

Tamar

[Genesis Chapter 38]

INTRODUCTION:

How much do you know about your family tree? How far back can you trace your ancestors? When my oldest son Thomas was in Mansion House, the official residence of the Lord Mayor of London, he told the Lord Mayor, who is a supporter of his work in China, that his great, great, great, uncle was the Lord Mayor of London! So they looked up in the records their and found his name!

One of the unusual things about the international lifestyle that we live is not seeing people in the context of their families. I always appreciate being able to meet people's parents / children / siblings because it gives me that perspective. Many people only see Janet and I with our foster children, and if they don't know us they might think these are our kids!! – but no, our children are 29, 24, 19 & 15! My parents are 78 & 79 – I am one of 5 boys and Janet is one of 5 girls!

In Matthew Chapter 1 we find Jesus' Family Tree, and this is what we read:

MATTHEW 1:1-3

*A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ
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.*

Today's sermon is about Tamar, one of the four women specifically mentioned by Matthew in the family tree of Jesus. Before we read the story of Tamar from Genesis Chapter 38 I want to state 3 things which I will then go on to explain:

As we consider the role of Tamar,

- this passage is not about sex but justice
- this passage is not about scandal but righteousness
- this passage is not about self-preservation but the survival of the Jews...
& salvation for the world

READ GENESIS 38.

JUSTICE

Genesis story: Judah left his family and went to live with a Canaanite. He settled in that area and married a Canaanite by whom he had 3 sons: Er, Onan and Shelah. Judah then arranged for his son to marry Tamar (whose name means "Date Palm"). The text says that he died because of his wickedness. That put Tamar in a very insecure position, but all was not lost because there was a widespread custom whereby the brother in law would raise up a child for the one who had died, and this is what Onan is told to do:

v.8 Then Judah said to Onan, "Lie with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother in law to produce offspring for your brother."

In the ancient Near East culture, women gained their status from the males to whom they were attached. Women who weren't in the position of a daughter, wife or mother were without patriarchal protection and were misfits in the social structure. This duty of the brother-in-law [known as levirate duty or levirate marriage] gave protection and a future to anyone who became a young childless widow in her husband's people.

- *We see another example in the book of Ruth which also illustrates that this duty may be performed by other male relatives - not only the brother-in-law [and this included the father-in-law]*
- *Deuteronomy 25 describes this as a sacred duty, and that if it wasn't fulfilled the widow should take off one of his sandals and spit in the face of the brother-in-law saying, "This is what is done to the one who will not build up the family line", and that man's family will be known as the family of the unsandalled.*
- *When I worked for BCM I had a Christian colleague who had married his brother's widow. He was single when his brother died leaving 2 young boys, so he married his brother's widow to protect and provide for them in much the same way as described here.*

Onan didn't want to fulfill his duty most probably because of greed - Tamar's child by him would have taken the place and inheritance of his dead brother, meaning that he would have less to inherit [this is also illustrated in the book of Ruth, when her closest relative wouldn't marry her for this reason]. Onan *used* his sister-in-law [several times] but refused to do his duty, and for that he died.

Judah then sent Tamar away – back to her father's house...and he had no intention of giving her his 3rd son Shelah. [v. 14, 26]

Tamar is the vulnerable widow
Tamar is the used woman
Tamar is the victim of tragedy
Tamar is the misfit
Tamar is the outcast
Tamar is the discarded family member
Tamar is the one unjustly treated.

But she didn't sit down and mope; she didn't let her circumstances paralyze her into inactivity – she did something. Injustice can sometimes be overwhelming...but injustice, whether to us or to others, needs to be actively opposed.

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Genesis story: Tamar comes up with a plan of how she can put right this injustice that has been done to her. Unloved and pushed aside, she takes a daring initiative to do what is right under Israel's law. Tamar's self-possession and assertiveness to produce an heir required her using trickery and deception to undo Judah's trickery, denial and deceit – his unjust treatment of her.

She had lived as a member of his family, and she obviously knew the sort of man that Judah was, and the sort of plan that would work to undo the injustice that Judah had done to her...on hearing that he is going to Timnah for the sheep shearing, she dresses as a prostitute and waits for him to pass by that way. The plan worked.

Some months later, after news had got to Judah that Tamar is pregnant, he violently condemns her, "Bring her out and have her burned to death"

Maybe they had already built the bonfire

Maybe they had brought the fire with which they would light the fire...

Maybe the bearded elders had stirred up the people and an angry mob, with the self-righteous Judah at the head, was banging on the door of Tamar's family home...

...until she sends out a package wrapped in a cloth containing the seal, the cord and the staff - the evidence that HE is the father.

When Judah recognizes the incontrovertible evidence – his unique, personal seal, cord and staff - he says: "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her my son Shelah."

The nuance and meaning of the word "righteous" as Judah uses it to describe Tamar is very significant in understanding whether her actions were justified. The Hebrew word [*tsadaq*] means "to be just or righteous." This word and its derivatives are used hundreds of times throughout the Old Testament. It is used to describe the righteousness of Noah (Gen. 7:1), the Law (Deu. 4:8), David (1 Sa. 24:17), and even Yahweh (2 Ch. 12:6). The meaning is therefore: correct, right before God, or justified, in a very strong sense of the word righteous.

- Judah acted as a righteous man – but was he righteous?
- Tamar appears to have acted totally unrighteously – but had she acted unrighteously?
→ *What does that tell us about our perception of righteousness?*
- Judah denounced her angrily. People often most strongly denounce in others those things that are their own personal weaknesses and failings.
→ *What do I most strongly condemn in others?*
- Tamar risked death by burning to give Judah an heir, just as Mary risked death when she accepted her role to be the mother of our Saviour, JESUS.
→ *May God give us that sort of courage and determination so that His purposes will be fulfilled in and through us.*

SALVATION

Genesis story: *When the time came for her to give birth there were twin boys in her womb. When she was in labour one of the boys hands came out only to be retracted, but not before the attendant had attached a scarlet thread around his wrist. Even though this one was then born second, the one with the scarlet thread was regarded as the firstborn.*

This description of the birth brought the following comment from A. Rendle Short in "The Bible and Modern Medicine" (1955). He writes: "*There is in Genesis...an account of the birth of locked twins with in one case a transverse presentation. Tamar, the mother, was fortunate to have survived. The midwife must have been a woman of skill and resource to diagnose correctly such a rare and difficult condition and to bring her patient through successfully.*"

From a human perspective God's plan of salvation seems so fragile!

After that daring and dangerous game-plan of Tamar to save the tribe of Judah from obliteration – the family line through whom the promised Messiah would come, **she risked death by burning.**

Thomas Mann in “Joseph the Provider” writes: “*Tamar had made up her mind, cost what it might, by dint of her womanhood to squeeze herself into the history of the world. She played the temptress and whored by the way, that she might not be shut out; she abased herself recklessly to be exalted.*”

Then it seems that these twins in the line of Judah and their mother, quite remarkably, survive a very dangerous and difficult delivery!

It was the same with the birth of Jesus: Mary not only accepted the embarrassment shame when she humbly submitted to the words of the angel that she, the virgin Mary, would conceive by the Holy Spirit and give birth to a son who would be called the Son of the Most High - **she risked being stoned to death.**

Joseph similarly took that shame and social stigma on himself when, instead of quietly divorcing her he consented to marry her; and when Jesus was born, it was only Joseph’s immediate obedience to the message to flee to Egypt that saved the child Jesus from Herod’s wrath.

→ *God looks for the same qualities in us that ensured the fulfillment of God’s plan through Tamar, Mary and Joseph: humility, trust, obedience & action, and a willingness to risk ourselves and our reputation to do His will.*

The scriptures tell us that there is an enemy of God who opposes God’s will and opposes God’s plan of salvation! In the first chapters of Matthew’s gospel we see that in the story of the birth of Jesus and Herod’s massacre of the innocents. And when Matthew includes Tamar’s name in Jesus’ genealogy, we are reminded of this story in Genesis 38 where:

- We see it in Judah’s moving away from his family and settling amongst Canaanites.
- We see it in Judah marrying a Canaanite
- We see it in Judah’s children: in the wickedness of Er and the refusal of Onan to fulfill the brother-in-law’s duty for Tamar and for the family.
- We see it in the Judah who appears to be unconcerned about the continuity of his own lineage.
- **From a human perspective God’s plan of salvation appears so fragile!**

The qualities in Tamar, Mary and Joseph that overcame Satan’s attempts to derail God’s plan of salvation are the spiritual qualities in us that will make us overcomers too!

So why does Matthew specifically include Tamar in the genealogy of the birth of Jesus Christ the Saviour and Messiah?

Tamar, oppressed and unjustly treated by the strong and powerful:

- She acted against her oppression
- She rights the wrong
- She shows up the self-righteous for what they are – hypocrites
- She ensures that there are children in God’s family

And that is a good introduction to Jesus! Because Jesus came to

- *Jesus came to free the oppressed*
- *Jesus came to put right the great wrong of mankind’s rebellion*

- *Jesus came to expose the façade of human righteousness as hypocrisy – and to replace it with a righteousness from God through his death on the cross, because through faith in Jesus Christ and his death for us we can be made righteous before God*
- *Jesus came to ensure that there are many children in God's family! John 1:12 "To all who receive him, he gives the right to become the children of God – children not born of natural descent, nor of a human decision or of a husband's will, but born of God."*

Just as the bible says about JESUS: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the capstone", so it is with Tamar. She was feared, denied and set aside – and yet it is Tamar who finds herself in such a significant place in the lineage of the purposes of God for you and me – the purposes that were fulfilled in the coming of the Saviour, Jesus Christ.

May God give us eyes to see the Tamars - used, abused and rejected, but who have a critical role to do in the purposes of God! For His kingdom's sake. AMEN.