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The Gracious King

(Matthew 1:1–17)

1

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

To Abraham was born Isaac; and to Isaac, Jacob; and to Jacob, Judah and his brothers; and to Judah were born Perez and Zerah by Tamar; and to Perez was born Hezron; and to Hezron, Ram; and to Ram was born Amminadab; and to Amminadab, Nahshon; and to Nahshon, Salmon; and to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab; and to Boaz was born Obed by Ruth; and to Obed, Jesse; and to Jesse was born David the king. And to David was born Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah; and to Solomon was born Rehoboam; and to Rehoboam, Abijah; and to Abijah, Asa; and to Asa was born Jehoshaphat; and to Jehoshaphat, Joram; and to Joram, Uzziah; and to Uzziah was born Jotham; and to Jotham, Ahaz; and to Ahaz, Hezekiah; and to Hezekiah was born Manasseh; and to Manasseh, Amon; and to Amon, Josiah; and to Josiah were born Jeconiah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon, to Jeconiah was born Shealtiel; and to Shealtiel, Zerubbabel; and to Zerubbabel was born Abiud; and to Abiud, Eliakim; and to Eliakim, Azor; and to Azor was born Zadok; and to Zadok, Achim; and to Achim, Eliud; and to Eliud was born Eleazar; and to Eleazar, Matthan; and to Matthan, Jacob; and to Jacob was born Joseph the

husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

Therefore all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ fourteen generations. (1:1-17)

As discussed in the introduction, one of Matthew's major purposes in his gospel, and the primary purpose of chapters 1 and 2, is to establish Jesus' right to Israel's kingship. To any honest observer, and certainly to Jews who knew and believed their own Scriptures, these two chapters vindicate Jesus' claim before Pilate: "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world" (John 18:37).

Consistent with that purpose of revealing Jesus to be the Christ (Messiah) and the King of the Jews, Matthew begins his gospel by showing Jesus' lineage from the royal line of Israel. If Jesus is to be heralded and proclaimed king there must be proof that He comes from the recognized royal family.

Messiah's royal line began with David. Through the prophet Nathan, God promised that it would be David's descendants through whom He would bring the great King who would ultimately reign over Israel and establish His eternal kingdom (2 Sam. 7:12-16). The promise was not fulfilled in Solomon, David's son who succeeded him, or in any other king who ruled in Israel or Judah; and the people waited for another one to be born of David's line to fulfill the prophecy. At the time Jesus was born the Jews were still anticipating the arrival of the promised monarch and the restored glory of the kingdom.

The Jews' concern for pedigrees, however, existed long before they had a king. After they entered Canaan under Joshua and conquered the region God had promised to them, the land was carefully and precisely divided into territories for each tribe—except the priestly tribe of Levi, for whom special cities were designated. In order to know where to live, each Israelite family had to determine accurately the tribe to which it belonged (see Num. 26; 34-35). And in order to qualify for priestly function, a Levite had to prove his descent from Levi. After the return from exile in Babylon, certain "sons of the priests" were not allowed to serve in the priesthood because "their ancestral registration . . . could not be located" (Ezra 2:61-62).

The transfer of property also required accurate knowledge of the family tree (see, e.g., Ruth 3-4). Even under Roman rule, the census of Jews in Palestine was based on tribe—as can be seen from the fact that Joseph and Mary were required to register in "Bethlehem, because he [Joseph] was of the house and family of David" (Luke 2:4). We learn from the Jewish historian Josephus that in New Testament times many Jewish families maintained detailed and highly valued ancestral files. Before his conversion, the apostle Paul had been greatly concerned about his lineage from "the tribe of Benjamin" (see Rom. 11:1; 2 Cor. 11:22; Phil. 3:5). For Jews, tribal identification and line of descent were all-important.

It is both interesting and significant that since the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 no genealogies exist that can trace the ancestry of any Jew now living. The primary significance of that fact is that, for those Jews who still look for the Messiah, his lineage to David could never be established. Jesus Christ is the last verifiable claimant to the throne of David, and therefore to the messianic line.

Matthew's genealogy presents a descending line, from **Abraham** through **David**, through **Joseph**, to **Jesus, who is called Christ**. Luke's genealogy presents an ascending line, starting from Jesus and going back through David, Abraham, and even to "Adam, the son of God" (Luke 3:23-38). Luke's record is apparently traced from Mary's side, the Eli of Luke 3:23 probably being Joseph's father-in-law (often referred to as a father) and therefore Mary's natural father. Matthew's intent is to validate Jesus' royal claim by showing His legal descent from David through Joseph, who was Jesus' legal, though not natural, father. Luke's intent is to trace Jesus' actual royal blood ancestry through his mother, thereby establishing His racial lineage from David. Matthew follows the royal line through David and Solomon, David's son and successor to the throne. Luke follows the royal line through Nathan, another son of David. Jesus was therefore the blood descendant of David through Mary and the legal descendant of David through Joseph. Genealogically, Jesus was perfectly qualified to take the throne of David.

It is essential to note that in His virgin birth Jesus not only was divinely conceived but through that miracle was protected from regal disqualification because of Joseph's being a descendant of **Jeconiah** (v. 12). Because of that king's wickedness, God had declared of Jeconiah (also called Jehoiachin or Coniah) that, though he was in David's line, "no man of his descendants will prosper, sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah" (Jer. 22:30). That curse would have precluded Jesus' right to kingship had He been the natural son of Joseph, who was in Jeconiah's line. Jesus' legal descent from David, which was always traced through the father, came through Jeconiah to Joseph. But His blood descent, *and His human right to rule*, came through Mary, who was not in Jeconiah's lineage. Thus the curse on Jeconiah's offspring was circumvented, while still maintaining the royal privilege.

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (1:1)

Biblos (**book**) can also refer to a record or account, as is the case here. Matthew is giving a brief record of the **genealogy** (*genesis*, "beginning, origin") of **Jesus** Christ. **Jesus** is from the Greek equivalent of Jeshua, or Jehoshua, which means "Jehovah (Yahweh) saves." It was the name the angel told Joseph to give to the Son who had been miraculously conceived in his betrothed, Mary, because this One who would soon be born would indeed "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Christos (Christ) is the Greek form of the Hebrew *māshīah* (Eng., messiah), which means "anointed one." Israel's prophets, priests, and kings were anointed,

and Jesus was anointed as all three. He was *the* Anointed One, *the* Messiah, whom the Jews had long expected to come as their great deliverer and monarch.

Yet because of their unbelief and misunderstanding of Scripture, many Jews refused to recognize Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. Some rejected Him for the very reason that His parents *were* known to them. When He went back to His hometown of Nazareth He “began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they became astonished, and said, ‘Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us?’ ” (Matt. 13:54-56). On another occasion, others in Jerusalem said of Jesus, “The rulers do not really know that this is the Christ, do they? However, we know where this man is from; but whenever the Christ may come, no one knows where He is from” (John 7:26-27). A short while later, “Some of the multitude therefore, when they heard these words, were saying, ‘This certainly is the Prophet.’ Others were saying, ‘This is the Christ.’ Still others were saying, ‘Surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee, is He?’ ” (John 7:40-41). Still others, better taught in the Scriptures but unaware of Jesus’ lineage and birthplace, said, “Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” (v. 42).

The genealogy establishes the Messiah’s royal lineage. Matthew’s intent is not to have the reader digress into a study of each person listed, but is to show that all of these persons point to the royalty of Christ.

THE GRACIOUS KING

Even so, from Matthew’s genealogy we learn more than Jesus’ lineage. We also see beautiful reflections of God’s grace. Jesus was sent by a God of grace to be a King of grace. He would not be a King of law and of iron force, but a King of grace. His royal credentials testify of royal grace. And the people He chose to be His ancestors reveal the wonder of grace, and give hope to all sinners.

The graciousness of this King and of the God who sent Him can be seen in the genealogy in four places and ways. We will look at these in logical, rather than chronological, order.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE CHOICE OF ONE WOMAN

And to Jacob was born Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. (1:16)

God showed His grace to Mary by choosing her to be the mother of Jesus. Although descended from the royal line of David, Mary was an ordinary, unknown young woman. Contrary to claims of her own immaculate conception (her being conceived miraculously in her own mother’s womb), Mary was just as much a sinner as all other human beings ever born. She was likely much better, morally and

spiritually, than most people of her time, but she was not sinless. She was deeply devout and faithful to the Lord, as she demonstrated by her humble and submissive response to the angel's announcement (Luke 1:38).

Mary needed a Savior, as she herself acknowledged at the very beginning of her song of praise, often called the Magnificat: "My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant" (Luke 1:46-48). The notions of her being co-redemptrix and co-mediator with Christ are wholly unscriptural and were never a part of early church doctrine. Those heretical ideas came into the church several centuries later, through accommodations to pagan myths that originated in the Babylonian mystery religions.

Nimrod, a grandson of Ham, one of Noah's three sons, founded the great cities of Babel (Babylon), Erech, Accad, Calneh, and Nineveh (Gen. 10:10-11). It was at Babel that the first organized system of idolatry began with the tower built there. Nimrod's wife, Semiramis, became the first high priestess of idolatry, and Babylon became the fountainhead of all evil systems of religion. In the last days, "the great harlot" will have written on her forehead, "BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (Rev. 17:5). When Babylon was destroyed, the pagan high priest at that time fled to Pergamum (or Pergamos; called "where Satan's throne is" in Rev. 2:13) and then to Rome. By the fourth century A.D. much of the polytheistic paganism of Rome had found its way into the church. It was from that source that the ideas of Lent, of Mary's immaculate conception, and of her being the "queen of heaven" originated. In the pagan legends, Semiramis was miraculously conceived by a sunbeam, and her son, Tammuz, was killed and was raised from the dead after forty days of fasting by his mother (the origin of Lent). The same basic legends were found in counterpart religions throughout the ancient world. Semiramis was known variously as Ashtoreth, Isis, Aphrodite, Venus, and Ishtar. Tammuz was known as Baal, Osiris, Eros, and Cupid.

Those pagan systems had infected Israel centuries before the coming of Christ. It was to Ishtar, "the queen of heaven," that the wicked and rebellious Israelite exiles in Egypt insisted on turning (Jer. 44:17-19; cf. 7:18). While exiled in Babylon with his fellow Jews, Ezekiel had a vision from the Lord about the "abominations" some Israelites were committing even in the Temple at Jerusalem—practices that included "weeping for Tammuz" (Ezek. 8:13-14). Here we see some of the origins of the mother-child cult, which has drawn Mary into its grasp.

The Bible knows nothing of Mary's grace except that which she received from the Lord. She was the recipient, never the dispenser, of grace. The literal translation of "favored one" (Luke 1:28) is "one endowed with grace." Just as all the rest of fallen mankind, Mary needed God's grace and salvation. That is why she "rejoiced in God [her] Savior" (Luke 1:47). She received a special measure of the Lord's grace by being chosen to be the mother of Jesus; but she was never a source of grace. God's grace chose a sinful woman to have the unequalled privilege of giving birth to the Messiah.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE DESCENDANTS OF TWO MEN

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (1:1)

Both **David** and **Abraham** were sinners, yet by God's grace they were ancestors of the Messiah, the **Christ**.

David sinned terribly in committing adultery with Bathsheba and then compounded the sin by having her husband, Uriah, killed so that he could marry her. As a warrior he had slaughtered countless men, and for that reason was not allowed to build the Temple (1 Chron. 22:8). David was a classic example of a poor father, who failed to discipline his children, one of whom (Absalom) even tried to usurp the throne from his own father by armed rebellion.

Abraham, though a man of great faith, twice lied about his wife, Sarah. Out of fear for his life and lack of trust in God, he told two different pagan kings that she was his sister (Gen. 12:11-19; 20:1-18). In so doing he brought shame on Sarah, on himself, and on the God in whom he believed and whom he claimed to serve.

Yet God made Abraham the father of His chosen people, Israel, from whom the Messiah would arise; and He made David father of the royal line from whom the Messiah would descend. Jesus was the Son of David by royal descent and Son of Abraham by racial descent.

God's grace also extended to the intervening descendants of those two men. Isaac was the son of promise, and a type of the sacrificial Savior, being himself willingly offered to God (Gen. 22:1-13). God gave the name of Isaac's son, Jacob, (later renamed Israel) to His chosen people. Jacob's sons (**Judah** and his brothers) became heads of the tribes of Israel. All of those men were sinful and at times were weak and unfaithful. But God was continually faithful to them, and His grace was always with them, even in times of rebuke and discipline.

Solomon, David's son and successor to the throne, was peaceful and wise, but also in many ways foolish. He sowed seeds of both domestic and spiritual corruption by marrying hundreds of wives—most of them from pagan countries throughout the world of that time. They turned Solomon's heart, and the hearts of many other Israelites, away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1-8). The unity of Israel was broken, and the kingdom soon became divided. But the royal line remained unbroken, and God's promise to David eventually was fulfilled. God's grace prevailed.

A careful look at the descendants both of Abraham and of David (vv. 2-16) reveals people who were often characterized by unfaithfulness, immorality, idolatry, and apostasy. But God's dealing with them was always characterized by grace. **Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham**, was sent to overcome the failures of both those men and of all their descendants, and to accomplish what they could never have accomplished. The King of grace came through the line of two sinful men.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE HISTORY OF THREE ERAS

Therefore all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ fourteen generations. (1:17)

From Matthew's summary of the genealogy we see God's grace at work in three periods, or eras, of Israel's history.

The first period, **from Abraham to David**, was that of the patriarchs, and of Moses, Joshua, and the judges. It was a period of wandering, of enslavement in a foreign land, of deliverance, of covenant-making and law-giving, and of conquest and victory.

The second period, **from David to the deportation to Babylon**, was that of the monarchy, when Israel, having insisted on having human kings like all the nations around them, discovered that those kings more often led them away from God and into trouble than to God and into peace and prosperity. That was a period of almost uninterrupted decline, degeneracy, apostasy, and tragedy. There was defeat, conquest, exile, and the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. Only in David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah do we see much evidence of godliness.

The third period, **from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ**, was that of captivity, exile, frustration, and of marking time. Most of the men Matthew mentions in this period—from Shealtiel to Jacob the father of Joseph—are unknown to us apart from this list. It is a period shrouded largely in darkness and characterized largely by inconsequence. It was Israel's Dark Ages.

Nevertheless, God's grace was at work on behalf of His people through all three periods. The national genealogy of Jesus is one of mingled glory and pathos, heroism and disgrace, renown and obscurity. Israel rises, falls, stagnates, and finally rejects and crucifies the Messiah that God sent *to* them. But God, in His infinite grace, yet sent His Messiah *through* them.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE INCLUSION OF FOUR OUTCASTS

and to Judah were born Perez and Zerah by Tamar; and to Perez was born Hezron; and to Hezron, Ram; and to Ram was born Amminadab; and to Amminadab, Nahshon; and to Nahshon, Salmon; and to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab; and to Boaz was born Obed by Ruth; and to Obed, Jesse; and to Jesse was born David the king. And to David was born Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah. (1:3-6)

Matthew's genealogy also shows us the work of God's grace in His choosing four former outcasts, each of them women (the only women listed until the

mention of Mary), through whom the Messiah and great King would descend. These women are exceptional illustrations of God's grace and are included for that reason in the genealogy that otherwise is all men.

The first outcast was **Tamar**, the Canaanite daughter-in-law of **Judah**. God had taken the lives of her husband, Er, and of his next oldest brother, Onan, because of their wickedness. Judah then promised the young, childless widow that his third son, Shelah, would become her husband and raise up children in his brother's name when he grew up. After Judah failed to keep that promise, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and tricked him into having sexual relations with her. From that illicit union were born twin sons, **Perez and Zerah**. The sordid story is found in Genesis 38. As we learn from the genealogy, **Tamar** and **Perez** joined **Judah** in the messianic line. Despite prostitution and incest, God's grace fell on all three of those undeserving persons, including a desperate and deceptive Gentile harlot.

The second outcast also was a woman and a Gentile. She, too, was guilty of prostitution, but for her, unlike Tamar, it was a profession. **Rahab**, an inhabitant of Jericho, protected the two Israelite men Joshua sent to spy out the city. She lied to the messengers of the king of Jericho in order to save the spies; but because of her fear of Him and her kind act toward His people, God spared her life and the lives of her family when Jericho was besieged and destroyed (Josh. 2:1-21; 6:22-25). God's grace not only spared her life but brought her into the messianic line, as the wife of **Salmon** and the mother of the godly **Boaz**, who was David's great-grandfather.

The third outcast was **Ruth**, the wife of **Boaz**. Like Tamar and Rahab, **Ruth** was a Gentile. After her first husband, an Israelite, had died, she returned to Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth was a godly, loving, and sensitive woman who had accepted the Lord as her own God. Her people, the pagan Moabites, were the product of the incestuous relations of Lot with his two unmarried daughters. In order to preserve the family line, because they had no husbands or brothers, each of the daughters got their father drunk and caused him to unknowingly have sexual relations with them. The son produced by Lot's union with his oldest daughter was Moab, father of a people who became one of Israel's most implacable enemies. Mahlon, the Israelite man who married **Ruth**, did so in violation of the Mosaic law (Deut. 7:3; cf. 23:3; Ezra 9:2; Neh. 13:23) and many Jewish writers say his early death, and that of his brother, were a divine judgment on their disobedience. Though she was a Moabite and former pagan, with no right to marry an Israelite, God's grace not only brought **Ruth** into the family of Israel, but later, through Boaz, into the royal line. She became the grandmother of Israel's great King David.

The fourth outcast was Bathsheba. She is not identified in the genealogy by name, but is mentioned simply as the wife of **David** and the former **wife of Uriah**. As already mentioned, David committed adultery with her, had her husband sent to the battlefield to be killed, and then took her as his own wife. The son produced by the adultery died in infancy, but the next son born to them was **Solomon** (2 Sam. 11:1-27; 12:14, 24), successor to David's throne and continuer of the messianic line.

By God's grace, Bathsheba became the wife of David, the mother of Solomon, and an ancestor of the Messiah.

The genealogy of Jesus Christ is immeasurably more than a list of ancient names; it is even more than a list of Jesus' human forebears. It is a beautiful testimony to God's grace and to the ministry of His Son, Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners, who "did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:13). If He has called sinners by grace to be His forefathers, should we be surprised when He calls them by grace to be His descendants? The King presented here is truly the King of grace!