

## When Your Life Is Not Promising

### A Study of Matthew 1:1-17

Characteristic of Completeness: Hope

Big Idea: Pin your hope to God's promises, not your presumptions.

Related Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-3; Deuteronomy 7:9; 2 Samuel 7:16; Isaiah 9:6-7; Romans 11:33; 2 Corinthians 12:7-9; Galatians 3:29; 2 Thessalonians 3:3; 2 Timothy 2:13; 1 John 2:25

Introduction:

A. Good morning. I'm delighted to be back again after my summer sabbatical. I'm grateful to the Elders for allowing me to take a break from preaching for about a month in the summer. It allows me to do a lot of other stuff in a relatively short period of time. Let me give you a quick fly-by of what I did on my summer vacation.

1. Cathy and I decided to take our bodies in for the 50-year maintenance items. Please indulge me. As you get older, you talk more and more about medical stuff.

We went to the internist for a check-up. We went to the dermatologist to get some things burned off and cut off and tested. We went to the eye doctor to get our peepers checked and lenses prescribed. We went to the dentist and Cathy got off easy. Just a cleaning and one filling repaired. I got wisdom teeth pulled at the dentist, and then I got sent to an endodontist for oral surgery on a root canal. And there's a little story here.

I decided to schedule the wisdom teeth and the oral surgery on the same day. Yank the teeth at nine. Cut the gums at ten forty-five. I figured if I was going to be in pain, I might as well do it all at once.

They didn't have to put me under. But the endodontist did prescribe three happy pills: one to take the night before for a good night's sleep, the other two for an hour before the surgery.

I didn't take the one the night before. I slept fine. I was at the dentist's office, all numbed up for the extraction, when I popped—or I should say slopped the two happy pills down.

I remember getting my wisdom teeth out and then driving to the endodontist's office. That's when the happy pills kicked in. *Blotto*. I have no memory of the rest of the day. But I hear stories. Apparently, I snored while being operated on. Apparently, when I got home, I traumatized my daughter-in-law by running around in my underwear. Apparently, I was discovered watching a Spanish version of the Jerry Springer show on TV.

2. Enough about medical things. We did other stuff, too. I took all my books off the shelves in my home office—75 boxes worth—and I varnished the shelves. We recarpeted the house. I tore out the pantry and rebuilt a new one. I installed a new over-the-stove microwave. In preparation for relandscaping and repainting the house, I removed four trees, fourteen juniper bushes, two pirocanthas (I don't know how to spell it), two oleanders, several tons of dirt, concrete, rock . . . and one phone line, which is supposed to be repaired today.

3. I came up with a one-year sermon plan, which is in your bulletin. And I planned out a staff-elder retreat.

It's been restful.

4. Actually it *has* been restful and refreshing to work hard in a different way. It hasn't all been work. In the middle, Cathy and I spent a week in Mexico for some long walks on the beach and lots of time together. It was great. All except for the intestinal Mayan Malady we got at the end, but even that helped us lose a few pounds. Hey, we're good.

5. It's good to be back. Today, we begin some sermons through the gospel of Matthew, the first book in the New Testament. The first half-dozen sermons constitute a series I've titled, "Hard Knocks." The ► subtitle for this first sermon of the series is "When Your Life Is Not Promising."

B. There are times when life simply does not seem promising. God is not taking care of you the way you expected. Your hope is deflated. You are disappointed. And you begin to wonder: Have I done something to mess up my relationship with God? Where is the peace? Where is the abundant life? Where is the victory? Has God abandoned me?

C. You are not alone. At the beginning of the first century, many Jews were wondering, too. Has God abandoned us? Is there any hope? These were understandable questions in light of their circumstances. Let me take a few minutes to tell the story.

You see, God had made some ► promises to the Jewish people. And He wasn't delivering on the promises. At least that's the way it seemed in the first century. Sometimes that's the way it seems today.

1. God made two or three very big promises to the Jewish people.

a. The ► first He made to Abraham, who was originally called Abram. The promise to Abram was made around 1900 B.C.<sup>1</sup> and it had three aspects to it, as recorded in Genesis 12:1-3.

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<sup>1</sup> Bibleworks timeline.

- (1) First, there was a national aspect. God promised to give Abram a land. This is the original basis for the phrase, “the promised land.” And, God promised that Abram’s descendants would become a great nation. This is the original basis for the phrase, “the chosen people.” These promises come in ► Verses 1 and 2, where God said,

<sup>NAU</sup> Genesis 12:1 . . . “Go forth from your country,  
And from your relatives And from your father’s  
house, To the land which I will show you; 2 And I  
will make you a great nation . . .”

Abram would become the father of the Hebrew nation—the Jews.

- (2) There was also a personal aspect to the promise God made to Abram. God promised Abram blessing and greatness and protection. These are represented in ► Verses 2 and 3, where God said,

<sup>NAU</sup> Genesis 12:2 “. . . And I will bless you, And make  
your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3  
And I will bless those who bless you, And the one  
who curses you I will curse. . . .”

- (3) Finally, there was a universal aspect in ► Verse 3, where God said to Abram,

<sup>NAU</sup> Genesis 12:3 “. . . And in you all the families of  
the earth will be blessed.”

Somehow, in Abram, “all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Now, the term “families” here refers to tribes or people groups. Somehow, through Abram all people groups and all their descendants would be blessed. God wanted to make this point very clear because He repeated this to Abram several times as recorded in Genesis. For example, later in ► Genesis 22:18, God said to Abram, whose name had been changed to Abraham at that point,

<sup>NAU</sup> Genesis 22:18 “In your seed all the nations of the  
earth shall be blessed . . .”

This was heady stuff. God promised that a great Jewish nation would arise from Abraham. God promised that Abraham's descendants, the Jews, would be a blessing to the whole world. They were the people chosen by God for this exalted role.

- b. And ► that's not all. There was a second big promise God made. The ► second one was given to another Jew named David around 1000 B.C.<sup>2</sup> David was then the king of Israel. The promise is recorded in ► 2 Samuel 7:16, where God said to David:

<sup>NAU</sup> 2 Samuel 7:16 "Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever."

Here, God promised that David's lineage and his throne would continue forever.<sup>3</sup> This can be viewed as an expansion of the national aspect of the previous promise to Abraham.

- c. Related to this promise of David's lineage and throne came a corresponding promise through the prophet Isaiah around 700 B.C.<sup>4</sup> It can be viewed as a third promise, but it's really an expansion of the first and second. It was ► the promise of a Messiah who would come to occupy the throne of David and reign forever as a blessing to all peoples. The promise is recorded in ► Isaiah 7:6-7. It says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Isaiah 9:6 For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. ► 7 There will be no end to the increase of *His* government or of peace, ► On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.

Now, looking ► back, these are big promises. The Jewish people were to be a great nation and a great blessing. The lineage and throne of David would last forever. And it would include a coming Messiah who would reign as king over all. Sweet.

2. Only one problem. Fast forward to the first century and things ain't so sweet.

<sup>2</sup> Bibleworks timeline.

<sup>3</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 57.

<sup>4</sup> Bibleworks timeline.

- a. For one thing, the Israelites had a sinful past. In fact, they had experienced the discipline of the Lord. They had these wonderful promises but kept straying from God. In the wake of Israel's continual backsliding, God allowed His people to be conquered by the Babylonians and deported to Babylon for 70 years.

At the time of the first century, the Jews had long been released from Babylonian captivity. But things since had not been as glorious as in the days of David. They were hardly a great nation. They still lived under foreign, pagan oppression—now under the thumb of the Roman Empire.

It was easy to question: Did we lose God's promises?<sup>5</sup> Has God abandoned us? Is there any hope?

- b. Other circumstances fueled their fears. For example, in the 400 years or so leading up to the first century, God had been strangely silent. There were no prophets who spoke for God during that time. The chronological gap between the Old Testament and the New is about 400 years. They are often called 400 years of silence.

It was easy to question: Did we lose God's promises? Has God abandoned us? Is there any hope?

- c. And there was another very bothersome fact. In the previous 200 years leading up to the first century, the kings Israel were not from David's family.<sup>6</sup> The Davidic succession to the throne had been broken. And it was looking more and more like it might never be restored.

Hadn't God promised? Didn't He say the lineage and throne of David would last forever? Did we lose God's promises? Has God abandoned us? Is there any hope?

- d. And there was yet other irritant. A guy named Jesus had come. The claim was that He was the Messiah. He did do some miraculous things. And it did look promising for a while. But in the end, He didn't conquer. In a way, it almost seemed like a cruel joke. They were expecting His coronation. What they got was His crucifixion. Some king.

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<sup>5</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One*, (London and Louisville, KY: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, 2004), 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

3. So, you see, the hopelessness of many first-century Jews is understandable. In fact, we have a lot in common with them.

For one thing, we all have a sinful past. It can make us wonder if we've cut ourselves off from God's promises.

And you may not be oppressed by the Roman Empire, but you may be oppressed by a chronic illness, or a troubled teenager, or the conflict of marriage, or the loneliness of singleness, or the emotional wounds of abuse, or the loss of a loved one, or the worry of debt, or the depths of depression.

And maybe God has been strangely silent. Silent for a long time. You've heard church people talk about experiencing the peace of God. And living the victorious life. And praying with enough faith to make good things happen. These are God's promises, they say. But life is not that promising for you. No peace. No victory. And your prayers seem to go unanswered. Your life is not promising. What do you do when your life is not promising?

- D. We ► can learn a thing or two from the introductory verses of the gospel of Matthew. It was written to a Jewish audience in the first century.

The text we're going to study today is Matthew 1:1-17. If you've ever read Matthew, chances are you've just sort of skimmed over this first part because it's just a boring genealogy. It's one of those yada-yada parts of the Bible. And so and so was the father of so and so, and so and so was the father of so and so—yada-yada—when do we get to something relevant?

I want to show you that this boring genealogy is not so boring; it is exceedingly relevant to the questions I have raised. Our text is about hope. In fact, ► hope is our Characteristic of Completeness in Christ for the week.

I want to show you that there are two big things to be learned from our text. There are two things that I think God wants to convey through these introductory verses in Matthew.

- I. Here's ► the first thing to be learned: God keeps His promises. When God makes a promise, He makes it good. When God says He's going to do something, He does it. We cannot somehow lose His promises by our misbehavior. We can bank on God's promises no matter what our circumstances look like.

- A. Look at ► Verse 1. It says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 1:1 The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham:

Right out of the gate, Matthew points to the fulfillment of God's biggest ► promises—the one's I talked about earlier.

1. Matthew says Jesus is the promised ► Messiah. As if to assure his readers that this is no slip of the pen, three times in our text, in Verses 1, 16, and 17, Matthew gives Jesus the title, Messiah.
2. He also calls Jesus ► “the son of David.” By calling Jesus “the son of David” he is linking Jesus to the fulfillment of the promise to David. Jesus is descended from the line of David. Jesus is the Davidic King enthroned. Jesus' reign will last forever.
3. And Matthew calls Jesus ► “the son of Abraham.” By calling Jesus “the son of Abraham,” he is linking Jesus to the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. Jesus—Himself a Jew—is the blessing to all the families of the world.

All of us who have believed in Jesus for eternal life are grafted into the Abrahamic promise of blessing. Galatians ► 3:29 explains:

<sup>NAU</sup> Galatians 3:29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

- B. Back in ► Verses 2 through 16 of our text, Matthew traces the lineage of Jesus from Abraham down through David. He summarizes it this way in ► Verse 17.

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 1:17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

There are a couple of things in this verse that are easy to miss.

1. First there is the matter of ► the fourteens. The genealogy is arranged in three groups of fourteen. What's the point? Well, we can look at this a couple of different ways.
  - a. We can look at the list as ► six groups of seven names. The number seven was and is one of the most prevalent and powerful symbols in the Old Testament, signifying completion or wholeness. Jews knew this. We get our week from this pattern of seven which dates all the way back to creation. There were six days of creation, then the seventh day was a day of rest, symbolizing completeness.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 4, s.v. “numbers,” by xxx (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, 1976), 459.

So what? Well, the Jewish mind would recognize from Matthew's genealogy that Jesus was born at the beginning of the seventh seven. As such, they would recognize that Jesus is the completion or climax or fulfillment of the entire list.<sup>8</sup> They would see that Matthew is pointing squarely to Jesus as the Messiah who they had been waiting for.

- b. You may ask, "Well, if Matthew wanted his readers to recognize the sevens, why didn't he just mention sevens instead of fourteens?" Good point. You're paying attention.

In ancient Hebrew culture there was something called a ► *gematria*. It involved the translation of words into numbers. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is assigned a number. You add up the numbers associated with all the letters in a word or name and you've got the *gematria*.

Take my name, Bob, for example. "B" is the second letter of the English alphabet. "O" is the fifteenth letter. So B-O-B is  $2 + 15 + 2$ , which equals 19. So, 19 is my *gematria*.

Back in our text, the Jews would have recognized fourteen as the *gematria* for the name, David. Scholars believe that Matthew's use of fourteens further points to Jesus as the fulfillment of the promise to David.<sup>9</sup> It seems that Matthew is using every literary device he can to point to Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises.

2. Then there is the matter of ► the "deportation to Babylon." In the list of names, Matthew throws in this event. At first blush, it doesn't seem to belong. Genealogies have names, not events. Why this event?

Here's what I think. I think God wanted the deportation of Babylon included in the list because it represents the sinful past of the people. It's the skeleton in their closet. I don't think God's intent is to rub their nose in it. In effect, I think He's saying, "I know your past. Yes, I remember. But I'm going to keep my promises anyhow. Your misbehavior does not negate my promises. I will be faithful and gracious to you, even if you have not been faithful to Me."

- c. So, ► the first big thing we learn from our text is that God keeps His promises. When God makes a promise, He makes it good. When God says He's going to do something, He does it. We cannot somehow lose His promises by our misbehavior. We can bank on God's promises no matter what our circumstances look like.

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<sup>8</sup> Wright, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew, The New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 53.

- II. “But,” you say, “wait a minute. How can Jesus be the promised Messiah? He didn’t fulfill all the promises. He didn’t conquer His enemies. He didn’t establish an earthly kingdom. He didn’t become Israel’s king. The government does not now rest on His shoulders. The world is not now being ruled in perfect justice and righteousness. So how can Jesus be the fulfillment of God’s promises?”

Good question. It’s the question first-century Jews were asking themselves. And most came to the conclusion that Jesus could not be the promised Messiah because He didn’t do what they expected the king to do, He wasn’t like what they expected the king to be, and He didn’t operate according to their expected royal timetable.

They expected a victorious warrior like David. David was a warrior from the get-go. Remember, starting with Goliath, David opened up a can of whoopin’ on all Israel’s enemies. By comparison, Jesus was a milquetoast who never seemed to put up a fight. He got Himself killed. Jesus was not the kind of king they were expecting. They presumed what God did not promise.

And they expected the coming Messiah to fulfill God’s promises right away in one big geopolitical move. They certainly didn’t expect the king to come and die a humiliating death. They presumed what God did not promise.

This brings us to ► the second big thing to be learned from our text: God may not keep His promises in the way we expect. In fact, God seems to operate in some ways we find quite strange. He’s an outside-the-box kind of God. He seems to feel no obligation to accommodate our presumptions.

You see, the Israelites did something we all tend to do. We presume what God did not promise. We add our presumptions to His promises. And then after a while, we get to thinking that our presumptions *are* His promises. And then when God does something or allows something that is perfectly consistent with his promises but not our presumption, we get to thinking that God has abandoned us or He has reneged or there’s something terribly wrong, when the only thing that’s wrong is our presumption.

- A. Jesus the Messiah came the first time some two thousand years ago to lay the foundation for God’s promises. He came to die and rise again in payment for our sins. He came promising eternal life to all who would simply believe Him for it. He now waits for people to take Him up on His offer. The blessing of Abraham has come.

But the throne of David has not yet been fully realized. When Jesus came the first time, He didn’t conquer His enemies. But, as the New Testament makes clear, He will the second time, when He returns. When He came the first time, He didn’t establish an earthly kingdom. But He will the second time, when He returns. The first time, He didn’t put the government on His shoulders; the second time, He will. The first time,

He didn't set up a world administration characterized by perfect justice and righteousness; the second time, He will.

We need to be careful to pin our hopes to God's promises, not our presumptions. In fact, here's ► the big idea of my message: Pin your hopes to God's promises, not your presumptions. Be careful to hold onto God's biblical commitments, not your unbiblical expectations. Don't confuse your presumptions with God's promises.

- B. I want to show you how the genealogy in Matthew is designed to rattle ancient Jewish presumptions. The genealogy is the blade to scrape off accumulated barnacles of presumption. It is presented to highlight the strange and unexpected ways God often works.

Here's the strange thing about the genealogy: women. In the ancient Jewish culture, if you wanted to impress somebody with your lineage, you didn't list women. It was neither customary nor impressive in that patriarchal culture.<sup>10</sup>

But there are ► five women in our text. Tamar in Verse 3. Rahab in Verse 5. Ruth in Verse 5. Bathsheba in Verse 6. And Mary in Verse 16. These women are not only mentioned, they are grammatically highlighted. They are conspicuous interruptions to the traditional pattern.

And these are not just any women. They are embarrassing women. Or at least they represent embarrassing circumstances. They're the kind of women you might want to skip over if you're trying to impress somebody with your pedigree.

1. There's Tamar. Read Genesis 38 and you'll find that Tamar seduced her father-in-law, Judah, by disguising herself as a prostitute. Now there's a bright spot in the family tree.
2. Then there's Rahab. Read Joshua 2 and you'll find that, unlike Tamar, Rahab didn't pretend to be a prostitute. She really was one.
3. Then there's Ruth. Read Ruth 3 and you'll find that Ruth essentially threw herself at Boaz in the middle of the night, raising suspicions about what really happened.
4. Then there's Bathsheba the wife of Uriah. Read 2 Samuel 11 and you'll find that David, in his relationship with Bathsheba, first played the role of voyeur, then adulterer, then murderer.

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<sup>10</sup> David L. Turner, *The Gospel of Matthew, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, (Carol Streams, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 37.

5. Then finally there's Mary. Read on in Matthew 1 and you'll find that Mary, a very young teenager, got pregnant out of wedlock. And Joseph, to whom she was engaged, wasn't the father.<sup>11</sup>

Why are these women highlighted? It's as if God is saying, "I don't operate according to your preconceptions. I'm not constrained by your presumptions of legitimacy or greatness. My ways are not your ways. Often, I choose lowly, humble, broken, painful, unexpected paths to victory—paths in which I can demonstrate my grace. Pin your hopes to My promises, not your presumptions."

- C. Let ► me give you an example of how this big idea can be applied in life today. Some time ago, I was at the bedside of a dear friend who was in a bad way. She was struggling with chronic dizziness. Hard for anybody, but particularly for her because she was used to being very much in control. Now, she was incapacitated by something that could not be explained, much less controlled.

She had exhausted every medical option in an effort to get better. Doctors. Medications. Surgery. With each new doctor or drug or procedure, hopes would rise and then fall. Nothing worked.

She had also seemed to exhaust every spiritual option in an effort to get better. She prayed. Friends prayed. The elders came to pray. Nothing worked.

God was strangely silent. Silent for what seemed to be the longest time. She was wondering. Did I do something to lose God's promises? Has God abandoned me? Is there any hope? She presumed that a promising life could not include dizziness.

I held her hand as she tearfully confessed that she was feeling hopeless and abandoned and a little panicky. Who wouldn't?

And then I asked her a question: "Where is your hope?"

She looked at me quizzically, like "What kind of question is that?" So I rephrased: "What are you pinning your hopes to? What are you holding onto?"

She paused and looked like she was thinking, "Is this a trick question?" Then she said, "My hope is to feel better, to have the dizziness go away."

I said, "I want that for you, too. It breaks my heart that you're going through this. We're all praying that you would feel better. But that's a dangerous place to pin your hope. Because God hasn't made any promises about your dizziness. It may go. It may stay."

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<sup>11</sup> In Matthew 1:16, the pronoun "whom" is feminine, referring only to Mary as the human parent of the Christ child.

“What God *has* promised is that He will never leave you or forsake you and that His grace will be sufficient for you to get through this.” Then I read some Scriptures to back it up.<sup>12</sup>

Then I said, “Those are some promises to pin your hopes to. God is going to stay with you and He’ll be enough for you no matter what.”

That was a watershed moment for her. We talked about her presumption that, if things were right with God, her dizziness would go away. She let go of that presumption. And we prayed together, thanking God for His promised presence and sufficiency.

Her dizziness didn’t go away that day. But some of her hopelessness did. It gradually got nudged out by a peace that “surpasses all comprehension”<sup>13</sup> in the midst of her suffering.

That was several years ago. She has since felt better. But she hasn’t forgotten. When I called her last week to ask her permission to share this story, I said, “Do you remember the time . . .” and without pause she said “Oh, yes. I remember.”

Pin your hopes to God’s promises, not your presumptions.

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<sup>12</sup> Hebrews 13:5 and 2 Corinthians 12:9

<sup>13</sup> Philippians 4:6-7.