

THE COMPASS

Desperate Housewives of the Bible, Part 5

Do You Come From Good Stock?

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“You come from good stock.”

That’s what a girl told me in my first week at college.

She was an upperclassman, so I assumed she knew what she was talking about. No,

I’m kidding; actually I had never heard such an outrageous statement.

I come from good stock? This sounds like animal husbandry or something.

It turns out she knew my family. We were actually on the same family tree.

Before World War II, three guys had immigrated to America from Europe.

One of the guys had two daughters.

The other two guys had sons.

Each daughter married one of those sons.

One of those sons was her uncle.

The other son — was my uncle.

We were in identical positions on opposite branches of the same family tree.

Apparently this, in her opinion, meant I came from good stock.

And it would be OK for her to date me.

At first it was offensive to me to think that someone would judge me on the basis of my family history.

Of course I dated her anyway; you don’t turn down an upperclassman.

But “coming from good stock,” quote-unquote, is a troubling concept.

Is this a legitimate idea?

How are you going to turn out? Can I look at your mother or your father and predict your future?

Maybe in order to get a handle on you, I should look up your family tree, even beyond your mom and dad — to your grandparents, and beyond.

How much of a product are you of your bloodline?

And how much of the stuff your forebears *did* will show up in your own *behavior*?

How responsible is “nature,” vs. “nurture”?

Sometimes I say or do something and I just go, “Wow! That was my dad! I’m becoming my father!”

Sometimes I’ll hang up the phone and realize, I just sounded like my mom.

How much of this is the work of the chromosomes I inherited from my parents, and how much of it the result of growing up in their house, under their instruction, subject to their example?

Sometimes I’ll be looking in the mirror, getting ready for the day, and suddenly realize, as I’m getting older, my face is gradually morphing into my grandmother’s face!

This is DNA! *Make it stop!*

In spite of being offended by the idea that that upperclassman assumed I was from “good stock,” I have to confess that if I’m going to hire somebody to, say, take care of my two teenagers for a couple of weeks while my wife and I are out of town, if you apply for the job and somehow I learn that your parents were drug addicts, and your grandparents were drug addicts — I am going to think twice before hiring you.

I am way likelier to feel comfortable hiring someone whose parents were in law enforcement. The financial industry. The lumber industry! The cattle industry! Anything!

This may not be fair, but it’s the truth.

History matters to us.

* * *

Now most of us didn’t get to choose our family history. We just got dropped into this particular stream of people and events, and we’ve been swimming along as best we can ever since.

The only one who ever got to choose his family history was Jesus.

Now honestly, if I had had the freedom to map out my own family history, there are a few people who made it onto my family tree who wouldn’t have made it.

(I had an uncle in New Orleans who— oh, never mind.)

In fact, Jesus had an almost unimaginable advantage in this: he had the power not only to shape the events in his family’s past, he could go right into the DNA, generation after generation, and organize the genetics of his bloodline.

He could make sure that every ancestor had every possible chromosomal advantage, and every possible social advantage, every possible educational advantage, every possible vocational advantage.

But instead of taking my approach, Jesus appears to have just missed it.

You look at his family tree, and it looks like he wasn’t tuned in to the importance of family history at all — like he wasn’t paying attention or something.

His family tree has more misfits than mine does!

Actually, when God set out to publish the story of Jesus’ life, the first book of the New Testament — the very first of the four gospels — the very first chapter, the very first sentence — is a detailed rendering of Christ’s family tree.

This is like some enormous strategic error, if you’re trying to impress people with your family background — because this is not an impressive list.

In fact, God inspires Matthew, the writer of this first Gospel, to SKIP some of the standouts — he doesn’t mention Abraham’s wife Sarah, the mother of the Jewish nation; doesn’t mention Rebekah, Isaac’s wife; doesn’t mention Rachel, Jacob’s wife.

The Scriptures use the phrase “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” about 35 times — but all three of their wives, who were overwhelmingly regarded as holy women, get left out of Christ’s first official genealogy.

On the other hand, he includes Bathsheba.

This is the married woman who slept with King David.
 It would be hard to character Bathsheba as honorable, let alone a “holy woman”!
 I would have left her off my family tree. But Jesus chose her to be included.

Matthew also mentions Rahab.
 She is maybe the most famous prostitute in the entire Bible.
 Not exactly a “holy woman”!
 But she helped God’s people. Later she had a baby, and the baby was Boaz, and he
 grew up to be King David’s great-grandfather.
 I would have left Rahab off my family tree. But Jesus chose her to be included.

Maybe the strangest choice of all was Tamar.
 Let me tell you about Tamar.
 You’ve heard the phrase “the 12 tribes of Israel,” right?
 This is not just a reference to the nation of Israel.
 Israel was a person. This is the name that God gave to Jacob.
 And the 12 tribes of Israel are his 12 sons — technically, 10 sons and 2 grandsons.

One of the sons was named Judah. **Genesis 38** tells us that he married a foreign
 woman, a Canaanite, and over the next few years she gave birth to three boys.
 The boys grew up.
 When the first boy came of age, his father Judah found him a wife. Her name was
 Tamar.
 But this young man was so wicked — we don’t even know from the historical record
 what it was that he did, but he was so evil — that God just let him die.

So — according to the custom of the day — Judah turned the young widow over to his
 second son.
 But this guy, by now, already had a wife and children; he didn’t want to be saddled with
 the complication of other children, didn’t want his estate divided between the
 children he considered his own, and these other children that he was just
 obligated to.
 And he was sneaky about it.
 He didn’t say, OK, look, I don’t want to do this.
 Instead, he pretended — actually, he employed an ancient form of birth control; I’m
 embarrassed to talk about it in mixed company — you will have to read the
 details for yourself in Genesis 38 if you want.
 But anyway, he was evil, and eventually he died too.

So now Judah is grief-stricken. He has buried two sons, he only has one son left. His
 baby.
 This one is still too young to get married.
 And honestly, Judah’s afraid that even if the boy grows up and he hooks him up with
 Tamar, this son will die too.
 As far as Judah is concerned, this Canaanite woman is cursed!

So Judah engages in a deception too (his son must have come by it honest).
 He assures Tamar — and look, she must have been grief-stricken too; she’s lost one

husband and been betrayed by a second — but Judah assures Tamar that he will fulfill the customary obligations.
 She should go live in her father's house, live like a widow — wear the widow's traditional clothing, stick with the traditional widow's routine — and when the boy grows up, they can get married.

Tamar goes for it.
 But the boy grows up, he becomes a man, and nothing happens.
 No engagement, no wedding.
 Years go by. Tamar is stuck in her father's house, wearing widow's garb.

So many years go by that now, old man Judah's wife dies.
 There's another funeral, another burial, and Judah goes through the grieving process all over again.
 But eventually he recovers, life gets somewhat back to normal, and Judah decides to make a road trip, with his friend Hirah. He's gonna go up to a place called Timnah.

Well, word reaches Tamar that her father-in-law is heading up to Timnah — and she decides to organize a little deception of her own.
 Because it just so happens — I hope you won't feel I'm being too indelicate here — Tamar is ovulating.
 So she takes off her widow's clothing and puts on a somewhat different outfit: she dresses like a prostitute. This outfit includes a veil — so when you look at her, you can't tell that it's Tamar.
 She goes to a certain way station on the road to Timnah, and she waits.

Judah swings by, he sees her, and he decides to negotiate for the prostitute's services. What will you pay? she asks him.
 Well, he wants to conserve his cash, so he offers something of pretty high value in that culture: a goat from his flock.
 That's pretty good, she says. But you don't have the goat with you. This is like buying on credit. How do I know you'll actually deliver the goat?
 Well, what do you suggest as security? he asks her.
 Hey, how about you give me your seal, your cord, and your staff? she says.

See, a prominent man in that culture would carry a seal for signing contracts. The seal was a cylinder engraved with unique markings; instead of signing a piece of paper the way we do today, you would roll this cylinder over a soft clay document as a way of certifying your identity.
 You carried the seal on a cord which you would wear around your neck.
 And your staff had unique markings carved on it too; this was another way you would guarantee that you were the person you said you were, and you would make good on whatever promise you were making.
 The combination of the seal and the staff might have been the equivalent of showing two photo ID's.

So Tamar says, leave me your seal and cord, and your staff, until you deliver the goat.

By this point I would suggest that Judah is not thinking too clearly. He is in a state of, shall we say, anticipation.

So he gives her his identity markers, and they proceed to engage in the act for which he has promised to pay.

Afterwards, he heads on down the road to Timnah. But he sends his friend Hirah back home to snag the goat and pay the debt for him, so he can reclaim his seal and cord, and his staff.

But after the guys have split, Tamar takes off the veil, changes back into her widow's clothing, and heads home to her father's place.

So when Hirah shows back up at the way station with the goat — nobody's there.

Hirah checks in with the neighbors. "Where's the hooker who works that corner over there?"

What? There are no hookers in this neighborhood; what's the matter with you?

Hirah links back up with Judah. *Uh, we have a little problem.* He tells Judah the story.

What can Judah do? He can't make a big deal, can't spread the news all over the area.

We better keep this quiet, he tells Hirah, or we'll become a laughingstock.

(I think Hirah, at that point, was thinking, *What's with the "we," buddy? All I did was deliver the goat!*)

Life returns once again to something like normal.

But a few months go by, and word gets around.

Tamar is pregnant.

Not married — must be guilty of fornication.

Under the judicial system of the day, Tamar's fate is in Judah's hands. He doesn't even send for her. Doesn't even ask for a conversation.

He sees his opportunity. He can get himself and his son off the hook for the marriage he's promised her.

And he looks like a really solid, straight-arrow religious guy to his pals.

So he goes straight to the harshest possible extreme:

"Bring her out and have her burned to death!" (Genesis 38:24).

But Tamar, of course, has the photo ID.

25 As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. "I am pregnant by the man who owns these," she said.... "See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are" (Genesis 38:25).

Judah's number was up. There was no denying the truth.

"She is more righteous than I," he confessed in **Genesis 38:26.**

And he admitted that he had been holding out on her about the marriage to his son.

But what she had done! The deception, and the sexual immorality — I would have avoided putting Tamar on my family tree.

But Jesus chose her to be included.

* * *

So what do we see?

We see that Jesus doesn't identify just with the well off, the holy, the proper people. He doesn't isolate himself with the rich, or the intelligent, or even the wise. When he set out to choose his family tree, he didn't stick with one race, or one religious group, or one country. He didn't exclude the riffraff.

In his own family tree, he made sure to include foreigners, pagans, a prostitute, adulterers, fornicators, bastard children and the parents who conceived them, deceivers, victims and villains, subjects of scandal, people who broke taboos, people who were despised, people who were odd, people who were utterly unholy — so I could easily get in. He would still do his thing, still fulfill his plan — but for my sake, he would do it with ordinary people. And less than ordinary people. Problem people. Broken people. Ugly people. People you and I would be suspicious of. People you and I would avoid.

The biblical scholar Raymond Brown says, "God writes straight with crooked lines." Our lives, he says — even if they are marked by weakness and insignificance — are also important in continuing the story of the incarnation, the story of Christ. He says, "A God who did not hesitate to use the scheming as well as the noble, the impure as well as the pure, men to whom the world harkened and women upon whom the world frowned — this God continues to work through the same mélange."

If Christianity is just for the pure, the talented, the good, the humble, and the honest, then I'm out.

But as the Catholic priest Father Ronald Heiser has written, "The story of Jesus Christ was ... written and keeps getting written too by the impure, by sinners, by calculating schemers, by the proud, by the dishonest, and by those without worldly talents."

And here's what he concludes:

"Nobody is so bad, so insignificant, so devoid of talent, or so outside the circle of faith, that he or she is outside the story of Christ."

I'm in! Phil Wurr is in! Jody Belinda is in! Scott Nixon is in! You're in! You made it! You're in!

It isn't that Jesus wasn't paying attention when it came time to organize his family tree. He was paying *close* attention.

He included misfits and ne'er-do-wells and criminals and scoundrels and reprobates and utterly ordinary people so that you and I could feel comfortable in this family.

He was saying to us, *I am with you. Please be a part of my family.*

Nobody gets excluded. No matter what stock you come from. Anybody can be adopted.

* * *

Adoption interrupts your life and gives you a new start. A new family.

Ephesians 1:5 says that God "adopts" us as his children **"through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will."**

But his adoption isn't just a legal thing; it's not just accomplished by a court document. It happens **"through his blood" (Ephesians 1:7).**

You become part of his bloodline.

And not by coincidence.

He says he *chose* us (**Ephesians 1:11**), “**in conformity with the purpose of his will.**”

I don’t care where you came from, he says. I don’t care *who* you came from.

I don’t care who says you can’t be included.

All it takes is you hearing that I want you, and believing that I’m telling you the truth.

At that point, I do the ultimate adoption — I give you a total blood transfusion — you’re part of my bloodline.

And at that moment, you’re in.

Ephesians 1:

13 ...You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,

14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession — to the praise of his glory.

From that moment, you “come from good stock.”

Your past is redeemed. He makes good on it, no matter how bad it seemed.

You’re part of Christ’s own bloodline now.

Forgiven. Bought. Paid for. You’re in.