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CHAPTER 1

Wicked Lies

THE STORY OF EVE

How the First Woman
Swallowed the First Lie

The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately wicked: who can know it?
Jeremiah 17:9
Bzzt, bzzt. She swats the flies away, but they keep on coming, too many to count. She has grown used to the constant annoyance, just one of many. Their favorite spot is around her eyes, where they gather to suck the tears away before she has time to shed them.

Still, Eve is a splendid creature, the most beautiful woman in the world, her husband says, enjoying his little joke. She has big honey brown eyes, smooth skin, and thick, dark hair that flows like a river down her back.

Eve has a memory, but it is not long. It swirls about her now, filled with images sharp and bright and shadows deep and long.

She knows what it is like to walk in God’s garden, in paths that wind through green meadows and lead to still waters. When she is hungry, she merely reaches out a hand to pick the food that grows in lush abundance. Olives, dates, citrons, almonds, figs, grapes, and pomegranates so big it will take days to eat them.

She recalls what it is like to feel every sense satisfied, every need cared for. To walk with God in the cool of the day. To know the immensity of his love. He tells her she is made in his image. That she and her husband are to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over the whole, wide world he has made. They are to be fruitful and multiply so they can care for his great creation.

He speaks to them of how he separated light from darkness and fashioned two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He tells of his delight in placing the stars on their track in the sky. To Eve they look like tiny pricks of brilliant light seeping through the canopy of night.

She listens in wonder as he speaks of how he made a home for her and Adam in the east of Eden, a garden paradise in which all kinds of trees grow—trees pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle
of the garden grows the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

She remembers, too, what Adam has told her. How God shaped him out of the dust of the ground. He can still recall the hot, sweet breath of God waking his soul to life. He loves to tell about the day God paraded all the animals in front of him—alligators, baboons, gazelles, skinks, parrots, crows, cheetahs, curlews, monkeys, macaws, pythons, bullfrogs, trumpeter swans, yaks, flying foxes, hummingbirds, egrets, elephants, lions, and great, strutting peacocks. God and Adam laughed long and hard as the most preposterous of his creatures passed by. The best part was that Adam got to name them all.

Indeed, Eve knows the scene well, almost as though she had been there, even though God had not yet put Adam to sleep to draw her from his side. Perhaps a memory lingers from when the two had been but one.

Adam always reminds her that even among the most marvelous of the creatures God had made, none was found to be his match. So the Lord God caused him to fall into a deep slumber; and while he was sleeping, God had fashioned a woman from his side.

God’s delight was evident when he presented her to Adam and heard him exclaim,

“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”

This is Eve’s favorite part of the story. She loves to hear Adam tell the tale—how stunned he was to meet her. Her breath, he says, smelled like the fragrance of apples, and her breasts were like clusters of fruit. Her mouth was the finest wine.

Eve and Adam. Adam and Eve. The two complete each other. She smiles as she recalls their life together in Eden.

She remembers, too, what she did not know at first—that there could be a place less perfect, a life less loving, a future less bright. That sin could lurk at your door, waiting for a chance to beat you down and shatter you into a thousand jagged pieces, each one a thorn and a barb.
Deceit, blame, want, shame, and terrible grief—all these and worse she has known.

She returns to her memories of what once was. She thinks of all the plants in paradise and of the luscious fruit they bore. The trees were the most delightful. Stately palms, gnarled olive trees, tremendous oaks, and fig trees perfect for playing a hiding game with Adam. But she especially loved the ones that grew in the center of the garden. One of them had bright green leaves lit up with tiny lights that danced inside. The other had deep purple leaves shot through with veins of red.

Why, she wondered, had God told them they were free to eat from any tree in the garden except from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, warning them that death would surely follow if they did? What exactly was this death he spoke of?

One day, while Eve was thinking such thoughts, and while she and Adam were walking together in the center of the garden, a creature appeared. Not just any creature but one craftier than all the wild animals God had made. The serpent spoke in beguiling tones: “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” Why, he asked, would a good God deny them anything? Weren’t she and Adam the crown of his creation?

For the first time, it dawned on Eve that she might be lacking something, that God might be withholding something vital she needed to know. But she feared such thoughts, and so she merely said, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not surely die,” the serpent told her. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

To know what is good in every situation. To see the end from the beginning and everything in between. To be able to achieve a goal with flawless precision and absolute certainty, surely this was wisdom. Why would God want to keep this gift of power from her?

She turned to Adam as though to find an answer to her silent question, but he said nothing. They were near the tree now. Plucking a piece of fruit, she held it in her hand, delighting in the firmness of its flesh.
When nothing happened, she took a single bite and then another until she had eaten it all.

Then she plucked another piece and handed it to Adam, who ate it without the slightest protest.

Suddenly their eyes were opened, and they could see the wrong in each other’s hearts. Ashamed of their nakedness, they sewed leaves from a fig tree to cover themselves.

Then Eve and Adam heard a sound they feared. God himself was walking in the garden. So they hid. “Where are you?” God called.

But who can hide from God?

“I heard you in the garden,” said Adam, “and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

Then God, who already knew the answer to his question, inquired of Adam, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

Struggling to explain, Eve’s husband spit out the truth, but not the whole truth. He began with an insinuation, blaming God for what he had done. Hadn’t God given him the woman? Then he bent the consequences in Eve’s direction, saying, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

Then God turned to Eve and said, “What is this you have done?”

The question pierced her like a knife, cutting her heart in two. But she prevaricated, just as Adam had, refusing to bear the blame. “The serpent deceived me,” she said, “and I ate.”

And then she cowered, her arms above her head as though to ward off blows.

But God merely turned toward the serpent, and said,

“Because you have done this,
Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals!
You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.
And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.”

But that was not the end of it.
Then God turned to the woman and said,
“"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with painful labor you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.”

To Adam he said,
“Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which
I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’
Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.”

God’s words struck like lightning in a sudden storm, flashing across
the sky with startling clarity, showing them everything they had lost.
The future loomed bleak and harsh before them.
As for God, he was grieved by what had happened, how the man
and woman he had loved into being had failed to love him in return. He
could not let Adam and Eve remain in the garden he had created just for
them. For if they reached out their hand and ate from the Tree of Life,
they would live forever in their sin, and there would be no possibility of
becoming other than what they were now, broken and bent by sin. So
God banished them and placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden
cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way
to the tree of life.
So Eve and her husband were barred from paradise, and the peace
they had always enjoyed became like a dream they could barely recall.
They had traded wholeness for brokenness, health for sickness, calm for anxiety, prosperity for want, and harmony for strife. Instead of living in the brightness of God’s presence, they lived alone in the dark.

But it was not completely dark. Though Eve and her husband had listened to the biggest lie of all, God had something more in mind for them than punishment. Even so, their lives unfolded just as God had said they would.

Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living. With great anguish, she gave birth to three sons, Cain, Abel, and Seth. The eldest became a murderer and the second his victim. As for Adam, he labored from morning until evening just to keep his family alive.

And as for God?

Fortunately for Eve and for Adam and for all the children who would become their descendants, God had seen the end from the beginning with everything in between. In his great love, and with absolute certainty, he had set a plan in motion to draw his people back to himself. This bold plan would take uncountable years and face unfathomable obstacles. But sooner or later it would be flawlessly achieved.

Of this Eve was sure, for hadn’t God promised that from her would come someone who would crush the serpent’s head? In his great wisdom God would provide a way for his children to come home to him.

**THE TIMES**

Her story takes place before recorded time.

*Eve’s story is told in Genesis 1 – 4.*

According to the worldview that prevailed among Israel’s neighbors in the ancient Near East, the primary role of human beings was to serve the needs of the gods. They were to do the menial work the divine beings were tired of doing, especially the work of providing food for themselves.

By contrast, Genesis presents God as the one who not only creates the first human beings but who provides food for them by fashioning a garden paradise for them to live in. The garden Genesis describes isn’t merely a flower garden or a garden filled with vegetables, but something
like a landscaped park with paths, pools, fruit-bearing plants and trees, and life-giving water flowing through it. It was a magnificent garden, the kind that might have adjoined a temple or a palace. The implication in Genesis is that the garden home of Adam and Eve adjoined God’s residence in Eden.*

Genesis also makes it clear that men and women, unlike the rest of the living beings God made, were created in God’s image. That the gods planted images of themselves on earth would not have been a novel idea. Surrounding peoples believed that these images, which took the shape of idols, monuments, or even kings, were actual images of divinity, containing the gods’ essence, which enabled them to do the gods’ work on earth.

But Genesis presents only one God, and he is the Creator of everything. Instead of treating Adam and Eve as his slaves, God begins by lovingly providing for their needs and then treating them as his royal image bearers, telling them to “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28).

Living in our broken world, it is hard to imagine all that Adam and Eve lost by giving into temptation and transgressing God’s clear command. The immediate consequence of their act was to expose their shame. Prior to eating the fruit, they had nothing to hide. But now no amount of clothing could conceal the shadows inside.

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* For an insightful commentary on Genesis and for more on why the Garden of Eden might be considered part of God’s residence in Eden, see John H. Walton, “Genesis,” Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 1:10–38.
THE TAKEAWAY

1. Imagine that you are the first woman or man and that you are living in the Garden of Eden. What do you think it would have looked like, smelled like, felt like?

2. In Eden, Eve must have had the perfect relationship with her husband. What do you think that first marriage was like in the beginning?

3. Have you ever disobeyed God because you didn’t understand or agree with one of his commandments? What was the result?

4. In what ways would you say the image of God is most broken in people today? How do you think God wants to restore his image in people today?

5. Why do you think God planted Adam and Eve in a garden paradise? What did it say about his expectations for how the first humans were to tend his world, as expressed in Genesis 1:28?
Older than dirt. That is Sarah. Her skin hangs like sackcloth, wrinkled and rough. Yet hers is a face that still makes men look, so beautiful it once charmed kings.

You might think her a fool for all the non-stop laughter. Her body shakes with it. But she is no fool, only a woman who can’t stop marveling at what God has done. Though her husband is more than a hundred years old and she not far behind, she’s pregnant with his child. Who wouldn’t find that funny? Two old sticks kindling a fire!

But then it comes—yet another sharp pain snaking down her leg. Ow! The added weight is hard to bear, and loose joints make her wonder whether she will topple over. Though the baby is so ripe she can hardly bend, she never complains. How could she since God Almighty has answered her prayers?

Sarah laughs again, this time because her baby is kicking. He’s like a little rabbit whose feet thump softly against her belly. “It won’t be long before I hold him in my arms,” she thinks.

But how does she know it will be a son?

Sitting in a quiet corner of her tent, Sarah thinks back, remembering all the hurtful things that once were whispered behind her back. She remembers the bitterness she felt every time she heard the women cluck-clucking because God had not blessed her with children. Surely, they would say, Sarah must have done something exceedingly wicked for God to have closed her womb.

Her Egyptian maid Hagar was always the first to throw a stone. She claimed God had cursed Sarah* because she had been unfaithful to Abraham when the two had travelled to Egypt. But what Hagar didn’t disclose was that Abraham had asked Sarah to tell a lie to save his skin.

* God changed Sarai’s name to Sarah and Abram’s name to Abraham in Genesis 17 to signify their special relationship with him. For the sake of simplicity I have chosen to render her name as “Sarah” throughout the story.
The couple had fled the parched deserts of the Negev for the lush land of Egypt. Where better to escape a famine than in that place of rich abundance created by the Nile River’s frequent flooding? In Egypt there were plenty of cucumbers, melons, garlic, and fresh fish to eat. But there was also a price to be paid. There always was.

Fearing what lay ahead, Abraham urged Sarah to tell the Egyptians she was his sister lest they decide to murder him in order to have her. And so she recited the lie—but not quite a lie, because Abraham was her half-brother.

As Abraham had feared, word of her beauty spread quickly until Pharaoh declared that he must have her for his own. After showering Sarah’s “brother” with gifts of sheep, cattle, donkeys, camels, menservants, and maidservants—of which Hagar was one—clueless Pharaoh added Sarah to his harem.

Before visiting Pharaoh’s bedchamber, Sarah had to look the part—to be transformed into an Egyptian beauty. Fortunately, that took time. Anointed with perfume made from precious oils and a crush of fragrant flowers, her face was painted white, its worry lines erased by a potion of cypress kernels, frankincense, wax, and milk. Her dark, curly hair was covered with a black, woolen wig whose braided tresses fell straight to her shoulders. She wore bracelets, rings, and a large necklace made out of gold.

Gazing at herself in a mirror of burnished bronze, Sarah wondered about the woman who looked back at her with so much sadness in her eyes. She had saved her husband’s life, but what would happen to her? Would Abraham return home without her? How could she bear to part with him, living out her life as a captive in Pharaoh’s harem?

Then something wonderful happened. A swift and terrible plague descended, ravishing Pharaoh’s household and leaving only Sarah untouched. The stench of stomachs emptied in a hurry soon flooded the harem and every corner of Pharaoh’s house. When he finally rose from his sickbed, Pharaoh summoned Abraham. “What have you done

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* Geologists and archaeologists have discovered evidence of a three-hundred year drought cycle that took place at the end of the third millennium and the beginning of the second millennium BC, dovetailing with one of the periods in which Abraham and Sarah were thought to have lived. See John H. Walton, “Genesis,” Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 1:73–74.
“Why didn’t you tell me Sarah was your wife? You pretended she was your sister. Now your God has cursed me. Take her and go!”

So Sarah and Abraham were hurried out of Egypt and loaded down with all the gifts that Pharaoh could bestow. One of these was Hagar, an Egyptian girl who was to become Sarah’s maid.

Hagar has heard the story many times. Indeed, she had lived through part of it. But whenever she recounts the tale, she leaves out the part about God standing up for Sarah, choosing instead to speculate on what it must have been like for her mistress to have become part of Pharaoh’s harem.

Sarah knows about her handmaid’s tendency to gossip, forever telling half-truths to cast her mistress in a bad light. Why, she wonders, did she ever tell Abraham to sleep with Hagar? At the time, it had seemed like a good idea to invoke the custom of letting another woman provide an heir when she could not. She had hoped it would ease the shame of her own barrenness.

Back then, Hagar had been a slip of a girl, ready to do whatever her mistress asked. Meek and eager to please, she went gladly enough to Abraham’s bed. How could Sarah have known that the moment the young woman’s belly began to swell with life, she would grow fat with self-importance, behaving as though she, and not Sarah, were the favored wife?

So Sarah began to despise her young maid, making her life a misery. She abused Hagar with words and work until she finally broke. Though pregnant with Abraham’s child, the young woman had fled into the wilderness. When that happened, Sarah had felt a momentary twinge of guilt. But then Hagar had come stumbling back with foolish tales of an angel who had persuaded her to return.

Since then, Hagar has been nothing but trouble. How Sarah wishes the wilderness had swallowed her up.

Despite their constant strife, Sarah grows old in the knowledge that her place is secure in Abraham’s heart. To know that is something. But it isn’t quite everything. Then something happens that makes her realize she is first in God’s heart too. Her belly begins to swell with a child. She ignores the wagging tongues and is amused at all the speculation.
How can a ninety-year-old woman survive the birth of a child? Even if she does, how will her shriveled-up breasts produce enough milk? But Sarah is confident. She remembers the promise God made, first in a dream to Abraham, and then last year in broad daylight when he visited them both at their tent near the great trees of Mamre.

That was when the laughter began. Her husband had been sitting at the entrance of his tent in the middle of the day when suddenly he saw three strangers approaching. A generous man, Abraham begged them to linger and enjoy his hospitality. Ducking quickly inside the tent to ask Sarah to prepare some bread, he instructed a servant to slaughter the best calf from his herd.

The moment Sarah completed her task, she began to feel ill. Holding her hand to her stomach, she remembered the long forgotten pain she had experienced whenever her monthly flow began. But that had stopped years ago. Minutes passed until she was certain. She must stay in the tent until her days of uncleanness have passed. Whispering the news to Abraham, she explained why she would miss the meal that was about to begin.

She could see the shock on his face, the worry in his eyes. What woman’s disease had she contracted? Would she be able to survive it?

Ever the gracious host, Abraham brought curds and milk and the roasted calf, setting the feast before his guests.

As they spoke, one of them asked, “Where is your wife, Sarah?”

Surely they were wondering why she wasn’t at the meal.

“There, in the tent,” Abraham replied, invoking a euphemism to explain that, like all menstruating women, she was secluded in her tent.*

Then one of them said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.” At once, Abraham realized that this was no ordinary stranger. God himself had spoken.

Eighty-nine-year-old Sarah had been listening to the conversation

* Though the biblical text (Genesis 18:1 – 15) never explicitly states that Sarah’s period started again, some scholars point out that there is no evidence that men and women ate separately in the ancient world. That was a custom that developed later. So the guests may have noted the irregularity and inquired about it. When Abraham replied that his wife was “in the tent,” he may have been employing a polite euphemism, indicating that she was menstruating and unable to join them. For this to have been the case, she would have needed to begin menstruating just after baking the bread because bread baking would have been forbidden to menstruating women. See John H. Walton, “Genesis,” 1:91.
from the entrance to the tent. Hearing the stranger’s outlandish promise, she broke into laughter, exclaiming to herself, “After I am worn out and my husband is old, will I now have this pleasure?”

“Why did Sarah laugh?” the Lord asked Abraham. “Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

Afraid, Sarah replied, “I did not laugh.”

Speaking directly to Sarah this time, God said, “Ah, but you did laugh.”

And laugh she did and laugh she would until the day her son Isaac — whose name means “laughter” — is finally born. She and Abraham laugh together. The joy rises up strong and wild, and even were she to try, she cannot push it down. “God has brought me laughter,” she says, “and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

And so it is that in her old age Sarah comes to understand that God has a sense of humor. Despite every shred of trouble and every evil circumstance, she knows that in the end he will prevail, laughing all his enemies to scorn.

But Sarah still has enemies. And they are close at hand.

By now Isaac is three, and he has just been weaned. Since death sweeps so many babies away, his good health is reason to celebrate. Despite the feast that Abraham throws to mark the vigor of his youngest son, Sarah is worried. So she presses him: “Get rid of that slave woman and her son,” she tells her husband, “for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

But Abraham’s heart is breaking because he loves both sons. How can he deny one to favor the other?

To Sarah’s great relief, the Lord appears to Abraham and weighs in on her side, instructing her husband to “do whatever Sarah says.” So Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael packing, straight into the wilderness.

But instead of meeting with ruin, as one might expect them to, they encounter a messenger from God. Because of an angel and a well of water and the Lord’s protecting hand, Ishmael grows up and, as the Scripture says, turns into “a wild donkey of a man.”
Sarah only knows that she is thankful to be rid of him and Hagar. Finally she can die a happy woman. Of course, she doesn’t know that her husband will one day take their son on a three-day journey into the wilderness and then up a mountain to be sacrificed. Abraham will make an altar, place Isaac on it, and then raise his knife to slaughter him.

When Sarah passes at the age of 127, she can imagine neither the glories nor the troubles that lay ahead for the descendants of the two sons of Abraham—the Arabs, who are Ishmael’s descendants, and the Jews, who come from Isaac’s line.

Had she been able to peer even further into the future, to the time when another beloved son would ascend the very same mountain on which Abraham was told by God to slay his son—she would have come to know the deepest truth of all. No matter how wickedness multiplies or troubles mount up, God will indeed have the last word, laughing his enemies to scorn.

**THE TIMES**

She lived around 2156 – 2029 BC.


During the lifetime of Abraham and Sarah, the surrounding peoples worshiped an array of gods. Gradually the concept of a more personal god emerged, with people expressing special devotion to a particular god who would become their special protector and provider. This may have been how Abraham and Sarah first viewed God when they heard him promise to give them many descendants.

Devotion to the family deity would have passed from generation to generation, but other gods would also have been worshiped. Only in Israel would the God of Abraham and Sarah come to be known as the God of the whole nation.

Because the ancient world had so little understanding of what caused diseases and disorders, superstitions abounded, causing additional shame to those who suffered from sickness or physical ailments.

Sarah’s grief at being unable to bear children would have been made sharply worse because her barrenness would have been seen as a sign of
divine judgment. Surely she had done something to make God angry, and he was exacting punishment by withholding children.

Though ancient peoples would have perceived a connection between menstruation and the timing of a pregnancy, they would not have grasped the biological reality that a human being is created only when a female egg is fertilized by male sperm. They believed that life was created when a man planted his seed into a woman’s womb. The woman was seen as a receptacle or incubator in which the seed could grow. If a couple failed to conceive after the man had done his duty, or if the child miscarried, the wife was invariably blamed.

Sarah’s barrenness must have put tremendous pressure on her marriage. She couldn’t have known that her inability to bear children earlier in life had nothing to do with her sin but everything to do with God’s plan to bring about a new people—children of the promise—of whom Abraham would be father and Sarah would be mother. Her pregnancy must have brought a profound sense of vindication and relief.

Four thousand years after her death, Sarah’s story lives on. Scripture states that she was buried in the Cave of Machpelah in what is known today as the Tomb of the Patriarchs, along with other key figures whose stories are told in the book of Genesis—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rebekah, and Leah. Located in the West Bank city of Hebron, the site traditionally ascribed to the tomb can still be visited today. It is not far from where Sarah would have sat in her tent, laughing out loud when she first heard God’s outrageous promise to give her and Abraham a son.
THE TAKEAWAY

1. Like many biblical characters, and many real people, Sarah is not an entirely virtuous person. Comment on the good and bad aspects of her character as revealed in the story. Which do you relate to most?

2. Sarah was sixty-five when God promised he would make Abraham (and by inference Sarah) into a great nation. But Isaac wasn’t born until twenty-five years later. Why do you think God spoke the promise so far in advance?

3. By suggesting that Abraham sleep with her maid in order to produce an heir, Sarah was merely following the customs of the time. She was also trying to make God’s promise come true. Have you ever tried to force God’s hand? What were the results?

4. Do you believe God has promised you something? How would you characterize your experience as you waited, and perhaps still wait, for the promise to be fulfilled?
CHAPTER 3

A Wicked Dis guise

THE STORY OF TAMAR

How a Widow Dresses Up Like a Harlot for a One-Night Stand

For the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.
1 Samuel 16:7
Night has fallen by the time Judah and his brothers arrive home, carrying with them the clothing of their seventeen-year-old brother, Joseph. When Jacob sees the richly ornamented robe he had given his favorite son ripped into shreds and covered with blood, the old man wails, “It is my son’s robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces.”

Better, Judah thinks, for Jacob to believe his precious son has been eaten by wild beasts than to know the sorry truth—that Joseph is still alive and that he is on his way to Egypt with a caravan of Ishmaelite and Midianite traders who have paid the going rate for a freshly minted slave.

Despite the fact that Judah has saved his brother’s life by suggesting he be sold rather than murdered, as his brothers intended, he is sickened by the whole sorry mess. No matter that Joseph has been such a peacock of a boy and that his father has inflamed the situation by playing favorites. Judah knows it for what it is—a terrible betrayal.

Distancing himself from his grieving father and the wild donkeys who are his brothers, Judah goes down to the town of Adullam and stays with a man he knows there. Before long he meets and marries a Canaanite woman. Together they have three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah.

As often happens, one bad decision has led to another. First Judah conspires against his brother Joseph. Then he lies to his father. Then he marries outside his tribe, unlike his forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. His marriage opens the door to future difficulties. One of these will come into focus years later, after his eldest son marries a woman by the name of Tamar.

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* The Midianites were Abraham’s descendants through his wife Keturah while the Ishmaelites were his descendants through Hagar. That would have meant that the traders who purchased Joseph and sold him into slavery in Egypt were his second or third cousins.

† Two of Judah’s brothers, Simeon and Levi, slaughtered a town full of Shechemite males because one of them had raped their sister, Dinah. For the sordid details, read Genesis 34.
Instead of growing tall and straight, Judah’s sons Er and Onan grow like bent branches on the family tree, their ways twisted and deceitful. Their brother Shelah is still a boy, and it is too soon to measure his character.

Er is a sour, weedy-looking man who delights in punishing his wife, Tamar, for his many failings; he is the kind of man others easily overlook. But God does not overlook him. Instead, he notes every detail of Er’s wicked ways and arranges for him to make an early departure from this life. At least that’s what everyone says when he is found in bed one morning, purple-faced and choking on vomit.

By now Judah has become a man of means. But he is one son short. As is customary, he does the right thing by instructing his second son, Onan, to marry Tamar so that his dead brother may yet have an heir.

Onan is a “yes, Papa, anything you say, Papa” kind of boy. But he has already closed his fist around his dead brother’s property as though it belongs to him. Why would he want to sire a son who would eventually snatch it back from him? So he merely plays at being husband. Whenever Onan sleeps with Tamar, he makes sure to withdraw before planting his seed inside her womb. There will be no child.

Tamar says nothing. She is too afraid of what Onan may do to her if she speaks up, and so her tears go unnoticed by her father-in-law, Judah.

But the God who sees everything takes note of Onan’s wickedness and puts Judah’s second son to death.

Now Judah is two sons short. Who will carry on the line of Judah?

Fortunately, he still has one son in his pocket. But what about Tamar? For a woman to marry a wicked man is tragedy enough. But to marry two wicked men in quick succession—that is more misery than one woman should have to bear. Still, Tamar is willing to hope for better things when Shelah comes of age.

So Judah instructs his daughter-in-law to return to her father’s house to live as a widow until Shelah is old enough to marry. But she is uneasy. Why doesn’t he let her keep living in his home as is the usual custom? Maybe he thinks she is to blame, her bed accursed. Having lost two sons, perhaps he is unwilling to risk another.

Tamar sits inside her father’s house and spends many hours working at the loom. But while her fingers ply the wool, she broods, watching
other women do what she longs to. Like hens, they gather their chicks beneath their wings. She wants to watch her own children grow strong and straight so that she can laugh about the days to come. But she has no husband, and there are no sons, and she feels an ache of fear that tells her she has already become the thing she dreads, a widow without a future or a hope.

Time passes and still there is no wedding. Then Judah’s wife dies.

One day Tamar catches news of him. He is planning to go up to Timnah for the sheep shearing. Because money is plentiful during the wool harvest, there will be women lying in wait. She knows this. But she is not like them, not in the least.

Tamar trades her plain clothing for a colorful robe and covers her face with a veil. Then she sits down on the road that leads to Timnah and waits.

To Judah, she is a welcome sight. It has not been easy all these months without a wife to comfort him. “Come now, let me sleep with you,” he says, his voice beguiling.

“How much will you pay me?” she asks.

“I’ll send you a young goat from my flock.”

The bartering continues.

“But how can I know you will keep your word? Let me have your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand.”* These she knows are precious to a man.

So Judah agrees and then he sleeps with her.

Later on, Judah sends a friend to deliver the promised goat and to retrieve his property. But the woman has vanished. No one has seen a prostitute† on the road where she was. The answer is always the same: “There’s never been a woman like that here.”

Judah is puzzled, but what can he do? He never saw the woman’s face because she kept it covered by her veil. So he merely shrugs and

* Judah probably wore his seal on a cord around his neck. The seal was a stamp or engraving made of stone or metal that could be impressed onto clay or wax. Used to authenticate legal documents, it would have been decorated with a simple picture and may also have included his name. Staffs were often engraved on top, making the owner easy to identify.

† While many translations of the story seem to indicate that Tamar was functioning as a shrine prostitute, i.e., as a woman who engaged in fertility rites, scholars now think that this may be a mistranslation and that the Hebrew word may simply mean “prostitute.” So it seems unlikely that Tamar and Judah were engaging in some kind of pagan fertility rite.
A WICKED DISGUISE

says, “At least I tried. Let her keep what she has. If I continue to look for her, the whole world will know about it, and I will become a laughingstock.”

Three months pass until a shocking report reaches Judah’s ears. “Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution and now she is pregnant!”

Judah is incensed. How dare Tamar bring shame on his family! He never considers her circumstances, that she is a childless widow with little means of provision. Nor does he think about what might have driven her to so desperate an act. Instead he thunders judgment, saying, “Bring her out and burn her to death!”

So the best men of the town hurry to do just that. But as they drag Tamar out of her house, she sends a message to her father-in-law along with certain items in her possession. “I am pregnant by the man who owns these. See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are.”

Judah is stunned. These can belong to no man but him.

What excuse can he make? The evidence is obvious. He has just condemned a woman for sleeping with a man, but he is that man! So Judah turns in shame to make his own confession: “She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah.”

But that is not the end of the story. Six months later, Tamar gives birth to two babies. During their struggle to enter the world, one tiny arm emerges. Wrapping the baby’s wrist with a scarlet thread, the midwife says, “This one came out first.” To her surprise, the little hand retreats, and his brother is born instead, prompting her to say, “So this is how you have broken out!”

Tamar’s first son is named Perez, which means “breaking out.” Her second son is named Zerah, which means “scarlet.”

A widow who was all but forgotten by those who should have cared for her, Tamar was remembered by God. Perez grew up and became the father of a stream of descendants who bore delightful names like Amminadab, Abijah, Jehoshaphat, and Zerubbabel. From him also came Boaz, King David, and the wise King Solomon.

As for Tamar, God made her a happy woman by rescuing her from two wicked husbands and then blessing her with two fine sons. As if that were not enough, she is among a handful of women listed in a
genealogy in the first chapter of Matthew’s gospel. Though their stories are laced with distasteful details, like incest, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and murder, each woman in the list is remembered as part of a vital chain of human beings that stretches from Abraham to Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ.

**THE TIMES**

She lived around 1893 – 1833 BC.

*Tamar’s story is told in Genesis 38. She is also mentioned in Matthew 1.*

The story of how Tamar tricked her father-in-law into sleeping with her so she could become pregnant by him strikes us as both sordid and bizarre. What’s it doing in the Bible? Unlike contemporary readers, Jewish people who heard the story would have thought of Tamar as a hero and not as a villain.

They knew that one of the worst fates that could befall a woman was to be without children because a childless widow lacked economic, legal, and social status. When Judah told Tamar to remain a widow even though he had no intention of providing her with a husband, he was breaking the custom of levirate marriage, a common practice in many ancient cultures. To die without an heir was considered a curse. To prevent this, the dead man’s wife was married to one of his brothers. Failing that, she could also be married to her father-in-law. Levirate marriage was a way to provide for the widow as well as to produce an heir to carry on her dead husband’s name.

An ancient Hittite law read like this: “If a man has a wife, and the man dies, his brother shall take his widow as a wife. (If the brother dies,) his father shall take her. When afterwards his father dies, his (i.e., the father’s) brother shall take the woman whom he had.”*

Judah was also sinning against Tamar by preventing her from remarrying as other widows would have been allowed to do should the family not provide a husband. Despite her father-in-law’s ill treatment, Tamar

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* Despite the fact that this Hittite law was recorded long after the period in which this story takes place, it captures the law as it may have been practiced at the time of Judah and Tamar. Quoted in John H. Walton, “Genesis,” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 1:126.
maintained her loyalty to his family by risking her life to produce an heir. Otherwise, the line of Judah, from whom the Messiah was to come, might have died out. Tamar’s actions meant that Abraham’s line would continue, not through Judah’s wicked Canaanite sons but through the children he had with Tamar.

THE TAKEAWAY

1. Why do you think the Bible includes sordid stories like this one?

2. Psalm 33:15 says that God watches everyone who lives on earth and considers everything they do. The words of the psalm would seem to be borne out by this story. How does this understanding shape the way you look at what’s happening around you? How does it shape the way you look at your own life?

3. What does this story reveal about God’s ability to redeem evil even in the midst of entrenched family dysfunction?

4. After condemning his daughter-in-law, Judah realizes his own sin. Have you ever had a similar experience—perhaps while scolding a child? If so, how did you respond?

5. In Tamar’s culture, a woman’s worth was determined by her ability to bear children, particularly male children. Take a moment to imagine that you are Tamar. You have lost two wicked husbands, the second of which was determined to keep you from having children. Then your father-in-law does the same to you by failing to provide a husband. How do you feel? How would you pray?

6. What kinds of things tend to make you feel worthless? What makes you feel worthwhile?
For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,  
and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.  
1 Samuel 15:23
Papa, tell us the story about Joseph and his beautiful coat,” she says. Her dark eyes shine in the firelight, as she leans forward to hear the tale once more. Each time her father recounts it, the story of the young dreamer and his jealous older brothers comes alive in her mind as though it happened only yesterday.

Her father says that God had his hand on the youth from the very beginning, planting dreams of such magnificence inside him that the retelling of them drove his brothers crazy with envy. But even their betrayal could not stop God’s plan to make Joseph a great man in Egypt—a man who would save the world—and his own family too.

Miriam knows that Joseph’s brothers came down to Egypt, during a time of severe famine. Once in Egypt, they found not only the food they craved but the brother they had sold into slavery years earlier. She remembers Joseph’s tears as he revealed himself to his betyers, and their terror at learning he was still alive. How strange and wonderful that Joseph had forgiven them and settled them and their families on some of Egypt’s richest land.

Like them, Miriam lives in the Nile Delta, in Goshen, not far from where the river flows into the Mediterranean. But unlike Joseph, the spirited girl has always been a slave. And yet she dreams of freedom. Her dreams are nurtured by stories about her people that have passed through the generations. They remind her that life has not always been this hard and that there is a God who loves them.

Though Joseph’s memory still lives on in the hearts of his people, a new ruler has arisen in Egypt who knows nothing of him. This ruler thinks only of how to control the Hebrew slaves, who are multiplying at an alarming rate. He fears they will soon grow too strong to subdue and that they may conspire with invaders on his northern border. So he decides to cull them, as though they are one of his herds.
He begins by instructing the Hebrew midwives to slaughter every baby boy that’s born. But the midwives fear God more than they fear Pharaoh, and so they contrive a lie that only a man would believe. They tell him that the Hebrew slaves are far heartier than Egyptian women. By the time the midwives reach the birthing stool, the baby has already been delivered and hidden away.

So Pharaoh commands his people to throw all the male infants into the Nile River as soon as they are discovered. Miriam thinks it strange that he should try to control her people’s fertility by throwing them into the very river he worships as the source of Egypt’s fertility.

Miriam’s mother, Jochebed, is one of those hearty Hebrew women who has recently given birth to a son. But it is not a cause for celebration, only for worry.

Sometimes Miriam hears screaming in the middle of the night, and she can’t keep the tears from rolling down her face. She knows that one more baby has just been fed to the river god.

By now Jochebed’s baby is three months old, a lusty boy whose cries might easily give him away. Pressing her cheek to the softness of his, she holds him close and begins to pray. Day after day the words of her prayers rise up like incense to heaven. Hearing them, the great God above—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—the God of her fathers looks down with pity and answers.

Suddenly she knows what to do. Pharaoh has ordered every baby boy to be consigned to the waters of the Nile. So be it. Carefully she covers a small papyrus basket with tar and pitch, making certain to coat the surface completely. When she is sure it is seaworthy, she lays her little son inside. His brown eyes gaze at her with so much trust that she is tempted to take him in her arms again and never let him go.

Miriam watches as her mother closes the lid of the waterproof basket and places it into the great river. Her heart is breaking too. How will the baby survive the pythons that lurk on its banks or the hippos and crocodiles that lurk in the water? Standing at the edge of the river, she cranes her neck to see what will happen as the little ark floats away.

Suddenly she spots one of Pharaoh’s daughters nearing the river bank. As soon as the princess notices the basket, she sends a slave girl to fetch it. Miriam watches as the girl wades through the water, snatches
it up, and then carries the basket to her mistress. She looks on as the princess opens the lid and exclaims, “This is one of the Hebrew babies.” How tenderly Pharaoh’s daughter lifts his little body from the basket and then holds him against her breast, swaying and cooing to quiet his cries.

Her heart beating wildly, Miriam steps forward to ask if there is anything she can do to help. Perhaps she can find a nurse for the infant. She knows of a Hebrew woman who has just lost a child. She holds her breath to see if Pharaoh’s daughter will fall for the ruse.

Fortunately the princess is grateful for her help, and Miriam rushes home to fetch her mother. How convenient, the princess thinks, to have a woman close at hand who has just lost her own child. Could she be the baby’s mother? But it’s no concern of hers. What matters is that the baby survives.

Thanks to Miriam’s boldness and God’s unfolding plan, Jochebed is not only reunited with her son but is also paid by a member of Pharaoh’s household to care for him. After a few years, when the boy is weaned, he will leave his family and move to the palace. Until then, he is shaped by the love and guidance of his family. Miriam delights him with stories, like the one about Noah and the beasts that climb aboard the ark, or his favorite, the story of Joseph and his jealous brothers.

Time passes and the boy grows strong. One day he walks down a path, holding hands with Miriam and his mother. He knows where they are going. He has always known because his mother is forever singing the princess’s praises, telling how she rescued him from the Nile River. He wants to live in the palace but not yet, even though his mother and father say he must. Miriam squeezes his hand, as though to say everything will be all right.

Pharaoh’s daughter welcomes them warmly. But when it’s time for Jochebed and Miriam to go, the little boy’s face contorts with fear, and his arms reach out as though to drag them back. “Don’t leave me!” he wails. Miriam turns away, hoping to hide her own fears.

With her arm around Miriam’s shoulders, Jochebed leads her out and whispers in her ear, “Hush child, your crying will only make things worse.” Then a tear slides down her own cheek.

As for Pharaoh’s daughter, she is delighted with her little boy. He will be a fine son, smart and strong. Now that he is safely past the age
of weaning, she gives him a name. He will be called Moses, she says, “because I drew him out of the water.” And so she had.

So Moses, a boy whom Pharaoh had tried to murder, grows up right beneath his nose, living in his palace, putting his feet up, eating his food, and getting the best education Egypt can provide. Whenever Miriam thinks of this, her pain eases. She laughs a little because it proves that God is in control and that he has a sense of humor.

Years pass. By now Moses is a grown man—forty years old. He is tall and broad—the picture of Egyptian dignity and power. Miriam wonders if he still remembers her. She hopes he recalls the stories she told him about a mighty God who had chosen their people and promised them a land to live in. Perhaps he will find favor with Pharaoh and become the one to lift them out of slavery, saving his family as Joseph did.

But this dream of hers, that God will deliver the lowly ones who cry out to him day and night, all but vanishes when she hears that Moses has been accused of murder and that Pharaoh intends to kill him as soon as he can lay hands on him. What is his crime? He has slain an Egyptian slave driver who was beating a slave to a bloody pulp.

Moses escapes, and she hears nothing of him for forty years.

After a while the king of Egypt dies, and another Pharaoh ascends the throne. This one, they say, is worse than the last, with the heart of a viper. A tiny, golden cobra—the emblem of Wadjit, the protective goddess of the Delta region—adorns his crown, reminding his enemies of his strength and cunning. It proclaims his power, as though to say he will surely strike should anyone be fool enough to challenge him. With Wadjit’s protection he feels his throne secure.

But Pharaoh’s smugness would vanish quickly if he perceived the truth—that even now a Deity he does not know is stirring up trouble, calling forth a deliverer who will marshal the forces of nature to wreak havoc on his kingdom. It has been in the Lord’s mind from the start, when he brought Moses to life in his mother’s womb and then kept him alive with the help of Miriam and Pharaoh’s daughter.

But where has Moses gone? By now he is living in the desert of Midian, east of Egypt. It is a place where God can shape and mold him into the man he must become, because there are some things that only the wilderness can teach.
What can Jezebel, the Bible’s wickedest queen, reveal about God’s holiness and power and even about his sense of humor? What about the Woman at the Well—the one with five husbands and a live-in lover? And what of the prostitute whose tears bathe the feet of Jesus in front of people who despise her?

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