

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“THE BIRTH OF HOPE”

Matthew 1:1-16

? The human world is a maelstrom of catastrophe, confusion, chaos, conflict and corruption. There is beauty and goodness; but the darkness goes deep. *Can we hope for more than just to hang on through the storm?*

○ Many of us will immediately say, “Yes!” {1 Pe 1:3}

“The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” “has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

? Still: we are ordinary people with limited knowledge, wisdom, and strength. We fail. We sin. Can this hope serve a greater cause than our comfort? *Can God use us to bring a real and living hope to the world?*

□ Matthew 1:1-16 is the human genealogy of Jesus.

Four of these characters really jump off the page.

All four are women. Three are foreigners. One is an adulteress and two engage in prostitution. Two perpetrate willful deception. One commits treason. Each violates the norms imposed upon women by her culture.

All four are thrust into hopeless circumstances beyond their control. But in the end, Sovereign God restores their personal hope. What is more, God works through them to bring hope to the world.

■ Matthew 1:2-3: **“Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of**

Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar...”

○ There is a family drama here that would not be out of place on the Jerry Springer show. We meet Tamar in Genesis 38 {Ge 38:6}, when Judah arranges a marriage between her and his firstborn son, Er.

In Tamar’s world a woman without a man is nobody. Her most fervent hopes depend on marriage and motherhood. Unfortunately for her, {38:7} Er is wicked, and the LORD slays him.

{38:8} Judah has another son, Onan. In keeping with tradition, he instructs Onan to fulfill his duty to Tamar by getting her pregnant. (As distasteful as that sounds, it effectively provides for a widow, carries on the dead man’s name, and protects his wealth.)

{38:9-10} Onan is happy enough to use Tamar for his own pleasure, but he does not want to father a child by her, so he routinely practices a basic form of birth control. God finds Onan to be wickedly selfish, and he puts Onan **“to death also.”**

Judah has a third son, Shelah. Judah is worried that {Ge 38:11} **“He may die too, just like his brothers”** and he refuses to give Shelah to Tamar.

Tamar’s hope is hanging by a thread. She returns to her father’s household, which is not far away. Any hope she has of finding a husband among her own people quickly fades. She cannot shake her reputation as a husband-killer who appears to be barren.

Tamar has food, shelter, and protection. That is well and good, but she has no real place, no social identity beyond childless widow, no real future.

{38:12-16} Years later Judah goes on a journey.

Tamar gets wind of it, disguises herself as a prostitute and waits beside the road that her father-in-law must follow. It is the desperate act of a desperate woman.

(Lest we are tempted to judge Tamar too harshly, consider that Judah has willfully reduced her already limited options. Also, what does it say about him that it would even cross Tamar's mind that this plan would work?)

When Judah comes along he does not see his daughter-in-law; as she expected, he sees a sexual partner for sale. **“Come now,”** he says **“let me sleep with you.”**

{38:17-23} Judah offers to pay her with **“a young goat from his flock”** but his herd is being sheared, so he gives her his seal and his staff in pledge. Soon afterward Judah sends a goat to their meeting place; but she is gone, and with her his seal and staff.

{38:24} Three months later Tamar's pregnancy is visible. Someone informs Judah that his **“daughter-in-law ... is guilty of prostitution.”** Enraged, he says: **“Bring her out and have her burned to death!”**

{38:25-26} At the crucial moment Tamar pulls out the seal and staff. Judah is stunned into repentance. **“She is more righteous than I!”** he says. He excuses Tamar for her deception and receives her as an honored member of the family.

{38:27-30} Six months later, she safely gives birth to twin boys. It is also the birth of new hope. Not only does Tamar experience the personal joy of motherhood, her

reputation is restored, her shame is erased, and her future is secured.

This isn't one of those stories we teach in Sunday school, is it?! We are uncomfortable with all the sex, selfishness, and deception, not to mention the awkward questions it raises about patriarchal systems.

It doesn't help that God is only mentioned when he kills Er and Onan. His judgments are righteous, yet they put Tamar in a precarious position.

Nevertheless, this is a profoundly hopeful narrative. Tamar suffers one soul-crushing loss after another. Her earthly fate rests in the hands of weak, selfish, corrupt men. She is, by all appearances, a hopeless case.

Yet Sovereign God is at work behind the scenes, removing wicked men from Tamar's life, redeeming sinful choices to accomplish his holy purposes, endowing Tamar with intelligence and courage. In the end he provides her with a husband, security, a home, children, a legacy, and a future.

Not only so, Tamar's [great x 8] great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson David will be the greatest king in Israel's history. Of immeasurably greater significance, the Messiah will trace his human lineage back to her.

If God is able to restore hope to an exploited, neglected, twice-widowed, seemingly barren 21st century B.C. woman trapped in an exceptionally dysfunctional family, he can give hope to us. If God can bring hope to the world through Tamar, he can bring it through us.

■ Matthew 1:5a: **“Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.”**

○ When we meet Rahab in **Joshua chapter 2** she is a prostitute in Jericho. The Israelites are on the east bank of the Jordan River, waiting to seize the land.

{2:1-3, 8-11} Rahab’s best hope, in the long run, is to join them. But why would they take her? She is a Canaanite, an idolater, a prostitute. Then two Israelite spies show up at her house. Within minutes the king of Jericho commands Rahab to hand them over.

Jericho is doomed – but it has not fallen yet. The king will not hesitate to execute her for treason. In the short run, her best hope for survival is to obey him.

{2:4-16} God gives Rahab hope beyond hope. She disregards her orders, hides the spies, misdirects the king’s, gives the Israelites military intelligence, and lowers them over the city wall. It is an incredible risk!

{6:22-23} Weeks later, as the city collapses around her, Rahab’s hope begins to be fulfilled. The Israelites spare her life and the lives of her loved ones.

In time she marries Salmon, the great-great-great-great grandson of Tamar. Together, they have a son named Boaz. The kings of Israel and God’s Messiah will trace their human lineage back to Rahab.

If God is able to give hope to a Canaanite who was once an idolater, who used to be a prostitute, and who lived in a city destined for total destruction, he can give hope to us. If God can bring hope to the world through Rahab, he can bring it through us.

By the way: this is not “a women’s sermon.” I am focusing on these female characters because it is so

unusual for them to be identified in an ancient genealogy. The males in their lives are pretty hopeless, too, so this message is just as much for us men.

■ Matthew 1:5a-b: **“Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth…”**

○ When we meet **Ruth** in the book that bears her name {1:3-5} her father, her father-in-law, her husband, and her brother-in-law are dead. She has no children.

{1:6-22} Soon Ruth journeys to Bethlehem with Naomi, leaving behind her homeland, her people, and her sister-in-law. All she has left is a bitter mother-in-law and her sterling character. Her life is defined by what she has lost and what she has never had.

But God is amazingly good! Ruth marries Boaz, the [great x 5] great-great-great-great-great grandson of Tamar and the son of Rahab. Together, they have a son named Obed. Obed will be the grandfather of King David. The Messiah will trace his human lineage back to Ruth.

If God is able to give hope to a woman who is all loss and no possibility, he can give hope to us. If God can bring hope to the world through Ruth, he can bring it through us.

■ Matthew 1:6: **“David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah’s wife”** (a woman by the name of Bathsheba).

○ When we meet Bathsheba in Second Samuel {11:2-4} she is bathing on her roof. King David (who is

descended from Tamar) sees her and seduces her. Both are already married to other people.

(As an aside, there is a power-differential in this relationship. A woman does not easily deny a mighty king! Still, the evidence points to a consensual encounter, rather than a forced one.)

{11:5-17; 12:1-18} Bathsheba gets pregnant. At first David tried to cover it up, then he has her husband murdered. David eventually repents and God forgives his sin, but the baby dies at the age of seven days.

It is a hopeless way to begin a marriage, but Bathsheba and David have four more sons together, one of whom (Solomon) will be king. The Messiah will trace his human lineage back to Bathsheba.

If God is able to give hope to a woman who is involved in such heinous sin, he can give hope to us. If God can bring hope to the world through Bathsheba, he can bring it through us.

■ And Matthew 1:16: **“Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.”**

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary: each was trapped in an apparently hopeless situation, yet he became an unlikely instrument of God’s hope.

Our course, our hope is not in those remarkable women; it is in Jesus. May we receive the hope he is well able to give even amidst our catastrophe, confusion, chaos, conflict and corruption. And may he use us to bring a hope that is real and alive into this world.