

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, move swiftly through the stubborn reaches of my obstinate mind. Agitate my feeble heart and stir my unwilling conscience. Dispel the gloom, panic and mistrust used by Satan to keep me bound, and cast his demons from me. Recreate the joy and vigour of my youthful grasp of faith so that, worn like a garment, all who look at me might glimpse the One to whom I owe my life. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

As you go about your work, take a break, and try to imagine how Jesus might deal with your workload

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Your home church** *Pray for the relationships between your church and other churches, may they grow in a godly way*
- *Pray that God will bless those who are organising aid to Haiti*
- *Pray about current concerns over the use of the internet in China*

Meditation

Be merciful, Jesus Christ, be merciful.

When I come into the presence of Your glory,
Hear the cries of my inner heart and heal my hurting soul.

When I am at fault, and do not know what to do,
May I fall into Your merciful hands, not those of the enemy.

When I stand accused before others, unjustly,
Surround me with Your protection so that I may be strong.

When I have walked through trouble and strife,
Assure me of Your everlasting love, constantly upholding me.

When I come into Your presence with thanksgiving,
Open my mouth to testify to the wonder of Your salvation

Together with all Your glorious people, the Church,
May the whole of my life give praise to You, and Your love.

Be merciful, Jesus Christ, be merciful.

Bible passage - Luke 3:23-38

²³ Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son, so it was assumed, of Joseph, the son of Eli,

²⁴ the son of Matthat,
the son of Levi,
the son of Melki,
the son of Jannai,
the son of Joseph,

²⁵ the son of Mattathias,
the son of Amos,
the son of Nahum,
the son of Esli,
the son of Naggai,

²⁶ the son of Maath,

the son of Mattathias,
the son of Semein,
the son of Josech,
the son of Joda,

²⁷ the son of Joanan,
the son of Rhesa,
the son of Zerubbabel,
the son of Shealtiel,
the son of Neri,
²⁸ the son of Melki,
the son of Addi,

the son of Cosam,
the son of Elmadam,
the son of Er,

²⁹ the son of Joshua,
the son of Eliezer,
the son of Jorim,
the son of Matthat,
the son of Levi,
³⁰ the son of Simeon,
the son of Judah,
the son of Joseph,

the son of Jonam,
the son of Eliakim,
³¹ the son of Melea,
the son of Menna,
the son of Mattatha,
the son of Nathan,
the son of David,
³² the son of Jesse,
the son of Obed,
the son of Boaz,
the son of Salmon,
the son of Nahshon,
³³ the son of Amminadab,
the son of Ram,

the son of Hezron,
the son of Perez,
the son of Judah,
³⁴ the son of Jacob,
the son of Isaac,
the son of Abraham,
the son of Terah,
the son of Nahor,
³⁵ the son of Serug,
the son of Reu,
the son of Peleg,
the son of Eber,
the son of Shelah,
³⁶ the son of Cainan,

the son of Arphaxad,
the son of Shem,
the son of Noah,
the son of Lamech,
³⁷ the son of Methuselah,
the son of Enoch,
the son of Jared,
the son of Mahalalel,
the son of Kenan,
³⁸ the son of Enosh,
the son of Seth,
the son of Adam,
the son of God.

Bible Study

Review

No one is very amused by having to read a passage of Scripture that contains long lists of names! However, because this is part of the text of the Bible, we must honour it appropriately with our attention. When reading a passage like this, it is best to scan through the text and focus on the names that we can recognise from our knowledge of the Bible, and check out some of the key figures.

Luke records Jesus' generations as going back through Zerubbabel (3:27), the ancestor of David on whom much hope was placed after the Exile in Babylon (see Zech 4:6f., Hagg 1:1,2:2f., Neh 12:1), to David himself (3:31). If then we track the names back from David to the time of Abraham, then Luke's list agrees with that in Matthew (1:2-6), and the names from Abraham back to Adam can be verified by records found in Genesis.

This much is clear, but Luke's genealogy is very different from that of Matthew (1:1-17). Firstly, Luke's goes in the opposite direction to that of Matthew, with Matthew recording names from Abraham to Jesus (42 generations), and Luke recording names from Jesus back to Adam, and thence to God Himself (78 generations). More significantly, the names from David to Jesus in Matthew (26 names) are vastly different from those recorded in Luke (41 names)!

There are three main theories about these differences, and most of them rely on the fact that when you go back several generations, most genealogies can be a matter of which family branch you chooses to follow! Firstly, it has been suggested that Matthew lists the royal heirs, and Luke records the natural descent of Jesus, and secondly, that Matthew follows the line of Joseph and Luke records the descent of Mary. Thirdly, an ancient story suggests that Joseph's lineage is complicated because he was the child of a 'levirate' marriage (where a man dies and his widow marries a brother of her husband to provide his heir), and this explains why Matthew says that Joseph's father is Jacob, but Luke says his father is Eli. Further details of these theories are to be found in 'Going Deeper'.

If you have heard any teacher attempt to explain the difference between these genealogies, then you will probably have heard one of these explanations, or perhaps a combination of them. However, we must accept that Scripture itself does not give us a clear cut answer to this, and we should therefore be open to any reasonable way of explaining this. It is well known that in Jesus' day, scribes and officials in Jerusalem kept detailed genealogical records, and although many were destroyed either by Herod or the Romans (when Jerusalem was sacked in 70AD), it is still possible that some could still be found that would shed light on the Biblical records.

Why then did Luke record a genealogy? In many other places, Luke copies Matthew almost word for word, but certainly not here! Most people reckon that Luke's genealogy records the human descent of Jesus, going back to Adam. This ties in with the great humanity of Jesus described throughout Luke's Gospel. However, I suggest that Luke wrote his genealogy using records available from the family of Mary, with whom we have already surmised that he may have had contact, but this may well have included records from the deceased Joseph. Also, by linking Jesus back through Jewish history to Adam and to God Himself (3:38), Luke was stating his belief that Jesus was both human and divine.

At the beginning of our passage today, Luke says that Jesus was 'around' thirty when He began His ministry; he was not exact, much to our disappointment! He then went on to say that Jesus was 'assumed' to be the

son of Joseph, thus saying that Jesus was Joseph's son for human purposes! To follow this statement with a genealogy ending with God seems to emphasise Luke's intent to say that Jesus truly comes from God, but that the evidence of His real existence lies in the history of God's people. Much more than this, it is probably unwise to say!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What is the significance of Jesus' age of thirty?
- What are the merits of the theory of Jesus 'human' descent, in Luke?
- What are the merits of the theory of Jesus' descent through Mary?
- What are the merits of the ancient story about Joseph's 'levirate' descent?

Notes on the text and translation

Significant phrases

V23 'Jesus Himself was about thirty years old when he began his work'

Other translations:

'Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry' (NIV)

'When He began His ministry, Jesus Himself was about thirty years of age' (New American)

The text is not easy to translate because on the one hand it is formal, but on the other hand, it uses a word expressing approximation ('osei'), which is usually translated as 'about', as in '*he was about thirty years old ...*'. This leaves us with the feeling that Luke was not strongly attached to the idea of being exact about Jesus' age. The difficult question for us to ask is this; was he therefore not exact in the matter of his genealogy?

Going Deeper

What is the significance of Jesus' age of thirty?

The age of Jesus is stated by Luke only roughly, and for this reason, most who read this passage take this snippet of information at face value and move on. Scripture does not do more than give us an approximation of Jesus' age, but of itself, this implies that Jesus' ministry lasted longer than just one year. Surely, if His period of active ministry was only a small number of months and within one year, the Gospel writers would have quickly stated His age as a given fact.

Within Judaism, the age of thirty is in fact significant, for it was commonly reckoned that a man became fully mature at the age of thirty. This may seem rather old to us, but we should remember that the 'coming of age' ceremony for a Jewish boy was thirteen; from this age until thirty, he was considered to be a young man.

The Old Testament can help us with understanding the importance of this age, because it appears in a number of significant places. David was thirty years old when he began to reign over the united Kingdoms of Israel and Judah (2 Samuel 5:4), and many years previously, Joseph entered the service of Pharaoh at the age of thirty (Gen 41:46). There are also indications that priests were considered of age to enter into Temple service at the age of thirty (Numbers 4:3), and Ezekiel began his prophecy at the age of thirty (Ez 1:1).

All these may be thought to be incidental, but it is at least worth considering that Jesus began His ministry at the very age when His preaching and teaching would have become acceptable on the Jewish public stage. The young boy who held the scribes and teachers at the temple captive with his answers to their questions (2:46f.) had to mature over many years before His Father called Him to public ministry.

What are the merits of the theory of Jesus 'human' descent, in Luke?

In this theory, no more than around a hundred and fifty years old, the genealogy of Matthew is a royal genealogy, listing those who held a Covenant relationship with God starting with Abraham and ultimately through David and the heirs to the throne in Jerusalem. Once the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed at the time of King Jeconiah (Matt 1:11f.), those who returned from the Exile were keen to try and re-establish a royal line through Zerubbabel, but the succession was again broken because of occupation of the region by other empires. So, the true connection between the lineage of David and Jesus is awkward, however we try to establish it (Matt 1:12-17).

Reading Luke's genealogy, there are a whole host of names between Zerubbabel and Jesus, and you would be forgiven for looking at them and occasionally thinking 'I know that name!' We read about an Amos, Nahum, Joseph and Levi, for example, but none of these can be connected to any of the other Biblical

characters by that name, because they are well outside the time-frame in which they could have lived. Scholars have subjected these verses to linguistic analysis, and some have come up with theories about patterns of names, or the possibility of multiple copies of the genealogies of both Mary and Joseph being interweaved into Luke's account.

Yet none of this can be confirmed, or comes anywhere near the standards of academic or literary proof required for us to take seriously.

What are the merits of the theory of Jesus' descent through Mary?

Over the years, some have argued that it is rather inconsistent for Luke to describe a 'virgin birth' of Jesus as the Son of God, and also offer a human genealogy, but the fact is that Luke give us both, and we must find a way of interpreting this. Around the fifteenth century, one named Annius of Viterbo came up with the theory that Luke's genealogy was in fact the genealogy of Mary, and this has appealed to many people since, especially those who felt that it is more appropriate for Luke to do this than say any more about Jesus' own background.

The idea assumes that we think of Jesus as the grandson of Eli, and Jesus' earthly father Joseph as the son-in-law of Eli, thus completely ignoring the earthly male line of Joseph because he had no physical part in the actual lineage of Jesus. All this takes the matter a little too far, however, because it does not allow for the fact that Luke himself speaks of the importance of Joseph's Davidic lineage, earlier in the Gospel;

'God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David, and the virgin's name was Mary' (1:27)

There is no doubt that the genealogy describes a human descent, but there is no actual information either in the Bible or not, to help us determine whether such a theory is true.

What are the merits of the ancient story about Joseph's 'levirate' descent?

It is possible that there is merit in the last theory, though it is a little hard for us to understand today. The reason we should consider it an explanation of the facts is because this is recorded by the first church historian, Eusebius (fourth century AD), concerning evidence of one named Africanus, another Christian historian and traveller of the third century AD. Africanus claimed to have information obtained from the descendants of James, the brother of Jesus, which led him to this theory. Because it is a little complex to explain, I have quoted below from the explanation found in Howard Marshall's commentary on Luke:

Africanus stated that Matthan (Matt 1:15) married a certain Estha, by whom he had a son, Jacob; when Matthan died, his widow (Estha) married Malchi (Luke 3:24) and had a son named Eli (Luke 3:23) ... The second of these two half-brothers, Eli, married, but died without an heir; so his half brother Jacob took his wife in levirate marriage, so that his physical son Joseph, was regarded as the legal son of Eli.

Now if you can follow this without trying to work it out on paper, you are doing better than I, but the gist of it is that Joseph's physical father was Jacob (as in Matthew) but by Jewish law of levirate marriage, it was Eli (as in Luke). Africanus himself agreed that his theory was lacking in sufficient proof other than what he had heard, but this is the closest we can get to what people believed in the early days of the church. It is unfortunate that people today do not understand the concept of levirate marriage so that it is hard to persuade people that this may be an adequate explanation of the facts!

Application

What we believe about Jesus is important, and I, for one, have been in a number of Christian 'groups' gathered for discussion in which people who are dedicated church goers have expressed views about the nature of Jesus that are far from Scriptural. Moreover, some seem hardly worried that their theories are not substantiated by Scripture, and are content to hang on to certain beliefs for purely personal reasons. The true Christian cannot afford such luxuries. We have a duty to do all in our power to try and find the truth about God and about Jesus, and part of this is to weigh up our own opinions and reflections against the testimony of Scripture. Luke's inclusion of a genealogy does say something about who Jesus is, and at the very least, his Gospel points us back through the history of God's people to God Himself. On the one hand, it tells us that God is behind everything that happens in His world, and on the other hand, it tells us that Jesus was born into a physical lineage according to the design of God Himself. If Luke was not concerned to be entirely exact about Jesus' age when he began His ministry, he was certainly concerned to tell those who read his Gospel that Jesus was a real man who was God's Son.

The various theories about the connections between Matthew's and Luke's genealogies are interesting, and they provide us with an insight into the world of scholarly debate about these things, spanning millennia. We should not treat these things lightly, but do our best to join in and make our own contribution, whatever it may

be, so that the quest for truth is maintained. It does not serve God's Kingdom for people to ignore what God has, in His wisdom, chosen to give us through His Word.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your group, discuss the merits of the three main theories of Jesus' descent as recorded by Matthew and Luke.
2. What does Luke want to say to us about Jesus within this passage of Scripture?
3. Should such passages of Scripture be ignored or discussed?

Topics covered by this text

- *The nature of Jesus as human and divine*
- *The human genealogy of Jesus*
- *The incarnation*

Personal comments by author

If you have read my analysis of Matthew's genealogy, you may be disappointed that this genealogy does not have as much to say to us as that of Matthew. However, it is surely enough for Luke to want to prove that Jesus was as much a product of the Jewish history and lineage as the product of a blessing of the angel Gabriel within the womb of Mary! People have debated the nature of Jesus for centuries, and this genealogy adds to this debate.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *List your own genealogy, at least, as far as you believe you can go. What does this tell you about yourself? If possible, contact your own relatives to find out a little bit more about your own background and the gaps in what you know about your genealogy.*
- *Pray to cut yourself off from any ungodliness to be found within your past generations, and ask the Lord God to redeem your own past and set you free to be the man or woman you were made to be.*

Final Prayer

We praise You, Jesus Christ, for becoming one of us on earth. Like us, You had a family, and Your history on earth is something we treasure. Help us to value what we know of our own past and the generations that went before, however good or bad they were. We commit ourselves to You, Jesus Christ, and we ask You to bless our generations; AMEN
