

Tamar's Triumph

- Genesis 38
- This is a difficult passage to read and no walk in the park to preach. I wanted to be as sensitive as I could with it, which is why Jesús just read a few selections. Why is this story here? I think there are two reasons, the simplest being, it happened, and it further illustrates the decline of the covenant family into corruption. The second reason, and the most important one, is that from this ungodly situation, the family line of the Messiah is preserved. The story opens with Judah choosing a Canaanite woman to marry. What do we know from the patriarchs about the covenant people of God choosing to marry Canaanites? Right, it was forbidden. But Judah does so anyway, and we are told his wife who is not named gives Judah three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah, an unfortunate name for a boy. He learned to fight; had to. Judah chose a wife for his firstborn, Er, and her name was Tamar. But Er was so wicked in the sight of the Lord that the Lord put him to death. Tamar was a widow with no children, and the Levirate custom of the day demanded that her husband's closest brother be given to her so that she could produce an offspring to carry on her dead husband's name. And so she would have children to support her in her old age. This would become law in Deuteronomy 25, and if a man's brother refused to perform his duty, the elders of the city would take him before the widow, and she would pull off his sandal and spit in his face. Onan, the second born son was called to fulfill this obligation on behalf of his dead brother. And he was happy to play the part with Tamar and go through the motions several times, but he made sure that he did *not* help her have a child. Why? Moses tells us, "because he knew that the offspring would not be his." This selfishness of Onan was wicked in the sight of the Lord, so the Lord took his life as well. The action God took against Er and Onan, Kidner writes, "emphasizes the steep moral decline in the chosen family, which only the outstanding piety of Joseph would arrest for a while. This tendency to an immediate plunge from grace, whenever faith is no longer an active force, is evident more than once in Genesis, but the pattern is most explicitly worked out in the book of Judges." There is one bright spot in this story. Her name is Tamar.
- Let's look at this story under three main points: Tamar's sorrow, Tamar's strategy, and Tamar's triumph.
- **Tamar's sorrow (verses 11-12)**
- Tamar had sorrow enough to be married to a wicked man who was so wicked that the Lord took his life. That sorrow was compounded by the fact that she was now a childless widow, and the first one in line who could help her have a child refused to do so, and so *he* was put to death. Judah then makes her sorrow unbearable when he tells her to go back to her father's house. This was an unspeakable thing, and no place for a young, childless widow to be, because there was another son in Judah's family who could have fulfilled the obligation. Most believe that Judah acted out of fear that this woman was cursed in some way, and it was her fault his older two sons were killed. Though he told her to go home to her father and wait until the third son, Shelah, was old enough to take his place with her, he had no intentions of allowing his third son to be anywhere near her. But none of this wrongdoing was on Tamar. All of the blame lies with Er and Onan, and their wickedness cost them their lives, and with Judah. His faithlessness could have led to the destruction of the covenant family.
- We read that Judah's wife with no name dies. After he had mourned her death, Judah perhaps got on his horse with no name and headed for Timnah, where the festival of sheep shearing would happen. In ancient Hebrew tradition, sheep-shearing became a spring festival to celebrate a sheep-herder's plenty. It became a significant celebration in the Old Testament characterized by feasting, heavy drinking, and the settling of old scores. There's a story in 1 Samuel of when David heard that in Carmel a man named Nabal was shearing his sheep. David sent ten men to Nabal to ask for some of the feast to be shared with them to bring back to David and his men. "Now your shepherds have been with us, and we did them no harm," David says through the messengers, "and they missed nothing all the time they were in Carmel." In other words, you have plenty and we protected what you had from

others, so will you share with us? Nabal refused and that story is how he ended up dead and his wife Abigail ended up with David. That leads us to...

- **Tamar's strategy (verses 13-23)**

- Tamar must have spent years wearing a widow's garment, waiting for the time when Shelah would be old enough and that time had come and passed. Tamar knew that Judah would not keep his word and give his third son to her. He had deceived her, so she made a plan to deceive him. Tamar changed out of her widow-wear, put a veil over her face, and went to Enaim, a city on the way to Timnah. She knew Judah would pass by there, and she knew enough about Judah and his character that if she posed as a harlot, just for him, she would be successful. But she was also risking her life. Allen Ross writes, "Tamar qualifies as a heroine in the story, for she risked everything to fight for her right to be the mother in the family of Judah and protect the family...She did what justice and the death of her husband demanded of her—but by a very dangerous scheme."
- Her face is covered and when Judah approaches, he sees her and assumes she is part of the entertainment for road-weary, low-character men. Her veil and the fact that she was by the wayside, alone, were all the clues Judah needed. God used this imagery in Jeremiah to describe an unfaithful Israel who went chasing after other gods: "By the wayside you have sat awaiting lovers..." (Jeremiah 3:2) Judah asks Tamar if he can come see her and she asks him what price he will pay. "I will send a young goat from the flock." Again the goat plays a part in the life and future of the covenant family. Tamar knows that Judah may not keep his word as she has seen that part of his character already. So she asks for a pledge, his signet, cord, and staff. Men of means would wear a signet ring or, in this case, a cord around their neck that held a metal cylinder, upon which was engraved the family seal. It identified the owner and could be used to complete contracts or covenants. What do we wear as our seal, as believers? "In him (Christ) you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." (Ephesians 1:13-14) We don't wear him, the Holy Spirit wears us!
- Judah gives her his seal and his staff as a promise that he will send her a goat in exchange for her services. But she had no use for the goat, which is why she wasn't in the same place when Judah's man came looking. It was the signet she wanted, and it was the signet of Judah that will save her life. Allen Ross writes, "It is not appropriate to judge her by Christian ethics, for in her culture at that time, her actions, though very dangerous for her, were within the law."
- When it is discovered that Tamar is three months pregnant, Judah, her father-in-law calls for her to be burned to death. *Bring her out! Set her on fire for this terrible sin!* When they drag her out to be burned, Tamar sends word to her father-in-law that the man who is responsible for the baby she is carrying is the owner of *this signet, cord, and staff*. It is then that her exoneration comes. Judah says, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son, Shelah." Yes, Judah, she was! If it were left up to Judah, the covenant family of God would have assimilated with the Canaanites. Tamar was the rescuer. That leads us to...

- **Tamar triumphs (verses 27-30)**

- Six months later, Tamar gives birth to twin boys, and the story again points to God's sovereignty. As the birth is happening, one of the boys sticks out his hand, so the midwife ties a scarlet thread around it and says, "This one came out first." The other boy in there said, "Uh-uh." Like his grandfather before him who was also a twin and who surpassed his older brother, Perez somehow maneuvered past the "first born" and comes out ahead. The midwife looks and says, "What a breach you have made for yourself." Perez means "breaks out," and it was this son who broke out and became part of the genealogy of Christ.
- If you notice some similar themes in this story to some other unlikely members of the lineage of Christ, it is no accident. Rahab is the harlot who will be rescued when Israel conquers Jericho because

she hid the spies and then tied a scarlet cord to her window, as they had told her to do. She is in the lineage of Jesus. So is Ruth, a foreigner, a Moabite woman no less, who came to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law Naomi after her husband had died. She ends up marrying Boaz when the closest kinsman redeemer refuses to take her as a wife. Ruth is the grandmother of King David and greatly esteemed by Christian women everywhere. Tamar should be as well. In fact, not only here but also in the book of Ruth is Tamar spoken of in a positive light. When the elders blessed the union of Boaz and Ruth, they said, "May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah." (Ruth 4:12)

- What are some things we can take away from this story? 1- God chose Judah in spite of his faithlessness.
- 2- God used Tamar's resourcefulness and determination to accomplish his purposes. He sometimes uses desperate acts of desperate and broken people to work out his perfect will.
- 3- God's plan is perfect and it is eternal. When Peter wrote to the "elect exiles" in his first letter, he says they are (**we** are!) elect exiles "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." The foreknowledge of God with regard to his people does not mean that God looked down the long corridor of time and said, "Hmm, there's a good person. Tamar is good. I will save her." Or Ruth, or Peter, or Paul. Or you or me. To be foreknown by God means that Tamar and Ruth and you and me who are saved and co-heirs with Christ were the object of God's affection and loving concern from all eternity, along with Christ! It had nothing to do with our "goodness" and everything to do with his mercy. May HIS name be hallowed!
- Stand and pray with me the Lord's Prayer as it appears on the screen.
- Greet one Another