



April 16, 2024

Tamar – Genesis 39

Introduction

Matthew begins his Gospel by listing the generations leading to Jesus. In this genealogy Matthew connects Jesus to some of the greatest men in the history of the Old Testament.

Matthew also refers to five specific women in this list. We begin in this lesson with the first woman named.

Matthew 1:

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

² Abraham was the father of Isaac,

Isaac the father of Jacob,

Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,

³ Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was **Tamar**.

Tamar

You find Tamar's rather sordid, X-rated story in Genesis 38.

Genesis 38:1: *At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah.*

Jacob's twelve sons:

From his first wife Leah:

Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun

From Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid:

Dan and Naphtali

From Zilpah, Leah's handmaid:

Gad and Asher

From Rachel, Jacob's second wife:

Joseph and Benjamin

(It was common practice in that day for a barren wife to give her servant to her husband to bear children in her name.)

Genesis 38: 2 – 11:

² There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. He married her and made love to her; ³ she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, who was named Er. ⁴ She conceived again and gave birth to a son and named him Onan. ⁵ She gave birth to still another son and named him Shelah. It was at Kezib that she gave birth to him.

⁶ Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. ⁷ But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death.

⁸ Then Judah said to Onan, "Sleep with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother." ⁹ But Onan knew that the child would not be his; so whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from providing offspring for his brother. ¹⁰ What he did was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death also.

¹¹ Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow in your father's household until my son Shelah grows up." For he thought, "He may die too, just like his brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's household.

Judah now leaves his brothers and goes to stay with Hirah, a man of Adullum. He meets there a Canaanite woman and marries her. What does that tell you right away?

Deuteronomy 7:3 - 4: *Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, ⁴for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.*

He and this woman, the daughter of Shua a Canaanite, had three sons: Er, Onan and Shelah. When it was time for Er to marry, Judah chose Tamar to be his wife. Tamar was a Canaanite as well, so Judah is heaping sin upon sin.

Proverbs 4:14 – 15, 26 – 27: *Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evildoers ¹⁵Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go on your way. ²⁶Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways.²⁷ Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.*

It's the first step off the right path that causes all the trouble.

God does not want you to dwell on what might have been.

Isaiah 43:16 – 19: This is what the LORD says—he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters,¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: ¹⁸“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

Philippians 3:12 – 14: Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Everything in your past can be used by God to teach you, to train you, to make you more like Jesus.

Tamar is married into this Jewish family not necessarily by choice, and how long Tamar was married to Er we don't know, but it couldn't have been a happy marriage.

Judah's sin of marrying outside of God's will produced this evil son, and now he has lost his oldest son. Now, Judah insists that his next son, Onan, marry Tamar in order to produce a son in the name of his brother, Er. It was greed on Onan's part that caused him to find a way to half-obey. What he did was wicked in God's eyes, so God took his life. Now Judah has two dead sons.

What's happening to Tamar all this time? Don't you image she felt used, even abused?

Judah secretly blames Tamar for the death of his two sons but he doesn't realize that God is the one who took their lives. Unlike other widows, Tamar cannot remarry and must stay chaste on pain of death. She is in limbo and has no recourse.

Genesis 38:12 – 19

After a long time Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, died. When Judah had recovered from his grief, he went up to Timnah, to the men who were shearing his sheep, and his friend Hirah the Adullamite went with him.

¹³When Tamar was told, “Your father-in-law is on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep,” ¹⁴she took off her widow's clothes, covered herself with a veil to disguise herself, and then sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that, though Shelah had now grown up, she had not been given to him as his wife.

¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. ¹⁶ Not realizing that she was his daughter-in-law, he went over to her by the roadside and said, "Come now, let me sleep with you."

"And what will you give me to sleep with you?" she asked.

¹⁷ "I'll send you a young goat from my flock," he said.

"Will you give me something as a pledge until you send it?" she asked.

¹⁸ He said, "What pledge should I give you?"

"Your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand," she answered. So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she became pregnant by him. ¹⁹ After she left, she took off her veil and put on her widow's clothes again.

What's your first reaction when you realize what Tamar is doing? Is she justified?

Remember:

- It's been a long time since Judah sent her to live as a widow and wait on Shelah.
- She is obligated to wait for Judah to give Shelah to her. If Judah doesn't fulfill his promise, Tamar will never have children.
- She is not a Jew, so her decision is not guided by God's word or by truth.

Genesis 38:20 - 30

Meanwhile Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite in order to get his pledge back from the woman, but he did not find her. ²¹ He asked the men who lived there, "Where is the shrine prostitute who was beside the road at Enaim?" "There hasn't been any shrine prostitute here," they said. ²² So he went back to Judah and said, "I didn't find her. Besides, the men who lived there said, 'There hasn't been any shrine prostitute here.'"

²³ Then Judah said, "Let her keep what she has, or we will become a laughingstock. After all, I did send her this young goat, but you didn't find her."

²⁴ About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant." Judah said, "Bring her out and have her burned to death!" 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. And she added, "See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are."

²⁶ Judah recognized them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." And he did not sleep with her again.

²⁷ When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. ²⁸ As she was giving birth, one of them put out his hand; so the midwife took a scarlet thread and tied it on his wrist and said, "This one came out first." ²⁹ But when he drew back his hand, his brother came out, and she said, "So this is how you have broken out!" And he was named Perez. ³⁰ Then his brother, who had the scarlet thread on his wrist, came out. And he was named Zerah.

Consider the role that Judah played in all this. He has not remained true to the faith of his father; the culture of Canaan has swallowed him and his family. And this is Judah, whom God chose out of all Jacob's sons to be the lineage of the Messiah.

Matthew Henry commentary:

This chapter (Genesis 38) gives an account of Judah and his family, and such an account it is, that it seems a wonder that of all Jacob's sons, our Lord should spring out of Judah. But God will show that his choice is of grace and not of merit, and that Christ came into the world to save sinners, even the chief. Also, that the worthiness of Christ is of himself, and not from his ancestors. How little reason had the Jews, who were so called from this Judah, to boast as they did. What awful examples the Lord proclaims in his punishments, of his utter displeasure at sin! Let us seek grace from God to avoid every appearance of sin. And let that state of humbleness to which Jesus submitted, when he came to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself, in appointing such characters as those here recorded, to be his ancestors, endear the Redeemer to our hearts.

Through this deceptive, despicable episode, Tamar gave birth to twin boys, Perez and Zerah. And Perez was a direct ancestor in the lineage of Jesus Christ.

Notice Judah's response when he discovers that the "shrine prostitute" was actually his daughter-in-law:

Judah recognized them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." And he did not sleep with her again (Genesis 38:26).

Judah does not say Tamar is guiltless. Tamar's actions aren't justified in any sense, but Judah fully realizes his role in creating the situation..

Why would God allow Tamar to be a part of the great lineage of Jesus Christ? Why would God choose Judah to be the lineage of the Messiah? And why would the Holy Spirit make a point of mentioning her name in the gospel of Matthew?

Tamar and her story are all about grace. The sin is not covered up nor does it go unpunished. But even so, Tamar gives birth to Perez who is specifically mentioned in Matthew 1:3:

Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron. . .

And the genealogy continues right to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What do you learn about God's grace in this story?