Tamar
Genesis 38

If you're anything like me, you've probably gone into the shops over the last couple of months, seen what's on the shelves, and gone, 'I don't believe it. Summer's barely over and there are angels and reindeer and Santa's little helpers appearing everywhere.'

And beginning today, we're about to make it worse. Because instead of waiting for Advent, we're going to give Christmas a bit of a longer run. And each Sunday, we're going to take a look at some of the names that appear in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. Starting with the women.

Because if you look at it, the genealogy's a list of men - of fathers and sons, the male forebears of Jesus. And yet, inserted among them are the names of five women. Which given it's a list of men should raise an eyebrow - even more so when you realise that each of those women - down to and including Mary - is a woman of questionable background or dubious character.

And so if Matthew was just making a half-hearted, first-century attempt at equality, there are probably better examples he could have chosen, aren't there? Instead, he seems to chose the worst, beginning with Tamar. Because if you made a list of *the* most sordid stories in the Bible, Tamar's would probably make the cut wouldn't it? In fact, if you know her story, you'll have noticed we missed out the bits in the reading that should carry a parents' advisory notice.

And yet, if Tamar's story seems out of place in Jesus' genealogy, think about its immediate context in Genesis. Because if Tamar's story is in Genesis 38, right before, in chapter 37 is the start of the story of Joseph, with his dreams, and robe of many colours, and his father's favouritism, and his brothers' anger, and how they sell him into slavery in Egypt. And then right after Tamar, in chapter 39, we go back to Joseph - whose story runs to the end of the book.

So why insert this story of Tamar and Judah into the story of Joseph were it sits so awkwardly?

Well, if this account gives us Judah having sex with his daughter-in-law, what comes next is Joseph, his younger brother, resisting the sexual advances of another man's wife. And so Judah's unfaithfulness makes Joseph's faithfulness shine all the brighter.

And yet, why tell Tamar's story at all? Answer: because in Genesis 3 we're told that a seed of woman will come who will crush the serpent's head; and then God promises Abraham that through his seed the world is going to be blessed. And the remarkable thing is, it's through this liaison that that messianic line down to David and beyond, runs. That it doesn't run through good and faithful Joseph - but through unfaithful Judah. That it's Tamar, in all her hurt and questionable choices, who is chosen to carry that seed.

Which tells you, it's not the quality of your moral life that saves you. It's the grace of God - the grace that intervenes in the lives of people like Tamar and Judah.

So that's what we're going to look at: Judah's Descent; Tamar's Plight; and the Son who Breaks Through.

Judah's Descent
Look at v1: 'It happened at that time…' So Genesis is linking the decisions we're going to see Judah make to what's immediately gone before. Which is Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery,

and then showing their dad Jacob Joseph's robe, stained with the blood of a goat, to have Jacob believe Joseph is dead.

And with that background, we're told, v1, 'Judah went down *from his brothers*.' Not 'down from that region', but *down from his brothers*. Because it's not the area he's fleeing- it's his family. Because imagine his situation: every time he sees his brothers, every time he bumps into them, in the kitchen, or the sheep pen, and they give him that look, it is like a daily, hourly, minute by minute reminder of his guilt. Because whose idea was it to sell Joseph as a slave? His. And he and they know that. And daily he has to see his father Jacob, broken by grief. And he can't stand it any longer. So he runs… where? To the pagan Canaanites.

In the next chapter we're told that Joseph went down into Egypt - *against his will*. Here, Judah goes down into Canaan of his own free will.

So take a look at this family and think, who are they? They are the family God has made covenant promises to, that he will use them to bless the whole world. But to say that they are broken would be an understatement wouldn't it?

And so, if you look at your life, or your own family, and you see brokenness, take heart. God has a track record in the rubble.

But as he heads down, away from his family, Judah's choices become more and more concerning. First, there's his choice of friends: v1, he 'turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah,' who's almost certainly a Canaanite, and who appears again in v12 when Judah goes in with the woman he thinks is a prostitute. And while Hirah can't be blamed for Judah's decisions, he's also not the kind of friend who says, 'hey, don't do that.' It's a reminder: the company we keep shapes us. And if your friends encourage you in wrong doing, or even if they just don't speak out against it, they're not friends.

And then, v2-3, 'Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er.' So Judah marries a Canaanite, outside the people of God.

But did you notice how Genesis describes it? 'Judah saw… he took.' It's the same wording for Eve eating the forbidden fruit: 'The woman saw…she took' (Gen 3:6). And so Judah's not choosing this woman for her godly character, or because she's a member of God's people. He takes her because he wants her, because she looks good. And *she* remains nameless throughout. It's as if she has no identity, no value to him apart from her looks.

And she conceives two more sons, Onan and Shelah. But with the birth of Shelah we're given an extra detail: v5, 'Judah was in Chezib when she bore him.' Why tell us he wasn't around for the birth? Does Judah think he's got better things to do? And that the way his boys turn out tells us, Judah was anything but an involved father or loving husband.

But then Tamar appears: v6, 'And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.' And the implication is that she's also a Canaanite. So while Judah's great-grandfather Abraham went to great lengths to secure a wife for Isaac from within his own people, and while Jacob, Judah's father, married similarly, it doesn't seem to bother Judah that his firstborn should marry a

pagan. And we're left wondering, does the promise of God to bless the world through his family mean nothing to him?

So as you consider your own decisions, ask yourself, is there a controlling story that's guiding what you decide and why? And is that story the story of self, and if it feels good, looks good, or pays good, you do it? Or is it the story of God, and his glory, and his Christ, and of service and love of neighbour?

Verse 12, 'In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah.' But when he sees Tamar by the roadside, dressed as a prostitute, he mistakes her for one and, v16, 'He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you."' And if we'd read the previous chapter, you'd notice the contrast between the depth of his dad Jacob's grief over Joseph, and Judah's seemingly short-lived grief over his wife.

But think, how does Tamar know her plan will work? What's she seen in her father-in-law that tells her, 'if I just dress like a prostitute I'll get him'? And the fact that she's not wrong makes his later hypocrisy, all the more glaring.

So that's Judah - a man who sold his brother to slavery, who walked out on his family the people of God, and who has begun the downward descent. Is there any hope for a man like him?

Tamar's Plight

Verse 7, 'Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death.' And we're not told what he did, but Er must have erred greatly for the Lord to take him out.

But that leaves Tamar vulnerable. And to protect widows like her, Ancient Near Eastern cultures practiced *levirate marriage*, where younger brothers would marry an older brother's widow, so their firstborn would be counted to the line of the dead brother, and the widow would be financially cared for and her right to bear the heir of the family secured.

And that's Tamar's right. And the responsibility to meet it falls to Onan: v8, 'Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." But Onan knows that any child they have will get the firstborn's share of Judah's estate - and he wants that for himself.

So what does he do? Verse 9, 'Whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother.' So he's happy to use Tamar for sex, but has zero intention of honouring her right to carry the seed of the firstborn. In fact, the seed promised to Abraham to bless the world, Onan is happy to spill on the floor.

And so, v10, the Lord 'put him to death also.' Does that seem harsh to you? Or can you see how woven through this story of man's sin is the far greater story of the justice and righteousness of God? You see, as the story progresses, we can be left thinking, was this right? Is this really God's plan? Well, God's judgment on Er and Onan tells you: the Lord sees, the Lord knows, and in all the sin and brokenness of life, including the wrong done against you, the Judge of all the earth will do what is right.

But ask yourself, how does having two dead husbands to her name make Tamar look? To lose one husband would be tragic; to lose two begins to look suspicious. At least in the eyes of her father-in-law. Verse 11, 'Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up" - for he feared that he would die, like his brothers.'

So, Judah's family's a mess, and who does he blame? Tamar. Have you ever noticed something similar in your own life? Like Judah, we can head down to Canaan, form unhelpful friendships, make bad choices, have life blow up in our faces, and it's always someone else's fault. And yet, as we'll see with Judah, it's only when we begin to take responsibility that change can begin.

But for now, Tamar is sent back to her father's house to live as a widow. And while Judah is obliged to give her his third son, which he promises to do, he has no intention of doing it. And so Tamar, who was supposed to *leave* her father's house, get married, and have lots of children, returns to her father a widow, childless, and with a tainted reputation.

But think what has Judah done to her by sending her away, at the same time as telling her to wait for Shelah? He's condemned her to living in limbo. She can't marry anyone but Shelah, but she's never going to have Shelah. She has to stay under Judah's control, but she's not under his care. And so she is cut off from the family of the people of God, and the question is left hanging: will the promise of God to bless the whole world through that family reach as far as her?

But, of course, while Judah orders Tamar to live the life of a chaste widow, he - also a widow - has no intention of living such a life for himself. And Tamar knows that.

Verse 14, 'She took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah.' And when Judah passes, he fails to recognise her, and mistakes her for a prostitute, because v15, 'she had covered her face.'

So can you see what Judah's decisions have reduced her to? She's veiled - unknown, unloved, uncared for. Okay… but does Judah *really* not recognise her? Obviously not. As John Calvin says, Judah's descent into sin has blinded him. And now he can't see what he should see. But that's what sin does to any of us, isn't it? It cauterises our consciences and dulls our senses, and we find ourselves doing things that before we would never have dreamed of doing. Because we've lost the ability to see.

And as the price for sex Judah offers a goat - the same animal whose blood he used to convince his dad that Joseph was dead. But it's not payment Tamar wants, is it? It's pregnancy. It's justice. It's to be protected, and provided for, and to be grafted into the covenant family.

Pregnancy and proof of identity. Because in the absence of a goat, she demands a pledge: v18, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." And the signet was a cylindrical seal carried by a cord around the neck by a wealthy man. And a wealthy man's staff engraved with his name and tribe, as a symbol of status.

So this is like her asking him for his driver's licence, ID card and 'hand over your passport while you're at it.'

And so while his wife has no name, and Tamar's identity is hidden, the story turns on the issue of Judah's identity - on who he really is.

And so Tamar conceives and, v19, 'taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood' and goes back to her father's house.

But as she does, ask yourself, is what she's done right? I mean, surely this is entrapment? And is the Bible condoning it?

And the answer is, no. Because did you notice that from the death of Onan on, God strangely drops out of the picture. So is he present in all of this? Of course he's present. He's present everywhere. But you can't see him. And so God is not the author of the sinful choices these two make, but he is crafting their stories with grace.

And Calvin, who himself married a widow whose daughter was either a prostitute or at least caught up in a scandalous affair, calls what Tamar does, 'an evil plan'. But then he adds, 'Those who are injured should not rush to take unlawful remedies.' In other words, when like Tamar you are injured, and you are hurting, and you long for justice, as Paul writes, 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Rom 12:13).

And yet, if we do return like for like, or if like Judah we hit moral rock-bottom, even then God is at work for his glory and our good.

The Son Who Breaks Through

Verse 24, 'About three months later Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." And that last sentence in Hebrew is just too words, 'take, burn.'

Why is his response so savage? I mean, his hypocrisy is bad enough, isn't it? That he would condemn her for the sexual immorality he himself is guilty of. But why the most awful of punishments?

Because that's what happens when deep down you know you're guilty but desperately want to feel righteous and better than others. And Judah is guilty of selling his brother, and destroying his father, of depriving his daughter-in-law of justice, and of sexual immorality. So how can someone like him - how can any of us feel good about ourselves when we know we're not good? Answer: By finding someone who you can tell yourself is worse than you. By finding someone of whom you can say 'take, burn.' Because then you'll know that in comparison to them you are righteous.

And so as she is dragged out, v25, 'She sent word to her father-in-law, "By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant." And she said, "Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff."'

In the previous chapter, Judah presented his dad with Joseph's bloodstained robe and said, please identify whose this is? And now the tables are turned and Tamar does the same to Judah.

And in doing so, she's not just asking him to recognise what belongs to him, she's getting him to recognise who he is. A man who sleeps with prostitutes. A man who robs people of justice. A man

who is no better than the one he is accusing. And the man who is father to the children she is carrying.

Verse 26: ‘Then Judah identified them and said, “She is more righteous than I.”’

And that becomes the turning point in Judah’s life. And recognising his own brokenness becomes the spur to reconnect with his broken family. And later, in the midst of famine, he and his brothers go down to Egypt, meet Joseph whose identity is hidden from them, and Judah, the man who was willing to sell his brother into slavery, becomes the man willing to offer himself as a slave to secure another brother’s freedom - to give his give for Ben’s life. Sometimes we need to be confronted with what we’re really like if change is to happen, don’t we?

But Judah’s transformation is just a taster, a sign-post pointing us to Judah and Tamar’s greater son. Because she is carrying twins. And so if Judah lost two sons to their wickedness, through Tamar he gains two sons. But at delivery, one puts out his hand first, only for his twin brother to muscle his way in, and when that brother is born, the midwife says, v29, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” Therefore his name was Perez.’ Which means a breach! or a break through!

And so Matthew’s genealogy is telling us, it’s through this boy, Tamar’s boy - the breaking-out, making-a-breach, break-through boy, that the messianic seed who will crush the serpent and bless the world comes.

And so if Judah’s a sinner, and Tamar behaves as a prostitute, through their son Perez a far greater Son will come - the Son who becomes the friend of sinners and prostitutes. And Jesus enters our world to bring about the greatest of breakthroughs - the break through of life over death and grace over sin and mercy over judgment. Because if Judah becomes the man willing to give his life to rescue his brother, Jesus wasn’t just *willing* - he did it.

And so, if the knowledge of our sin leaves us looking for someone to blame so we can feel good about ourselves, or if we long for someone, even ourselves, to say, ‘you’re righteous’, Jesus *doesn’t* say of us, as Judah said of Tamar, ‘you are more righteous than I’, because how could he? He says something infinitely better. Because at the cross he who knew no sin became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him. And so as you look at him, taking your place, as your substitute, he says of you ‘you are now as righteous as I.’

So, if you look at your life, or your family, and see rubble, look again at Matthew 1: ‘the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham… Judah the father of Perez… *by Tamar*.’ And know that his grace can, and will, break through for you.