

Church Can Be...

ANYONE **Matthew 1:1-6, 18-19**

So you've decided you want to learn more about Jesus. You want to get close to Jesus. You want to get to know Jesus.

And you decide the way to do that is to read through the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—all the way to Revelation. So you get your Bible, and you blow off the dust. You get a cup of coffee (or some hot tea, or cocoa). You sit down in a comfortable chair, and you're thinking "This is going to be great. The most important book in the world. Great stories, great literature..."

And you open up to the first page of the New Testament—and the first thing you encounter is a long list of names:

Abraham begat Isaac
Isaac begat Jacob
Jacob begat Judah...

And you think, "What is this? This is no way to start the most important book in the world! Every good writer knows you have to capture people's attention. You need to pull the reader in, from the very first line. You know, like "It was a dark and stormy night." Now that's a great first line!

So, why does Matthew start his Gospel with a genealogy? I'm going to tell you, but first let me tell you this. This whole business of genealogy got me curious about my own background. So I did some research this week, and I found out that one of my ancestors was a fellow named Georg Heinrich Weidner—also known as Henry Weidner. He sailed across the Atlantic in 1740 in a ship called the *Molly*. And he came down the Great Wagon Road through the Shenandoah Valley and was the first European to settle in what is now Hickory, North Carolina. And the story in my family is that my great, great, great...grandfather Henry Weidner was a member of the royal family of Saxony, Germany—and one of his brothers was the father of Prince Albert (you know, the guy in the can). And this summer I traveled to England and I saw the Prince Albert Hall and the huge gold statue of Prince Albert, and now I find out I might be related to that guy! How cool is that?

And then I thought about this: my wife Lorie—her maiden name is Carlisle—and this summer, she went to England and she went to the town of Carlisle, where her people are from. And she saw Carlisle Cathedral and Carlisle Castle. Lorie has a castle! How cool is that?

So what about Jesus? What kind of background does he come from?

To Jewish people in the first century that was a big question. Lineage was a big deal. In the first century, your background determines who you are.

If you're sitting on a piece of land, and you're claiming it's yours, you better be able to trace your lineage back to the original owner of the land.

If you're a priest in the temple, you better be able to trace your lineage back to Aaron, the brother of Moses.

If you claimed to be royalty, you better be able to trace your lineage back to David, the greatest king of Israel.

If you're a first century Jew, you know your background, because your background determines who you are. That's why the Gospel of Matthew starts with a genealogy. But, but, but, but – there's something very peculiar about the genealogy of Jesus. There's something in this list of who begat who that you would almost never find in a first century Jewish genealogy.

So what's unique about the genealogy of Jesus? **WOMEN**. The genealogy of Jesus includes women.

And this is amazing, because first century culture was very patriarchal. Lineage was traced through the male parent, through the father. You would only list the mother's name if you were trying to make a point.

So let's look at the women Matthew includes.

Tamar. Her story is very sad. She married one of the sons of Judah, his first son. But he died before they had any children. So Judah's second son fulfilled his brotherly duty and he married her so that the land would stay in the family—but he tricked her and cheated her out of having children. And then he died.

And then Judah said to Tamar, “No way, you’re not getting my third son! You have a habit of making husbands die!”

So there’s poor Tamar---no husband, no children, no land, no way to take care of herself. But Tamar stood up for her rights. She figured out a way to stay in the bloodline of Judah’s family. And the way she did it was ... well, I can’t really talk about it in worship. Suffice it to say that when Tamar finally had children their father was Judah.

And that’s how Tamar entered the bloodline of Jesus.

Rahab. Rahab practiced the world’s oldest profession. She was a lady of the evening. She was also a Canaanite, and the Canaanites were the enemies of Israel. Their sin had reached its full measure, and God had marked them for destruction.

So one day two Israelite soldiers went to spy out her city. And somehow the two Israelite spies ended up in her house, maybe because Rahab was also an innkeeper. At least, I hope that’s why they were in her house.

Pretty soon word got out that Israelite spies were in the city, and eventually the authorities came to Rahab’s house and knocked on the door and said, “Rahab—bring out those men in your house, ‘cause we know they’re spies.”

So Rahab took the guys up on the roof and hid them under flax stalks, and then she went back down to the front door and said, “There ain’t nobody here but little ol’ me!”

Then she went back to the Israelite spies and said, “Look—I know that your God is the one true God, and I know that God has given you this city—but please, please, please save me and my family.”

And the spies said, “OK. Despite the fact that you are one of the enemies of God’s people, and despite your less than honorable profession – because of your faith, we will save you, and welcome you into the family of God.”

And that’s how Rahab entered the bloodline of Jesus.

Ruth. Ruth was a Moabite. Also an enemy of Israel. The law said no Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord, even to the tenth generation.

Ruth's mother-in-law was an Israelite woman by the name of Naomi, who lived in Moab. And Naomi's husband died, and Ruth's husband died, and one day Naomi said, "There's nothing for me in Moab. I'm going back to Israel." And Ruth said, "I'll go with you." Naomi said, "Ruth, that's crazy. You're young and pretty. You could still get a husband, have children. My life is over, but you still have a shot at happiness."

And Ruth looked at Naomi and said,

"Don't urge me to turn back from you:

- Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.*
- Your people will be my people, and your God my God.*
- Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.*

May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."

And so these two poor widows—one old, one young—one from Israel, one from Moab—start an unlikely journey around the dead sea, through the desert, back to the land of Israel.

And to make a powerful story short, Ruth, who is still young and pretty, has a romantic fling with a rich older man named Boaz, and he marries her.

And that's how Ruth entered the bloodline of Jesus.

The wife of Uriah. Notice how Matthew puts that: "David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah." Matthew wants to remind us that Jesus was linked to King David by a woman who wasn't even supposed to be his wife.

Her name was Bathsheba. One day when her real husband was off fighting with the army, Bathsheba was at home taking a bath, and King David was leering at her, and he had her brought to the palace, where he violated her, and then sent her home.

A little while later, it turns out that Bathsheba is pregnant – and David’s in trouble. He has to cover this up. So he brings Bathsheba’s husband Uriah home from the battlefield, figuring that while he’s home he would spend time with his wife, and everybody would think the baby was his.

But Uriah, being a faithful and loyal soldier, said, “No, I’m not going to go home and sleep in my own bed when my brothers in arms are sleeping on the ground!” So David brought him in the palace and got him drunk. But Uriah still wouldn’t go home. So David wrote a letter, stamped it with the royal seal, and said, “Go back to the battlefield and take this letter to your commanding officer.”

Little did Uriah know that what he was holding in his hand was the warrant for his own death.

And after Uriah was dead, David brought Bathsheba to his palace and said, “Now you’re mine.”

And that’s how Bathsheba entered the bloodline of Jesus.

So what do these four women have in common?

Number one, they were all **outsiders**. Tamar was a Canaanite. Rahab was a Canaanite. Ruth was a Moabite. Bathsheba may have been a Hittite—we know she was married to one. None of these women was pure-bred Jewish. They were Gentiles. They were outsiders. Outsiders are in the family of Jesus.

Second, they were all **victims**. One was poor. One was a refugee. One was a victim of sexual harassment. Three were widows. And all four had to deal with horrible tragedies in their lives. Victims are in the family of Jesus.

Third, **they were all involved in scandal**. Every one of these women was involved in one way or another with some kind of immoral or disreputable behavior. You say, “Not Ruth!” Well, go read Ruth chapter 3 and you’ll see that Ruth did something pretty risqué. People involved in scandal are in the family of Jesus.

And fourth—they were all **used by God**. From their broken stories, God brought forth the greatest story ever told. They suffered, but God used it. They sinned, but God redeemed it. They struggled, but God restored them. God redeemed their

stories, and brought them into the family of Jesus—and used them to change the world.

So what does this mean to you and me? Simply this: *Church Can Be Anyone*. Outsiders, victims, people with a past—you can be part of the family of Jesus!

The poor, the hurting, people who've suffered tragedy—people who've been violated and abused—you can be part of the family of Jesus!

Ethnic minorities—people of different backgrounds, races, socio-economic status—you can be part of the family of Jesus!

People who have messed up—people whose lives have been ruined by bad choices—whether yours or somebody else's—you can be part of the family of Jesus! *Church Can Be Anyone*.

Matthew starts his Gospel with a genealogy, and he specifically mentions these four women, because he wants to let you know *right up front*—before he even talks about the birth of Jesus, or the miracles, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus—Matthew wants to let you know *right up front* that **THIS GOSPEL IS FOR EVERYBODY**.

So what are we doing, right up front, to show people that the gospel is for everybody?

Church can be anyone. Amen.