

Genesis 38

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 May 2019

Preacher: David MacPherson

- [0 : 0 0] How should we describe women who are brutally wronged, women who, like the women we are meeting in Genesis, are raped, used and abused, vilified and discarded?
- Are they victims or survivors? All are victims, some are survivors.
- Following one of the sermons in this series, I was helpfully challenged to reflect on this matter of the language that we use to describe people.
- And it was suggested that to describe some of the women that we've been looking at as victims was somehow to ignore their more noble identity as survivors in the face of the wrongs that they have been subject to.
- Now, I'm not sure if we need to choose between the two words. Many of the women in Genesis, and many women today, are both victims and survivors.
- [1 : 1 2] And this evening, we'll meet one of them, Tamar. Tamar is a victim at so many levels, and she is also quite heroically a survivor. And I do want to focus on her identity as a survivor.
- And so, we will concentrate on that truth concerning her and, indeed, her life experience as it's recorded for us in this account that we've read in Genesis.
- You know, as with last week, the account is really very sordid in many ways. It's full of injustice and deceit and immorality of one kind or another.
- And yet, here we find it in God's Word, and there is a purpose in that. And perhaps we can draw out something of that purpose this evening. So, let's think about Tamar and get to know her, and yes, indeed, even honor her as we pose three questions about her.
- First of all, what did she survive? If we're describing her as a survivor, well, that begs the question, well, what is it that she survived? But then also, pose the question and see what the chapter says in answering the question, how did she survive?
- [2 : 2 6] If we can consider her a survivor, which I think we certainly can, there's that question, well, how did she do it? How did she survive, given the many ways in which she was wronged?
- And then thirdly, just think about how Tamar was vindicated and by whom. So, that's really what we want to think about as we consider this chapter, and particularly this woman named Tamar.
- First of all, what did she survive? Well, she survived many things. She survived tragedy. She survived injustice. She survived abandonment. She survived cruelty. And she survived even a death sentence that had been declared on her.
- And let's just think about each of these as we make our way through the chapter and the story. First of all, she survived great personal tragedy. In verses 6 to 10, we have the account of how she was secured as a wife for Judah's first son, heir.
- And she is landed with a wicked husband in the person of Judah's firstborn. There in verse 7, we're told, but heirs, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the Lord's sight.

[3 : 49] And even if we just pause there, what a miserable thing for this young woman to discover that the man she has been married to is wicked. He's a wicked man. Now, we're not told how that wickedness finds expression, but you can maybe imagine that Tamar would not have been free from the suffering associated with being married to a wicked man.

Indeed, he was so wicked, we're told, that the Lord intervenes to put him to death. And again, we're left with the mystery, really, of what it was that led the Lord to take such direct action, if you wish.

But as I say, I am sure that Tamar suffered greatly, perhaps only briefly. We don't know the timescale, we're not told, but she suffered greatly the misery of being married to a wicked and, I would imagine, cruel husband.

But she survived. And then Tamar suffers the loss of her husband. Now, you might say, well, that could have been a relief to her, given what he was like.

But wicked though he was, this was still a very real personal tragedy for Tamar, the loss of her husband and the uncertainty that would accompany such a loss.

[5 : 10] But she survived. And as the custom of the time demanded, this arrangement known as leveret marriage, where if a husband died, then there was the obligation on a brother to marry the widow in order to provide a descendant for his deceased brother.

And that custom or that arrangement, I don't know how we could call it at this point, it hadn't yet been codified as a legal requirement, but certainly it was what was expected, kicked in.

And so Judah provides his second son, Onan, as a husband for Tamar. And Tamar suffers again.

She soon discovers, she would have discovered, I would imagine, within hours of whatever ceremony there was, she soon discovers that Onan views her as an unwelcome burden, useful only perhaps as a sexual plaything.

Can you even begin to imagine the pain and humiliation she endured as she alone witnessed her new husband's conduct as he consciously and deliberately and cruelly denied Tamar a child, perhaps time and time again.

[6 : 33] And she has to be subject to this ritual humiliation in her life. She was condemned to a loveless marriage, viewed by her husband as little more than an unpaid maid and maybe even viewed by him as an unpaid prostitute.

And then, as with air before him, Onan, a wicked man, is struck down by the Lord.

But Tamar survives. Her husbands are dead, but she is alive. She survives. She's the victim of great personal tragedy.

But she's also the victim of great injustice. Now, indeed, in what we've seen so far, we see much injustice that she has suffered. But we can delve in and see other evidences of the injustices that she suffers.

Onan, of course, acted unjustly towards her. But now in the account, in verse 11, it's the turn of Judah, her father-in-law, to act unjustly towards Tamar, to deny this woman, his daughter-in-law, what is rightfully hers.

[7 : 49] You see, the obligation to provide a husband for Tamar remained, even though two had already died. And Judah had a third son, Shelah.

And it was necessary, it was right that Shelah be provided as a husband for Tamar. But Judah has no intention of, as he saw it, sacrificing yet another son on this woman.

Judah, not unlike his father Jacob, was, certainly as we meet him here, and a little bit later on we'll consider how Judah changed and maybe think a little bit about why that might have been.

But as we meet him here, he is, like his father before him, a very unsavory character. You know, in the previous chapter, in chapter 37, and you may well remember this detail, Judah is the brother who proposes the sale of Joseph to the Midianite merchants.

Well, that says something about the kind of man that he was. In this chapter, he's introduced, distancing himself from his family, marrying a Canaanite woman, and now in the grip of pagan superstition, he denies his third son, Shelah, to Tamar for fear that, and I quote, he may die too.

[9 : 09] It turns out it's all Tamar's fault. She's the one who has been wronged. She is the one who has been treated appallingly. And yet, as far as Judah's concerned, she's at fault.

She's the cursed one. She's the one responsible for the death of his two sons, forgetting that it was their wickedness that was the reason why they died.

Nothing to do with Tamar. And yet, Judah imagines that if he hands over his third son, well, he may die too. Now, Judah does promise Tamar, as we've read in the account, that when Shelah is of age, she will be granted her right to marry him.

Now, we're not told how old Shelah was. It may be that he was already old enough to marry, but maybe only just, we don't know. But in any case, this is the excuse that Judah employs to deny Tamar her right to marry his third son, Shelah.

And he says, as we read in the chapter, you go back to your household, and when the time comes, you know, you can marry Shelah. And so here Tamar suffers this litany of injustices.

[10 : 21] So she's a victim of tragedy, of injustice, and also of abandonment. And many of these things overlap. They're to do with the same thing that she's enduring. But there we read in verse 12, after a long time, Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, died.

So a long time has passed. Now, that in itself is quite revealing. Well, it's revealing because it just proves, but we kind of knew all along, that Judah had no intention of fulfilling his promise of giving Shelah to be Tamar's husband.

A long time has passed. Shelah is certainly of age to marry by now, but there's no indication that Judah has any intention of providing Tamar with his third son.

Tamar has been abandoned to her grief, to her unending widowhood, without even the option of securing a different husband. You see, while she waits for Shelah, she can't even contemplate marrying somebody else.

That would have been a scandal. So she had to marry Shelah, but then Judah won't give her Shelah. So she's abandoned, abandoned by those who had a responsibility to provide for her.

[11 : 38] Notice how in verse 14 we're told that she has remained in her widow's clothes. Now, we're told that after a long time, and we don't know what that long time means, but you know, you could perhaps imagine maybe several months, maybe years, and there she is still in her widow's clothes.

And in this, in the narrative, there's really quite a bitter irony emerging when we're told that Judah, there in verse 13, that after a long time, Judah's wife, the daughter of Yeshua died, when Judah had recovered from his grief, he goes up to do what he was going to do, and participate in the shearing of the sheep.

When he had recovered from his grief, well, that's nice, isn't it? He can recover from his grief maybe after a few weeks. Oh yes, when his wife died, he grieved, but a few weeks have passed, and all's good.

But what about Tamar? Months, years have passed, she's still in her widow's clothes, while Judah, thank you very much, has recovered from his grief, and he can move on and start a new life.

Well, you see the injustice of it, and you see how this woman has been cruelly abandoned by Judah. But Tamar survives her abandonment.

[12 : 56] And as we will soon discover, Tamar has not been broken by tragedy and injustice and abandonment. Far from it, she may be many things, but she is not a broken woman.

Now, we're going to come back to how Tamar acts, which is what comes next in the chapter, if we were to follow the order of the chapter. But before we do that, let's just jump forward to see all that she continued to suffer, as it's recorded for us in the account.

Not only suffered, but survived. She also suffered great cruelty. In verse 24, and here there's maybe an element of speculation, but I think it's plausible. In verse 24, we're told, and of course this is after the incident with her father-in-law, she is now pregnant.

And there in verse 24 we read, About three months later, Judah was told, Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution. And I'm just focusing in on what might seem of other insignificant detail when it says, About three months later, Judah was told.

Judah was told. Now, we don't know the motivation of whoever told Judah. But I reckon, or I would be willing to wager, That this report falls into the category of cruelly grassing on Tamar, With the anticipated outcome of great harm befalling her.

[14 : 19] Whoever told Judah didn't do it out of any love for Tamar. He told Judah, knowing full well that the consequences for Tamar could be fatal.

And yet, cruelly, he grasses on her and informs Judah of this great scandal that Tamar is pregnant and must have been involved in prostitution because she's an unmarried widow.

A victim of great cruelty. But Tamar survived. And a victim also, of course, of this horrendous death sentence that Judah pronounces upon her.

So, there in verse 24, we read, Judah said, Bring her out and let her be burned to death. I think we're all struck by the hypocrisy of Judah.

It's breathtaking. And his intended cruelty to Tamar is nauseating. Not content with executing an innocent woman, he would have her be burnt at the stake.

[15 : 20] Now, this is one of the patriarchs. This is Judah. And he's acting like an ISIS executioner. And it's disgusting. It's appalling. It's repulsive. And Tamar is the victim of this appalling conduct on the part of Judah, sentenced to death, to be burnt to death by her father-in-law.

Of course, we know he didn't know her identity. But Tamar survives. And in a moment, we'll see how she survives. And let's just move on to that.

And just ask the question, How does Tamar survive all of these wrongs that she is subject to? Well, she survives by determination, by guts, and by guile.

Tamar is a determined woman. In her circumstances, everybody expected her to give up, to accept her miserable fate, to curl up and die, to simply be anonymous and forgotten, but not Tamar.

Even after a long time, to use and to acknowledge the language of the text, even after a long time, she is thirsty for justice.

[16 : 42] It is justice that she craves. With justice will come, she anticipates and hopes, no doubt, with justice will come family and children and security, maybe even love.

But justice is her right, and she will grasp it for whatever it takes. And in her case, it really was whatever it takes. But we need to see behind her behavior, that we can be quick to criticize, and say, well, that's a scandal what she did.

And see behind that, and see that what she is searching for, what she is thirsting for, what she is demanding rightly, is justice. She has been wronged, and she deserves justice.

God is a God of justice, and God honors those who seek and search for and thirst for justice. Well, here is a woman thirsting for justice. And the plan that she devises, seemingly sordid, maybe to our susceptibilities, is grounded in justice.

She was due a male member of Judah's family, as her husband. And if Judah was going to deny her his son, then Judah would have to step up to the mark, albeit unknowingly, and in rather seedy circumstances.

[18 : 08] She is determined, and she is gutsy. It took guts to do what she did. It was dangerous. It was a high-risk strategy. It could easily have led, and nearly did, to a cruel and painful death.

And Tamar knew that full well. She knew how dangerous this was. And yet she embarked on this course of action, fully aware of the risk that she was running.

But Tamar, thanks to her determination, her thirst for justice, she survives. But not only determination, not only guts, but also guile.

You see, the plan that she concocts, that we may be shocked by, but nonetheless, the plan is masterfully conceived and perfectly executed. Tamar knows all about Judah's circumstances.

She knows that he's lost his wife. She knows also about his sexual appetites and weaknesses. She establishes the precise location.

[19 : 16] She determines a price that will ensure she can secure a pledge. She demands the perfect pledge, his seal and cord, which was effectively his ID.

And then, of course, we have in the account her final challenge to Judah, the moment of great drama in the whole account, when she's about to be dragged, to be burnt to death, and she sends the message to Judah, I am pregnant by the man who owns these.

And we can only stand and admire. Her actions, scandalous though this may sound, are worthy of admiration.

That is not to say that everything she did was right, but her actions and her thirst for justice, her determination, her courage, and her guile, are, I would contend, worthy of admiration.

How does Tamar survive? Well, grounded in a thirst for justice, she shows determination and guts and guile. But the final thing we want to just notice is, how is she vindicated?

[20 : 28] How is she vindicated? Perhaps the question should be rephrased. Who is she vindicated by? Well, first of all, she's vindicated by Judah, in some ways, her oppressor in chief.

But she's vindicated by Judah. We have the words of Judah that I think are familiar. When he is challenged by her, when he acknowledges and is brought face to face with his own guilt and hypocrisy, what does he cry out there in verse 26?

Judah recognized them. He recognized the seal and the staff. He recognized them and said, she is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah.

She is more righteous than I. And so Judah himself, in the words that he pronounces, vindicates Tamar. Now, the words that Judah pronounces might appear to us to be faint praise.

After all, to say that she's more righteous than I, you might say, well, he wasn't very righteous, so that's not saying that much. But I think that would be to misunderstand the weight of Judah's testimony and declaration.

[21 : 37] Here you have Judah, the head of the family, a man of position and of reputation, declaring that his daughter-in-law, Tamar, is more righteous than he is, that she is righteous, that even in the conduct that she has participated in, there is a sense in which it can be acknowledged as being righteous.

Here was a righteous woman seeking what was right and just. So she was vindicated by Judah, but she was also vindicated by God. And I think we can say that she was vindicated by God in two ways, how God views her and how God uses her.

And these things, too, also kind of overlap. But first of all, how Tamar is viewed by God. And on one occasion, we're given a hint as to how Tamar is viewed by God.

And we find that in the book of Ruth, in the words of blessing that were directed to Boaz when he was about to marry Ruth. And in that context, the men of the town pronounce a blessing on Boaz.

And let's just read what they say. So if we look for Ruth chapter 4 and verses 11 and 12. And so Ruth chapter 4 and verses 11 and 12.

[23 : 07] So many generations have passed, but there is this blessing that is pronounced on Boaz. And we'll read from verse 11. 11 and 12 of Ruth chapter 4. Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, We are witnesses.

May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home, that would be Ruth, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathra and be famous in Bethlehem.

Through the offspring, the Lord gives you by this young woman. May your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.

That's a very intriguing blessing that of all the families that perhaps they could have made reference to, here the men blessing Boaz say, May your family be like the family of Tamar who bore Perez as a son.

That tells us something about how Tamar is viewed by God and indeed by God's people in succeeding generations. She's viewed as a blessed woman who constructed, in the most unlikely of circumstances, a godly and righteous family.

[24 : 21] How Tamar is viewed by God, but also how Tamar is used by God. And that can be explored at two levels. At the micro level of her unwitting, I would imagine, influence on Judah, and we'll just think about that in a moment.

And also in the context of the big story of redemption, something that is often highlighted when the story of Tamar is recounted. But what is less often highlighted is her influence in the life of Judah.

Now here there is an element of speculation, but bear with me and you can listen and come to view on how much merit there is in what I'm going to say.

It seems to me that Tamar's behavior is critical in the life of Judah and provides the opportunity for a real turning point in his life.

Up until this point, Judah, as we've already described him, was a very unsavory character. Everything we know of him really is negative. He's the one who proposes selling his brother Joseph.

[25 : 29] He's the one who leaves the family and marries the Canaanite woman. He's the one who treats Tamar in the appalling way that he treated her. This is Judah. That's what we know of Judah. The next time we meet Judah in the Genesis account is a few chapters on when, and you'll recall, when there's famine in the land and the brothers, you know, they have to go to Egypt to secure food.

And in that situation, there is that time, you remember, when Joseph, who still hasn't revealed himself, and the authorities there demand that Benjamin remain behind when the brothers are going to go back to see their father.

And who is it that says, no, I can't expose my father to such grief. I will stand in the breach. I will take the place of Benjamin.

Who is it? It's Judah. And you say, well, this is a different man. This isn't the man that we meet in this account. And you say, well, what's happened? Why is it that there's been this turnaround in his life?

He's noble and he's self-sacrificing. And I wonder, and I can't do more than that, I wonder if this occasion was not what brought Judah to reflect seriously on his life.

[26 : 51] And he thought, this is not the man I'm meant to be. And he's turned around by, unwittingly, but by the actions of Tamar and her search for justice.

And so, I'm suggesting that she is used by God in this rather remarkable way. But of course, she's also used by God in the big story of redemption.

You know, throughout Genesis, we've been following how God has preserved a righteous line of descent to secure the fulfilling of the promise given by God in Genesis 3 and verse 15 of the seed of the woman who would strike the head of the serpent.

And God vindicates Tamar not only by giving her sons and twins at that, but by scandalously choosing a son born of the union between Tamar and her father-in-law Judah, Peres, to be the one through whom the righteous line would continue.

And then, of course, that the glorious vindication is sealed in the appearance of Tamar in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew chapter 1. And again, I think that's an appearance of Tamar that we're familiar of and indeed we've preached about in the past.

[28 : 08] In Matthew chapter 1 and in verse 3, or let's read from verse 2 where we start with Abraham, or let's start from the beginning of Matthew. This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of Peres and Zerah whose mother was Tamar.

And just as a kind of anecdotal note, Shelah did go on to have his own sons. The third son of Judah had sons. He had a family. We're not told about it curiously in Genesis.

We need to go to Chronicles to find out about Shelah's sons. But the point I'm simply making is that there were other sons that could have been chosen as the line of Messiah.

But God chose the line of Perez, the son of Tamar. And so we have Tamar, the mother of King David, the mother of Messiah Jesus.

[29 : 09] What greater vindication could we possibly imagine? But then finally, let me say this. Is there a way in which Tamar can be vindicated by us? How can we vindicate or at least honor Tamar?

I think we can honor Tamar by fleeing from all that would harm and violate the powerless. But perhaps especially by sharing her thirst for justice on behalf of the oppressed and the downtrodden.

Now her thirst for justice on the behalf of the downtrodden was on behalf of herself. she was the downtrodden. But we can share that thirst for justice on behalf of others who are oppressed and downtrodden.

We can follow her example in fighting that battle for justice, hopefully by other means, but with determination, guts, and guile.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for what we learn of real people like us, fallen sinners, and yet used by you.

[30 : 16] We recognize in the story the reality of the broken world in which we live that leads to so much suffering for so many, and for some, much more than for others.

And we know that today there are many who suffer like Tamar, who suffer injustice and violence and cruelty. We pray that you would help such, that you would strengthen such, and that you would use us, your people, to be those who have a thirst for justice, that we would use all legitimate means that you grant us to fight with determination and courage and guile on behalf of the downtrodden and the oppressed.

We thank you that you are a God who orders through all of these things. And we see this most wonderfully and most gloriously in Tamar as one who appears in the genealogy of our Savior, Messiah, Jesus.

And we pray these things in his name. Amen.