

# **JESUS: SON OF TAMAR**

## **Matthew 1:3 and Genesis 38:1-30**

### INTRODUCTION

If you were Osama bin Laden's son and lived in New York City, would you want that information published on the pages of the New York Times? Or Rod Blagoievich, the governor of Illinois who is indicted on charges of selling Barak Obama's Senate seat to the highest bidder, if you were his son and wanted to run for political office, would you put that information in all of your political advertisements? If you wanted to be an investment counselor and your grandfather was Bernard Madoff, the guy who was just arrested for running a \$50 billion "Ponzi" scheme, would you put that info on your business card?

For 2000 years the opening lines of the NT, which is the document designed for the purpose of advertising the greatness of Jesus, has begun with a list of 41 of his human ancestors. What is shocking about this list is that it contains some of the most notorious people talked about in the OT. Among the most sordid stories in the OT is the story of the birth of Perez, the son of Judah, whose mother is Tamar. Matthew only mentions four of the mothers within the human ancestry of Jesus and so the mention of Tamar is very deliberate. The story is contained in the 38<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis and it is an X-rated account. This is the kind of family story that is never talked about in the family, much less published for all to see. Yet, Matthew intentionally draws attention to this particular story, this particular human ancestor of Jesus by mentioning the fact that the mother of Perez is Tamar. Why does he do it? What does God want us to learn about the coming of Jesus by making sure we know that he is the son of Tamar?

Before I answer that question I need to tell you the story of Tamar and the birth of her son Perez. I will do the best I can to not use graphic language. However, you parents may have to do some explaining when you get home. This story is embedded in the story of Joseph and is directly related to that story. If you will remember, Joseph was the 11th of Jacob's 12 sons born to four women. He was Jacob's favorite son, as he was the firstborn of his favorite wife, Rachel. His 10 older brothers despised him. Just prior to the story of Tamar the 10 brothers beat Joseph up and throw him into a pit. They have a fierce debate about whether or not to kill him but then Judah, persuades his brothers to sell their annoying younger brother into slavery to a passing caravan of Ishmaelite traders. So by Judah's cunning the brothers not only got rid of Joseph but profited from the deed. Upon returning to their father they told him that a wild beast had killed and eaten Joseph and they showed him Joseph's coat, covered in blood to prove their story.

It is at this point, while Jacob mourns the death of his son and Joseph is taken to Egypt by the Ishmaelite traders that we are told the story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar. Judah leaves his father's tents and moves to live among the Canaanites, the enemies of God. He takes a Canaanite woman as his wife and proceeds to have three sons. His first son, Er, marries a Canaanite woman, named Tamar. However, Judah's oldest son is "wicked in the sight of the Lord" and so God justly kills him, leaving Tamar as a widow. It was the custom of people in those days that when a married brother died without leaving any children that the next oldest brother in the family was to marry his older brother's widow and have children by her that would then take the dead brother's place in the line of inheritance. In other words, the younger brother, Onan, was to father a child by Tamar who would then receive the firstborn's share of Judah's inheritance. This would mean that the younger brother would get less of the inheritance. So Onan used Tamar for his gratification but refused to have a child by her. While only he and Tamar knew why she was not getting pregnant, God saw what he was doing and so God killed him too. Judah's third son, Shelah was still too young to be married so Judah told Tamar to return to live with her father as a widow until Shelah was old enough to have children for the oldest son by her.

Though Judah had told her that eventually Shelah would be her husband, he had no intention of letting his son marry her as he was sure that she was to blame for the death of his two sons. He cruelly left her in a perpetual state of widowhood and childlessness. So the years passed and Shelah grew up and did not marry Tamar. After

a long time, Judah's wife died and after the days of mourning were fulfilled he went up to Timnah to where his men were shearing his sheep. Tamar heard that her father-in-law was going up to Timnah. As her father-in-law was not going to do the right thing she came up with a plan to obtain a son for her dead husband. She took off her widow's clothing and dressed herself as a temple prostitute with a veil over her face. She knew her father-in-law and went to sit on the roadside where she knew he would be passing. Sure enough, when Judah saw the prostitute by the road he went up to her and propositioned her. When she asked what he would pay he promised that he would send her a goat in payment. The veiled Tamar demanded that he give her something that would guarantee that he would send payment. So he gave to her, his seal and cord and walking staff. This was like giving her his driver's license and credit cards. After fulfilling his lust he left and she returned home.

When Judah got home he sent a goat by a friend to pay the prostitute and retrieve his property. However, the woman was nowhere to be found and the friend returned with the goat but without Judah's seal, cord and staff. Judah did not do any further investigation so as not to arouse suspicion about what he had done. Several months go by and one day he is informed that the widow of his oldest son, Tamar, has been discovered to be pregnant, thus having committed adultery. Judah's response to this news is one of the most extreme examples of human wickedness and hypocrisy in the Bible. He said, "Bring her out and have her burned to death." While Tamar is being dragged out of her tent and brought to the piled wood she sends friends to Judah with his seal, cord and staff and they say to him on her behalf, "I am pregnant by the man who owns these." Judah immediately recognizes them as his and understands what has happened. He declares that she is more righteous than he is because he refused to give to her his son Shelah. So rather than killing her he brought her into his house as a wife but never had sexual relations with her again. So Tamar gave birth to twin boys, the second born was named Perez and it was through him that God brought Jesus into the world.

As I said, Matthew did not have to mention Tamar in his genealogy but he does, thus reminding anyone who has read the Bible about this story of human perversion and deception. There is no way that any of us would want this story made public and yet God wants the world to know that it was through these scandalous people that he brought his son into the world. Why does he do this?

## MAIN POINT

**Jesus is the son of Tamar, therefore we know that...**

### **I. God only saves sinners**

There is no question that one of the chief reasons God includes this story in the Bible and then draws our attention to it as he begins the story of the good news of Jesus' coming into the world is to demonstrate that God does not save good people or people who are trying hard to do the right thing but that God only saves sinners. This story and scores of others like it are in the Bible to crush human presumption. The story of Judah and Tamar is our story. Let me draw your attention to six ways that the sinfulness of human beings is emphasized in this story.

**1.** Judah, the cruel and greedy brother who joyfully led his brothers in the sale of Joseph and in the deception of their father leaves behind the people of God and goes to live among the enemies of God. Then, like Eve seeing the fruit and taking it to eat, like Pharaoh seeing the beauty of Sarah and taking her into his harem, like Ishmael taking two Canaanite wives against the wishes of God and his parents, like Shechem seeing Dinah and taking her and raping her, he sees a Canaanite woman and takes her to be his wife. He willingly chooses to live among and live like the enemies of God, even though he knows better.

**2.** We discover that cruel and faithless Judah has raised two faithless and wicked sons. Shortly after his oldest boy, Er, is married to Tamar God kills him because he was "wicked in the Lord's sight." So Judah gives Tamar to his second son, Onan, in order for Onan to impregnate her so that Er would have a descendant. However, Onan knows that if there is no son born to Tamar, then he, Onan, will be able to take all the rights of the firstborn. Onan's evil is even greater because he knows, as the grandson of Jacob, that it is God's will to raise

up descendants for the sons of Jacob and yet he refuses to believe the promises or to obey the commands of God. He despises God and God's promises and refuses to impregnate Tamar, so God kills him also.

3. Like a malignant cancer, Judah's evil continues to grow. He does not mourn the deaths of either of his two sons but works out a scheme to protect his retirement account, his youngest son, Shelah. As he deceived his father, so he ruthlessly deceives Tamar. He blames Tamar for his sons' deaths. He does not acknowledge their evil or God's justice in killing them but rather blames the helpless widow for their deaths. He lies to her and intends for her to remain in a perpetual state of widowhood and childlessness while he pursues other options for his son Shelah.

4. Years go by while Tamar lives in the prison of widowhood; Shelah grows up and she is not given to him. Now we discover that Tamar is also a cunning person. She knows her father-in-law well and knows just how to obtain what he is withholding from her. She, like Rebekah before her, knows how to use this man's desires against him. She knowingly engages in incestuous relations with her father-in-law in her lust for revenge and for a child. He willingly engages in sexual immorality because he knows no other way to live.

5. When Judah's friend cannot find the "temple prostitute" in order to retrieve his cord, seal and staff we find out that Judah is afraid of being exposed. He cares what people think about him while caring nothing of what God thinks about him. He cannot bear the thought of being shamed in public when he knows God has seen his every action and he feels no shame at that reality.

6. The evil of Judah reaches a crescendo when, three months later he is informed that his daughter-in-law is pregnant. The adulterer immediately calls for her to be brought out and burned alive for the crime of adultery. What a spectacle this is; the lust-filled, greedy, cruel-hearted Judah, like a righteous judge, calling for the execution of the widow for committing adultery. Ah, but Tamar, while being bound and dragged to the pile of wood, has a friend take her "ace in the hole" to Judah. Tamar may die but she will have her revenge on the father-in-law, the heartless hypocrite who sought to deprive her of children and happiness in life. The only thing he feared, being humiliated in public has been brought to pass by Tamar. Tamar exacts her sweet revenge.

This story is for us a relentless reminder that God's favor is not bestowed on us due to anything good in us. We have done nothing to earn God's kindness. Rather, we have, like Judah, like all of God's people only done evil. If you do not see yourself in Judah and Tamar, then you are not reading the Bible as God means it to be read. These stories are not like the newspaper, merely giving us juicy stories of other's sins so we can wag our head and say, "How can people live like this?" "Can you believe how bad the world is getting?" This story is included in the divine record to confront each of us with the reality of who we are.

Have you not lied and deceived those in authority over you in order to cover up your crimes and indiscretions? Have you not enjoyed the company and joined in the lifestyle of those who are enemies of God? Have you not blamed others for the misfortune that has befallen you because of the evil you have done? Have you not abused your authority in order to protect your interests and in so doing injured others? Have you not sought to gratify your sexual appetites outside of monogamous marriage, the only place that God permits the expression of sexual desire? Have you not done evil in order to pay back those who have offended you? Have you not feared what humans would think if they knew your sins but have not given a thought to what God thinks, who sees all your sins? Have you not self-righteously condemned others for acts of evil that you yourself have engaged in?

I beg you to not read these stories and to shake your head at these people the way you shake your head at child molesters and wall street con-artists as if you are somehow better or different. These stories are written for us to see ourselves in these lives so that we will view the coming of Jesus into the world as good news.

*Jesus is the son of Tamar, therefore we know that...*

- *God only saves sinners*

- *And therefore we know that...*

## II. God only saves sinners by sovereign grace

What is so easy to miss in this story and in life is that in the midst of evil there are strong evidences of the undeserved, unearned favor and kindness of God. In and through all this immorality, God is working to save his people, to keep his promises. I want you and I to be as shocked by these expressions of mercy as we are by the iniquity we see. I want you to see five evidences of the grace of God in the midst of these disgusting lives.

1. God promised Jacob that his descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore. Judah is one of his sons. In spite of Judah's disobedience in living among the enemies of God and marrying into their family, God does not forget his promise but graciously, against all expectation gives children to Judah. Judah is acting and living as an enemy of God and yet he blesses him with three sons in fulfillment of his promise.

2. When Er and Onan, Judah's sons are killed by the Lord, we should wonder why it is that Judah and his ten brothers are not dead. Er and Onan did evil in the eyes of the Lord and are summarily executed for their evil. Surely, the evil that Er and Onan did cannot be greater than what the ten brothers did in selling Joseph into slavery and deceiving their father? Why does God justly punish Er and Onan but permit Judah and his brothers to live? We see God's grace evident in the fact that Judah is not killed, as he deserves. Yes, he loses his sons and he is put to shame, but he deserves to be dead and in hell. When we see God's justice in the killing of Er and Onan, we should wonder why it is that we are not dead. Can it be that we have done nothing deserving of death? Why is God permitting you and I to remain alive when he has justly taken the lives of others? It is not surprising that people die, even die violently. What is surprising is that anyone lives. I have said this many times before and I will continue to say it because we rarely live as though we believe it, "You and I have never been treated as we deserve." If you do not believe that, then you are not living in light of reality. God is being enormously kind to you right now by simply giving you life and breath, just as he was enormously kind to Judah by not killing him.

3. How is it that Judah did not recognize his daughter-in-law when he was with her in the most intimate ways a man could be intimate with a woman? How is it that he gave away the signs of his authority and wealth to a prostitute? How could he be so stupid? How is it that he could be so completely oblivious to what was going on? How could the plan of Tamar work out so perfectly? How is it that Tamar's evil scheme should have such a happy ending? God graciously vindicated the oppressed but evil widow by exposing her oppressor and rewarding her with her heart's desire, children. There is no way Judah would have been deceived or that Tamar's plan would have succeeded without divine intervention. No human could have made this plan and carried it out with such precision on his or her own.

4. It is God's stated intention to give Jacob's descendants an abundance of children. Judah and his sons despise God's plans and promises. They work against his stated will. Yet, Tamar, a Gentile woman pursues the obtaining of children for Judah. She patiently waits as a widow for Shelah to grow up, rather than seeking another husband. She takes great risks and exercises tremendous courage to have children by Judah, the descendant of Jacob. Where does this earnest desire to have children for Judah come from? Why this willingness to endure suffering and to take such risks to get children through Judah? While she is wrong to use the methods she uses, Tamar's desire to have children for the descendants of Abraham is evidence of God's gracious work in her life.

5. The birth of Perez at the end of the story and his inclusion in the genealogy of Matthew points to the answer to the biggest question that this chapter, indeed the whole list of Jesus' ancestors poses: how is it right for God to be so kind to such wicked people? The birth of Perez is pointing ahead to the birth of one of Perez's descendants who will be the one who dies for the sins of Judah and Tamar. When God is accused of playing favorites, of being unjust by killing and sending to hell Er and Onan while he blesses Judah and rewards him

with eternal life he merely says, “I punished my Son for all the sins of Judah and therefore it is just for me to reward Judah with all this kindness, for the sake of my Son.”

If God is willing to save Judah and Tamar, then there is no reason he would not be willing to save you or me. We meet the qualifications. We are sinners. Do you ever look at your own wickedness or at the dysfunction and evil in your family and despair? Does the chaos of your life and relationships ever overwhelm you with a sense of hopelessness? This story ought to fill you with hope. Even in the most wicked and chaotic situations, God is at work to save his people. God is willing and able to rescue you, no matter how evil you have been, through his Son Jesus. God is able to change you, no matter how hard hearted you have become. Rejoice in God’s Sovereign Grace that overcomes all sin to fulfill his great and glorious plan to save all his people out of this present evil age.

*Jesus is the son of Tamar, therefore we know that...*

- *God only saves sinners by sovereign grace*
- *And therefore we know that...*

### **III. God only saves sinners by sovereign grace through faith in Christ**

This story obviously emphasizes that God does not make promises, keep promises and work in the lives of humans because they deserve to have him work in their lives. “God saves sinners by sovereign grace” is the message of this narrative. Yet, we also know that the Bible clearly says that the sinners that God saves trust him. While the men and women who make up God’s people are sinners, yet they are different from the people they live around in that they exercise faith in the promises of God and obey and worship God because they believe those promises. There are evidences of faith in both Judah and Tamar in this story. At the end of the story Judah openly confesses his sin against Tamar. He acknowledges that it was wrong for him to not give his third son to Tamar. It was wrong for him to believe the death of his first two sons was her fault. It was wrong of him to enslave her to widowhood for life. Then, while she and her sons come to live in his house, he does not have sexual relations with her again. The implication of the text is that he never has sex again, for the rest of his life. Why are we told this? It is because God forbids father-in-law—daughter-in-law sexual contact. It was incest and according to God’s law as recorded in Leviticus those who engage in this relationship are to be executed. Therefore, Judah, for the first time chooses to live in obedience to God. He had lived life gratifying the lusts of his heart and now he lives a life of restraint. This is always the impact of God’s grace in a sinner’s life. The way you know that God is working in your life is that you openly confess your sins, you trust God’s word and seek to live in obedience to him.

But also, while Tamar's tactics are clearly sinful, yet the fact that she took such risks to obtain a son for Judah points to her faith in the promise of God to make a great nation of out the descendants of Jacob and Judah. Her risk taking exhibits her faith that God intends to bless all the nations of the world through the nation of Israel. The fact that she is a Gentile is a clear indication that the people of God are known not by their race or ethnicity but by their faith in God's promise to bless the world through the "Seed of Abraham." So, as we see that Jesus is the son of Tamar we are encouraged to flee to this one who was named Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. We recognize ourselves in these sinners and so we know that we also, like them can be saved from our sins by this son of Tamar as we trust in his life and death and resurrection.

*Jesus is the son of Tamar, therefore we know that...*

- *God only saves sinners by sovereign grace through faith in Christ*

© Copyright 2008 John Swanson.

You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that:

- (1) you credit the author,
- (2) any modifications are clearly marked,
- (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and
- (4) you do not make more than 1,000 copies.

If you would like to post this material to the web, or if your intended use is other than outlined above, please contact River Hills Community Church, 2843 West Court Street, Janesville, WI 53548. (608) 758-0943. mail@riverhillsonline.org