



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Hope-Filled Christmas

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If you were going to put together a team to change the world, who would you choose to put on your team? If we kind of want to do this around a bit of a shopping metaphor, where would you shop? Would you maybe shop at Scheels, because you want the kind of strong athletic type, or maybe Home Depot, because you want the “get ‘er done” type, or maybe you go to the University, or Barnes and Noble, because you want the intellectual type. But I would suggest to you that nobody would shop at the city dump, where things are thrown away when they're abused and used, and no longer of value.

We would pick the highfliers, the high performers. Yet when we read through the Scriptures, there is this consistent pattern, where God surprises us. Sometimes, He actually shocks us, and maybe even at times offends us, and our sense of what's right and decent, in using the most unexpected people to change the world.

One of the ways that we see this is through the genealogy - through the family line - of Jesus. One of the ways to process this is, ask yourself the question, how would the King of Kings come to this world? And if He actually could superintend His family line, who would He put in his family tree? What we find is actually quite shocking. If you have a Bible, turn to Matthew Chapter One, where Matthew specifically records the lineage, the family tree of Jesus, and it is the royal line. It is the line of a king.

In the ancient world, especially in the Hebrew world, it was almost unheard of to record women in a genealogy. It was almost always exclusively male. So, we're first of all somewhat taken aback in Matthew Chapter One, when we find other than Mary, the mother of Jesus, there are four women listed in this genealogy; but what's really shocking is that they are four very scandalous women.

We pick it up in Verse One:

The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob, the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar... *NASB, Mt. 1:1-3a

Now, if we aren't familiar with our Old Testament, we may just read past that without realizing how shocking those words are. Turn Your Bible to Genesis 38. We want to look at the story of Judah and Tamar.

Just a little bit of background: the promise came to Abraham that through his seed would come the Christ, the Messiah. So, you start with Abraham, goes to Isaac, goes to Jacob. Now already if you go back and look at those stories, it's a little bit unnerving, but when you hit Jacob beyond that, it gets very questionable. I talked about Jacob's family, unimaginably dysfunctional. Jacob

falls in love with Rachel, thinks he's marrying Rachel, consummates the marriage, wakes up in the morning, and low and behold, it isn't Rachel; it's Rachel's sister Leah, whom he doesn't love. He was tricked, so he's married to a woman he doesn't love, but then they make arrangements, so he gets Rachel too, so he has two wives. It ends up being four wives, 12 sons and a bit of a disaster. Leah is the wife that he doesn't love, but she's the one bearing him children, so she has four sons. The fourth of those sons was Judah. Finally, at the end of the child-bearing part of the story, Rachel finally has a son named Joseph. Because Jacob loved Rachel - this is the wife he passionately loved - then he passionately loved the son of Rachel, Joseph, and he quickly became the favored son, and there's no question about that.

We pick it up then in Chapter 37, where Jacob's sons are out with the herd, and Joseph comes to check on them, comes to visit. They so resent their brother, they so hate their brother, that they in essence kidnap him and throw him in a pit. Then one of the brothers comes up with an evil, diabolical plan: "Let's sell our brother into slavery and we'll take his fancy little coat and we'll soak it in blood and we'll tell our father that he has been killed by a wild animal," knowing that the message would absolutely devastate the father. One brother comes up with this plan; his name is Judah. They carry out the plan and when Jacob finds out that his favored son is dead, he is absolutely devastated. That's how Chapter 37 ends. We pick it up then in Chapter 38. In the Joseph narrative, he's sold into slavery from Chapter 37 all the way basically to the end of Genesis: it's about Joseph; it's about Joseph in Egypt; it's about Joseph's rise to power; it's about Joseph becoming the prince of Egypt. It's a remarkable story of integrity and leadership and character. Joseph gets more press than almost any other Old Testament character.

Everything from Chapter 37 to the end of the book of is about Joseph, except one chapter: Genesis 38.

Verse One:

And it came about at that time, that Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. Gen.38:1

Now it tells you during this time, the best way to understand that, is that from the time of Genesis 37 until the family goes back to Egypt and reconciles, that time period is what's necessary for the events of Chapter 38 to take place. So, these are two stories running concurrently: there's the Joseph story and there's the Judah story, and both of them take over 20 years to accomplish. So, they're going on at the same time. Most commentators believe that the reason Judah left home, was because he simply couldn't live with his father's grief one more day. Day after day after day, he sees his father in absolute agony because of the plan that he devised. And he can't take it. So, he moves away from home and he's gone for well over 20 years.

Verse Two:

Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her, and he went into her.

When you go back and look at what God told Abraham - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob - the Hebrew people were not supposed to marry outside of their race. They were uniquely called to be an ethnic people. And here you're talking about the patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and now Jacob's son - the family through whom the Seed would travel. So, for Judah to leave home, and the first thing he does is he marries a Canaanite, is kind of his way of just sticking it to his dad

and the whole system. He couldn't have cared less about this whole seed thing, this whole patriarch thing. So, he takes a woman from Canaan. One of the things you'll notice - I'll try to point this out throughout the story - is that the writer is very careful to present Judah in a very unfavorable light. One of the ways he does this, right from the beginning, is in talking about marrying this Canaanite woman, and the two Hebrew verbs that he uses there - he took her and went into her - are very short, terse verbs, to kind of create this imagery that this is some reckless guy. This is all about lust: he saw a beautiful woman; it didn't matter that she was a Canaanite; boom, boom; he marries her so he can have sexual relations with her. That's kind of the intent of the verbs. One of the ways that the writer also kind of tells that story, is throughout the story, the Canaanite wife will not have a name. From the very first moment on, there is nothing about the relationship, and she will remain nameless throughout the story. It's a way of saying, this is not a Jacob and Rachel love story. This is about a reckless, lust-filled, selfish man.

So, she conceived and bore a son and he named him Er. Then she conceived again and bore a son and named him Onan. She bore still another son and named him Shelah; and it was at Chezib that she bore him. Vs. 3-5

So just kind of matter-of-factly, three sons.

Verse Six:

Now Judah took a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.

Now we're immediately struck, that while Judah's Canaanite wife remains nameless to the story, immediately Tamar is named, and we get this indication she's going to be a player.

But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the sight of the Lord. So, the Lord took his life. Vs. 7

That's all we know. How evil was this guy, that God took him out? Lest you think that's just kind of a consistent pattern of this kind of Old Testament God, that's incorrect. This is actually the very first time in the book of Genesis where God takes any individual out. So, it's a significant moment. Certainly, as a reader, we're kind of kind of taken aback by this. He was so evil; God takes him out.

Then Judah said to Onan, "Go into your brother's wife and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her and raise up offspring for your brother." Vs.8

Now in our culture, this would be rather awkward. It's not exactly the way we operate, but in this ancient culture, this would have been considered the honorable thing to do. Everything was about a family line. Everything was about carrying on your name. So, in this case, if the older brother dies, it was the duty of the next brother to have relations with his brother's wife, simply to produce a son. And that son would belong to his deceased brother, and the family line would travel through that son. So what Judah is asking, is actually a very honorable thing to do in that particular culture.

Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so, when he went into his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother. But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord; so, He took his life also. Vs. 9-10

The way the text reads, the verb talking about Onan visiting his brother's wife, would indicate he did so over and over and over again. In other words, there's kind of this impression that he was enjoying that part of the assignment but unwilling to do what was the honorable thing to do, and that is, to produce a son for his deceased brother. We don't have to guess as to why; the text tells us: because he understood that if he produced a son for his brother, then his brother's son would get the inheritance of the firstborn. But if there was no offspring, then that inheritance would come to him. So, while he was in essence enjoying his relations with his brother's wife, he practiced a form of birth control to make sure she would not have a child, so he would receive the inheritance. And God says, you know, I think that's evil too. And he takes him out. So now, here Judah has two sons married to Tamar, both of them dead.

Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up"; for he thought, "I am afraid that he too may die like his brothers." So, Tamar went and lived in her father's house. Vs. 11

Basically, Judah says, you know, we're going to have to wait until Shelah grows up a little bit. But if you do the math, he would've been plenty old enough. What he's thinking, the text tells us, is there's something wrong with this woman. She's got to be cursed or something, because each time one of my sons marries her, they end up dead. You know, maybe Judah wasn't even willing to recognize how evil his oldest son was. He probably didn't even know what was happening with his middle son. He just thinks there's something wrong with this woman. She's cursed, so there's no way I'm going to give my youngest son to her. So, his plan is to simply send her back to her father, and I'll call you if I need you.

You have to understand, in the ancient culture, that was as shameful and as humiliating as it possibly could have been for Tamar. She had had two husbands, both of them died, no offspring, sent back home to dad, used, abused and discarded. She would have spent the rest of her life alone in shame. And you think about this: what did she do wrong? She was married to a man who was pure evil, so God took him out. She was required to have relations with the next son, but only she, and Onan, and God, knew what was going on under the cloak of darkness, night, after night, after night, until God takes him out. And now she's the one who's humiliated. She is the one who is shamed. She is the one who is sent back home. Devastating.

Cara: Bryan, I think devastating is the word that you used to end today's study. But the story isn't over, and that's a really good reminder, that when we get to a point in life that is devastating, our story isn't over yet either.

Bryan: Yeah, so you're right. It's so important to remember things could not have been more hopeless- feeling to Tamar, but the story wasn't over. She had no idea what God was up to. I think a relevant question is always, what does it mean to be faithful today? Because today's all I have.

Arnie: So, Bryan, why did Moses just stop in the middle of the story of Joseph and sidetrack to this story about Judah? It's such a big change.

Bryan: Yeah, it is a big change. It's kind of a, "meanwhile back at the ranch," so the two stories are going on simultaneously. It's hard to really tell that from the text, but I also think it sets up the big surprise at the end of Genesis, that the seed of the Messiah would travel through Judah and not Joseph. And it's a reminder these narratives are so skillfully written.

Cara: It seems like Judah's sad story started back when he left his brothers and started hanging out with that wrong crowd in Canaan.

Bryan: Yeah, it certainly got worse. I mean, if you ever stopped to think about the family dynamics in that family, they were crazy. You can just imagine what all those boys grew up with, four wives and all this competition for Jacob's attention. Judah came up with the plan to sell Joseph, so you know, he's been a struggling guy, but it certainly just got worse as he drifted farther away from Jacob and the family.

Cara: We get off track in that same way too.

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely. It's one step at a time. It's usually not a big step. It's just multiple small steps at a time.

Arnie: But Bryan, Judah definitely made himself god. He didn't even care about his wife. He didn't care to discipline his kids, and they must've been rotten kids, because God just takes them out. It seems like God has his eye on that poor daughter-in-law from the very beginning.

Bryan: Yeah. So, big mess, and Tamar is caught up in it really through no fault of her own. And according to the text, we're not really told she did anything wrong, at least until she went back home. Then maybe some of her choices were a little questionable.

Arnie: So why was it so horrible for a widowed woman to be sent back to her own family?

Bryan: Yeah, there's so many things in these stories that are so different than our culture - makes it hard to understand - but twice widowed, and in such dramatic fashion, most people would have believed she was cursed for some reason, out of favor with the gods. It would've been clear evidence to them of God's disfavor and would've left her really in a very difficult position to survive.

Cara: So, Bryan, the whole time I was listening to your teaching, I was thinking of "like father, like son". It definitely kind of fits that picture of Judah and his sons. Does it also apply to Judah and his father, Jacob? I mean, Jacob was righteous, but he was really far from perfect.

Bryan: Yeah. So, Jacob's a bit of a scoundrel. When we went through Genesis, he's not a real likable guy. And the family is just incredibly dysfunctional: deception, manipulation everywhere. So, I think absolutely, that's true.

Arnie: Bryan, this seems so crazy. We're working our way into Christmas with this crazy genealogy of Jesus.

Bryan: It is interesting: not only that they're there, but how they're identified. I mean, most of the women aren't mentioned. These women are mentioned, and it's not swept under the carpet. It's actually underscored. But to me, that's the whole point of Jesus coming. We're all messed up and in need of a Savior.

Cara: I like it because it comes down to the heart, not what was going on, or the exterior. God sees the heart.

Arnie: But take all this dysfunctionality - point it to Christmas.

Cara: And you would have my family. [Laughter] [That's amazing.]

Bryan: Lots of families. So, one of the things I often remind our congregation at Berean is, we're a gathering of sinners, misfits, and losers, who have been made right by the power of Jesus. So, we're all in this together. We all admit together that we desperately need a Savior. And that's the whole point of Christmas.