

## **The Lion of Judah's Dysfunctional Family**

December 2nd, 2012

Matthew 1:3, Genesis 38

*"<sup>1</sup>The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. <sup>2</sup>Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup>and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar..."*

If you've been a student of the Bible for any period of time, surely you've come across genealogies like the one found at the beginning of Matthew's gospel. And if you're like most people, these probably aren't your most exhilarating portions of Scripture to wade through. They're hard to read (that's why I left it to Andrew Peterson this morning!), and it doesn't feel like there's any spiritual value to taking the time to read through them. So we end up either skimming through them, or just passing over them altogether.

The genealogies might seem bland to us, but they were very important to the Jewish people, and this one at the beginning of Matthew's gospel would have been especially important. He begins by writing to his Jewish audience that Jesus is the Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. These are massive claims, and conscientious Jews would have wondered, "Ok, where did this Jesus come from? What's His family line? What kind of pedigree does He have? If Jesus is all that you say He is, He must have some kind of family history that is going to match these exalted titles that Matthew is giving Him."

### **Introducing the Mothers of Jesus**

And so Matthew starts with a genealogy, and one of the things that stands out right away about this genealogy is the presence of a few women in this listing of names (the red ornaments on the Christmas tree). That wasn't entirely unprecedented in the culture of that day, but it certainly wasn't very common. So you'd think that if Matthew was

going to include a few women in this genealogy, that they must be women who would reflect very well on Jesus' genealogy. You might expect to find some heroic women of Israel's history in this list, women like Sarah or Rebekah or Rachel or Leah or Hannah.

But that's not what we find in Matthew 1. What we find is four Gentile women (not a big deal to us, but would have been huge for Matthew's Jewish readers), and when you get into their stories, these four ladies don't seem to bolster the claim that Jesus is the great, long-awaited Messianic King. So why these four women? Clearly for Matthew to begin his gospel in this way, with forty generations of Jesus' forefathers and then, along the way, inserting the names of four of Jesus' mothers, there has to be some intentionality behind that, right? Out of all of Jesus' mothers, why Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba?

Well, as we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth this year, we are going to spend the four Sundays leading up to Christmas by going into the Old Testament and looking at the stories of these four women. And it's my hope that as we see who Jesus came *from*, we'll get a glimpse of the sort of people who Jesus came *for*. So today we'll look at the first woman Matthew mentions, Tamar, whose story is found in Genesis 38. It's a bit racy...I don't anticipate a VeggieTales video on this story any time soon, but it's God's Word nevertheless. I'll pray, then we'll read through it together, and I'll draw out one connection to Christmas, and then we'll take the Lord's Supper together.

### **Verses 1-5: Judah Leaves His Family**

"At that time..." -- What's just happened is that we've read of Joseph and his dreams in which his brothers bowed down to him, and his brothers jealousy and their plot to murder Joseph, but then Judah steps up and says, "Hey, why not make a little money off of this; instead of killing him, let's sell him into slavery?" and so they do that, and take his multi-colored coat and dip it in blood and show it to their dad,

Jacob, so he thinks his son is dead. So we see even before this story begins that Judah is a selfish, greedy, treacherous, deceptive man. It's at this time...

"Went down from his brothers..." -- This is not good. Judah's brothers are God's chosen people, the people of Israel, the nation from whom God has promised to bring blessing to the whole world. Judah and his brothers are the sons of Jacob, whose dad Isaac was the son of Abraham, the man who God promised to make into a great nation, through whom blessing would flow to the ends of the earth. And Judah says, "I'm moving on."

And he goes into Gentile land, and makes himself at home there with some friends and gets himself a pagan wife and settles down there. He's made himself what the New Testament calls "a friend of the world." We have a calling to the world; we are sent into it to bear witness to Jesus, just as He was sent by the Father. But our calling involves our being distinctive from the world -- not of it, but sent into it -- and Judah has failed in this.

Just a word to the singles here: as you think about marriage, don't compromise your convictions about God, and settle for a person who has a lot of great attributes, but a passion and hunger to know and love and serve Jesus isn't there. Throughout the Bible -- and here in Genesis 38 -- we see that marriage is a bond so deep and pervasive that when you yoke yourself together with someone who doesn't love Jesus, it's a great danger.

So Judah has left his family (God's people), intermarried, fallen in love with the world, and fathers three children.

### **Verses 6-11: Judah's Wicked Sons**

"Tamar" -- Here she is, one of Jesus' "mothers".

"The Lord put him to death" -- We don't know what his sin is, but we're told bluntly that God killed him for it. God hates sin; it is an offense to Him, an insult to His glory and worth and value. And we love the gospel of Jesus Christ, that there is forgiveness of sins. Praise God! But let's never forget that the God who has saved us hates sin. So let's never make peace with sin in our lives. God hates sin, and sin kills people. And as much as the death of Jesus testifies to God's love for us, Jesus' death also bears witness to how much He hates sin...that Jesus had to die so that we could have peace with God.

"The duty of a brother-in-law" -- Now this sounds crazy to us, but you have to understand this society. A young widow in that time was in a big predicament. It's an agrarian society, so they're trying to look after the young women in that culture, because there weren't employment opportunities for a woman to take care of herself. Such a woman, if their husband died, she wasn't a virgin, so men would not want to marry her. So these women, in an effort to provide, would need to go into prostitution. And so the custom was let's take care of these ladies who are widows so that they're not taken advantage of.

So if the oldest brother died without male children, the younger brother would take the widow as his wife, and produce male offspring for the deceased brother. As the wife of Judah's firstborn, Tamar had a right to be the mother of Judah's heir. So Onan, the second born, is to fulfill his responsibility to his dead brother and to Tamar.

Verse 9 -- Because Er was the firstborn, his son would have inherited his position of family leadership and double portion as Judah's heir. Onan wanted that for himself, not for his dead brother's offspring, so he had intercourse with Tamar but prevented conception of a child (not just once, but regularly).

"He put him to death also" -- For his selfish indifference to his family's well-being. It's more than a stretch to conclude from this passage that God condemns any and all forms of birth control.

"For he feared..." -- He's already deceived his dad about Joseph's coat; now Judah deceives his daughter-in-law about his third son. He tells her to wait a few years, but he has no intention of ever giving him to her. Judah has now watched two of his sons marry Tamar, and watched them both die. And he thinks, it must be Tamar. She's bad news. He seems totally blind to his own sin, and the wickedness of his sons, and chooses to point the finger at her.

Beware of pointing the finger at other people to excuse or minimize or justify your own sin. Your sin problem (in marriage, with your kids, at work, etc.) is not due to something, or someone, "out there"; it's in your own heart.

### **Verses 12-23: Tamar's Plan**

"Timnah" -- From my studies, going up to Timnah for sheep-shearing was a sort of ancient-times Mardi Gras, a time of gross immorality and indulgence. In those days, as part of invoking the gods to cause your flocks to be fruitful and your lands to be fruitful, people engaged in ritual fornication with temple prostitutes. And so the time of sheep shearing was a time in which this was overly indulged in.

Verses 13-14 -- The absence of any kind of moral judgment from the author here is perplexing. I wouldn't say this is a commendable plan Tamar has put together. I don't see any way in Scripture to give approval to incest and prostitution. At the same time, Tamar was clearly in quite a predicament. She was technically engaged to Shelah, but that marriage obviously wasn't happening. And again, she really can't, in that culture, sustain a livelihood on our own. What she's after - - as imperfectly as she's pursuing it -- is justice. She has a right to be the mother of Judah's heir, and she devises a bold plan.

And the fact that she devises this plan says something else shameful about Judah, doesn't it? Why would she have taken this approach, unless she knew that this was his "M.O."? This must have been his regular pattern of conduct.

"Signet and cord" -- This was sort of like Judah's driver's license and social security #.

"...or we shall be laughed at" -- This is a sick man. Conducting himself in this way, and all he cares about is how he might look. He treats Tamar better as a prostitute (following through on his word to bring a goat to her) than he did as his daughter-in-law.

What's your image of Judah at this point in the story? Is he the sort of guy you want your daughter to marry? Is he the sort of guy you want in your family tree? But it gets worse!

### **Verses 24-30: Judah Exposed**

"Let her be burned" -- What hypocrisy! What duplicity! He's been deceitful and unfaithful, he's solicited a prostitute, and he wants her condemned for conceiving a child out of wedlock!

"Please identify..." -- Or, "recognize". There's a play on words here from 37:32. There Judah said to his dad, "Please identify" Joseph's coat. Now Tamar says to Judah, "Please identify" the signet and cord and staff. And Judah doesn't just recognize his stuff; he finally recognizes his guilt and corruption. He has a breakthrough (the name of the firstborn son of Tamar, Perez): "<sup>26</sup>Then Judah identified them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.""

And Judah is, from this point, a changed man: "And he did not know her again". As the Genesis account moves on, we see Judah is the one who steps up before Joseph in Egypt and says, "I will be imprisoned so that Benjamin can go free." Selfish, irresponsible, unfaithful Judah is

transformed (I'll say more about this at the communion table). Let's thank God for, and pursue eagerly, the loving correction of others in our lives. Judah was utterly blind to his grievous sin and selfishness. Often times you cannot see the character flaw that is hurting you the most, and praise God that He'll send a Tamar into our lives to help us see in our own souls what we have been blind to. Don't despise the loving correction of God's people.

Verses 27-30 -- Tamar gives birth to two sons. And in light of the whole Genesis account and its focus on a seed that would bring blessing, and the unusual nature of this birth account, with its focus on the firstborn, suggests that there is something significant about Perez and his line.

### **Connecting Judah and Tamar to Christmas**

And that brings us to our Christmas connection this morning. I bet a lot of you are excited about the release of *The Hobbit* on December 14th. And many of you know that *The Hobbit* is a prequel, it's a movie being released *after* the release of the three Lord of the Rings movies, but the plotline takes place *before* those three movies. And if you're into movies or books and have been exposed to a prequel before, you know that you can watch it without knowing what happens in the later ones and still find some enjoyment from the storyline, but the richness and deepest meaning of the prequel only comes out when you know the entire story and how it all is going to unfold.

When you view Genesis 38 as its own story, it's just a baffling, awful tale of sin and selfishness. Yes, there's a turn for the better at the end with Judah coming to his senses, but in light of the whole chapter, this family is just sick. You think your family is dysfunctional, look at this one! This is like Jerry Springer meets *As the World Turns*!

But when you see the story of Judah and Tamar as a prequel to Christmas, there is a depth and a beauty and a richness to this story that

is so breathtaking to behold. Because when we zoom out from Genesis 38 and look at God's grand plan starting in Genesis but moving all the way to Revelation, we find that our Savior Jesus Christ is called "The Lion of the Tribe of Judah". Why would the eternal Son of God, coming into the world in flesh and blood to reveal Himself as Lord and Savior, come from the line of Judah?

Wouldn't Joseph be a better choice? Genesis 38 is followed by the story of Joseph's sexual purity and integrity in his dealings with Potiphar's wife. Judah's selfishness and immorality are a stark contrast to the character of his brother depicted in Genesis 39. And yet the Messiah descends from the line of Judah, not Joseph.

And not only Judah's line, but from this twisted act of incest between Judah and Tamar. God could have brought His Son into the world through Judah and his third son, Shelah. But instead, Matthew tells us: "<sup>3</sup>and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram..." Why would the bloodlines of the Son of God be stained with the moral filth and dirtiness of Judah and Tamar?

Because Jesus has come into the world to get dirty with the sins of the world, that sinners like you and me might be washed clean: "<sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'" This shameful and embarrassing story is found in the Bible to show that Jesus willingly came to bear the shame and guilt of the dirtiest sinners. Judah and Tamar are the great great great grandparents of Jesus to highlight for us that there's no sin, no shame, that cannot be redeemed by His infinite grace; to make us sing and dance that there is room in the family of God for the worst of us.

Jesus is not ashamed to have Canaanite, incestuous, prostituted blood running through His veins, the very blood that would be shed for your sins and mine. He became sin in our behalf, that in Christ we might

become the righteousness of God. And because Jesus is not ashamed to call Judah and Tamar His grandparents, we can have confidence that He is not ashamed to call us brothers (Hebrews 2:11). If God can use the likes of Judah and Tamar to bring His Son into the world, then maybe He can demonstrate what He is like to the world through messed up people like you and me.

Some of you have sinned, and maybe you're still racked with guilt about sin that you committed in the midst of dire circumstances (like Tamar, and Judah): maybe an abortion, or a divorce, or fornication, or theft, or substance abuse. And you knew it was wrong, but it just seemed like your circumstances were so dark and hopeless that you had no choice. Though dire circumstances don't nullify sin, and don't give you a right to sin, I would remind you today from Judah and Tamar's story that Jesus redeems us from our sin. He covers our shame, and removes our guilt as far as the east is to the west.

The world would call Judah's family "dysfunctional". The Bible would call them sinful. But isn't that good news for those of us who know we're dysfunctional and sinful and broken and flawed? As we come to the Lord's table, where we celebrate Jesus as a family of redeemed sinners, we can come today remembering that the Lion of the Tribe of ***Judah*** has a very dysfunctional family, and that is the hope of every selfish, shameful sinner in this room. That's the meaning of the Lord's Supper, and Christmas.