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Section 1:

Preparing My Heart for Grace

Week 1

The Scarlet Women of Matthew 1

Do you remember *The Scarlet Letter*, a book written by dear American author Nathaniel Hawthorne? In the story, a young woman named Hester Prynne and her daughter were forced to wear a scarlet letter—the letter A—on their clothing. The adulteress and the child of adultery were shunned by the condemning community.

Centuries earlier, in biblical times, the color scarlet had already been associated with a problem past. Scripture tells the “scarlet stories” of women who also experienced rejection by those around them:

- *Tamar*, a shrewd widow who took the law into her own hands in a scandalous way . . .
- *Rahab*, a hotel manager who, over the years, played hostess to many men . . .
- *Ruth*, a young refugee woman, who perfumed herself and lay at the feet of a wealthy landowner while he slept . . .
- *Bathsheba*, the wife of one of the king’s top thirty soldiers, who was called to the king’s bedroom while her husband was at war . . .
- *Mary*, a teenager who became pregnant while engaged to be married, yet claimed she was still a virgin . . .

Who are these women? Did God condemn them? It might surprise you to know that, in the first chapter of Matthew, the five women named in Jesus' family tree are these scarred or scarlet women.

What was God thinking? Why didn't God choose women who were named "Mother of the Year" . . . or "most likely to succeed"? Why did He choose women with questionable reputations?

If the truth were known, perhaps He chose women like you and me.

Perhaps He was telling some of us that we don't have to wear the letter A for the rest of our lives . . . or pass that letter on to our daughters.

He was saying to all of us that we don't have to stay in the scarlet areas of our lives. That there is a way out. That the vivid scarlet of His shed blood cancels out the blotched scarlet of our sins.

As you read the stories of these women, the words of the prophet in Isaiah 1:18 will have new meaning for you: " 'Come now, let us reason together,' says the LORD: 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.' "

BACKGROUND READING: Matthew 1

1 — Monday

DOES ANYONE CARE ABOUT ME?

"The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." (Deuteronomy 33:27)

Read Matthew 1:3; Genesis 38:1-11

*My husband's gone, the one I loved
—his brother too, who hated me—
and now my father-in-law has said
his home's no longer home to me.*

*The faces of my parents show
a look of disappointment
—and of shame.*

—Tamar

According to the Hebrew law of levirate marriage, Tamar was the legal responsibility of her father-in-law, Judah. After all, she had married *two* of his sons! Since both Er and Onan had died without leaving an heir, Judah was required to give Tamar his youngest son, Shelah.

"Return to your father's house for now"—Judah said, eyeing his weeping daughter-in-law uncertainly—"until my son grows up." As she slowly gathered her belongings, Tamar felt the sharp sting of rejection. She went back to her father's house and waited—she had no other options. Would she spend the rest of her life waiting?

Like Tamar, have you experienced loss? abandonment? rejection? loneliness? Does it seem that no one cares what happens to you? Has bitterness crept in to join loneliness? And, since people don't seem to care, have you come to the conclusion that God must not care either—and so you've distanced yourself from Him, from His Church, from His people?

*Whether you believe it or not,
God has a plan for your life.*

1 – Tuesday

IF GOD HAS A PLAN FOR MY LIFE, WHEN AM I GOING TO FIND OUT WHAT IT IS?

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” (Ephesians 2:8)

Read Genesis 38:12-30

*A plan, a plan—has God a plan?
A plan for her, perhaps, her friends . . .
but does His care extend to me?
Why is it others have a life
of carefree fun and happiness
while I see only misery?
—Tamar*

Tired of experiencing grief, tired of waiting for her brother-in-law to be old enough to marry her, tired of waiting for Judah to take care of her, Tamar decided to take matters into her own hands. If somehow she had Judah's child, he would *have* to take care of her. Once she made her decision, everything fell into place. Disguised as a prostitute, she waited along a road she knew her father-in-law, a lonely widower, would travel. It was a matter of time. . . .

Tamar's plan worked! She conceived twin sons, Perez and Zerah, who became well-known in the tribe of Judah. But was the plan God's "Plan A" for her life?

Have there been times in your life when you felt as desperate as Tamar and did things that shocked—or grieved—those around you? Perhaps you're trying to put those times into the past, but you feel that everyone still remembers. Or perhaps no one knows, but you can't forgive yourself. And you're tired of waiting for God to work a miracle. . . .

*It may not be evident to you right now,
but God is at work all around you
to include you in His plan.*

1 – Wednesday

DOES GOD KNOW WHAT I'M REALLY LIKE?

"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." (Isaiah 1:18)

Read Joshua 2

*If you only knew, you wouldn't give
another glance to this sad stare.
If you only knew, you'd pull away
afraid to touch or feel or care.
If you only knew, you'd walk—or run—
avoid my problems, refuse to share.
If you only knew . . . I'm sure you don't . . .
Can't take the chance, my heart's too bare.
—Rahab*

When the Israeli spies visited Jericho, Rahab could not hide her identity. Everyone knew Rahab as the leading lady of the local inn. And, because of the scarlet cord hung from her window, so would all of Israel.

Rahab knew right from the start that the God of Israel knew all about her too. Really, it's better that way. It doesn't work to hide anything from God. He is omniscient; He knows everything. He knew *you* when you were in your mother's womb. God can see into your heart.

God also knows when, like Rahab, you realize it's time for a change. She was sick of her sin. She wanted to leave her sin behind and never return to it. She wasn't about to carry a "piece of the rock"—a piece of the wall—with her.

All of us have sinned.

Our sin is an insult against God and causes Him great grief.

Sin is punishable by everlasting separation from God.

Like Rahab, we must see our sin clearly before we recognize our need for a Rescuer.

We cannot save ourselves.

Like Rahab, we must be rescued from Satan's stronghold.

What is your Jericho?

What do you need to turn away from?

1 — Thursday

GOD WANTS A PERSONAL LOVE RELATIONSHIP WITH—ME?

“Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer.” (Ruth 4:14)

Read Ruth 3-4

They stare at me, stare right through me.

I’m just a nothing—nothing me.

I count for nothing—zero me.

I’m good for nothing—shameful me.

I need a reason to be—me.

Please find a reason to be me.

—Ruth

Ruth must have felt like a nobody. She was a widowed refugee from the hated land of Moab. But she had made a choice to stay with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi—and she intended to follow through on her commitment. God honored Ruth’s commitment by sending a “kinsman-redeemer” into her life—Boaz. (Incidentally, Boaz was the son of a refugee named Rahab!) Not only was Boaz wealthy enough to buy back Naomi’s land, he was also obedient enough to marry the widow Ruth!

God honors lives lived unselfishly. God’s answers to prayer don’t always come as quickly as they did in the book of Ruth, but He does answer. And even though His answers aren’t instant and His thoughts are not ours nor His ways ours (Isaiah 55:8)—we can count on the fact that He cares equally about each one of us.

God desires to have a personal love relationship with you.

He wants to bring into your life people who fit His plan for you.

Jesus became our Kinsman-Redeemer—He redeemed us by paying for our sin on the cross.

Now He desires to become your “Bridegroom-Protector” and to add to His family through you.

1 – Friday

“CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART, O GOD”

“According to your unfailing love . . . blot out my transgressions. . . . Let the bones you have crushed rejoice.” (Psalm 51:1, 8)

Read Psalm 51

*My heart was broken, like the lamb
whose shepherd broke his straying limb,
but broken legs and wills and hearts
can keep a lamb from further sin.
And once the Shepherd's held us close
until the healing can begin
wee lambs have no desire to leave
His heartbeat—or the Shepherd's hand.
—Bathsheba*

Sometimes an Oriental shepherd spent so much time in search of a stray from the flock that he was forced to take drastic action. And so he carefully broke the leg of the repeatedly disobedient “black sheep.” He bandaged the leg, anointing it with medicinal oil and wine. Then he carried the lamb next to his heart until the leg healed. And it was said that the wanderer never strayed again.

The author of Psalm 51, a song of confession, was King David, who allowed lust to lead him astray. Imagine the shame Bathsheba must have felt—whether she was a victim or a willing participant—after the king engineered the murder of her husband Uriah and she moved into the palace as David's wife. And imagine the palace gossip!

*Although God hates sin and must punish it, He loves the sinner.
(And He loves a victim too!)*

When you repent and confess your sin, God forgives because Jesus took your punishment on the cross.

And so God chooses not to remember your sin.

Remember that it is Satan who accuses us after God has forgiven us.

1 — *Saturday*

“WITH GOD, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE”

*“I am the Lord’s servant. . . . May it be to me
as you have said.” (Luke 1:38)*

Read Luke 1:46-55

*I wonder, how can these things be?
How can they happen, Lord, to me?
A child begun in such a way—
Will He ever have a normal day?
And what about my heart, O Lord?
How will I feel the piercing sword?*

—Mary

Imagine the emotions with which Mary struggled after the visit of the “annunciation angel”! Did she expect no one in Nazareth to believe her story—not even her own mother—and so turned to her cousin Elizabeth?

God gifted Mary with a great honor—and great responsibility. An ordinary young woman, Mary was being asked to lend her womb to the Almighty One, to bear, to raise—and then to give back to His Father—an extraordinary child who would become the God-man. And along with all that came a promise delivered by the old prophet Simeon: “And a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:35). How did Mary feel when her Son asked His Father to forgive those who had humiliated, tortured and finally killed Him? When He cried out that His own Father had forsaken Him?

Do you feel that you or your family members have been treated unfairly? Do you find it hard to forgive? Are you angry at God? Do you wonder where God was when . . . ?

Where was God?

*He was watching His own Son hang, in terrible agony, on a cross.
Because God is just, He must punish sin.*

But because God is merciful, He put the punishment for sin on Jesus when He hung on the cross.

By recognizing that Jesus took your punishment on the cross, you can experience forgiveness of sin and receive the gift of eternal life.