

## The Scandal of the Savior

### Matt. 1:18-25

When we think about the meaning of Christmas, there are many words that come to mind. Words like peace on earth, good will toward men. Words like the love of God, and good news of great joy. We think of a babe in a manger and traveling wise men and shepherds keeping watch by night. We think of a Savior sent to save us from our sin.

I want to suggest one more word to associate with the meaning of Christmas. The word, *scandal*. That's probably not a word most of us typically think of when we think of Christmas, and I admit it doesn't give us the same warm fuzzies that the other words I mentioned do, but as we look at the details surrounding Jesus' birth and then connect it with his life, ministry, and death, it's hard to escape the realization that God meant for Jesus' birth and life to be marked by scandal. Rom.9:33 quoting from Isa 8:14, says - *As it is written, Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling block and rock of offense: and whosoever believes in Him shall not be ashamed.*

*I Cor. 1:23 - But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block and unto the Greeks foolishness; 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

The word for "stumbling block" is the Greek word *scandalon*, from which we get the word scandal. God says He is intentionally laying a scandal that will trip up many. Jesus is the *scandalon*, salvation for those who believe, but a stumbling block, a rock of offense, a *scandal* to those who don't.

#### I. There is scandal in the good news of the Savior

Robert Frost wrote, *Something there is that doesn't love a wall*. To paraphrase Frost, *something there is that DOES love a scandal*. And that something is the press! The press loves a scandal because scandals sell news! Scandals give people something to talk about and check the news daily for the latest updates. When someone's life and reputation is being rocked by a scandal it's kind of like a train wreck: it's painful to watch but impossible to turn away from. Scandals are good for selling news not because scandals are good news but because they are bad news and bad news *sells*.

But woven throughout the good news of Jesus' birth is a consistent thread of scandal.

#### 1. There is scandal in Jesus' lineage

In Matthew's genealogy, the first scandal we come across is Tamar and Judah. **Tamar** was the daughter in law of Judah and when her husband died and Judah's other sons did not honor their duty to produce offspring through Tamar, she disguised herself as a prostitute and waited by the roadside for her father in law to pass by. Judah did pass by and not knowing who she was hired her services and she conceived twins by her father in law. It doesn't surprise us that Jesus' line passes through Judah, but it is surprisingly scandalous that it passes through prostitution and a forbidden incestual relationship.

**Rahab** was a Gentile prostitute in the city of Jericho. Hebrews 11 calls her a "harlot" – what we would call a "woman of ill repute".

**Ruth** is a Moabite, a people who were Israel's sworn enemy and oppressor. Moses commanded Jews concerning Moabites:

*"No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever, Deut. 23:3*

A Moabite wasn't even to be allowed to enter the assembly of the Lord – not to the tenth generation. For Ruth to enter the ancestry of the Lord was scandalous.

Then Jesus' line continues through King David and a woman Matthew identifies as *the wife of Uriah*. David committed adultery with **Bathsheba** and then killed Uriah to hide his own sin and shame. Jesus' lineage would pass right through that scandal, and Matthew makes sure we remember the adulterous connection between David and Bathsheba – *the wife of Uriah*.

There are only four women mentioned in Jesus' lineage (other than Mary), and those four women represent four scandals. They would be the names we'd want to *leave off* the list, but here they are intentionally highlighted. It's hard to escape the sense that they are listed *because* their inclusion in Jesus' lineage is scandalous. There is scandal in the lineage of the Savior.

### **2. There is scandal in the circumstances of Jesus' birth**

Mary was a young maiden betrothed to a godly man named Joseph. When she was found with child, Matthew records the painful but merciful decision Joseph made to divorce her quietly. An angel told him that the child conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit, but most people would not have known that, and there were certainly whispers and rumors of scandal in the birth of Jesus. Mary carried the undeserved shame of a rumored scandal regarding the conception and birth of her son, Jesus.

### **3. There is scandal in Jesus' ministry**

Jesus' ministry also scandalized the religious leaders. He taught with an authority that was offensive to them. He claimed to be the light of the world, the only way to the Father. He claimed to be God. And he hung out with vile sinners – the outcasts, the lowest of the low. This offended the religious establishment so much that they conspired to execute him on the cross, which brings us to the last scandal of the good news of our Savior.

### **4. There is scandal in Jesus' death**

*"And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, 23 his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance. Deut. 21:22-23*

Hanging on a tree was a way to belittle or despise someone who broke the law of the Old Covenant. Jesus hung on a cross like a cursed man who had broke the old covenant law.

That's why people reviled Jesus and wagged their heads at him as they passed by. It is a sign of derision and disgust. There was no dignity in Jesus' death, only scandal and shame. There is scandal in the good news of the Savior. But...

## **II. There is good news in the scandal of the Savior**

Here's the ironic thing: it's not that the good news of the Savior is tainted with scandal, but the scandal associated with the Savior is a *part* of that good news! Because, while Jesus is the scandalon, there is no true scandal in his life.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines scandal as *an occurrence in which people are shocked and upset because of behavior that is morally or legally wrong*. We live in a world of scandals. Adam and Eve's lives were rocked by the first scandal – their disobedience to God's one command - and people's lives have been being destroyed by scandal ever since. Scandal knows no boundaries: politicians, Hollywood celebrities, Wall Street powerbrokers, athletes, prestigious universities, religious leaders, that person next to us that is so nice – there's really no segment of society that can't be touched by scandal.

But there is nothing in Jesus or about Jesus that is morally or legally wrong. His scandal is really an anti-scandal. Every person he ever met committed more scandal on any given day than he would in his entire life. Jesus is the only person who ever lived who could say of the devil, *he has nothing in me*. No claim, no hold, no secret that could be exposed. There is good news in the scandal of the Savior, because what shocks and upsets us about the gospel isn't what is morally wrong, but what is totally undeserved yet mercifully right about the Savior stooping to our level to rescue those trapped in the scandal of sin.

### **1. *It is the scandal of the Exalted One humbling himself to the lowest place***

Ever wonder why men and women who seem to have the world by a string risk it all by committing scandalous acts? The Greeks had a word for it: *hubris*. It means the kind of arrogance that loses touch with reality and thinks far higher of itself than is warranted. Hubris causes a person to think they are above the law and the rules that apply to lesser men don't apply to them. Hubris is an arrogance that leads to ruin and to scandal.

Jesus' scandal isn't the result of hubris. Just the opposite, it's the result of humility. Jesus didn't try to raise himself above what was warranted, he lowered himself way beyond what was warranted. The scandal of Jesus is the scandal of power, glory, majesty, holiness, being wrapped in the swaddling cloths of weakness, poverty, and seemingly shameful conditions. Mary was honored above all women when God chose her to carry His Son, but in that honoring, Mary carried the weight of public scandal as if she had done something terribly wrong. It is the odd intersection of the perfect right appearing as if it was a scandalous wrong, and part of the honor Mary had was to carry that appearance of scandalous wrong. Jesus grew up with whispers that he was illegitimate, when he was the only truly legitimate human being who ever lived. He humbled himself to the lowest low – that's what makes his glory so glorious! He who knew no sin became sin so that we might receive His righteousness. He who knew no scandal embraced scandal, so that he could save a scandal filled world, one scandal filled life at a time.

### **2. *It's the scandal of the sinless One identifying with our sin, rather than distancing himself from it***

In a genealogy that only lists the men, why does God showcase the four women in Jesus' lineage that had scandal associated with their lives? Think about this: the children born to those four women should never have been born – Tamar should never have committed incest with her father in law. As Gentile women Rahab and Ruth weren't eligible to be married to Jewish men. And David should never have had a son *by Uriah's wife*. And why, since it did happen, does God displays it for all to see? We hide scandal – that's just what we do with scandal. Why does God showcase it?

God wanted these four women highlighted because He loved them and He was proud to list their names because they represented the scandalized people he came to save. Jesus didn't come to disassociate himself from our sin – He could have stayed in heaven if he wanted to do that. He drew near, identified with our sin, and embraced our sin as if it was his own. Jesus scandalized the religious leaders because he enjoyed hanging out with the worst sinners of his day. When he called the tax collector Matthew as his disciple, Matthew invited him over to his house for dinner and invited all his loser friends to join them. The Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples, why does Jesus eat with sinners? It's scandalous. But it's not *wrong*. It's the heart of God on display.

Scandal runs through Jesus' lineage, birth and ministry and death because he came to save a scandal filled world, one scandal filled life at a time.

### ***3. It is the scandal of loving the unlovely with an everlasting love***

In three days we'll all be celebrating Christmas Day – thinking of a baby born in a manger. The Savior. It is the scandal of the love of God loving sinners too much to leave us to our fate. Loving us with what the Bible calls an everlasting love – it will never end or fade or change.

The reality is that we all have scandals in our lives. Oh, I don't mean that you are doing things that would send you to prison or make the front pages of the New York Times, but would any of us want everything we've ever done or thought or said publicized? An executive for Vimeo tweeted a few lines that she thought was funny as she boarded a plane for Africa, where she had no wifi, no connection with what was going on in the world. When she got off the plane her entire world had exploded. She had no job, her reputation was destroyed, and her life was covered with shame. All because of a few unguarded words. We're all a few unguarded minutes away from a destroyed life, all the time. We all live with a sense of shame whether we are aware of it or not, because we all sin every day, every hour, every minute.

Judgment Day is when every sin is exposed for all to see. The press would *love* it except they will be dealing with their own private scandals being exposed and judged too. Jesus entered this scandal filled world to save anyone who would believe in him from their scandal. When we believe in Christ, all our sins are forgiven, covered by the blood of Jesus, and we are given the gift of eternal life.

The good news in the scandal of the Savior is that it's not the scandal of a life tainted by sin, it's the scandal of a sinless life touched by our need. Jesus loves the sinner with a love that is almost scandalous, it's so unexpected and so strong. Scandalous, but not wrong. It's the heart of God on display.

**Jesus** came to save a scandal filled world, one scandal filled life at a time. That's you and me. That's what Christmas is all about, and that's the good news of the scandal of the Savior. Let's pray.