

## **GOD'S LADDER CAME DOWN**

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My aunt gave me my grandmother's Bible. She had died when I was a toddler and I don't remember her at all. I looked at the date on the inside. It's 1898, a hundred years old. She bore nine children, my mother being one of them. I'd never read my grandmother's handwriting. At the back of the Bible is her handwriting, a poem when her son Clarence died at the age of 5. Then all the births and deaths of her family. Nine children, twenty grandchildren of which I am the seventeenth. Probably the first thing I look for when I go to the Bible is to see where my name is.

Which to me makes fascinating a portion of scripture that is often not interesting to us. It would be very interesting if our name were in it. It's Matthew 1:1-17. Which reads "The book of generations of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham..." Let me try to make this a little bit more vivid today. Abraham begot Isaac, begot Jacob, begot Judah and attached to Judah is a flag named Tamar, begot Perez, begot Zara, begot Ram, Aminadab, Nahshon, Salmon, to whom was attached another flag, Rahab, from Salmon to Boaz, attached another flag, Ruth, began Obed, begat Jesse, begat king David. From Abraham to king David fourteen generations. Then Matthew counts David a second time. David to Solomon to whom is attached another flag, referring to him whose mother had been Uriah's wife, Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshapat, Joram, Hezekiah, Menasseh, Amon, Josiah – fourteen generations. Then from the deportation, through a group of names we really don't know but preserved in genealogical history of the Jewish people in Jesus' line all the way to Joseph, husband of Mary of whom was born. Not that Jesus was born of Joseph but he was born of Mary. Joseph's name is the one to whom he was linked of adoption to the legal line of David. Jesus who is called the Christ. Thirty two generations from Abraham to Jesus, the genealogy of Christ our Lord.

What truth is there in this genealogy for us? That's what I want to talk about today. My message is called God's Ladder Comes Down.

Link that genealogy for a moment with an Old Testament passage. Where the young man Jacob was fleeing for his life from his brother Esau who was really po'ed at him for stealing his birthright, his inheritance. He's laying down at night with his head on a rock for a pillow. And he has this vision of a ladder resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven and the angels of God descending and ascending on it. There above it stood the Lord and he said, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham, the God of Isaac. All people on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go."

Here we are the third one in the chain, all peoples will be blessed through you and your offspring. The ladder coming down is probably an intergenerational ladder that Jacob could not envision as part of the ladder that God was building between heaven and earth. His ladder came down.

I have three points. This genealogy says to us that the excluded become included when they want to be included.

Or to put it another way it's the inclusion of the excluded who want to be included. Why do I say that? I want to point out these spurs, these are Matthew's flags for us. He is writing, his whole gospel is to establish that Jesus is king of Jews. Jesus of course in his ministry has

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reached out to outcasts, he's reached out to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, he's reached out to the harlots, the lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes. Beyond that to Samaritans. Beyond that to Gentiles and Roman centurions. The church of Jesus Christ would ultimately reach out to a whole host of people.

I always begin holy land tours at the city of Joppa to remind us before we see the holy land that it was in Joppa that Peter had his vision, that God was going to include the excluded. And that Jesus came that we might all have life, not just those who were of the blood line of Abraham and David but who were children of God not by blood or the will of man but the will of God.

Matthew knows all of that. He knows all the record of the ministry of Jesus and how he reached out to people who were excluded. He's saying if you look at the family tree you'll see that God's always been up to that. He's been including the excluded. He didn't have to do that. He didn't have to reach out into the skeletons. Religious people have the tendency, the bad tendency, to want to hide stuff that's unpleasant. We all do that I supposed.

I know as General Secretary of Assemblies of God I have responsibility for the archives. We're just dedicating at the first of the year a brand new million dollar archival center which is going to be a wonderful museum exhibit archival center of Pentecostal history. A photograph had been sent to us of the building in which the Assemblies of God was formed. It's an old opera house in Hot Springs, Arkansas. In our first meeting in April, 1914 three hundred believers met there. Little did they realize that their dream of reaching the world within 85 years would become a family 30 million people in 154 countries. So the old opera house has kind of been etched into our history.

I had never seen a close up, a good photograph of the opera house. The Hot Springs archival association sent us a photograph which we had never seen. We're preparing a scale model inside and outside of it. Upon closer look we saw the word etched in the glass on the first story of the two story building: Saloon.

How do we replicate that? So the discussion began to take place as to whether or not why flag that for people? I went to the General Superintendent and said, Here's the issue. What do you want to do? He said what do you recommend? I said I'm not a historical revisionist. I prefer to show the story as it really happened. The fact is a lot of our churches began in saloons. In fact part of the history of this church began in the American Legion Hall in Newport Beach where every Sunday morning they'd have to clean out the bear from the previous night. A church in Calcutta began on the second floor above a saloon in Calcutta.

I said I don't think we should gloss over it. It's in our history. He agreed. So we've got a new scale model and you'll see that we started in a place that was partly used for a saloon. We however drank the new wine.

So Matthew is flagging these. Tamar. If I were a young person I'd say *hello!* Tamar. If ever a person was excluded she was excluded. She was the daughter in law of Judah. Judah's son died without producing an heir. So the custom of the time the next in line brother was to take her as wife and have a child of hers which would inherit the dead brother's estate. He refused to do the sexual act with her on repeated occasion and finally the Lord got tired of him using this woman and he struck him dead. So Judah said I don't have another son who is mature enough to marry you. Wait till he grows up. When he grew up he forgot his promise. So she knew that Judah

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was going out on a little business trip. She hiked down the road, put off her widow's garments and put on the garments of a prostitute and sat on the side of the road. Judah said How much? But I don't have my Visa card with me. She said, that's ok. Just give me your cord, your seal, and your staff. I'll take those until you can get payment. So he did. Then when the servant comes back to bring the payment she's not there. He forgets about it. Three months later Tamar in his household winds up pregnant. They bring the news to Judah. He says like any good religious person in that day, Burn her. She deserves to die. So she produces the cord, and the sash and the ring. And says classic line, My Lord, whose are these? He says, "On second thought...."

She becomes the mother of Perez. Matthew's waving the flag at us.

Once isn't enough. The next flag is Rahab, the wife of Salmon, the mother of Boaz. Rahab the harlot of Jericho, excluded.

If that's not enough, one more flag – the wife of Boaz, Ruth. Ruth wasn't Jewish at all. She was a Moabitist. The Moabites who had induced Israel, seduced them to sin of whom it is said in Deuteronomy, "No Moabite shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord." Ruth becomes David's grandmother. Flag.

Then of course that most remarkable... Matthew can hardly say the name. Years later he can't get the name out. So he refers to Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife. Bathsheba is here. Matthew, theologian that he is, is sending us a message in the inclusion of those names. He's saying God wants to include the excludable. Those who want to be included in this line, in the past, had an opportunity to be included.

If the church of Jesus Christ is going to keep on growing it's going to have to reach people who don't feel like they belong. God is saying to people, You may have messed up in the past. But I can help you make a different future.

With the inclusion of these four women outcasts it's no wonder that at Christmas time the glory of God appears to shepherds and pagan wise men and Jesus' own ministry would be to harlots, tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners. Because he is wanting to include the excludable of which we ourselves are aliens from the covenant, the prophets and the promises. But in Jesus Christ God has brought us near.

The second point of this genealogy that I see today is that the genealogy, God's ladder come down, tells us that God gives us freedom to choose but he never gives us freedom to frustrate his ultimate purposes. There's plenty freedom to choose in this. In fact as you go through these generations you can see a lot of people that messed up.

Thomas Fuller's great little line on the father-son relationship. He reminds us of how we are the product of our own choices. It's not just because "I'm this way because my parents made me this way..." You look at Rehoboam for example. Rehoboam was a bad guy. He was a bad father who began a son Abijah who was also a bad guy. So a bad father can beget a bad son. But guess what? Abijah later becomes a father and he begets son named Asa who was a good guy. So a bad father can beget a good son. And a good son can beget a good son, Jeshophat was a good son. And a good father can begets a bad son, Joram was a bad son.

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So here you have a bad father begets a bad son, a bad father begets a good son, a good father begets a good son and a good father begets a bad son. So it's said, "I see that my father's piety cannot be handed on. That is bad news for me. But I see also that actual impiety is not hereditary. That is good news for my son."

Thomas Cahill has written a new book, The Gift of the Jew. It's a remarkable book. I don't agree with the underlying biblical theology behind a lot of which he expresses but he has some fascinating points that need to be paid attention to. He talks about how God through Abraham shows how he's working within human history. And that the faith that was given to Abraham and the relationship that Abraham with God initiated a religion which was different from every religion of the period. He talks about in the age of Abraham every religion in the world saw the world in cyclical terms as the great wheel. This eastern religion which is still so popular today. The reincarnational kind of idea that everything that goes around comes around. That nothing is ever unique. Nothing is enacted but once. Every event has been enacted, is enacted, will be enacted perpetually, and the same individual has appeared, appear and will appear at every turn of the circle. Cahill says that the Jews were the first people to break out of this circle. If all is a circle then nothing we do matters. None of us matter. Life doesn't matter. It'll all happen again. What we do doesn't matter.

For our actions to matter they must be able to influence the future. But the future cannot be influenced if everything happens over and over. Scripture is saying it doesn't happen over and over. On every continent and in every society, Cahill says, Abraham would have been given the same advise when he was in Ur of the Chaldee. He'd been given advise wise men would one day give their followers: "Do not journey but sit. Compose yourself by the river of life. Meditate on its ceaseless and meaningless flow. On all that's past or passing or to come until you've observed the pattern and become at peace with the great wheel and with your own death and the death of all things. Sit there and watch the wheel."

God says no. I've got a ladder coming down.

Cahill says most of our best words, in fact words like new, adventure, surprise, unique, individual person, vocation, time history, future, freedom, progress, spirit, faith, hope, justice are the gifts of God to the Jews. God gives us freedom but he does not give up on his plan when one or two generations fail him. He is still working to create his inter generational ladder of history in the midst of ignorance, rebellion, sin and the like, God is weaving a scarlet thread of redemption through the tapestry of the generations. As he said in the worst of times to Joram king of Israel, Nevertheless because of the covenant the Lord has made with David the Lord is not willing to destroy the house of David; he has promised to maintain a lamp and his descendants forever. Jesus, who is called the Christ, is what was being looked at. The lamp forever.

So that's the first point – the inclusion of the excluded who wanted to be included. Then secondly, freedom to choose but not frustrate God's ultimate purposes. That's true in our own lives. We have freedom of choice but God's going to work the tapestry of his purposes in the midst of our own rebellion. He'll work in the next generation coming after us if we choose not to be a part of what he wants to do in our lives.

The third point of this message is simply this: this generational ladder is a God who can be trusted to keep his word.

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Notice Matthew 1:1 “The record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David the son of Abraham.” Notice that’s inverted. Chronologically it should be the son of Abraham, the son of David. Abraham came before David. But the focus of this genealogy is on David. You see it in several ways. You see it in Matthew 1:1 where the keys in on David’s name first. You see it secondly in the fourteen generations – fourteen from Abraham to David. Then he counts David twice and puts him both as the fourteenth of the first and the first of the next. Then the word David itself in the Hebrew is DVD which the Hebrews don’t have numbers. They use letters for numbers. And D equals four and D equals six. And DVD is actually fourteen. So it’s a metanomical tool to remember that the genealogy of Jesus is fourteen, fourteen, fourteen.

If that’s not enough he calls David “king.” The only one in the genealogy to get a title. What he’s saying is God made a promise to David that David would have an eternal life and that his kingdom would last forever. 2 Samuel 7:16 “Your house and kingdom will endure before me forever. Your throne will be established forever.” Is it no wonder then when the wise men come they are looking for where is the king of the Jews? And later in Jesus’ ministry when the people of Jerusalem are wondering is he the Messiah, some say no he can’t be because he’s from Nazareth and the Messiah will come from Bethlehem because they understood the text in Micah 5:2 that Bethlehem, David’s home town, from it would come a ruler.

On his cross the words of mocking was put: “King of the Jews.” But the verdict of history is reversed by the God of heaven who says, “I’ve given him the name that is above every name. That is the name of Jesus that every knee should bow in heaven and on earth.” The kingdom of this world has become, Revelation says, the kingdom of our God.

Isaiah put it this way, He will reign over David’s throne. The promises that God gave to David that he would have an everlasting kingdom if Jesus is not the heir of those promises God’s word cannot be true for there is no kingdom of David. Israel is not today a kingdom. It is a Parliamentary government with a prime minister. It has no king. It has had no king since 600 BC. There has been no king. Either God’s word that he would give an everlasting king is a true word or if Jesus is not king there is no king in Israel and God’s promise to David is simply like a promises human beings make went nowhere.

A play called “The Black Stranger” talks about the great Irish famine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which brought so many immigrants to America. One day the lead character of the play is out working on roads with his father and it dawns on him that the roads they’re building has no particular purpose except to give them something to do. He looks at his father in a key moment in the play and says, “Father, we’re building roads that lead to nowhere.”

Is that what life is all about? I talked to a young lady on the plane a few weeks ago. When she found out I was a minister she asked me the question, Why are we here? She’d been to church twice in her life. Not knowing where she came from or what she was doing or where she was going. It was a wonderful conversation we had over the next hours on the plane. I tried to talk to her about Christmas and history, that God has a ladder coming down. God’s word can be trusted.

History is an innersgenerational ladder descending from God down to earth. This is Matthew’s genealogy. You know there’s another genealogy in the New Testament. Luke’s is the other. Let’s see what Luke’s genealogy looks like.

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Luke does an interesting thing. Matthew's genealogy descends; Luke's genealogy starts with Jesus and works backward. What Luke is evidently doing, the most likely theory is that Luke traces Mary's genealogy through her father Heli and Matthew traces Jesus' genealogy through his adopted father Joseph. So you have Matthew's genealogy, the legal genealogy. And you have in Luke's genealogy the biological. So you have the different lines coming. Until you get to Nathan who was another son of David. David had the son Solomon who becomes the head of the royal line. This other son Nathan is not the king but he is in the line of Jesus evidently through Mary. So we've got from David we've got two branches of genealogy. But that isn't all that we've got.

He takes us past Abraham. Abraham's father Terah and takes us all the way back through the patriarchs through Lamech, through Shem, Noah, Lamech, on back through Methuselah, through Seth and ultimately to God. So that Jesus is son of David, son of Abraham, son of Adam, and son of God. We get the whole genealogy. God's ladder coming down.

Here is the inner generational ladder descending from God in Jacob's dream down to earth, from God to Abraham, to David to Jesus. Leading back up to heaven again through Jesus saying life has meaning, purpose and direction. God keeps his promises. We know where we came from, why we're here and where we're going. It's interesting that in the time of that Abraham was alive the predominant religion of the period had an epic called Gilgamesh of which this question was asked Gilgamesh: "Where do you roam? You will not find the eternal life you seek. When the gods created mankind, they appointed death for mankind and kept eternal life in their own hands."

The wonderful news of the gospel is that that's not true! God, working through the innergenerational ladder of history at the end of the line brought to us one who came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Jesus Christ our Lord.

Four centuries after that comment in Gilgamesh the editor of our *Pentecostal Evangel* edition earlier this month interviewed a 73 year old man on the streets of Moscow. He asked if he believed in God? The old man responded, "I've read the Bible but I don't go to church or know if God is real. Nobody has seen anything. No one from the other world has ever come to us." Not true. God's ladder has been coming down – Jesus.

And it comes all the way down to him. Then something marvelous happens at the end of the ladder. Jesus never married. He never had children. Jesus doesn't have biological children but he has spiritual children. Through adoption we get placed into this family and become an heir to all the promises that God made to Abraham and to David. Heirs and joint heirs with Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul says it eloquently in Ephesians 1 "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world." How long has God been thinking of you? How long has God been planning to save you? How long has God known that you would exist – you at the bottom of the ladder – how long did he know? Before he ever created Adam. He knew you were going to be in this line. I get chills just saying that!

That we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ.

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There's one other thing I need to point out. Everybody that's in this genealogy except Jesus didn't have a choice in coming. Adam didn't have a choice. God didn't say to Adam in some pre-incarnate space, "Adam would you like to go?" Adam was made out of nothing. Out of dirt actually which is sort of nothing. So Adam didn't have a choice in the matter. Seth didn't have a choice; it was his parents' choice. Enoch didn't have a choice. Terah didn't have a choice. Abraham didn't have a choice.

Nobody in this ladder had a choice. Except Jesus who chose to become God's Son and come down. But there is the only human being – Jesus obviously is human and divine. We have a divine nature but we're different from him – the only human in this chain that had a choice to be in the chain was you and me. Where you get into this chain, as John so eloquently says, "It's not by the blood nor by the will of man, but by the will of God." "To all who receive him," John says, "he gave power [gave the genetic power if you will,] to become the children of God. Children of God and joint heirs through Jesus Christ our Lord. The end of the matter is whether or not we add our name at the last. So we complete God's ladder come down.

If you're here today I don't know what your own personal biological family is. But there's one family for sure you need to belong to and that's the family of God. The only way you get into that family is to say, I want to belong. When you want to belong, guess what? God puts you in because he is including the excluded.

Lord Jesus, we come to you in this moment. We thank you that your ladder came down all the way down to us. We thank you, Lord, that it's not a long way back to you. There is generations that have come down but, Lord, in one gigantic lift you're going to take us back to you. We thank you today for the power of the gospel. We thank you today for the power in your word that you can be relied upon to keep your promises. And that you're working in our lives. As we review this year, Lord, maybe there were some choices we've made have been unfortunate and maybe some things that have happened to us that we didn't choose have likewise been unfortunate. But in all the tapestry of life you're weaving and working your divine purpose until that day when we are complete in you. For your ladder came down that we might go up. Thank you for the great possible that you've given us Jesus Christ.

There is no genealogy after Jesus. You make the choice as to whether you're going to become his son or daughter. Adopted into the beloved. If you've not made that choice there's no better day than today, the Sunday before Christmas to come and say, I want to belong to Jesus.

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