

Genesis and Skeletons

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Date: 08 April 2018

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[0 : 00] Well, we start a series today on Matthew chapter 1, which is at the beginning of the New Testament, about three-quarters of the way through the Bible on page 807.

If you're new to the Bible, New Testament, the Old Testament is about two-thirds to three-quarters of the Bible. And that's where it folds nicely open. Thank you.

The first is, it's boring. I mean, come on, this is like watching golf. Or chess. I had someone deeply offended at the chess comment this morning.

I would rather eat cardboard. I mean, there are lots of exciting things you can say about Jesus.

Matthew starts with a list of unpronounceable names, which Zoltan read very manfully.

Many of whom we know nothing about. But how can this be helpful? And if anybody has children in church this morning, I just tell you, it is a parental guidance sermon. Because some of the stories we're going to tell around some of these characters are scandalous, salacious, sordid, the kind of skeleton you want to keep in the closet.

[1 : 41] And Matthew doesn't include them to pander to our love of entertainment, but for a different reason, which we'll come to in just a moment. Now, of course, there's one thing we can say before we go any further, and that is that since Matthew starts with a list of names going back nearly 2,000 years, Christianity is clearly not a philosophy or a lifestyle or a worldview.

It's a history, right? That Jesus Christ came from a specific family at a specific time, specific place. He doesn't just, you know, pop out of history somewhere, nor does he come down like an alien. How are we going to get inside this? And I have felt in working on this this week, it's like an ocean. And you can go deep down anywhere.

And as I've come to the end of the week, it's felt more like a tar pit. Come to that in just a moment. So first is it's boring. Well, at least it's not. But that's our modern sensibility.

The second is the whole idea of kingship. I mean, our experience of kings are either petty despots and tyrants or the ornamental tourist attraction that are not really much use.

[2 : 55] And the Bible has a distinctive, a unique view of kingship. In fact, God has his own word for king. It is the word Messiah, Christ, same word. And God's view of kingship, God's king, is the reverse of world kings.

And he's come to reverse our ideas of kingship and power, which we looked at a bit last week. This is exactly what the Gospel of Matthew, it's all about.

It's about God's idea of a king. It's about God's king and how he reverses power and expectations. The Son of God come to bring us into the kingdom of God.

You can tell this almost anywhere in Matthew's Gospel. So the basic posture of the person who comes into Jesus' kingdom is poor in spirit. Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are poor in spirit, for they shall mourn.

Sorry, for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. So this is a very deliberate and intentional and brilliant start in my view, because the whole list is organised around God's unique king.

[4 : 07] Kingship is at the heart of this list. It's not a random list. In fact, he's left out some names and included some names, but it's a record of how God has been bringing his king into the world ever since the beginning.

And if you have the Bible open, you can see it's shaped around three paragraphs, three groups of 14. Verse 2 to 6, from Abraham down to David the king.

6 to 11, from David down to the deportation in Babylon. 12 to 16, deportation to Jesus who is called the Christ. And just in case we missed it, verse 17, so all the generations from Abraham to David were 14 generations.

David to the deportation were 14. Deportation to Christ are 14. Three stages in history, in the history of Israel, where God brings his king to us.

And the entire history of God's people is how God will bring his son. Incidentally, that means that the Old Testament is not Jewish scriptures and the New Testament Christian scriptures.

[5 : 14] The whole thing is Christian scriptures because it's all about Christ, God's king. And in case we missed this, Jesus is called the Christ. You see in verse 1, Jesus Christ, Messiah.

Then at the end of the list, in verse 16, called the Christ. And then in case we missed it again, in verse 17, Jesus is called the Christ. And this marks him out as distinctive and different.

And there's only one person in the entire list of 314s who has a job description. And that is, verse 6, David, the king.

Because God chose David to be a king for his people. And he promised him that he would establish his throne eternally. And there would be someone from his body who would rule forever.

And by the time of Jesus, it hadn't come. So there's so much we can learn from this genealogy. And I wish I had a lot of time this morning, but we don't.

[6 : 15] And so I just want to touch on three things. And the first is the sheer goodness of God. Now, we're going to do a bit of Bible flipping in the sermon today.

You may not be a Bible flipper. But this is, because all of this is in the Old Testament, what I'd really like you to do, and it may mean, if you've got something important in your hand, like your iPhone, you may have to turn it off.

I'm really sorry. Or if you're holding someone's hand. Keep your hand in Matthew 1, please.

And then let's start flipping back. And let's start in Genesis 17. First book of the Bible. Page 11.

I'm going to start. Thank you. Page 11. So the genealogy in Matthew 1 starts with Abraham, right?

Now, we've all heard of Father Abraham and God's promises.

[7 : 20] But have you heard this promise to Abraham in 17.6? I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.

Ten verses later, he says the same to Sarah. All right? So how does that go? So by the time we come to the end of the Abraham narrative and there are children, we just think that's pretty good, exciting, kings are going to come.

Look back in chapter 1 of Matthew, verse 2. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar.

This is very important. Tamar was a woman. And for this, we need to go, well, let's go to Genesis 38. So Judah is one of the 12 sons of Jacob.

Stay with me. And they have a younger brother called Joseph, who's a bit of a pain, really, because he keeps telling them that God's giving him dreams, and all the older brothers are going to one day bow down to him.

[8 : 43] So the older brothers are out in a field one day with Judah amongst them, and Joseph is with them, and they decide to throw Joseph in a field because he's a painful younger brother. Sorry. They throw him in a pit.

And Judah comes up with the idea in chapter 37, verse 26, to sell Joseph to a foreign trader, and they do. And he buys Joseph and puts him in slavery in Egypt.

Not a very good start, is it? And then we come to chapter 38. And chapter 38 has incest, adultery, masturbation, prostitution, deception, and revenge sex.

It's a very busy chapter. Judah has a Canaanite daughter-in-law. And her husband, Judah's son, dies.

And Judah fails to provide for her, so she dresses up as a prostitute one day and puts herself in the way of where he's going to be wandering around. Notice, please, she's both a victim and a perpetrator.

[9 : 45] And she veils her face, so he asks to have sex with her, not recognising her. And he promises to pay her a goat, which he doesn't have with him. And she agrees and takes a pledge, which is his signet ring, his belt, and his staff.

And he has sex with her, and she conceives. And some weeks later, Judah hears that his daughter-in-law is pregnant, though she's still unmarried. And in verse 24, he says, bring her out, let's burn her to death for what she's done.

It's wonderful hypocrisy, isn't it? And she says, she comes out, she says, I'm pregnant by the man who gave me these three things, signet ring, belt, and staff. And she produces them. And Judah's response is, she is more righteous than I.

Which is absolutely correct, but it's not saying much, is it? And she gives birth to twins, Perez and Zerah, and there they are in the royal line of Jesus in Matthew 1-3.

Judah, Tamar, Perez, and Zerah. And you want to say, really, Jesus? These are your ancestors? I mean, it's a pretty squalid episode, but surely, Mr. Matthew, in polite circles, we can skip a couple of names.

[11:05] But I think that's the point. If there's going to be any hope of God's king coming, it's not going to arise from us. It's not going to be some great act of human heroism. It's going to come from God's goodness and his grace.

And it's not like God's got to build a bridge to us and, you know, he's just run out of raw material. He's got the wrong material to build a bridge. I mean, you know, it's like building a bridge out of marshmallow.

Or clearing an oil pit with more oil. The whole list shows the goodness of God. You know, in chapter 1, the list of kings in verses 9-11 after David, some of them are really good kings.

Some of them follow the Lord and care for God's people, but a lot of them are just wicked. Ahaz and Manasseh burn their children alive to idols, which they bring into the temple.

They whack out the altar and they stick up Asherah pole and they bring in mediums and idols. And what does God do? He continues to woo and to warn his kings.

[12:07] He woos them by promises of the future and he warns them if they do not turn back to him, he'll send them out of the land. And that's exactly what happens. So back in Matthew chapter 1 from verse 11 onwards, we read about the deportation to Babylon.

It's a complete collapse in the kings of Israel. And the royal family is decimated. And it looks like God's purposes have come to an end. And then we read this little verse.

Well, the first verse in the New Testament. Just turn back to Matthew 1. The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ. And the word genealogy is the word Genesis.

The book of Genesis of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. Matthew thinks as he writes the story of this king, this Christ, this Messiah, he's writing the Bible all over again.

It's a new creation. It's a fresh start for the world, deeply tied to what God has done in the Old Testament. And the whole genealogy from this point on is a statement of the sheer goodness of God.

[13:15] You know, right in the middle of this murkiness and messiness, God is bringing his king to us. In fact, the darker it gets, the brighter his goodness shines. The family of Jesus is a glorious triumph of God's goodness.

He brings the infinitely pure son, and he has to come into a family that he's got to die and save. And God continues with his promises despite and against human sin over thousands of years.

God knows how to bring about his promises over thousands of years. He knows how to bring about his promises in the next 10 years, 10 days, 10 hours. It's really good news for us because of what kind of king Jesus will be.

Right from the start in Matthew's gospel, completely without sin. And he draws new people into his family and into the kingdom of God, not because of their own goodness or because of their potential, but because of his own goodness.

That is always the way it is with this king. Every single follower of Jesus Christ has this sense. You have this sense. I have this sense that belonging to this king is just almost too good for us.

[14:26] My life is very messy. And though, you know, the longer we know this king, the more we will be like him and love him, still I've done things and said things and thought things that would bring him deep shame.

Jesus is not ashamed to call you and me brothers and sisters. It's why he came. Bringing forgiveness in the kingdom, as we'll see next week and in the weeks to come.

So that's the first and longest point. The genealogy shows the sheer goodness of God. Secondly, it shows the reach of his goodness.

And I want to point out in this line here, there are five women listed. Tamar at the beginning, we've talked a bit about her. Mary at the end. And then three women around David, King David.

And all these three women are powerless, marginalized, and don't even belong to God's people. And here they are in the family tree of Jesus. Back in Matthew chapter 1 verse 5.
[15:30] Salmon, which as I said earlier, because we're in Canada, should be pronounced salmon. I'm tempted to say he was quite a catch. Just seeing if you're awake.

He was the father of Boaz by Rahab. And Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth. Obed the father of Jesse. Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah. Now these women break every cultural convention. They are not models of upright behavior.

They're not the famous women from the Old Testament. I mean, he could have chosen Esther or Sarah or Hannah or Deborah. Even the queen of Sheba. They're all morally dubious and all of them are not Jews.

You see, because God doesn't just reach out to the powerless and to the nations around Israel reluctantly or resentfully. God actually works through them and brings them right into his family and they become part of the royal line of Jesus.

[16:37] It's amazing. Tamar and Rahab were both Canaanites. If you were a Jew, you weren't even allowed to marry a Canaanite. And Rahab's day job, you remember, was as a prostitute.

That's how she supported herself. We don't know why. But she'd heard of Israel's God and how he delivered his people out of Egypt.

And the Bible tells us that she showed to God steadfast love. And she hid the Jewish spies who'd come to Jericho to spy out the land. And she and her whole household was saved.

And here's the thing. She becomes King David's great-grandma. Ruth, a Moabite.

The Moabites were very dangerous enemies of God's people. She commits herself to her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi. Beautiful scene in the book of Ruth. She becomes David's grandma.

[17:37] And I reckon those extended family meals really must have been something. I don't know how long they lived, but can you imagine great-grandma Rahab, grandma Ruth, and there's Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah.

But without these women, the purpose of God would have failed. And this is an essential part of Jesus' kingship.

Jesus has come for people like us and for people who are not like us. The first people in Matthew's gospel who come to worship Jesus, they're not insiders.

They're wise men from the east. And the king of Israel at the time ought to be worshipping Jesus. He wants to slaughter that child. The first miracle Jesus performs in Matthew's gospel is healing a leper.

You couldn't have someone more excluded from society. And Jesus goes out to him and touches him and heals him. The second miracle is of a centurion's servant, a Roman.

[18:45] And when Jesus sees his faith, he says this in chapter 8, It's good news.

It just means there is nobody who's too far gone from his goodness. That he doesn't welcome you based on your very exclusive background or on your potential goodness.

He welcomes us on his own. So the genealogy shows both his goodness, the reach of his goodness, and thirdly and finally, the depth of his goodness.

Let's have a look at this. Turn back to Genesis chapter 12 for a moment. This is deeply personal to God. Genesis 12, 1 to 3.

The list starts with Abraham. These are very familiar verses to us, I'm sure. Genesis 12, Now, blessing is a word that's thrown around today, but in the Bible, it's a Garden of Eden word.

[20:27] It's a word to describe all the goodness that we experience in the presence of the living God. It's a bucket word for the freshness of life that comes from him.

And the great tragedy is that we have turned away. We said, no, we're not going to let God be God. And God is personally committed to bringing us back into his personal presence.

And the way he does this is by sending his son, the king, who dies on the cross, becoming a curse for us so that we might receive his blessing. Let me show you one more illustration.

In verse 11 of Matthew 1, we meet Zerubbabel. And for this, I want you to turn to Haggai.

Let's turn. It's the third last book in the Old Testament. Page 792, please. Stay with me.

[21:33] Jeconiah is the last king of Israel. He's taken off into deportation. God takes his people, has them slaves in Babylon for 70 years. And after 70 years, just as he said, he sends them back into Israel.

And Zerubbabel goes with him. He might have been born in Babylon. His name is Zerubbabelon. And he goes back and he begins to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. And he's called the governor in this third section in the Old Testament.

He is the grandson of the last king of Israel. He has royal blood in him. And God takes Zerubbabel in Haggai and makes a particular promise to him.

Just look at the last couple of verses of Haggai. The word of the Lord came a second time to Haggai. That's a prophet. The 24th day of the month. Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I'm about to shake the heavens and the earth.

To overthrow the throne of kingdoms, I'm about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations and overthrow the chariots and riders and the horses and the riders shall go down, everyone by the sword of his brother.

[22 : 42] And on that day, declares the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel, my servant, son of Shealtiel, declares the Lord, make you like a signet ring, for I've chosen you, declares the Lord of hosts.

This is absolutely brilliant. To make him a signet ring is to reverse the punishment. Signet ring was something beautiful and precious to the owner, kept it so close to himself, never took it off.

And it's the sign of God's authority, the king's authority. But here's the thing. Zerubbabel died like the rest. The temple was completed, but it was nothing like the form.

There was no glory, no splendor, no earth shaking. It was a bit of a fizzer, really. And between the last book of the Old Testament and the first book of the New Testament, it's 400 years of silence, no prophets.

And during that time, Israel was invaded, conquered, and occupied by Rome. And then the New Testament opens, the book of the Genesis of Jesus Christ.

[23 : 46] And from this point on, everything God is doing is built on the person of Jesus Christ. And from now on, we enter into the blessing of God, into his personal blessing, with the promise of his personal presence, by becoming members of his family and welcoming others into that family.

And at the end of the genealogy, we read this. Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, which is called the Christ. And when we come to Matthew 12, we discover that Jesus deliberately extends the bounds of his family.

He says, who is my mother? Who are my brothers? Stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my father is my brother, my sister, and my mother.

And what is the will of God the Father? It is that we exalt Jesus Christ as our King. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.