

Today we are starting a study through the gospel of Matthew. If you ever wanted to know about Jesus, you can read for yourself over this series. This first chapter—Matthew—describes an origin story. Our stories matter because they are part of God's bigger story. God has been at work through history, and He is at work in your life right now. Our stories are part of a bigger story because of God's grace. That's what we see in Jesus' family story.

We all have family stories. My dad was born in New York. Growing up, his uncle owned a small electronics store. One night, guys who worked for the mob robbed the store. When the guys returned with a great haul and presented it to the local mob boss, he asked them where they got it. When they told him, he was furious. My dad's aunt, the wife of the man who owned the electronics store, was the daughter of this mob boss! The thieves had stolen from the family! You can imagine the threat he gave them. So, the next night they broke back into the store and returned the stolen items. My dad's uncle arrived at the store and found that the thieves had returned not only what was taken from my dad's uncle, but also items that never belonged to him!

We all have family stories—some stories we laugh about, some we avoid, some are good, some are complicated stories. Jesus had a family story. The people in His family had ups and downs. They were insiders and outsiders, saints and sinners, marked by failure and hope for the future. Through grace, God used their story to set the stage for the culmination of history.

Before we get to the text, it's important to understand some background information on Matthew's writing and the world at the time of Jesus. Matthew wrote with a Jewish Christian audience in mind. More than any of the other three gospel writers, Matthew uses a lot of references to Old Testament scriptures. There is a debate on the date of this writing. Some scholars say that Matthew wrote after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans (AD 70). Others claim that he wrote in the AD 60's before the fall of Jerusalem, which is where I lean. Either way, we know from history that Matthew is well-known and often quoted by early Christian writers at the end of the first century.

What is Matthew's purpose in writing? Matthew's purpose is to show that Jesus is the promised Jewish Messiah, the culmination

of God's salvation story. Jesus is the one who inaugurates an unlikely kingdom for all.

A bit about the world at the time of Jesus: In the first century, the world was ruled by Rome. The Roman ruler over the Jews before and at the time of Jesus' birth was Herod the Great. It's important to get a sense of the culture of Herod's reign.

Herod had an insatiable thirst for power. He inflicted heavy taxes and spent his wealth in extravagance. For example, Herod wanted to build a palace on top of a mountain. However, there wasn't a mountain around. So he had a mountain built and constructed a huge palace and called it Herodium. He built a seaport called Caesarea with an ingenious breaker system that some archaeologists suggest should be included as one of the wonders of the world.

Herod was also incredibly brutal with his power. In his paranoia, he killed anyone who he deemed a threat, including those in his family. He killed his brother-in-law, mother-in-law, his favorite wife, Mariamne, and his three eldest sons on suspicion of plotting to seize their father's throne. Caesar Augustus once commented, "It's better to be Herod's pig than one of his own children."

His brutality extended to the Jewish people. There was an eagle on the gate of the entry of the Temple. The eagle was a symbol of Roman power. At one point, Herod became very sick. Thinking that Herod may be near death, two Jewish teachers incited their pupils to take down the eagle. Herod found out about it, rounded up the teachers and pupils, had them brought to his home in Jericho and burned them alive. At his death, Herod left plans (thankfully, not carried out) to execute Jewish nobility so that there would be mourning. After his death, a delegation of Jews traveled to Rome to plead that Herod's sons not be allowed to follow in rule because of their brutality.

Also, the Jewish people were waiting for God to act in the world. God had been silent—no prophets—for 400 years. Where is God in the midst of darkness? The Jewish hope was that God would come to His people, that He would defeat the enemy of His people, and that His rule would be established. Into that context, Matthew tells the story of Jesus in Matthew 1:1-17.

Origin Story of Messiah

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham: (v. 1)

The passage begins with two words in Greek, “biblos” (meaning, record or book) and “genesis” (meaning, origin or genealogy). In other words, Matthew begins with an origin story. Genesis is a familiar word; it is the name of the opening book of the Bible that describes the creation of the world. In that book, the writer describes the origin of the world. Matthew is going to describe the origin of the world renewed.

Matthew is telling the origin story of Jesus the Messiah. “Messiah” is an essential concept in Jewish theology. Messiah means “Anointed One.” In Greek, the term is “the Christ.” This person would be God’s representative on earth, enacting the things of God. In that way, this person would be the Son of God. In Jewish thinking, the Anointed One would restore worship, defeat the enemies of God’s people, and lead God’s people. Biblical passages like Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7 describe Messiah.

We know from history of several first-century Messiahs. (You can read about these in Josephus and Acts 5 and Acts 21). In AD 6, Judas the Galilean led a revolt as a result of a census. Rome heavily taxed the Jewish people. A census wasn’t for informational purposes, but for Rome to maximize who is taxed and how much. For some, paying taxes to Rome was equated to subjugation to Rome. Judas the Galilean was of that group. He claimed to be God’s deliverer and gathered a group of people to follow him. Rome heard about it, sent troops against this group, killed Judas and scattered his followers.

Theudas claimed to be Messiah in the AD 40’s. He promised people that, if they followed him to the Jordan River, the river would part as a sign that God was with them in their revolt. Rome sent a cavalry, killed some of the following, and returned with the head of Theudas. Likewise, a guy known as “The Egyptian” gathered people at the Mount of Olives in anticipation of overtaking Jerusalem from the Romans. He promised that, as they approached the city, the walls would fall. Rome sent troops and crushed the group, and the Egyptian fled.

Messiah was a political statement as much as a spiritual statement. Messiah was a key figure who would deliver God’s people and establish the reign of God on earth. Matthew claims that this long-anticipated Messiah is Jesus.

Matthew tells the genealogy of Jesus. A few comments about this genealogy: This is where we tend to check out or skip over. Maybe you intended to read Matthew at some point and struggled to get past this first section. When facing a list of names, we need to ask, “Why does Matthew include this list? What point

is he attempting to make?” Matthew doesn’t give every name throughout the history of this family line. (The word “father” also means “relative of.”) That’s not his aim. Matthew is using history to make a theological point—namely, that this man, Jesus, is the true Messiah for all people.

Matthew tells the story, but he makes both expected and unexpected points along the way.

Insiders and Outsiders

**Abraham was the father of Isaac,
Isaac the father of Jacob,
Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,
Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,
Perez the father of Hezron,
Hezron the father of Ram,
Ram the father of Amminadab,
Amminadab the father of Nahshon,
Nahshon the father of Salmon,
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, (verses 2–6)**

The first section of names includes people that, if you were in Matthew’s audience, you would expect and some people that you wouldn’t expect. It includes insiders: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David. But it also includes outsiders: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba.

Why would Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba be considered outsiders in Matthew’s day? Three reasons. First, none of the four were Israelites. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites, Ruth a Moabite, and Bathsheba was a Hittite. If you were listening to an origin story about Israel’s Messiah, you wouldn’t expect that the story includes people from outside the tribe. Second, they were outsiders because three of the four had questionable moral practices. Tamar seduced her father-in-law, Rahab was a prostitute, and Bathsheba committed adultery. You wouldn’t expect that God’s Messiah would have a family history of people practicing un-God like behaviors. Third, these four people would have been considered outsiders in Matthew’s day because all four were women. In a male-dominated society like ancient Rome, in a culture that traced heritage through men, you wouldn’t expect

Matthew to include people that many in his world would consider outsiders.

So immediately, we see that Matthew is telling a different kind of origin story. The story of God's Messiah is a story that includes outsiders.

Saints and Sinners

Solomon the father of Rehoboam,
Rehoboam the father of Abijah,
Abijah the father of Asa,
Asa the father of Jehoshaphat,
Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram,
Jehoram the father of Uzziah,
Uzziah the father of Jotham,
Jotham the father of Ahaz,
Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,
Hezekiah the father of Manasseh,
Manasseh the father of Amon,
Amon the father of Josiah,
and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers
at the time of the exile to Babylon. (verses 7-11)

Matthew has a list of kings in Israel's history and lists some that you would expect and some that you wouldn't expect. Israel had a history of kings who vacillated between good and evil. You would expect Matthew to highlight the good kings, but he equally mentions the evil kings. The story includes both saints and sinners. Here are some examples: Rehoboam (evil) divided the kingdom; Asa (good) removed foreign practices; Uzziah (good) led a golden age of building and kingdom advancement; Ahaz (evil) surrendered the northern kingdom to Assyria; Hezekiah (good) re-established worship, the tithe, and religious feasts; Jeconiah (evil) was so evil that God removed him from authority. The origin story of the Messiah includes both saints and sinners.

But Matthew is telling a different kind of origin story. The story of God's Messiah is a story of God's good providence enduring despite people who were living contrary to God's way.

Failure and a Future

After the exile to Babylon:
Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel,
Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,
Zerubbabel the father of Abihud,
Abihud the father of Eliakim,
Eliakim the father of Azor,
Azor the father of Zadok,

Zadok the father of Akim,
Akim the father of Elihud,
Elihud the father of Eleazar,
Eleazar the father of Matthan,
Matthan the father of Jacob,
and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of
Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is
called the Messiah. (verses 12-16)

Matthew concludes the origin story by mentioning something that you wouldn't expect. Matthew highlights the Exile. This is the low point in Jewish history and relationship with God. The sin of the people led to the nation conquered by the Babylonians, the Temple destroyed, and the people enslaved in a foreign nation. It was a moment when the future of God's people was in jeopardy.

If you were listening to a story about God's Messiah, you wouldn't expect His family history to be marked by failure. We tend to cover our failures. And for a good reason—we live in a culture that marks us down for the slightest mistake and decides the future can only be as good as our past.

But Matthew is telling a different kind of origin story. The story of God's Messiah is a story that declares the lowest point is not the ending point; despite failure, there can still be a future.

Culmination of Grace

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah. (v. 17)

Matthew says all of this history culminates in the birth of Jesus. Insiders and outsiders, saints and sinners, failures and the hope for a future have led to this point—the arrival of God's Messiah, who is Jesus.

We can see that in how Matthew organized his origin story. Remember, this was less about history and more about theology. He had three sections of 14 names. Again, it's important to ask, Why did Matthew organize it that way? Perhaps it was easy for people to remember. This would have been an oral story before it was a written story. Maybe there is another reason. Three sets of 14 are also six sets of seven generations. Seven is an important biblical number that refers to completion. Matthew sets up this origin story so that Jesus is born at the beginning of the seventh set of 7. All of history culminates in Jesus Messiah. Jesus is God's Anointed One. Jesus is God's agent on earth, to defeat what has plagued humanity, to deliver God's people, and to establish God's kingdom.

And so that we don't think that is simply head knowledge, Matthew tells this origin story. He tells a story of ordinary people,

people like you and me. He tells of people who are insiders and outsiders, who are saints and sinners, who have experienced failure and hope for a future. We quickly realize that Jesus is a Messiah for all of those people. He is Messiah for people like you and me.

But how can that be? How can God's Messiah story include outsiders, sinners, and failure? It is because of God's grace. The only way that this history didn't derail was because of God's grace. The only way that you and I woke up today, and experience good today is because of grace. We wring our minds to figure out why there is evil in the world, which is a fine question, but maybe we should step back in wonder. Why is there any good? That is God's grace.

God's grace means that Jesus is Messiah for all...

...for everyone counts...for everyone who has been counted out

...for anyone on the inside...and for those on the outside

...for those who do the right thing...and those who can't seem to get anything right

Grace runs through Matthew's origin story because grace runs through each of our stories. You are a recipient of grace. Grace that invites you into a relationship with a God who has been and still is at work in your life.

Paul, writing about the gift of grace to the church in Ephesus, said that all who are in a relationship with Jesus are adopted as sons and daughters of God. This happens when we exchange our life apart **from** God for life **with** God. We find redemption, our story made new. *"In [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace, which He lavished on us"* (Ephesians 1:7-8a). It is all because of grace.

So what do we do with this origin story of grace? This week, I want you to consider how grace confronts the worst in us and the worst in others. Two questions for you to act upon. First, how can you confront the worst of your story with grace? You and I are faced with the worst of our stories. We are driving and reminded of something we failed to do. You come across people who point out how you failed. You lie awake at night consumed by your weaknesses and inabilities. We listen to a non-grace story. And that's a story far different than that of Jesus Messiah. When faced with those non-grace reminders—whether from your voice or someone else—confront that with grace; that God is the God who redeems outsiders, sinners, and failures. That doesn't mean we ignore our weakness, but rather that we see them in the light of grace.

Second, how can you confront the worst of others with grace? As much as we feel the worst of our story, we're confronted every day with the worst of someone else. Someone says something that cuts you down, they sabotage your work, they let you down. It's hard to understand how to make sense of this behavior. What if you confronted that hurt in you with grace? You choose to extend grace just as God has extended grace to you. That doesn't mean we ignore the hurt of others, but rather that we see them in the light of grace. You and they are both parts of a larger story, a story of how God is at work in the world to announce the arrival of Jesus Messiah.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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