

Gospel Beginnings: Matthew

SCOTT HOEZEE

Years ago, the first few pages of some bibles used to have a blank family tree so that families could fill in the names of their ancestors. If that bible was going to become the family bible, it made sense to show the family's history. When people are still interested in that, today they might go to something like ancestry.com to trace their family origins because we want to know our roots – where we came from. The evangelist, Matthew, knew people might just be interested in Jesus' family tree, too; and even before he tells the story of Jesus' birth then, Matthew shows us Jesus' ancestors. Today on Groundwork, let's see what Jesus' family tree reveals to us about the one who became known as Immanuel – God with us.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me today as my co-host is Scott Hoezee. Welcome, Scott, to this series of programs for Advent, really, the season of Advent in the Church's year.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is good to be here. Advent is not as well-known a word as Christmas, but in the Church these are the four Sundays that come right before December 25; Advent means arrival, and it is a season of expectation – a season of waiting for the birth of Jesus, and during Advent we look at different themes that lead up to the story that we now know so well from Luke 2 and the birth of Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Yes; for Christians, at least if we are getting our heads on straight, this is not the Christmas season – it is not all about holiday shopping and preparations. Our preparation is of a different sort, and the wisdom of the ages has dictated that Christians should hold off a little bit on all of the hoopla of celebrating Christmas, and have this kind of preparatory season of four weeks, where we meditate and think about why Jesus had to come into the world, and we remember that He is planning to come back again as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; we think of both the first Advent – His first arrival – and anticipate His second coming – the second Advent – when He comes back in glory. So, Advent in the Church is a way to make sure that by the time we get to Christmas, we know who we are celebrating; we know why we are celebrating; and we have prepared ourselves by getting our hearts ready and repenting of our own sins, and thinking very clearly about why God's Son had to become a human being. So, that is what Advent is about; and here on Groundwork we are going to spend four programs looking at how each of the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – begin the story of Jesus.

DAVE BAST

We start, then, with Matthew, the first Gospel, and immediately we might kind of run into a problem. Matthew starts out this way: This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham. Fine so far, but it does not stop there. The names start rolling: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob... so far so good. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; most of us have heard of them; but it goes on and on and on. Ram the father of Amminadab, Nahshon the father of Salmon. Jehoshaphat the father of

Joram...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this goes on for seventeen verses...

DAVE BAST

It's like, what is this, the phonebook? I am supposed to be interested in these people?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And no matter how a given bible is laid out, it is almost inevitable that the whole first page of Matthew is that long list of hard-to-say names, and it does not look like the most exciting way to start a book; in fact, it is the first book of the whole New Testament in the way we lay it out; and it is the sort of thing that you think, what was Matthew thinking? We teach our students at seminary: Hey, sermon introductions are important. You want to get peoples' attention – you want to get them into it right away or they might just tune you out, and here Matthew seems intent on tuning us out by giving us this... Most people just kind of think Matthew really starts at verse 18. This prelude...

DAVE BAST

With the more familiar Christmas story. For us, in our modern mindset and our short attention span, it does sound like a surefire way to have people turn you off.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you are going to lose your readers.

DAVE BAST

But, Matthew must have had a really good reason... One of the things that strikes me is, in the ancient world, space was very limited if you were writing a book. I mean, you had a scroll, and that determined how long your book could be; and scrolls were hard to make. It took a lot of work to put these reeds together and make your own paper. So, this is valuable space, and Matthew must think this is really important if he is going to devote this many verses to it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Again, if you were reading the Bible in the order that the Bible is generally laid out, Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, and you flip the page and there is the New Testament, and this is where we start; and yet, there is probably a reason why the Church decided to put Matthew first. We do not think it was written first. We think Mark may have been the first Gospel; but it made some sense to put Matthew here because actually what Matthew was doing was showing the connection between the end of the Hebrew Scriptures that concluded with Malachi and the beginning of the New Testament. It is not a new beginning, it is the same story, and Matthew knew that this history would show you: Here is how we are getting to this part of the story, and it goes all the way back to Abraham. It goes right back to Genesis.

DAVE BAST

There is also a very important clue here at the end of the genealogy, in a bridge verse before he begins the Christmas story. It is verse 17: Thus, Matthew says, there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

Now actually, Matthew has to do some editing – some heavy-duty editing of the list to come up with that number fourteen, because if you stop and think about it, from Abraham to David was about a thousand years; from David to the exile was about five or six hundred years; so, clearly, there were more than fourteen generations in the first segment. What is up with the fourteen? I think that is a clue to Matthew's purpose here. He is not only bridging and showing how the story connects Old Testament/New Testament; but he wants to hone in on the identity of Jesus as the Son of David...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Because the Hebrews use numbers symbolically, and fourteen happens to be the number in Hebrew of the name David.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, exactly; and we believe... Sometimes people ask: Why do we have four Gospels? Why not just one? But we believe that the Holy Spirit knew what He was doing in inspiring four different writers to present the story of Jesus from four different angles, and scholars believe that Matthew was writing mostly to fellow Jews whom he wanted to convince: This is the Messiah we have been waiting for. This is the one. We have been waiting ever since Abraham...

DAVE BAST

The Son of David – the one to whom... all the promises to David are coming true in this one person.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, Matthew knew that for his friends and his family and his fellow Jews, if they were ever going to say: Jesus of Nazareth is the One – He is the Anointed One – Ha'Mashiach – the Messiah – the Christ, then the bare minimal requirement is that He descends from Abraham, and especially from David; and that His family tree is intact. So, we today, we open this and say: Oh, what a yawn. What a rotten way to begin a book, Matthew. His readers said: Ah, yes. This is exactly where we must begin. If we want to know Jesus is the Lord and the Messiah, this is the information we need to know. We want to read this very carefully.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; this is exciting stuff to them because it clues them in right from the outset as to Jesus' true identity, and the fact that God is keeping His promises. This is the fulfillment. All these generations – think how long that took – how long they waited for the coming of the promised one, and here He is, and the clue is right there before you. It is in His ancestry. It is in His name. He is the Son of David. He is the one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is the one; and we do pay attention to such things, you know. In the United States, we have even had a lot of discussions about where are certain candidates for president born. They have to be born in the right place or they cannot qualify. Jesus had to be born from the right people in order to qualify, and when we come back, we will see how Matthew preaches the Gospel and presents Jesus as the true Messiah through the names he includes on this list.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are beginning this new, pre-Christmas, Advent series by looking at the start of each of the four Gospels; and today we are looking at Matthew, and we said just a moment ago, Dave, that Matthew begins with what looks to be a boring genealogy – a list of Jesus' family tree, but we also said just a moment ago it would not have been boring for the people for whom Matthew was writing. They would need to know that Jesus is the true Son of David, or He could not be the Messiah. This is the bare minimal requirement, and so Matthew puts this right up front to say we have this one covered, and then will go on to tell the full story.

DAVE BAST

But now we want to dig into the family tree a little bit and look at some of the particulars; and right for starters, we need to observe that there were certain conventions for Jewish genealogies. There were rules to follow. You put it together in a given way, and Matthew really breaks several of those rules in quite a shocking way. Imagine, I love reading stories to my grandkids. It gets a little tiresome when they ask it for the fourth or fifth time, you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes, sometimes.

DAVE BAST

But they love... You know, a child loves a story, and they want it to be told in a certain way. They know the right way because they have heard the story; so, if you are reading *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, and suddenly you say: And Goldilocks tried the three cups of tea, and one was too hot... No, no, no. It is three bowls of porridge. So, these genealogies followed a pattern – they followed a rule – and Matthew flaunts the rules, in a way, by the kind of people he includes here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And his readers would notice that just as surely as your grandkids or my kids... Sometimes I would get sleepy and I would mess up the three bears or *Goodnight, Moon*, and you know, you have to start over. The kids noticed immediately. Matthew's readers would notice immediately, and the main thing they would notice that we want to look at now is that it is patriarchal and all that, but the rule was back in Matthew's day, family trees – only men. Just the father of the father of the father, you did not mention the women. They are the ones who gave birth to all these people, but by rule, it was always just a list of the fathers.

DAVE BAST

The technical term would be *patrilineal descent* – that was what was important...

SCOTT HOEZEE

There are a lot of syllables in that one.

DAVE BAST

Who your father was, right; and here come these ladies sprinkled in – these women from the Old Testament.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And not the ones you would expect, because some family trees they did allow for women to be mentioned, but then they had to be the mothers of Israel: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah. They were allowed now and then. Matthew has four women referred to, too, and not one of them is Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, or Leah; and in fact, let's listen, Dave, to a few of these verses and we will hear, in verses 2 through 6 of Matthew 1, we will hear the women he names or refers to.

²Abraham was the father of Isaac; Isaac the father of Jacob; Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. ³Judah the father of Perez and Zerah whose mother was Tamar. Perez the father of Hezron and Hezron the father of Ram. ⁴Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon. ⁵Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife.

DAVE BAST

There are the four women. I do not know if every listener picked up on the four of them. One of them, Ruth, everybody loves Ruth. Ruth has a book of the Bible named after her – lovely story; but, Ruth was not an Israelite...

SCOTT HOEZEE

She was from Moab.

DAVE BAST

Ruth was not Jewish... She was from the enemy people of Moab, so there is a little bit of a shocker, but it gets worse, it gets more extreme, it gets more dramatic.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, if you are listening closely or if you have a Bible open, you would see the women are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and then Uriah's wife, that was Bathsheba, and Matthew did not even mention her name specifically; actually, by calling her Uriah's wife, we will mention this in a moment, it kind of twisted the knife a little bit in terms of that very sad story from the life of David; but let's just look at them real quickly in order. The first one bore a child with Judah; her name was Tamar, who was actually Judah's daughter-in-law, and the story is complicated – we will not go into it, but...

DAVE BAST

Yes, just as well, because it is not PG, frankly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know the R-rated story.

DAVE BAST

I do not think the story of Tamar makes it into very many children's bibles.

SCOTT HOEZEE

She ends up... She needs a child, and things go wrong in the family. Judah kind of does wrong by her, but the long story short is, she dresses up as a prostitute, seduces Judah, and that is where the child comes from who gets in this family tree. It is an unhappy, unsettling story...

DAVE BAST

Very seedy, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then, the next person is Rahab.

DAVE BAST

And she actually is a prostitute.

SCOTT HOEZEE

She was a prostitute!

DAVE BAST

She does not just dress as one, it is her job. She is the Madam of a brothel in Jericho.

SCOTT HOEZEE

and hid the spies, which meant they were able to rescue her. I mean, the deal was: I will save your lives if, before Jericho falls when Joshua's army comes, you save my life. They do, and she ends up getting married to somebody in Israel who puts her into Jesus' family line – Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho. So, now we have two women who have some upsetting stories associated. Neither one of them was an Israelite; neither was Ruth, as we already mentioned; and then you get to Bathsheba, also not an Israelite by birth...

DAVE BAST

Also more sinned against, perhaps, than sinning, but nevertheless, an adulteress.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The darkest blot in David's story. He sees this woman; he takes her for himself; he tries to cover it up by murdering her husband – or arranging for him to die on the battlefield – just a very sad and upsetting story, and these are the women who Matthew puts in the tree, and those are the stories it reminds you of, and you say: Why?

DAVE BAST

Well, it is almost as though Matthew is going out of his way to emphasize the checkered history of Jesus' ancestors.

SCOTT HOEZEE

These are the skeletons in Jesus' family closet, and it would have been so easy to leave them out. Most people did.

DAVE BAST

You know, you think about the concern that some people – some groups – have with say, racial purity, or moral superiority; and the truth is, there is none of that in Jesus' family tree. Jesus comes from a messy, dysfunctional, broken down line of ancestors, and yet, this is the means God uses to bring His Son into the world – to come Himself to take up our flesh – and somehow, none of the taint falls upon Jesus. He does not inherit these bad things or these problems from His ancestors. So, if your concern is with the purity of your family tree, sorry! Jesus did not seem to be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right. So, the readers of Matthew would have noticed all of these surprises. They would have been taken aback by the presence of those four women. They would also be taken aback by one last surprise that we will look at in just a moment, and then we will see how it all comes together to be the Gospel in the middle of a family tree.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome back to Groundwork; I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, we are looking at Matthew Chapter 1; specifically, the first 17 verses: Jesus' family tree; the genealogy with which Matthew opens his Gospel; and we have just been focusing on what you called the skeletons in Jesus' family closet – the four women whose names appear, each of whom – or at least most of them with some moral irregularities about her life. The very fact that they are women, and even more so perhaps shocking that they are gentiles, they are non-Jews, and yet, these women contribute their genes to the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Matthew put this right at the start of his Gospel, and the Church has placed this on Page 1 of the New Testament, to remind us that this Gospel story now about Jesus is still part of the big story that started way back in Genesis. It is a continuation, not a wholly new story, but a continuation; but it also reminds us that a lot of the messed up parts of that big story as they came across in what we now call the Old Testament, that was Jesus' story too; and you know, that is actually good news, because I do not know too many families who do not have a few things that disappoint them about their own families: broken relationships in their families, things that have disappointed them. Well, guess what? Matthew is saying: Jesus understands; His family was the same way. He understands you and He is your savior for that very reason.

DAVE BAST

Yes. There is a Puritan writer who also points out in this genealogy that there is a sequence of good and bad kings; and he says, “I learned from this that piety cannot be bequeathed from a father to a son. That is bad news for me,” he said, “but I also learned that sin or wickedness cannot be passed on from a father to a son. That is good news for my son.”

So this idea is you say that we are not locked in by our past – by our history. We are not necessarily tainted by it; that God can work in and through all these things, and He can redeem all people; and He wants to redeem all people. There is another message of this, that this is something bigger than just Israel. Jesus may be Israel’s Messiah, but it is more than that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Matthew gets at that more than that with the last surprise of the family tree comes right at the end, in verse 16, where we get what my professor David Howard at seminary called a holy irregularity because the pattern breaks. We have had 16 verses of the father of, the father of, the father of; and then you get to Joseph, the *husband* of Mary. Joseph is not called the father of Jesus, but the husband of Mary; and so, this long, standard genealogy pattern snaps and the reader sits up straight and says: Wait a minute. Why isn’t Joseph the father of Jesus? What do you mean, only the husband of Mary? And of course, the story that comes next in Matthew 1 tells us why. It is not Joseph’s son, it is God’s Son.

DAVE BAST

The incredible sign that this is true is the fact that Mary conceives and gives birth to Jesus with no human father. I think it was C. S. Lewis who said: I do not really understand why people quibble at the miracle of the virgin birth, because if you believe in the incarnation, the virgin birth is a much simpler thing than that. The fact that God took on human nature and became a genuine human being; and if you do not believe in that, well, then, it does not really matter – virgin birth or not. The real miracle is that God became a true human; like us in every respect except for sin, and the sign of that is His miraculous birth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Joseph was the first person who had to deal with it. Mary tells him the story and... I am sure he did not believe her initially. He thought he would divorce her – just put her aside, and it took an angel in a dream to say: She is telling the truth.

DAVE BAST

Right; what I love about this, Scott, is that these people knew the facts of life. They knew how babies were made and where they come from, and sometimes people have said: Yes, oh, well, they could believe in a virgin birth back then because they were so ignorant. No, no, no.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, no, no, no.

DAVE BAST

No, Joseph says: Hey, wait a minute. Time out. Mary is pregnant? Forget about it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is not me, it is somebody else; but he comes to accept it, and the angel says in verse 23: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call Him Immanuel. So, Joseph has said: Look, this child, his name will... be commonly called Jesus, but what it means is God with us. This is God’s Son, and He is the “with us” God, and what Matthew 1 has taught us by laying out this family history that could otherwise be roaringly dull, but it is not dull at all for those with eyes to see, because the “with us” God that concludes this chapter... Who is the “us?” Who is the “us?” Well, the “us,” it turns out, is all of us, not just Israel – Moabites, Jerichoites – people from foreign lands – Hittites – everybody; and who is the “us?” Well, not just nice, buttoned-down, upstanding, religious types, but people who have families whose stories are a little like

Tamar's and Rahab's and Bathsheba and Uriah, and all the sadness. Jesus came for us; us ordinary, broken, sinful, messed up people. That is the "us" of God with us. That is the Gospel, right in Matthew 1.

DAVE BAST

Amen! So, thanks for joining us on Groundwork today, and do not forget it is listeners like you asking questions and joining the conversation that will keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing. If you would like, suggest a topic or passage you would like to hear us talk about on a future Groundwork program. Just visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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