

Historical Needle in a Haystack

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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You know, we just quoted Scripture, who the Son sets free is free indeed, and I want to clarify, I think, a grave misunderstanding. For some reason it has been propagated through the years that when somebody becomes a believer in Jesus Christ, when someone takes on the title of a Christian, a follower of Jesus, that somehow their life becomes restricted, somehow it has barriers and there's bondage and there are chains and such, yet let me remind us that in the garden of Eden before sin ever entered the picture, God made this statement to Adam and Eve, he said, "You may eat freely of every tree of the garden except his one." When the serpent comes around in Genesis 3, here's what he said, "Did the Lord say you can eat of every tree?" Did you notice the word that he left out? Freely. The Lord gives freedom, the enemy promises freedom but gives us nothing but bondage. Whom the Son sets free is truly free indeed.

Let's pray.

Lord, as we come to this time in our service where we have declared the truth of your word, Lord, we simply have just been singing back to you that which you gave to us. Lord, now as we open your word, Lord, may this not be an academic exercise, may this not be a cerebral challenge but may this be one of those moments in life where your Holy Spirit reaches down through your word and it transforms us from the inside out. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Matthew 1. As you're turning to Matthew 1, if you're a guest or visitor with us, we are simply and very systematically as a family of faith walking through the Scriptures typically a chapter a day or sometimes two chapters a day and I may need an amen or a witness, aren't we grateful we made it through Isaiah? I mean, we made it through Isaiah and we're now in familiar territory, what we know as the book of Matthew, and today in Matthew we're going to look at chapter 1 and a portion of Scripture that is oftentimes overlooked and to be quite honest with you, is really somewhat strange at least on the surface, it's the genealogy of Jesus, and typically when we come to this passage of Scripture, let me go ahead and admit what we all need to admit is we just skip it. I mean, So-and-so begat So-and-so who begat So-and-so. Okay, let's get to what we know as the Christmas story. Let's get to the action. Let's get to the good stuff.

So oftentimes we overlook this section of the Bible but if we do pay close attention, when you begin to read the names, it sometimes becomes obscure. I mean, this is the first genealogy in your Bible that actually contains the names of women in it. It's the first genealogy that has the name of someone who would be a Gentile by birth and by nature. It's the first genealogy that doesn't mention death. In the Old Testament it says, "So-and-so lived a certain amount of years and they died." Here it just says, "So-and-so begat So-and-so who begat So-and so." But one of the verses, in fact, it's the concluding verse in verse 17 of Matthew 1, may be the most obscure and possibly overlooked verse in this chapter of Scripture. In fact, what we're going to see today hopefully as we kind of peel the layers away as much as we would do an onion, is I want us to see that there is this historical needle in a haystack that we need to pay attention to.

Matthew 1:17,

17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations.

You read that verse and many of you may have never noticed it before, now here's this verse that three times talks about 14 generations, to others of you it may seem somewhat obscure because you look back and you read the history there and say, "Why did the Lord summarize the entire Old Testament in one simple verse?"

Well, I want to begin today by defining some terms before we peel the layers of Matthew 1:17. The first term I want to identify or define is the term "time." Time is linear. You do understand you can never get time back? Once it's passed, it is past. It is one of those items in life that once you've experienced it, it's gone. That's why we label it the past, the present and the future. History, on the other hand, is cyclical. In fact, one of the things about history is it seems to oftentimes repeat itself over and over again. I don't know if you were one of the few who stayed up last night for the seven overtime football game, it just repeated itself over and over and over. But on a serious note, when you look at history and its cyclical patterns, one of the things that's often been said is that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. It's also been said that the one thing that we do not learn from history is to learn from it.

So time is linear, history is cyclical, but here in Matthew 1:17, the Lord uses a word, "the generation." From the generations of Abraham to David are 14. From David to the carrying away are 14. From the carrying away into Babylon are 14 generations. And the term or the idea or the concept of a generation both encompasses linear or chronological time but it also involves a historical, cyclical way of thinking perspective. Allow me to illustrate with the words of Jesus Christ himself.

Matthew 24. He's on the Mount of Olives. I mean, he's there just days before his eventual crucifixion. The disciples have come to him with some very strategic questions. They ask

him in Matthew 24, "When will these things happen? And what will be the sign of your coming?" Very eschatological, Second Coming, everything is coming to an end question. Jesus begins one of the most famous teachings and discourses in all of his ministry, the fact that there will rise up false prophets, there will be wars and rumors of wars, and this thing known as the abomination of desolation, all these crazy concepts, but then toward the end of this chapter, Jesus draws a parallel by using a parable and he talks about a fig tree and within the Old Testament more often than not the fig tree is a picture of, an illustration of Israel, but he makes this statement, he says that, "When you begin to see the fig tree blossom, when you begin to see that it's just about to bear fruit, know that it is the last generation." What Jesus was simply saying was this: all that he spoke on the Mount of Olives, when you begin to see it happen before your very eyes, you can start the stopwatch. There is going to be a linear time. It has begun and the Lord one day will end it. It is a linear, chronological use of the word "generation."

But then earlier in Matthew 12, Jesus used this term, the concept of a generation, to describe an aspect of the cyclical, historical, philosophical way of looking at life. There was a group gathered around him, in fact, it was a large group. The Bible says that there were those of an older fashion of what we would call today senior adults; there were young families; there were probably singles that were there. Thousands of people were gathered and they had this one question on their mind: would Jesus do what no one else had done? Sure he had multiplied the food, he had walked across the water, he did some incredible teachings, but they gathered to him and they said, "We seek a sign. We want something more." Jesus emphatically declared, "I'm only going to give you one sign. As Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, so the Son of Man," speaking of himself, "will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights." Here's what Jesus said, "You want a sign? I'll give you a sign, I'm going to breathe my last breath, you're going to close me in a tomb, you're going to roll the stone over it, and three days later I'm going to be alive more than I've ever been and you've seen me." There's your sign. What's interesting and intriguing about that passage is right before he gives that answer, here's what he declares to his audience. Remember, there are those that are young children, what we would call teenagers, young adults, senior adults, he says, "An adulterous generation seeks for a sign." So from the mouth of Jesus, we see that this concept or this idea of a generation is not restricted to pure chronology, it's not even restricted to a way of thinking or history, it's actually a plausible combination thereof.

You say, "Well, why is that so significant?" Well, when you look at Matthew 1:17 and you begin to go back in the Old Testament, you begin to study the names that are listed in this chapter that oftentimes we overlook, allow me to go ahead and share the obvious: there is no way to chronologically match up the generations that are listed. When it says from Abraham to David, from David unto the carrying away, from the carrying away unto Christ, when it says that all three of those are 14 generations, you can go back and say, "Okay, this guy had a child and he had a child and he had a child," they're all different time frames and it all seems to not add up. But as you walk through the Old Testament particularly when you read through the Kings and the Chronicles, there is an amazing discovery you'll find. It says that there will be a man and that he will follow the ways of the Lord. His son will follow the ways of the Lord. His grandson will follow the

ways of the Lord. But his great-grandson will forsake the Lord. He'll re-establish the high places and he'll offer a sacrifice unto what we know as idols. That is four chronological or linear generations but it's only two historical or philosophical generations and so when we come to this verse that's often overlooked and sometimes very obscure, notice that what the Lord is communicating to us and what we're going to discover today is this: don't think just strictly in terms of chronology, think of how we respond to or don't respond to our Creator, the Lord himself.

Now before we dig into exactly how Israel responded, I do want to share with you some interesting discoveries as of late, what we might call trends or turnings. A lot of individuals who are a lot smarter than I am, a lot more cerebral than I am, have gone back and looked at cultures. It doesn't matter whether it's the Jewish culture of the Old Testament, it doesn't matter whether it's the American culture of today, or the hundreds and thousands that are in-between through the course of time. They have discovered that every group of people, every culture including what we're about to study in verse 17, goes through a series of generational trends, turnings or cycles.

For example, there's a time where this culture or this group experiences what they call a high. Everything is wonderful, like the old song says, "It's Sunday, Monday, Happy Days. Tuesday, Wednesday, Happy Days." Everybody is happy. The institutions are working. The community is working. Everybody is working together. It just seems like a blissful time period. We see a lot of those moments in the Old Testament. There are a lot of times where the Israelites were doing very well not only with each other but in their relationship to the Lord.

Then there comes a time that they call the awakening. An awakening is where, and by the way, this doesn't have to be a strict chronological, the next generation, sometimes it happens hundreds of years down the line, that there's a group that comes along that says, "We don't want to," in their eyes, "settle for the security of the past. We want to see what the grass looks like on the other side." Now if you've ever had the grass is greener on the other side idea, let me go ahead and share with you if it's green, it's because there's a septic tank on the other side of the fence, usually it's brown and/or burnt up. But that's what happens. They begin to express this radical individualism of, "It's all about me. What can I experience? What can I be about? What can I grab, so to speak, in life and make mine?" They forsake the days gone by. They forsake how the Lord provided in their past for the desire of their own individual goals and aspirations.

Then there comes a generation that many people have called the unravelers. They look back at generations past and say you went on the other side of the fence and you found out exactly what it was. It wasn't worth going but you tried. They look generations back and they look at those that experienced this incredible movement of God, particularly in the Old Testament but even in our culture today, and they began to fear that the sky is falling; that there is no hope; that everything is despair because when we were all doing well together, it faded. When we decided to go out on our own, it backfired. So the sky must be falling. Everything is horrible. It is nothing but doom and despair.

Then a fourth generation rises. By the way, each and every one of us see this happen in our lives on a regular basis. More often than not, the most generations that you'll ever see alive in a family at any given time is four generations. Occasionally you'll see a fifth but it's very rare. This is a generation that has this crisis moment. They look at all that's happened in days gone by, they look at their forefathers, they look at those that have preceded them, and they realize that there truly is a crisis, are we going to be about which we used to be about, are we going to follow our forefathers that tried to go out with this radical individualism, or are we just going to unravel at the seams? And what they discovered not only in your Old Testament but throughout time is that culture after culture after culture goes through these cycles where there are these great moments and not so great moments and they begin to roll, but here's the thing that's interesting, is that every single culture that when they get to that fourth time of crisis, it is the most critical of all because so much time has passed and so many generations have come and gone that even though there may be fragments of remnants of what they used to be, they look completely different on the other side.

Now go back to verse 17 of Matthew 1 and I want you to see how this plays out in the Old Testament. Notice here in verse 17 that all 39 books of your Old Testament and the 400 years in between Malachi and Matthew are summarized. It says, "from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations." You know that each one of those statements began and ended in what we might call one of these social crises of such.

Let's begin with the first one, Abraham. Back in Genesis 11, Abraham and his family and his friends were on the backside of what we know as the Tower of Babel. By the way, I like to tease my Jewish friends that before Genesis 12, nobody was Jewish, everybody was Gentile. My Jewish friends tend to come back in Genesis 12 and say, "Yeah, but then in chapter 12, we got a promotion and you didn't." But nonetheless, in Genesis 12 a man by the name of Abram was up in a land known as Ur of the Chaldees. He's tending the flocks of his father-in-law when the Lord comes to him and says, "I want to do something through you. I want to make your descendants more numerous than the stars even though you and your wife are well past what we know as the child-birthing years. Do you believe me?" And Abraham said he did and according to Hebrews 11, he went to a land that he knew not of, but it wasn't just that he went to this land, the Lord said, "Okay, we're going to have a covenant between us. There's going to be a significant marker that's going to establish whether you're into this plan or not." And what we know as circumcision was given to Abraham and his followers, not only for him but his descendants, and for years and years and years and generation after generation, even though there were some good times and some not so good times, it was this act of circumcision that verified the covenant or this relationship with the Lord to the Jewish people.

But notice it says here from Abraham to David were 14 generations. From David. You see, in David's lifetime, he desired something very special of the Lord. He wanted a permanent place for what we know as the ark of the covenant. He wanted a place for the Spirit of God to dwell on a permanent level and he sought it after God but the Lord told

him, "You can't do this because you're a man with bloody hands." He so desperately wanted to that according to the book of Chronicles he sought out a group of people known as the Issacharites, wise men, intelligent men, men of renown, and they said, "I'm sorry, David, the thing, times are 'changing.' Something new is on the horizon." Fourteen of these generations had gone through and it says from David.

Who came next from David? It was Solomon. In fact, it would be the third of the monarch kings in your Old Testament. Solomon was given the allowance, he was given the provision, he was given the blessing by God to build that building that David so desperately wanted to and when that building was erected, when that building was initiated and they began to worship there, what we know as circumcision did not go by the wayside, it was not eliminated, but it was no longer the core foundation of who the Israelites were for from this point forward it would be the feast of Passover, it would be the tabernacles, it would be Pentecost where they would gather together in this one place, they would bring their sacrifices, they would bring their offerings, and they would celebrate the goodness, the provision and the forgiveness of God. You see, beginning from David or shall we say Solomon, for generation after generation after generation when battles were won, when battles were lost, when times were good, when times were bad, there was one thing that provided this common denominator for the Israelites, it was the temple.

It says there were 14 generations from David unto the carrying away. You see, the year was 538 and there was a man, BC by the way, there was a man by the name of Nebuchadnezzar who came into what we know as Jerusalem. He pillaged the people, though he preserved a few whom we know as Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and those, they made their way to the exile in Babylon, but what we know as that temple, that foundation, that core for who they were, it was literally razed to the ground. It was taken to the ground, the elements were stolen, it was eliminated. For 70 years the Israelites wandered in a place known as Babylon. It would be a new kind of wilderness. Unlike the one in the book of Exodus, in Babylon their shoes did wear out, their clothes did get old, and manna did not come directly from heaven. But there was a time where a man by the name of Nehemiah, he cried out, he cried out not only to God but to Cyrus, the now Persian king, that he desired to go home and what had happened in 586 when they had been taken captive now was being reversed. They were allowed to go back and rebuild the wall as Nehemiah describes. They were allowed to rebuild the temple as Ezra described. The Torah, the Scriptures were established and what we often call the Second Temple was built. It would again be the place of sacrifice. It would be the place of atonement. It would be the place of grace and mercy and forgiveness.

Notice what verse 17 says, "from Abraham to David, from David until the carrying away. from the carrying away unto Christ." You see, even in Jesus' days of ministry, twice according to the Bible, the book of John 2 and the book of Matthew, Jesus goes into the temple, this building that had become their foundation, their stability not only as a culture together but in relationship to their God, and he said, "You made my Father's house a den of thieves," and he made this declaration, he said, "If this building be taken down," he said, "I will rebuild it in three days." According to John 2, the disciples said, "They knew

not what he meant, that he spoke of his body." Matthew 27 it says that Jesus breathed his last breath. He said, "Father, in your hands I commend my spirit." He said there he gave up the ghost, the veil of the temple, that which was in front of the Holy of Holies, it separated, it tore from the top to the bottom, then the Bible says the earth did quake. Did you catch the order there? The earth did not quake and then the veil tear, the veil tore, then the earth quaked, and what Jesus had been declaring for 3 ½ years of his ministry would come true, that according to 1 Corinthians 6 when we admit that we've sinned, when we believe on Jesus Christ, our bodies now become the temple of the Holy Ghost. We now become not just the permanent residence of the Holy Spirit but the portable residence of the Holy Spirit, unlike that temple.

Why is this critical? Because in this one oftentimes overlooked, obscure verse, the entire history of the Israelite people is laid out. This generational cycle of circumcision, this first temple, this second temple, and very clearly it lays out that it began and it ended and there was this 14 cycles of generations.

Now you may be wondering to yourself today, "How does this apply to my life? I mean, that's an interesting study and it's intriguing at best, but how does that impact me when the alarm clock goes off tomorrow?" Well, you understand that it happened in the Israelites' history, it's happened in Chinese history, Korean history, British history, American history. You see, we are not immune to the cycles of history and the generations of life and those who are a lot smarter than I am have shared that you and I find ourselves today in a very interesting, intriguing time in history for we find ourselves today as what we know this culture, on the fourth cycle of these generations. In fact, there's great discussion now that because the American culture is so unique even compared to the Hebrew or Jewish culture, that oftentimes our chronological descendants think very differently than our parents and our grandparents, and occasionally there is an overlap but not so much, and so there is dispute now that they can't decide is it the millennials or is it generation Z that are the 14th generation. Did you catch that? You see, here in Matthew 1:17, the Lord summarized all of Israel's history into three cycles of these turnings and yet what is the problem with history is we tend not to learn from it. We're at the same place that David was with the temple. We're at the same place that the Israelites were with Babylon thinking, "Oh, they'll never overtake us." We're at the same place where the Jewish leaders said, "Crucify him! Let his blood be on our hands forever."

The interesting thing is there's a lot of division today, there's a lot of discussion, there's a lot of discord on where we've come from, who we are and where we're going, and if you take this passage and the lessons therein and you apply it to our culture today, you know, there are several things that most people will never communicate, share or be willing to even entertain and that's that we as a culture, we started in a time of crisis. I don't know about you but I call the Revolution a pretty critical event in life. I mean, that was a crisis. I mean, that was a time where decisions had to be made, sacrifices had to be given, but what most people will never talk about is the fact that in the years leading up to that crisis was what we know as the first Great Awakening. It was a time period where the Spirit of God moved in such a mighty way in our culture that what we know as the Ivy League,

now let me talk about the Ivy League for just a moment. With the exception of Harvard and Yale, all the other Ivy League schools were initially started as seminaries to teach young people how to properly share the Gospel all over the world. Most people don't know that, in fact, I'd say another thing about the Ivy League most people don't know and Bama fans, you've got to forgive me in advance, there's actually a discussion on who has the most national titles: Princeton, Yale or Harvard. Oh, don't worry, they're self-proclaimed but nonetheless, Yale claims 28, Princeton claims 27 or vice-versa. I mean, it was an era, by the way, that's when football had only like eight teams, so don't panic, that being said, the Ivy League schools, they weren't known for football, they weren't known for academics, they were known as teaching the Bible during the first Great Awakening.

We had some good times, we had some bad times, but 100 years later we had another struggle in our culture. This one wouldn't be over our identity or our establishment, it would be a division of families, it would be a division of politics, it would be a division of what was perceived destiny, we call it the Civil War. A horrible time in our nation's history yet very few people will ever talk about the fact that in the 18 months preceding what we know as the Civil War, over 1 ½ million people came to know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, an amazing revival movement. That would be the equivalent today of 30 million people getting saved in 18 months in this country, and though the war was horrific and the ideologies were different, a lot of people don't know that at the end of the day when the troops would go to their campsites, that oftentimes the Confederate soldiers would invite Union chaplains to come and lead Bible study, and oftentimes the Union soldiers would invite Confederate chaplains to come and lead Bible study. You say, "Well, what's the significance there?" Because in our past in the midst of great division and discord, we have as a culture a history of putting Jesus Christ above the junk. Did you hear me? Even when we were so divided that almost a million people lost their lives on the battlefield, when the dust cleared it didn't matter what the uniform was as long as they had a Bible in their hands.

You fast forward a few more years through a time known as the Great Depression. Now we would not be separated by ideology, politics, although we still were are some level, we would be separated economically from the haves and the have-nots, and I think John Steinbeck put it best in his book, "The Grapes of Wrath," as those pilgrims went across the country that every town, every city, no matter how large or how small, there were tents that were put up and every night in the community you could go down and hear the Gospel sung and hear it preached from the word of God. You see, we are a culture of a lot of highs, we're a culture of a lot of lows just like the Israelites, but the thing that we need to learn today is in our history even as sordid and as bad as some of it is, and it is awful in some cases, that the prominence and the preeminence of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures was always raised above the fray.

Today we're in another one of those moments, we're in another one of those times just like the Israelites were. We're in the same place and we have to ask ourselves a very important question: are we going to repeat the same mistakes they did or are we willing to allow the Gospel, are we willing to allow the Scriptures to rise to the place that it should and needs to? We are a culture that is greatly divided. We are a culture that has

incredible discord but we've also become a culture that at least at this moment is refusing to place the Scriptures and Jesus above the decibels. So I'm going to ask you an important question today: are you willing to do so in your life? In fact, I'm going to ask a question that I've asked in the past to folks individually and I'm going to warn you in advance this usually gets people pretty upset with me. Are you ready? Whatever your ideology is, whatever your philosophy is, whatever your economic position, whatever your politics is, put that on pause for just a moment, as a person who claims to believe in Jesus Christ, do you really want revival or do you just want to be the one calling the shots? Think about that for just a moment because if you're more interested in people getting saved than your position, then we can learn from history and see that the Gospel always trumps the discord but we've got to be willing to do this individually, we've got to be willing to do this as a family, we've got to be willing to do this as a church and as a community to say that no matter where we stand or whatever we stand on, that Jesus Christ and the Scriptures will always be above any earthly position or disposition. The problem is we rarely learn from history, do we? And yet this could be one of the most strategic important times in our history to place the Scriptures and Jesus above it all, the question is are you willing to?

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, maybe you're that individual today, it doesn't matter if this is your first time on our campus or you've grown up in church nine months longer than you've physically been alive, but maybe you're one of those individuals today among the study and among the peeling away the layers of Matthew 1:17 said, "In spite of the history, in spite of all the stuff that's out there, I don't have a relationship with Jesus. I have never been forgiven of my sins. I need to just be saved." The Bible says very clearly in the book of Romans whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. You may question yourself, "Well, what does that look like?" Well, here's the great news, you don't have to sign up for a bunch of classes, you don't have to check off a bunch of boxes, in fact, the Bible is very clear you just need to cry out. If that's who you are today, let me encourage you just to have a conversation with the Lord. You don't have to have this conversation out loud, in fact, you don't have to say the same words that I might say but maybe your conversation would go a little something like this. "God, today I just want to admit what you already know, I'm the problem. I'm the one who has messed up. I'm the one who has sinned. I'm the one who has rebelled and I believe that Jesus Christ is the only answer. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to pay the price of my sins on the cross and I believe that three days later he rose from the dead so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to all the problems of life, I don't even have the answers to most of the problems in my life, but I do know that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem. So in the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, if you had that conversation with the Lord today, we'd love to have a conversation with you. We'd love to just celebrate what the Lord is doing in your life. But maybe you had that conversation years ago, maybe

you've been saved for years or decades and maybe today out of a simple study of a very obscure verse, maybe you realized you've allowed other things to get above the Gospel, you've allowed other ideas to be above Scripture. Maybe today is a return to putting things in your life in their rightful place and order.

Heavenly Father, as we come to this time in our service, thank you that you're a God of mercy. Lord, thank you that rather than giving us what we rightfully deserve in judgment that you extend mercy and grace and forgiveness and a willingness to be called your child, a son and a daughter of the King of kings. Help us, O God, to cherish that this day. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me as our team leads us. Whatever decision, I'll be right here at the front.