



“And the Soul Felt Its Worth”

Matthew 1:1-7

This week in places as diverse as Tokyo and Toronto, Moscow and Manhattan, Austria and

Australia, millions of people will experience traffic jams, late night shopping, and department stores festooned with tinsel as we announce to children of all ages, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year.”

Yet if someone asked you to explain what is meant by the real meaning of Christmas, how would you respond? What would you say? Would you begin by explaining, “Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac was the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers” (Matthew 1:1)? When Matthew begins his gospel that is exactly what he does. He begins with a list of names.

If you are writing a significant document, perhaps in a work context, or drafting a resume, you would probably wish to create a document that is carefully crafted, compelling, and impactful. You would intentionally use words that are so engaging the reader will want to keep reading and find themselves unable to put it down.

So why then does Matthew begin his gospel with a list of people, many of whom have unpronounceable names and come from unfamiliar places?

If you are anything like me, when you read Matthew’s opening words you are tempted to skip over them and prefer to begin at verse 18, “This how the birth of Jesus Christ came about...” and then continue reading from that point on.

Why when writing an introduction to the birth of Christ does Matthew intentionally and carefully do so by providing his readers with a list of names?

It may be that when you read the opening words of Matthew’s gospel you are tempted to think that clearly Matthew had an obsessive compulsive nature. He is obviously a perfectionist, he was a details kind of individual. A perfectionist is the type of person who would go to great pains, and then pass on those pains to others. Is that what is happening?

Matthew begins with a list of names because

within this list lies a profound biblical truth which we do not always recognize when we only give it a casual glance and give in to the temptation to skip over it.

The passage opens with the patriarch Abraham, and as you read through the list it is fascinating to realize “who is” and “who is not” on the list. Abraham was indeed the father of Isaac. He was also the father of Ishmael, but Ishmael is not mentioned despite being the first born. Isaac was the father of Jacob but also the father of Esau who was the first born, but Esau is not mentioned either.

Jacob was the father of Judah, yet Judah sold his brother Joseph into slavery. Judah is mentioned but Joseph is not. Joseph was a mighty instrument in God’s hands becoming not only the prime minister of Egypt, but his story dominates the final chapters of the book of Genesis. Joseph has a great deal to teach us and he is a powerful reminder that we can trust in the invisibility and invincibility of the grace of God, and that Providence has servants everywhere. Yet Joseph is not mentioned.

There are 51 names which records kings and shepherds, merchants and military leaders, governors, carpenters, Jews and Gentiles, males and females, some are famous others are infamous.

So why does Matthew begin with a list of names? It is in many ways a surprising list, but the more you examine it the more you notice that this is a list of the seemingly insignificant and the instantly forgettable, the unremarkable, the ordinary, the unknown.

God often selects people who have struggled with dry spells in their faith. Those who have been wounded and hurt, who have been tempted to give in and walk away. People who have been abandoned by others, who have prayerfully persevered and risen above the circumstances of their lives and the sin which almost destroyed them. Individuals who have experienced God’s tender touch which renews and refreshes them, equipping them for all that is to come.

These are the ancestors of Christ. Not always the nobility of their day, not always the famous and the well-to-do. Not the Pop Idol and X Factor winners of their day. But people whose lives have been ravaged, blighted, and damaged by sin, yet by the love and grace of God they not only survived, but thrived—“And the Soul Felt Its Worth.”

Matthew knows what that is like. Matthew the tax collector. He knew how to manipulate and use the power of his position to extort money from others. Yet God delights to make known to Matthew His transforming love and overwhelming grace. That is the enthralling and utterly captivating biblical principle which lies behind the list of names which begins Matthew’s gospel. These are real people with real problems, yet they experienced the reality of God’s touch when “the Soul Felt Its Worth.”

Matthew’s genealogy is in fact the story line of the entire Bible. When you come to this list, please look upon it as a priceless antique. The longer you look at it, the closer you exam it, then you begin to realize its true significance and value.

This list of the seemingly insignificant and the instantly forgettable is a potent and cogent reminder that God never works in a vacuum. He is consistently bringing to pass His purpose and His will, through the lives of real people, one generation after another, while working out His eternal purposes.

This week as you go about your final preparations for Christmas and find yourself caught up in the hectic, demanding activities of the season, please remember which season it is. It is a time to reflect, a time to pause and seek to understand the wonder of the incarnation.

That is why Matthew writes, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’—which means, “God with us”” (Matthew 1:22-23).

Let me also take this opportunity to wish you and all whom you love God’s richest blessings for Christmas and the New Year.

Christmas Eve Service Streaming

On Christmas Eve, we will be streaming a pre-recorded Christmas Eve service at 2:00pm, 5:00pm, 7:30pm, and 11:00pm. The service will be available on our website, Facebook, and YouTube channel and will remain on all platforms to view at any time.

The service will include Scripture readings, the lighting of the Advent candle, special Christmas music, and a Christmas Eve message from Dr. Gibbons. **Go to FirstPresChristmas.com.**