
God's Family Tree

DAVE BAST

This week we continue our Advent preparations by digging into the first part of Matthew Chapter 1, Jesus' family tree. I wonder when the last time is that you read this portion of scripture? Biblical names can be hard to pronounce and lists are boring, so it is easy to jump ahead to the story, but can we learn anything about Christ from a list of names? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Bob, the Bible can be a very strange book at times.

BOB HEERSPINK

It can.

DAVE BAST

I think we recognize that. We are just so familiar with it that we forget that. You know, they weren't always like us in the things that attracted their attention. I mean, just take for example the way Matthew begins his Gospel. Now, you know a little bit about communications, you are a preacher. How do you try to start a sermon?

BOB HEERSPINK

You start with a great story. You grab people's attention.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; or else, you will lose them for good, right?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

How does Matthew start? Well, let me tell you. This is not the passage that kids memorize for the Sunday school scripture pageant, but here it is:

¹This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham. ²Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob – okay, so far so good; we have heard of them. I like it though in the old King James: So and so begat so and so begat so and so...

BOB HEERSPINK

The "begats," yes.

DAVE BAST

Well, I will just skip to the ending because there are a lot of unfamiliar and difficult names in there. And then we get finally again to people that we know. Well, there is a little passage where we have David and Solomon; we have heard of them; but then:

¹⁶Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah. ¹⁷Thus, there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile into Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Dave, over the years I have actually become rather interested in my own genealogy, and there is a book that recently came out that has my family tree in it. It is kind of an expensive book, so I have been delaying buying it. It is published in Europe, but I do want to get it because, well, the book really captures, I think, something of who I am. As I get older, I get more interested in roots and in history. It is important to me. It must have been important to Matthew.

DAVE BAST

I guess so. You mentioned *Roots*; that was the most watched television drama in American history. It goes way back to the 70s, but it tried to give a sense of who African Americans were and how they came over involuntarily as part of the slave trade, but then set down roots here in North America. Roots are important, and Jesus' roots are especially important to Matthew.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, there is something about starting with a genealogy that is strange, and yet I think it really says something about the nature of our faith. It is rooted in history, and we just assume that because we are so familiar with the idea as Christians, but a lot of religions really are more about high-flying ideas than about actual events that take place in history.

DAVE BAST

Or think of all the stories in the ancient myths of Greece and Rome of gods who just sort of pop into the world, or appear on the scene. They are not real. They only appear to be human; but Jesus is a real, flesh-and-blood human being. This is not a kind of mythological story of the god appearing on earth. Matthew wants to root Jesus in these generations of real people.

BOB HEERSPINK

I was talking to a Russian believer a while back who came to faith during the time of the Soviet era, and he said: You know what really brought me to Christ was opening up a Bible and seeing all those maps. He said: I had been taught that Christianity is just a bunch of myths and stories. He said: When I saw those maps I said these are real places in the world today. This is real history. This really happened.

DAVE BAST

I like that because in a way this genealogy is a map. It is a family tree, and you can kind of trace the line of God's purpose coming down through generation upon generation and finally culminating in Jesus Christ. This is nothing like a myth. This is 180 degrees different from all the legendary material that was in the ancient world that sometimes skeptics want to lump in Christianity. You know, the myth of God incarnate.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and it really says God works in history. You know, I think sometimes we look at our own personal histories and we say: Is this in any way connected with what God is doing in the world? Is life meaningless? And I think out of this genealogy you get the basic message: Hey, God is at work in history. He can take his time as he works in history. We want him sometimes to work faster than through all these genealogies; but in history and in my personal life, God is doing his thing. He is accomplishing his purposes.

DAVE BAST

Here is another thought that just struck me as you were talking just now, Bob. Most of these people did not know what God was doing in and through them. They had no idea that they were going to be ancestors of the Messiah. What a great thing that is to imagine unimaginable things that God...

BOB HEERSPINK

Can you imagine this group sitting around today and saying: Hey, let me share with you this genealogy – your genealogy – and see what God was doing in all of those little bits and pieces of your life that you just couldn't figure out at the time.

DAVE BAST

I want to pursue this a little bit further. We need to take a break right now first, but let's dig deeper into this list of names and see what we can find.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Dave, we are talking about the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, and how surprisingly important something like this is to really understand Christ. I think that first verse of the genealogy is packed with all kinds of implications. Matthew says:

¹This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham. Now, when he says: This is the genealogy of Jesus, literally he is saying: This is the *beginning* of Jesus; and all of a sudden I am beginning to have...

DAVE BAST

Echoes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thoughts about Genesis 1 and John 1.

DAVE BAST

Yes, biblical echoes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and it is like, this isn't just a genealogy, this is a text that is pulling together all of salvation history.

DAVE BAST

It really does repay a little deeper digging, even at first blush it appears to be pretty barren territory; just hard name after hard name after hard name; but the two most important names, I think, in the list... at least, not counting Joseph and Mary, maybe... are the two that appear there that you read in verse one: Abraham and then David.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; those names really pick up the whole history of the Old Testament. I was looking at Frederick Bruner; he has written a great book about Matthew, and you he says at one point...

DAVE BAST

Dale Bruner.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, Dale Bruner, not the other Bruners...

DAVE BAST

You were thinking of Frederick Buechner, but anyway. *

BOB HEERSPINK

But he says with regard to those names that here you find two huge buckets of promise; in the name David and in the name Abraham. I like that.

DAVE BAST

I do, too, because of course, Abraham is the original promise from Genesis 13**: I will make of you a great nation and give you a land. The land and the people – the Promised Land and the promised people of God – both of which are fulfilled in Christ and in the worldwide spread of the Gospel...

BOB HEERSPINK

So with Abraham you have the all nations blessing.

DAVE BAST

There you go; and then David, the promise of a ruler – of a descendant of David who will bring about the fulfillment of all of God's purposes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; the Messiah King; and the way Matthew sets it up right from the beginning is to link those two together. He is really saying you cannot think about the Messiah King of Israel without remembering the promise to Abraham.

DAVE BAST

So, who is Jesus? Well, he is the descendant of Abraham and of David, both. He is... This is, first of all, saying something extremely important about the identity of Jesus – Jesus the Christ – Jesus the Messiah; and that is also picked up in a way that would have been a clue for the original readers of this Gospel – the Jewish Christian community, perhaps of which Matthew was a part or was the leader – for whom he was primarily writing. It is often pointed out by scholars that Matthew is really a Jewish Gospel, in particular; that that comes through more clearly; and I think that is another reason for this genealogy here; but here is the interesting point: The emphasis on the number fourteen, which he says in verse 17: Fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile, fourteen from the exile to Christ.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, Matthew looks at the genealogy and he says: There is this trajectory of salvation history; that God brings people up in grace. People fail; they end up at the point of the exile; God is going to bring them back.

DAVE BAST

Yes, but, also the fourteen idea.

BOB HEERSPINK

Oh, okay.

DAVE BAST

He draws attention to the number fourteen. Now, I think about this and you know, call me skeptical or whatever, but I look at those three chunks of time: Abraham to David – that was about 800 years; David to the exile, that is maybe 600 years... 500 years; exile to Christ, 400 or 500 years; so these are not equal blocks of time, and yet Matthew says in each case there were fourteen generations.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, he is making a selection. There are other people in the genealogy...

DAVE BAST

Exactly; it is not literally just fourteen.

BOB HEERSPINK

But then you have to come back to the question: Why is fourteen such an important number to him? And the reason for that is because in the time of Matthew, names were associated with numbers and that is the number of David.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; so again, the strange world of the Bible. This wouldn't kind of ring our chimes, but for those first readers... because every letter in the Hebrew alphabet had a numerical equivalent, a name could stand for a number and a number for a name.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

So fourteen is the name David; and again, he is telling us Jesus is David's true fulfillment and embodiment.

BOB HEERSPINK

But now, if you look at the genealogy, the thing that you cannot overlook is the inclusion of the women. That really, I think, is the most shocking thing in this genealogy because it was not typical of Jewish genealogies to include women; especially *these* kind of women.

DAVE BAST

Apart from the number of the names, if you begin to look at the names themselves, you see that in addition to a message about who Jesus is, it says something about who *we* are – we are as the people of God, the family of God. I think about all the nobodies in here; you know, who were these people? Shealtiel, Zadok, Achim, Eliud... we don't know – we don't know anything about them; and yet, they are taken up into God's purpose; and then, as you point out...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, but... we do know the women...

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

The women we know, and...

DAVE BAST

We have heard of them.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is like, why in the world would you want to include in your genealogy people like Tamar and Rahab and Ruth and the wife of Uriah?

DAVE BAST

Bathsheba.

BOB HEERSPINK

Bathsheba.

DAVE BAST

She is not named, but she is mentioned – identified. I mean, Ruth, yes, I can see. She was one of the most virtuous and heroic characters of the Old Testament; but Rahab was a prostitute, you know. Let's not beat around the bush; and they were all Gentiles; that is the other shocking thing.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think that is the most important thing. I mean, certainly in this genealogy the inclusion of the women says: Hey, the genealogy of God's Son includes sinners, and that is not just the women, but the men as well, because actually in these stories the men typically come off worse than the women; but they are all... these women are all either Gentiles or connected with Gentiles. The wife of Uriah the Hittite – it is like the genealogy is saying: Even as you think about the promise to David, don't forget about the promise to Abraham; that the genealogy of the Messiah...

DAVE BAST

The all-nations promise; the all-nations, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; is including Gentiles right in Jesus' family tree.

DAVE BAST

Because it was always God's plan to save the whole world through the Messiah, Jesus Christ; and don't forget, too, that God can use us whoever we are. Wherever we got our human idea that we want racial purity or we want only those who are like us, we didn't get that from God, because God is a kind of come-one-come-all sort of God, including in the family of his own Son.

BOB HEERSPINK

Any time we begin to think that somehow our ethnic identity puts us one-up with God, yet you can come right back to this genealogy and say: That is not the way God works. God builds a world family, and ethnicity does not define your identity within the family of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Now that may sound like a great conclusion, and it is, but there is still more; and we want to look a little bit more in just a moment at this genealogy of Jesus Christ.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi; welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, we have been talking about the genealogy of Christ, and really unpacking what this says about Jesus, that he is the Son of David; he is the Messiah; he is also the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that there is going to be a blessing to all nations; and we have seen how that unfolds in the way in which Matthew weaves the women through the genealogy – these Gentile women who become signs of the fact that we as the people of God are a people that engulf all nations – all ethnicities – the world.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it says something about us, too, the people of God. Not only a message about Christ's identity, but look at our identity. Most of us are not famous. A lot of these names are simply unknowns. Many of them are mixed – definitely mixed characters; think of David and his sin, and Jacob and his personality; and some are just totally inappropriate, we would think; sinful women, just women period, in that culture, to name them as part of the genealogy... shocking thing; but God uses us all.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think that is the important thing: God uses; and with the genealogy it is here not just to say something about who we are as the people of God, but the way God works – the way God acts. This is a God story, isn't it?

DAVE BAST

I like that. The God who can make the dead come to life; the God who can keep his promises even when it seems like there is an absolute roadblock in the way. Think of the exile and how that affected the people of Judah who experienced it. As far as they were concerned, that must have meant the end of everything. Jerusalem destroyed, the Temple burnt to the ground, people carried away into Babylon; and yet, it wasn't the end for God; he is still working.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; because we can look at this genealogy and say: Oh, we know the end of the story. It ends with Jesus; but if you are in the story, when you come to the exile it looks like it is all over. You know, human capability to bring God's people back from the edge – it doesn't exist; and this suddenly becomes a story that has always been about God, but now in that last segment, moving from exile to the coming of Christ, it is really the faithfulness of God that is going to make this happen.

DAVE BAST

And as I read through these names one after another, some of them famous, most of them not, I think about the promise-keeping God that we have, that we know, that we serve, that we love. Somebody once said he is a God who always keeps his appointments. I like that. He doesn't stand us up; and we are waiting now for another promise to be fulfilled. We have talked about it. The promise that Christ will return; that is what Advent is about as well; not just preparing to celebrate his first coming, but looking forward to and anticipating his coming again to finish the job – to right the wrongs that so fill our world – to dry the tears, as the last book of the Bible promises. We are waiting, and we can believe that it will happen.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; you know, every generation, Dave... every generation of Christians has believed – and I think appropriately – this is the generation when Christ might return; this is it.

DAVE BAST

Well, I saw some story that says 40% of Americans believe Christ will return while they are still alive; so...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and I think that is exactly the kind of anticipation in which we as believers need to live; but I think we have to balance that by saying: If the Lord tarries, it is okay; and he is still faithful.

DAVE BAST

So you are saying it is a good thing that we should believe Christ will return in our lifetime?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, because it motivates us in terms of how we proclaim the Gospel, the calling that we have to do his work in the world; but I think we have to balance that by saying he can tarry; because otherwise we also might just fold our hands and say: Well, if Jesus comes back tomorrow, then why be at work, really, in this world today? Someone said to Luther: Why are you planting a tree? If Jesus comes tomorrow, why plant the tree? He said: I will still plant the tree because I need to be taking the long-term look, as well as simply saying Christ might return next week.

DAVE BAST

So, for us the challenge is to live in such a way that we really believe the promises of God are coming true, and it could be at any time; but if they don't come true right away, we don't give up – we don't lose hope – we don't abandon ship and say forget about it; I am bagging the whole thing; I don't believe any of it is true.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I read a book once where the author basically said the story of the Bible is that God just kind of got bored with the whole project and walked away, and has kind of disappeared on us; and that absolutely is not true. The God that has come to us in Jesus Christ is still as actively involved in this world as he ever has been, and he is faithful to his promises. He says: I am going to bring all of this to an incredibly grand conclusion; and it is going to happen.

DAVE BAST

And it is going to happen through us, in a way. I keep coming back to that idea we shared earlier in this program, that most of those people did not know what God was doing through them at the time that he was at work; and we don't know what God might be doing through us right now, right here, as we are faithful in obeying him and living out the signs of the coming of his kingdom.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; there will be a point when we look back on our lives and we will be able to see the way God just wove us into this genealogy as he has built his family beyond Christ, and we are going to be able to say God delivers. He delivers on his promises. God never fails.

DAVE BAST

So, in the fullness of time, he sent forth his Son into the world, as Galatians says. In the fullness of time Christ will come again into the world, and in the meantime, we can serve him.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is what we celebrate in Advent.

DAVE BAST

Well thanks again for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today; and don't forget that it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keeps our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us online at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

*Note: The theologian F. Dale Bruner is Frederick Dale Bruner.

**Correction: The audio of this program misstates the reference for this passage as Genesis 3. The correct reference is Genesis 13.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/gods-family-tree>

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