

## Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)

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**Abstract:** *Matthew 1:1, “Jesus, son of Abraham, son of David” reminds us not only of the lineage of Jesus, but also the influence of past generations. Abraham and David both faced difficulties that had a lasting impact on their children, grandchildren, and others to come. Generational sin and dysfunction are a reality even today, most clearly as generational trauma and struggles with addiction. Clear connections can be made between the lineage of Abraham and David to contemporary family struggles. But just as Jesus was the new Abraham and the new David, he also provides healing and new birth to families today. Through Christ, and only through Christ, generational sin and struggles can be resolved.*

**Key Words:** *addiction, generational sin, Jesus, Matthew 1:1, trauma*

This article is situated around a single verse in Scripture, Matthew 1:1, and aims to do three things. First, the article will exegete the verse and highlight several assertions that connect the nation of Israel and the modern church, namely dysfunctional families within the church. Second, space will be given to understanding generational dysfunction, primarily as it presents in the home today. Finally, this article will argue that not only is Christ the culmination of the nation of Israel and the contemporary home, but he is also the only one through whom either one finds redemption. Put another way, without Christ, generational dysfunction would continue throughout the history of mankind. We are no exception to this reality. Proper counseling, then, particularly for generational dysfunction must point towards Christ for redemption.

### The Bible and Generational Dysfunction

#### Jesus and Generational Dysfunction

Matthew 1:1 is a fairly simple verse. It reads, “An account of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham” (CSB). In the Greek, it is only eight words, and quite literally reads, “a book of the *genesis* of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.” Read in a literal

translation, the reader’s mind should automatically go back to Gen 1:1, “in the beginning.”<sup>1</sup> Like John 1:1, Matthew is properly situating his reader and making substantial claims from the opening words of his gospel.<sup>2</sup> The reader should not be mistaken: Jesus Christ *is* the genesis, he is the beginning, and he is the focus of the entire text. As the subject of the verse, he is subsequently the subject of the book.<sup>3</sup> In referencing the book of Genesis, we might even say that Matthew is arguing that Jesus is the focus of the entire Old Testament, the culmination of the nation of Israel. The focus is displayed when he calls Jesus the “son of Abraham, son of David.” Matthew is summarizing the entire Old Testament canon. He is pointing the reader not only to the historical figures, but the “holders” of the covenants that God has made with his people.<sup>4</sup> With Jesus being the “son of Abraham” and “son of David,” he is the recipient of the covenants. And by claiming that this is the book of the *genesis*, Jesus is also the origin of and the means through which the covenants, for the entire history of God’s people, have their meaning. He is the fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham and the new and better king David.<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting as well that Matthew assigns the word “Christ.” This word was indicative of his assertion that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah for God’s people, the deliverer whom God had promised throughout Israel’s history.<sup>6</sup> By the fourth word of Matthew’s book, written to Jewish readers, he is asserting the kingship of Jesus and that he fulfills the prophecy that they’ve waited so long for.<sup>7</sup> In some sense, it is as if Matthew is saying: “He’s here! The one you’ve been waiting for is here. Let me tell you about how He’s come to save us!”

The remainder of the book of Matthew draws on this message. Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience—no doubt familiar with the OT canon—demonstrating that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah. Not only that, but Matthew seeks to demonstrate that Jesus is the Son of God, the fulfillment of OT prophecies. Jesus is the rightful heir of the messianic promises (more to come on this), was born of a virgin in Bethlehem and fulfills OT events such as Israel’s wandering in the wilderness. Furthermore, Matthew often quotes OT prophecies and draws connections, such as Jesus as the suffering servant and messianic king. He also bestows on

<sup>1</sup> Charles Quarles, *Matthew*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 106.

<sup>2</sup> Quarles, *Matthew*, 106.

<sup>3</sup> Quarles, *Matthew*, 106.

<sup>4</sup> Quarles, *Matthew*, 56.

<sup>5</sup> Quarles, *Matthew*, 56.

<sup>6</sup> Quarles, *Matthew*, 107.

<sup>7</sup> Quarles, *Matthew*, 107.

Jesus a multitude of messianic titles, such as “Son of David” and “Immanuel.” It should be clear to any reader that Matthew is asserting Jesus is the Messianic King.<sup>8</sup>

Though this article has already drawn out the connection between Abraham and David and the covenants that Jesus came to fulfill, this is not the primary focus. Instead, the focus is on generational dysfunction. Both Abraham and David were men of faith, men who believed in the Lord and trusted in his provision for their lives. But when we progress through the biblical text, it is quite evident that neither one had his house in order.

### Abraham and Generational Dysfunction

Consider Abraham. At the end of Genesis 11, Abram shows up in the genealogies, a passage not unlike the rest of Matthew chapter 1. In Genesis 12, God calls Abram, 75 years old at the time, to go to Canaan. The Scriptures say that Abram obeys, taking his household with him. In v. 8, Abram builds an altar to the Lord, but only a few short verses later, Abram and Sarai find themselves in Egypt where Abram tells his wife to lie about who she is so that he will not be killed (Gen 12:11–13). She was “taken to Pharaoh’s household,” and Abram tended Pharaoh’s flocks. It was not until plagues came that Pharaoh realized what was going on (Gen 12:17). This was no short time, though it is only a few verses in the text. After some time and a few other difficulties, Abram and all of his household, leave along with his relative, Lot. Within a few short chapters, Abram entered into a covenant with the Lord, was told that he will have a son to fulfill that covenant, and took his wife’s handmaid to try to force the Lord’s hand. This handmaid conceives, then Abraham is complicit with forcing her into the wilderness. Isaac is born, in fulfillment of what the Lord said would come to pass, but Isaac is not Abraham’s first born. Interspersed is another lie that Sarah is his sister, with some substantial implications on the household they are residing in (Gen 20:2).

Isaac grows up, marries Rebekah, and they conceive Jacob and Esau (Gen 24). Genesis 25:22 tells us that the twins “struggled with one another” in her womb. When she asks the Lord why this is happening, God tells her that two nations are at war within her and that her two sons will separate and that the older will serve the younger. Things will not be as they should. This plays out when Esau sells his birthright to Jacob who receives the greater blessing (Gen 25:29–34). Jacob then goes on to take both Leah and Rachel as his wives, and there is conflict in his home. He

favors Rachel, particularly Rachel’s sons, which in turn causes conflict between them. So much so that the sons of Leah sell Joseph as a slave (Gen 25; 29; 37). Though there is not sufficient space to walk through the rest of their story, there is an evident theme arising: Abraham’s story, and the story of his descendants, is one of conflict. And that conflict arises in no small part because Abraham and members of his family want to fulfill the covenant to ensure their own succession. Abraham and those who follow also fall into repeated patterns of fear, dysfunction, and a lack of trust in God’s promises.

### David and Generational Dysfunction

David follows a similar path. In many ways, the demonstration of his generational dysfunction is even clearer, and it happens even more quickly. David, a man after God’s own heart, is established as king over Israel. Certainly, there is conflict that happens around this event, but that is not entirely surprising. Throughout David’s time as king, he took another man’s wife as his own, had that man killed, and the son that is conceived died (1 Sam 11–12). Later, another one of David’s sons raped his half-sister, David’s daughter, with little to no consequence, then another son killed that one and comes after David to overthrow him (1 Samuel 13; 15). David, however, escapes. That son, Absalom, is then killed for trying to overthrow his father (1 Samuel 18). David fathered at least nineteen sons from no fewer than seven women—the biblical account is not shy in sharing the dysfunction that happened within his family. David had his fair share of loss and pain, but overwhelmingly it was tied to David’s own sinful choices.

Like Abraham, though, God upholds his covenant with David. David fathered Solomon, son of Bathsheba, who became the wisest king in the land. Solomon took the throne at a young age and exercised substantial political power to purge those who would threaten him, which no doubt caused some further conflict (1 Kgs 2). But he was known for his great wisdom that he received from the Lord at his request (1 Kgs 3:5–15). He would go on to author multiple books in the OT canon. He also spent considerable effort building the temple and other key buildings in Jerusalem during his time as king.

Following after his father’s example, Solomon’s family was extensive. First Kings 11 tells us that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. This practice allowed the import of other deities, permitting these wives to worship other gods. But this has disastrous consequences. First Kings tells us the Lord’s response:

And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared

<sup>8</sup> Quarles, *Matthew*, 57.

to him twice and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods. But he did not keep what the Lord commanded. Therefore, the Lord said to Solomon, “Since this has been your practice and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and will give it to your servant. Yet for the sake of David your father I will not do it in your days, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son. However, I will not tear away all the kingdom, but I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem that I have chosen.” (1 Kgs 11:11–13 CSB)

God upholds his covenant with David, by the time Solomon’s son Rehoboam takes power, the nation of Israel begins to crumble. This happens two generations from when the original covenant was made, explicitly because of sin in the line of David, and is limited to only the second generation because of God’s mercy (1 Kgs 12).

Like Abraham, several themes emerge. David’s house and his lineage are characterized by rebellion and discord. Amidst all of the conflict, David is unable to keep his house in order. He shows favoritism and a lack of discipline in more than one instance, and he is often seen fleeing for his life, even from his own sons. There seems to be little accountability even for things like rape and murder. It is clear to any reader that David’s house was lacking peace.

Readers might be tempted to think the accounts of Abraham and David are entirely different today. We certainly do not take 700 wives and 300 concubines. We do not try to pass off wives as sisters (hopefully!). But notice the underlying themes: conflict, discord, rebellion, fear, poor communication, parental failure, and a lack of trust in God’s promises and provision. Within the house of Abraham, there is perpetual conflict to the point of selling one’s own brother into slavery. This escalates in David’s household where Absalom kills Amnon and then comes after his father. Both men fail to trust God fully and try to take control of a situation that is God’s to handle. And in each case, there are disastrous consequences. It’s only because of the grace of God and the upholding of his own word that either family continues. God preserves their households rather than either of these men doing it.

### Generational Dysfunction Today

Undoubtedly, there are modern-day parallels. Conflict and sexual sin abound, poor communication is almost universal, and parental failure is commonplace. Although there are many generational dysfunctions that we could explore, this article will narrow its focus now to explore two

primary arenas in which generational dysfunction is perhaps most clearly seen in the modern day: addiction and trauma (the second of which is not foreign to the families of Abraham and David). Unfortunately, both impact a significant part of the population in the United States.

Currently in the United States, over 16 percent of the population over twelve years of age struggles with a substance use disorder (and not merely someone who uses a substance regularly).<sup>9</sup> Over ten percent have alcohol use disorder.<sup>10</sup> Twenty-two percent of the population used illicit drugs last year alone.<sup>11</sup> It is not an understatement to say there is an addiction problem in our country. Furthermore, research demonstrates that rates of addiction are higher in children who were brought up in the care of parents or caregivers who struggle with addiction.<sup>12</sup> Theories abound as to why this is, whether it be genetics, their environment, or behavioral factors.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of whether or not there is an underlying genetic or physiological predisposition, the fact remains that children learn maladaptive coping behaviors based on what they are exposed to. When a parent engages in problematic behavior like substance use, children are exposed to it and are more likely to mimic that behavior.

The second generational dysfunction of focus in this essay is trauma. Research on adverse childhood experiences (also known as childhood trauma) shows that almost two-thirds of adults in the US have experienced at least one childhood traumatic event.<sup>14</sup> One in six has experienced four or more.<sup>15</sup> Most of these children then grow up to be parents, bringing with them the trauma experienced as a child. These numbers are astounding, and the implications for long-term physical and mental health

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<sup>9</sup> 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/release/2021-national-survey-drug-use-and-health-nsduh-releases> (accessed 12/21/2023).

<sup>10</sup> 2021 NSDUH.

<sup>11</sup> 2021 NSDUH.

<sup>12</sup> L. Chassin, S. C. Pitts, C. DeLucia, and M. Todd, “A Longitudinal Study of Children of Alcoholics: Predicting Young Adult Substance Use Disorders, Anxiety, and Depression,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 108.1 (1999): 106–19 (<https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843X.108.1.106>).

<sup>13</sup> D. Hawkins, R. Catalano, J. Miller, “Risk and Protective Factors for Alcohol and Other Drug Problems in Adolescence and Early Childhood: Implications for Substance Abuse Prevention,” *Psychological Bulletin* 112.1 (1992): 64–105.

<sup>14</sup> M. M. Islam, M. Rashid, and M. Rashid, “Adverse Childhood Experiences and Association with Poorer Health and Health-harming Behaviours in Adulthood among the Americans,” *Child: Care, Health and Development* 49.6 (2023): 943–54 (doi: 10.1111/cch.13104. Epub 2023 Feb 23. PMID: 36772922).

<sup>15</sup> Islam et al., “Adverse Childhood Experiences,” 943.

are staggering. Adverse childhood experiences truly are a public health crisis. To narrow into generational trauma, a recent study on these sorts of adverse childhood experiences linked this type of trauma directly with the trauma experienced by their parents. Researchers with the National Institute of Health write, “Parents who experience trauma have diminished capabilities to empathize with their child’s emotions due to an altered perception of the world and the individuals they interact with. Diminished parenting skills may result in decreased trust and feelings of safety for their children from a lack of emotional stability. In turn, children mirror their parents’ instability, and the process of intergenerational transmission of trauma continues.”<sup>16</sup> The study demonstrated that parental experience of trauma, particularly that of the mother, influenced the child’s adverse experiences. Fathers were more likely to parent as they had been parented, including in unhealthy ways, but both mother and father contributed substantially to overall family health.

Other studies show that children or grandchildren of individuals who have experienced trauma may exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, or other mental health disorders, even if they did not directly experience the traumatic event themselves.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, research has shown that trauma can have lasting effects on the brain and nervous system by altering stress response systems, influencing emotional regulation, and changing cognitive processing.<sup>18</sup> These changes can be passed down through generations, potentially increasing the risk of mental health disorders in subsequent generations. For example, if a parent or grandparent experienced a traumatic event such as war, violence, abuse, or a natural disaster, the impact of that trauma may be transmitted to their children or grandchildren through epigenetic changes, modifications to gene expression without altering the underlying DNA sequence. These changes can affect how genes related to stress response, emotional regulation, and mental health are expressed, potentially increasing the risk of mental health disorders in the offspring or descendants of

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<sup>16</sup> Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma: The Mediating Effects of Family Health - PMC, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9141097/> (accessed 12/21/2023).

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Curry, “Parents’ Emotional Trauma May Change Their Children’s Biology: Studies in Mice Show How Suffering Triggers Changes in Gene Expression That Last for Generations,” <https://www.science.org/content/article/parents-emotional-trauma-may-change-their-children-s-biology-studies-mice-show-how>; doi: 10.1126/science.aay7690 (accessed 12/21/23).

<sup>18</sup> Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: The Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 42–46, 54.

trauma survivors.<sup>19</sup> In sum, whether the influences are physiological, relational, or emotional, healthier families lead to healthier children; unhealthy families lead to unhealthy children.

### Generational Dysfunction and My Personal Experience

In light of this research, and as a counselor and counseling professor, let address this issue anecdotally. I have the privilege of sitting with families as they walk through sometimes unspeakable hardship. I often work with teenagers and children, and I can attest that the actions, attitudes, and experiences of parents directly influence their children. My own children not only look like me; they *act* like me. I frame their experiences for them and am a model for how they are to perceive and process reality around them. We cannot escape that fact.

Furthermore, I am in many ways a product of my parents. Their mannerisms, speech patterns, habits, and values all manifest themselves in my life in one way or another. I am my mother’s child. And even though I am an adult now, with the ability to rationalize, formulate and develop my own values, and assess the world around me, my parents thumbprints are all over me as a person. Children, in many ways, do not have the cognitive ability or discernment to think through positive versus negative influences. They simply respond and react to what is given to them.

But why does that happen? Why, beyond simple modeling, does parental behavior get passed down from parents to children? There are many reasons. Many mental health struggles do have an underlying hereditary component, so while those genetics may not be *causative*, they very well may be highly influential, as we have explored already. Environmental factors are also at play; the family of origin is a child’s primary environment, such that the family provides the schema or framework for how a child understands everything around them. Families determine what is “normal” and “acceptable,” and children oftentimes have few others to counter those norms. Dysfunctional patterns of behavior and problematic coping behaviors are shared from parent to child, along with things like understanding one’s emotions, how to speak to others, or how to deal with conflict. Lastly, certain societal or cultural norms (like having multiple wives in the OT) influence family dynamics and normalize potentially problematic behaviors. Culture influences family values, stigmas around mental health, or the roles of men and women. Though children may not

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<sup>19</sup> R. Yehuda and A. Lehrner, “Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Effects: Putative Role of Epigenetic Mechanisms,” *World Psychiatry* 17.3 (2018): 243–57 (doi: 10.1002/wps.20568. PMID: 30192087; PMCID: PMC6127768).

be able to articulate their framework for understanding the world, children are incredibly observant.

Given these realities, it should be no surprise that dysfunction carries from generation to generation. The connections between generational trauma or increased rates of substance abuse noted above should not shock us. Our own experiences (at least mine) affirm these connections. When a parent demonstrates that alcohol is the only effective coping mechanism for stress, children will follow suit. Alternatively, when outbursts of anger, or even physical abuse, are the norm in a home, a child has little opportunity to discover or understand any alternative. It is no wonder sin patterns repeat themselves. As Solomon wrote in Eccl 1:9, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun” (CSB) It seems these words were a bit prophetic of his own life.

### Conclusion

Let us return to Matt 1:1 and ask how these things connect. Recall that Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant of Abraham—God’s covenant to bring Israel into communion and community, into the family, of God himself—and Jesus is the new and better king David. Here is the point of this essay: Jesus is the only answer for generational dysfunction. He is the only healer, he is the only deliverer, and he is the only hope. Outside of Christ, there is no hope of change. We will continue to be like our father Abraham and father David. We will continue to be like their sons in the book of Matthew who challenged Jesus, who failed to understand him, and who went about their lives in rebellion to him—products of those who had come before them.

But Matthew reminds us clearly that Jesus does something: he brings restoration. And he does it in a myriad of ways. First, through faith, Jesus brings about deliverance in the individual person. When Christ calls men and women to himself, they are loosed from the bondage of sin. They are no longer enslaved, as Paul tells us in Romans 6. They now have the ability to choose the way of escape when temptation comes (1 Cor 10:13). They have the ability, through the power of the Spirit, to choose different, to create a different household, and to reframe the “norms” of the children in their home. This restoration through Christ has tremendous implications for generational dysfunction.

Furthermore, Christ also brings about healing through grace and forgiveness. He brings restoration of conflict—the same types of conflict that plagued the houses of Abraham and David, and I suspect, the same types of conflict that many of us grew up with. Jesus provides the right model for confrontation and reconciliation, and empowers us again

through his Spirit to speak words that build one another up and bring hope. Not only does he give clear teaching on forgiveness, he reminds us that, for those who are in Christ (Col 1:13–14), he has already paid the price for the sins of our fathers. We no longer have to live under the guilt and shame of past sin, either ours or our family’s.

Additionally, through the Spirit sent to us, Christ also fosters in us new loves (John 13:34). He brings about the fruit of the Spirit that push back the effects of dysfunction in a family. He enables us to love one another rightly, find joy and true peace, demonstrate patience and goodness, uphold faith, be generous, and exercise self-control (Gal 5:22–23). Certainly no person is perfect, but in Christ we can repent and restore rather than pass down and perpetuate (Col 3:13). Because he enables us to love God wholly and love our neighbor rightly, those new loves become the priorities, and rightly so (Rom 5:5). We can work towards eliminating sinful patterns, particularly those like conflict or poor communication, because we have been shown how to speak lovingly and constructively.

The Spirit is the one who makes our hearts new, who cultivates within us a love for the Lord and the things that honor him (Ezek 36:26–28). The Spirit exposes sin in our hearts and brings about transformation in ways that we cannot in our own power (John 16:8). And the Spirit gives us understanding about the things of God that we are blind to otherwise (1 Cor 2:10–12).

Lastly, though we want to rightly recognize the profound influence of the family of origin, Christ offers believers a new family. He died to make us his brothers and sisters, adopted sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. We are now members of one body (1 Cor 12:12–14), fellow citizens of God’s kingdom (Eph 2:19), and a holy priesthood (1 Pet 2:5). This unity transcends physical or biological relationships and is based on the shared faith in Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He also established his church in which we can encourage one another, be vulnerable and transparent with one another, hold one another accountable, be mentored and discipled, and cooperate with one another towards God-honoring ends. Now, “generations” are spiritual generations, passed down from spiritual mothers and fathers as Christ conforms all of us more and more into his own image.

We cannot end without also mentioning the eternal hope of glory and freedom that Christ will usher in at his second coming. Both Abraham and David were looking forward to a day of redemption, to the culmination of God’s promises given in the covenants. That day has not yet fully come, but it will. We see a beautiful picture in Revelation 5 of Christ the lamb seated on the throne, the only one worthy to open the scroll. He is the deliverer and priestly king. And by the end of the book of Revelation,

his reign is established in full. All of the covenants are fully realized and all generational dysfunction has ceased. The “generations,” then, is the entire family of God living free from conflict as they perfectly image the Son.

All of this is the hope of Matt 1:1. Matthew is reminding his Jewish readers where they have come from, dysfunction and all, and how Christ is going to satisfy all the things that they could not. The same message applies today. Christ came and will come again to restore all things, including generational dysfunction. Praise be to God.