

## Tamar's Redemption: From Crisis to Christ

Genesis 38; Matthew 1.1-3a

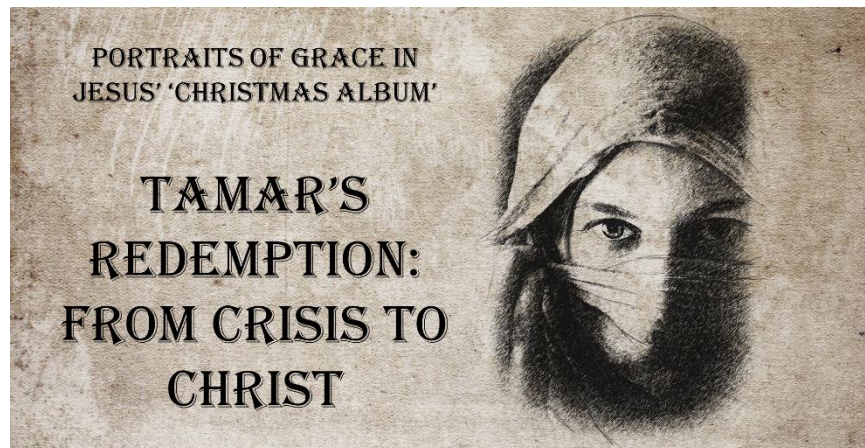
This Christmas we're going back, *way back*, to four Old Testament women in Jesus' family tree. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus records them for us – four *unlikely* women, who exhibit through their lives God's redemptive purpose in sending Jesus to this world.

### Tamar's Life: Grief and Scandal (Genesis 38)

- Marries into a family mess
- Widowed twice, then abandoned
- Playing the harlot, facing death
- Declared "more righteous"!

### Tamar's Redemption: Two Sons, and the 'Son of Man'!

- A 'double-blessing,' and a lineage for Judah
- The Son of Man came to seek and save (Lk. 19.10)
- The God of redemption never gives up on us!
- You're never so lost that God cannot save you!



Take your Bibles and turn to Matthew 1. The story of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus that we remember at Christmas are recorded in just five chapters in Scripture – Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-3. We know these stories well: Of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary to tell her she would give birth to the Messiah, and her fiancé Joseph being told in a dream to take Mary as his wife and name the baby Jesus; of Mary becoming pregnant while still a virgin, and giving birth in Bethlehem's manger; of angels appearing to shepherds in fields outside Bethlehem and them coming to see baby Jesus; of wise men seeing the star in the east and coming with expensive gifts. These and other stories are immortalized in Christmas books and songs and dramas. They show the power of God in sending His Son to save the world.

But 'behind the scenes,' in fact, hidden in the ancient records of Jesus' earthly ancestors, God has woven into stories on the fringes of history the greatest truths of Christmas – the most wonderful gift of God's timeless grace. These truths are veiled in stories of four startling women who by nothing short of God's intentional plan are included in Matthew's genealogy of the Messiah. Each in their own way reveals God's redemption and grace in sending His Son on that first Christmas night.

If you have your Bibles open to Matthew 1, follow along as I read from verses 1-3:

### Matthew 1.1-3a

The record of 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, and Jacob the father of

Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar...

---

Exploring ancestry is big business today. People want to know about famous people in their family tree. An ad for ancestry.com's new genealogy app says that it 'will make you (feel) famous.' Whoareyoumadeof.com will 'find out if you have famous ancestors.' Relativefinder.org will help you 'discover how you are related to prophets (and) presidents.' Are you related to a famous person? The Geneastar database will tell you! And on and on.

Matthew understood that: He first mentions Jesus' two most famous ancestors, Abraham, and David. Every Jew was a descendant of Abraham; but being a descendant of David was a feather in your cap – it made you somebody!

But what stands out in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus are four surprising entries. Four *women*. You may wonder, *Why only four?* Consider this: Luke's genealogy of Jesus contains 76 names – and not a single woman. It isn't that women weren't honored, but genealogy was traced from father to son, so when Matthew lists the names of four women, he does it *intentionally*. Why? Why would the Holy Spirit have prompted him to do that?

Perhaps you think these women were revered in Israelite history. But no Sarah, Rebekah, or Rachel here. Instead, we encounter four women, none of them Jews, every one tainted with scandal and scarred with death. To discover why are these four women are singled out, we'll need to meet them 'up close and personal,' and as we do, we'll

discover that they each are a 'portrait of grace' in Jesus' Christmas album.

The first woman in Matthew's genealogy is Tamar. To 'introduce' her story, we must go all the way back to Genesis 38. As our story opens, Jacob's son Judah is leaving home. Let's read verses 1-6:

#### Genesis 38.1-6 (NLT)

*About this time, Judah left home and moved to Adullam, where he stayed with a man named Hirah. There he saw a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua, and he married her. When he slept with her, she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and he named the boy Er. Then she became pregnant again and gave birth to another son, and she named him Onan. And when she gave birth to a third son, she named him Shelah. At the time of Shelah's birth, they were living at Kezib. In the course of time, Judah arranged for his firstborn son, Er, to marry a young woman named Tamar.*

Tamar. Just hearing that name in a list of Jesus' ancestors which includes Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David, seems absurd. It must have sounded scandalous to any Jew who knew her brief appearance on the stage of Old Testament history. How on earth does a Canaanite woman with such a scurrilous reputation appear in the line of the Messiah?

The answer to that question only makes sense when you know God – the God of *redemption*. The God who takes the world's outcast and transforms it into a thing of value and significance. Tamar fits perfectly into the narrative of

Christmas. But let's be clear: Her life isn't a Christmas story. More like a horror story. It goes like this.

### The Story of Tamar (Genesis 38)

The first thing we learn from the text is that Tamar was not a Jew. She was Canaanite, the idolatrous people who lived in Canaan, the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. Abraham had settled there, but God specifically commanded him that he and his descendants were *not* to intermarry with the Canaanites. So how does Tamar end up in the line of Christ, the Jewish Messiah? It's one of the strangest stories in the Bible.

A quick review is important here. Judah was the fourth of the twelve sons of Jacob, but this family was a mess. You recall that the older brothers sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt. The three oldest, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, each sinned horribly and were barred from receiving the family inheritance. Judah was next in line, and knew that he must not marry a Canaanite. But as Genesis 38 opens, he moves to the Canaanite city of Adullam to be with his friend Hiram, and meets and marries a Canaanite woman.

He and his Canaanite wife have three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. When Er was of age, Judah found a Canaanite wife for him to marry. Her name was Tamar. It's vital to understand what was at stake here: Judah is now the son of promise; he is supposed to carry on the family line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But his half-Canaanite son Er is marrying the Canaanite Tamar. This is a catastrophe. And as bad as that is, it's about to get worse.

Step into Tamar's shoes for a minute. It is doubtful that she knew anything of Judah's Hebrew heritage when she married Er. Judah had lived with Canaanites for at least 15 years, and was accustomed to their ways. Tamar probably knew little or nothing of God and His promises. Then tragedy struck.

All Scripture tells us is this: Er was wicked and God took his life (Gen. 38.7). Just married, Tamar is now a widow. For her, this was a crisis. Not only is she grieving the loss of her husband, she now faced ruin. In their agrarian and patriarchal society, her security and status depended on being married and bearing children.

Because of this, marital laws of the day dictated that if a husband died without an heir, his brother would marry his widow and raise up a son to be his brother's heir. Er's brother Onan was next in line, so Judah instructed Onan to marry Tamar, and father a son to be the legal heir to the birthright of the family.

Tamar really had no choice in the matter. Whether she loved Onan or not, she needed an heir, so although she is still very young, she's now married for the second time. Then tragedy strikes again. Onan didn't want to father a son for his brother; he was the second-oldest, and if his brother didn't have an heir, he would receive the family blessing. So after he married Tamar, he refused to get her pregnant. This was selfish and evil. God was angry with Onan, and took his life (vv8-10).

Tamar is now a widow twice – by all accounts, both her husbands were losers. Only one brother is left, Shelah.

He was evidently no better than his brothers. Judah is afraid that Shelah will disobey God, and be killed. So he concocts a plan (Gen. 38.11):

*Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, “Remain a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up”; for he thought, “I am afraid that he too may die like his brothers.” So Tamar went and lived in her father’s house. (Gen. 38.11)*

Tamar takes Judah at his word, and returns to her father’s home, but we know what she didn’t: Judah had no plans to ever give her to his son Shelah. He would just string her out until any connection was forgotten. Tamar would end up an ‘old maid,’ without family, and forced to sell herself to stay alive.

This is nothing short of cold-blooded evil. Not only was Judah dishonest, he was cruel. Tamar was condemned to a life as a rejected widow. It was just about as low as you could go. And before long, Tamar realized she had been permanently sidelined. What could she do?

What she did shattered every Jewish moral convention – there’s no way to make this look good. Judah’s wife died, and Tamar, knowing the kind of man he was, guessed he would be soon be looking for female companionship. It was sheepshearing time, and she knew the road he would travel to shear his herds.

It was a Canaanite religious practice for prostitutes to sell their services at shearing time as fertility magic to ensure the growth of the herds. Tamar quickly changed out of

her mourning clothes, put on the veil of a prostitute to hide her identity. Judah wouldn’t give his son to produce a child for her husband, so she would take matters into her own hands. It was purely business.

Judah took the bait. He didn’t have a goat to give for her services, so she asked for something to hold to guarantee that he wouldn’t fail to pay. It had to be something that would prove who he was. He readily gave her his signet ring (which hung around his neck) and his staff. After all, they weren’t of any value to her, and he would get them back in a few days.

When Judah reached his flacks, he sent a friend with a goat – but he couldn’t find her. Tamar had put on her widow’s garments, and the prostitute who had Judah’s ring and staff was gone. Judah was ashamed of what he had done, and decided to just let it go.

Three months passed, then it was reported to Judah that Tamar had prostituted herself and was pregnant. Judah, in self-righteous anger, demanded she be put to death. At the critical moment, as she was led out to be burned, she brought out his ring and staff: *By the man to whom these belong I am pregnant. Please identify whose they are!*

Judah was exposed. He was forced to admit that the items were his! Then Judah did something that marked a change in his life: He confessed his wrong, that Tamar was justified in what she had done, because he had not given her his son Shelah. In that moment Tamar was vindicated; Judah was humbled.

## Tamar's Redemption: Two Sons, and the 'Son of Man'!

- A 'double-blessing,' and a lineage for Judah  
The story ends with Tamar giving birth to twins, Perez and Zerah. Judah was the son of Jacob chosen to carry on the family line of Abraham – the line of promise. That line was preserved through a Canaanite girl who showed grit and determination in the face of crisis. She not only received a 'double-blessing' – two sons, but in the plan of God, was listed in the genealogy of the Messiah of Israel. And that – as Paul Harvey used to say – is 'the rest of the story.'

- The Son of Man came to seek and save (Lk. 19.10)  
But there's more. Our God is a God of redemption. Few people seem to be less likely candidates for God to take an interest in than Tamar. But here, almost 2000 years before Jesus was born, God inscribed Tamar's story on the pages of Scripture, to underscore a truth that Jesus Himself would proclaim: *The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost* (Lk. 19.10).

- The God of redemption never gives up on us!  
As the story of Tamar unfolds, the crises mount one after another. She's a Canaanite. She marries a wicked man, and she's a widow. Her second husband is a loser, and she's a widow for the second time. Her father-in-law connives to destroy her life. She plots to save herself, and is sentenced to death. But God doesn't give up on her.

- You're never so lost that God cannot save you!

But the most compelling message from this story is about God. For if you or I were God, we'd never look at Judah and Tamar as candidates to be in the line of the Messiah! We'd look for someone with a spotless record, who never got out of line – and certainly not someone who messed up as bad as Judah, or prostituted herself like Tamar!

But think about it: Isn't that what God's in the business of? He takes the ashes of our lives, and by His 'amazing grace' He transforms us into people who have a heart for Him. The whole world may give up on you, and you may give up on you...but God will never give up on you.

It's the story of God's grace and redemption. People whose lives were a mess...in prison, on drugs, addicted to porn, alcoholics, depressed, lonely, unloved. But then God touched their lives, they were redeemed, and God's grace turns it all around. Another life is rescued.

You may not be any of those things...maybe you're just 'stuck in neutral' – but wherever you are, the message of the story of Judah and Tamar is that God's grace can do something in your life you can never do yourself. I know it's true; I see it every time I look in the mirror.