

Tale of Tamar | October 14, 2018

In 1982, Readers Digest came out with a condensed Bible; it is 40% shorter than the actual Bible. Which seems somewhat dangerous! One would assume that if God gave it to us, we probably shouldn't edit it down. It turns out, over the last century there have been a number of attempts to shorten or condense the Bible; one of the popular ways to do so is to cut genealogies. Which, if we're honest, there are probably quite a few of us that glaze over when we get to a genealogy or skip it altogether. Which brings us to today's text! Matthew 1:1-17.

Matthew 1:1-17 (NIV)

¹ This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

² Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴ Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife, ⁷ Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, ⁸ Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah, ⁹ Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰ Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah, ¹¹ and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.

¹² After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³ Zerubbabel the father of Abihud, Abihud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴ Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Elihud, ¹⁵ Elihud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah. ¹⁷ Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

Did you see it? Did you see why this genealogy matters so much? Matthew wrote a shocking opening to his gospel. **The Gospel is proclaimed!** Genealogies were critically important 2000 years ago; they provided context, they gave identity, they told a story. And Matthew managed to proclaim the gospel through what at first glance appears to be a simple list of names.

It was unusual. For a Jewish audience who would have had much, or all, of the Old Testament memorized, they would know these names. Genealogies were put together to confirm a family's position and authority, to enhance its story. The value was put on first born males. As a first born male, it makes sense to me. This genealogy breaks the norm; there are a number of younger brothers listed. More significantly, it includes four women. In a culture where women had little to no status, were treated as property, could not own land, could not testify in court,

it was incredibly rare to include a woman in a genealogy – the only time it was done was to enhance the purity and dignity of the lineage. Now, there are four women who it would have made sense to include: ***“The Mothers of Israel”*: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah**

But they aren’t mentioned. Instead, Matthew highlights four different women, four unlikely women. ***The New Mothers of Israel*: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, “Uriah’s Wife,” Bathsheba**

You may know their names already. All four of them were foreigners, which is shocking enough on its own. Rahab was a prostitute who gave her life to God and saved the Israelite spies. Ruth was shocking in the way she asserted herself for what was rightfully hers; scholars agree there is far more sexually charged innuendo in her passages going to Boaz than we often realize. Bathsheba, summoned to the King’s bedroom at a time when a woman could not say no to the king. It is notable that the Bible only speaks of David being confronted as sinning in that story. And Tamar, perhaps the least known to us today; a Canaanite woman with shocking story.

Last week Pastor Nate spoke on the Bible’s instructions regarding responding to leadership; to our shepherds. But in that Nate tackled not just how we respond to leadership in general, but how we respond to those who abuse their authority, their position, their power. This week we will see how the gospel was lived out in the life of a woman who was on the receiving end of abusive authority, manipulation at her expense. Tamar’s story is recorded in Genesis 38.

[TWELVE BROTHERS IMAGE] To give some context, these are the twelve sons of Jacob. The eleventh son, Joseph and his famous coat of many colors, had just been sold into slavery by his older brothers. Reuben had hoped to save him, but Judah, the fourth born son helped engineer a way to both get rid of him and make some money through it. He was a wicked man. Yet, later in Genesis, Judah is the one who repents to Joseph, offering to give his life in exchange for the youngest brother. Genesis 38 records a step in Judah’s transformation.

Genesis 38:6-10 (NIV)

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.

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.

That got weird fast. Here’s what’s at stake; inheritance. Women had no status; becoming a widow was a dangerous affair. Consequently, if a man died before having a male heir, his brother would marry the widow and produce a male heir in the name of his deceased brother, to carry on the brother’s name, to provide for the widow, and to have the inheritance. Er, as a first born, would have been entitled to a double inheritance. **[3 BROTHERS; INHERITENCE DIVIDED BY QUARTERS IMAGE]**

We don't know Er's sin, only that he was evil. But we do know Onan's sin. He didn't mind using Tamar for sex, but he had no intention of allowing her half the inheritance. If he did not produce an heir in Er's name (that's a tongue twister!), he went from receiving a quarter of the inheritance to becoming the firstborn entitled to what would now become two-thirds. [2 BROTHERS; INHERITENCE DIVIDED BY THIRDS IMAGE]

When he died as well, Judah goes on to further the sin. He used the excuse that his third son, Shelah, was too young to get married. But he had no intention of allowing this foreign woman, who had already seen two of his sons die, be with his final son or gain her inheritance. [1 BROTHER; TOTAL INHERITENCE] Instead, he sent her away and essentially hoped she would just disappear – trying to manipulate his way out of honoring his responsibility to her.

Tamar waits. Time goes by, Shelah is old enough, but there is no wedding. And so she takes action; knowing that Judah would be traveling, she dressed like a prostitute, which at the time included a veil.

Genesis 38:15-19 (NIV)

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.

Well, Judah sends his men with the goat, but they can't find her. He essentially goes, "oh well, I get to keep my goat."

Genesis 38:24-26 (NIV)

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.

This is the first time Judah begins to acknowledge his unrighteousness. He was wrong. He essentially says, her actions are more justifiable than mine. Tamar's actions play an important role in changing Judah's direction, in him becoming the man who would later repent and offer his own life in his brother's place. From selfishness to selflessness.

But our focus is Tamar. Her story spanned years. An evil husband, a second husband who took advantage of her sexually but refused to honor her. A father-in-law who used her body – and was ready to have her put to death for something he did.

For the Jews, she was one of the heroes of the Old Testament. I'm reminded of Joseph's words to Judah and his other brothers;

Genesis 50:20 (NIV)

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Paul teaches the same principle in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 8:28 (NIV)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

It's easy for us to forget the incredible persecution believers were going through; they were being tortured, put to death, fed to lions, cut off from family and work. And Paul tells them in the midst of this incredible hardship that God is working for their good – something that was probably incredibly difficult to see! Incredibly difficult to feel.

Which brings us back to this genealogy in Matthew. These four women did not fit the mold. From society's perspective, they were outsiders for so many reasons; foreigners, prostitutes, all of them had different degrees of questionable sexual history, their lives had hardship. From a human vantage point, Tamar would not be someone you would talk about. But in God's economy Tamar's value, Rahab's value, Ruth and Bathsheba's value is calculated far differently.

Ephesians 2:10 (NLT)

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

When we give our lives to God we become new creatures. We become His masterpiece. You see, *In God's story, Tamar's presence enhances the purity and dignity of Jesus' lineage.* In God's story, Tamar is His masterpiece, a woman of incredible value and influence. Her story did not just challenge and impact Judah; her story lives out the gospel message. She is a critical presence in sending a message about Christ to those who open the book of Matthew

We find our identity, our value, in Christ – in HIS story, not our past.

And because of that, Tamar absolutely enhances the purity and dignity of Jesus' lineage. Do you see yourself that way? Do you see yourself the way Christ sees you? Pure, holy, dignified, immeasurably valuable?