



The Genealogy of Jesus Christ

Matthew 1:1-17

Rev. Jerry Hamstra
Riverside ARP Church
December 23, 2018

I want to begin this morning by thinking a little about the idea of celebrating Christmas. Of course, we are not commanded to celebrate Christmas and a huge part of Christmas in our society has nothing to do with the birth of Christ. It is about the spirit of giving or about parties or about presents or about Santa Claus. It is more than anything else an atmosphere and for the most part, if he is there at all, Jesus is very far in the background as part of the atmosphere. That is Christmas in our society. It has little to do with Christ.

It's different of course for the church. We enjoy many of the same things that the world enjoys about Christmas, but we put a lot more emphasis on the birth of Christ which historically is the reason for the season, so we have a Jubilate where we sing some Christmas songs and hear some Scripture readings. We have some church services where we focus on advent themes and today both sermons are about the significance of the birth of Christ.

To really celebrate the birth of Christ we have to realize that there is a great difference between celebrating the birth of Christ and what Christmas is mostly about in our experience of family get-togethers and the Christmas atmosphere and Christmas traditions. There is nothing wrong with all of that stuff, but it's far removed from a response to what the Bible teaches us about the significance of the birth of Christ.

To really celebrate the birth of Christ is to enter into the thought-world of the Bible and experientially to enter into the things about the birth of Christ that the Bible holds out to us as reason for joy and celebration. And the things that the Bible holds out to us as reasons for joy and celebration are the same for the birth of Christ as they are for the overall message of the Bible. Indeed the birth of Christ is part of the

heart of the message of the Bible which is that God has a wonderful plan of salvation that involves saving us from the guilt and power of our sins, reconciling us to God, making us holy and establishing the rule of God over the whole creation. There are two main aspects to the plan – there is the little picture of individual salvation and there is the big picture of the kingdom of God and the defeat of evil. And so to truly respond to the biblical message about the birth of Christ is to deeply enter into the joy of being reconciled to God, of being set free from the power of sin, of the goal of God’s plan to conquer all evil and fill the world with his glory as the waters cover the bottom of the sea.

As I said, there is no obligation to celebrate Christmas as such. But we are obligated to celebrate the birth of Christ and that is a call to celebrate the biblical meaning and implications of that birth. And that has to do with the same sort of thing that we focus on whenever we are loving God and doing what he commands. It has to do with our personal relationship with God, with worshipping God, with thanking God for his salvation and with seeking to live life to the glory of God. It has to do with thinking the thoughts that the Bible would have us think, ordering our priorities and values as the Bible would have us order them. It has to do with loving God and delighting in him and hating evil and fighting against it. The call to celebrate the birth of Christ is just a version of the call to seek first the kingdom of God or the call of Paul in Colossians 3:1-2, to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on the earth.”

What is so wonderful about the birth of Christ? The answer is the same as the answer to the question what is so wonderful about God’s plan of salvation. The birth of Christ is a significant moment in the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation which is all about God’s mission to conquer sin and death and Satan and establish his Kingdom on earth – to save his people from their sins and to overcome all opposition to his reign and to bring about the new heavens and new earth which will be populated by God and a people who love him because of who he is and because he has saved them from their sins. On the individual level, the plan of God is about the salvation of sinners so that they are made right with God and are learning to love God with all their hearts and to serve other

people rather than living only for themselves and the joys of this life. We can only really enter into the celebration of the birth of Christ if we are saved so that our hopes and dreams are in line with what is important to God.

So we are going to look at these first 17 verses of Matthew 1. It does not make for exciting reading, but it does convey an exciting meaning. This is the introduction to Matthew's account of Jesus and his mission and significance. From the perspective of the Jewish way of thinking about things, this is a very meaningful and significant way of introducing Jesus. It is telling us that Jesus is the goal of the history that runs from Abraham to David to Jesus. It is telling us, in other words, that Jesus is the goal of Israel's history. The whole history of Israel was a preparation for the birth of Jesus.

Let's look at the structure of the genealogy. Verse 1 says, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Verse 17 says, "So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations." So the genealogy covers the whole of the history of Israel from Abraham to the birth of Jesus Christ. And the point is that all of the history represented by this list of names leads to Jesus. As Chris Wright puts it in his classic called *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament*, "What Matthew is saying to us by beginning in this way is that we will only understand Jesus properly if we see him in the light of this whole story which he completes and brings to its climax." (p.2)

First of all, the genealogy shows that Jesus was a true Israelite. His ancestors could be traced all the way back to Abraham through Isaac who was the son of the promise. This connects Jesus to Israel's purpose in God's plan for the salvation of the world.

The biblical story tells us of the problem of sin and evil in the first 11 chapters of Genesis. There we read of the creation of the world and Adam and Eve and then the fall into sin and then of the spread of evil by means of sinful people spreading throughout the world. Chapters 3-11 of the book of Genesis present the spread of sin as threatening any positive, God-glorifying result in God's world. By the time you come to

Noah there is only one godly family left on the earth and before God called Abram, there were none. By the time of Abram, all human beings were rebels against God. That is where the human race ended up in the period that is described in the first 11 chapters of Genesis. Not one God-fearing person left. The flood had not made a difference. By the time of the tower of Babel the whole human race was united in its rebellion against God.

God's original intention of human-beings ruling the creation on his behalf and for his glory was not being realized, and unless God did something to change that situation there would never be a time when the creation would be full of image-bearers of God living for the glory of God and enjoying fellowship with him which was God intention when he created the world and mankind in his image. This is the context in which the call of Abram is embedded. The human race left to its own resources had all turned away from God.

So, God chose one of those rebels, named Abram, and determined that through this man and his family he was going to bring about a world filled with faithful God-fearers who would love him and serve him and reap the benefits of living with God and for God.

Joshua 24:2 makes the point that before God called him Abram was part of a family of idol worshippers: "²And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods."

This is the background to God's plan of salvation and so this is also the background for the meaning of the birth of Christ. Jesus was born to be the saviour of the world and the reason that the world needed saving is sin. There is no appreciating a biblically shaped celebration of the birth of Christ without some understanding of this background both on an individual level – that is my sin – and on a world-wide level – the fact that we are all sinners. God's plan of salvation has to do with overcoming sin and its consequences and that is the context in the light of which the birth of Christ must be understood. The significance of the fact that the genealogy of Jesus is traced back to Abraham is that it shows that Jesus belonged to the offspring of Abraham and so his

meaning is tied up with their meaning in the history of God's plan to deal with the sin and its devastating consequences.

The meaning of Abraham and his offspring in the history of God's plan of salvation is summarized by these words of God to Abram at the time when God called him out of paganism and made him into the father of the nation who would be central to God's purpose to defeat the curse of sin: In Genesis 12:3, God says to Abram, "[I]n you all the families of the world shall be blessed." This cryptic promise is ultimately about the salvation of the world through the offspring of Abram. In the New Testament, in Galatians 3, Paul explains the relationship of this promise to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. He says there in verse 8: "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'" Furthermore in Galatians 3:16 Paul makes the connection between this promise and Jesus Christ. There he writes, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ."

So the promise made to Abram that through his offspring God was going to bring blessing to the world is ultimately fulfilled through **the** offspring of Abraham, who is Christ and the salvation that he would accomplish. This is Matthew's point in showing that Jesus Christ was descended from Abraham. Matthew is going to tell the story of Jesus and his significance and the very first thing he does is to connect Jesus to Abraham by means of this genealogy. So when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we do so in the light of Jesus' significance and this genealogy shows us that Jesus is the one through whom the purpose of the offspring of Abraham to be a blessing to the world is going to be fulfilled.

And the apostle Paul refers to all of this in his exposition of the good news about Jesus which is, among many other things, the good news of justification by faith. That is what Paul is teaching in Galatians 3 when he makes the connection between the promise made to Abraham and the wonderful message that we can be made right with God through believing in Jesus. Let me read verse 8 of Galatians 3 again. "And the

Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'"

This is the significance of the fact that Matthew begins his account of Jesus by showing that Jesus is a son of Abraham. And so celebrating the birth of Jesus includes celebrating the fact that Jesus is the son of Abraham through whom God would fulfill his promise that through the offspring of Abraham he would bring blessing to the nations. That blessing is foundationally the good news that sinners can be made right with God through believing in Jesus. Of course, the rest of the story of Jesus includes his life, death and resurrection.

But the point of all this for our celebration of the birth of Christ is that truly celebrating the birth of Christ is celebrating the fact that Jesus came to make it possible for us to be restored to relationship with God. Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness in our place. Jesus came to die on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus came to deal with the problem of all problems, the curse of sin. That is the significance of the birth of Jesus in the storyline of the Bible.

And any celebration of the birth of Jesus that is in harmony with the interests and priorities of the Bible will be rooted in the glorious fact that Jesus came to deliver us from sin and its consequences. This is at the heart of the reason that Jesus was born. There are many angles and many different aspects to Jesus' mission, but this is at the heart of them all. Jesus came to deal with sin. Jesus came to overturn the curse and the power of sin and to destroy the death that is the wages of sin.

And that has profound implications for what it means to truly celebrate the birth of Christ. Whether we focus on that in December or at some other time is not important. What is important is that truly celebrating the birth of Christ means appreciating the fact that the most destructive and awful thing in human existence is sin and the most glorious thing that has ever happened is that God decided that he was not going to let the whole human race suffer the ultimate consequences of sin but that he was going to deliver a people from it by sending his own Son to become a human being and conquer sin and its power by paying its penalty on the behalf of his people. There is no celebration of the birth

of Christ that is in line with biblical priorities that does not have the overturning of sin by Jesus at its heart. The problem of all problems, both in each of our lives and in the world in general, is sin and the blessing of all blessings is the fact that God send Jesus and Jesus came to deliver us from the curse and the power of sin.

And if that is what we are truly celebrating in our lives, that sentiment will have profound implications for what is most important to us in our lives in general. If our celebration of Jesus' birth is in line with the biblical account of the reasons for Jesus' birth then our lives will reflect the reality that sin is the greatest negative and that the restored relationship with God that Jesus came to accomplish is the greatest good.

The atmosphere of family gatherings and the like are part of a genuine celebration of the birth of Christ only when they are integrated with joy and thanksgiving in the relationship with God and in the life of holiness that is the purpose of the birth of Jesus. I'm not saying that the enjoyment of the spirit of the Christmas season is a bad thing. What I am saying is that it is only truly a celebration of the birth of Christ if the heart of our joy is the fact that in Christ through faith our sins are forgiven, and we are changed so that the resulting relationship with God is truly the deepest joy of our lives.

And indeed this is reason for joy and celebration. The greatest negative in life is not disappointments in life or suffering or any of the usual things about life that are hard and unwelcome. The greatest negative in life is sin and conversely the greatest good is being a child of God and living life with God and for God. But that is not our natural way of thinking. It is only possible to see this through grace as a result of what Jesus came to accomplish. And so the call to celebrate the birth of Christ is a call to consider our priorities and what really gives us joy and what really makes us tick.

Thankfully the salvation that Jesus came to bring means that believers are not condemned even though their priorities are not yet completely reordered to line up with God's priorities and what is truly most important and most precious. But salvation in Christ does change us so that we begin to see and understand and experience that there is

nothing more important and precious than our relationship with God and there is nothing that is more destructive of joy and true wellbeing than sin.

So in introducing Jesus to us, the first thing that Matthew does is to show that Jesus is the key figure in God's plan of salvation. The same is the case with the fact that the genealogy shows that Jesus was also the son of David except that that connects to a different promise and a different way of looking at God's plan of salvation. The story that begins with Abraham leads to David and each part of the story tells us a little more about God's plan to deal with the problem and the devastation of human beings refusing to live as he commands them to live. David is an important part of that story and a promise that God made to David near the end of his life, further describes what God is working toward in his plan of salvation and how he is going to get there.

This is what God promised to David as he was coming to the end of his life on earth. 2 Samuel 7:12–16, "¹²When your days are fulfilled, and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, ¹⁵but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.' "

This promise, like most of God's promises has multiple fulfillments. It refers to Solomon and the other merely human kings that would descent from David. That is why it can refer to the iniquity of the sons of David. It ultimately refers to Jesus, as the final and ultimate son of David and the promise is that of an eternal kingdom. Israel was God's kingdom on earth. The kingdom of Israel in its fully formed state was destroyed because of the refusal of the people to keep God's commands. But this promise of a son of David who would establish the throne of his kingdom forever was remembered through all the history that follows and it becomes a beacon of hope for a people who never again were a

free kingdom as they had been before the exile. God's promise to David is reaffirmed and further developed by the prophets who both explained to Israel the connection between their sinfulness and the devastation that they would and finally did experience, and revealed to them a hope beyond the devastation that was rooted in God's promise of a son of David who would establish an everlasting kingdom of God.

Perhaps the most complete instance of this is Isaiah 9:6–7, "6For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this."

This is a promise of a king in David's line and a kingdom of peace and justice and righteousness. It is a promise of the establishment of the kind of kingdom that Israel should have been, but never fully was. It is a promise of an ideal kingdom with a king who is larger than life and whose rule brings about a situation of peace and justice and righteousness such like the world has never seen. The description of the king is larger than life and the description of the kingdom is beyond anything that has ever existed on earth.

Here again the background is sin. All of this is also part of the plan of God for the defeat of sin and its consequences. Many of the consequences of sin have to do with sinful rulers, the abuse of power in human relationships and the terrible conditions of war and oppression and injustice that have always been part of the human condition.

The fundamental biblical insight about this is that this is what happens when people do not submit themselves to God's rule. God's laws are the way of peace and prosperity and wholeness and justice and righteousness. The trouble with the world is that people are sinners and so they mistreat one another. When God's rule is obeyed people are blessed. When God's rule is ignored the result is suffering and injustice and brokenness in all kinds of ways. The promise of the son of David is

bound up with the promise of a kingdom of righteousness in which people will know peace and comprehensive wellbeing.

So Matthew in this genealogy makes the connection between the promise God made to David along with its elaboration by the prophets. It is a hope for a perfect world and the premise is that the perfect world exists where the rule of God is obeyed. Matthew in introducing Jesus connects him to this stream of promises right at the beginning of his account to show us another aspect of the significance of Jesus in God's plan to undo the curse that Adam's sin and all subsequent sin had unleashed into the world.

And it is in the light of this promise-stream that we understand the words of the angel and then the song of the choir of angels in Luke 2:10–11 & 14, "¹⁰And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:14, "¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!""

This is a hope for a world without sin. It is a hope for a world in which the son of David rules and his rule is obeyed. It is a hope for a kingdom where all the subjects love God and keep his commands. It is a hope for a kingdom where God is honored, and the people keep his commands and reap the blessings of doing so. This never happened fully in Israel. And indeed the history of Israel showed that something more was needed if God's vision of a kingdom of loyal and obedient citizens was ever to be realized. That something more is what Jesus' mission was all about. As the story of Jesus life, death and resurrection will show, Jesus came to deal with sin at its root and deliver his people not only from its guilt, but also from its power so that they would want to obey and so they would be able to obey.

That is the hope associated the fact that Jesus is the son of David. It has to do with a king who will establish an eternal kingdom which means a sinless kingdom which means it is populated by a people who have been delivered from their sins and enabled to obey the king.

We are part of that kingdom because we have been saved by grace and are being transformed into obedient citizens. But the final realization of that vision is still in our future. And it is the hope in the light of which we live and the hope that is celebrated in connection with the birth of Christ.

These are the main things that this genealogy of Jesus tells us. And the main point that I want to emphasize is that these are a few of the main biblical themes to celebrate in connection with the birth of Jesus. The word of God calls us to emphasize and to celebrate and to focus on and to rejoice in what is truly wonderful in the plan of God and Jesus' role in it. To celebrate the birth of Christ is to celebrate the salvation that Jesus came to accomplish. It is to value more and more the forgiveness of sins, the process of gradually being renewed to hate sin and love obedience, being accepted and embraced by God and loving him in return and the world-wide goal that God is working towards to establish his kingdom, to completely overcome evil and to bring about the world where he receives the honor that he is worthy of and in which giving that honor is our greatest motivation and joy.