

Generations of Faithfulness

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[0 : 00] All right, well we are continuing this morning through the Gospel of Luke. Last Sunday we heard about Jesus' baptism and the powerful sign that God gave that Jesus was indeed his son.

The people saw the Spirit of God come down upon Jesus from what appeared to be a rift in the sky and they heard God speak audibly from heaven stating that Jesus was his son.

And we talked about last Sunday how the Spirit coming down upon Jesus like this should give us great expectations for what Jesus will do and say.

And Luke's about to get to all that, but before he does, Luke wants us to be clear about who Jesus is with regard to his humanity.

And so right in the middle of this account, Luke writes out the genealogy of Jesus. We're in Luke chapter 3, verse 23.

[1 : 02] Now Jesus himself was about 30 years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, the son of Methat, the son of Levi, the son of Melchi, the son of Jani, the son of Joseph.

And the list goes on like this for quite a while. The son of, the son of, the son of the son of the son of 76 names in total from Jesus all the way back to Adam, the first man ever created.

Let's talk about genealogies for a minute. Most of us might find genealogies boring and dry. If we think about our everyday conversations, when's the last time somebody asked you about your distant ancestry?

Probably not very often. In our modern North American culture, genealogies and family trees are just not valued as much as they used to be by previous generations.

And then we could add to all of that some of the statements made in the Bible about genealogies. Paul, in his letter to Timothy, said this in 1 Timothy 1, verse 3.

[2 : 20] He commanded Timothy to stay in Ephesus so that he might command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies.

He said such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work. He wrote this to Titus in Titus 3, verse 9.

He said, Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law because these are unprofitable and useless.

So there's a sense in which spending a lot of time tracing out our ancestry is simply a waste of time. It's unprofitable. It's useless.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, even refers to his own ancestry in chapter 3. He says that he's of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews.

[3 : 25] But then he dismisses all of that as putting confidence in the flesh. He says, I consider that rubbish and loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus and being found in him.

So there's a sense in which our culture actually does well not to obsess or worry about genealogies and ancestry. But it hasn't always been this way.

In the distant past, genealogies were a big deal. Back in the days of kingdoms and empires and family dynasties and nobility of all different varieties, ancestry was a huge deal.

Many civilizations in the past upheld the royalty of a particular family. And so ancestry mattered greatly. And of course, they would pay extra careful attention to keep those genealogical records well.

And in much of human history, that approach to ancestry really has been about putting confidence in the flesh. But at some point, we have to come to grips with the reality that there are quite a few genealogies in the Bible.

[4 : 41] By one count, there are about 25 to 30 genealogies in the Bible. And now some of those would be really short and just a few names. But some are longer, multiple chapters.

And if God has seen fit to preserve these words for us in his scriptures, then there must be great value and importance and purpose to these genealogies in particular.

For example, one of the great purposes of genealogies in the Bible is simply to answer the question of who we are, where we came from. And so it's really great to have Genesis chapter 5, which traces things from Noah and the great flood all the way back to Adam, the first man whom God created.

Genealogies in the Bible reveal the truth of where we came from. Another great benefit to genealogies is that they help us see the movement and grouping of families and peoples as they spread out over the earth.

The table of nations in Genesis chapter 10 is very helpful. We learn there that some of the grandsons of Noah were named Egypt and Canaan and Cush.

[5 : 57] And then the descendants of these men became nations, which are part of our world story as time went on. And so genealogies give us helpful historical context about who's who in the ancient world.

But there are three things that really stand out to me when it comes to genealogies in the Bible. The first is that genealogies reveal the faithfulness of God.

If we look back on the history in the Bible, we see that time and time again, God makes promises. And he makes very specific promises to many different people.

Great promises about how things will go for their descendants, for their offspring, which if we think about is quite something.

God frequently makes promises which cannot even be seen to be kept until generations have passed. Promises so big that we die before they come true.

[7 : 04] But then future generations are able to look back and see the amazing faithfulness of God. God's consistent ability to keep his word.

Without the genealogical records of the Bible, how would we be able to see if God's promises came true? How would we see that God did indeed make Abraham's offspring into a great nation?

How would we be able to see that God did in fact keep every man over 20 except Joshua and Caleb from entering the promised land, as he said? How would we be able to see if God's word about cutting off the line of Eli from the priesthood ever came true?

So this is one truly breathtaking thing about God that genealogies of the Bible reveal. They reveal his consistent faithfulness to keep his multi-generational promises.

The second thing, genealogies reveal the sovereign power of God and the wisdom of God. And it's kind of related to the faithfulness of God because at some point we just have to ask the question, how is it that God can be right about what's going to happen in the future 100% of the time?

[8 : 24] And we start to see that it's not just predictions that God is making, but God's actually claiming to be actively at work to bring to pass the things that he promises and foretells.

And there are many stories in the Bible where human beings in their pride or their arrogance or sometimes even in their ignorance do something that would seemingly thwart the plan of God and keep his promise from coming true.

And yet, amazingly, God demonstrates his ability and his power to rule over all that happens on earth in such a way that everything that he said comes to pass.

So genealogies give us the needed contours of that story so that we can see the power of God at work from generation to generation.

Not only his power, but also his wisdom. I mean, how could God know who would do what in generations down the line before any of them had even been born unless he were truly all-knowing?

[9 : 43] Third, and probably the most significant, genealogies reveal God's plan of salvation. And it ends up being like this simply because God makes his promises to save in a way that's tied to future offspring, as I said earlier.

Think of the promise God made in the garden to the serpent after Adam and Eve sinned. He, the offspring of the woman, will crush your head and you will strike his heel.

Think of the promise God made to Abraham. All people on earth will be blessed through you. Think of the blessing of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, which he gave to Judah before he died.

He said, the scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

Think of the covenant promise made to the great King David, a descendant of Judah, about how his son would reign on his throne forever. This is from 1 Chronicles 17.

[10 : 59] When your days, this is God speaking to David, are over and you go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom.

He is the one who will build a house for me and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his father and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him as I took it away from your predecessor.

I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever. His throne will be established forever. Notice all these promises of salvation and deliverance and blessing are made about the future descendants of each person.

And not only that, but they seem to be narrowing things down in God's great plan of salvation. First, we're looking to a descendant of Eve, just a human being.

Then, a descendant of Abraham, a man who lived many generations after. Then a descendant of Isaac and Jacob, Judah, and then David. Suddenly, had we lived in any of these times, genealogies and ancestry are now extremely important because God is promising such great things through the unfolding of generations.

[12 : 26] But not just any genealogy is extremely important. One genealogy in particular is of immeasurable value because through this line, the Savior, the Deliverer, the King, promised, is revealed.

I mentioned earlier that there's about 25 to 30 genealogies in the Bible, but in the New Testament, there are only two. And both of them are for one person, Jesus.

If there's any genealogy ever that we should care about, it's this one. If there's any that displays the time-enduring, multi-generational faithfulness of God, it's this one.

Because in this genealogy, the Savior, the Messiah, the Son of God Himself is revealed. And so let's dig into it a little bit together this morning. The first thing we notice here is how Luke refers to Joseph, the father of Jesus.

Jesus was the Son, so it was thought of Joseph. Already, we need to pause and reflect. Why does Luke say it that way?

[13 : 47] Well, Luke's already shown us in the story that he's been telling that Jesus was conceived and born of the Holy Spirit and Mary.

without a human father. God's Spirit will overshadow you and cause you to conceive such that the child to be born will be called the Son of God, said Gabriel.

So Luke's reminding us right here at the beginning that Jesus was thought or considered to be the son of Joseph by all the people around him as he grew up.

But Joseph was only his father in a legal, head of the household, perhaps even adoptive sort of way rather than in the ordinary biological way.

From there he goes on. And Joseph was the son of Heli. Already we run into a major and challenging discussion.

[14 : 49] Don't worry, we're not going to go through every name at this level in detail. Otherwise, this will be the best sermon on genealogy that you never heard.

Joseph was the son of Heli. But the other genealogy of Jesus given in Matthew's Gospel says Joseph's dad was a man named Jacob.

Let's see if I can put them on the screen both together side by side. So what's going on here? And as we continue down the list of names comparing Matthew and Luke's genealogies of Jesus, we notice that there are two different sets of names until we get down to verse 27.

Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel in Luke's Gospel. Both Matthew and Luke have him in their genealogies of Jesus. And then we also notice that from Shealtiel all the way down to King David, there are two different sets of names given by Matthew and Luke.

So what's going on here? How can there be two significantly different genealogies for Jesus? And this turns out has been a sort of puzzle which has had scholars and commentators and Christians speculating and discussing back and forth for almost 2,000 years.

[16:12] Even the early church fathers acknowledged these differences in their writings all the way back in the second century. In the year 220 AD, there was a guy named Julius Africanus.

He's the first man we know of to propose some sort of explanation to the reason for the differences. And there are primarily two explanations for the differences between Luke's genealogy of Jesus and Matthew's.

One common idea is that Luke is actually giving us the genealogy of Mary rather than Joseph. With this understanding, there's a lot of emphasis here on that phrase, so it was thought of Joseph. In other words, Joseph was not biologically Jesus' father. But, let's continue to give his relatives, Heli was biologically his grandfather.

And so, the idea here is that this whole lineage traces out through Mary all the way back to King David and then Matthew's would be through Joseph.

[17:24] Personally, I find this view unconvincing. Grammatically, the natural way to understand this is that Joseph was the son of Heli, regardless of what so it was thought is taken to mean.

And it does make sense to us to trace it back through Mary because that's the biological connection. But, if we look at how genealogies were done back then, it was always, always, always traced through the father.

Sometimes, there'd be the mention of the mother alongside the name of a man, but predominantly through the father. Though, if this is the case, if this is Mary's genealogy, then it certainly would show how Jesus was biologically descended from David.

The second view is that both of these genealogies, Matthew and Luke's, trace Jesus' ancestry through Joseph. So, then the big questions with this view are, how is it that Joseph had two dads? Similarly, if we look down to verse 27 in Luke, how is it that Shealtiel had two dads? If we look at what's happening here, from King David, the lines basically diverge, then they converge again at Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, then they diverge again and converge again at Joseph and then Jesus.

[18:53] And all of that happens over a span of about a thousand years. Julius Africanus, the man that I mentioned earlier, reminds us that there was the Jewish custom from the law of Moses whereby if a man died and left his wife behind childless, then his brother was permitted to marry his widow and could raise up offspring for his deceased brother.

This custom was called levirate marriage and it was still well-known enough in Jesus' day that the religious leaders asked him a trick question about it. So that's one possible explanation for how a man could have two fathers.

He could be considered the son of his deceased father by his family name, but be biologically the son of his dad's brother. A second possibility whereby a man could have two dads is in the case of adoption.

This is one more familiar to us. Perhaps Joseph's birth dad was Jacob, as stated in Matthew, but then for some unknown reason, Jacob died, leaving Joseph an orphan, and then Joseph was later adopted by Heli.

Both of these possibilities imply that one of these fathers was Jacob's biological dad and the other his legal or adoptive or head of the household father.

[20:24] And the effect then would be having two different genealogies like this, it would confirm that both of Joseph's fathers were descended from David. In a sense removing any doubt as to the ancestry of Jesus, in case anyone might call it into question.

We simply don't know which of these possibilities it was that explain these two convergences in Jesus' line from David.

Both of these things, adoption and levirate marriage, are relatively uncommon, but over the span of a thousand years, is it conceivable that there be two adoptions?

Or one adoption and one levirate marriage, causing Jesus in a sense to be doubly related to David? I think that seems a reasonable explanation. Not only that, we have to remember that the people descended from David, especially closer to him, would have considered themselves to be of royal birth, related to the great king David, and so of course they would have kept track of their genealogical records meticulously, knowing the promises God had made.

It's even more likely that an adoption or a levirate marriage or two took place over the centuries in order to ensure that the family name carried on down the line to the next generation.

[21 : 54] So that's a lot to say that we don't know all the details of why these two genealogies are different, but there are at least a few good possibilities to explain how they ended up different from each other, and it shouldn't be a reason to doubt the accuracy of the Bible.

With that out of the way, let's look at some of these names and think about what Luke wants us to see by including all of this in his account. Let's start with one of the more significant names. Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, in verse 27. Very significant figure. He was the grandson of Jehoiachin, king of Judah, and Jehoiachin was the second last king of Judah leading up to the exile. In fact, Jehoiachin himself was actually captured by the Babylonian army in Jerusalem, and then he was taken prisoner to Babylon along with many of the other people of Judah. But by the power and working of God, God brought many of his people back into Israel out of exile 70 years later, and Zerubbabel, the grandson of King Jehoiachin, was one of the men who came back.

[23 : 10] He's mentioned several times in the book of Ezra. He helped with the rebuilding of the temple, the city of Jerusalem, and the wall. He's mentioned in the books of Nehemiah and Haggai and Zechariah.

He's referred to not as a king, but as the governor of Judah, probably because in his days, the land was under the rule of the Persian Empire. And yet, Zerubbabel was the royal heir to the throne. And probably, he was regarded as the leader and installed as governor because of his descent from the kingly line of David. Zerubbabel is probably the first name that most of the Jews would have recognized in Jesus' genealogy.

The next most familiar name in the list was likely King David, the son of Jesse, in verse 31. And this is part of the point of this whole genealogy.

It's to show that Jesus is the promised son of David, the Messiah. And we've talked a lot about that, so we won't say too much more about him.

[24 : 18] Before David, you might recognize Boaz's name if you've read the Old Testament book of Ruth. He was the guy that married Ruth, the Moabite widow of his relative.

And if we keep going back, we see that all these men were descendants of Judah, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and the other patriarchs as well, Isaac and Abraham.

Really significant figures in the book of Genesis. At Abraham is where Matthew starts his genealogy of the genealogy of Jesus. But Luke just decides to keep on going right past Abraham through Shem and Noah, all the way back to Adam, the first man God created.

And it's worth mentioning that everything from Adam down to King David was common knowledge. It's all found in the Old Testament scriptures. A huge chunk of that is found in Genesis, and then there's the rest of it's found in Ruth and in 1 Chronicles chapter 1.

But why does Luke decide to go back so far? Why go all the way back to Adam? I mean, is he just like to have a complete record?

[25 : 36] Is he obsessed with details? Or are there other reasons? These are the three reasons that I thought of. First, going back through all of these men should bring to mind, if we know the scriptures, all of the different promises and covenants made to each one of them.

And I think Luke wants us to remember exactly what was prophesied to men like Judah by his father Jacob, or the covenant that God made with Abraham.

I think he even wants us to think back to what happened. In the garden, with Adam. And what this does is it helps us see that this man, Jesus, at the end of this long line, is the one through whom all these promises made will be kept.

The second reason that perhaps that he goes back to Adam, it reminds us of what happened with Adam. and how he rebelled against God.

How he plunged all of humanity into sin and guilt. It reminds us of how we all became liable to judgment before God. But not only this, it reminds us that God has been unfolding his plan to save us since the very first day that we defied him.

[27 : 00] Through all these generations, God has been working to bring our salvation. And this man at the end of this line is the one. He is the Savior who can fix what Adam broke.

And a third reason. Going from Jesus all the way back to Adam, the first man reminds us that Jesus is truly one of us. We already heard at the beginning the statement that reminds us of Jesus' divinity.

That he was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph. But the rest of this genealogy highlights his humanity. He is descended from all of these men, even the first man, because he is truly human, truly one of us.

Luke wants us to feel this. Son of God, yes, but also son of Adam, son of man. Another thing that I noticed as I was studying through this is that between Jesus and David, there are a lot of unfamiliar names.

Maybe you feel that when you read through this and you just kind of feel that urge to skim, because how do I pronounce that anyway? Zerubbabel and Shealtiel would be the exception here, but other than them, many unfamiliar names.

[28 : 27] Mena, Malaya, Jonam, El-Madam, Resa, Jossik, Nagai, Janai, Helai. I looked these up in a concordance, and the only time they appear in the Bible is right here in this genealogy of Jesus.

Some of these were common Jewish names written about or mentioned in other Jewish literature, but these men in particular from Jesus' ancestry are all men that we know nothing about today. Their names didn't make it into the historical writings of Josephus or into other Jewish writings, which means that these were likely just ordinary men.

People unknown to the world, not famous, not well-known, men who went about their business, worked, raised families, and the first time we hear about them in history is here in this genealogy of Jesus.

I got thinking about that. God used ordinary men to bring about his great purposes. All through these generations, the world's attention was somewhere.

[29 : 42] It was on other things going on. It was on other notable figures and celebrities. And yet here, in this line of people that nobody's ever heard about, God was working to bring his great salvation through these seeming nobodies, these ordinary dads in their days.

God loves to bring great things through the seemingly common and ordinary. It's one of his signature moves. The words of Paul come to mind here.

God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are so that no one may boast before him.

We sometimes lament over the fact that the names in some of these genealogies are unfamiliar to us. You know, like, who are these guys? But what if that's the point?

Here's a genealogy that traces out the ancestry of the most important person in history. And yet we don't even know who half of these men are. Nobody did until Jesus came and somebody got these records from Mary.

[31 : 01] God has done this in a way to keep us from putting confidence in the flesh, as we talked about earlier. together. Well, we've talked about genealogy a lot and I hope that some of this has been helpful to you this morning.

At the end of all this, we still may not care too much for genealogies, just like our world around us. But there's one. There's one that we should care about.

And it's this one. Here we see in brief record form how God's loving plan to save us unfolded. We see how through 75 plus generations, God was faithful and he kept his word.

We see God's wisdom in choosing ordinary men so that no one can boast or put confidence in the flesh. And we see that nothing, nothing can stop God from doing as he has promised.

So glory be to him. Let's pray. Father in heaven, thank you for these words.

[32 : 26] Maybe not the first words that we would choose for our favorite verses in your word, but we know that in them is a wonderful truth and it all points to you and your grace, your faithfulness, your love, your power, your salvation.

We thank you that you did send Jesus into our world to save us and to be our king when he returns now and when he returns. And I pray that our hearts would be filled with joy because of that.

Pray this in your name. Amen.