

SINNERS & SAINTS

Tamar

Genesis 38

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This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:
Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. – Matthew 1:1-3

If you were with us four weeks ago on July 9—the last time I preached before going on vacation—you might wonder why I’m starting this sermon with the same introduction I used that day, which at the time, I said was probably the most boring intro to a sermon you’ve ever heard. Perhaps you’re thinking, “Did Pastor Layne not have time to prepare another sermon so he’s re-preaching an old one?” “Is he preaching this again since it was mid-summer, and many people were vacationing and missed his earlier sermon?” Or “Did he think people looked sleepy the first time he preached this, and he wanted to ensure everyone got the point of the message by preaching it a second time?”

No, no and no. It’s true that message and this one began with Jesus’ genealogy from Matthew 1, but my July 9 sermon was about Rahab, the Canaanite inn-keeper and prostitute who protected the Israelite spies, and this message is about Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah. As we begin, it’s also important that I clarify that this Tamar, who is introduced to us in Genesis 38, is different than the Tamar mentioned in 2 Samuel 13—Absalom’s sister, who was raped by her half-brother Amnon.

Similar to Rahab, it’s surprising to find Tamar listed in Jesus’ genealogy because 1) she’s a woman, and 2) as you’ll see, she took what I’ll call a sketchy path to becoming an ancestor of Jesus. Tamar and Rahab have some similarities, but Tamar’s story is very different than Rahab’s. Before we get into the details of how Tamar landed in Jesus’ genealogy, I want to make sure we’re all tuned into what this sermon series is about.

Our summer sermon series is titled “Sinners & Saints.” Over the course of June, July and August, we’re exploring the lives of 13 Old Testament heroes and heroines and focusing in on their stories of how God used them to accomplish his purposes. We’ve used the title “Sinners & Saints” because contrary to what we might expect, outside of Jesus, the men and women the Bible highlights in its pages weren’t perfect. They had warts and flaws, and they messed up and sinned just like you and I do... and at times, even worse. Throughout this series, I’ve frequently referenced a quote by Tyler Staton, because I think it perfectly captures our focus in this series as well as the truth about the people God used in the Scriptures and still uses today. To paraphrase Staton, “The Bible doesn’t identify people as saints because of how good they were; the Bible calls people saints because they experienced the goodness of God.” I hope that statement encourages each of us today with the understanding that in spite of what we’ve done, where we currently are, or what our future holds, we can walk in relationship with God, and God can use us to partner with Him in accomplishing his purposes.

To date, we’ve looked at Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Moses, Daniel, Rahab, Gideon, David and Deborah. In the remaining weeks, we’ll explore the lives of Samuel, Ruth and Elijah. Today we’re focusing on a woman named Tamar, and I’m confident that for the vast majority of us, she is the most obscure and unknown character of all the people we’re looking at. I hope to answer three questions today in the course of this sermon. Who is Tamar? Why is she in Jesus’ genealogy? And what do you and I have to learn from her life and her story?

Tamar’s story is found in Genesis 38. It’s a chapter-long interlude in the midst of the Bible’s account of Joseph, which takes up the rest of the last 14 chapters of the book of Genesis.

At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah. 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. – Genesis 38:1-7

Let's pause at this point so I can give a bit of background regarding Judah and Tamar. Judah was Jacob's fourthborn son, and his mother was Leah. However, Judah was given the firstborn son's rights because of his three oldest brother's indiscretions. Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben, in an attempt to solidify his role as his father's heir, disqualified himself by sleeping with his father's concubine. Jacob's second and thirdborn sons, Simeon and Levi, were stripped of their rights, because they violently killed off the residents of a town called Shechem for dishonoring their sister Dinah. Despite their misbehavior, which stripped them of the rights of the firstborn, Reuben and Simeon went on to become leaders of two of Israel's 12 tribes. Levi was established as the head of Israel's priestly tribe, the Levites, again reinforcing the truth that God used and continues to use imperfect people.

To assist us in understanding what happens to Tamar, we need to recognize that women in that culture had very few rights and were viewed as property of men. Their primary purpose was seen as bearing descendants for males. Remember that as I read these next verses and think about the implications for Tamar.

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. – Genesis 38:8-11

Since a woman's primary role in that culture was to produce heirs, the established practice was that if a husband died before he and his wife could produce offspring, his wife was transferred to the man's oldest brother in the hope that she'd be able to deliver a son to carry on her dead husband's name and family line. So Er's brother, Onan, was told by his father to do his duty to his brother and carry on his family name. He slept with his sister-in-law Tamar, but because he didn't want to have a child that wouldn't technically be his, he took steps to ensure that no child would be conceived. Like his brother, Er, Onan was put to death by God for his wickedness. Judah then instructed Tamar to live as a widow awaiting his youngest son, Shelah, to grow up. In other words, Tamar was consigned to live a miserable life. As a widow without children, she had no standing in the culture of that day. I'll pick up reading at verse 12, where this story gets very interesting.

¹² 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.

¹³ When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep," ¹⁴ she 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.

²⁰ 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.” – Genesis 38:12-23

If you’re looking for drama, intrigue, romance, and spicy story lines, modern soap operas and movies have nothing on the Bible. It would be difficult to make this stuff up. Tired of waiting as a widow and in all likelihood never having the opportunity to bear a child, Tamar took matters into her own hands and tricked her father-in-law into getting her pregnant. By asking for Judah’s seal, cord and staff, she safeguarded herself so that when her sin was discovered, she was able to implicate her father-in-law of sinning. In verses 24 and following, we read this:

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. – Genesis 38:24-30

See what I mean? You really can't make this stuff up. In accordance with the law of that day, Tamar was about to be killed for being promiscuous outside of marriage, but before she is burned at the stake, she identifies Judah, her father-in-law, as the father of her child. To his credit, and there's really not much redemptive in this story, Judah puts a stop to the plan to burn Tamar at the stake and admits that he was actually the cause of her indiscretion. He acknowledges that he was more guilty than she was of sinning. Eventually Tamar gives birth to twin boys, Perez and Zerah. Once again, as has already happened numerous times in the Bible story, God's blessing rests on the younger rather than the older son. Perez, since he was technically now Judah's firstborn son, carries on Judah's family line and is therefore listed in the genealogy of Jesus.

After introducing Tamar at the beginning of the sermon, you may remember I said I was going to answer three questions: Who is Tamar? Why is she in Jesus' genealogy? And what do you and I have to learn from her life and her story? I've answered the first two questions, and now we turn our attention to what we can learn from Tamar's life and story.

My standard line as I've preached about Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Daniel and Rahab has been “If God can use people as flawed as those he works through in the Bible, He can also use us”—and that's also true for Tamar, but I think that message is even more poignant in Tamar's story than it is in many of the other stories we've looked at because of how anonymous and seemingly insignificant Tamar was.

Tamar literally had no power or influence. She was a bereaved widow who, to add insult to injury, had then been badly mistreated by her brother-in-law, who took pleasure from her without providing her a child, and by her father-in-law, who disregarded the God-established

practice of the day and intended to leave Tamar wasting away as a forgotten widow. It would be a stretch to say that God directed Tamar to seduce her father-in-law so she might conceive a child, but we do see that God blessed her and her son Perez became an ancestor of God's Son, Jesus. Tamar, the misused and forgotten widow, became the mother of a son whose ancestral line eventually produced Jesus, our Messiah.

I don't want to belabor this point, but I also don't want to assume that each of us is able to personalize it for ourselves. God can take the worst mistakes we make and the most difficult aspects of our lives and turn them around for his purposes. The song "He Makes Beautiful Things" captures this so well, I'd like to share some these lyrics with you...

He Makes Beautiful Things

All this pain

I wonder if I'll ever find my way

I wonder if my life could really change at all

All this earth

Could all that is lost ever be found

Could a garden come up from this ground at all

All around

Hope is springing up from this old ground

Out of chaos life is being found in You

You make beautiful things

You make beautiful things out of the dust

You make beautiful things

You make beautiful things out of us

You make me new

You are making me new

You make me new

You are making me new

Past mistakes. Current struggles. Future missteps. None of them disqualify us from being used of God. As Jesus said to the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I'd like you to say these words aloud with me: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." And Paul's response, which I hope we're able to declare with him, was "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

May you and I be strong in Jesus as we embrace his grace in the face of our weaknesses and shortcomings. AMEN!