

SEX AND FORGIVENESS

Genesis 19:31-38,38:24-26; Joshua 6:22-23; Ruth 3:7-14; Hosea 1-2; John 8:3-11

By Raymond White

Before I begin, I must warn you: Don't take what I say here as permission to be sexually promiscuous. What I prefer you take from this slightly risqué essay is a better understanding of the depth of God's love and forgiveness. That does not imply license.

That disclaimer should tip you off that what I will say about the sensitive subject of sex may be very different from what you expect. These are the Bible stories of fallen women (women that lived not so chaste lives) who were forgiven. Or maybe forgiven is not quite the right word — what I really mean is that they turned out all right in spite of (or maybe even because of) their sexual dalliance. That is to say, at the end, when they looked back across their lives, they had to conclude that they had been blessed.

[1] PROLOG

The Christian ideal is of course sexual purity — always has been, always will be, and should be. Not just religiously but also philosophically, life goes better and is more fun when you are in love with, and totally committed to, and faithful to just one person. Nothing else brings so much joy as being in love, and in love for an entire life.

However, not all lives are so stain free, and it's easy for people of virtue to write off such lives as hopeless. Well, often that is true, but often it is not, and in the grand scheme of things, like baseball, it isn't over 'till it's over.

Jesus had an opinion on this subject. He said this —

Matthew 21:31 ... Jesus saith unto them [chief priests and elders], Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. :32 For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed ...

Wow! Jesus hits hard. Priests are damned and prostitutes are saved? That's what he said. We could take a lot of time grappling this verse, but that would miss the point, which is: **Luke 19:10** *For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.* He accepts whoever is willing to take him up on his offer, including prostitutes.

Yes, the pure life is certainly the life that all Christians must strive for. It is what God wants from us. But when a sexual mistake happens, is that the end of the world? Is one's life "ruined"? That can be true, but not necessarily. To get a grip on this, let's ask the Bible and see just how bad "bad" is, and is not. Let's start at the beginning: Genesis.

[2] LOT'S DAUGHTERS

Of all the stories I could have started with, this is maybe the most disturbing. But I am doing this in chronological order and so "Lot's Daughters" it is.

Everyone knows the story of Lot's wife becoming a pillar of salt. That's not the story we're interested in here, we're interested in the aftermath. But before we get into it, some background first.

Lot was Abraham's nephew. Lot moved his family and his entire household, servants and all, to Sodom. For some reason, that seemed like a good idea at the time, but in retrospect, it turned out to be a huge mistake. The place was depraved and eventually God got angry and destroyed Sodom.

Abraham tried to save Sodom by negotiating with God. "But, God," Abraham argued, "If there are five righteous people there, would you still destroy the place?" And God replied, "For five, I will not destroy it."

How many righteous people did God find in Sodom? He found four: Lot, his wife, and their two daughters. And so Sodom's doom was certain.

God sent two angels to rescue Lot and his family. The wicked men of the city saw these beautiful male angels and demanded them for sex (**Genesis 19:5**). In a strange twist, Lot offered his daughters to the mob in exchange for the angels' safety (**Genesis 19:7-8**). But that only enraged the mob and made them more determined to have them all. Then the angels took over. They blinded the mob and brought Lot's family out.

A side note: Lot's using his daughters to negotiate for the angels causes us to wince and wonder about his fatherly integrity. Without passing judgment for or against him, I will only point out that the Bible says this: **2 Peter 2:4** *For if God spared not ... :6 ... the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah ... :7 And deliver just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked ...*

In Peter's assessment, and therefore God's assessment also, Lot was "just." I will also point out that Lot's uncle Abraham offered up Isaac as a sacrifice which pleased God. Note that neither Abraham nor Lot had to actually go through with their ugly offer because in both cases, angels commandeered the situation and brought a happier ending. Angelic intervention may not be entirely satisfying but, well, there you have it. In both stories the evil deed that rankles us never happened. God protected them.

But let's proceed. The real story is yet to come.

They made their escape. Sodom was destroyed, and Lot's family was safe, except that his wife was turned into a pillar of salt.

The loss of his wife was not incidental because it left Lot and the girls alone among people they feared. So they kept separate and foraged for themselves. And that created a predicament. With no wife and mother, eventually they would die leaving no posterity. And the possibility of family extinction was horrifying to them.

To solve that problem, the girls came up with a solution of their own, and that is the story I want to tell.

Genesis 19:31 *And the firstborn said unto the younger, Our father is old, and there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth. :32 Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father. :33 And they made their father drink wine that night: and the firstborn went in, and lay with her father; and he perceived not when she lay down, nor when she arose. :34 And it came to pass on the morrow, that the firstborn said unto the younger, Behold, I lay yesternight with my father: let us make him drink wine this night also; and go thou in, and lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father. :35 And they made their father drink wine that night also: and the younger arose, and lay with him; and he perceived not when she lay down, nor when she arose. :36 Thus were both the daughters of Lot*

with child by their father. :37 And the first born bare a son, and called his name Moab: the same is the father of the Moabites unto this day. :38 And the younger, she also bare a son, and called his name Benammi: the same is the father of Ammon unto this day.

Wow! What a wild and wicked story of incest and seduction — quite opposite to the lovely story of the virgin Mary.

Let's be bold and ask the question, how bad what their incest? A not so satisfying answer might be to point out that Lot's uncle Abraham married his own half-sister Sarai, and God blessed that union so how bad could it be?

So, how did they fare? Apparently they lived happily ever after, these two girls, their two sons, and their father. They produced two nations. And from one of them, Moab, came Jesus Christ: **Matthew 1:5** ... *and Boaz begat Obed of Ruth* [a Moabite].

So, whose to judge? Lot's daughters did a naughty thing (yes, it was naughty) but good things came of it. And nowhere do we read that God condemned them for it.

Which brings me to this question: If God did not condemn the girls, why did God condemn Sodom? I'll offer two possible answers, both just guesses.

First: Sodom was a homosexual community. You just saw that. Homosexuality is not pro-children. It seeks sexual gratification only, without the possibility of children. God, on the other hand, is very pro-children. His first commandment to the human race was multiply. When we circumvent that, God grumbles, as for example: **Genesis 38:9-10**.

Second: Maybe God's complaint against Sodom was more than sexual preference. An underlying dark message that threads the Bible is that societies that disregard children soon discard children. That is what child sacrifice was all about. Unrestrained sexual appetites often lead to rape, torture, murder, and child sacrifice. Lot said to the men of Sodom, "*do ye to them as is good in your eyes.*" Maybe he did not expect to get his daughters back alive. Recall that God destroyed the earth because of violence: **Genesis 6:13** ... *for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.* I'd wager that Sodom was a violent place, and God responded in kind.

What about Lot's daughters? They were certainly pro-life. After all the tragedy in their young lives, they wanted nothing more than to have children, to produce a surviving family. That they used drastic means did not mitigate the rightness of their motive. They even risked God's ire which was brave since they saw what God did to Sodom and knew what God was capable of. But they had a precedent. Eve also had risked God's wrath to have children. And had Eve not taken that risk, we wouldn't be here. So thank you Eve.

My final point is that God did not get mad at them. Instead, he blessed them and gave them the children they wanted. And those children produced nations. Ought we to condemn them? We should be careful to not condemn that which God blesses.

[3] TAMAR

Judah, one of Jacob's twelve sons, had three sons. The oldest died and left a childless widow, Tamar. She had a legal right to demand a child by Judah's second son, but he died also. So she asserted her right to the third son. But he was a bit too young to honor that demand so Judah said wait a bit, and he promised that when the young son was old enough he would take care of that responsibility.

Time went by and the boy did become a man. But Judah seemed uninterested in fulfilling his promise, and that left Tamar in an uncomfortable limbo.

Finally, when she realized this was never going to happen, she took matters into her own hands. Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute, complete with veil so that no one would recognize her, and placed herself where she knew Judah would pass by. Judah was in the mood for a prostitute and the two had a conjugal union.

But Judah did not have the price of a harlot with him so he had to leave and return with it. In the meantime he left a pledge, basically a security deposit: his bracelets, his staff, and his signet. While he was gone, she disappeared with his stuff — and his baby. She was pregnant.

Three months later, her pregnancy became obvious as pregnancies do, and she found herself in a terrifying situation.

***Genesis 38:24** And it came to pass about three months after, that it was told to Judah saying, Tamar thy daughter in law hath played the harlot; and also, behold, she is with child by whoredom. And Judah said, bring her forth, and let her be burnt.*

But Tamar had an adequate defense which saved her life and her child's.

***Genesis 38:25** When she was brought forth, she sent to her father in law, saying, By the man who things these are, am I with child. :26 And Judah acknowledged them, and said, She hath been more righteous than I.*

So the story has a happy ending, and in time, she gave birth to twins: Pharez (***Matthew 1:3***) and Zarah.

Now it's time to ask ourselves, was Tamar's action sinful or was it not? She had sex with a man that she was not married to, but she did it to get a child that she had a legal right to.

Was she wrong to do it? I'm not going to condemn her, not when Matthew acknowledges her and this act in the genealogy of Christ. At the very least, you must concede that good often comes from bad, but it is not even clear that her act was bad. She was, after all, claiming her legal right.

My point is this: We think that sexual transgression is always clear-cut. In this case, however, the morality of it is murky, one of those "shades of gray" we wish we didn't have to deal with.

I think Tamar was completely right to do what she did. She had a legal right and she asserted it the only way she could. And Judah agreed. And I guess, so did God.

This story makes me think about women who have no prospects for marriage and who, because they do not want to go through life childless, resort to the drastic option of artificial insemination at a fertility clinic.

Many Christians would condemn that as sinful. Is it? And what exactly is sin anyway? Jesus said that the essence of the law was to love God and love our fellow man; in other words, do good and not harm. Well, if a woman does good by creating a loved life and harms no one, just how is that sin?

[4] RAHAB

Four hundred years later, the army of Israel was marshaling itself to engage the battle of Jericho. To scope out the city's defenses, Joshua sent two spies. The spies were detected, pursued, and found safety in, of all places, the home of a prostitute, Rahab.

To Rahab, this was a windfall. She knew what was coming, Jericho would die and her family with it. But with the arrival of the spies, she had an escape. So she made an offer: "Spies, I'll save your lives if you save ours." And they did.

Joshua 2:1 And Joshua ... sent ... two men to spy secretly, saying, Go view the land, even Jerico. And they went, and came into a harlot's house, named Rahab, and lodged there. :12 Now therefore, I pray you, swear unto me by the Lord, since I shewed you kindness, that ye will also shew kindness unto my father's house, and give me a true token. :13 And that we will save alive my father, and my mother, and my brethren, and my sisters, and all that we have, and deliver our lives from death.

Rahab arranged for the spies' escape at great risk to herself and they made good on their word. She and her family were saved.

Joshua 6:22 But Joshua had said unto the two men that had spied out the country, Go into the harlot's house, and bring out thence the woman, and all that she hath, as ye sware unto her. :23 And the young men that were spies went in, and brought out Rahab, and her father, and her mother, and her brethren, and all that she had; and they brought out all her kindred, and left them without the camp of Israel.

Hebrews 11:31 By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she received the spies with peace.

But that's not the end of the story. The question now is: What sort of life did she, an ex-prostitute, have after that? And the answer to that question is —

Matthew 1:5 And Salmon begat Boaz of Rachab ...

So this ex-prostitute had a pretty good life. She appears to have married a good man, Salmon, and had a child and became the great-grandmother of king David and an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Not bad for a prostitute, wouldn't you say?

So, where does God condemn her? Nowhere. She would have been condemned had she remained a Jericho prostitute, but God offered her a different life and she took it.

[5] RUTH

Ruth is one of the most honored women in the bible, a grandmother of king David, which is a bit ironic because she was not an Israelite, she was a Moabite, and therefore a descendant of that act of incest between Lot and his eldest daughter.

I won't tell you the whole Ruth's story; you know her story. The graciousness of this lovely woman leaps from the page with these beautiful words to her mother-in-law Naomi who finds herself widowed and now childless —

Ruth 1:26 *And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:*

Ruth's loyalty was lovely, and it fills us with good emotions.

The story continues. These two women finally made their way back to Israel.

Safely in Israel, they discover that there may be an opportunity for Ruth to marry well. Boaz, the local rich guy — the *old* local rich guy, but not *too* old — was a near kinsman of Naomi's deceased husband. And as such, Ruth had a right to have a child by him *if* she can get him interested in her.

Now, we all love this lady, Ruth — gracious, sweet, loyal, virtuous, etc. But here comes a surprise, and it might make you blush.

Boaz had already indicated an interest in her by giving her access to already harvested crops which gleaners are forbidden to touch, and in this way he showed her clear favoritism. He was hot for her and she knew it.

Naomi understood immediately the romantic implication of that gesture and instructed Ruth to take full advantage of the opportunity. Ruth did exactly as Naomi advised, and reciprocated Boaz's kindness in a very direct way.

Ruth 3:7 *And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of corn; and she [Ruth] came softly and uncovered his feet, and laid her down. :8 And it came to pass at midnight, that the man was afraid, and turned himself: and, behold, a woman lay at his feet. :9 And he said, who art thou? And she answered, I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman. :10 And he said, Blessed be thou of the Lord, my daughter: for thou hast shewed more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou followedst not young men, whether poor or rich. :11 And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requires, for all the city of my people doeth know that thou art a virtuous woman. :14 And she lay at his feet until the morning: and she rose up before one could know another. And he said, let it not be known that a woman came into the floor.*

There are two opinions about this text: (1) Ruth and Boaz did not have sex. (2) They did. Want to know the truth? Really? They did.

The words “uncovered his feet” is a euphemism for uncovering one's genitalia.

A euphemism is verbiage that we substitute for other verbiage that we're trying to say but don't want to say because we're too embarrassed to say.

For example, a man might want to say to a woman, “Let's have sex,” but would instead say, “Sleep with me,” which, if she took literally, he'd be very disappointed because sleep is not at all what he has in mind. The Japanese would say “pillowing.”

Another example: If we need to urinate we say, “I have to go to the bathroom.” It is left to the hearer to understand that we do not mean to take a bath. The child-speak version is “I have to go potty.”

So, what we have here in Ruth is a euphemism. Ruth is said to uncover Boaz’s feet. Well, she uncovered a lot more than his feet. The proof of the meaning is found elsewhere in the Bible. Here are some examples:

Deuteronomy 28:57 ... *her young one that cometh out from between her feet* [her private]

2 Samuel 11:8 *wash your feet* [Uriah, go home and have sex with your wife]

1 Samuel 24:4 *cover his feet* [urinate]

2 Chronicles 16:12 *And Asa ... was diseased in his feet...* [maybe venereal disease]

Proverbs 19:2 ... *he that hasteth with his feet sinneth* [running is not a sin, adultery is]

Isaiah 7:20 *hair of the feet* [pubic hair]

Ezekiel 16:25 [Jerusalem] *opened thy feet to everyone...and multiplied thy whoredoms.*

Yes, it is possible that Naomi meant “feet” literally and nothing more. But that is highly unlikely because the euphemism was so common (like our “sleep with”) that to say “uncover his feet” would first conjure up a sexual image. And if the literal meaning were intended, Naomi would have had to clarify to avoid misunderstanding. Naomi offered no such clarification so the only meaning Ruth could have taken from her advice was the sexual meaning. When a man says, “Sleep with me,” he’s not talking about sleep.

Also, there is a second euphemism that cements the meaning of the first: “*spread therefore thy skirt over thin handmaid*” which can only mean I’m not wearing much, let me inside your robe. She was coming onto him pure and simple, just as God later said to Israel: *Ezekiel 16:8* *thy time was the time of love* [you were young and beautiful]: *and I spread my skirt over thee and covered thy nakedness* [I consummated with you].

Ruth’s action was more aggressive than Naomi had advised. Naomi had merely said do what he tells you to do; in other words, wait for him to take the initiative. But instead Ruth, feeling confident and frisky, took the initiative and asked Boaz quit boldly, let me into your clothes. For what purpose is obvious.

Here is my final defense of my assertion that they did have sex that night: If a young, pretty woman comes in the middle of the night and slips into bed with an inebriated, rich, older man, just what exactly does she expect to happen? Anything other than sex would be hopelessly naïve. And if she later claimed, “Well, I didn’t think he would do *that!*” frankly, no one would believe her.

So, what’s the conclusion? Was Ruth a wicked woman? Well, Boaz called her virtuous because she picked him and not some younger man that she might have. In other words, not only was he glad to have her, but she was doing the right thing.

The story had a wonderful ending: they lived happily ever after. But you knew that already. The happy ending is, after all, the point the story.

[6] GOMER

God told Hosea, his prophet, to marry a whore. Some people say, and I even read in a Sunday School manual, that God wouldn’t do that to his prophet so the story is just a fanciful parable.

The fanciful parable theory is nonsense, and to put that to rest, let's consider the kinds of things that God has at times subjected his prophets to. Isaiah was sawn in half, Jeremiah was imprisoned in a slime pit, Ezekiel's wife died on the day that Jerusalem was breached, Daniel was a eunuch, Peter was crucified with his wife, John was boiled in oil, and Paul was beheaded. So remind me how God protects his prophets? I didn't get that memo. We therefore ought not to think it so strange that Hosea was told by God to marry a prostitute. He was in good company. This story actually happened, it was not merely a parable, and the lady's name was Gomer.

Why would God ask Hosea to do such a thing? Because God wanted to illustrate that Israel was like a whoring wife, and Gomer was the living illustration.

And so, obediently, Hosea did what he was asked. He married the prostitute.

Well, that gave God his living parable, but it was pretty rough on Hosea.

Did she give up her evil ways? No, she did not. Here's the story.

***Hosea 1:2** ... And the Lord said to Hosea, Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the Lord. :3 So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim; which conceived, and bare him a son.*

Gomer and Hosea had three children. The name of the youngest, Loammi, is telling. Loammi means "not mine." Gomer was a whoring wife who had no intentions of being faithful except when it suited her.

***Hosea 2:7** And she shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them: then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now. :8 For she did not know that I gave her corn, and wine, and oil and multiplied her silver and gold,*

So she was home again for the food and security, but soon she is off again looking for her next thrill.

***Hosea 2:10** And now will I discover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers, and none shall deliver her out of mine hand.*

And this is what Hosea had to put up with. Still, Hosea pursues her, just as God pursues Israel.

***Hosea 2:14** Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her.*

But finally, Gomer got herself into so much trouble that she found herself on a slave's auction block. And the only way Hosea could get her back was to buy her at auction. And that was exactly what he did.

Hosea 3:2 So I bought her to me for fifteen pieces of silver, and for an homer of barley, and an half homer of barley: :3 And I said unto her, Thou shalt abide for me many days; thou shalt not play the harlot, and thou shalt not be for another man: so will I also be for thee.

And that is what happened to Israel. Sold into slavery then bought back by her true husband, God.

Did she finally live happily ever after with her husband? It seems so, I hope so. In any case, at that point in her life she found forgiveness and happiness. In spite of her determination to live another kind of life, she found grace.

[7] MARY

The first lady in the New Testament to be accused of and forgiven of adultery was Mary the mother of Jesus. That she was innocent is beside the point, she was thought guilty and therefore faced severe consequences. Ultimately she was protected by an angel so she was never really in danger, but for awhile she was at risk of being executed.

But her husband (an engaged man counted as a husband) would have none of that. Joseph *was minded to put her away privily (Matthew 1:19)*. In other words, he didn't want to kill her, he didn't want to humiliate her, he just wanted to quietly step away and let her get on with her life.

Others thought her guilty, and that accusation continued throughout Jesus' life.

John 8:41 Ye do the deeds of your father. They said they to him, We be not born of fornication; we have one father, even God.

Their snide inference "we be not born of fornication" means "like you were."

So Mary continued to take heat from the nature of Jesus' birth, and so did Jesus, and so, no doubt, did Joseph.

Having learned the truth of Mary's pregnancy from an angel, Joseph certainly defended his family. But before he knew the truth, he was forgiving her anyway, which is my point. This is the first New Testament story of forgiving an adulterous woman. That she was not adulterous, as I said, misses the point. He thought she was, and he forgave.

[8] THE WOMAN TAKEN IN ADULTERY

This is one of the most famous stories of the Bible, a turning point in that it defines for us exactly what Jesus meant by forgiveness. Talk is cheap, anyone can say anything. But actually doing it, in this case forgiving, is really putting your money where your mouth is.

John 8:3 And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him [Jesus] a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst, :4 They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. :5 Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what saith thou? :6 This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and

with his finger wrote on the ground, as though they hear him not. :7 So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. :8 And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. :9 And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. :10 When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee? :11 She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

This story has been told and retold millions of times. And it should be, because it is pivotal.

In the confrontation, Jesus affirmed the law and accepted that she had committed a capital crime, and he unleashed their wrath on her: “Yes, go ahead and stone her. She deserves it.” Had he not judged her guilty first, had he wimped out — (“Come on, fellas. Surely you can’t take the law that seriously. Adultery? Is that really such a big deal?”) — then forgiveness would have had no meaning. You cannot forgive a non-sin, a non-crime. That’s the first point of the story. She *was* guilty of a capital crime just as they had accused, and she deserved to die. Therefore, forgiveness was available.

Forgiveness is not about setting aside the law, it’s about refusing to execute the law. Jesus said, “Go ahead, stone her, *if* you are yourselves free of sin.” And that, no one can claim except himself.

What did Jesus write on the ground? The text doesn’t say. But I think I know. I bet, and I may be wrong but I don’t think so, that Jesus was listing their sins so that they would know that he knew who was sinless and who was not. “Avi, you hit your wife again this morning. Moshe, you came home drunk again last night. And you think you have the right to stone her? I’m watching you!”

Then finally, the one person who *was* sinless, the one person who had the right to condemn her, said to her, “and neither do I condemn thee. Go, and sin no more.” That is forgiveness.

Did she take his advice? We don’t know, the text doesn’t say. But we can hope.

[9] CONCLUSION

I don’t know that I have a good conclusion. You can make up your own. But we have certainly learned to not be throwing stones at people because they don’t live as we think they ought. On the other hand, *we* ought to live in God’s will and we ought to encourage others to do that also. After all, “Go and sin no more” is good advice.