

Genealogy

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (Matthew 1:1 ESV)

Tamar

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Matthew 1:1-3, Genesis 38

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Genesis 38. After you have found that, I want you to keep a finger there, but I also want you to turn with me to Matthew 1.

This morning is day 1 of a 5-week-long celebration of the incarnation. That being the case, I don't want to take the chance of assuming that we all know what the word *incarnation* means because, if I'm wrong, this could be a long and confusing five weeks for some of you. It's a Latin word that has carried over into English and it means simply "in flesh". The incarnation describes one of the greatest, most incomprehensible mysteries of the Christian faith: God became a man! That's who Jesus is: Divinity clothed in humanity – truly God and truly man – God *incarnate*!

In doing so, he became a bridge for us – spanning across the great chasm between a holy God and a sinful people. I love the imagery that one commentator uses to capture this truth:

To be of any use, a bridge across a chasm or river must be anchored on both sides... With one foot planted in eternity, he planted the other in time. He who was the eternal Son of God became the Son of Man. And across this bridge, the man Christ Jesus, we can come into the very presence of God, knowing that we are accepted because we have a Mediator.¹

We were separated by a great chasm – a chasm that We created with our sin and rebellion. Long lay the world in sin and error pining – longing for an answer – longing for a way back to God – till HE APPEARED! Hallelujah, he appeared! A Thrill of hope! The weary world rejoices! God saw

¹ Ralph Earle, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Ephesians - Philemon)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 11, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 358.

us in our sin and our ruin, and He built a bridge across the great chasm – a bridge that was firmly planted on both sides! Jesus is the way home!

That's what we're going to be celebrating for the next five weeks, and it is a worthy focus! Amen? As we celebrate, we are going to be making our way through Matthew's genealogy. Look with me now to Matthew 1. We're going to read from verses 1-3. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

² Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, (Matthew 1:1-3 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now, let's be honest: This text feels like an odd choice to structure our Christmas celebration. We don't typically read genealogies with a great sense of expectation, do we? We take a deep breath, and then we stumble through the names that we can't pronounce, and we wonder if there's any purpose in these lists at all.

But these genealogies DO serve a purpose. They serve several purposes in fact! The primary purpose of *this* list at the start of Matthew's Gospel is to demonstrate that Jesus is the true son of David. He is the Messiah King that the Israelites had long been waiting for! That's the major theme of this genealogy and it's what the Jews who read this account would immediately come away with.

But Matthew is making more than one point here, and it is those often-overlooked emphases that we are going to be considering this advent. Did you know that Matthew references five women in this genealogy? The first woman appears in our text this morning. Look again at verse 3:

and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah **by Tamar** (Matthew 1:3a ESV)

That seems like an unnecessary addition. Why is Tamar included in this list? What does this addition accomplish? He didn't mention Isaac's mom, or Jacob's mom. In fact, if this were *merely*

a recounting of history to prove Jesus' familial connection to David, then the practice of the day would have him limit this genealogy to the men of the family.

But this isn't a list for history's sake. Matthew is *teaching* with this list. Matthew is *shaping* his listeners with this genealogy. The inclusion of Tamar is a significant and INTENTIONAL footnote that Matthew has chosen to include in his telling of the Christmas story.

But Matthew is writing here to a people who are familiar with the Old Testament, therefore, if we are going to see what Matthew intends for us to see, we will need to look back to the book of Genesis. Who is Tamar? What is her story? Why does Matthew mention her here? To that end, please look with me in your Bibles to Genesis 38.

This is a long text, so we're going to read the chapter section by section and I'll explain the story as we go. But before we begin, I want to warn you off the top that this is one of the top three WEIRDEST chapters in all the Bible! We're going to read some things that will make us grimace. And yet, Matthew has attached this curious footnote to the Christmas story for a reason. So, let's look now to Genesis 38 and listen closely to the story:

The Christmas Story: A Curious Footnote

Look with me now to verse 1:

It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. ² There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, ³ and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. ⁴ She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. ⁵ Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him. (Genesis 38:1-5 ESV)

Let's stop there. In these verses we are zooming in on the life of Judah. The placement of this story is very significant. If you look down at your Bible, you will see that the chapters before and after this are all devoted to the story of Judah's brother, Joseph.

Do you remember the story of Joseph? He was the noble, honest, righteous young man who was favoured by his father and was given a beautiful "technicolored dream coat". Well, his brothers

were jealous and – led by Judah, who we are considering in today’s text – they sold Joseph into slavery. We don’t have time to unpack all of the details, but after a series of events in which Joseph’s integrity and purity were displayed, he was promoted to become the second most powerful man in Egypt! In fact, one might even say that JOSEPH is the kind of guy that should be included in Jesus’ genealogy. And yet, Jesus didn’t insert himself into the line of Joseph, but into the line of Judah. And, right smack in the middle of the inspiring story of Joseph, Moses has chosen to insert this less-than-inspiring story of Judah.

Moses was an expert storyteller, and he used this opportunity to expose the horrifying contrast between these two brothers. While Joseph was courageously resisting temptation and living faithfully for the Lord, Judah was chasing after forbidden women! That’s what we see in these first five verses. God had explicitly forbidden the Israelites from intermarrying with the Canaanites because He didn’t want them to adopt their evil practices. Judah’s grandfather, Isaac, passed this warning down to Judah’s father. In Genesis 28 we read:

Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and directed him, “**You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women.** (Genesis 28:1 ESV)

To be a son of Abraham was to be *distinct from the Canaanites*. And yet, here we find Judah disregarding God’s clear instruction and following his passions into sin and ruin. As we will see, Judah’s sin went far beyond his choice of wife. As is always the case, one sin leads to another. A little compromise here leads to ruin and destruction down the road.

Let’s jump back into the story at verse 6:

⁶ And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and **her name was Tamar.** ⁷ But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. ⁸ Then Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.” ⁹ But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. ¹⁰ And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. ¹¹ Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, “Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up”—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father's house. (Genesis 38:6-11 ESV)

Let’s pause here and catch our breath.

As I said, this is a weird story. This is the kind of story that you hope your unbelieving friend doesn't bring up at the watercooler. Before we go further, I think it might be helpful to explain the difference between prescriptive and descriptive texts. A *prescriptive* text tells us what we *should* do. A *descriptive* text tells us what people *did* do – with no commentary as to whether what they did was right or wrong. Well, in this case, our text is describing some things that were done that were really, really wrong! To be clear, there are no heroes in Genesis 38! The hero comes later – in Matthew 1, to be exact. That being said, let's unpack what we just read.

We're not told what kind of wicked things Tamar's first husband did. We're just told that, whatever it was, it was heinous enough that God struck him dead. Now, he must have been doing some AWFUL things because there were some wicked men in the first 37 chapters of Genesis. Yet, this is the FIRST time in the Bible that we read of God being so displeased with a man's wickedness that He struck him dead on the spot!

At this point, it was the responsibility of the next brother to give Tamar a son. Maybe you're wondering why that is. Well, in an agrarian society where a person's livelihood was almost directly related to their ability to do hard, physical labour, it was hard for women to sustain themselves. Land, property, and other aspects of a person's inheritance were passed down through the males of the family. If you were a widow without a son in the ancient near east, you were in a dangerous position. For this reason, Onan was commanded to impregnate Tamar. Her son would then become the heir of Er's inheritance, and Tamar would be provided for through that inheritance.

But Onan didn't want Tamar to become pregnant. He did some calculations and realized that, if Er had no descendent, then HE could take over the inheritance. A baby would be bad for business! So, he did what he felt he needed to do to keep from impregnating Tamar.

But, in Onan's calculations, he failed to remember that our God is the defender of widows. That was a costly oversight. God saw Onan's wickedness He struck him down!

This left Judah with two dead sons and only one remaining. After watching what happened to Er and Onan, Judah didn't want to risk a similar fate for Shelah, so he gave Tamar some half-hearted, insincere assurances that he would help her later. He left Tamar to languish, childless and husbandless. That's where we pick up the story in verse 12:

¹² In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite.¹³ And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep,"¹⁴ she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage.¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face.¹⁶ He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?"¹⁷ He answered, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." And she said, "If you give me a pledge, until you send it—" ¹⁸ He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him.¹⁹ Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

²⁰ When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her.²¹ And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute who was at Enaim at the roadside?" And they said, "No cult prostitute has been here."²² So he returned to Judah and said, "I have not found her. Also, the men of the place said, 'No cult prostitute has been here.'" ²³ And Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her." (Genesis 38:12-23 ESV)

Let's stop here. Up until this point, Tamar was an innocent victim in the story. That all changes here. Tamar, realizing that she had been given false promises, decided to wrongly take matters into her own hands. Cult prostitution was one of the wicked worship practices of the Canaanites. Judah had clearly succumbed to the very thing that Isaac had warned about – he had married a Canaanite and adopted their way of life. Tamar seized upon her father-in-law's sin and set the trap.

She posed as a cult prostitute and convinced Judah to leave his unique signet ring and staff as a surety until the proper payment of a goat could be delivered. Judah happily complied, and he unwittingly impregnated his daughter-in-law.

I don't imagine that I need to expand much further on any of the details here other than to say that this story is vivid example of the depravity and complexity of sin. Sometimes we sin out of ignorance. Sometimes we sin out of lust and passion. Sometimes we sin out of desperation. But sin is sin, and it is a terrible thing.

This brings us to the climax of the story. Let's pick back up in verse 24:

²⁴ About three months later Judah was told, “Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality.” And Judah said, “Bring her out, and let her be burned.” ²⁵ As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, “By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant.” And she said, “Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.” ²⁶ Then Judah identified them and said, “She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not know her again. (Genesis 38:24-26 ESV)

Let’s stop here. Fresh off of sleeping with a prostitute – in the midst of a life lived in gross hypocrisy and blatant disobedience – Judah hears the report about Tamar’s sin, and his self-righteousness flares up. “Bring her out and let her be burned!”

Unfortunately, there are all too many Judah’s in this world – men who fancy themselves as the gods of their little universe – men who are unconcerned with their own blatant sin but who demand a pound of flesh for the sins of others.

When Tamar put her desperate plan into motion, she knew that this day would come, but she had opted to take the risk. As the servants seize her for execution, Tamar instructs them to deliver Judah’s signet ring and staff. She wants him to know that, if he is to follow through on this execution, he will also have to execute his unborn son.

Her plan succeeded. Not only did Judah relent from the execution, but by all accounts, this wakeup call legitimately served as a turning point in his life. Verse 26 says:

And he did not know her again. (Genesis 38:26b ESV)

Our text concludes with an account of the birth of Perez and Zerah. Look with me to verse 27:

²⁷ When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. ²⁸ And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, “This one came out first.” ²⁹ But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” Therefore his name was called Perez. ³⁰ Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah. (Genesis 38:27-30 ESV)

Thus, the line of Judah continued. THIS is the family that our Holy, Holy, Holy God inserted Himself into.

At this point, I imagine that some of you are thinking to yourselves, “Why on earth are we talking about THIS on the first week of advent?” That’s a fair question, but we need to bear in mind that it

was Matthew – inspired by the Holy Spirit – that directed our attention here. As he reminded us that Jesus was the long-expected King in the line of David, he intentionally included this footnote! Why did he do that? What are we meant to see here? That’s the question I want to conclude with this morning:

What Are We Meant To See Here?

God’s Word speaks honestly about the brokenness of this world. And thank God for that! Truly! Because, everywhere I look, I see problems that defy comprehension. I see systems that are so permeated with corruption that hope seems like a fool’s game. I see families that have been so ravaged by sin or by circumstance or – as is often the case – by BOTH, that I can’t even imagine a positive outcome! This story of Judah and Tamar – as shocking as it is – is the kind of story that is playing out all around us.

Matthew is inviting us to marvel at the scandal and the glory of the incarnation! God entered into the story! Moreover, God entered into THIS story! This shocking, broken, sinful, HORRIFYING story! This story that had no hero! This story that had no good guys! This story that had no silver linings! And yet, God was working.

So, what are we meant to see here? Well, for starters, we need to see that:

1. **God redeems wicked plans**

If you were Matthew, would you have included this story as a footnote? Would you want to mention Judah? It was bad enough when Judah sold Joseph into slavery. But then he turned around and impregnated his daughter-in-law? That’s the kind of thing that ought to get you written out of the story, right? That ought to be the last time we utter the name of Judah, right? So, what does Matthew do? He brings up Judah, and then makes a point of mentioning Tamar!

What did Matthew see that we’re not seeing? Well, as I mentioned earlier, this story of Judah lies right in the middle of the story of Joseph. And do you remember the climactic words that Joseph spoke at the end of his story?

As for you, **you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good**, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. (Genesis 50:20 ESV)

You meant evil. But God meant it for good.

Er had evil plans, but God was up to something bigger. Onan acted with wickedness in his heart, but God's plan was not foiled. Judah was guilty of adultery and idolatry, but God was working even still. Tamar's solution was an abomination, but still God's plan was unfolding. Each and every person in this story was working evil in one form or another. But God was working for GOOD!

See that this morning! Rest in that this morning!

An old Portuguese proverb says:

God writes straight with crooked lines.²

Isn't that good? The Apostle Paul said it even better. He wrote:

And we know that for those who love God **all things** work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

Friends, let me say it as clearly as I can: Your story isn't over!

Maybe you feel like Judah. You crossed all of God's boundaries and did life your own way. You followed your passions into sin and now all you can see is brokenness. You see kids that have left the faith. You see consequences that you're going to have to live with for the rest of your life. You see a dark, miserable future with no hope in sight. Hear me this morning: The story isn't over.

Maybe you feel like Tamar. You are the victim of the sins of others. People who should have known better. People you trusted! So, you took matters into your own hands. You sinned, and you strayed, and you did things that you shouldn't have because you convinced yourself that you had to. And now you feel helpless and ashamed and you regret the lines that you crossed. Hear me this morning: The story isn't over!

² Quoted in Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 245.

This Christmas, as you look to the manger, remember that God draws straight with crooked lines! God brings light out of the darkness! What man intended for evil, God intends for good! Our God redeems wicked plans.

Second, we need to see that:

2. God redeems sinful families

I can almost picture a little twinkle in Matthew's eye as he writes this line in the genealogy:

and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah **by Tamar** (Matthew 1:3a ESV)

Who would include that? Who would draw our attention to the story that we just read? It doesn't exactly scream Christmas, does it? Yet, I think Matthew's soul was singing as he pondered this mystery in his heart. God entered one of the most broken and dysfunctional and sinful families that you could ever imagine! The Prince of Peace inserted himself into a family of chaos! The spotless lamb of God traces his roots to the sinful lust of Judah.

The reality is, we all come from families with a dark past. We are all sons and daughters of Adam – we all spring from families filled with angry fathers and rebellious mothers. Some of us are more aware of that than others. Some of us have been more immediately affected by that than others. But we all share a common story, and it is not a good one.

This genealogy reminds us of a glorious hope: God redeems sinful families!

Jesus enters into the family chain, and he changes everything! He did that emphatically on that first Christmas morning, and he CONTINUES to do it amongst us today as men and women and boys and girls are transformed by his grace! Sinful and dysfunctional family chains are being redeemed and revived all around us! Have you ever thought about that? It is one of my greatest joys as I minister in this place to see men who are nothing like their fathers, and their grandfathers, because Jesus entered into the family chain and changed everything! It is one of my greatest joys to see women who by the grace of God are setting a new trajectory for the generations that will follow them.

When Jesus entered into this genealogy, everything changed! This Christmas, as you look to the manger, let it remind you that God redeems sinful families.

And finally, we are meant to see in this story that:

3. God redeems broken people

I mentioned earlier that, by all accounts, this encounter with Tamar truly appears to have been a turning point. Let me expand on that now. The Judah who we met in the *beginning* of the Joseph story is not the Judah we find at the *end* of the Joseph story. At the beginning of the story, Judah was the voice who urged all the brothers to sell Joseph into slavery. That's the kind of man that he was. But, at the end of the story – after this episode with Tamar – Judah was the one who stood up and who offered *himself* as a slave in place of his brother Benjamin. From self-serving to self-sacrificing – that's the change we find on display in Judah.

The man who sold his brother into slavery over a fit of jealousy – the man who disregarded God's commandments so that he could satisfy his passions – the man who could sleep with a prostitute on one day and then blaze with self-righteous hypocrisy the next – THAT MAN was TRANSFORMED! Judah deserved to be struck down for his sin, but God was merciful. Rather than crushing Judah, God elected instead to humble him. And then, God picked that humbled hypocrite up off the floor and transformed him into a selfless servant who was willing to offer up his own life for his little brother.

That's what God does. He redeems broken people.

What right did Judah have to be named as an ancestor of Jesus? What right did Tamar have to be included in the family of God? And yet, God in His mercy chose to redeem these broken men and women in order to shine his glory through them. In fact, that's exactly why Jesus came. As the angel declared to Joseph:

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, **for he will save his people from their sins.** (Matthew 1:21 ESV)

Jesus entered into the family of Judah and Tamar in order to save adulterers and prostitutes and hypocrites and traitors. He came into this world to take sinners like Judah and Tamar and you and me and to bring us into the family of God! As the Apostle John reflects on the incarnation, he writes:

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.¹² **But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God** (John 1:9-12 ESV)

Isn't that incredible? Isn't that marvelous? He entered into our genealogy so that we could be invited into his! He inserted himself into the most broken of families so that he could rescue and replant us into his perfect family. You haven't disqualified yourself. If there was room for Judah – if there was grace for Tamar – then there is grace for you. As Richard Sibbes once said:

There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us.³

THAT is why Matthew included this footnote in the Christmas story. THAT is what we are meant to see as we marvel at the incarnation. As you look to the manger this Christmas, see the God who redeems wicked plans, and sinful families, and broken people. See, and believe. There is a Redeemer! This is his story. And, by God's grace, now it is our story as well. Let's pray.

³ Richard Sibbes as quoted by R. Albert Mohler Jr., *The Prayer That Turns The World Upside Down*, (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), 89.