

untamed



How the *Wild* Side
of Jesus Frees Us
to Live and Love
with Abandon

LISA
HARPER

AUTHOR OF *A PERFECT MESS*

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PRESS

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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Introduction

Beauty on the Other Side of the Brink

I love pure speed and pristine mountains, and one of my favorite places to combine the two is Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Jackson Hole is a bit off the beaten path when it comes to snow-skiing resorts, so the town isn't overdeveloped with fast-food restaurants, nor are the slopes jam-packed like a shopping mall on the day after Thanksgiving. It's still a relatively unspoiled Eden, where the local elk population outnumbers the tourists.

One of my favorite ski runs at Jackson Hole is called Timbered Island. Just after you exit the lift, there's a spot so steep it's essentially a cliff face. As a matter of fact, if you stop on the catwalk and turn your skis downhill, the tips will jut out into thin air. However, that alarming pitch levels out into a gently sloped field flanked with towering pine trees. Therefore, if you're daring enough to go over the edge, you're rewarded by the feeling of flying—of weightless freedom—followed by cruising into a soft playground of white crystals. It is absolutely exhilarating! Every time I've gasped in slightly terrified awe at the top, but I've ended up laughing in sheer delight while zooming to the bottom.

Yet despite the spine-tingling payoff, I've noticed that most skiers glide right past the precipice without stopping to consider the view, much less consider jumping off. Perhaps because the trail map designates Timbered Island as a "blue run" (which means the terrain is negotiable for skiers of average skill level), they're seeking a cushy, nonjarring ride. Maybe they've become so accustomed to moderate inclines that they're not even tempted to consider a riskier, more vertical route.

Choosing the safe but boring path is an apt metaphor for the years I spent rather numbly and halfheartedly pursuing God. As Francis Chan candidly describes in his book *Crazy Love*,

I called myself a Christian, was pretty involved in church, and tried to stay away from all of the things that "good Christians" avoid—drinking, drugs, sex, swearing. Christianity was simple: fight your desires in order to please God. Whenever I failed (which was often), I'd walk around feeling guilty and distant from God.

In hindsight, I don't think my church's teachings were incorrect, just incomplete. My view of God was narrow and small.¹

Thankfully, I came to a spiritual cliff face that challenged my small, narrow view of God. I got to the edge of who I'd previously understood Jesus to be and risked going beyond it. And the reward has been much more liberating and exhilarating than anything I've ever experienced on skis. Choosing to explore past the boundaries of my incomplete perception has led me to a bigger and better view of our Redeemer. I've discovered Jesus to be much more confrontational and provocative than the pale imitation of Him I had settled for!

As we explore some of His wilder aspects for the next two hundred or so pages together, I really hope you'll get a bigger and better view too. I hope you'll sense the Holy Spirit drawing you into a riskier, more intimate, and less religious relationship with Jesus. I hope that it'll reawaken the sense of adventure God hard-wired into your soul. That you'll find yourself awed by His power and glory and laugh out loud with sheer delight over the fact that this majestically untamed Savior is madly in love with you!

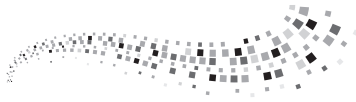
Furthermore, although *Untamed* isn't formatted like a traditional Bible study, I hope it will encourage you to experience Scripture in a fresh way. Each chapter includes an icebreaker question to prompt you to connect your own experience with the topic at hand. At the end of each chapter, you'll also find questions in the "Living and Loving with Abandon" section geared toward helping you reflect on how the "wild side" of Jesus can impact your heart today. These questions are especially stimulating when discussed over coffee with friends!

I believe you'll find *Untamed* to be an interesting book-club selection, an engaging Sunday school curriculum, or even a useful tool to help your women's Bible study group explore the life and ministry of Christ. I sincerely pray it'll help you experience some of the same freedom God has been lavishing on me lately.

Most of all I pray it quickens your heart to wonder and worship over the mind-blowing miracle that King Jesus chooses us as the objects of His affection!

1

Exposing the Myth of a Milquetoast Messiah



Our Savior Is Wildly Redemptive

We have very efficiently pared the claws of the
Lion of Judah, certified Him “meek and mild,”
and recommended Him as a fitting household
pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.

—DOROTHY SAYERS



Brace yourself.

This book is all about getting caught up in a new sense of freedom. In our efforts to achieve maximum buoyancy, along the way we'll be jettisoning a number of mistaken beliefs and a bunch of misplaced guilt.

To start things off, I've decided to clear my conscience of this long-held secret: I used to have a huge crush on Stan Brock. My prepubescent girlfriends nursed crushes on more familiar '60s and '70s icons like Lee Majors, the squinty-eyed actor who starred in the television show *The Six Million Dollar Man*, or rock stars like the plaid-clad Bay City Rollers. But throughout elementary and middle school, I was stuck on Stan, who achieved only marginal fame as Marlin Perkins's sidekick on the NBC series *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*.

It didn't matter to me that Stan wasn't a household name or a guitar hero; I thought he was incredibly cool. My heart was his to lose after the episode when he wrestled a giant, angry anaconda into submission. I'd never before seen such courage in the face of danger. Of course he didn't

look half bad in his safari outfit either! Genteel, white-haired Marlin had more sound bites, but brave Stan—who lived among the Wapishana Indians in the Central Amazon Basin as a teen—fully captured my attention and affection.

Fate brought him to our small town during the height of the show's popularity and my crush. I can still remember the surge of happiness I felt when the local newspaper announced he was going to be the grand marshal of our Christmas parade. I talked Mom into taking me to the parade early so I could get a front-row seat on the curb. My anticipation built as I waited to see Stan Brock in person. The silly clowns zipping by on tiny scooters held no interest for me. I simply craned my neck, attempting to peer past the marching band and catch the first possible glimpse of my hero as he came into view.

He finally came galloping down First Avenue, riding bareback on a big horse. I think he might've been barefoot too. He had on the same khaki clothes he always wore on the show, and he grinned at me when he rode past. To this day I'm convinced he winked. Right. At. Me! Utterly and completely smitten, I chased after him for a few blocks before reluctantly and dutifully stopping in front of Faust's drugstore so Mom wouldn't worry. In my biased and breathless ten-year-old opinion, Stan was the man!

Describe the most compelling hero from your childhood. What specific characteristics attracted your admiration?

Now here's a bigger confession: until recently I found Stan a more compelling hero than Jesus in many ways. Don't get me wrong. I loved Jesus wholeheartedly; I just wasn't really sure He was strong enough for

me to trust Him with the full weight of my life. In contrast to Stan's strong physique and untamed persona, my mental picture of Jesus sketched a skinny, mild-mannered fellow. Sort of like Clark Kent, only paler.

I attribute that milquetoast image partly to hearing more sermons about Jesus as a carpenter than as a sword-wielding deliverer. It also didn't help to see Him depicted as a sad-eyed blond guy in religious paintings, in which the artists seem to have ignored the fact that Jesus was a Jew who grew up in the Middle East, so He was probably dark headed and olive skinned.

Mostly though, the emasculated Redeemer of my imagination was shaped by my own fear and insecurity. While my girlhood champion had been a risk-taking tough guy, as a grown woman I settled for safe when it came to a Savior. Probably because some of the "tough guys" I'd had relationships with in the past had left bruises. A few bloomed purple on my body, but the most serious wounds were inflicted on my heart, which left me wary. So I edited out the seemingly rough and wild parts of Jesus and squished Him into a box small enough for me to comfortably carry around.

Until one day I finally realized my squashed caricature of Jesus wasn't big enough to calm my anxiety or heal my wounds or defeat the wickedness in our world. Pretending Jesus was less than He actually is resulted in someone I wasn't compelled to worship. So I began a journey to discover the whole Jesus—including the seemingly rough and wild parts—revealed in the Bible. And I found Him to be considerably bigger and better than I ever dreamed possible.

In fact, I discovered that in the very beginning of the Gospels, before our incarnate Savior even appeared on the scene in person, He proved to be *wildly redemptive*.

DON'T SKIP THE BEST PART

Before we go any further, I should probably encourage you to grab a cup of coffee or a Diet Coke, because initially the following passage is going to seem more like a cure for insomnia than a lens through which we'll be able to see Jesus bigger!

This is the family history of Jesus Christ. He came from the family of David, and David came from the family of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah.

(Their mother was *Tamar*.)

Perez was the father of Hezron.

Hezron was the father of Ram.

Ram was the father of Amminadab.

Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.

Nahshon was the father of Salmon.

Salmon was the father of Boaz.

(Boaz's mother was *Rahab*.)

Boaz was the father of Obed.

(Obed's mother was *Ruth*.)

Obed was the father of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon.

(Solomon's mother had been *Uriah's wife*.)

Matthew 1:1-6, NCV; emphasis added

Not exactly riveting reading at first, is it? It's sort of like when someone invites you to view a photo album of their family reunion. However, when you understand the context of Matthew's account of the family tree of Jesus, it gets very interesting.

First of all, Matthew was gabbing to a Jewish audience. And when this gospel was written, women weren't recorded in Jewish genealogies. Although those ancient mamas had their babies without ice chips or epidurals, they were seldom included in official birth records.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ The *Wild* Ways of God ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Whereas Matthew traces the genealogy of Jesus back to Abraham, probably to underscore the Messiah's Jewish roots, Luke traces the genealogy of Jesus all the way back to Adam (Luke 3:23–38), probably to prove that Jesus is the hope for *all* mankind, not just the Jews.

There are other significant differences in Matthew's and Luke's genealogy records, most notably naming different fathers for Joseph (Jacob in Matthew 1:16 and Heli in Luke 3:23), which many theologians attribute to Matthew's emphasizing royal succession while Luke emphasized actual physical descent. (Remember, Joseph was technically Jesus's "stepfather," not His biological dad.) There are differing explanations for the naming of two different fathers for Joseph, but the most sensible one is that Joseph's real dad died, and his mom remarried. Thus, Joseph was the physical son of one and the legal son of another.¹

Therefore, while modern readers are tempted to skip over the beginning of Matthew to get to the good parts where Jesus walks on water or a paralytic turns cartwheels, the original audience for this sermon was probably shocked. They couldn't believe Matthew had the audacity to trample on Jewish propriety. They were probably texting each other messages like *Can you believe this? Matt's including chicks in the genealogy of Immanuel!*

But what I find really interesting is that the women highlighted in these first six verses of Matthew—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba—aren't stereotypical Hebrew good girls. Instead, much like you and me, each of them had some ugliness hidden in her past that made it doubtful her name would show up anywhere close to that of the Messiah.

RIPPED FROM THE TABLOIDS

Tamar, the first girl Matthew mentions, was sort of like the Old Testament version of Elizabeth Taylor: she made quite a habit of walking down the aisle! You can find the unabridged version of her story in Genesis 38, but I'll give you the brief edition. Her first husband was the eldest son of a man named Judah, a pretty important guy. Judah was a brother of Joseph, the guy with the multicolored coat. Like each of his brothers, Judah eventually became the father of an entire "tribe," one of twelve people groups that descended from Joseph and his brothers.

Tamar's first hubby, "Judah Jr." (his name was actually Er!), was a stinker, so God killed him. Then Tamar was married to Judah's second eldest son, Onan. Icky though that sounds to our modern ears, the arrangement—called a levirate marriage—was a culturally kosher setup. When a man died without having produced an heir, his brother was to marry the widow and produce a son to carry on the name of husband number one.² But Onan was a stinker too, so God killed him.

Next man up to bat was Shelah, Judah's baby boy. But Judah apparently decided he had a "black widow" for a daughter-in-law. Essentially he told her, "Hey, Tamar, since Shelah hasn't gone through puberty yet, why don't you go back home and hang out with your family. I'll call you when he's ready to tango."

This got Tamar scheming for a way to get Judah to live up to his responsibilities sooner rather than later—or likely, never. She ended up disguising herself as a prostitute and lured her father-in-law into sleeping with her. Her dastardly plan succeeded; she wound up pregnant by Judah, her father-in-law. Yuck!

When her condition—and her immorality—became apparent, Judah commanded that Tamar be burned to death, unaware of his role in fathering her unborn twins. Of course, he had a dramatic change of heart when she revealed that she was the "prostitute" he had slept with and declared, "These babies are yours, big boy!"

Tamar was not exactly an ideal candidate for ancestor of the year, but the second girl mentioned in Matthew 1, Rahab, was every bit as scandalous. Rahab's story is found in Joshua 2, and suffice it to say, she didn't have to disguise herself as a prostitute; she was a card-carrying member of the Notorious Ladies of the Evening union! So why was she included in the Messiah's lineage?

IT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE JERRY SPRINGER BLUSH

Right now you're probably wondering how a *good* girl like Ruth—one of only two women to have an entire Old Testament book in her name—ended up in this list of unlikely leading ladies. And I agree with you; as an individual, Ruth was faithful. Her story provides a poignant picture of loyalty and restoration. But if you look up through the

branches of her family tree, you'll see that Ruth's heritage goes all the way back to Genesis 19, to the trashy cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sodom and Gomorrah were so wicked—think a double dose of Las Vegas and then some—that God decided to destroy them and all their depraved inhabitants. Except for one fellow named Lot, who loved God. In light of Lot's faithfulness—actually much of the faithfulness credited to him was borrowed from Abraham—God agreed to allow him to escape with his wife and two daughters before He brought the hammer down on Sodom and Gomorrah. But God set one important condition: under no circumstances were they allowed to look back on their way out of town.³

Let me assure you that the following commentary can't be found in the Bible; it resides solely in my imagination. But I like to think that Lot and Mrs. Lot had just finished a floor-to-ceiling remodel of their kitchen. Mrs. Lot had fussed and pouted until Lot finally dug deep in his pockets to spring for granite countertops and stainless-steel appliances. It was the kitchen she'd always dreamed of, and the desperate housewives of her cul-de-sac were drooling with envy.

As they were sprinting out of Sodom and Gomorrah, all Mrs. Lot could think was, *I don't want to leave my gorgeous new kitchen!* So she disobeyed God, looked back in greedy longing, and got zapped into a pillar of salt—establishing her place in history as the original “Scary Spice”!

Whatever the reason behind Mrs. Lot's undisciplined eyes, we do know that only Lot and his two girls made it out alive.

The end of Genesis 19 tells us the three of them ended up living in a cave. They'd barely had time to measure for drapes and carpeting when Lot's older daughter turned to the younger one and declared in a huff, “This is a real bummer. There aren't any available bachelors up here. You and I are going to end up lonely old maids if we don't do something about it!”

Obviously, I'm taking just a little bit of liberty with the original Hebrew, but the point is that these girls hatched a plot even more revolting than Tamar's. Lot's daughters got him drunk and both were physically intimate with him on successive nights. Both girls got pregnant, and both had baby boys. The oldest daughter named her son Moab, which translated into English means "from Father."⁴ His descendants were known as Moabites, a people group so wicked that God forbade them to enter the Tent of Meeting, the portable temple the Israelites used for worship while they were wandering in the wilderness.⁵

Which brings us back to Ruth, a *Moabite* and the third woman woven into the genealogy of Jesus. Although most of us consider her to be a good girl, based on the book of Ruth, a first-century Jewish audience would surely be thinking, *Yikes, that girl comes from way over on the wrong side of the tracks. Her family tree is rooted in incest, and everyone knows her people were total pagans!*

WHO'S IN CHARGE OF BACKGROUND CHECKS?

So the first chick Matthew acknowledged in Jesus's family tree was a manipulative liar, the second was a prostitute, and the third had relatives straight out of an episode of *The Jerry Springer Show*. And Matthew won't even call the fourth woman by her given name. Instead, he describes her by saying, "Solomon's mother had been Uriah's wife" (Matthew 1:6, NCV).

You probably remember that Solomon's mama was the beautiful Bathsheba, with whom David had an affair before having her husband killed on the battlefield and marrying her.⁶

This list Matthew compiled is so *not* a group of good girls who had it all together.

Yet, through the deliberate inclusion of these women in Jesus's family tree, the God of the universe is essentially saying, "These are *my people!*" And God's mercy for these less-than-perfect women is especially significant in light of Matthew's original audience. The first readers of the gospel according to Matthew were Jewish men and women who'd been taught from birth that unless they followed, *to the letter*, each of the 613 commandments from the Torah (their version of the Holy Scriptures), they wouldn't be accepted—much less blessed—by Jehovah. And they earnestly believed perfection was a prerequisite to having a relationship with the coming Messiah.

But then along came Matt—a former IRS agent turned pastor—blowing their minds by teaching about the grace Immanuel extends to flawed people. I bet some of their faces lit up as they wondered, *Wow, if Jesus could associate with broken women like that, maybe He could accept me after all.* Matthew challenged their perception of the coming Messiah as a distant and demanding rule enforcer and presented a very different kind of Savior, one who compassionately associates with the most colorful of sinners.

From the very beginning this Savior brought into His most intimate circle women so disreputable that few of us would rush to claim them as friends. Women who had participated in or been a witness to appalling depravity were divinely embraced. Which is especially meaningful when you consider how desperate each one of the women in Matthew 1 must have been: Tamar needed a son so she'd have someone to care for her in her old age. Surely she felt cast aside, abandoned, worthless. As for Rahab, talk about a woman willing to take desperate measures, even betray her own people, to ensure her survival and that of her family. Ruth needed a kinsman-redeemer, someone to rescue her from desperate financial straits and cultural exclusion. Bathsheba, well, depending

on your interpretation of the story, was either starving for affection or a deeply wronged woman forced to make the best of a horrific situation. These four probably would've settled for some small gesture of kindness...maybe a low-interest loan or a short reprieve from the mean-spirited gossip swirling about them. Instead, they were lovingly redeemed and literally woven into the family of God.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ The *Wild* Ways of God ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

All four of the “wild girls” Matthew wove into the genealogy of Jesus experienced real-world redemption too: Tamar’s father-in-law admitted he had mistreated her; as a result of risking her own life to assist the Israelites, Rahab was allowed to join them; Boaz married the widow Ruth, and their son Obed became the grandfather of King David; and David eventually took the blame for his adulterous liaison with Bathsheba and married her, making her one of his queens.⁷

I sometimes wonder if Isaiah was thinking about Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, or Bathsheba when he wrote these words:

“Don’t be afraid, because you will not be ashamed.

Don’t be embarrassed, because you will not be
disgraced.

You will forget the shame you felt earlier;
you will not remember the shame you felt when
you lost your husband.

The God who made you is like your husband.
His name is the LORD All-Powerful.
The Holy One of Israel is the one who saves you.
He is called the God of all the earth.
You were like a woman whose husband left her,
and you were very sad.
You were like a wife who married young
and then her husband left her.
But the LORD called you to be his,”
says your God.
God says, “I left you for a short time,
but with great kindness I will bring you back again.
I became very angry
and hid from you for a time,
but I will show you mercy with kindness forever,”
says the LORD who saves you. *Isaiah 54:4–8, NCV*

The description is certainly apropos.

IT'S OKAY. SHE'S WITH ME.

At a crucial stage in my preadolescent development, my stepfather, John Angel, left the office of superintendent of the public school system in Seminole County, Florida, and became the principal of a state-of-the-art middle school about twenty miles from where we lived. He and Mom reasoned that since his new school had better resources than the one I was zoned to, it would be a good idea for me to transfer at the beginning of the sixth grade. Which sent absolute terror coursing through my preteen body.

I was already scared about graduating from elementary school to

middle school. I'd heard rumors that you actually had to take off your clothes in front of everybody in P.E., that some kids smoked cigarettes in the bathroom, and that certain wild girls smuggled vodka in their Bonne Bell lip-gloss containers. Now to make matters worse, I was being dragged to a school where I didn't know anybody and where my step-father was the *principal*! It was as if the stars had aligned to make sure I became a miserable misfit.

And let me tell you, my first few days at Teague Middle School were indeed miserable. I felt like I'd crash-landed on some strange, inhospitable planet. The other students wore Levi cords and surf shirts, while I wore dress pants and button-up blouses. Most of the girls had blond "Farrah" hair, while mine was brown and wingless. They drank Cokes and ate snacks from the vending machines for lunch, while my brown paper sack contained healthy food like egg-salad sandwiches, squashed in Ziploc bags. It seemed everybody else had known each other since kindergarten as they jostled and joked between classes. I figured my best defense against outright rejection was to walk with my head down and hope no one would notice me.

But a few weeks later, somebody did: a grinning, tow-headed, athletic guy named Corky Clifton, the one all the guys wanted to be like and all the girls wanted to be with. For some reason he decided to step over the invisible line separating popular kids from pariahs and choose me—me!—as a friend. Because Corky took a risk to associate with the gawky new girl, I was warmly received into the often-hostile world of adolescence. Armed with Corky's seal of approval, I found that people scooted over so I'd have a place to sit at lunch. I got invited to pool parties. I had funny notes shoved into my locker.

Corky was willing to sacrifice his reputation as the coolest kid in the sixth grade by hanging out with me. Jesus was willing to sacrifice His

deity. He knew the consequence of weaving His story with ours, and He still jumped at the chance. He forfeited His throne in heaven and boldly shrugged into a suit of skin.

Our Savior isn't some wimpy, pale guy wearing a caftan and Birkenstocks; He is our radically compassionate Savior who risked everything to restore mistake-prone people. He believes this motley crew called humanity is a treasure...that we're valuable enough to die for.

We need an untamed Savior because...

only a *wildly redemptive* Jesus can free us from the pain and bondage of past mistakes!

■ ■ Living and Loving with Abandon ■ ■

1. Which one of the four girls listed in Jesus's genealogy in Matthew 1 do you most identify with, and why?

2. Read Galatians 4:1–7. Describe the first time you realized you could call God “Father.”

3. Read Isaiah 43:1–2. What mental picture best illustrates your response to God’s redemptive declaration at the beginning of Isaiah 43?
4. Describe a situation in which someone sacrificed his or her reputation to redeem yours. How did it make you feel at the time? What about now?
5. If you were writing Jesus a literal thank-you note for choosing to hang out with you in spite of your mistakes and flaws, what would the first sentence be?

6. Read Philippians 2:1–11. Theologians have called verses 6–11 the “hymn of Christ.” What do you think these New Testament lyrics suggest about how we should treat other people even if they don’t have the right pedigree? Can you think of a pop-culture song with a similar anthem?