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The Daughter-in-Law

Four Scandalous Women Who Changed the World

Genesis 38

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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 want to do this around a bit of a shopping metaphor, where would you shop? Would you maybe shop at Scheels because you want a kind of strong athletic type or maybe Home Depot because you want the kind of *Get-r-done* type? Maybe you would go to the University or Barnes and Noble because you want the intellectual type? But I would suggest to you that nobody in this room this morning would shop at the city dump, where things are thrown away when they are abused and used and no longer of value. We would pick the high fliers, the high performers. Yet when we read through the Scriptures, there is this consistent pattern where God surprises us—sometimes actually shocks us and maybe even at times offends us and our sense of what's right and decent—by 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—unless you were in a coma this past week —you're probably aware there was a royal wedding. Now I could personally go a few days without hearing about it again, but that's just me. But when you think of all that went into that, all of the royal stuff, and then ask yourself the question, "Then 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 1, 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 1, 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, Matthew 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 and this morning 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; it 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.

If you were here during the family series, I talked about Jacob's family—unimaginably dysfunctional. Jacob falls in love with Rachel, thinks he is marrying Rachel, consummates the

marriage, wakes up in the morning, lo 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 and he gets Rachel too. So he has two wives and it ends up being four wives, twelve sons, and a bit of a disaster. Leah is the wife that he doesn't love but she is the one bearing him children; so she has four sons. The fourth of those sons was Judah. Finally at the end of the childbearing part of the story, Rachel finally has a son named Joseph. Because Jacob loved Rachel—this is the wife he passionately loved—that he passionately loves the son of Rachel—Joseph—and he quickly became the favored son and there is 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 will 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 that message would absolutely devastate their father. One brother comes up with this plan. His name—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 is 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 is about Joseph except one chapter—Genesis 38. Verse 1:

> **And it came about at that time, that Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.**

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 is 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 twenty years to accomplish. So they are 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 twenty years. Verse 2:

> **Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her and he went in to her.**

When you go back and you 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 are 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—it's 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 will notice, and I will try and 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 **he went in to her** are very short, terse verbs that 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 that he can have sexual relations with her. That's kind of the intent of the verbs. One of the ways that the writer also tells that story is, throughout that 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 the writer saying that 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 6:

> **Now Judah took a wife for Er his first-born, and her name was Tamar.**

Now we are immediately struck that, while Judah's Canaanite wife remains nameless throughout the story, immediately Tamar is named and we get this indication she is 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 are kind of taken aback by this. He was so evil—God takes him out.

> **Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to 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 in to 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 was unwilling to do what was the honorable thing to do and that was 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 is evil too," and he takes him out. So now here Judah has two sons married to Tamar and 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 are going to have to wait until Shelah grows up a little bit." If you do the math, he would have been plenty old enough. What he is thinking the text tells us, "*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."* 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 and she is 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 has 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 is humiliated; she is the one who is shamed; she is the one who is sent back home. Devastating!

> **Now after a considerable time Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died; and when the time of mourning was ended, Judah went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite.** (Vs. 12)

So Judah's wife dies. Notice, even in the death scene, she remains nameless. There's a message in that. She dies; Judah goes through the required period of mourning but, as soon as he meets the requirements, his response is, "Let's party!" The record of the narrator there is meant to create that kind of picture. When it was time to shear the sheep, just like when it was time for the crop to come in, when it was time for the wool to come in, it was party time. There's nothing wrong with that. It was the big harvest. But the way this is described is that, basically Judah goes through the required mourning period, but as soon as that is up, he is ready to party and he heads off to Timnah.

Now one of the things that we have to notice is, in all of this, there isn't one mention of the slightest bit of grief. You can't miss the contrast between Jacob in chapter 37 and Judah in chapter 38. Jacob is emotionally devastated at the loss of his son whom he deeply loved. Judah has lost two sons and a wife and there isn't one word of grief or compassion. Again the writer is wanting to paint a picture of this selfish, reckless, lust-filled person.

> **It was told to Tamar, "Behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep." So she removed her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in the gateway of Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah had grown up, and she had not been given to him as a wife.**
> (Vs. 13-14)

Somebody comes and says, "By the way, your father-in-law is coming to the party," and immediately she takes off her widow clothes and she puts on her prostitution clothes and she devises a plan. She now knows that Shelah will not be given to her. Her only hope is to pretend to be a prostitute and go sit by the road, which raises an interesting question: What did she know about her father-in-law where she knew this was the right plan?

> **When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, for she had covered her face. So he turned aside to her by the road, and said, "Here now, let me come in to you"; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law.** (Vs. 15-16a)

Now that phrase**…let me come into you…**sometimes, when we get these phrases from the ancient world, there's just such a difference between an ancient culture and a modern culture. The difference between the Hebrew language and our modern language—things don't always mean the way they sound—but in this case this Hebrew phrase is meant to sound as crude and as vulgar as it sounds, for the first reader would have understood this as unbelievably crude and vulgar. In other words it's trying to paint a picture of this man. He's selfish; he's reckless; he's lust-filled; he sees this prostitute by the side of the road and he's just abrupt and he's vulgar when he speaks to her. That's the intent there.

> **She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" He said, therefore, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." She said, moreover, "Will you give a pledge until you send it?" He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" And she said, "Your seal and your cord, and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. Then she arose and departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow's garments.** (Vs. 16b-19)

So she begins to negotiate the deal, "Okay, what's this worth to you?" "Well, I'll give you a lamb. I just don't have one on me so, when I get home, I will send it back." She says, "Okay, that's a deal, but I need some sort of security, just to make sure you don't rip me off." He says, "Okay, what do you want?" She says, "I want your driver's license; I want your wallet; I want your credit cards." That would be the equivalent. When she gets a hold of that signet ring, that is his credit card. She could go all over town charging up whatever she wanted with that ring. So you have to understand, in that culture, what he gave was unbelievable. In other words, he runs into a roadside prostitute and he says, "Here's my wallet; here's my driver's license; here's my credit cards." Again it's painting a picture of this guy who is so reckless, who is so lust-filled, who is so out-of-control that he's willing to do that for this moment of pleasure. It's just kind of shocking. We're told that Tamar becomes pregnant. She conceives; she goes home; she takes off her prostitution clothes; she puts back on her widow's clothing.

Now that part of the text is saying she is not a prostitute—she's a woman who has been shamed. She's a woman who has been used and abused and discarded and now she has been backed into a corner. She has nowhere to turn and she didn't know what else to do so she devised this plan to somehow have a child that would continue the family line.

> **When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite, to receive the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. He asked the men of her place, saying, "Where is the temple prostitute who was by the road at Enaim?" But they said, "There has been no temple prostitute here." So he returned to Judah, and said, "I**

did not find her; and furthermore, the men of the place said, 'There has been no temple prostitute here.'" Then Judah said, "Let her keep them, otherwise we will become a laughingstock. After all, I sent this young goat, but you did not find her." (Vs. 20-23)

In other words he is saying, "Hey, we tried to find her and pay the bill, but we couldn't find her, so let's move on." But the comment about **…we will be a laughingstock…**is in reference to the fact that if anyone finds out that I had an encounter with a roadside prostitute and I gave her my driver's license, my wallet, and my credit cards, we will be a laughing stock because that behavior was so ridiculous and so reckless. That is what he is saying—that this is so bad that we just need to keep it quiet and move on.

It was about three months later that Judah was informed, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot, and behold, she is also with child by harlotry." Then Judah said, "Bring her out and let her be burned!" (Vs. 24)

You have to understand how absolutely shocking that would have been, even to a first reader. Even someone in the ancient world would have understood this to be unimaginably shocking! It gives you a picture of the kind of authority these men had over these women. He was a law unto himself. If he wanted to bring her out and burn her, he had every right to do that. But even an ancient reader would have understood this as being unbelievably severe. As a matter of fact Robert Alter, who is considered to be one of the experts in Hebrew narrative, says it is just breathtaking how quickly Judah responds, without the slightest degree of compassion. This woman is an embarrassment to him. He sees an opportunity to eliminate her. "Bring her out; we'll burn her to death." In the ancient world it was not twenty years of appeals; it would have been carried out that day and that's exactly what transpires.

It was while she was being brought out that she went to her father-in-law, saying, "I am with child by the man to whom these things belong." She said, "Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?" Judah recognized them, and said, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not have relations with her again. (Vs. 25-26)

When she's being brought out to be burned to death, she says, "Oh by the way, I have a driver's license here; I have some credit cards here. I wonder if you might look at them; this is the father of the child." Of course Judah figures it out pretty quickly and states, **"She is more righteous than I".** Now I don't think the text is saying anybody in the text is *righteous.* I think her behavior was offensive to God but you understand what had been done to her. She was desperate and she came up with this plan to do something. What he is saying is the reason she stooped to this behavior is she is not a prostitute; she is not a bad person; but I had pressed her into a corner and she had no hope in life and that is why she did what she did. He is saying, "I'm the one to blame, because I pressed her into that circumstance." Interestingly enough, end of story for Judah. Judah virtually disappears—that's it! There is one more paragraph related to Tamar.

It came about at the time she was giving birth, that behold, there were twins in her womb. Moreover, it took place that while she was giving birth, one put out a hand, the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, "This one came out first." But it came about as he drew back his hand, that behold, his brother came out. He she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" So he was named

Perez. Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand; and was named Zerah. (Vs. 27-30)

Now in an ancient culture the fact that she was having twins would have been considered God's blessing, so we notice that as a reader. But then this strange detail about one of the son's sticking his hand out and he gets this red ribbon and then it goes back in and then the other one is born, and basically she is saying, "This is all mixed up." But in the text you get the sense that this story isn't over; that there's something else going on here.

Chapter 39 picks up the Joseph story and you can't miss that chapter 39 is about the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Joseph could not have been more different than his brother Judah. When tempted, when seduced, he chose to do the right thing with integrity and morality and that is a dramatic contrast between him and his brother Judah. The rest of Genesis is the Joseph narrative: the favored son, the favored child, a man of character, a man of integrity, a high performer who becomes the number two man in the world—the prince of Egypt.

So by the time we get to Genesis, Chapter 49, this is a done deal. We know exactly how this is going to work—that the seed is going to go from Jacob to Joseph and on. That's why we are absolutely shocked when we get to Genesis 49 and we find out the seed does not go through Joseph, the high performer; it goes through Judah! Not only does it go through Judah, it goes through Judah and his relations with his daughter-in-law Tamar! That child would be the *Seed of Promise*. It is absolutely shocking! It goes against everything that we think is decent and right. We don't know what to do with this. It is just so unbelievably scandalous!

If you were to go onto Ancestry.com, this is not the story you want to find in your family tree. This is embarrassing; this is shame-filled. This is the kind of story we hide and hope no one will ever find out. You would think when Matthew was recording the genealogy of the King, the genealogy of God-become-flesh, the genealogy of the Messiah, he would slip past this one as quickly as possible and hope nobody notices. But as a matter of fact, he does the exact opposite. Again in this genealogy, other than Mary, there are only four women named and the first woman named in the genealogy is Tamar. If you had a story like this in your family tree, why would you focus attention on it? Why would you make it jump off the page? Why wouldn't you hide it and hope nobody knows….unless that is the point? Unless that is the point that God Himself was going to enter into the garbage heap to seek and to save those who are lost, those who have been used, those who have been abused, those who have been discarded, those whom the world says have no value. Isn't that the whole point? We all live in the garbage heap and desperately need a Savior. Isn't the whole point that He would enter into the mess, even to the degree that that mess would be scandalously represented in His family line? Isn't it God's way of saying that His ways are not like our ways?

One of the reasons why grace is just so hard to process and so hard to fully embrace is because it is so *other than* anything you will ever experience in this life. It is so *other than*. At times it surprises us; at times it shocks us and I think at times it even offends us and goes contrary to everything that we think is right and decent. I mean the grace of God is so unbelievably scandalous that who knows, God may actually choose you to change the world.

Our Father we're thankful for Your scandalous grace. Lord, I feel like the more we talk about it, the less we understand it. It's so contrary to what we think is right and decent and proper, where sometimes it just kind of shocks us. Lord, sometimes we maybe look at somebody else and wonder, "Wow, how could God use him? How could God use her?" Lord, I'm guessing most of the time it's when we look in the mirror and we wonder if You could use us? Lord, this text answers with a resounding, "Yes!" Lord, help us to believe that—help us to believe that in Jesus' name. Amen

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