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Matthew

MAKING DISCIPLES FOR THE NATIONS



1

THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST

Matthew 1:1–17

*A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David,
the son of Abraham: (Matt. 1:1)*

To make sense of events, we need to know who the characters are. This is true of the birth of Jesus, but it is true almost any time that something striking happens. One Saturday I headed off for a tennis match against the best team in the league, on their court. Still, competitors always hope for an upset. My hopes surged as I began to warm up with one of our opponents. He was a big, hard-hitting lefty, but he looked erratic and slow-footed. Much hinged on his partner, who had not yet showed up. The minutes ticked away. The time for a forfeit was approaching, when Lefty asked a club pro to find someone to fill in. The pro returned with a slender man named Altof, who moved like a cat and held his racket in a faintly menacing way.

I began to hit with Altof. In league play, men warm up watchfully, trying to judge their opponent's skills and deficiencies. Watching Altof, I saw all skill and no deficiency. His strokes were effortless, his footwork flawless, and every ball he struck came in deep and hard.

The Birth of Jesus Christ

Before the match, I told my partner, “We need to hit to your man; mine looks *very* solid.” So we hit to Lefty and it worked well enough that the score was tied 4–4 after eight games. Then, suddenly Altof was everywhere, crushing the ball for winner after winner, and we lost the first set 6–4. Before the second set began, I overheard Altof whispering to Lefty, “I need to finish this soon.” I told my partner, “If we lose the second set in fifteen minutes, we’ll know something is up.” Indeed, we lost 6–1 in fifteen minutes, with Altof covering the entire court, punishing us in point after point. As we shook hands at the net, I said, “That was good. Now tell me who you are.”

“Well,” he confessed, “I’m a pro here, just filling in so you could have a match.”

“Oh, I figured that out a while ago,” I smiled. “I want to know *Who Are You?*!”

“OK,” he said, “I’ll tell you. I was a touring pro till a year ago; I played for India’s Davis Cup team.” To translate, of India’s one billion residents, Altof was in the top five. Out of every ten million people, less than one is better than Altof. Now I understood our match.

Matthew 1 follows the same principle: You have to know who the characters are to make sense of the events. And Matthew 1 describes some very unusual events. There is a virgin who is pregnant by the agency of the Holy Spirit. An angel appears to prevent a young man from setting aside an unwed mother. Then the angel picks the name of that child and declares that he will be the Savior.

It’s a strange, incomprehensible story—unless you know the characters. So, who is this child? It’s a good question; people ask it more than once in the Gospels:

- A storm threatens to swamp a boat, drowning everyone on board. Jesus stands up, rebukes the wind and the waves, and they stop at once. His disciples see it and ask, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Matt. 8:27 // Mark 4:41).
- He forgives sins and the bystanders ask, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” (Luke 7:49).
- He enters Jerusalem attended by a crowd that lays cloaks and palm branches on the road before him. They call out, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” and the city asks, “Who is this?” (Matt. 21:10).

- At his trial, the high priest of the Jews asks, “Are you the Christ?” The Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, asks, “Are you the king of the Jews?” (Matt. 26:63; 27:11).

The whole Gospel asks and the whole Gospel tells who this is, starting in chapter 1. This child’s name is *Jesus*, for he will save his people from their sins (1:1, 21). He is the Christ, the one anointed by God for a given task (1:1, 18). He is the *Son of David*—born the king of the Jews (1:1; 2:2). He is the *son of Abraham*—he will bring blessing to the nations (1:1). He is born of the Holy Spirit (1:18). He is *Immanuel*—God with us (1:23).

Jesus received names such as *Jesus* and *Immanuel* not because they were fashionable or manly, but because they were fraught with significance. Each name reveals part of Jesus’ identity. The question “Who is this?” leads next to the question “Why is he important?” The answer leads through the hopes and fears of two thousand years of Israel’s history.

Matthew tells us who Jesus is. Yet his nature is never separated from his work, for he is the Savior for the nations. Matthew 1:1 introduces us to the hero by stating his name and his origin. He is Jesus the Savior, Christ the anointed, the son of Abraham, hence of both pagan and Jewish lineage, and he is the Son of David, the great king.

JESUS, THE SAVIOR

As Matthew introduces Jesus, he quickly reveals several names and titles. Jesus is son of Abraham and Son of David (1:1), therefore, the king of the Jews (2:2, 6). He is the Christ (1:1 and 2:4). First and best, he is Jesus, God with us, to save (1:1, 21–23). Jesus is a Hebrew name. In the Hebrew it is Joshua; in Greek, that becomes Jesus. Joshua means “the LORD [Yahweh] saves” or “The LORD is salvation.” The name Joshua reminds us of the Joshua who succeeded Moses and led Israel into the Promised Land. In his day, the Lord saved his people physically and materially by giving them their land and ending their years of wilderness wandering.

Jesus does not save that way. He did not save Israel from military enemies or from physical danger. Jesus did save some people from physical illness and danger (8:25–26; 9:21–22). But such deliverance pointed beyond itself, to God’s eternal restoration of all things. Psalm 130:7–8 says,

The Birth of Jesus Christ

O Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.

In the long run, God cares about salvation from enemies, disease, and death, but that part of his program lies in the future, when Jesus returns.

By his incarnation, Jesus began to address the problem that lies at the root of all pains and sorrows. He came to save his people from their *sins*. We see this already in the genealogy. Jesus descended from the line of Jewish kings. Matthew names fifteen of them, from David to Jeconiah (also known as Jehoiachin). So Jesus came from a noble line, but if we look hard we see that this regal group was not so righteous. About half of the kings were men of faith. Several, including David, Hezekiah, and Josiah, were great men. Still, even among the believers, some committed striking sins. Jehoshaphat entered into alliances with wicked men (2 Chron. 20:35–37). In foolish pride, Hezekiah showed the treasures of Israel to her powerful enemies, who later plundered them (2 Kings 20:12–18). After years of successful rule, Uzziah became proud and dared to usurp the role of a priest. He entered the Lord’s temple to burn incense on the altar (2 Chron. 26:1–21).

About half the kings in the genealogy were truly wicked. For example, Ahaz worshiped the pagan gods of Assyria. He practiced human sacrifice. He killed one of his own sons. He stripped the gold and silver from the temple and gave it to other kings. He defiled the Lord’s altar and installed pagan altars instead (2 Kings 16). Nor was Ahaz alone. Rehoboam and Jeconiah were almost as bad and Manasseh was worse. Indeed, Manasseh “did more evil than the nations” that the Lord drove out of Canaan. He promoted the worship of idols and murdered innocent people (2 Kings 21:9–18).

So Jesus’ genealogy includes great kings and sordid sinners. Regal as his lineage was, Jesus did not come to praise his forebears, but to save them. If you doubt this, look at the four women who appear in the genealogy. People often wonder why we find women inserted apparently at random in the genealogy. The answer is clear if we notice that common threads appear in the foursome whose mention is interwoven with that of kings: “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" (Matt. 1:5–6). Three women are listed here; the fourth is barely mentioned in 1:3. They are:

- Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, who was the son of Jacob; she played the role of a prostitute (Gen. 37).
- Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho, who helped Israel's spies (Josh. 2, 6).
- Ruth, the Moabite who was adopted into the family of Boaz (Ruth 1–4).
- Bathsheba, the paramour of David and the wife of a Hittite (2 Sam. 11–12).

Within this quartet, all but Tamar came from foreign lands or families. They were outside the family of God. Moreover, of the four, three were known prostitutes or adulteresses. Looking at Jesus' genealogy, it is quite clear. He comes from the *human* line, pimples and all. His own people, his own family, needed him to save them from their *sins*.

The last part of Jesus' genealogy shows that Israel was suffering the consequences of its sin (1:11–16). The borders of Israel had failed to hold. The Assyrians dethroned Israel's king and Babylon conquered Judah, deported its leaders, and declared the pitiful remnant to be their vassals.

Jesus' family lost their rank as kings, lost their wealth and land, and nearly lost their identity. We could compare the family of Jesus to the last derelict scion of a once-great family. They were Roosevelts, Lincolns, or Jeffersons, but had fallen far over the years. In any shattered clan, some are drunks, gamblers, or wastrels; others are decent folk, perhaps, but lacking in any great skill or asset. Those are the people Jesus came to save, then and now. We too have low-lives in our family and we have done things that fit a low-life-laden family.

CHRIST, THE ANOINTED ONE

Jesus is a given name. "Christ" eventually became Jesus' second name in Christian usage, but originally it was a title for the Messiah. As a title, it