

Immanuel: God With Us (I)
Matthew 1:1-17
Key Verse: 1:1

"This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham...."

In this passage Matthew traced the genealogy of Jesus to show that he was born in the line of David. This was an essential criterion for the promised Messiah. Matthew proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah who saves his people from their sins. Genealogies are not so important in our times. Most people know about their parents, fewer know about their grandparents, and most know nothing beyond that. Postmodern thinking emphasizes the present, and eschews the past. But God is the God of history. He reveals himself throughout history. The meaning of "Immanuel - God with us" can only be fully understood through a panoramic review of history.

This genealogy begins with an introductory summary in verse 1 and ends with a concluding summary in verse 17. Within these summaries, it is divided into three distinct parts: the period of the patriarchs (2-5), the period of the kings (6-11), and the exile and post-exilic period (12-16). This genealogy is not comprehensive; Matthew omitted some kings. Many people believe that Matthew arranged it in this way to make it easier to memorize. It provided a framework for understanding God's history, just as memorizing the names of presidents does for American history. However, to grasp the meaning, we must look at the main characters in more detail.

I. Jesus the Messiah: the son of David, the son of Abraham (1)

Look at verse 1. "This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham...." In this verse Matthew presents the coming of Jesus as the focal point of God's history. "Jesus" means "Savior." "Messiah" means "God's Anointed," and especially referred to a king. Jesus is the Savior King sent by God. The birth of Jesus was in God's mind before he made the world (1 Pe 1:20). Right after the Fall of man, God promised to send a Savior from the offspring of a woman. God first raised Abraham and David as ancestors of faith. Many important characters, like Moses, are not mentioned in this genealogy. Why are Abraham and David key figures? It is because they had special covenant promises from God which were ultimately fulfilled by the coming of Jesus. Let's consider them briefly. First, Abraham (Gen 12-22). God called Abraham around 2,000 B.C. At that time, Abraham was 75 years old. His wife Sarah was barren. Failure to have a child made them fatalistic and sorrowful. They could have burdened others by sharing their sad story repeatedly. But God promised to bless Abraham. God promised to make him a great nation, make his name great, and make him a blessing to all peoples on earth (Gen 12:2-3). All Abraham had to do was to obey God's call. It was not easy; it required a drastic relocation and a life commitment to God. But the promise was really fantastic. Abraham needed to believe that God was able to do what he promised. Abraham looked at God, not himself. By faith, he went to the land of promise as the Lord directed. In this way God began a personal relationship with Abraham.

God gave clear promises. But practically speaking, God did not give Abraham a son for a long time. God taught Abraham to live by faith and to have a great vision based on God's promises (Gen 15:5). Then, after 25 years, God granted a son, Isaac, to Abraham and Sarah. Isaac means "he laughs" (Gen 17:19), and he turned their sorrow into joy. But one day, God told Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. God wanted Abraham to demonstrate that he loved God more than God's blessings. Abraham was fully prepared to do so. Abraham passed God's test. Afterward, God swore by himself that he would keep the promises he had made to Abraham (Gen 22:16-18). God did this to assure Abraham that it would happen (Heb 6:17).

God fulfilled his promises to Abraham through the nation Israel. But Abraham's heritage is even greater than that. God promised to bless all peoples on earth through his offspring. According to Galatians 3:8, this was the announcement of the gospel in advance to the Gentiles. God's promise to Abraham was a promise to mankind to send the Savior Jesus. God fulfilled his promise. Abraham has become the source of blessing to all nations.

Second, David (1 Sam 13-2 Sam 24). David lived around 1,000 B.C. By that time God's work had advanced significantly. Israel had been formed into a great nation through suffering in Egypt. God delivered them with mighty power through Moses and gave them his law. They conquered the land of promise under the leadership of General Joshua. They endured ups and downs during the period of Judges. Then it came time to establish the king and to unite the kingdom. For this, God chose David, the youngest of eight sons of Jesse, and a shepherd boy. God chose him because he was a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14). God anointed him through the prophet Samuel and the Holy Spirit came upon David in power. David defeated the giant Goliath in mortal combat, delivering Israel from Philistine oppression. Then God put David into difficult training. Due to King Saul's jealousy and frequent

death threats, David had to live as a fugitive. While running for his life, David took care of downcast and disheartened men with the love of God. He fought the enemies of his people at every opportunity. He grew in the heart of God and gained the inner bearing of a shepherd king.

Then God raised David as the king of Judah and of all Israel. David established Jerusalem as the capital city and brought the ark of God there. It was a golden moment in Israel's history. God's presence was at the center of the nation and they worshiped only the one true God. A king after God's heart, who obeyed the word of God, reigned with peace and love. Justice and righteousness filled the land. A united Israel enjoyed victory over their enemies, and prosperity. It was the greatest picture of God's peace that the world had ever known. If only it could last forever! At that time, the Lord promised David that he would raise up his offspring to succeed him and establish his throne and his kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:12-13). It looked forward to the everlasting kingdom of God, ruled by God's anointed King. Jewish people referred to this coming king as the Messiah.

After receiving this promise, David became complacent. Sadly he fell into the sin of adultery, and then murder, with grievous consequences. David's family and the kingdom were devastated. Many people had to suffer the wages of sin together with David. But the Lord did not abandon David. The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to rebuke him. Upon hearing God's rebuke, David repented his sins and was forgiven. Then, after a time of painful discipline, God restored David's heart and his kingdom. David bore God's covenant promise through repentant faith and by God's grace.

In Romans, Paul mentions Abraham and David together as examples of faith. They believed in God who justifies the wicked. They believed in God who forgives the sins of his people and uses them by his grace. They did not deserve God's blessings. They made mistakes and failed badly while living as God's servants. But they believed God's forgiveness of sins. Paul tells us to have the same faith. God wants us believe the forgiveness of sins and to stand in his redemptive history depending on his grace alone.

II. The patriarchs (2-5)

Look at verse 2. "Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers...." The remarkable fact here is that these patriarchs were chosen by God, not by man. Abraham wanted Ishmael, his son by a maidservant, to be the covenant bearer. But God told him, "No. It is through Isaac that your offspring shall be reckoned" (Gen 17:21; 21:12). God--not Abraham--decided who the covenant bearer would be. God's sovereign election is even clearer in the next generation. Jacob and his brother Esau were twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah. Esau was firstborn. However, before they were born, the Lord said, "...the older will serve the younger" (Gen 25:23). It meant that God chose Jacob to bear the covenant. It is God alone who chooses, raises and uses people from one generation to the next. This is why we must pray earnestly for our children. Among Jacob's sons, Judah became the covenant bearer. If we read Genesis carefully, this may surprise us. Joseph is the hero of Genesis. Judah seems to be more wretched than he was good. He was a ringleader in selling Joseph into slavery. He left his godly father Jacob to live among the Gentiles. He married a Canaanite woman and had wicked children. However, Judah later repented sincerely. Through repentance, he became a faithful man and a good influence to his brothers. At the end of Jacob's life, when he blessed his sons in the sight of God, he proclaimed Judah the covenant son (Gen 49:10). In fact, one name of Jesus is "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Rev 7:5). God uses repentant sinners in his work and history.

The stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah and his brothers, and Perez and Zerah are recorded in Genesis. So we can know something about them. However, little is known about Hezron, Ram, or Amminadab. During their lifetimes, Israel was in bondage in Egypt. Though the people of Israel suffered greatly, the line of covenant bearers was maintained. After the exodus, when Moses called for the first census of Israelites, Nahshon was listed as the representative of the tribe of Judah (Num 1:7).

Salmon, Boaz, Obed and Jesse lived in the transitional period from the exodus and the conquest of Canaan, to the time of the Judges, and into the time of the kings. We can find Boaz's story in the book of Ruth. His mother was a Gentile woman, Rahab. Though his blood was mixed, his spirit was that of a true Jew. He was a noble man of godly character. He valued God's history. He knew God's heart and was mindful of the needy. He had faith to marry according to God's leading, even with a Gentile woman. He exemplifies the kind of persons God wanted to raise in Israel, as well as God's hope for Israel to embrace the Gentile world with faith.

Among the patriarchs, Matthew mentions three women: Tamar, Rahab and Ruth. It was unusual in that time, for women were not regarded equally with men. However, to Matthew, they were women of great faith in God. On the basis of their faith, Matthew respected them and recognized them in the history of God. Let's consider them briefly. First, Tamar (Gen 38). Tamar married Judah's first son, Er. After he died due to his wickedness, she was given to Judah's second son Onan. He also died for his wickedness. Then Judah promised Shelah, his third son, to Tamar. Since Shelah was too young to marry, Judah told her to wait. In fact, Judah did not intend to keep his promise. He was afraid that Shelah would die too. Tamar waited patiently, but finally realized that Judah was not going to give Shelah to her. She seemed destined to suffer the fate of a barren widow. At that moment she did something extraordinary. She disguised herself as a prostitute, slept with Judah, and became pregnant. Three months later, Judah was told that Tamar was pregnant and guilty of prostitution. Judah ordered her to be burned to death. But when she produced evidence that Judah was the father, he relented. Judah realized that he was an unfaithful sinner, while Tamar was a woman of courageous faith and great faithfulness. God blessed her with twin sons, one of whom became the covenant bearer. One act of faith turned Tamar's destiny from to God's abundant blessing.

Second, Rahab (Joshua 2,6). She was a Canaanite prostitute who lived in Jericho. When she heard how the God of Israel had dried up the Red Sea for the Israelites and given them victory over enemies, she realized that he is the living God. She was sure that God would give Canaan to Israel. She believed the message of God's judgment on her people. So she cooperated with Jewish spies to the detriment of her own people. Humanly speaking, she was a traitor. Yet she stood with God and his people in an act of faith, risking her life. The author of Hebrews and James recognize her as a woman of faith and a heroine in God's history. God blessed her faith, spared her and her family, and included her in the genealogy of Jesus.

Third, Ruth (Ruth 1-4). She was a Moabitess. She married a Jewish man, the son of Naomi. When he died, Naomi urged her to go back to her people and to marry among them. But Ruth refused. She told Naomi, "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ru 1:16b). Ruth committed her future to God, and to Naomi, even if it meant she would never marry again. She followed Naomi to Israel. In God's providence, she met Boaz. At Naomi's urging, Ruth boldly proposed to Boaz. She risked painful rejection and her reputation as a good woman. God blessed her faith. She married Boaz and gave birth to Obed, the grandfather of King David.

We learn faith in God from these women. They were not Israelites. They did not know much about God. But when they confronted the living God, they believed in him and made decisions to risk their lives to express their faith. They received God's grace and power in times of trouble. Their destinies were changed from cursed to blessed, from defeated to victorious, from death to life. Faith in God, regardless of human condition, is the way to turn adversity into great victory. Furthermore, the faith of these women may have encouraged Mary, who had to bear terrible misunderstanding to give birth to Jesus. No matter what our challenge or adversity, let's believe in Immanuel, God with us. If God is for us, who can be against us? Immanuel can turn our defeat into great victory.

III. The kings (6-11)

Matthew lists fifteen kings in his genealogy. First and foremost is David, who alone is called "King." He was the shepherd king raised by God through divine discipline, and the standard by which all who followed him were measured. After him there were good kings and evil kings. Good kings include Solomon, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Uzziah, Jotham, Hezekiah and Josiah. Evil kings include Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah, Ahaz, Manasseh and Amon. Some kings started well and finished poorly, like Solomon. Other kings started badly and finished with repentance, like Manasseh. Good kings begat good kings: Asa and Jehoshaphat. Good kings begat evil kings: Jehoshaphat and Jehoram. Evil kings begat evil kings: Rehoboam and Abijah. Evil kings begat good kings: Amon and Josiah. In the books of the kings, the author highlights the influence of mothers. Yet the underlying principle is that grace does not necessarily flow from one generation to the next. Nor does the power of sin necessarily rule from one generation to the next. Any king who had personal faith in God and received his grace could be a good king. Any king who did not have faith in God became an evil king.

Among the kings there was Manasseh. He reigned for 55 years, longer than any other king of Judah. He may also have been the most evil king. He led Judah into gross and vile idolatry. Jewish tradition says he was the one who put Isaiah the prophet to death by having him sawed in two. As a result, God punished Manasseh and he was carried off to Babylon with a hook in his nose. But there, he humbled himself before the Lord and sought the favor of the Lord. The Lord was moved by his prayer and restored him to his throne. Afterward Manasseh knew that the Lord is God and he did his best to serve God. It was too late to save his nation. But he himself was saved. We learn a great lesson

here. It is never too late to repent, for God is ready to forgive and restore even the most terrible sinner. We can also see God's patience. God bore with the most evil king for the longest period of time. God's patience finally led Manasseh to repent (See 2 Chr 33).

The striking truth about the period of the kings is God's faithfulness. God bore the good and evil, the ups and downs of Israelite rulers and kept a descendant of David on the throne. God was faithful to his promise.

IV. The exile and the post-exilic period (12-16)

Verses 11-12 both mention Judah's exile to Babylon. This was not just a random event. It was precisely God's divine discipline upon Judah due to their sins (2 Ch 36:15-19). The Babylonian army conquered the city of Jerusalem after a long siege. They captured King Zedekiah, as he was trying to escape with his entourage. They put his sons to death in front of him and gouged out his eyes, so that the last visible memory he had was one of crippling sorrow. They burned the temple, the palace, and all the houses and important buildings in Jerusalem. They broke down the walls. Then they took all the able and talented people to Babylon, leaving only the poor in Jerusalem to work the vineyards and fields. In this way, the Lord removed Judah and Jerusalem from his presence (2 Ki 23:26-27).

The purpose of the exile was to purify the people of Judah from their compromise and idol worship. It lasted 70 years exactly, as Jeremiah had prophesied (Jer 25:11-13). It was a time of great suffering, as we learn from Psalm 137:3-4: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" The Jews grieved over their loss. And yet, in that time of sorrow, God revealed his promises to send the Messiah more vividly. God raised the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel, who foretold in even more detail the coming of God's King and his kingdom. The period after the exile was a time of humiliation for Judah. By the decree of the Persian King Cyrus, some Jews returned to Jerusalem and began to rebuild. Zerubbabel led the rebuilding of the temple. Nehemiah led the restoration of the walls. Ezra led a spiritual reformation through repentant Bible study. Yet Jerusalem regained only a shadow of her former splendor. The new temple was simple and plain. Those who had seen the former temple cried when they saw it. The Jews lived under foreign oppression during succeeding conquests by Persia, Syria, Greece, and Rome. Their human glory disappeared. Yet, at this time, the true hope of the coming Messiah and his kingdom burned brightly.

Because God loved his people, he disciplined them. When excessive human blessings had spoiled them, God sent trouble. Though painful, these were the greatest expression of his love. Through troubles the Lord purifies the hearts of his people. The Lord restores them to love him first and foremost, and to worship him alone. This is the way of life and blessing. The Lord disciplined the Israelites for their good. Yet, after doing so, he kindly restored them and gave the best blessing, the coming of the Messiah.

In this genealogy, we have thought about many people and events. There have been times of victory and success for God's people, as well as times of failure and sorrows. But one thing has been constant. God kept his promises without fail. God is faithful. God's word is trustworthy. God is with his people through his promises and he works according to his promises. His greatest promise was to send the Messiah. God fulfilled this promise through many struggles, difficulties, disappointments and failures of his people.

We have an advantage over the Jews, for we can study this genealogy in light of the gospel. Now we know that Jesus has come as our Savior King. Jesus, though in very nature God, came down to this world, took on human flesh, and lived among sinful people. Jesus defeated the devil, healed the sick, drove out demons, and even raised the dead. Jesus died on a cross for our sins and rose again to life. He ascended to heaven and pours out the Holy Spirit on all who accept him with faith. Now we can have God living in us through the Holy Spirit. We also have a great promise: Jesus' coming again in power and great glory to establish God's eternal kingdom. Our faithful God will keep his promise without fail. Let's believe this!

Still, we learn an important lesson through this study. It is to see Immanuel, "God with us" through the span of history, not only through our personal experience with him. This adds deep assurance to our faith. During this Christmas season, let's review how God has been with us personally, in our families, community, nation and world mission. Let's consider the promises God has given us and how he has fulfilled them. This will give us, not just an

emotional lift, but a deep abiding faith that can stand firm amidst the ups and downs of life. This Christmas, let's appreciate Immanuel and put our faith in him newly. May God richly bless you.