

Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson

“Christmas: The Long Game”

Matthew 1:1-17

Take a first look.

I. Rube Goldberg makes toast. It is long and complicated.

Here is what www.rubegoldberg.com says about him: “**Rube Goldberg (1883-1970)** was a Pulitzer Prize winning cartoonist best known for his zany invention cartoons. He was born in San Francisco on the 4th of July 1883 – and graduated from U. Cal Berkeley with a degree in engineering. His first job at the San Francisco Chronicle led to early success, but it wasn’t until he moved to NYC and began working for Hearst publications that he became a household name. Rube Goldberg is the only person ever to be listed in the Merriam Webster Dictionary as an adjective. It’s estimated that he did a staggering 50,000 cartoons in his lifetime.”¹ One of those definitions is as follows: “**Rube Goldberg** - a comically involved, complicated invention, laboriously contrived to perform a simple operation” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*).²

Here is a link to one such *Rube Goldberg*, with the simple goal of making toast.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTsJA7MQ0pU>

II. God brings about His good purposes for the human race. It is long and complicated!

Sometimes it seems that God established the Rube Goldberg pattern, long before He created Rube Goldberg! When we look back through history, and this includes the history of the Bible, there is a seemingly long and complicated story, involved many twists and turns—often startling and unexpected twists and turns—before we begin to see His good purposes working out. That shouldn’t surprise us, should it? The story of Scripture begins at the creation of the earth and ends with a vision of The End. The very words and the sixty-six books included in our (Protestant) Bibles were compiled over a period of about 1400-1600 years. Even that is a very long story line, and the story covers much more time than that.

Oftentimes, our lives seem just this complicated and full of unexpected and dramatic twists and turns. Things happen that we can’t possibly anticipate—some of them quite good and some quite bad. People often do things we can’t understand and perhaps we don’t see any good possibly coming from those actions within our own lifetimes.

III. Let’s take up an often overlooked passage in Scripture and see if we can’t get some help on this general subject. I have titled this message, “Christmas: the Long Game.” Here is why.

Take a closer look at Matthew 1:1-17.

First, we should address something that Bible readers have pondered since the first Christian century. There is a marked difference between this genealogy and the one presented in the Gospel of Luke, 3:21-38.

Matthew seems to have the legal and Messianic purpose in view. His genealogy skips generations and selected descendants so that the essential nature of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah would be crystal clear.

¹ From www.rubegoldberg.com.

² Ibid.

Luke takes a bit of a different angle. He intends to show that Jesus is truly the Representative Man, the Savior Who identifies with but transcends all other men and women. Matthew begins with Abraham and works his way through history to the coming of Jesus Christ. Luke begins from Jesus and works his way all the way back to Adam, “the son of God.” It is interesting that in the Greek, the word “son” is lacking. It is supplied at each new descendent because it is found in verse 24, and thus it is implied, but it is not required, especially in this last expression. Each of the expressions can simply be taken as “of Heli, of Matthat, of Levi, of Melki, ...” and all the rest.

There are at least **three explanations of the differences between Matthew’s genealogy and Luke’s.**

(1) The first (and perhaps best) is that Luke traces the line of Jesus back through Mary, the actual bloodline of Jesus and that Matthew traces it through Joseph, the legal father. So the way to understand the expression in verse 23 would be to take it as “Joseph, the son of Heli (by marriage),” and so on. This would be unusual, since ancestry was always traced back through the father, but consider how unusual the virginal conception of Jesus was. It was a once-in-history event.

(2) A man named “Africanus (c. AD 220) suggested that there was a Levirate marriage. He thought that when Heli died childless, Jacob, who had the same mother but a different father, married the widow and Joseph was born. On this view Matthew gives us Joseph’s genealogy through Jacob, his actual father, while Luke gives it through Heli, his legal father.”

(3) J. Gresham Machen (a significant Greek scholar and champion of the Reformed understanding of Christian faith in the first half of the 20th century), argued that the difference is this: Matthew traces the line of the *legal* descendants of David, if the throne had been continued down to Joseph. Luke then gives the *actual* descendants of Joseph without reference to the throne of David.

We can’t be conclusive here, but we can see clearly that in the record of Jesus’ ancestry there are **two clear themes: (1) Jesus is truly the Jewish Messiah**, promised through the centuries and finally realized through His birth, and **(2) He is also the Savior of all people**, the “second Adam” as Paul argues, Who has brought the work of God’s grace to the whole world.

Now, let’s make a few simple observations from Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ ancestry.

I. God works in history through every generation to bring about His good purposes. This is providence.

1. The generations from Abraham to Jesus Christ are represented in the genealogy. This basically is a review of the Jewish heritage, going all the way back to the first Patriarch, Abraham, and then moving forward to the birth of Jesus.

2. There is a purposeful flow to these generations, as Matthew arranges them in three groups of 14 generations each. Again, this is a selective presentation, intended to show how orderly and purposeful God is in fulfilling His plan. Matthew could have chosen these generational names in order to form multiples of 7, considered a complete and divine number (even Luke includes 21 generations, another multiple of 7).

3. In each generation, the purposes of God could have been thwarted through human choices and adverse circumstances, but God turned these bad circumstances into good results. Consider some of these:

(1) *Abraham and Hagar*. When the promise of God to bring a child to Abraham and Sarah seemed not to be fulfilled, after 16 long years of waiting, Sarah came up with a solution: "Marry my maid and have a child with her. Legally, she would still be ours." It sounded good to Abraham, so he married Hagar. Ishmael was the son born to that union, and the conflict between Arabs (descended from Ishmael) and Jews (descended from Isaac, born 9 years later) is to some degree the result. That story is told in Genesis 16.

(2) *The selection of a bride for Isaac by the servant of Abraham*. Genesis 24 describes the long journey back to the land of Canaan by the servant to find a wife for Abraham from his own people. It was a journey surrounded by uncertainty, and yet, God directed that servant, a man of faith and prayer, right to the clan of Abraham. God then inclined Rebekah's heart to venture away from her homeland to marry Isaac, a man she had never even laid eyes on prior to that time.

(3) *Then the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah, Esau and Jacob, became mortal enemies* after Jacob tricked Esau into selling him his birthright at the firstborn son. So began a years-long enmity between them that could have resulted in the chosen son, Jacob, being killed in a jealous rage. Rather, God changed hearts and brought reconciliation.

(4) And then you notice that *it is through the line of Judah that Joseph's (Jesus's legal father) line is drawn* (Matthew 1:3). When you read the book of Genesis again, you will find that Judah, well, had his problems! Genesis 38 describes part of his sordid tale. Judah moved away from the family for awhile, married a Canaanite woman, and had three sons. Two of them were wicked. The third one was young at the time of his brother's deaths. The widow of Judah's firstborn was Tamar. Judah promised that when his youngest son grew up, he would give him to Tamar as a husband. He grew up, and Judah didn't follow through with his promise. So, she came up with a plan to have a son with Judah. She traveled into the countryside, positioned herself along the path of Judah's travels, and seduced him as though she was a prostitute. When Judah found out that his daughter-in-law was pregnant, he threw a violent fit, calling for her death. But, she presented Judah's pledge—his seal and cord and staff—and showed that, in Judah's words, she was more righteous than he, since he wouldn't give his son in marriage to her. And she gave birth to twin sons, one of whom was [ready for it?] Perez (Matthew 1:3b). Oh, my goodness!

(5) The balance of the book of Genesis is taken with *the story of Joseph*: favored second to youngest son of Jacob/Israel out of twelve, sold into slavery by the ten older brothers, imprisoned on false accusations, forgotten, and then rising to power to become second in command over all of Egypt just in time to save his entire clan, all of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, from nearly certain death through a widespread famine. How many things could have gone wrong in that story!?

(6) Following the death of Joseph in Egypt we have *the long centuries of sojourn in Egypt (430 years)*, and their miraculous deliverance from slavery through Moses. The book of Exodus tells that tale of divine intervention despite the fledgling nation's struggle to trust in the Lord through it all.

(7) *Forty years of wandering in the desert* ensued.

(8) *The period of the Judges* followed the conquest of Canaan, a period marked with repeated lapses of faith in God into rank paganism. This period is something like *the Dark Ages of Israel*.

(9) In the middle of all of that, we read *the intriguing story of Ruth*, a young widow who returns to Israel with her mother-in-law and finds a family, amazingly enough, in a marriage to an older bachelor named Boaz (See Matthew 1:5).

(10) Then, you notice how *the unvarnished truth is presented in Matthew 1:6*: "David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife." There was adultery in that union, action tantamount to murder (the story of Uriah), the death of a child, constant family conflict and more.

(11) And though *Solomon* was considered the wisest man to have lived in his generation, he still failed to keep his robe on and married women to his heart's content. This led to spiritual confusion and lapses of faith for Solomon, which resulted in the division of the kingdom of Israel (into the two regimes of Israel in the north and Judah in the south).

(12) *The history of the kings descended from Solomon* in the southern kingdom of Judah was filled with the vexation of threats from foreign powers, apostasy, and more. Manasseh was one of the worst of the kings of Judah, whose reign lasted the longest. As the books of Chronicles tell us, he had a late-in-life experience of humility and repentance, but he had already sealed the fate of the nation.

(13) *Seventy years of exile followed, after Babylon conquered Israel*. Seventy years! The nation was completely dissolved and scattered all over the Middle East. And yet, God brought them back to the land and restored a semblance of nationality to them.

(14) This was followed by *the silent years between the testaments (another 400+ years)*. Things have changed dramatically and new challenges have emerged during those four long centuries. Oh, my goodness! Yet, God kept working through that *Rube Goldberg History Machine* to bring the Messiah, the Christ, into the world.

Insight: Just as God has worked in past generations, He will do His work in this one and in future ones.

I—My own father became a follower of Jesus through the influence of a friend.

Dad was 35 years of age at the time, and his friend pestered him into going to an evangelism service. He went, heard the gospel, and put his faith in Christ. Then he returned to college, met my mother during that time, went to seminary (during which time I was born) and became a church-starting pastor. He got married to his first wife on the day that Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese Air Force (December 7, 1941), and sometime right after the end of World War II, his wife died from an illness before they had any children. He was so grieved by that event that he decided that he would never get married and go through that again. He had survived combat deployment in the South Pacific (Signal Corp, attached to an Army Air Corp Battalion) and was working in the oil fields of Texas when he got that nagging invitation from his friend. How many things could have gone terribly wrong through all of that? And yet, here I am (with an older brother whom I admire as much as any man alive), with three wonderful children (two sons pursuing a life of service to God) and ten grandchildren!

And that is just one person on my side of the family. It is even more interesting when my lovely wife's ancestry is considered, too. Our prayer for each of our children and grandchildren is that they will pick up the torch of faith and carry it into the generations that follow! Our personal history is not yet complete.

II. God works through people of all kinds to bring about His good purposes. This is grace.

1. *There are people of truly heroic standing in the history of the Messiah/Christ*. There is Abraham, the father of faith (though Genesis reports some serious lapses of his faith in God). We read of David, the shepherd-warrior-poet-king who became the standard for all the kings who followed him. We read of Solomon, whose wisdom spread far and wide during his lifetime. There was Zerubbabel, the civil ruler who returned to lead the exiles of the restoration of the nation after the period of captivity. Amazing stories.

2. *There are others who are true cases of redemption in the history of the Messiah/Christ*. In fact, many of the same people were not only stories of heroism but stories of

grace and mercy and redemption. Abraham lied multiple times about his beautiful wife to save his skin—hardly the stuff of great faith. David committed adultery and proxy-murder to marry Bathsheba. Solomon allowed his lust for women to undo his spiritual commitment. And much more.

Insight: Really, there are only broken and repaired people through whom God can work in every generation—and He still brings about His good purpose through them, and us!

I—God hits straight shots with crooked sticks (because He has no others with which to hit)! David, Solomon, even Manasseh! were famous members of the genealogy, but the Biblical record presents an unvarnished portrait of their actions—good and bad, and often very bad.

Martin Luther, through whom God fan the flames of reformation in the 16th century, was loud and obnoxious often, was complicit in the massacre of many during the Peasants Revolt, and had an anti-Semitic streak that came out in later life.

John Calvin, a second-generation reformer in the late 16th century, condemned a man named Michael Severus to death as a heretic.

Francis Schaeffer and C. S. Lewis were used by God to defend the Christian faith in the mid to late 20th century with a skill unparalleled, but both of them had their personal issues, which the biographies of the two men reveal.

Nelson Mandela was tempted early in his life to align with some unscrupulous communist revolutionaries. When he emerged from prison 27 years later, his message was all about reconciliation, fueled by his serious Christian faith—a faith renewed and nurtured during the long years of his imprisonment.

Mother Teresa was considered often demanding and inflexible as she led the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta, India. Yet, for all of that, God used all of these greatly in their generations, often in strategic ways to move the Christian faith forward to the generations that followed. *God hits straight shots with crooked sticks, because He has no others with which to hit.*

III. God prepared a people through whom He would fulfill His good purposes. This is community: Israel, and now the Church.

1. *The selected history told by Matthew emphasizes God's work through the chosen people, the descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob.* The selective history presented here is of a family line, not just individuals seen one by one.

2. *He includes family heads and their role in God's purposes, regardless of their individual choices and character.* We have observed this rather fully already.

Insight: In the Church, we are a mixed bag of people at all different stages of spiritual maturity.

I—“When the first Apple Store opened in 2001, there was no iPod or iPhone, and 97 percent of people in the U.S. were on dial-up Internet. For every hundred people who visited the store, one person actually bought something. Most people who walked through those glass doors in 2001 didn't own a single Apple product, and the team at Apple were totally comfortable with that, because they knew that if they got it right, success would come off the back of becoming meaningful to people.

“That success took a few years to arrive because people didn't understand the stores or the Genius Bars at first, but the Apple Store eventually became ‘the most successful retail

concept of all time,' according to *Fast Company* [magazine]. As Ron Johnson, former VP of retail at Apple—the guy we have to thank for the Apple Store concept—said, 'People really love our stores because we are more than a store; we are a place to belong.'"

Alright then, if Apple can come up with a place to belong, they are only mimicking the place of real belonging, *the Church* begun by the birth of a little baby placed in a manger. It is a place where real people, flawed in so many ways, can find the love and purposes of God for flawed people, where they can be taken up into God's long game of human redemption. How do I know this? "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8, NIV). It's right there in the announcement of the angel to the step-father of our Lord: "You are to give him the name Jesus, because *he will save his people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21, NIV). Feel like a sinner in need of forgiveness today? I do! Thank God that this is why Jesus came: to be born, to live freely and without sin, to die in our place, the righteous for the unrighteous, and to be raised to life again! He does His powerful work of forgiveness and spiritual renewal in our lives by the Holy Spirit, Who now makes Jesus real in our hearts and lives. And because He is doing this in each of our hearts, we have a shared connection that is inseparable.

Take it home (applications).

I. So what are we waiting for to become a part of this spiritual family and get drawn up into the eternal purposes of God for the human race? Receive this One as Lord and Savior.

II. How does God need to do His powerful work of redemption in our lives? Where are the broken places? How does He want to work in those to repair and restore? He is in the salvage business! He can take the most disastrous mess and craft a work of art from it. "For we are His *workmanship*, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10, NIV). Are we ready to get into God's workshop, onto His canvas, into His art studio to see what He can bring from our lives today?