

The Lord Writes the Books of Our Destinies in Collaboration With Us Sunday Before the Nativity of Christ, January 4, 2004

By Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev

On the Sunday before the Nativity of Christ the Church remembers the Holy Fathers who were the ancestors according to the flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ. Today we heard the genealogy of our Lord in the Gospel of Matthew 1:1-17, which is the listing of the names of His ancestors. Many people think: "Wouldn't it have been more edifying for us if something else was chosen to write about in the Gospel instead of the listing of unknown names such as Shealtiel, Zerubbabel and others?" In actual fact, it is not by chance that the Church has chosen this Gospel reading, and it is not by chance that the Gospel of Matthew begins with the listing of these names.

In the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, for example, in the Book of Numbers, the listing of names takes up many pages. For us, the majority of these names have no significance, but for the people who composed these books they meant quite a lot. First, behind each of these names is the destiny of mankind, and second, because every Israelite considered himself to be a full-fledged member of the chosen people of God only if the names of his ancestors were listed in this genealogy. The Evangelist, by listing the ancestors of our Savior, wanted to show that not only was our Lord Jesus Christ perfect God but also perfect man, fully and completely a part of His people and flesh of their flesh.

The names of the Old Testament Fathers are also listed in the Gospel because they all lived according to the faith in the coming of our Savior. We heard about their faith today in the Epistle of the Holy Apostle Paul to the Hebrews: "*By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance...By faith Abraham sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise...By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac...*" (Hebrews 11:8-9,17). The entire life of the Forefathers: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the others who are remembered in the Gospel, was permeated with faith in God and the expectation of the coming of our Savior.

We are living in such times, when many people not only do not know who Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were, but also do not even suspect that the celebration of Christmas is somehow connected with the name of Jesus Christ. They make no connection of their celebration of Christmas with the event which occurred two thousand years ago which changed the entire course of the history of mankind — the incarnation of God, the birth into this world of our Savior. It is for this reason, however, that we celebrate Christmas, the Nativity of Christ, because this event marked the beginning of our salvation and is related to the fate of each of us. We know that our Lord's appearance on the earth did not occur at a random time or in a random place, for the entire history of the Israelite people consisted of the preparation of mankind for the coming into the world of our Savior. It is for this reason that with gratitude we remember Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and the other patriarchs, as well as David, Solomon and the other kings of Israel. It is for this reason that with gratitude we read the Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and the other Old Testament prophets, whose images we see in the icons.

The history of the Old Testament was not erased by the New Testament. Christ said about Himself: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them*" (Matthew 5:17), that is, to fill in the gaps and to complete the Old Testament law. Therefore, when we hear the listing of the names [the genealogy] in the Gospel, let us not think that this is something that is insignificant.

Let us also not become bored when we commemorate the living and the departed in church and hear the listing of their names during the liturgy. It is not boring for God to hear these names again and again, because behind each name is a human life. Each name represents a person who was created by God in His image and likeness and for whom God came into this world in order to grant salvation. Every name reminds us of a specific person who struggles for

his own salvation and for the salvation of his neighbors, standing at the crossroad between good and evil. And the names of the departed speak to us about those people who have lived through this earthly life and have crossed over into another world — some with faith, others without faith. Some have departed full of virtues and the fruits of good deeds and others without having acquired these fruits. Christians are called upon to pray for all people, living and departed. We must understand that if we approach these names which are read in church with reverence, then our names will also be recorded by the Lord himself in the Book of Life. If we don't pray for each other, then it is possible that our names will be crossed out from this Book.

When we go to the library, we see a great many books on the shelves. The binding of each one faces us, on which is printed the name of the book and the author. The titles mean nothing to the person who has not read these books. But for those who have read some of them, their titles are worth the entire world. For the people who have written these books, their content is well known, to the very last word, to the very last letter.

Each of us is a book that the Lord writes in collaboration with us. Every day and year of our lives are the pages that we turn. Every day brings us closer to the conclusion of this book. Page after page we leaf through our own destiny with God. We must pray for a worthy ending to our lives, that we become worthy co-authors with the Lord in what he expects from us, in how he wants our lives to be written and in how He wants our lives to be lived.

Translated by Archpriest Peter Olsen