being a real person.

This is not true for Christianity – which is why it is not a religion. Christianity depends on a series of events that actually took place in time and history and the core of Christianity is not what Jesus taught us, but what Jesus did and does for us. Jesus is not the mouthpiece for Christianity – Jesus is Christianity! Scholars point out that the Gospels (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are basically just prologues to the death of Christ. The central element in each Gospel is the death of Christ. They skim over 33 years of His life and 3 years of His teaching and focus heavily on one week in which He would go to the cross, bear the penalty for our sins, die in our place and then rise again.

The Gospels contain a lot of things that Jesus taught, but the focus of the Gospels is not on what Jesus taught, but Who Jesus was and what He did. That's why I say the gospel is not good advice; it's good news. The word 'gospel' means an announcement of good news. In the Greek *gospel* is 'euangelion' which is a combination of two words: *eu* meaning 'good,' and *angelion* meaning 'message or news.'

Just imagine for a moment that you were living in ancient Greece and a foreign army was invading your country and the army general in charge of protecting you was short-handed so he sent out word that he needed every able bodied man and woman to come help him fight. That would not be a *gospel*. That would be a request for help. But if the general had won the battle and defeated the invading army, and then he sent out a message to the country to announce that he had won and that peace now reigned in the land, that would be a 'gospel.' And the messenger who brought the gospel would have been called an *angelos*, or an angel.

So do you remember who showed up when Jesus was born in Bethlehem? Angels - announcing peace on earth and salvation for mankind. They didn't say, *"The great teacher is here"* they said, *"the Saviour is born."* Humanity didn't need just one more religious teacher. We hadn't listened to all the previous ones! Why would we listen to a new one? C. S. Lewis said it best:

"There has been no lack of good advice for the last 4,000 years. A bit more would not have made a difference. We never have followed the advice of the great teachers. Why would we be likely to begin now? Why would we be more likely to follow Christ than any of the others? Because He is the best moral teacher? That makes it even less likely that we shall follow Him. If we cannot take

the elementary lessons, is it likely we are going to take the most advanced ones? If Christianity only means one more bit of good advice, then Christianity is of no importance."

We needed a different kind of salvation and a new kind of Saviour and God became that for us by entering into history and doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Those who believe *that* gospel and receive *that* gospel would be forever changed, but not just because of what Jesus taught but because of what Jesus did.

The most important thing about the gospel is that it must be believed and received, as a gift. That means: You're not a Christian if you are just trying to emulate the moral teachings of Jesus. Even if you follow them really well and better than most people do – it means nothing.

The core of Christianity is not a set of teachings to be followed - it is a gift to be received.

So the gospel is not good advice, it is good news, but this genealogy shows us something else.

2. Jesus is the centre of history

Matthew takes what the world would have considered to be an insignificant family tree and organizes all of human history around it. Here's why that's important. At that point it certainly didn't seem like Jesus was the focal point of history. Israel was a small backwater; a Middle Eastern country that was under the rule of somebody else. Nobody in Rome was paying any attention to this family tree. But God had made a promise to Abraham to bring salvation to the whole world through Jesus and to bring the whole world into subjection under the rule and reign of Jesus.

At this point in world history you've got these really powerful nations and people that seem like they are directing things but what Matthew shows us in this genealogy is that God is the one guiding it all according to His plans for the Messiah! The powers of this world are just an illusion.

Let me give you one quick example of that: One of the details most people know about Christmas is that Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem because Rome was taxing everyone and you had to go to your home city to be registered in a huge census. But Luke explains to us that God's purpose in that was so that one of the prophecies about the Messiah would be fulfilled, the one that said he would be born in Bethlehem. So God moves Rome to require this census right at this point in history so that He can get Mary and Joseph back to Bethlehem in time for the birth of the Saviour.

Have you ever wondered why God went to all that trouble? Why not just appear to Joseph in a dream and say, "*Joseph, go to Bethlehem?*" It is to demonstrate to you that God moves powerful nations around like chess pieces to accomplish His purposes in Jesus. God orchestrated this census on the entire Roman world, just to move two people 120 kilometres up the road. If this had happened a month before or a month later – none of it would have made sense. But God made sure it happened right then so that Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem and the prophecy would be fulfilled.

Here's why that should be encouraging to you. Right now it doesn't look like Jesus is the centre of history. The media in our nation are not turning up at Churches this weekend to discover what we are doing. They are not looking at us at all. They are focused on what they think are the most important powers in the world - the stock markets; the White House; the Kremlin; the Chinese Communist Party - world politics. However these things are an insignificant drop in the bucket - the true centre of history is what God is doing in the kingdom of His Son, Jesus Christ. The real story is the accomplishment of God's purpose to take salvation to every nation on earth and to bring the whole world into subjection under Him. So God moves around the most powerful nations at will to

accomplish His purposes. So there's always an unseen story behind the story we see – and yes, even behind this boring genealogy.

Many of the Israelites were, at this point, discouraged. They looked around and didn't see how God was fulfilling His promises. Rome was in charge. God's people were oppressed ... yet again! Many of you may look around our world today and are discouraged; you see unbelief growing; secularism taking over, corrupting our institutions and destroying our nation. But don't be deceived. Back then it didn't look like God was accomplishing His purposes either, but He was.

In fact, He was doing his greatest work, by far! And we are blessed to have the Bible which outlines God's cosmic plan for His creation and we know how the story ends. So of all the people in this broken and sorry world, Christians are the very last ones who should be lost in despair wondering what is happening. We know how this story ends! We know that God wins in the end and so do we - because we live and move and have our being in Christ and Jesus Christ wins this cosmic battle against sin, death and Satan.

Some of you may remember the TV series some years ago which had the shortest title on record. It is just called '24.' It is supposedly set in real time and each episode covers 24 hours in the life of Jack Bauer. His character has worked in various capacities on the show's many seasons, often as a member of a Counter Terrorist Unit based in Los Angeles, and working with the FBI in Washington, D.C. Jack got into multiple situations where you were convinced he was going to die. In fact, I think a few times in the series he actually did die, or at least you thought he was dead or lost forever in captivity.

But we always knew he would make it. Why? Because all the series were available on DVD and you could pick up a DVD you hadn't seen yet and there was Jack's face on the cover. So it may look really bad when you are watching him being taken out by the baddies, but you know he's going to pull through because you have his face on the cover of the next series! Well friends, the face of Jesus is on the cover of the book of books too. And He is there in the final episode because He wins!

The same thing is true in your life. You may be discouraged because it may look like you are subject to forces you can't control. But God has an infallible purpose for your life - to reveal Jesus to you and glorify Himself in you and through you. Everything in your life has ultimately been about that. Which brings me to my next point.

3. God is working in all things, good and bad, for His purposes

You will notice in verse 17 of Matthew 1 that he organizes the progression from Abraham to David and from David to the exile and from the exile to Jesus - as 3 sets of 14. Matthew does this to show that God has superimposed His seal on history. Which is amazing when you consider some of the messy, random, chaotic stuff in there. Yet in all of this, God was working, bringing about a perfect plan and He is working in your life, too, even when he seems absent.

Perhaps you have some messy dysfunction in your life, and I'm not saying God was pleased with the pain that has come into your life; he was broken-hearted by it; some of the things that others did to you angered Him, just like it would anger me for someone to hurt one of my family.

However God has one over-riding purpose in your life, to accomplish the mission of Christ in and through you, and He's working in all things, even in the darkest parts of your personal genealogy to bring that to pass. He takes the chaotic mess of your life and works through it to achieve His purposes.

In Romans 8:28 we read that, *"all things work together for good for those who love Him ..."* These words are quoted in isolation millions of times a year across the world and that particular translation misses the whole point.

We should always read verses 28-31 together:

Romans 8:28-31 *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to these things?"*

How reassuring is it to see that God is in control, in spite of the circumstances around us? Regardless of how tough our life can be at times, God is the One Who works everything for the blessing of His children and for the growth of His Kingdom.

4. The gospel is for the outsider

For a Jewish person, their genealogy was like their résumé. Your heritage was how you showed the world your worth. And so back then (like today!), résumés were fudged to include the best parts and to omit the nasty details. I'll give you an example: Herod, who was the king when Jesus was born, published his genealogy, but when he did he expunged his record of all his embarrassing ancestors so it looked like he came from a line of sheer awesomeness and so of course he deserved to be king.

So a genealogy is like a résumé, and kings like Herod would only list people in their genealogy who established their worth. However we see a number of people mentioned in Jesus' family tree which would not normally be celebrated. I won't list them all now or comment on them – for there are many – but I do want to mention the five women who appear in this important genealogy. That's right – five women are mentioned in the family tree of Jesus, in spite of the fact that women were held in pretty low regard in that society at the time, but Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary all rate a mention.

At first glance, their inclusion might appear unremarkable yet the fact that they are included is quite incredible. Women played a background role in society yet these five women distinguished themselves with their grit, determination, and courage. They had independent and assertive streaks but also great compassion and love. These five women lived influential lives that made and changed history and their stories still live and speak volumes to us today about faith, hope, obedience, courage, and love.

So Jesus' family tree is filled with moral outsiders; ethnic outsiders (Gentiles); gender outsiders (women) and this is all supposed to be sending us a clear message: Jesus came for everyone. He was not ashamed to identify with the outcasts as their brother and make them part of his family. That's why Abraham and King David are mentioned in the same list as the prostitute Rahab because all men and women stand on level ground before the cross of Christ and if Jesus names you as part of His family, your relative worth in the eyes of the world becomes irrelevant.

These names are included in the line that leads to Christ so that you and I can know that our name can be included in the line that leads from Christ. We are saved by grace, not because of our own worth. That means no matter who you are or what you've done, there is room in His family for you.

You may feel like an outcast. You're not. He has brought you close.

You may feel worthless but Jesus has purchased you with the universe's most valuable possession: His own blood.

You may think God's plans for you are over. This genealogy shows you that they may have only just begun.

God was at work in the ugliest of situations bringing forth his most beautiful son. In Christ He takes the ugliness of your life and redeems it for the beauty of His glory.

In this genealogy are all the essential things you have to know about Christianity. Jesus comes to you as a gift, doing something for you that you could not do for yourself, winning a battle against your sin and paying your sin debt for you. Have you received embraced His gift to you?

Jesus is the central point of history and your life. Have you come to know Him? That's what God has been saying to you in all of your pain. He's trying to get you to see that life is fragile, and that there is no joy on earth that can sustain you or fill you. You were created for something far more, something far greater. There is a love and a joy from outside this world that is trying to press into your life if you will receive it - and His name is JESUS.

Jesus is the centre of history. When it's all said and done, and all the minor actors have taken a seat, the only One on centre stage receiving all the applause will be Jesus. That tiny, helpless babe in the manger is none other than the Messiah, the Saviour of the world and the One in Whom you can place your complete trust and hope this Christmas.

Jesus comes to you as a gift Have you received Him? I certainly hope you have.

John 1:12 *"... to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."*