

Mother Christmas: Tamar

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Genesis 37 begins the story of Joseph: his coat of many colors, the jealousy of his brothers, how they ambush him, and eventually sell him into slavery.

Genesis 39 to 50 finishes that story: Joseph's rise then fall, then his rise again to the second highest position of authority in all of Egypt; and, thru that authority, how he eventually saves his whole family from starvation. He saves God's people!

Yet, did you notice something strange in my brief outline of Joseph's story? Did you notice there's a chapter missing from the outline. Chapter 37 starts the story while chapters 39 thru 50 conclude it. *But, what about Genesis chapter 38?*

Well, if you've ever read through Genesis, you'll recall it's a strange chapter. *Veggie Tales* doesn't include it in "The Ballad of Little Joe".¹ As far as I'm aware, there's not a "Coat of Many Colors" VBS curriculum that incorporates Genesis 38 in its retelling of the Joseph narrative. In fact, one of my seminary professors claims that he's never heard the chapter preached. (We're going to remedy that today.)

Why is chapter 38 in the middle of Joseph's story? Why's this sordid tale—of deception and incest—interrupting this magnificent history of God's saving work for his people through his servant Joseph? What do we make of this woman, Tamar? What do we make of this strange and disruptive chapter?

Brothers and sisters, that's what we have the privilege of finding out today.

I'm going to read the entire chapter. Friends, it's not G-rated; this is R-rated or worse. It's a strange, squalid text. But, it's Scripture. It's inspired. And, it speaks to us of God's Savior-bringing plan. It points us forward to Christmas.

Genesis 38

38 At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah.² There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. He married her and made love to her;³ she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, who was named Er.⁴ She conceived again and gave birth to a son and named

¹ You can watch that retelling of Genesis 37, 39-50 [here](#).

him Onan.⁵ She gave birth to still another son and named him Shelah. It was at Kezib that she gave birth to him.

⁶ Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.⁷ But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the Lord's sight; so the Lord put him to death.

⁸ Then Judah said to Onan, "Sleep with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother."⁹ But Onan knew that the child would not be his; so whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from providing offspring for his brother.¹⁰ What he did was wicked in the Lord's sight; so the Lord put him to death also.

¹¹ Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow in your father's household until my son Shelah grows up." For he thought, "He may die too, just like his brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's household.

¹² After a long time Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, died. When Judah had recovered from his grief, he went up to Timnah, to the men who were shearing his sheep, and his friend Hirah the Adullamite went with him.

¹³ When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep,"¹⁴ she took off her widow's clothes, covered herself with a veil to disguise herself, and then sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that, though Shelah had now grown up, she had not been given to him as his wife.

¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face.¹⁶ Not realizing that she was his daughter-in-law, he went over to her by the roadside and said, "Come now, let me sleep with you."

"And what will you give me to sleep with you?" she asked.

¹⁷ "I'll send you a young goat from my flock," he said.

"Will you give me something as a pledge until you send it?" she asked.

¹⁸ He said, "What pledge should I give you?"

"Your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand," she answered. So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she became pregnant by him.¹⁹ After she left, she took off her veil and put on her widow's clothes again.

²⁰ Meanwhile Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite in order to get his pledge back from the woman, but he did not find her. ²¹ He asked the men who lived there, “Where is the shrine prostitute who was beside the road at Enaim?”

“There hasn’t been any shrine prostitute here,” they said.

²² So he went back to Judah and said, “I didn’t find her. Besides, the men who lived there said, ‘There hasn’t been any shrine prostitute here.’”

²³ Then Judah said, “Let her keep what she has, or we will become a laughingstock. After all, I did send her this young goat, but you didn’t find her.”

²⁴ About three months later Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant.”

Judah said, “Bring her out and have her burned to death!”

²⁵ As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. “I am pregnant by the man who owns these,” she said. And she added, “See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are.”

²⁶ Judah recognized them and said, “She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not sleep with her again.

²⁷ When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. ²⁸ As she was giving birth, one of them put out his hand; so the midwife took a scarlet thread and tied it on his wrist and said, “This one came out first.” ²⁹ But when he drew back his hand, his brother came out, and she said, “So this is how you have broken out!” And he was named Perez. ³⁰ Then his brother, who had the scarlet thread on his wrist, came out. And he was named Zerah.

We’re going to look at two things as we study this text together: (1st) a people who are sinful; and (2nd) a woman who is cursed.

1. A people who are sinful.

Well, I probably don’t need to work all that hard to convince you on this point, even by today’s standards. There’s much selfishness. There’s deception on all fronts. There’s dabbling in cult-prostitution. And, if all of those things weren’t bad enough, there’s incest too. There’s not one person in this story who comes out clean.

As the apostle Paul says in Romans: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). This narrative is a case in point. It’s a microcosm of the sinful world in which we live. A mere glimpse at the news (or in the mirror) proves this.

(It’s almost like Judah’s family is running the world.)

Yet, despite all the obvious sinful stuff here, there are actually a few things you might’ve missed—subtle sins that can help you make sense of all the messiness. What are those sins?

Well, **first**, we must note where Judah is. He isn’t with his father and brothers. Rather, he’s gone to live with the Canaanites. Now, this may not seem like a big deal to us, but it was a big deal for the Israelites. They’d made a covenant with the Lord. They were supposed to be set-apart from the Canaanites as a witness and testimony to all the peoples of the earth. They were to display the wisdom and power and truth of Yahweh—the one and only God.

So, as we read this, we are supposed to interpret all of this wayward sinning through the lens of Judah’s wayward wandering. In a sense, we might see this move as the sin which leads to all the other sins—like the gateway sin.

- Where does all the wicked behavior of Judah’s oldest two sons come from? We’re supposed to see that it comes from abandoning the Lord’s covenant and by ignoring his promises.
- Why does Judah choose to visit a shrine prostitute after his wife’s death? We’re to see that he’s becoming entrenched in all of the religious practices of the Canaanites rather than of the Israelites.

Judah is off track. He’s forsaken the fellowship of Yahweh’s covenant people. And, all of these dark deeds are the wages of that decision. When we run from God, sometimes he allows us to experience the desolation of his absence. This is precisely what we see in Genesis 38.

Friends, I know it’s often difficult to get up on Sunday mornings to worship with your church family. I know the rhythms of prayer and the readings of Scripture can sometimes feel monotonous and meaningless. I realize that the world around us is constantly calling for our conformity and that it is tempting to simply live our lives as those voices tell us we should. I feel all these temptations with you.

Yet, there's grace in the family of God. There's a blessing in this fellowship. There's a great bulwark in Christ—protecting you from the destructive forces of sin. Don't forsake Jesus. Don't wander away from his people. Trust in his purposes.

Well, let me point out the **second** sin you might miss here—the sin of Judah against Tamar. To see it, you need to realize her dilemma. In the ancient Near East, women had fewer rights than you might think, *and you may not think they had many!* When Judah sends Tamar away (following his 2nd son's death), she can't just go-out and get a job to support herself. Neither can she just go-out and find another husband. She is essentially at Judah's mercy. And, what we learn is that he's not very merciful. In fact, he intends to make her his scapegoat.

No one wants to believe that they have a bunch of evil children. Nobody wants to admit that they're a bad parent. That's the case today, and it was equally the case in Judah's day. So, how do you exonerate yourself from or explain-away that reality? You blame someone else. If you're Judah, you blame Tamar.

Here's what one professor of mine wrote concerning Judah's sinful treatment of Tamar. He writes:

She has been cast out from the family in which she ought to occupy a place of honor as the widow of the eldest son. It is her father-in-law, Judah...who treated her so poorly. She has lost her status as the intended mother of the future head and heir of the household.... Her future seems to be bleak, for it is most unlikely that anyone will marry such a despised, rejected, and cursed woman or give a son to her in marriage.²

Friends, Judah is determined to brand Tamar as the problem. She's the reason for the death of his sons, he says. Something is wrong with her, he says. It's not him. It wasn't his two sons. Tamar's the problem. Do you see? She proves an easy target. She doesn't have any real power to defend herself. Tamar is vulnerable. And, Judah is more than happy to exploit her vulnerability. *This is his sin!*

You know, God is concerned for the poor. Our heavenly Father is concerned for the needs of the widow and the fatherless. When you read through your Bible—with an eye on that theme—you will see that it's of paramount importance to him. And, you will also see that the Lord's determined to bring those who exploit the poor

² Jerram Barrs, *Through His Eyes: God's Perspective on Women in the Bible*, 79.

and needy to justice. Proverbs 28:27 captures our Lord God's heart when it comes to this. It simply explains—*Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses.*

Brothers and sisters, I believe Genesis 38—in all of its messiness and sin—serves as a warning to us. How often do we look at others as Judah looks at Tamar? How often do we ignore or, even, exploit those who have nothing? Our Lord cares for these people, and he calls us to care for them as well. There are truly a multitude of ways to do this—*Breakthrough Urban Ministries* and *Lydia Home* immediately come to mind. Our church has a historic relationship with both ministries.

Yet, no matter where you choose to serve, here's my challenge to all of you: *Don't make it just some perfunctory exercise! Engage in it with your whole person! Learn empathy and compassion! Allow the Holy Spirit to truly transform your heart! Love those in need like Jesus loves you...in your need!*

Well, we need to take a brief look right now at Tamar.

2. A woman who is cursed.

You know, everyone looked at her that way. And, even in the church today, she's not one of those biblical characters we celebrate. But, friends, she was a lion. She was courageous. And, God chose to use her powerfully.

I alluded to how much we love to tell and retell the Joseph narrative in church during my introduction. It's one of the most iconic of biblical stories.

We love to teach the history of Joseph to our children. Vacation Bible Schools, Sunday school songs, and Veggie Tales episodes have recounted the story of Joseph and his brothers—with his coat of many colors, his siblings selling him into slavery, his eventual rise to power in Egypt, and his gracious act of provision for his family: saving them from starvation during the seven years of famine. Joseph's story is one of the longest and most beloved stories in the Old Testament. It's the story of a savior who came at just the right time.

So, why do we love it so much? *Because...* Joseph points to the greater Savior. He points us to Jesus Christ! Therefore, we tell this story to our kids, *as we should!* We take the events of Genesis 37 to Genesis 50 and teach them, *as we should!*

But, friends, guess what—Genesis 38 is part of that story. It’s the same story in shorthand. If you don’t believe me, just recall the refrain Joseph repeats two times for our benefit—*What you intended against me for evil, [the Lord] intended for good, ...to preserve the lives of many people* (Genesis 50:20, Berean Study Bible).

Genesis 38! All the mess! All the sin! The sin of Judah and of his two sons! And, the sin of Tamar too! What they—in their fallen natures—intended for selfish and evil purposes God used for good. Through this cursed woman and cursed man, Judah, and cursed family of Jacob, the Lord has saved and is saving countless lives. He was bringing about good news.

Listen to the opening verses of Matthew’s gospel.

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 Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar...(Matthew 1:1-3).

Through this cursed woman—despite all of her sins and all of her weakness—God brought us his Son, Jesus Christ...the Savior of the world. Through Tamar—this cursed woman—God was pleased to reverse the human curse of sin and death for ever and ever. Amen.