



A QUESTION OF BREEDING

The Birth of a King

Text: Matthew 1-2, Luke 1-2

Strange Beginnings

Somebody wise once said that before you can really understand *who* someone is, you need to know *from whom* he has come. In some sense, identity is intimately related to history. Who someone really is today, and what that person may actually do tomorrow, is in large part a question of breeding. We know that, don't we? It explains, for example, why parents want to know what kind of family their child's current dating interest has come from. Although as one parent observed: "One of the great mysteries of breeding is how that idiot your daughter married can be the father of the brightest grandchildren in the world!" In most cases, at least, breeding matters. It explains why horse buyers want to know the lineage of the animal they are considering for purchase? It's why psychiatrists and counselors ask a client what their parents were like.

And, I might be bold to suggest, that is why -- when he *could* have begun the story of Jesus in a thousand other ways -- the gospel-writer Matthew chooses to give his *genealogy* first. "Do you want a clue as to what this man from Nazareth is really all about?" he says. "Then listen closely, my friends, and let me tell you about his *breeding*... let me tell you about **"the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham."**

Who Jesus Really Is

The FIRST thing Jesus' bloodline tells us is who Jesus really is -- someone whose full nature and role we can only understand by knowing something about two of the relatives who came before him and pre-figured the role that Jesus was to play. On the one hand, Jesus is in every sense a **"son of David,"** that is, he was born to rule. Under the kingship of David, Israel had enjoyed a brief shining moment of unsurpassed glory, purity, and unity. For one moment in time, the Jewish nation had seemed to embody the kingdom of God on earth, and then it was gone. All that was left after the moral bankruptcy of the nation took its final toll was a promise, spoken through the prophets, that one day God would give Israel a second chance. Out of the same bloodline as David would spring a new King who would establish a kingdom and throne that no force on earth could unseat.¹

"Don't you see," Matthew is saying, "this carpenter before you is HIM -- the son of David -- the promised King? Wake up Israel -- this is your second chance! Listen to the authority with which he speaks and recognize a wisdom by which to live your life. Watch how even demons flee before him and tempests become calm, and believe that he has the power to fell the giant forces which weigh against you. Feel the tenderness with which he embraces his lambs and trust that there is a place in the Shepherd's arms for you. For in Jesus you are meeting no ordinary man -- but a wisdom, power,



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and love so sovereign it is not crazy to call him Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."²

"But that's *not all* that Christ's breeding tells us about his nature," Matthew would say. "He is worthy of your love and your loyalty not merely because *he is the supreme sovereign in the line of David*, but also because *he is the supreme servant in the line of Abraham*." No other figure besides David stood so tall in the Jewish mind as did that elderly saint who surrendered all that he had and was to the service of God. From his willingness to pack up all his belongings and move hundreds of miles from his ancestral home to a destination he did not know, to his readiness to sacrifice his own precious son to the purposes of the Lord, Abraham's name became synonymous with humble obedience. And for that sacrificial service, God had made Abraham a promise. He promised that through the bloodline of Abraham would come forth another servant --- Someone through whom the light of salvation would be given to all nations.³

"When you meet Jesus," suggests Matthew, "does it ring any bells?" Have you noticed that that like his ancestor Abraham before him, this Jesus maintains an obedience to following God's calling that is nothing short of radiant? Does it intrigue you as much as it does me that the teachings of this "**son of Abraham**" seem to cut like a beam of light through the moral fog of our time? Is it pure coincidence that his very character seems to cast a loving warmth into every room and heart he enters? Isn't it just possible that the light of the world has really come to illumine the pathway home?!

Who We Really Are

Dear friends, the genealogy of Jesus tells us first and foremost who *Jesus* really is -- the promised son of David who comes to be our sovereign Lord; the precious son of Abraham who comes to be our servant Savior. And yet there is a SECOND vital thing that his bloodline tells us that has to do with who *we* really are. You see, if you look closely, you will notice that there is something very *strange* about the family bloodline. To understand what I'm getting at you need to understand that genealogical records were fairly common in the ancient world. They were treasured not only as a means to helping people develop a sense of familial identity, but also as a proof of religious and social credibility. Most genealogies followed a couple of simple rules. First, there were *no females* allowed on the list, since the common assumption in the Jewish world was that both property and identity passed down through the patriarchal line. Secondly, *no foreigners* (i.e. non-Jews) who had married into the family would be mentioned, lest anyone see that the family bloodline had been ethnically diluted. And finally, since the limits of paper or memory required that genealogies be somewhat abbreviated, *no failures* – moral or otherwise – made the final cut. Only the most illustrious figures would be included on the list.



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The practice reminds me of the story of a very prominent family of this century who commissioned a professional biographer to record the family tale. In giving him instructions, the family cautioned the writer to deal carefully with the one "black sheep" in the family, a certain Uncle George who, in a drunken stupor, had somehow committed murder and was subsequently sent to the electric chair. The biographer assured them he could handle the situation with a minimum of embarrassment. He would simply write: *"Uncle George occupied a chair of applied electronics at an important government institution. He was attached to his position by the strongest of ties, and his death came as a real shock."*

What is so striking about the genealogy of Jesus is that it is so full of Uncle Georges -- without any attempt at disguise. At almost every turn it violates the normal conventions by which such documents were written. Amidst a society where conservative Jewish leaders doubted whether women even had souls, five *females* make the short list as ancestors of the son of God. On top of that, the names of four *"foreigners"* are there unabashedly disrupting the ethnic purity of the list. And as if all of that wasn't radical enough, the genealogy contains eight people who would be regarded by Matthew's readers as *failures* in one way or another. There were two people who were the product of the illicit union of a father and his daughter-in-law; one prostitute who betrayed her city into enemy hands; two adulterers; a murderer; and a pair of wicked kings.

The thing I want to know is "Why?!" If you or I were setting out to promote a figure as the Messiah of the world, wouldn't that be the *last* sort of genealogy we would compile or allow to be published? Wouldn't such a bloodline raise too many embarrassing questions of breeding? Then again, what an incredible thing the genealogy we do have says about the kind of Messiah Jesus is. You see, dear friends, Matthew is reminding us that the story of Jesus is not about fairy tales; it's about real life, real people, and the real love which redeems it all.

A Family Resemblance

I suppose the Son of God might have chosen to be born into the Perfect Family, but the incredible truth is that he chose instead to be born into the Simpsons -- to come to save the Uncle Georges and to love the unlikely of this world. Throughout history, God has shown an almost comical propensity to work his redemptive purposes out through the very people whose moral and spiritual failure would seem to disqualify them from inclusion in the family of man, much less the family of God. But then, contrary to popular belief, God doesn't really work *through* saints and *around* scoundrels. More often than not he simply uses scoundrels who for a single moment or many times yield



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to the pull of a love that calls them to do saintly things. Then God works that simple thing down through the ages to bring his perfect purpose to light. He uses ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary purposes.

In closing, I can't help but wonder how many of the unlikely heroes, scoundrels, or ordinary people who sit or stand in this room today might one day appear on some *updated* list of the genealogy of Jesus Christ. I know, we can't claim to be part of the blood-line that stretches *back* from Jesus through David to Abraham. But then, the good news is that the blood-line flows the *other* way too. You and I are related by blood to Jesus in perhaps an even more personal way than those who appear on today's list; we are bonded to him by the blood he shed in love for us on the Cross. Matthew records the truth at the end of chapter 1: **"And he shall be called Jesus, for he will save *his people* from their sins."**⁴

I wonder if a knowledge of that most important blood-line will help change anything about us in these coming days. I wonder if any of the people we will meet this week will detect a family resemblance in you and me. Will they see something of the king of kings and servant of all in your life and mine? Will they hear his wise words speaking through our perspective on life? Will they feel his strengthening touch upon them in times of trouble? Will they notice your patience, be moved by your compassion, admire your integrity and say to themselves: "Why there's something about that person that, well, sort of reminds me of this Jesus I hear about." I guess when you come right down to it -- it's still *a question of breeding*.

Let us pray...

Great God of salvation history, we give you thanks for your power to work your redemptive purpose through the uncommon saints and ordinary scoundrels which make up your family on earth. Help us to more deeply receive and resemble that Lord by whose blood alone we are made part of your sacred line. Now send us out today filled with a confidence in your sovereignty, and a heart for your service. For we pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, son of Abraham, son of David, savior of this world. Amen.

¹2 Samuel 7:12-16; Isaiah 11:1-5

²Isaiah 9:6-7

³Genesis 22:18

⁴Matthew 1:21