

Sunday 23rd March 2025 - Know My Name: Family Names - Beauty In Brokenness

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[0 : 00] Well, we're continuing our series, Know My Name, and this morning we're going to take a look at the importance of family names and Jesus' family history.

And what we might learn from that and what it might mean for us. So, what's in a name? Says a lovesick Juliet in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet.

Yeah, it's probably one of the best known scenes in that play. There she is, on the balcony. But soft, what light through yonder window breaks. It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Oh, Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?

Yo, Juliet's in the house. Woo-hoo! Of course, she's thinking out aloud, expressing her frustration.

[1 : 08] She's not asking, where are you, Romeo? Because wherefore art there is an old English word meaning why. So, it's why are you, Romeo? Romeo, or more accurately maybe, why must you be a Montague?

Little does she know that Romeo, of course, is listening in below. Juliet goes on to say, what's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

What's so special about a name, she thinks? Does it really matter? After all, isn't it just a label?

Doesn't it just, it doesn't define who we are, our true worth, or our character?

And maybe, I don't know, maybe she's got a point. But, Juliet's family are the Capulets. And Romeos, oh dear.

Romeos are the Montagues. Sworn enemies in a deadly feud. And it's not going to end well. And spoiler alert, it doesn't.

[2 : 18] So, if you want to see how this does end, and you've not seen this play before, this version with Leonardo DiCaprio is currently available on BBC iPlayer.

There are other channels. But, you know, if you want to see that. So, I was thinking, what modern pop culture equivalent picks up on some of the themes of family history, of loyalty and honour, kind of which a lot of this is about, and the feuding and the infighting that goes on in families.

And I thought of this. I am coming for you, Ian.

You are so selfish. You don't have to do this. I still have feelings for you.

Back away from them! We gotta get out of here. Now! Oh. I'm no big fan.

[3 : 36] I don't watch it. But it's been going strong now for 40 years. Full of family fights, fallouts, love triangles, revenge, violence, and occasionally, just occasionally, forgiveness and reconciliation.

But not often. I suppose what makes it, you know, what makes it so successful and what makes it so addictive for people to watch this are these dysfunctional families, you know, falling out with one another.

It's not great, is it, really? But it is all about the names. You know, the Bills, the Mitchells, the Fowlers, the Hubbard Foxes, the Moons, the Brannings.

And that's just sort of some of the more well-known ones. If you go back away, you've got Dirty Den. How many of you remember Dirty Den?

Yeah. You know, and the Watts family, Angie. There's so much family history in that show.

[4 : 45] There's more skeletons than there are cupboards, aren't there? And if we've learned anything over these last nine weeks, hopefully we've learned that names can be very important.

Now, when Dave was sharing a couple of weeks ago about how God changes the names of people like Jacob becoming Israel, it meant something.

You know, so God takes Jacob, a manipulative trickster and a liar, and he works with what he's got and reforms him into a new creation with a new name, Israel.

God perseveres. God perseveres. And so, staying focused then on the significance of names, I wonder how many of us and how many times you've read the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.

You know, maybe scratched your head or even skipped over it. It can be a bit of a one-way ticket to snoozeville, can't it? If you know Matthew 1. I've got to say, at face value, it's not a riveting read.

[6 : 03] It's not like the start of the Gospel of Mark that moves along at a fair old pace. Matthew starts with a list of names. It's a long list of names.

Quite a few of which, I guess, we're just not that familiar with. And the temptation then is to maybe skip over it as we sort of half-read it. But in the Jewish world of Matthew's day, the genealogy was the equivalent of a fanfare of trumpets, connecting Jesus to the royal line of David and to God's promises to Abraham.

So this isn't just a sort of a boring list of who begat who. It's Matthew's way of saying, listen up. This Jesus, this is the one.

The one that we've been waiting for. All of the prophecies fulfilled. So, here's the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 1, verses 1 to 17.

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac.

[7 : 25] Isaac, the father of Jacob. Jacob, the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah, the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.

Perez, the father of Hezron. Hezron, the father of Ram. Ram, the father of Aminadab. Aminadab, the father of Nashon.

Nashon, the father of Salmon. Salmon, the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz, the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.

Obed, the father of Jesse. And Jesse, the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife.

Solomon, the father of Rehoboam. Rehoboam, the father of Abijah. Abijah, the father of Asa. Asa, the father of Jehoshaphat.

[8 : 24] Jehoshaphat, the father of Jehoram. Jehoram, the father of Uzziah. Uzziah, the father of Jotham. Jotham, the father of Ahaz.

Ahaz, the father of Hezekiah. Hezekiah, the father of Manasseh. Manasseh, the father of Amon. Amon, the father of Josiah.

And Josiah, the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon, Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel.

Shealtiel, the father of Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel, the father of Abihu. Abihu, the father of Eliakim. Eliakim, the father of Azor.

Azor, the father of Zadok. Zadok, the father of Akim. Akim, the father of Elihud. Elihud, the father of Eleazar.

[9 : 28] Eleazar, the father of Mathan. Mathan, the father of Jacob. And Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. And Mary was the mother of Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

Thus, there were 14 generations in all, from Abraham to David. 14 from David to the exile to Babylon. And 14 from the exile to the Messiah.

It's a long list of names, isn't it? I mean, it's not one that we often play in church in terms of the reading.

But, of course, you know, it is important. It's interesting that Matthew bookends the genealogy emphasizing the royal line of David.

So, in verse 1, you get Jesus the Messiah, the son of David. And then in verse 17, it says this. So, all the generations from Abraham to David add up to 14.

[10 : 36] From David to the Babylonian exile, 14 generations. And from the exile to the Messiah, 14 generations. With David, of course, right at the heart of this.

That's no accident. Okay, that is no accident. Matthew is making some not-so-subtle points here. Let's face it, for his mostly Jewish audience.

So, first of all, on a political level, all the kings and queens for the last couple of hundred years before Jesus, you know, they weren't from David's line.

Herod the Great had no connection to David at all. He wasn't even fully Jewish. Just an opportunistic military commander that got on the right side of the Romans. But there were people who could trace their lineage back to David. But, you know, shout about that too loudly and you might get the wrong sort of attention from Herod.

[11 : 47] But Matthew, Matthew wants his listeners to be in no doubt about Jesus' royal bloodline back to King David.

And this is then understood in the passage by something that I think, you know, we, kind of as modern readers, might quite easily miss. But I think Matthew's Jewish audience would have picked up on, and it's this.

It's this 14, 14, 14 pattern of names that we get. Now, in the ancient Hebrew language, there is a numerical system called the gematria, in which Hebrew letters are assigned numerical values. So this is how David's name would be spelled in the Hebrew alphabet, which is pronounced as Dalet, Va, Dalet.

Okay? And then the corresponding numerical letters, the value for those letters, are these. Four, six, and four.

[13 : 08] Oh, look. It adds up to 14. Now, Matthew, Matthew's a tax collector. Okay? Remember? He's good with numbers.

He likes playing with numbers. Okay? He likes playing around with them. And actually, he's giving us here six groups of seven names. Yeah?

And seven, as I'm sure you know, being one of the most powerful, symbolic numbers in the Bible. Go and check out the creation story. So to be born at the beginning of the seventh seven, in this sequence, which Jesus, of course, is, is the pinnacle.

It's the climax to the whole list of names. And, of course, it echoes Leviticus 25, where the seventh seven was a jubilee year.

A time for rest for all. Freedom from slavery and forgiveness of debts. Everything which Jesus, of course, embodies.

[14 : 23] It's all deliberate. But, a little bit of textual honesty here. Okay? Matthew actually leaves out several generations of David's line.

Okay? To make the numbers work. Oh! Naughty Matthew. But, in its time, it was a fairly common literary practice in ancient Hebrew, because genealogies were primarily ways of making theological claims.

And the Hebrew word for begat, okay, didn't necessarily mean father. It could just as easily be great-grandfather.

And so, you could collapse the line to make it shorter. Now, Matthew didn't just make numerical changes.

It seems he also tweaked a few of the letters in some of the names for the same purpose. For example, he changed the name of Asa, who was a king, to Asaph, a well-known psalmist in the Book of Psalms.

[15 : 41] Interesting. And Amon, another king of Judah that's in the list, to Amos, the prophet. Interesting. So, what's going on?

I think Matthew is kind of winking at us here. It's knowing that the readers, who knew this history well, would spot these out-of-place names.

And the point he is making is that Jesus doesn't just fulfill Israel's royal hopes, but also the hopes of the psalmists, through Asaph and the prophets, Amos.

So, Jesus is from a kingly succession that also culminates in the rich tradition of worship and prophecy of Israel.

Now, you can go back. Go back and look in your Bibles, if you want to check this, okay? But most translations of Matthew's Gospels don't appear to have gone with this play on words, okay?

[16 : 44] And so, they have changed the names back to the original reference. I guess, assuming it was a textual error. But I think Matthew was on to something.

If we take a closer look at some of these names then, leading up to Jesus, you'd think they'd be, wouldn't you? Some of the most honourable, you know, people in the New Testament, spiritual people, full of integrity, you know, but far from it.

Far from it. God chooses some of the most peculiar, morally irresponsible and flawed people to achieve his purposes. And I, you know, I guess we should take comfort in that because that

includes us, doesn't it, as well.

So, Abraham lied to Pharaoh that his wife Sarah was his sister. Yeah, she does it twice. To save his own neck. I'm sure Sarah wasn't too chuffed about that, being hauled off to the harem.

And Jacob deceives Isaac to get Esau's birthright. And Judah, with his brothers, lie to Jacob that his son Joseph had been killed instead, and then selling him off to slavery.

[17 : 57] And then Judah ends up sleeping with Tamar, who by all rights is his daughter-in-law, after she disguises herself as a prostitute and hangs outside the city gates at the annual sheep-shearing contest.

I mean, it could be, couldn't it? It could be out of an EastEnders script. It really could. And then Tamar tricks him into giving her his seal and his staff, which are powerful symbols of his identity and his lineage.

And then they go their separate ways. And then three months later, Judah learns that Tamar is pregnant. And like any good father-in-law, he demands that she's brought out and be burnt to death.

You know, it's the only honourable thing to do, isn't it? Only Tamar pulls the trump card and sends a message back to him and says to Judah, I'm pregnant by the man who owns these.

What a mess. What a mess. And we could go on. You know, we really could. Even David, the golden boy, okay?

[19 : 05] He was an adulterer and a murderer. And then you've got Joram, the fifth king of Judah. He killed six of his brothers. And then Manasseh.

Manasseh, he was just outright evil. I mean, he was involved in sorcery, Baal worship, and the cult of Moloch, which involved him sacrificing his own son by passing him through fire.

These are not nice people. You think you've got some skeletons in your family. I mean, this is Jesus' family tree. Some of them are just awful.

They're just awful. But here's the thing. Matthew doesn't try and shuffle any of these unsavoury characters under the carpet.

He wants his readers to see that God has been using all types of people to move the kingdom forward. It's a portrait of an inclusive and expansive God and a kingdom that goes beyond Matthew's genealogy and spreads out into the rest of his gospel.

[20 : 20] It's a real breath of fresh air, a new creation. Jesus isn't defined by his family tree.

His identity, his purpose, his mission is rooted in his father. And our past, our family history doesn't disqualify us either.

Whatever we've done, whatever has been done to us, whatever shame, whatever regrets we carry, God works through us.

Whether it's divorce or addiction or financial disasters or physical or psychological or sexual abuse or abandonment or family meltdowns.

Terrible, terrible as all these things can be. None of it excludes us from God's story. Because God doesn't wait around for perfect people.

[21 : 27] Let me say that again. God doesn't wait around for perfect people. He works to restore what he's got. Okay?

Real, flawed, messy people with messy lives. Japanese have an art form known as kintsuji.

It roughly translates as golden joinery. And it's a method of repairing broken ceramics with a lacquer mixed with gold.

and the aim is not to hide the repairs but to make them a feature to incorporate them into the design which is often more beautiful than the original object.

And the philosophy of kintsuji is to value the brokenness of things. Cracks that are an important part of the history of that thing that can be pieced back together into something different but nonetheless beautiful.

[22 : 40] I think that's how God is with us. Where maybe we see something shattered and broken he sees potential and the possibility of creating something beautiful and new.

And so it's not about hiding the cracks and the scars it's letting God work with them and in them.

And that's not to say that every situation is restored.

Some relationships some marriages don't mend. Some people never break free from addiction.

Sometimes loss stays with us and in this life physical healing doesn't come.

but even then God can still make something beautiful from what remains. The other side to this is that we need to be very careful about the opinions we form of others.

Matthew includes foreigners refugees like Ruth and former prostitutes like Rahab in Jesus' family tree.

[24 : 11] I mean culturally it must have been a bit of a shock that women are actually included in the genealogy. But again Matthew wants his listeners to see that their names are there.

These were often the social outcasts of their day. And I think that is meant to challenge us and our own prejudices. Sometimes the people that we are tempted to write off are the very people that God chooses.

And I think Matthew confronts this type of thinking head on. You know all of us all of us are image bearers.

So they're in Genesis 1 made in his image. God values each one of us whatever our circumstances or whatever our outward appearance in exactly the same way.

So if I took this here we are comes into play. I took this 20 pound note and I know they're plastic now aren't they?

[25 : 22] They used to be paper but they're plastic now. But I screwed it up into a ball let the dog play with it for half an hour and then bury it in the mud and left it in the rain for a month and then came back to it it's going to be in a right state isn't it?

Yeah absolutely so. But let me ask you this how much is it worth then? 20 pounds 20 pounds it looks a mess but it's still worth 20 pounds because it's underwritten by the crown and I haven't got my glasses on so I can't read it but I know what it says it says I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of 20 pounds it's underwritten by the crown well by the Bank of England and so it is with us and God and we understand the concept don't we and aren't we and all the people we meet so much more valuable than this let me bring this to a close we don't get to choose our families at least not the ones we're born into if we're fortunate they are places of love and acceptance safe places like Hayley said a few weeks back you know a harbour in stormy seas to gather ourselves back together but we all know that that's not everyone's experience and maybe you know of or you've got family family and family members that have fallen out and they don't speak to each other anymore or there are families where there's just a lot of anger or jealousy or resentment washing around and it's like walking on eggshells and it just needs one spark doesn't it to kick things off or families which just don't share stuff because they don't trust one another kind of laced with dark secrets it can be a lot of stuff a lot of baggage people end up carrying and it's like you try not to think about it but then if you're like me you end up thinking about it even more and maybe you desperately want to put down some of this stuff put it behind you because who wants what someone else did to us or said to us to determine what our life is going to be like now and in the future and all you can do sometimes is to choose to break the cycle to choose to forgive to choose not to inflict the same pain onto those that you love and to trust God to carry this stuff because frankly it's just so exhausting to keep hauling it around and to be honest

God doesn't want us to hold on to it okay not one moment longer Paul says this in 2nd Corinthians chapter 5 verses 17 to 18 so if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation everything old has passed away see everything has become new all this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation we don't get to choose our families but we don't have to let them define us either all the cracks all the scars yet they're an important part of who we are but if we let God work with them and in them and through them we get to see something of what

God sees something beautiful and new Amen Amen