

Tamar

Daughter-in-Law of Judah

HER NAME MEANS

“Date Tree” or “Palm Tree”

HER CHARACTER: Driven by one overwhelming need, she sacrificed her reputation and nearly her life to achieve her goals.

HER SORROW: That the men in her life failed to fulfill their responsibility, leaving her a childless widow.

HER JOY: That her daring behavior resulted, not in ruin, but in the fulfillment of her hopes to bear children.

KEY SCRIPTURES: Genesis 38; Matthew 1:3

Monday

HER STORY

Genealogies hardly make compelling reading at bedtime—or at any other time, for that matter. Perhaps you welcome them with a yawn, or skip over them entirely as you read through the Bible. But even long lists of bewildering names can reveal interesting insights into God’s mysterious plan. That’s the way the Scriptures work, yielding hidden riches on every page.

Take the genealogy in the first chapter of Matthew, for instance. It lists a grand total of forty-one male ancestors of Jesus, beginning with Abraham, and a mere five female ancestors, three of whose stories (those of Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba) are colored by such distasteful details as incest, prostitution, fornication, adultery, and murder.

Jesus, the perfect Son of the perfect Father, had plenty of imperfect branches in his family tree and enough colorful characters to populate a modern romance novel. That women should be mentioned at all in his genealogy is surprising, let alone that four of the five got pregnant out of wedlock. In addition, at least three of the women were foreigners, not Israelites.

Tamar fell into both categories. Her father-in-law, Judah (son of Jacob and Leah), had arranged for her to marry his firstborn, Er. Half Canaanite and half Hebrew, Er was a wicked man, whom God killed for his sins. That's all we know of him.

After Er came Onan, Judah's second son. As was the custom of the time, Judah gave Onan to the widowed Tamar, instructing him to sleep with her so that she could have children to carry on Er's line. But Onan was far too crafty for his own good. He slept with Tamar, but then "spilled his semen on the ground," thus ensuring Tamar's barrenness. That way he would not be saddled with the responsibility for children who would carry on his brother's line rather than his own. But God took note, and Onan, too, died for his wickedness.

Already Judah had lost two sons to Tamar. Should he risk a third? Shelah was his only remaining son, not yet fully grown. To placate his daughter-in-law, Judah instructed Tamar to return to her father's house and live as a widow until Shelah was of marriageable age. But time passed like a sluggish river, and Tamar continued to wear her widow's garments as Selah grew up.

After Judah's wife died, he set out one day for Timnah to shear his sheep. Hearing the news of her father-in-law's journey, Tamar decided to take desperate and dramatic action. If Judah would not give her his youngest son in marriage, she would do her best to propagate the family name in her own way. Shedding her widow's black, she disguised herself in a veil, impersonating a prostitute, and sat down beside the road to Timnah. Judah slept with her and gave her his personal seal and cord along with his staff in pledge of future payment.

About three months later, Judah learned that Tamar was pregnant, little realizing he was responsible for her condition. Outraged that she had prostituted herself, he ordered her burned to death. But before the sentence could be carried out, Tamar sent him a stunning

message: "I am pregnant by the man who owns these. See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are."

The man who had so quickly passed judgment, little heeding his own secret tryst with a prostitute, was suddenly taken up short. To his credit, he told the truth, saying, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah."

Six months later, Tamar gave birth to twins. Once again, as with Jacob and Esau, the children struggled in her womb. A tiny hand came out and then disappeared, but not before being tied with a scarlet thread by the midwife. Then a small, slippery body emerged, but with no trace of the red thread. They named the first boy Perez (meaning "Breaking Out"). Then the little one with the scarlet ribbon was born and they named him Zerah (meaning "Scarlet"). Perez was recognized as the firstborn. From his line would come King David and finally, hundreds of years later, Jesus of Nazareth.

Judah had shown little concern regarding the continuance of his line. Instead, God used a woman, shamed by her own barrenness and determined to overcome it, to ensure that the tribe of Judah would not only survive but that it would one day bear the world's Messiah.

PROSTITUTION

As abhorrent as it seems to us, prostitution was actually an expression of worship in the ancient Near East. Pagan peoples often believed that fertility gods granted blessings to those who practiced cultic prostitution. The sacrifices and the payments for the use of a cult prostitute brought huge amounts of money into the coffers of the god or goddess being worshiped. The sexual intercourse itself symbolized the hoped-for fertility and abundance of the harvest.

Judah, a widower who had only recently “recovered from his grief” (Genesis 38:12), traveled to Timnah during sheep shearing time to watch his own sheep being sheared of their wool. It may be that when he saw Tamar, he took her for a shrine prostitute and had intercourse with her to ensure a good crop of wool. That hardly justifies Judah’s act, but it may shed light on his motives.

Shrine prostitutes usually kept themselves heavily veiled before and during the act of intercourse, an attempt to create the illusion that the participant was actually engaging in the sexual act with the goddess herself. This practice worked in Tamar’s favor, giving her the perfect disguise so that her father-in-law would never recognize her.

Prostitution was the imagery used often by the biblical prophets to describe Israel’s waywardness, their proneness to follow false gods. They saw God as the husband of Israel, her keeper and her true love. Whenever the Israelites turned from the true God to false gods, they “prostituted” themselves. It is a strong picture, but an accurate one, of turning away from the God who truly loved them and was willing to care for them and watch over them, if only they would remain true to him.

Tamar’s story takes us by surprise, repulses us. We recoil from the sordid details of prostitution and find little to inspire us. Yet stories like Tamar’s are what make the Bible so believable. Who would ever invent such a thing, then record it not only in the historical narrative but also in the lineage of the Messiah? Only the God of eternal surprises. The God who takes the unfit, the desperate, and the profane, and uses them to his eternal and holy purposes.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Who was Tamar arranged to marry?
2. Was Er a good man? Why?
3. Who was Tamar's 2nd husband's name?
4. Why didn't Onan want to get Tamar pregnant? What did he do to prevent it?
5. Did Onan die? If so, why?
6. Why did Tamar sleep with her father-in-law, Judah?
7. Why didn't Judah recognize his daughter-in-law?
8. What was Tamar's punishment? Was it carried out? Why?
9. Did Tamar have kids? If so, how many and what were their name?
10. Was prostitution a sin in the ancient Near East?
11. Why did Judah mistake Tamar as a shrine prostitute?
12. Why did Judah sleep with a prostitute?
13. Can you relate to this story – God bringing good out of your tragedy and blessing you?

HER LEGACY IN SCRIPTURE

Read Genesis 38:1-10

1. Onan was supposed to father children through Tamar for his brother Er. This is the same act as that of the “kinsman-redeemer” found in the book of Ruth. The closet of kin was to father a child to carry on the line of the deceased husband. Although the act may seem offensive to us today, what do you think God’s purpose was in decreeing such a plan? _____

2. In that culture, a woman’s whole worth was in bearing sons to carry on the family line. A woman who failed in that was nothing. What makes you feel you’re worth a lot or not much? _____

Read Genesis 38:11-19

3. None of the men in Tamar’s life fulfilled their responsibilities to her, including her father-in-law, Judah. Describe how you think Tamar must have been feeling throughout the course of these events. Angry? Ignored? Dishonored? Belittled? Ashamed? _____

4. Why was Tamar so desperate to have a child? _____

5. Are you, or is someone you know, desperate to have children? How do the ordeals of infertility today compare to what Tamar was willing to endure in ancient times? _____

Read Genesis 38:20-24

6. What do you think of Judah’s response to the news that Tamar was pregnant? Was it a double standard for him to condemn her actions but not his own? And Why? _____

7. Do such double standards still exist today? How? Are they as common as they were, say, ten or twenty years ago? _____

Read Genesis 38:25-30

8. When you consider what Tamar did in offering herself disguised as a prostitute to her father-in-law, do his words in verse 26 surprise you? Why? Explain what Judah meant by these words. _____

9. The story of Tamar is a difficult one to digest. There is simply no way to assimilate what she did with our current way of thinking. Why would such a story ever be included in the inspired Scriptures? _____

Read Matthew 1:3

10. What does Tamar's inclusion in the lineage of Christ tell you about God's power to bring good out of tragic events? _____

11. How has God worked good out of the bad things that have happened to you, the bad things you've done, or to someone you know? _____

*T*he story in Genesis 38 reveals nothing about Tamar's knowledge of God's hand in the events of her life. More than likely, she was totally unaware of the power of God at work. But he was at work nevertheless, bringing good out of tragedy and blessing out of less than honorable events.

That's the beauty of this story. God's power to bring positive things from the negative, even sinful, events of our lives is just as much at work now as in Tamar's day. We may not see it today or tomorrow—or perhaps ever—but we can trust the God we love to do what he loves: bring blessing to us in spite of ourselves.

Promises in Scripture

Not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed.

—JOSHUA 23:14

*Your ways, O God, are holy.
What god is so great as our God?*

—PSALM 77:13

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.

—ROMANS 8:28

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

Judah [was] the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.

—MATTHEW 1:3 (GENEALOGY OF CHRIST)

- REFLECT ON: Genesis 38.
- PRAISE GOD: That he allowed his own Son to be intimately linked with fallen human beings from whom he was descended.
- OFFER THANKS: That God can use everyone and everything to bring about a good result.
- CONFESS: Any tendency you may have to judge others with a double standard, as Judah did Tamar.
- ASK GOD: To take any desperation you may be feeling and replace it with hope, calling to mind the verse in Jeremiah 29:11: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

Lift Your Hear

*I*f you've never sketched out your family tree, make an effort to trace your heritage, going back at least four or five generations—more if you have the time and energy. Ask older relatives to supply as much information as possible about your ancestors. Pay special attention to the women in your family tree. Take notes on everything you discover. Then transcribe all the information into a keepsake book that can be passed along to your own children after you're gone. Include any photos and news clippings you can find. You may discover some fascinating insights into your family background.

Lord, you formed me in my mother's womb. You knew then what every single day of my life would be like. You saw the great things and