

Break the Chains Bible Study Series

Session 2

By Mylinda Baits

The Break the Chains Bible study series is designed to help you explore the complex issues surrounding today's global slave trade as you prayerfully consider the biblical message of God's redemptive work through saving love. Some of the passages you will be asked to reflect upon may make you feel uncomfortable and challenge your thinking, but we encourage you to be open to the surprises God has for you in the Word.

Please begin and end each study with prayer and reflection. Think about your present life situation and ask God to be present in your study, as well as show you how to act on what you discover. If you are studying in a group, read each section aloud and allow all willing participants to share their insights; if you are using this study as an individual, keep a journal of your thoughts and feelings as you ponder the biblical story, information, and personal stories that you read.

May God's spirit fill you, challenge you, free you and transform you in and through your study.

Sacred Scandalous Stories

Matthew 1:1-7 (esp. verses 3-6)

Background

Jesus' family tree was full of some interesting fruits. The author of the Gospel of Matthew formed the genealogy that we find in his account to reflect fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Matthew proclaims history with a redemptive plan. The inclusion of the four women in the genealogy of Jesus is noteworthy. The lives of the four women actually make the history of redemption much more interesting. Who are these women and where do they come from? Why are they included and named?

Verse 3, Tamar: She dressed as a prostitute and tricked her father-in-law Judah into providing her with an heir after he refused her his third son. Under the Mosaic Law, a "kinsman redeemer" should have been provided, meaning, if a man died and left his wife without an heir, or in other words, before bearing a child, his brother or close kin must marry her to provide a child, thus guaranteeing an inheritance, land, and financial security. She was a Canaanite, and therefore a racial outsider. *Genesis 38:1-30*

Verse 5, Rahab: She was the prostitute in Jericho who saved the Israelite spies by hiding them. When Joshua and his troops captured the city, Rahab's family was spared. She, like Tamar, was a Canaanite. She later married an Israelite named Salmon and was the mother of Boaz, who later became the kinsman redeemer of Ruth. *Joshua 2; 6:22-25; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25*

Verse 5, Ruth: She was a Moabite, despised descendants of the offspring of one of Lot's daughters who had sex with their father to insure themselves an heir after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ruth wooed Boaz, Rahab's son, into marrying her as a kinsman redeemer after coming to Jerusalem with her mother-in-law, Naomi, following the deaths of their husbands. *The Book of Ruth, Genesis 19:30-38*

Verse 6, Bathsheba: She was impregnated by King David and later became one of his wives. To cover his sin, David had her husband, Uriah the Hittite, killed in battle. Bathsheba was most likely a Hittite like Uriah. She was the mother of Solomon, giving birth to him after the death of the first child fathered by David. *2 Samuel 11; 2 Samuel 12:24; 1 Kings 1-2; 1 Chronicles 3:5*

For more reflection, a good source of information on these characters can be found in A Biblical Word for an Urban World: Messages from the 1999 World Mission Conference, Raymond J. Bakke, (published by the Board of International Ministries, ABCUSA, 2000), chapter 3.

Entering the Story

As you reflect on this genealogy, imagine that you are walking through a cemetery and come across the family plot of Jesus. Take note of the tombstones and what clues they give you about the plan of God as worked out in the real life histories that led up to the birth of Jesus.

- What do these four women have in common with one another?
- What do these women have in common with you?
- Why do you think Matthew included and named these four women in the opening lines of his Gospel?
- Why do you think their inclusion was important to the first readers of this Gospel message?

After reflecting on your own about these questions, consider the following insights from others who have studied this passage as well:

- As I (Mylinda Baits) studied and reflected on the four women in Jesus' family tree, these were the things that stood out to me:
 - all had sexually scandalous, non-G rated histories or dirty laundry in their closets
 - all were foreigners or outsiders to the Israelite people
 - all took initiative to redeem their situations within their cultural contexts
 - all experienced God's grace, redemption, and welcome
 - all have their names and stories recorded and remembered in God's Story
- Why does Matthew include and name the women in the opening lines of his Gospel? According to Ray Bakke in his book *A Biblical Word for An Urban World*, Matthew was making a theological statement by including them. Unlike the genealogies we find in Exodus and Chronicles, the women are named and present, thus honoring their place in God's redemptive history. By including four foreign women, Matthew was making a statement affirming mission to and redemption of all nations, going beyond national borders. We see in Jesus' family tree and own life experience, the story of an immigrant people, moved outside of their homeland for extended periods of time because of famine, genocide, political unrest and other imposed situations. Jesus was no stranger to border crossings. Not only do the fruits of Jesus' life and redemptive work reach to the ends of the earth, his own roots go beyond the borders of Palestine. Matthew reminds us that Jesus came to earth to save his own and his own are all the peoples of the world.
- Another perspective on why Matthew included the four women with scandalously sacred stories can be found in Raymond Brown's book, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Anchor Bible, 1999). He believes that Matthew was providing a bit of pastoral care to Mary, the mother of Jesus. With this purpose in mind, according to Brown, the writer of Matthew looked throughout all of the stories of the Old Testament and found accounts of scandalous births and strange marriages in the patriarchal line. He put them together to say, "Mary, I know you have some problems explaining where your son came from, but you are not alone. Here is your support group."

Responding with Our Story

- What might God be trying to tell us today as we interact with this text?
- Have we ever felt left out, excluded because of nationality, or like a victim of injustice or exploitation? What does it feel like to be included and have our story or background honored? What do we learn from others when they share their stories with us? How can we honor God by honoring the "sacred scandalous stories" of God's people?
- What do we normally do with the "uncomfortable and scandalous stories" from our own experiences?
- How can we deal openly and honestly with the issues of sex, slavery, and scandal in our own families, churches, neighborhoods, communities, cities, and world so that the truth is spoken and that truth can set us free?
- How have you experienced redemptive freedom in your life, history, and personal experiences?

Many of today's immigrant people, Jesus' own, are also victims of commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Exploiters prey on the vulnerability of immigrant status and use it to hold their victims captive. Though they appear free to move about and work in the sex trade, the exploiters' social and psychological control keeps victims of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking from escaping their situation for fear of legal and immigration trouble. Because of horrid economic and political situations (today's famines and genocides), many are forced to look for work outside of their own countries, making them highly vulnerable to exploitation as they try to find ways to survive and care for the needs of their families. Guilt and shame for making their living in a "morally unacceptable way" keeps them from seeking help or sharing their experiences with others. Their unconventional and unsavory profession may also make us feel uncomfortable and tempted to pretend the situation really doesn't exist or, if it does, as if we can't possibly understand where they are coming from. As in the case of Mary and the women listed in Matthew's genealogy, God uses and redeems many "unspeakable stories" of countless unnamed people to proclaim the liberating message of grace and Good News to a broken and hurting world.

In 2002, the Xtreme Team to Costa Rica visited a number of different ministries. In a ministry in the town of Guapiles they met Eunice and heard her story. Eunice was eight years old when she first started selling her body to help her family survive economically. After nine years of almost daily sex labor, she hated life, hated God, and hated herself. One night, as she stood on a dark corner waiting for customers, a car with five men pulled up next to her. When she got close enough to talk with them, they pulled her inside the car, took her to a deserted area, gang-raped her, pistol-whipped her until she was unconscious, and then threw her off a cliff outside of the city. Miraculously, she woke up and was able to climb up the 200 foot slope onto the highway where she collapsed. Later she was found and taken to a hospital. When she regained consciousness a week later, the attending doctor said to her, "There must be some important reason why you are still alive because there is no way I can medically explain why you are with us today. God must want you alive for a special purpose." Soon after that day she met Jesus and experienced his care and healing through the restorative ministry of Casa Hogar, a residential care home for child victims of commercial sexual exploitation. By sharing her story with others who've walked those dark streets, Eunice has become a witness to God's saving grace. Like the women in Jesus' family tree with her non-G-rated past, God works his redemptive plan in and through her life, to bring wholeness and healing out of brokenness and pain. The chains of her "unspeakable stories" were broken when she shared them others and saw how God could use even her worst of times for his purposes.

What Can We Do?

- Share with others your own story of how God's grace touches you.
- Listen to and honor the stories of women even when they make you feel uncomfortable or uneasy. Your acknowledgement and acceptance of them as persons of worth may allow them to move forward or make a needed change. Pray for God's redemptive grace to be alive in and through their lives.
- Read some modern-day Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba stories in David Batstone's book *Not for Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade—And How We Can Fight It* (HarperOne, 2007) to raise your consciousness and give you ideas on how you can help organizations who are making a difference in the lives of those caught in the global slave trade.

Mylinda Baits and her husband Gary are American Baptist missionaries in Costa Rica, working with the Costa Rican Baptist Convention to provide pastoral and lay leadership training and theological education.