

Tamar

Daughter of King David

HER NAME MEANS

"Date Tree" or "Palm Tree"

HER CHARACTER: Tamar shared her father's, David's, good looks. Young and innocent, she was naive to the danger that threatened from her own family.

HER SORROW: That her half brother saw her only as an object for his lust, destroying her future as a result, and that her father, the king, did nothing to protect her.

KEY SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 13:1–22

Monday

HER STORY

David's daughter Tamar was a knockout. No doubt she was destined for a marriage that would strengthen the king's political alliances. Though not under lock and key, she probably lived a rather protected life. But all the precautions in the world couldn't save her from the danger that threatened from David's inner circle.

Amnon was David's heir. As the king's eldest son, he was used to getting his way. But lately he'd grown despondent. Something was bothering him, chasing away his sleep, gnawing at his heart.

One day, Jonadab, Amnon's cousin, asked him: "Why do you, the king's son, look so haggard morning after morning? Won't you tell me?"

Amnon confided in his friend, saying, "I'm in love with Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister."

"Go to bed and pretend to be ill," Jonadab shrewdly advised. "When your father comes to see you, say to him, 'I would like my sister Tamar to come and give me something to eat. Let her prepare the food in my sight, so I may eat from her hand.'"

So David, concerned for his son, unwittingly sent his daughter into a trap that would ruin her life.

After Tamar had prepared a meal for Amnon, he asked her to enter his bedroom and feed him. But as soon as Tamar did, he grabbed her, begging, "Come to bed with me, my sister."

"Don't, my brother!" she said to him. "Don't force me. Such a thing should not be done in Israel! Don't do this wicked thing. What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace? And what about you? You would be like one of the wicked fools in Israel. Please speak to the king; he will not keep me from being married to you." But despite her pleas, Amnon forced himself on her.

As soon as the storm of his passion died down, Amnon's infatuation turned to hatred. He threw Tamar out of his house, bolting the door against her, as though she, not he, were the guilty one. Desolate, the young girl tore her robes, throwing ashes on her head and weeping loudly as she wandered the streets. When her brother Absalom found her, he hushed her, saying, "Be quiet now, my sister, he is your brother. Don't take this thing to heart." But Absalom himself took it to heart, hating his half brother Amnon for what he had done.

Though David was furious when he heard the news, he did nothing to punish Amnon. Did he favor his son over his daughter, thinking her hurt a small matter? Or had his moral authority been so compromised by his lust for Bathsheba that he simply could not bring himself to confront his eldest son? Whatever the case, Absalom did not share his father's hesitation. Instead, he bided his time, waiting for an opportunity for vengeance. Two years later he murdered Amnon.

First rape, then murder. David's household was devastated not by barbarians outside the gate but by those inside his own family. After Amnon's death, David must have been haunted by Nathan's earlier prophecy after David's own adultery with Bathsheba: "Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house.... Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you" (2 Samuel 12:10–11). The father's lust was mirrored by the son's; the father's violence, by one son's murder of the other.

Tamar, unprotected by her father, betrayed by her own brother, lived in Absalom's house, a desolate woman, without the possibility of marriage or children because she was no longer a virgin. Thus a chain of sin wove its way through David's family, enslaving the innocent along with the guilty.

RAPE

*T*amar's half brother, Amnon, raped her. The stark words don't begin to communicate the humiliation and despair that rape brings to those who experience it. This account in 2 Samuel 13 movingly describes Tamar's pleas to her brother not to do this to her, pleas that echo through hundreds of years of women who have been forced into the sexual act against their will. "Since he was stronger," Amnon could force himself on her, and Tamar had no effective means of resistance.

God's reaction to sexual sin is evident throughout the Bible. He doesn't turn away from the victim, and he doesn't allow the rapist to go unpunished. Deuteronomy 22:25 says that "the man who has done this shall die." Leviticus 18:29 reminds the Israelites that "everyone who does any of these detestable things—such persons must be cut off from their people." In the New Testament, Paul repeatedly reminds believers to pursue sexual purity: "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:13–14). "Flee from sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18). "Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality" (Ephesians 5:3).

Amnon went unpunished by his father but died when his half brother Absalom took his revenge—he didn't go unpunished forever. And what about Tamar, the beautiful virgin princess in her rich royal robes? She felt too degraded to go back to her own home in David's palace. How could she face her other virgin sisters? Instead, she went to live as "a desolate woman," with her brother Absalom. The effects of rape on its victims is the same today: desolation, grief, misery.

The Bible doesn't gloss over the fact that God's people have participated in these dreadful acts; it describes many instances of rape, incest, homosexuality, and adultery. Why would a holy God think it necessary to include such sordid stories in Scripture? Perhaps because he knows our thoughts and actions, even if the world is blind to them. Through these stories God reminds us that he never forsakes his own, whether victim or criminal. Just as he offers help and comfort to the victims, never forsaking them in their trouble, he also offers healing and forgiveness to the evildoer.

HER LEGACY IN SCRIPTURE

Read 2 Samuel 13:1–22.

1. Do you think Amnon truly loved Tamar? Why or why not?
2. Describe your feelings as a woman when you read Tamar's pleas in 2 Samuel 13:9–14.
3. Why did Tamar say that sending her away was "a greater wrong" than rape (13:16)? What did she want?
4. What should David have done to Amnon? What could he have done for Tamar?
5. Have you ever been betrayed by someone you trusted? If so, how has it affected your life? Where is God in your story?

HER PROMISE

The horrifying facts of Tamar's experience—not only the rape itself but the effect it had on her future and her emotional well-being—are not too far from the experiences of many women today. Statistics reveal a staggering number of women who have been violated by family members when they were very young. The effects of those experiences can haunt a woman's existence, influencing her relationships with her husband, with male and female friends, and with her children. Help is available to those who seek it, but the ultimate hope and help can only be found in the love and acceptance God so willingly offers. His forgiving spirit can help recovery begin. His comforting spirit can bring a soothing balm to the hurt of the past. His constant presence can bring healing for the loneliness and detachment many feel.

Promises in Scripture

For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you.

—DEUTERONOMY 4:31

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

—DEUTERONOMY 31:6

*Hear my voice when I call, O LORD;
be merciful to me and answer me.
My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"
Your face, LORD, I will seek.
Do not hide your face from me,
do not turn your servant away in anger;
you have been my helper.
Do not reject me or forsake me,
O God my Savior.
Though my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will receive me.*

—PSALM 27:7–10

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

Though [God] slay me, yet will I hope in him.

—JOB 13:15

REFLECT ON: 2 Samuel 13:1–31.

PRAISE GOD: For giving us a hope rooted not in the events of this life, but in eternity.

OFFER THANKS: That God has the power to restore our hope.

CONFESS: Any hopelessness about your life.

ASK GOD: To show you that he really does care about you.

Lift Your Heart

*W*hether we suffer from sexual abuse, the loss of a loved one, divorce, sickness, or financial reverses, we can sometimes feel hopeless about the future. But anyone who belongs to God will not be consigned to a hopeless end. Even if you have difficulty believing this, pray for the grace to want to believe it. As a small gesture expressing your desire, plant a bulb garden in the fall. This simple act will affirm your belief that even after the harshest winter, spring will come again with its profusion of color and new life. If fall is still far away, buy a colorful bouquet of flowers to grace your bedside table for the week ahead.

Father, plant something new in my life, a sprig of hope that will set me on a new course. Help me to live in the present, spending my emotional energies on this moment rather than squandering them on regrets about the past or anxieties about the future.