

In the Line of the King: Tamar
Matthew 1:3; Genesis 38
ABC 11/26/17

Although this isn't the 1st Sunday of Advent, I'm starting my Advent series this morning. Why? Because there are 4 sermons in it & I'll be out of the pulpit on Dec 10th due to Kendra's wedding. However, I expect you to be here then. Don't miss just because the pastor's gone! In my 29 years as a pastor, I've preached around 120 Christmas sermons. This year I'm doing something I've never done before. Maybe because I've been preaching through a long list of names in Rom 16, this year I've decided to preach on a genealogy. Aren't you excited?!? If Paul is correct, & he is, that all Scripture is profitable (2 Tim 3:16), that includes genealogies. In Mt 1, (turn there), we have 42 generations given between Abraham & Jesus, broken into 3 groups of 14 generations each (17). Beginning a book with a genealogy seems strange to us, but knowing who a Man was by knowing His ancestry was important to people in the ancient world, especially Jews, who needed to prove their Jewishness in order to take part in temple worship. In this list, surprisingly, because it wasn't the norm for that day, we find 4 females mentioned along with Mary, the mother of Jesus. We're going to take a look at these 4 ladies who are included *In the Line of the King*. Some of these stories are sordid, slimy, sleazy, & hard to read, this morning being a prime example. But they're included in God's Word & these ladies are in the direct lineage of Jesus so that we might see, recognize, & understand, to some degree, God's grace toward us all. **Mt 1:1-3**

PRAY

If the Bible weren't inspired of God, Gen 38 wouldn't be there (turn there). It doesn't make God's people, Abraham's descendants, look good. If this episode had happened in your family, you'd want to keep it quiet. But God has a way of displaying things we'd try to cover up. Hanging dirty laundry in public is embarrassing, not only for those whose laundry it is, but also for those who view it. When you're around someone who shares intimate problems too freely, it's awkward, isn't it? You don't know what to say, so you mumble something & try to change the subject. That's the way many preachers & commentators approach Gen 38. They skim it or skip it &

move on to the life of Joseph. But God saw fit to take this skeleton out of the closet & include it in His eternal Word. Without further ado, let's read **Gen 38**.

What in the world does this have to do with Christmas? What does this story have to do with anything & why is it in the Bible? Sounds like something off of daytime TV. But 2 themes run through this chapter: The 1st is how quickly God's people can drift from Him. Judah's sin is contrasted in chpt 39 where Joseph resists Potiphar's wife. Derek Kidner puts it this way:

As a rude interruption of the Joseph story it (chpt 38) serves other purposes as well. It creates suspense for the reader, with Joseph's future in the balance; it puts the faith & chastity of Joseph, soon to be described, in context which sets off their rarity; & it fills out the portrait of the effective leader among the ten brothers.¹

The 2nd theme is the holiness & grace of God. Those 2 qualities are always in perfect tension: God's grace never negates His holiness, nor does His holiness nullify His grace. God's holiness is seen when He strikes dead 2 of Judah's sons for their sin. But God's grace overcomes the sin of Judah & Tamar, so that their son, Perez, becomes a part of the genealogy of Jesus (Mt 1:3-16). We see that while God's people are prone to corruption, God is marked by holiness & grace.

1. Descendants Judah, the son of Jacob, grandson of Isaac, great-grandson of Abraham, a member of the family God was dealing with on the earth, lived just as the Canaanites lived. Abraham's family is a mess. Judah & his brothers have sold Joseph into slavery & lied to their father. This is no *Leave it to Beaver* family. This family is in desperate need of God's grace & we see it at work, even in this. Judah's corruption follows a progression:

A. He distanced himself from God's people. In vs 1 Judah leaves his family & becomes involved with the Canaanites. That didn't happen accidentally. It involved a choice on Judah's part. We don't why he did this, but he did. He becomes buddies with Hirah & the people of Adullam. Even though his brothers weren't a godly bunch, Judah's move signified a move away from the people of God.

B. He marries outside of God's people. Judah saw a Canaanite woman, the daughter of a man named Shua, & **he took her in marriage & went in to her** (2). The emphasis is clearly on the physical, not the spiritual. Judah *saw* her, liked what he saw, & had to have her. Judah & his wife

¹ *Genesis*, p 198

have 3 sons: Er, Onan, & Shelah. They grew up & Judah found a wife for his oldest son named Tamar (marriage at 15 wasn't uncommon for males & 13 for females in that culture). Judah, contrary to Abraham's warning (Gen 24:2-4), has picked a Canaanite wife for himself & now one for his son. Thus, it's not surprising to read that Er was so evil God took his life. His sin isn't mentioned, but he must have been a wicked man. This was an era before God gave the Mosaic Law, in a society dominated by family tribal rules. If a woman's husband died without offspring, his brother was to marry her to produce a son as the legal heir of the deceased husband. Therefore Judah told his 2nd son to go in to Tamar & perform his duty as a brother-in-law with her. This is called levirate marriage (from the Latin, *levir*, meaning *husband's brother*), a common custom in the ancient Near East which was later included in the Mosaic Law (Dt 25:5-10). If a man died childless, his brother was to marry the widow & the 1st son was regarded as the heir of the deceased man. Onan apparently married Tamar, but he didn't want to give his brother an heir. He had an obvious conflict of interest. Onan knew a son with Tamar would only further the cause of his dead brother rather than his own. If they didn't have a male child, Onan would receive a larger % of the family inheritance. Onan sinned because his motivation was evil. Not only did he sin against his father & Tamar, but against his dead brother. He put his own personal interests above his brother's family line. For his refusal to raise up an heir for his brother, God struck Onan dead (9-10). Er & Onan's sin emphasizes the steep moral decline in God's chosen family, which provides the backdrop for Joseph's godliness. Judah is now left with 1 widowed daughter-in-law, 2 dead sons, & a 3rd son too young to marry. Judah didn't know why his sons were dropping dead. All he knew is, they married Tamar & then they died. He wasn't about to have his 3rd son marry her. It never seemed to occur to him that it was his sons who were the problem. He told her to go back to her father's house & wait until Shelah was old enough to marry, but he didn't intend to go through with it (11). In Judah's mind, Tamar was jinxed. Several years go by (12). Shelah is old enough to marry, but it's become obvious to Tamar that Judah isn't going to keep his word. If she were to bear children to carry on the name of her 1st husband, she decided she must force the issue. She comes up with a plan to trick Judah into

getting her pregnant so she'll be the mother of his heir, as was her right. As we go through this, remember this is God's chosen family, His chosen people. You look at this family & you wonder where Joseph came from. He's like nobody else in his family.

2. Deception The whole plot of vss 12-26 revolve around Tamar's rights to be the mother of Judah's heir. She was the wife of his 1st born son & she had the right to be the mother of the heir to Judah. Since Judah was unwilling to risk the loss of his last & only living son, Tamar determined to force the matter by trying to become pregnant by Judah himself. Tamar, & what she does, is all about the right to be the matriarch of Judah's eldest son's line. Tamar knew Judah was trying to brush her aside & so she devised a strategy. The text itself makes no moral comment on it. Neither does Moses. But in light of the fact that in the very next chapter Moses records Joseph refusing the propositions of the wife of Potiphar, Moses is clearly condemning Judah's actions. One reason he's describing this tale in Gen 38 is so we can see the contrast with Joseph. Judah has been sucked into the Canaanite culture, value system, & practices because he's living in & married into it. This is Judah's own choice. Time moves on. Judah's wife dies. He mourns for her. & now it's time for shearing his sheep. Unknowingly, Judah's the one going to be fleeced. This was a festive time, *when sexual temptation would be sharpened by the Canaanite cult, which encouraged ritual fornication as fertility magic.*² Tamar hears of Judah's plans & puts a deceptive plan in motion. She takes off her widow's garments, dresses provocatively, possibly as a cult prostitute, with a veil, & sat where she knew Judah would pass by. Sure enough, Judah saw her, assumed she was a prostitute, & solicited her services. His readiness to do this & the calm way he handles the negotiations show this wasn't the 1st time he'd done this. Tamar knew his character or she wouldn't have dreamed of trying it. They negotiated the price (one kid goat) which Judah didn't have with him. She was smart & took some collateral so he'd pay later. It was this collateral, not the pay, she was after. She took his staff, seal, & cord (equivalent to your driver's license, passport, & license plate. The seal was a clay seal with his markings on it carried on a cord around his neck. Possession of these would give Tamar proof of

² Kidner, p 200

the identity of the father of her child(ren) when he was born. They had sex, Tamar conceived, went home & put on her widow's garments again.

Think back with me. This is the beginning of the Jewish nation, the people who would produce the Messiah. There have been 3 generations of deceit already. Jacob deceived Isaac by wearing a goatskin to appear hairy (27:9-10, 16). Judah deceived Jacob by dipping Joseph's coat in goat's blood (37:31). Tamar deceived Judah with a disguise & a veil. This is a family of deceivers & tricksters. But they're God's chosen family. The one whom the Messiah, the Redeemer, the One who would bless the whole world would come through.

Back to the story. Judah sends his payment by the hand of his friend, Hirah, who couldn't find this prostitute. This put Judah & Hirah in an embarrassing situation. If Judah reported the theft of his staff & seal by a prostitute or went public in looking for her, it would become public knowledge that a prostitute had gotten the best of him. Judah decided to take his losses & move on. 3 months pass & word comes to him that Tamar is pregnant. She's officially engaged to Shelah, Judah's son, but is pregnant by someone else. Even though Judah never intended to go through with the marriage, he acts highly offended & calls for the death penalty. It's possible he saw this as the solution to a problem over which he'd agonized. Sooner or later he'd have to face the fact that Shelah, his only living son, was pledged to Tamar. There was no doubt he was old enough to assume the role of husband & father, but Judah feared losing this son also (11). If Tamar were put to death, his problem would be solved. No Tamar, no threat. It was almost too good to be true! Tamar would be out of the picture & Shelah could take another woman as his wife. Of course, he's highly hypocritical, condemning Tamar for the same sin of which he was guilty. Judah calls for her to be burned alive (Hebrew says, *Take, burn*), an even harsher death than the normal stoning. As they were taking Tamar out to burn, she sends Judah's personal items to him with the message, *I'm pregnant by the man to whom these things belong. Do you recognize them? Do you realize what this means?* She could have pointed to Judah in front of his peers & declared, *He's the father!* But presenting Judah's items & not mentioning his name, Tamar showed her willingness to die rather than to shame him publicly, revealing her righteous

demeanor.³ Judah was had. He admitted he'd been wrong in not giving Tamar to Shelah as he had promised. Judah doesn't say anything about his sexual sin. He just admits that he'd done wrong in not keeping his promise to give Tamar to his son in marriage. He acknowledges she is more righteous than he. Or, he's more unrighteous than she is. It must be noted that it's Tamar the Canaanite, not Judah the patriarch, who was humanly responsible for the survival of the descendants of the house of Judah. & yet Jewish scholars believe this all reflects well on Judah since he eventually confessed his sin against Tamar. *Since Judah confessed to his error sincerely, this is a sign of righteousness & so the story of Tamar is read & explained (vs 26).*⁴ Others have different views. However, there can be no doubt that God shed His grace on Tamar because she gave birth to twin boys, Perez & Zerah, from whom came King David & King Jesus. Tamar probably didn't understand all God's promises associated with Judah's family. But she understood her right to remarry, bear children, & partake in Judah's heritage. Although rejected by Judah, she sought inclusion with Israel. Perhaps unaware, she was standing on the promises of God. & God accepted her.

We who confess the power of God's grace must never lose hope that His Spirit can change the greatest sinner into the greatest saint. In fact, history proves time & again that those who oppose the Gospel most fervently or flee from Jesus most rapidly are often those who later confess Christ most passionately. No matter how far gone we think a sinner may be, God's grace is greater & more far-reaching than any sin (Dan 4:28–35; Eph 3:8; Js 4:6). Judah illustrates this truth perfectly. Here was a man so cold that he led his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery (Gen 37:25–28). He left his family & married a Canaanite. On top of that, he ignored his daughter-in-law's desperate plight (38:11–14), & frequented prostitutes. However, God changed his heart, bringing him to repent over his neglect of Tamar (26). The next time we read of him he's back with his brothers & family. Later he's willing to give up his life for Benjamin (44:14–34). Though he did evil like Simeon, Levi, & Reuben before him (34; 35:22), Judah's repentance results in his preeminence in Israel (49:8–12). The Messiah would be a descendant of his. It appears Judah

³ Talmud Sotah 10b

⁴ Mishnah Megillah 4:10

learned something through this & returned to the faith of his family. This is all by God's grace. Tamar demonstrates the Lord's grace a bit differently by showing the reward that comes to those who honor Him. This woman willingly left her pagan past to serve the one, true God & His people. When Abraham's sons according to the flesh wouldn't raise up children for him (thus ignoring the Lord's promise), she showed herself to be Abraham's daughter by faith when she risked her life to give heirs to Judah. Her faith, though not meritorious in itself, is rewarded when God makes her a matriarch of Israel. Tamar is important to mankind's redemption through Jesus Christ. God used Judah & Tamar (through Perez) to bring the Messiah into the world (Mt 1:3). Isn't that a great Christmas story? How's it end?

3. Conclusion (27-30) The closing paragraph of the chapter describes the birth of the twins that resulted from the union of Judah & Tamar. Since the twin that was 1st to emerge from the womb traditionally possessed the rights of the firstborn, some kind of identifying mark was placed on the 1st to come from the womb. When one of the boys thrust out a hand, a scarlet thread was tied about it, assuming he'd shortly come forth. The hand was withdrawn, however, & the firstborn was the other boy. This firstborn was named Perez, while the next son, the one with the scarlet thread, was named Zerah. As later genealogies will prove, this firstborn son, Perez, was to be the son of Judah who would carry on the messianic line.

Isn't this a great chapter? Talk about intrigue, mystery & turn of events. It has marriage, incest, death, prostitution, conspiracy, deception, & pregnancy. Israel's roots were rotten! They couldn't look back upon their ancestry with any thought of smugness & pride. There were too many skeletons in the closet for that. Instead, they had to acknowledge that whatever good had come to their nation was the result of God's grace alone. Even though they used dubious methods, this chapter demonstrates God's grace & His sovereign control of the Messianic line.

In our day, it's common to sacrifice God's holiness on the altar of His grace. We excuse our sin by thinking (or saying), *We're under grace*. But God's grace doesn't exclude His judgment & discipline. Remember, it's in Galatians, which champions God's grace, that Paul writes,

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life (6:7-8).

Have you ever wondered why God struck down Er & Onan for their sin, but not Judah & Tamar? The answer lies hidden in the inscrutable sovereign purposes of God. For reasons known only to Him, He chose to make Er & Onan examples of His judgment, but Judah & Tamar objects of His grace. But both cases show that God, in His holiness, judges sinners & disciplines His people. Although Judah wasn't struck dead, he was disciplined by the Lord. He lost 2 grown sons. He'd later go through the famine in the land & have to bow before his brother, whom he'd once despised. Though we'd prefer an incident like this not to be associated with God's people, let alone our Savior, the account of Judah & Tamar provides a glimpse of God's amazing graciousness & goodness. As the psalmist says, **The LORD is good to all, & His mercies are over all His works** (145:9). God's grace means that on account of Jesus, He shows favor to those who deserve judgment. We see God's grace here in that this morally corrupt Canaanite culture was allowed to continue in its sinful course for another 400 years, until **the iniquity of the Amorite** was complete (Gen 15:16). During those 400 years, any Canaanites who'd heard of God's promises to Abraham & his descendants probably mocked Him. Abraham's descendants were in slavery in Egypt. Canaan & its idolatrous culture was thriving. There's always the danger that during a period of God's grace, sinners will mistakenly think things will continue that way forever. They won't! But the real beauty of grace in this chapter is found in Mt 1:3, where we read that Tamar & her son Perez, born through this sordid affair, are included in the genealogy of Jesus. God used them to produce the ancestor of the Messiah. Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more! Tamar becomes one of the only women listed in the genealogy of Jesus. This promised Redeemer has Canaanite blood flowing in His veins because God loves to turn that which is evil to His own purposes & bring blessing from curse & redeem that which deserves destruction.

Here are a few lessons we can learn from the sordid story of Judah & Tamar:

1. Grace takes our greatest mistakes & makes them the ingredients of God's greatest blessings.

Our 1st glimpses of Judah aren't very hopeful. He encourages his brothers to sell Joseph to the

Ishmaelites (Gen 37:26-27). This may have prevented them from killing Joseph, but the better path would have been to condemn his brothers & release Joseph. The details of Judah given in Gen 38 are even more disturbing. He becomes entangled with a best friend from among the Canaanites. His choices grow worse & include the neglect of Tamar, the sin of immorality, & the deception that followed. But Judah later becomes a more godly man (Gen 44:18-21). In the end, Jacob blesses Judah with the promise that he will be the leader of his brothers (49:8-13). Judah was not bound to dwell forever in the darkness of his sin. God's grace lifted him up & provided that the lineage of Jesus would come through this awful relationship of a selfish man & a desperate woman. If God can use Judah & Tamar for His purposes, He can also use us.

2. Grace surprises us with unexpected heroes. Tamar is spoken of with great respect by the Elders of Bethlehem in the time of Ruth.

The elders, said, We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel & Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel; & may you achieve wealth in Ephrathah & become famous in Bethlehem. Moreover, may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring which the LORD will give you by this young woman (4:11-12).

Tamar is the 1st female named in the NT. Think about her. She's a Canaanite, she slept with her father-in-law & gave birth to twins through manipulation or prostitution. Yet God's grace establishes her as one of the key people in the lineage of Jesus! Yet Tamar isn't to be praised, God is. God chose to bring His Son into the world through the sordid & soiled story we've looked at this morning. If He can do that, He can certainly use the likes of you & me!

3. Grace is never about us, it's always about God. Judah & Tamar were both acting in their own interests, but God was putting this all together for His glory! In our lives, God's grace isn't ultimately about us getting our way or our getting out of a tough situation. God chooses to bless us in spite of our sin in order to demonstrate the extent of His grace! This is the theme of Rom 9:22-23.

What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath & to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? & He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.

4. Grace turns our failures into God's victories. As we've seen, Judah was so humbled by his failure that he committed to follow God's ways from this time forward. God turned Him around. It's never too late to turn your heart to God. He can use us even though we're horrible sinners. Every person that God uses is a sinner saved by grace!

5. Grace always points us to Jesus. Even though the Messiah isn't mentioned in Gen 38, it's ultimately all about Jesus! The child of Judah & Tamar is a noticeable part of the lineage of Jesus. The sad story told here points us to Jesus! How? Tamar got her life back when Judah looked at her & said, *In spite of your sin, you are righteous.* Right? In spite of her sin, all this incest & deception, Judah covered it, didn't he? He says, *You are righteous,* & she got her life back. Judah is pointing to the ultimate Judah. He's pointing to his descendant, Jesus. What you & I need, the thing that'll make us able to admit the depth of our sin, is we need to hear the ultimate Judah, Jesus Christ, look at us & say, *Truly, in spite of your sin, you are righteous in Me.* How can Jesus do that? The answer is He's the opposite of His ancestor Judah. Judah was punishing Tamar for his sins, but the real Judah, the real Jesus, took the punishment for our sins. That's the reason why He can look at us like Judah looked at Tamar with all the sin & say, *Righteous!* You have to know that kind of acceptance. The story of Judah & Tamar & Perez points to the great Judah, Jesus Christ, Redeemer, Messiah.

The twisted parts of our lives should likewise point us to Jesus. He is our hope. If your life is a mess, He can still become the center. Turn to Him through faith & He'll clean you up & give you hope. He'll take you & forgive you. He'll use you again even if you've failed Him. This is His grace & He delights to make it known to you. Judah is one of many figures in history who show us there are no sinners too wicked for God to redeem. Those who commit the most horrific crimes can still be transformed & renewed when they repent & turn to Christ. If this is true, then we should never think God can't convert & sanctify even the worst of sinners. Don't give up praying for & reaching out to even the vilest offenders of God's law.

Jesus, the descendant of Judah through Tamar, was born without sin so that as the spotless Lamb of God He could die as the Substitute for us as sinners. Thus God is able to be both holy &

gracious through Him. He is holy in that all sin is punished. If a person rejects Jesus, he bears the penalty for his own sin, eternal punishment & separation from God. If we trust Jesus, His death pays for that person's sins. God is gracious in extending forgiveness to every sinner who will receive it freely through Jesus. Jesus promised, **All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, & the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out** (Jn 6:37). Every sinner who comes to Christ finds mercy at the cross. There are no great men & women of God. Only a great God. Despite our sinfulness, God still shows grace & mercy. He still brings about His will & purposes in spite of us. God graciously does for us what we cannot do for ourselves: mending broken lives & restoring shattered hopes. We're all prone to corruption. **All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Jesus** (Is 53:6). & no sin, no matter how awful, puts us beyond God's reach. We don't have to be conformed to corruption. If we avail ourselves of God's grace through the descendant of Judah & Tamar, the Lord Jesus Christ, He'll keep us from the corruption of this evil world.

Nancy Guthrie writes in an article named, *The Best of the Boring Parts of the Bible*:

The NT begins with a genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham. & oh the grace we find in this boring part of the Bible! There in the lineage of Jesus is ... Judah who fathered Perez & Zerah by Tamar, his daughter-in-law.

She concludes,

The #1 best thing about the boring parts of the Bible is: The genealogy of Jesus shows us that Jesus welcomes flagrant but forgiven sinners into His family. This gives outsiders & outlaws like you & me hope. He is not ashamed to call us brothers & sisters.⁵

⁵ www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-best-things-about-the-boring-parts-of-the-bible