

# The Fourteenth Generation

Ruth 4:13-17

Matthew 1:1-17

Church of the Palms

February 16, 2014

Dr. Paul T. Eckel

*“The Lord is good, his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.”*  
(Psalm 100:5)

Reading aloud that Matthew passage has got to be about the dullest three minutes you’ve spent in worship for a long time...right?

If I had ended with the traditional words, “And may the Lord richly bless to us this reading from His precious Holy Word” someone out there would have snickered. Look, we all believe it’s a good thing to read the Bible, but nobody imagined we should start at this point!

Then why bother with this list of names? Essentially, because our Bible is not a random collection of carelessly compiled data. Matthew had some reason for beginning with a Genealogy. I’d like to climb through the branches of this Family Tree long enough to find out what he had in mind.

## **Exploring a Family Tree**

Clearly this is a *Jewish* Family Tree with two strong tap roots.

*“An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah,  
the son of David, the son of Abraham.”*

Right off the bat Jesus is connected with the two greats of Jewish history – Abraham and David. God gave each of these men a promise that would be worked out through a son. Yet each son was a disappointment.

David’s son of promise was Solomon. His most conspicuous national contribution was the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. His most significant personal characteristic was wisdom.

That said, Solomon's reign denied much of the meaning of the Temple and his personal life contradicted the insights of his wisdom. So lacking was he in the spirit of his father David that by the end of his reign he had sown the seeds of discord that would tear the nation apart for good.

But now we learn, *Jesus* – not Solomon! – is the “*son of David.*” It is Jesus who will fulfill the Kingdom dreams of worship and wisdom.

And Abraham's son? O yes, Isaac – *Yitsaq*. The name means *laughter*. Isaac was ‘God's joke’! He was born when Sarah was 90 and Abraham was 100! If you don't get the joke, you're not paying attention.

Isaac proved a bit disappointing. He failed to inspire his own sons with the vision given his father Abraham that this family would bless the whole world.

But now we hear that Jesus – not Isaac! – is “*the son of Abraham.*” Jesus will fulfill the promise made to Abraham, “*In you all the families of the earth will be blessed*” (Genesis 12:3).

So, the double tap roots of this Family Tree put a big idea in front of us. Matthew's story of Jesus will fulfill the promises given to the two greats of Hebrew history – David and Abraham.

If we were Jewish we could all say “*Amen!*” and get out early today. But most of us are Gentiles. We can't help wondering whether this Family Tree of our Lord has anything to say to us.

### **Including Women!**

Well, it does! This good news starts shining through with the mention of *Ruth* in verse 5. You remember Ruth. She was not Jewish. She was from Moab. Jews despised Moabites. Listen to Deuteronomy 23:3.

*“No...Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.  
Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants  
shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.”*

Yet *Ruth*, a Moabite, an outcast from God's covenant people, made the cut! She who should have been *out* according to the law, was *in* because

of God's grace. She became the great-grandmother of King David! Ruth shows us that no one is excluded who wants to be part of God's family?

In Christ, the destitute and despised take their place alongside the rich and respected. In Christ, every we/they barrier is breached.

To press home this point we find other women in this Family Tree. Astonishing! I don't know of another case where women are mentioned in an ancient Hebrew genealogy. She would carry and birth a son, but the boy was always *his* son not *hers*.

Yet in *this* Family Tree *women* are included! And such women – each with a slight shadow over her character.

*Ruth* set her cap for Boaz. *Tamar* was a seducer. *Rahab's* name is synonymous with harlot. "Uriah's wife," *Bathsheba* by name, was an adulteress. And *Mary*? Well, imagine the gossip that got whispered around Nazareth once her condition became obvious?

Why, the very notoriety of these women should have disqualified them. Yet here they are. And because *they* are part of Jesus' lineage, it removes from us the luxury of dividing things up into neat categories – saints and sinners, sacred and secular, spiritual and unspiritual.

This genealogy tears down all the human barriers we erect between race, gender, income, or presumed moral superiority. God is obviously up to some new thing through Matthew's story of Jesus, the Messiah.

### **Surprising News**

But what? What is God up to? This question pushes us back to the Gospel. The 'good news' focuses on God's grace transforming creatures he has made into children he has redeemed. Case in point, verse 3.

*"Judah was the father of Perez and Zarah by Tamar."*

Sounds innocent enough until you drill down into the story recorded in Genesis 38. Let's sketch out the basic storyline. Judah's wife bore him three sons.

His eldest was given a wife named *Tamar*. But he was not a good boy and died leaving no children. So *Tamar* was given to the second son who also died childless. Now *Tamar* hoped to be given to the third son, so that she could fulfill her obligation of continuing the line of Judah.

But that third marriage never happened. Desperate to maintain her father-in-law's lineage, *Tamar* struck upon a plan.

Dressing up as a harlot, she seduced her father-in-law and became pregnant by him. But she was shrewd. She insisted he give her beforehand tokens of his good faith – his personal seal, his belt and walking staff.

Well! When Judah discovered that his widowed daughter-in-law was pregnant he was livid! He was about to have her burned to death when she produced incontrovertible evidence that the person who wanted to execute her for being an adulteress was himself the father of her unborn children!

I'll tell you, those afternoon soap operas got nothing on the Bible!

If you find this story offensive, don't blame me – take it up with *Matthew*. 'Matthew, had you any breeding you'd have sidestepped this steamy little episode in our Lord's Family Tree.'

Forget it! King David and the Messiah himself are descendants of an incestuous union! And the prophet's words come drifting back, "*He was numbered with the transgressors*" (Isaiah 53:12). With this as a precedent, do you honestly think God is going to be stymied by your sins or mine?

### **Fourteenth Generation**

This Genealogy is not a list of stained-glass window 'saints. Each of them is a sinner like us, yet touched by God's grace. That opens the door for you and me. Two odd features of this Genealogy confirm our place in this Family Tree.

The first oddity is this. Matthew has compiled this Family Tree in three neat sections each containing fourteen generations. We can't help asking, 'What's the big deal about fourteen'? And the answer is...we're not exactly sure. But here is a possibility worth considering.

The Hebrew language had no numerals, but gave numerical value to certain Hebrew letters. The Hebrew name David is spelled *DWD*. The numerical value of these three letters added together equals *fourteen*. It may be that Matthew's genealogy is controlled by the symbol of David the King.

The fourteen generations from Abraham to David tell of a people reaching for royal purpose in life. The fourteen generations from David to the Exile tell of a people who lost their royal purpose for living. And the fourteen generations from the Exile to the coming of Jesus tell of a people out to reclaim God's royal purpose in their life.

What purpose is that? This brings us to the second odd feature of this Family Tree. In that last division, the one ending with the words "*Jesus who is called the Messiah,*" you won't find fourteen generations listed, only thirteen. Count them for yourself. Well, so what?

Maybe Matthew miscounted, or forgot a name as we often do, or skipped a generation inadvertently. What difference does it make?

Matthew is a consummate literary artist and faithful witness to Jesus Christ! He did not toss his Gospel together. Why would Matthew tell us there are fourteen generations culminating in Christ, then list only thirteen?

My hunch? I believe Matthew was convinced that those who read his Gospel and became believers would complete the '*fourteenth generation*' in their own day! Imagine! Jesus' Family Tree is not complete until you and I and others of faith down the centuries are grafted in.

Christianity only flourishes when one '*generation*' of believers passes on the Gospel to the next '*generation.*' That Gospel, revealed in the Bible, is powerful enough to change lives.

## **Changing Lives**

Can reading the Bible make that much difference in a person's life? Frankly, I was startled to recognize that every person in my family who has been influential in my life was brought to faith by reading the Bible!

My mother heard a preacher say, he was "as sure he would be in heaven as he was certain Jesus Christ would be there." Can anyone be that

certain, Mom wondered? To find out, she began reading her Bible and discovered the pastor was right. Her faith became biblically grounded.

As a teenager, my father could not get his religious questions answered. But rather than reject religion wholesale, he began reading the Bible thinking ‘there must be something to this.’ Turns out, there was. He put his faith in Christ and became a teacher of the Bible for the rest of his life.

As a young pastor my grandfather preached about current events in an effort to be relevant. God said, “Jessie, pick up your Bible and read it.” He did and the first verse leaped from the page, “*In the beginning God...*” From then on he preached the Bible and lived it.

I’ve been surrounded by loved ones whose lives have been changed by reading the Bible. So, it’s not surprising that in retirement I have birthed a ministry called *Bible Mission USA*. We exist to put the Gospel into the hands of those in our community who are needy, or struggling, or lost.

Presbyterians believe in a mission like this. It’s called evangelism – sharing the good news of God’s love in Christ with others. Evangelism scares some, but stimulates others – our daughter among them.

Again this year, Faith accompanied a pastor and a small group of Christian lay persons visiting local bars on Christmas Eve. No, they did not go to drink with them, but to sing carols with them, to warmly talk together, and to give away over 300 copies of the *Gospel of John*.

## **Extending Your Reach**

Some might wonder, “What difference will any of that make?” Who’s to say? Well, maybe Jesus! He said scatter God’s Word as if it were seed. Not every seed will germinate, of course, but some will take root and grow. God has promised, “*My Word will prosper everywhere I send it*” (Isaiah 55:11).

Out there, a new “*fourteenth generation*” is waiting to be born. Today, millions of Americans are rejecting Christ without ever knowing who he is. Alas, most of us aren’t sure what to do about this or how to reach out to our spiritually confused generation.

Here's an idea. Why not start with Matthew's clue. To reach that "fourteenth generation" today, at least give them the Gospel to read! That's something we can do. That's what we're about. That's why we say: ***Let our hands extend your reach.***