

“What’s With This List of Names?”  
Matthew 1:1-17

What’s with this list of names? What am I going to say about this passage that has any value to us today? Before you conclude that I’m a few cubes short of a full ice tray, please remember that II Timothy 3:16 declares that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” I believe this list of names is useful, valuable to us for at least two reasons.

The first value is that it helps us identify Jesus in a very distinctive way. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Matthew’s answer to the question, “Who was Jesus?” is that Jesus is the Christ, which is the Greek word for the Hebrew name, Messiah. So the first reason this list is of value is that it’s one of the critical ways Matthew establishes that Jesus is the Christ. You know that Matthew’s Gospel was written chiefly to Jews about the Messiah. From the Old Testament, the Jews knew that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David, He’d be a part of David’s family tree. As God promised to David in II Samuel 7:16, “Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.” If Jesus is going to be recognized, proclaimed, and honored as the Messiah, there must be proof that He comes from the royal family of Israel. Matthew begins his gospel by showing that Jesus was a member of that royal family, the family of King David. I have to tell you that if you compare the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew with that in Luke, you’ll see some clear differences. It’s argued by skeptics and attackers of God’s Word that these differences are contradictions that prove that the Bible has errors. A closer look shows that this isn’t the case. Matthew starts with Abraham and follows the line forward through David to Jesus through Joseph’s family. Yet note that Matthew doesn’t refer to Joseph as “Joseph, the father of Jesus,” but as “the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.” Scripture is clear that Joseph was not the father of Jesus, God was. Luke starts with Jesus and outlines the genealogy of Mary’s family back through David and then all the way back to Adam. Matthew’s is Jesus’ genealogy through Joseph; Luke’s is Jesus’ genealogy through Mary. There are two separate genealogies, but both are important. Here’s why. Because Jesus had no human father, he couldn’t be a descendant of David through Joseph. Still, the legal right to rule always came through the father’s side, and this was true in King David’s lineage, true in Jesus’ case. Legally, Jesus was Joseph’s oldest son. Luke’s genealogy shows that through Mary, Jesus was a descendant of David. Matthew proves that through His adopted father, Joseph, Jesus was legally in the royal line. Luke proves that through His mother, Mary, Jesus was literally in that royal line. This list of names not only helps to establish Jesus’ identity as the promised Messiah, it also establishes His right to rule. When He appeared before Pilate and Pilate said, “You are a king then!” Jesus spoke the truth in response: “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (John 18:37). In this list of names we see God working in human history to prove His Son is the promised Messiah.

We also see in this genealogy a magnificent picture of God’s grace, which is our second point. Jesus was sent by God the Father to be king. But He would not be a King of law, judgment, or iron force. He came to be the King of grace. Virtually every name in the list we read shows us some lesson about God’s grace, His favor and blessing on men and women who have done nothing to deserve it. Indeed, for who they are and what they’ve done, they deserve the opposite of God’s grace. Let me call your attention to a few of these names. Abraham is acknowledged as the father of the Jewish faith. You’d think he was a spiritual giant. Yet for fear for his life and a lack of trust in God, he lied to two

different pagan kings. He told them that his wife, Sarah, was his sister. In doing this, he brought shame on his wife, on himself, and on his God.

King David is known as a “man after God’s own heart,” but he sinned terribly in committing adultery with Bathsheba, and then compounded that sin in a cover-up that led to the murder of her husband Uriah. After Uriah’s death, David took her as his own wife. That’s some of the “dirty laundry” of Abraham and David. Would it surprise you to know that their descendants lived lives characterized by unfaithfulness, immorality, idolatry, and apostasy? But that’s not what really stands out about this list of names. A typical Jewish genealogy did not include women. To find four women’s names in this list is remarkable. Given the sorry record of the men, you’d think these women are included because they epitomize the kind of person we’d expect to find in the family tree of the King of kings. But that’s not the case at all. First, there’s Tamar, mentioned in verse 3: “Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.” Her story is found in Genesis chapter 38. Here’s a summary of how Tamar got on this list: Through deception, prostitution, and incest, she had twin sons Perez and Zerah, by her father-in-law, Judah. By God’s grace, Perez, her firstborn, carried on the messianic line. Rahab is mentioned in verse five. She was a prostitute who lived in Jericho. She hid the two Israelites Joshua sent to spy on the city. The act that defined her life was that she lied. She lied to the king of Jericho’s men in order to save the spies. Yet she’s in the family tree of Jesus. Ruth is listed in verse five. She was a non-Jew, a pagan Moabite. After her first husband, a Jew, died, she returned to Israel with her mother-in-law Naomi. Although she had no right to marry a Jew, by His grace God provided her a second husband, Boaz. Ruth was the grandmother of King David. Bathsheba is not mentioned by name, but she’s referred to in verse six as Solomon’s mother who had been Uriah’s wife. The son produced by the adultery of David and Bathsheba died in infancy, but the next son born to them was Solomon, the successor to David’s throne and continuer of the messianic line.

The genealogy of Jesus is more than a list of names. It’s proof Jesus is a descendant of King David, and that He’s the promised Messiah, the Christ. And this list of names is a magnificent record of God’s grace. Look at the lives of Abraham and David. Consider that the kings that followed David were often wicked and evil. Add these four women who at best would be called outcasts. It’s as if Matthew is nominating people for a “Hall of Shame.” It seems as if Jesus’ family tree is full of sinners. And that’s the point! Jesus came as the friend of sinners. He came to live among sinful men and women. He was completely without sin, yet He took on Himself the punishment for our sins. That’s the grace of God. God claims by grace those who have no claim to grace. God’s grace mends broken lives and restores shattered hopes, it brings forgiveness and new life. That’s why He came, not for those who are self-righteous and proud, who look down their nose at those who are not like them. He came for sinners, to save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

Here’s the best part: the same grace that was active in this list and in Jesus’ life is active today. If you think your past or your present includes decisions, mistakes, behaviors that disqualify you from God’s grace, realize what this list of names is saying to you! No sin, no matter how awful or evil, puts you beyond His reach. Nothing you do can put yourself beyond His reach as long as you are willing to receive: receive God’s grace, receive God’s Son. As Hebrews 7:25 promises, “Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God through Him.” Christmas is the time to celebrate and receive the Messiah, King Jesus. And it is the time to celebrate and receive His life-changing grace!