



O HE IS
NOT
ASHAMED

*THE STAGGERING LOVE OF
CHRIST FOR HIS PEOPLE*

ERIK RAYMOND

“The sweetness of the gospel is that Jesus gives himself to people who do not deserve him. He loves the unlovable. He welcomes those no one else wants. He is not embarrassed by embarrassing people. This is good news, especially for messed-up people like you and me. *He Is Not Ashamed* welcomes you to come face-to-face with the Jesus who doesn’t shame sinners but summons them to be part of his forever family. Whether you’re just coming to know Jesus or have walked with him for decades, I commend this wonderful work to you.”

J. Garrett Kell, Lead Pastor, Del Ray Baptist Church, Alexandria, Virginia; author, *Pure in Heart*

“Our past, present, and potential future can often cause us to believe we aren’t worthy of God’s love. And the truth is, we aren’t. This is what makes God’s love through Christ genuinely amazing—it’s freely extended to the unworthy, outcast, and overlooked. *He Is Not Ashamed* is a thoroughly biblical and experiential portrait of the love, tenderness, and grace Christ extends to all his beloved people, regardless of how we sometimes feel about ourselves. Erik Raymond turns our gaze from our constant introspection to the magnificent wonder of divine love. Wherever you are or whatever you’ve done, these words will undoubtedly be fresh water for your parched soul.”

Dustin Benge, Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Historical Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *The Loveliest Place*

“Erik Raymond has given us a masterful treatment of the most staggering reality in human existence. *He Is Not Ashamed* is like a tall, full glass of cool water for anyone that is dry and thirsty for grace.”

Jared C. Wilson, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Love Me Anyway*

“*He Is Not Ashamed* might just convince you that the good news about Jesus is even better than you dared to believe. Erik Raymond demonstrates from the Scriptures that Jesus loves his people more than they could imagine, despite our sin, weakness, and shame. It moved my heart with gratitude and joy, and it brought more than a few tears to my eyes. I cannot wait to pass it on to friends.”

Michael McKinley, Senior Pastor, Sterling Park Baptist Church,
Sterling, Virginia

“Do you believe that God loves you as he loves Christ? As a pastor of a local congregation, I have found that many Christians, including me, struggle to believe that God truly loves them in the way he says he does (John 17:23). It’s only when we come to grasp God’s staggering love for us that we will experience the deep humility, genuine freedom, and abundant life that we have in Christ. Understanding this naturally leads to a life of loving and grateful obedience to our Savior as we rest in his perfect righteousness, all by the power of the Holy Spirit. I am so grateful for pastor Erik Raymond and for this insightful book that helps us to ground ourselves in God’s unchanging love for us rather than in the constantly changing emotions of our hearts.”

Burk Parsons, Senior Pastor, Saint Andrew’s Chapel, Sanford,
Florida; Editor, *Tabletalk*

He Is Not Ashamed

He Is Not Ashamed

The Staggering Love of Christ for His People

Erik Raymond

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He Is Not Ashamed: The Staggering Love of Christ for His People

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*To those who fill out the family photo of Jesus.
May you stand upright, with a smile formed by grace,
assured that Jesus not only knows you but loves you.*

*“If I ever reach heaven, I expect to find three wonders there:
first, to meet some I had not thought to see there;
second, to miss some I had expected to see there;
and third, the greatest wonder of all, to find myself there.”*

JOHN NEWTON

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Introduction

IMAGINE IF WE gathered together all of the believers throughout history and lined them up for a massive family photo. Whom would we see? What kinds of people would be there?

We may be surprised.

Dotting the horizon of this picture, we'd find people with unflattering stories. Some are known as the chief of sinners, the sinful woman, the thief on the cross, and the prostitute. We'd also see those who were overlooked and disregarded by society. We'd find weak people unable to give God anything. We'd even see those who wore the uniform of opposition to God. Here in the portrait of grace, we'd find a multitude of misfits. It would be quite the picture.

If this were your family, would you hang it on the wall or hide it in the attic?

Now zoom in closer. Focus on the middle of the picture. Jesus is there. Seems out of place, doesn't he? There, in this panorama of redemption, is Jesus, the perfect Son of God, wedged shoulder to shoulder with people marked by their depravity. Jesus, identifying with men, women, and children of all ages and backgrounds.

Bearing the scars that narrate their painful stories and sinful histories, they surround Jesus.

At first glance, we might think that Jesus doesn't belong with people like this. What business does majesty have with outcasts?

But poring over the Scriptures, we see something else. In this family photo, Jesus may seem out of place, but in reality he's exactly where he belongs. Even more, *he's right where he wants to be*. Instead of being ashamed of them, he calls them family.

Jesus wouldn't hide his family picture. He'd hang it on the wall.

What a staggering reality! How do we forget it? From beginning to end, the Bible includes emphatic examples of the types of people Jesus identifies with. Take, for instance, Jesus's family tree listed in genealogies in the New Testament. Matthew's list (Matt. 1:1–16) includes Judah, Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba, and Manasseh. These aren't exactly the all-star cast members of the Old Testament. Why does he include them? Every name carries a generous portion of depravity, separation, and shame that mark all who would follow Jesus. These are the people that Jesus comes to identify with and save. Don't forget this vital truth: Jesus not only comes *from* sinful people, but he also comes *for* them. He's not ashamed of people like you and me (Heb. 2:11).

We need help remembering this. We rob ourselves of joy and Christ of glory when we forget where we came from and Christ's heart for us.

We Can Easily Forget Where We Came From

With each passing day, Christians move further away from the hour of their conversion. And it can become easy to forget where

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we came from. This is natural. Days tick by, as do months, years, and decades. Our minds are full of current burdens and recent memories. It's tough to recall the experiences and emotions that characterized our lives before.

So easy to forget, but so important that we remember.

The Bible constantly reminds us to look over our shoulder. Paul tells his readers to look back:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which *you once walked*, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom *we all once lived* in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and *were by nature* children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Eph. 2:1–3)

He continues with this retrospective approach in Ephesians 2:11–12:

Therefore *remember* that *at one time* you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—*remember that you were* at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Paul reminds these Christians of their hopelessness and helplessness apart from Christ. He opens up their spiritual biography and begins reading from the ugly pages of their past. His words remind

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all believers that our natural disposition was one of opposition to and alienation from God. We were fully engaged in a rebellious insurgency against him. Listening to the direction of the commander of this world, we fell in line and marched to his cadence. Our mission was to satisfy our flesh. In a word, this is depravity. Depravity describes who we were, which in turn explains what we did. We were depraved, so we lived in sin.

Several years ago, someone made a video clip of John Piper saying in a sermon, “I don’t just do bad things, I am bad. And so are you,” accompanied by music from Michael Jackson’s “I’m Bad.”¹ While the arrangement might make us laugh, the theological truth is dead on. Our natural status is alienation from and enmity with God (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:21). Although some may sin in larger font (bigger, bolder, and more noticeable sins), we all have a past characterized by rebellion against God. We all have something written on the page. To say it another way, *none of us were as bad as we could’ve been, but we weren’t as good as we should’ve been*. As he surveys the whole of human history (except Jesus), God declares, “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10), “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

Forget this truth, and we dull our spiritual senses. Our gratitude to God should correspond to our understanding of what we have been forgiven. If we are forgiven little, our love will be little. But if we have been forgiven much, then we will love much (Luke 7:47). And, the truth is, we all have been forgiven much. Consider the alienation we all once experienced. Because of our sin and God’s holiness, we were infinitely separated from him.

1 “John Piper is Bad,” YouTube video, October 5, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com>.

But God in Christ reconciled us to himself! How could we ever get over this?

When we look into the family photo of Jesus and consider the lives we see there, I am sure we'll notice people just like us. And this should encourage us. Jesus identifies with people like you and me.

We Can Easily Forget the Heart of Christ

In addition to forgetting our sin, we can forget Christ's heart. We can forget how he views his people. You can forget how he sees you. The types of people that attract Jesus make other people uncomfortable. Jesus is different. His heart is drawn to the battered and broken. Nobody has a story that can make Jesus blush. Our sin doesn't repel such a compassionate Savior. It attracts him. This is something religious people tend to forget. To them, Jesus is a scandal, not a Savior. We see this all over Luke's Gospel.

And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (Luke 5:30)

The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (7:34)

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." (7:39)

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And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” (15:2)

And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” (19:7)

Let’s make sure we’re not following the playbook of the Pharisees and religious leaders who were scandalized by Jesus. Pharisees teach us to scoff at sinners. Jesus welcomes them. Jesus is the Savior we need: someone we can be honest with and trust that he will welcome us, someone with whom it’s okay not to be okay, someone who’s not ashamed of us. We need Jesus.

Read this slowly. Jesus “is not ashamed to call [us] brothers” (Heb. 2:11). Although Jesus has every reason to be ashamed of us, the staggering fact is that he isn’t at all. We sometimes use family terms like *brother* or *sister* to communicate close relationships. It was no different at the time when Hebrews was written.² Whether you’re male or female, *brother* means the same thing here. When Jesus calls us his brothers, he’s communicating the removal of all barriers imposed by his superiority.

To put it another way, he’s pulling us close to himself and publicly owning us as his own. What could be more encouraging than this? “No unworthiness in them, no misery upon them, shall ever hinder the Lord Christ from owning them and openly avowing

2 “In the Graeco-Roman world of the first century ‘brother’ was occasionally used for persons of comparable social status, but when a person from another level of society was called ‘brother’, social distinctions gave way to a sense of unity.” Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 109.

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them to be his brethren.”³ No matter what we’ve done or what we’re going through, he’ll never love us any less. This should give believers unspeakable joy!

What’s behind this unflinching love?

His Eternal Oath

God’s love for his people is unconditional. In other words, no one could merit such love for themselves. It’s a gift of grace. Such love is humbling because it is undeserved and unearned. It’s entirely beyond our grasp—even on our best days. But this love fortifies us too. God lavishes his love on people even though they don’t deserve it. For our sin, we deserve judgment (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). Yet, in a shocking reversal, we are given salvation as a gift. The God who knows all things knew that our best day would still merit his wrath. He also knew that our worst day wasn’t beyond his mercy. In eternity past, before he even created the world, God set his love on his people.

God communicates this eternal act to us with a covenant.⁴ A covenant is an oath, or promise, with an obligation. This particular covenant is between the Father and the Son, promising and obligating themselves to lovingly redeem sinners. There is a sacred bond between members of the Trinity. The Father sent the Son to assume human nature (Heb. 2:10–14; 10:5–7), put himself under the law, and pay the penalty for sin for all of his people (Gal. 1:4; 4:4–5). The Father promised the Son that he’d support him in his work

3 John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 20 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Goold (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1854), 423.

4 This paragraph has been adapted from Erik Raymond, “Burn Long Not Just Hot,” *The Gospel Coalition*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>.

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through the Holy Spirit, deliver him from death, seat him at the right hand of glory, and send the Holy Spirit to build the church (Ps. 16:8–11; Isa. 42:6–7; John 14:26; 15:26; Phil. 2:9–11). The Father promised the Son the reward of a people from every tribe, language, and nation and that he'd draw and keep them unto glory (Ps. 2:7; John 6:37–45; Rev. 5:9). This eternal pact between the members of the Trinity was compelled, accomplished, and secured by love.⁵

As Christians we often allow our circumstances to interpret God's character. If we are enduring a difficult season, we might be tempted to think that God is angry with us or distant. Shouldn't we instead see our circumstances in light of God's character? Our fluctuations don't change him. They can't. Our cool hearts can't chill his eternal love. As you perceive a growing sense of your sin, zoom out. Notice the rays of his love that cannot be eclipsed. The matter is settled in eternity between the unchanging, all-powerful members of the Trinity. Moved by love, the Father elected a people (Eph. 1:4) and gave them to his Son (John 17:6). When Jesus went to the cross, he knew whom he was purchasing. And he didn't keep the receipt.

His Solidarity with Us

Hebrews also shows us that Christ's solidarity with his people is a chief reason for why he's not ashamed of them, "For he who

5 We see a window into this covenantal outworking shortly before Christ's death. As Jesus prayed to his Father, he said, "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me" (John 17:6). Notice that they were first the Father's and then they were given to the Son. This gift was not given on this particular night but in eternity, along with the work he was given to do: "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (17:4). Here we see the covenant working itself out in real-time, with the Son praying to the Father and reviewing the gift from his Father.

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sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Heb. 2:11). The one who sanctifies is Jesus, and those who are sanctified are the people of God. The shared source is God. This is anchored in the truth of the covenant of redemption: Jesus is the Son of God who entered into an eternal oath to save sinners. In a time *before* time, Christ identified with us. God loved us.

Jesus is not ashamed of his people because they are the ones on whom God has set his love before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4–5). God’s people are Christ’s people (John 17:6). We are the children that God has given him (Heb. 2:13). Jesus is not ashamed of his family photo because he loves every single one of us. He is well aware of our baggage. And he loves us anyway. He treats us like family. He always has and always will. Nothing we think or do could ever overturn such divine love to his children.

Let’s consider another aspect of this solidarity: Jesus’s humanity. Let’s not forget who Jesus is. When he became a man, he didn’t stop being God. Although his flesh veiled his infinite glory, he nevertheless remained the Son of God. The infinite and eternal God, the one from whom angels cover their eyes (Isa. 6:1–4), is, in fact, Jesus of Nazareth (John 12:41). Isaiah beheld the glory of Christ in a vision and was undone. God took on the form of a servant (Phil. 2:5–7), being born of a woman and under the law (Gal. 4:4–5). This Jesus, himself God, “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:15–16), has condescended from his palace of exaltation to his place of humiliation (Phil. 2:5–8). Considering who we are and who he is, the fact that Christ says he’s not ashamed to call us brothers has staggering implications.

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Dear Christian, if you ever struggle to believe that God loves you, especially as you feel the weight of your weakness, remember that God became a man for you. To summarize Thomas Watson, it's a more extraordinary demonstration of humility for Christ to become a man than it is for him to die. It's natural for a man to die, but unheard of for God to become a man.⁶ Far from Jesus being ashamed of his people, the fact that he became a man showcases his love for us.

His Suffering for Us

Jesus didn't back into the cross. His suffering and death for us was intentional and motivated by his eternal love. He willingly chose to come, live, and die for us and our salvation. His face was set like a flint to go and suffer (Isa. 50:7; Luke 9:51). He loved his own, even to the end (John 13:1). This love continued even onto the cross where Jesus prayed for those who opposed him and proclaimed the gospel to those who mocked him (Luke 23:34–43). Paul says that the cross was the supreme display of God's love for you:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:6–8)

Think of how rare it is for someone to sacrifice his life for a good person. But how much rarer is it to give one's life for an enemy

⁶ Thomas Watson, *The Christian's Charter of Privileges*, in vol. 1 of *Discourses on Important and Interesting Subjects, Being the Select Works of the Rev. Thomas Watson*, 2 vols. (Glasgow: Blackie, Fullarton, 1829), 1:128.

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(Rom. 5:10)? This is meant to reassure us in moments of doubt and despair: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). This is an argument from the greater to the lesser. If God took care of your biggest problem, which cost him the most, how much more can you trust him to take care of your relatively minor problems? He’s proven his love for you at the cross.

Besides being the most violent and torturous way to die, nothing was more soaked with shame than crucifixion—so much so that people considered it improper to even speak of crucifixion in polite company. The one crucified was nailed to the cross, completely naked, in the thoroughfare into the city so that all could see the power of the Romans. The victims were mocked by people and picked at by birds. It was horrible.

But in addition to this, when Jesus was on the cross, the sin of his people was charged to him, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). While physically naked, Jesus was swaddled in the garments of our sin. He publicly bore our shame, guilt, and curse.

The cross should settle the question of whether Jesus is ashamed of you. He endured such shame and suffering because he loves his people. It would be a great insult to question the love of one who went to such depths to display it.

God wants us to know that Jesus loved us before the cross, on the cross, and after the cross. I do hope you see the value of looking through Christ’s eyes and sensing his love for you. He’s not ashamed of his people.

John Owen writes of the value of reminding a believer that “God in Jesus Christ loves him, delights in him, is well pleased with him, has thoughts of tenderness and kindness toward him; to give, I say, a soul an overflowing sense thereof, is an inexpressible mercy.”⁷ When sitting under a shadow of depression, discouragement, or guilt that seems like it will never budge, remember this in that very moment: our Lord Christ is not ashamed to claim you as part of his family. He proved his love to you on the cross (Rom. 8:32). His sufferings console us. And remember, Christ’s heart in heaven is the same toward us as it was when he was on earth. “He loved us then; he’ll love us now.”⁸

We would do our souls well to reflect on the eternal oath between the members of the Trinity, Christ’s solidarity with us in the incarnation, and the extent of his sufferings for us. Indeed, he is not ashamed to call us brothers. Look at what he’s said and done. Praise the Lord!

What I Aim to Do in This Book

In this book we will examine the types of people God delights to identify with. We’ll see in chapter 1 that Jesus is not ashamed of those with an embarrassing history. Nobody has a story that can make Jesus blush. He doesn’t Photoshop anyone out of the picture. In chapter 2, we’ll look at some who opposed Jesus and yet were saved by him. Christ delights to showcase his mercy by turning his enemies into ambassadors. In chapter 3, we’ll consider

7 John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, ed. Kelly Kapic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 378.

8 Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 189. See 189–95.

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how Jesus is not ashamed of those who are overlooked. Those who are marginalized by society have the eye of Jesus. In the fourth chapter, we'll think about those who were far from God. Jesus is not ashamed of them either; his mission is to seek and save the lost. In chapter 5, we'll look at the thief on the cross as an example of someone who has nothing to give Jesus. As we'll see, he is the perfect candidate for grace. In the sixth chapter, we'll think together about Jesus's choice to save those who are weak. In the seventh chapter, we'll see how the grace of Christ flows downhill to those who still sin. Jesus extends his nail-pierced hands to his children, who continue to hurt themselves and others. He is gracious indeed. In the final chapter, we'll see the only people whom Jesus is ashamed of—and it should strike us with sobering fear.

As we linger over the family photo of Jesus, we will be looking through the eyes of Christ to see the types of people his heart is drawn to. I pray that you would grow in your perception of God's staggering love and, in so doing, that you would have a greater sense of gratitude to and security in God. As you look at these snapshots of people whom God is not ashamed of, I hope you're reminded of the types of people he is drawn to, so that you would not stray far from his heart. Finally, I hope to testify of the unrivaled beauty of Jesus to those who are not yet following him. He is, in fact, just the Savior we need.

He Is Not Ashamed of Those with Embarrassing Stories

EVER MEET A TAMAR OR A RAHAB? Me neither. Why don't more people name their daughters Tamar or Rahab? Because they have shameful stories. Shame and embarrassment may be everyday experiences, but who would want to deliberately identify themselves with shame?

Embarrassment can result from something minor, like tripping over our own two feet in a crowded airport or accidentally belching during a presentation. The cause can also be more substantial and costly, like something said or done in private that unintentionally becomes known to others. It can arise from a deeply personal experience, either something that's happened to us or that we've done to others. Regardless of the circumstances, when we're embarrassed, we want to shrink and disappear. We want it—whatever *it* is—to go away.

Embarrassment sticks. We can feel awkward and ashamed before others, even if we're the only ones thinking about it. In

those moments, our lives tell a story about us that we don't like. We're uncomfortably exposed. We'd rather tell a different narrative. We'd love another take.

Have you ever wanted a do-over? I have good news. There is someone willing to identify with people who have embarrassing stories and to remove the associated shame. He sympathizes with people who want to disappear. He's drawn to them. His heart is especially sensitive to those who are hurting. And he's seen everything (literally), so you can't make him blush. What's more, he is so powerful and so good that he's not only able to give us a second chance but also use our stories for good. Imagine that! Your worst nightmare can be used to make your dreams and longings come true.

Too good to be true? Hear me out. Turn to the opening verses of the New Testament and begin reading the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–16).

No doubt some names are more familiar than others. Some surprise us. Double-click on a few names, and we find prostitutes, deceivers, and adulterers. Matthew breaks with his day's norms by including five women, most of them Gentiles, each with biographies that raise eyebrows. This is Jesus's family tree! Why would Matthew introduce his Gospel like this? Among other reasons, he means to convince us that Jesus is not ashamed of people with embarrassing stories. People with stories like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary are the types of people he sets his love on. They are his family.

In this chapter, I want to pull on the dangling thread of embarrassment and see how God has masterfully woven it into the tapestry of grace. We'll see how God brings comfort to the

hurting. People in Jesus's family photo have shameful stories. I can't wait for you to meet them. You may find yourself relating to some of them.

Tamar, the Desperate Widow, Comes Home

And Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar. (Matt. 1:3)

The fourth name in Jesus's genealogy is Judah. He's Jacob's son and the father of Perez and Zerah. Judah figures prominently in the Genesis narrative and the development of the Old Testament. But neither Judah nor his sons catch our attention here. Tamar does. She's not even Judah's wife. She's actually his daughter-in-law. Confused? Unsettled? Before we untie this embarrassing knot, let's think about the context that leads up to their story.

Judah married a Canaanite woman, and they had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. The oldest, Er, also married a Canaanite woman named Tamar. But he was put to death by the Lord for his wickedness (Gen. 38:7). Judah then told his unmarried second son, Onan, to fulfill his responsibility according to the custom¹ and have children with Tamar "to raise up offspring" for his brother (38:8). But Onan was wicked like his brother. He was happy to give the appearance of nobility by publicly taking Tamar as his wife, but he only used her to gratify himself sexually, refusing to give her a child (38:9). God judged Onan's selfishness and, like his brother, put him to death. When Judah took stock of the situation, he sent Tamar back to her father's house in Canaan.

1 In Deut. 25:5–6 the process for a Levirate marriage is outlined. From the Latin *levir*, meaning "husband's brother," the practice involves a childless widow marrying the nearest relative of her husband in order to provide an heir for the deceased.

Whether seeing her as a reminder of the painful stories of judgment or a bad-luck charm, he kicked her out of his house. She left Judah's house, the family of promise, with these embarrassing stories and the sense of being cursed looming over her head like a dark shadow. Why was it so crucial for Tamar to be married and have a child? This is a more significant cultural matter than most of us experience today. For Tamar to be married and have a child meant having a place. Without this, she was vulnerable and helpless. She desperately wanted to be in a house and hoped to have a child. But Judah sent her back to her father's house. He sent this member of his family back to Canaan. And so she left in search of a place. Adorned with mourning garments, Tamar, the widow, made the lonely walk to the wilderness, resembling one who bears the curse. Her only hope at this point was a thin promise from Judah: "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up" (Gen. 38:11).

Years later, Judah's wife died, and he went up to a sheep-shearing festival with some friends. These parties were known to be lively affairs as the shepherds sheared sheep and drank heavily.² Tamar found out that her father-in-law went to the festival and hatched a plan to go. We read, "She took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah" (38:14). She took off her garments of mourning, customary attire for her as a widow, and put on a veil, which along with her decision to sit by the road, gave her the appearance of a prostitute. Why did

2 See 1 Sam. 25 when Nabal went to a similar festival and got roaring drunk. This is a key bit of information because the alcohol likely contributed to why Judah did not recognize Tamar.

she do this? Because Judah bailed on his promise. Judah's third son was grown up and was not given to her in marriage (38:14).

Hard to imagine this story becoming more cringeworthy, but it does.

When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" (Gen. 38:15–16)

Judah was now propositioning his daughter-in-law for sex. He had no idea it was her, of course. The veil over her face, along with the generous amount of alcohol he'd likely imbibed at the festival, hid her identity from him. After quibbling about the amount and manner of payment, Judah agreed to give her his signet, cord, and staff as collateral. Like a modern-day wallet, all three of these items would quickly identify Judah.³ And with shocking simplicity, we read, "So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him. Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood" (38:18–19). This is equal parts sad, embarrassing, and painful. Imagine this was how your mom got pregnant with you? A sense of embarrassment and shame like this lingers.

But this story is not over yet.

3 A signet was something that could be used on a ring or seal to make his mark, the chord likely hung around his neck, and the staff was an everyday tool used when walking. Any of Judah's family and friends, seeing these items, would know they were his.

In due time, Judah arranged for his friend to take payment to the woman whom he believed to be a prostitute, but the man couldn't find her.⁴ Fearing embarrassment, Judah instructed his friend to forget it and let the woman keep his stuff. But shame would soon come to the house of Judah.

Three months later, the news spread that Tamar had been immoral and was now pregnant. As the news came to Judah, this philanderer suddenly transformed into an oak of righteous morality, sentencing his daughter-in-law to death. On her way to execution, Tamar had a word to share: "As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, 'By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant.' And she said, 'Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff'" (38:25). The music stops. Every eye turns—glued on Judah. His heart thumping, Judah gulped and admitted the indicting evidence as his own. Judah's proud head dropped in shame, and he couldn't look anyone in the eye. He owned it: These are mine. The child is mine. Whatever you think of her, think less of me. "She is more righteous than I" (38:26). Shame had indeed come to Judah's house.

Throughout the story, the conflict surrounds Tamar's childlessness. She buried two wicked husbands, was duped by a tricky father-in-law, and seemed hopeless. But now she was pregnant with twins. God blesses the undeserving with abundance. Illustrating this point, the story concludes with an unusual birth. At the time of the birth, one son put out his hand, and the midwife tied the thread on it, pronouncing, "This one came out first" (38:28). Surprisingly, he drew his hand back, and his brother was born

⁴ This area, called Enaim, means "two eyes" and is ironically a place where people aren't able to see very clearly.

first—but was not the firstborn. That honor was for Perez: the one with the scarlet thread. This birth encapsulates a biblical truth: the underserving receive the blessing. Whether Perez, Tamar, Judah, or you and me—none of us deserve God’s blessings but receive them wholly by his grace and kindness.

When Matthew includes Tamar, Judah, and their children’s names in Jesus’s genealogy, he means to make a point: Jesus comes from a line of people with messy, embarrassing, and shameful stories. And not only does he come *from* messy people, but he also comes *for* them. And as we’ll see shortly, this has massive implications for how we understand our experiences and actions. Jesus isn’t ashamed of you or your story. With Jesus, it’s okay not to be okay. He has sufficient compassion and power to deal with you and me. We see this as the story continues.

Ruth, the Outcast, Draws Near

And Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah. (Matt. 1:5–6)

The book of Ruth is a tender story about devotion, redemption, and God’s providence. A love story unexpectedly blossoms, turning tears of sorrow into tears of joy. But the book also makes some meaningful connections for us. As the genealogy in Matthew makes clear, the book of Ruth adds more faces to the family photo of Jesus. Considering the characters and their actions in Ruth, we find *lots of shame*. We also see one who’s *not ashamed* because he loves.

The story of Ruth begins in the time of the judges (about 1100 BC), when hope seemed as scarce as food. Israel was a turbulent nation. If we took their spiritual temperature, they'd be ill. The final verse in the book of Judges reflects this: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). The opening verses of Ruth introduce us to a couple named Elimelech and Naomi, who were from the Messianic line of Judah (Ruth 1:1–2; Mic. 5:2). Though they were from Bethlehem, meaning "house of bread," their house lacked bread—they were living through a famine. A food shortage was often understood as God's judgment on the faithlessness of the covenant community (Lev. 26:23–26; Deut. 32:23–24). We are meant to sense the dark clouds of despair casting shadows on the tear-stained cheeks of this seemingly hopeless family.

The couple and their sons left Bethlehem searching for food and went to the other side of the Dead Sea, to Moab. "They went into the country of Moab and remained there" (Ruth 1:2). Additionally, we learn that the sons "took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years" (1:4). The family stayed in Moab, assimilating to the people and culture. During their time there, both Naomi's husband and her sons died.

There are contextual speedbumps to slow us down and give us a better view of where Ruth comes from. Knowing who the Moabites were helps us appreciate Boaz's kindness and the significance of Ruth's welcome into the royal line. When the Moabite train pulls into the family photo of Jesus, it brings cars and cars packed with unsettling, shocking, and embarrassing material. Let's pump the brakes and think about who the Moabites were.

To get the full Moabite story, we have to go back to their embarrassing beginning in Genesis with a man named Lot, the nephew of Abraham. And I warn you, the story isn't pretty.

Lot lived in Sodom, and God graciously warned him about Sodom's impending destruction (Gen. 19:12–22). Lot's family ran for their lives out of town. But while Lot and his daughters escaped, his wife looked back, becoming a pillar of salt (19:26). Standing in the pathway of deliverance, she became a monument of destruction. She reminds all to flee from the wrath of God and the folly of loving this world (Luke 17:28–32). With the odor of destruction still in their nostrils, Lot and his daughters retreated to Zoar, where they sought shelter in a cave. The cave may have been a suitable shelter, but soon it would become the setting for one of the most heinous scenes in all of the Bible.

After God's judgment of Sodom, Lot's daughters feared they wouldn't find a husband and have children. Their solution? Get dad drunk and then take advantage of him to become pregnant. On consecutive nights, they executed their sinful scheme. Lot got drunk with wine and got his daughters pregnant—yet another shameful story involving a woman deceiving a dishonorable man to have children. When we line up for the family photo, I'm guessing no one would want to stand next to Lot and his daughters.

Lot's daughters had two sons, and they became the Moabites and Ammonites. These two nations are not the good guys in biblical history. Due to their persistent opposition to Israel and rank idolatry, God excluded them from Israel's worship (Deut. 23:3–6). The Moabites and Ammonites were responsible for two of the most shocking monuments of rebellion in the Bible: the sin of Baal-Peor (Num. 25) and the worship of Molech,

associated with child sacrifice (2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chron. 28:3). In fact, in back-to-back chapters, the prophet Jeremiah spells certain doom on these nations (the Moabites in Jer. 48 and the Ammonites in Jer. 49).⁵

Thus, going to Moab was going away from God. To identify with a Moabite was seen as shameful. And shame is what we find in the book of Ruth.

Ruth's widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, heard that the Lord had provided food for his people and decided to head home to Israel. Since she didn't have any more sons for them to marry, she sent away her daughters-in-law. But Ruth insisted on coming. She demonstrated remarkable loyalty to Naomi and faith in God, saying,

Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you. (Ruth 1:16–17)

Upon returning, Ruth went out to a field to glean some grain.⁶ Boaz, the owner of the field, saw Ruth and asked about her. His men identified her by her hard work, manners, and heritage. But pay attention to how the man in charge of the crew replied to

5 This paragraph has been adapted from Erik Raymond, "The Christmas Present in Lot's Cave," *The Gospel Coalition*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>.

6 There is a gracious provision in the law permitting the poor, sojourners, orphans, and widows to gather grain from the four corners of the fields (Lev. 19:9–10).

Boaz, “She is the young Moabite woman” (2:6). Do you get the point? Ruth is a foreigner, even a Moabitess.

Boaz models God’s love for people with embarrassing stories. Boaz helped the poor, widowed Moabitess. He identified with her and all of her baggage. He displayed extraordinary kindness to Ruth. Instead of being repelled by her, he drew near. He invited her to enjoy the better grain, his protection, and refreshment (2:8–16). Unexpectedly, Boaz was kind to Ruth. With total self-awareness and understanding of what it meant to be a Moabite in Israel, Ruth fell on her face and asked him, “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” (2:10). Yes, *why* would someone like Boaz help someone like Ruth? Why would he choose to identify with her when everyone else would not? Why would he choose to approach her shame?

Boaz answered, citing her kindness and faithfulness to Naomi. Also, he reminded her of her faith in God: “The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!” (2:12).

Meanwhile, a light bulb went off in Naomi’s mind. Boaz was a relative and an eligible redeemer.⁷ Naomi planned for Ruth to go to Boaz’s field at night and propose marriage to him! The plan unfolded with a scene rich in ancient culture, humility, love, and purity. Ruth laid at his feet as he slept. Upon waking at midnight, Boaz was shocked. In the darkness, she identified herself and explained, “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer” (3:9).

⁷ According to the Levirate marriage arrangement outlined in Deut. 25:5–6 and referenced in the Tamar narrative above.

In this bold proposal, Ruth took the words that Boaz used earlier and applied them to him. Boaz encouraged Ruth to take refuge under *God's wings* (2:12). But here, Ruth asked Boaz to spread *his wings* over her. Why? Ruth understood that God was the source of every blessing, and *Boaz was God's means* to bless her. God would take care of Ruth through Boaz. The plan to bring a foreigner home hatched under the midnight stars in Bethlehem.

There's a snag, though, with the plan. Legally, Boaz was not the closest relative. Another man in town was a more eligible redeemer. Boaz had to clear his intentions with this eligible relative. The next day, Boaz addressed the man. He informed him of the land that Naomi was selling and his eligibility to redeem it. The man heard of the opportunity to acquire the land and answered, "I will redeem it" (4:4). Boaz then included the detail that taking the land also meant taking Ruth the Moabitess. Hearing this, the man decided to pass on the offer (4:5–6). He was interested in the land but not in the daughter of Moab. Was it her shame that repelled him? He declined the offer and gave the right of redemption to Boaz. Dramatically, Boaz summarized the deal for the witnesses present:

Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon. Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day." (Ruth 4:9–10)

The witnesses offered their best wishes for both Ruth and Boaz. To Ruth, they expressed a desire that God would be pleased to use her like Rachel and Leah to build up the house of Israel (4:11). To Boaz, they drew on the story of Perez.⁸ In a short time, they married, and the Lord gave them a son. They named him Obed. He would be the grandfather of David, the king.

Why would someone like Boaz help someone like Ruth? Because God chose to love Ruth through Boaz, a redeemer. Through Boaz, God provided refuge and care to her (2:12; 3:9). God draws near to and cares for people like Ruth, a person who couldn't outrun the shadow of her family's history. But God eclipsed the shadow with the shining face of his covenant love. And then, he punctuates the point by listing Ruth in Jesus's genealogy. Jesus comes *from* people with embarrassing stories, and he also comes *for* them.

Conclusion

The stories of Tamar and Ruth are similar. Both are foreigners. Both have shameful stigmas associated with their names. And both figure prominently in the genealogy of Jesus.

But they're not the only ones. There's Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who helped the spies in Israel (Josh. 2); Bathsheba, the widow of Uriah and the one with whom David committed adultery (2 Sam. 11); and Mary who, out of wedlock, miraculously conceived Jesus through the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:26–38). In each scandalous story, we find people in the family photo of Jesus that we wouldn't expect to see. If we were writing the

⁸ It was after Onan refused his right to redeem Tamar, that she became pregnant with Perez through Judah.

genealogy, we might have put different women in the list. But God doesn't do this. Instead, he highlights women with noteworthy scandals.

Why? To make this point: Jesus comes from messy people, and he comes for them. Jesus isn't ashamed of you or your story. Of course, not everything we've done is okay. This is why we need a Savior in the first place. But our shameful stories don't repel Jesus. He knows our shame, and he still loves us. In fact, it was his loving response to our guilt, sin, and shame that compelled him to come for us (John 3:16). He is drawn to us in our guilt. He identifies with us in our shame. Even the circumstances of Jesus's birth underscore this. Our Lord's mother, Mary, was assumed to be guilty of scandalous sin when she miraculously became pregnant (Matt. 1:18–19). This stigma likely followed Jesus his whole life (see John 8:41). He came into the world with suspicions of scandal in his immediate family and confirmed cases in his family tree. Then on the cross, Jesus became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). As the hymn writer says,

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned he stood.⁹

His whole point in coming was to identify with us and deal with our shame. He's not ashamed to call people like us his family.

So many people carry around the embarrassment, shame, and pain from their experiences. Jesus's genealogy shows us that Christ brings hope and healing. Glance again at the family photo

9 Philip P. Bliss, "Hallelujah! What a Savior!," 1875.

He Is Not Ashamed of Those with Embarrassing Stories

of Jesus. Think about the implications of this for yourself and the people you know.

- Like Tamar, have you been sexually mistreated—or even sexually abused?
- Like Ruth, have you experienced the biting sting of racism?
- Like Judah, have you oppressed and victimized others?
- Like Perez, or even Jesus, were you born out of wedlock?
- Like Tamar, and even Mary, have you conceived children out of wedlock?
- Like Judah, Rahab, and David, have you been sexually immoral?
- Like Tamar, have you been rejected by your family?

No matter how shameful, embarrassing, or painful your experiences feel to you or appear to others, remember that nothing can extinguish Christ's redemptive love for his people. Jesus comes in the line of David, with Moabite and Canaanite blood in his veins. He came from people with shameful stories, and he came for them. This must be a source of comfort, joy, and gratitude for us every day. Scan the faces in the family photo of Jesus and see those whose stories did not repel Christ's heart. Many may be tempted to airbrush them out, but look again. He's standing there among them. Rising above the commotion of painful memories from your past, dear Christian believer, Jesus's voice speaks to you: "I am not ashamed of you. You are part of my family. I love you."