

Genesis 38:1-6 ; Matthew 1:1-3

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 38, and we read the first few verses of the chapter, recounts the story of the sexual encounter between Judah and Tamar.

So, that's between father-in-law and daughter-in-law. Now, that alone gives you an idea that what we have recorded for us here is a pretty distasteful piece of history.

It happened, it's true, but there's nothing nice about it at all. Indeed, the very chapter, its location in Genesis, it almost comes across as an unwelcome imposter interrupting the story of Joseph.

We love the story of Joseph, it has its dark side as well, it has to be said, but overall it's a great story. You have these several chapters dedicated to the story of Joseph, and then in the middle you have this imposter chapter, if we can call it that, recounting this account of Judah and Tamar.

There's a sense in which we feel what we really could do without it, or that's how it would seem.

Just to reinforce that, I was looking at one or two commentaries on this chapter, and there's one commentary on Genesis by a fellow called Leopold.

[1 : 31] It's a good commentary. He's a good evangelical conservative commentator on the book of Genesis. And I brought it here because I just want to read what he says because I was so intrigued by what he said.

At the end of every chapter, he has what he calls homiletical suggestions, which is just a fancy way of saying, here's some ways you might want to preach about this chapter.

And listen to what he says about Genesis chapter 38, which is what I'm going to preach on tonight. He says this, entirely unsuited to homiletical use. Much as the devout Bible student may glean from the chapter.

So, basically what he's saying is don't touch it with a barge bull. Don't preach from it. It's distasteful. It's horrible. And you really don't want to be dealing with it.

Yes, study it and, you know, gain something from it as a Bible student. But certainly don't preach from it. Well, what does he know? We're going to give it a bash. Now, let me just explain what I'm going to do or what I'm going to try and do.

[2 : 31] I'm going to start by telling the story in a purely descriptive way without commentary or judgment. Basically set out what happened. So, I deliberately didn't read the whole chapter for reasons of not wanting to repeat myself.

And what I'm going to do is I'm going to tell the story. It's really going to follow. Obviously, it's going to follow what we have in the written account. But I'm going to recount it in story form.

So, I'll tell the story, hopefully briefly and quickly. And then having done that, I want to ask a couple of questions and they're related questions. First of all, just ask the question, why is an account like this even included in the Bible given how distasteful it is, as you'll discover as I tell the story.

But perhaps more significantly, what can we draw from the fact that the two key characters in the story, Judah and Tamar, figure prominently in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus?

There they are, celebrated, if you wish, as members of the family of Messiah Jesus. Figuring there at the very beginning of this great gospel account of the life and mission of Jesus.

[3 : 47] What are they doing there? What can we draw from the fact that we find them there of all places? Having suggested an answer to those questions, I then want to return to the two characters, to Judah and Tamar, and discover what we can learn of God's grace and power exhibited in their lives.

Judah and Tamar, stories of grace. So, that's the plan. Well, let's start with the story. Judah was one of the sons of Jacob.

He was the fourth son of Leah. Probably best known for his part in the Joseph story, that this account interrupts, if you wish. Judah is prominent in the Joseph story at the beginning.

You may recall that he was the one who proposed that Joseph, his brother, be sold to the Midianite traders. Some wanted to kill him, and Judah said, well, no, let's sell him.

Reuben, another brother, wouldn't have done that at all. He wanted to get him back to his father. But Judah took kind of like a middle position and said, well, let's just sell him. At least that way we don't have the guilt of having killed him.

[4 : 59] So, he figures fairly prominently at the beginning of the Joseph story. But then he figures again at the end, where he's the one who acts much more honorably in being willing to take the place of Benjamin, so as to avoid his father Jacob in evermore grief.

And those are the two bookends, if you wish, where Judah figures. And this account of Judah and Tamar is in the middle. This takes place in the years when Joseph is in slavery in Egypt and rising to prominence.

While all that's going on, Judah is involved in the manner in which it's described here in chapter 38. For reasons that we're not privy to, Judah moves from the family home and settles among the Canaanites.

He married a Canaanite woman and had three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. We discovered that much in our reading. As his firstborn grew into adulthood, he set about finding a wife for Er and fixed his eyes on a young woman called Tamar.

Er and Tamar married and then were told, rather abruptly, that Er was wicked. And so the Lord put him to death. They were given no more details about what that was all about.

[6 : 22] And in such circumstances, the death of Er, Tamar becomes a widow. In those circumstances, the custom was to apply what was called the Leveret Law.

And what that involved was when a man died, leaving his wife a widow, then a brother had the obligation to marry that woman, if he wasn't already married himself.

And in doing so, he would then, if there was a child from that union, the first child, would be considered the child of the deceased brother.

The purpose of that was to secure descendants for the deceased brother. It was also intended to provide a measure of protection for the widow, who in other circumstances might have been left abandoned.

And I think there was also some sense in which this could secure the property rights for the family. So this is what needed to be done. And Judah was willing to go along with this custom, law, custom.

[7 : 23] And so what does he do? Well, he provides his second son, Onan, as a wife for Tamar. But, and if we were to have read the account, you discovered that Onan wasn't at all keen on this arrangement.

He couldn't deny his father's instructions. But what Onan chose to do was to, though he complied with entering into an intimate relationship with Tamar, marrying Tamar, he made sure that when they did come together, he ensured that conception did not happen.

You can read the account if you want to get the details. I'll leave it at that. He was successful in that. And Tamar did not become pregnant. But his reasons for that were that he didn't want to have a son that was not his own, that would be accounted to his deceased brother.

God was displeased with Onan for his selfishness, and he too suffered the same fate of his brother, Er, and was put to death by God.

Again, we're not told the manner in which that happened. So you've two brothers who have now died. But as we discovered, Judah had a third son, Shelah.

[8 : 44] And the Leveret law was still one that needed to be applied. And so the right thing to do at that point would have been to provide his third son as a husband for Tamar.

But at this stage, Judah wasn't keen on that. He kind of thought there was some kind of curse on his family, and it was all connected with his woman Tamar. He'd lost two sons, and so he didn't want to provide this third son as a husband for Tamar.

And so what he does is he says to Tamar, he says, My son, he's very young, he's not ready yet to marry, so you go back to your father's household, and you remain there.

And then in due course, when my son is older, well, we can see what arrangement we can come to, or some words to that effect. But Judah had no intention of giving his third son as a husband for Tamar.

Some time passes, and Judah's wife dies. And Judah decides to make his way to the hill country to participate in a festival associated with a sheep shearing.

[9 : 53] So that was one time of year, the sheep would be sheared. And to celebrate this occasion within the farming calendar, there would be this big festival. And Judah decides he wants to participate in that.

And so he's going to make his way to the location where this was going to take place. Now, by this stage, we don't know how much time had passed, but sufficient time had passed for Tamar to come to the conclusion that Judah, her father-in-law, had no intention of giving his son Shelah to be her husband.

She had been abandoned, and she had no prospect of marrying anybody else, because the person she ought to marry was still alive. So she had been abandoned by her father-in-law.

And she realizes that that is what has happened. And so she contrives a plan to secure descendants, to secure a family for herself, which she had a right to.

And what does she do? Well, her plan is really a very, what could we say, striking and dramatic one. She removes her clothing that would have identified her as a widow, and dressed in a manner that she could have been identified as a shrine prostitute.

[11 : 12] She also put a veil so that she wouldn't be able to be identified as to who she was. And knowing the route that her father-in-law was going to take to the sheep shearing, or to the celebrations associated with it, she located herself strategically so that when her father-in-law passed by, she would be visible to him.

So sure enough, Judah makes his way to whatever it was he had to go, and he sees Tamar. He didn't know it was Tamar, but he sees this woman with a veil, evidently a prostitute by the roadside. He's now a widow himself, and he approaches Tamar in order to secure her services. And they come to an agreement.

He will provide for her a young goat in return for the sexual services that she will provide to him. But Tamar is very astute, and because the arrangement is that the goat will be paid subsequently, Judah didn't have a goat with him there and then.

She says, well, I'm not sure if you'll pay me. I need some guarantee. So give me some guarantee that will secure for me the confidence that in due course you will indeed provide the payment that we've agreed.

[12 : 28] And so she asks for the seal, cord, and staff of Judah. The seal and cord were probably one item, a cord that went around the neck with the seal that was almost like an ID for people.

They would use it if they were signing contracts. They would use their seal. And so it was very particular to the person. You could identify the person by their seal. She said, you give me that just to be sure that you will pay me.

And so he does that. He gives her those things. And he continues on his way. He makes an attempt to deliver the young goat, as they'd agreed. But the friend who provides him with that favor of paying the woman can't find her.

And she's nowhere to be found. Goes back to Judah and says, I can't find her. And so I haven't been able to pay her. And Judah says, well, OK, what can we do? We can't make a big scene about this because it would be scandalous.

We'll just have to lie low and hope that nothing comes of it. So that's what's happened. And then three months later, Judah is told that his daughter-in-law, Tamar, is pregnant.

[13 : 33] And she's pregnant as a result of her work as a prostitute. So the accusation is made. Judah is indignant that one of the family members, though abandoned by him and treated abysmally by him, nonetheless, one of the family circle has been guilty of such a heinous sin.

And so he determines and declares that Tamar must die. She must be burnt to death. That is the sentence that Judah determines for his daughter-in-law.

And, of course, at this point we have the dramatic climax, as it were, when Tamar, having discovered that this is Judah's determination, sends the cord, the seal, and the staff and declares that the owner of these items is the father of the unborn child.

Now, Judah can do nothing but acknowledge his guilt. And he declares very tellingly, at that point in the story, he declares, she, that is Tamar, she is more righteous than I, since I couldn't or I wouldn't give her to my son, Shelah, as he ought to have done.

When the time came, Tamar gave birth to twins, Perez and Zerah. Well, that's the story, and it's not a pretty story. And so then we have the question that I want to pose.

[14:50] Why is this account, this very sordid account, really, even included in the Bible? And more significantly, what can we draw from the fact that the two key players, Judah and Tamar, figure prominently in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus?

Well, in terms of why the story is there, I guess at one level, the story reminds us of what a messed up world we live in. It reminds us of how men with power have throughout history abused that power. There's nothing new under the sun.

That's what the headlines are in these past weeks and months. Men of power abusing their power. Well, it's ever been so, and that was true of Judah. He abused his power, and the victim of this abuse of power was Tamar.

So, in that sense, we're given this crude but realistic example of what fallen humanity is like. That's useful to have that reminder.

But why do these two characters, Judah and Tamar, figure in the genealogy of Jesus? Or rather, what can we draw from their presence? The presence of what we might think of as quite unsavory family members among the forebears of Jesus.

[16:05] I think we can draw two truths and then dwell on the second of these truths. First of all, we can say this, that nothing frustrates the purposes of God. God had promised that from the seed of a woman would be born one that would strike the head of the serpent, and nothing and nobody will frustrate his purposes.

And so, throughout history, even though you have these bizarre and dark chapters, the purposes of God continue, unobstructed.

Nothing will frustrate the fulfilling of his promises. But perhaps more significantly, we can draw from these two characters, Judah and Tamar, the truth that nobody is beyond God's grace.

God has no issue in associating with sinners. Even the most flagrant sinners are welcome in his family, even to the extent of occupying a place of prominence in the family tree of Messiah Jesus. You know, as Ivor reminded us last Sunday evening, Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. Sinners like Judah. Sinners like Tamar. But let's backtrack a little and think about these two characters.

[17:16] I've just given the story without any judgment. But I want us to backtrack now and think about these two characters, but from the perspective of God's saving work in their lives. We'll think about Judah as a restored rebel.

That's the title we're going to give Judah, a restored rebel. And then we're going to think about Tamar, but we're going to think about Tamar as a vindicated victim. I think these words describe these two characters, both in different ways the objects of God's saving grace.

Let's start with Judah, a restored rebel. You know, I can sketch out for you in bullet point format a timeline of Judah's rebellion against his God.

We've already picked up some of it in simply relating the story, but let's just remind ourselves of just to what degree this man rebelled against God. I mentioned how he was involved in the sale of his own brother, Joseph, to the Midianite.

You don't get, you would say you can't get much lower than that, selling your own brother to slave traders. Well, that was Judah's work together with others.

[18:30] But then we were told at the very beginning of this chapter, the chapter that we're thinking about, chapter 38 of Genesis, we're told, and I'm just going to read from the ESV, because it gives a sense to what Judah was doing that is, I think, more helpful, given what we're trying to establish.

There we read verse 1 of chapter 38. It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adulamite whose name was Hira.

Judah turned aside, and it seems that this verb is very significant. It was a deliberate act in the part of Judah of turning aside from his family, from his God, to the Canaanites.

He's rebelling against his heritage. He's rebelling against his God. He's saying, I don't want to be here anymore. I want to be here with the Canaanites, in their world, with their gods.

So here is Judah, one of the sons of Jacob, and he's turning aside from his past, from his family, and turning to the Canaanites. And we see how he becomes infected by the superstitions of the Canaanites.

[19:31] He imagined that his sons were under a curse, so he wouldn't give his third son because of this fear of this curse that he imagined he was under. And then, of course, his treatment of his daughter-in-law is abominable.

He lies to Tamar. He condemns her to a life of despised widowhood. He frequents with prostitutes. He seemed to know what he was doing when he entered into this arrangement with Tamar. And obviously, we can't know for sure, but it seems to suggest this wasn't the first time he had participated in such a transaction. And, of course, he proves himself to be a prized and cruel hypocrite when he calls for the death of Tamar.

We recoil at the hypocrisy of it. How could this man call for the death of this poor woman, given that he knew his own sin? Obviously, he didn't know about the details of that particular pregnancy. But nonetheless, the hypocrisy is startling. And in a bitter twist, you might say, he coldly seeks the death not only of Tamar, but of his own flesh and blood.

[20 : 45] Of course, he didn't know that. But nonetheless, that's what he was doing, the child in her womb. Or, as it turns out, the twins in her womb. And there's a real irony in that, because even though he, of course, wasn't conscious at the time that that's what he was doing, when we read of the reason why he wants Joseph to be sold to the Midianite traders rather than be killed, he explicitly says, so that we do not kill our own flesh and blood.

And yet, here he is. He's gone down so far that he is about to massacre his own flesh and blood as he kills Tamar and burns her to death, which is his intention.

It's not a pretty picture. And this is the man that God chooses to form part of the line of the Messiah. But, of course, his rebellion is not the end of the story.

The story of Judah is a story of redemption. And let's just notice the steps in Judah's redemption. And the first step, as in every story of redemption, the first step is a step of repentance.

We've already read those telling words, or quoted those telling words. In chapter 38 and in verse 26, when he is discovered, or when he discovers what has actually happened, that he is the father, he is the one who has made this woman pregnant.

[22 : 02] What does he say? Judah recognized them. And the seal and the staff. And he said, she is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son, Shella.

She is more righteous than I. Now, it's an intriguing way to express himself, but I think at the heart of what he is saying is, he's acknowledging his guilt. He's acknowledging his sin.

He's acknowledging, in some measure, repentance of his sin or from his sin. So, there's repentance in the story of redemption. But there's also transformation.

And the transformation of Judah is most vividly seen in the part he plays when the brothers returned to Egypt during the famine. Of course, this is subsequent to these events. Judah reconnects with his family in circumstances that we're not privy to.

And then we discover, as I mentioned just at the very beginning, this act of chivalry, this act of, this noble act on the part of Judah when he offers up his own life in the place of Benjamin.

[23 : 04] You know the story, but I don't have time to recount the story. But Jacob is grief-stricken, even though the years have passed from the death of Joseph. And the idea of losing Benjamin, his other beloved son, son of Rachel, it was too much to bear.

And here we have Judah, the man we've just discovered, this prized hypocrite, this cruel man, this brutal man. And yet here we have Judah saying, I will take the place of Benjamin.

I will stay with Pharaoh. I will be his slave. When Pharaoh was wanting to keep Benjamin, he said, no, take me. Take me. Because otherwise my father will die of grief.

Take me. I will take the place of my brothers. He's a man transformed. And in this act of offering his own life for his brother, Judah, I think in a real way, points to his greater son, the lion of the house of Judah, who would offer up his own life for his brothers, for you and me.

What a transformation. This is the work of God. And then there's not only repentance and transformation, there's a marvelous restoration. Indeed, it's much more than restoration. In chapter 49 of Genesis, we have the account of Jacob blessing his sons.

[24 : 28] Now remember that Judah was the fourth son of Leah. In that sense, he didn't really have many rights compared to his elder brothers. And yet, listen to the blessing that Judah receives from his father, Jacob.

And I'll just read what it says in verses 8 to 10 of chapter 49. Judah, your brothers will praise you. Your hand will be on the neck of your enemies. Your father's sons will bow down to you.

You're a lion's cub, O Judah. You return from the prey, my son. Like a lion, he crouches and lies down. Like a lioness, who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until he comes to whom it belongs.

And the obedience of the nations is his. It's tremendous blessing on this man, Judah. The man we've been discovering in all his darkness, in all his sinfulness.

God directs Jacob to give the preeminent blessing to Judah and determines that the kingly line from which would come King David and King Jesus would be the line of Judah. I think there's also in the blessing what we might call a gracious irony.

[25 : 38] Notice how the blessing of Judah speaks of the ruler's staff that would never depart from Judah. And I wonder, as Judah heard this blessing from his father, and all we can do is wonder, we don't know, but I wonder, as he listened to his father declare these words, that the ruler's staff, your staff, will never depart from you and from your descendants.

I wonder if he remembered the day of his sinful folly when he handed over his staff to the prostitute as a guarantee, or the woman he thought was a prostitute, as a guarantee for the subsequent payment of services they rendered.

The story of Judah is a remarkable story of God's redeeming love and power. This is what God can still do in the lives of those he would have to be part of his family.

A rebel restored. But let's just quickly think about Tamar, a vindicated victim. Tamar is sometimes presented as a woman of dubious morality, and in that context, we're invited to marvel at the grace of God in associating with such a woman, and having this woman in the genealogy of Jesus.

But Tamar, though a sinner, we're all sinners. Though a sinner, she was no Judah. Tamar is a victim who in turn demonstrates remarkable faith and perseverance in the midst of the oppression that she is subject to.

[27 : 08] Tamar suffered horribly. Two wicked husbands, two dead husbands, cruelly cheated and discarded by her father-in-law. Tamar was driven to the darkest place.

She was, in the estimation of all, the lowest of the low, the most pitiable of specimens, a victim of the sins and oppression and cruelty of others. But Tamar stubbornly persisted in her duty as she conceived it, as she understood it, to provide descendants for the house of Judah.

Her methods were unconventional, let's call them that. But I don't detect any hint of condemnation in the words of the inspired writer as he recounts for us of the events.

And whatever we make of what she did, what we can say is that Tamar was vindicated by God. The birth of her twins was in itself vindication. I wonder, and again, we're just speculating.

One for each husband, perhaps? I don't know. But the birth of twins, a double blessing for this faithful woman. Then you have the place of honor accorded to her in the elder's blessing of Boaz.

[28 : 18] In the genealogy, another woman that we're going to meet is Ruth. But even before we get there, we can just notice what is said about Tamar in the blessing that the elders make or give to Boaz, Ruth's husband, as it's recorded for us in Ruth chapter 4.

And the place of honor that Tamar is given in that blessing, part of this historic vindication of this woman. In chapter 4 and verse 12, it's the elders and they're speaking to Boaz.

And they say to Boaz, through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, by Ruth, may your family be like that of Peres, whom Tamar bore to Judah.

What an amazing thing to say. We want you to be blessed. And what would be a great blessing that your family would be like the family of Tamar in Peres? What a remarkable thing.

And so even at this point in history, there's this vindication of Tamar. Indeed, the account of Ruth, the book of Ruth, ends with the family line of Peres, the firstborn son of Tamar, one of the twins.

[29 : 27] But then her vindication, her ultimate vindication, if you wish, is to be found in the place of honor that she has granted in the genealogy of Jesus. A matriarch in Israel, this Canaanite woman, this woman who had presented herself in order to secure what she thought were legitimate objectives, presented herself as a prostitute on the side of the road, and yet here she is, a matriarch in Israel, the mother of King David, the mother of Messiah Jesus.

God vindicates Tamar. This is what God does for the oppressed and the downtrodden, the victims. We think of what the psalmist declares in Psalm 113, He raises the poor from the dust, He lifts the needy from the ash heap, He seats them with princes, with the princes of their people.

He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children, praise the Lord. Well, not in a biological sense, but in all, in any other sense, Tamar was a barren woman who was lifted up from the dust and given the happiness and the joy of children and a home that is presented as a model family in the Scriptures.

This is what God does for victims. Judah and Tamar, stories of grace, the stories of members of the family of Jesus. We're all stories of grace.

Without grace, there is no story. And God is still in the business of weaving stories of grace in the lives of the most unlikely, in my life, in your life, and in many lives of those round about us.

[31 : 13] May we be able to see the hand of God weaving these stories of grace, seeing the manner in which He would have us be involved in the lives of others, in the lives of the most unlikely, in the lives of rebellious rebels like Judah, in the lives of victims, oppressed, cruelly, like Tamar.

Well, let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.