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Genesis 38:1-30 – *Women of Jesus' Genealogy: Tamar*

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Genesis 38:1-30

At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah. <sup>2</sup> There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. He married her and made love to her; <sup>3</sup> she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, who was named Er. <sup>4</sup> She conceived again and gave birth to a son and named him Onan. <sup>5</sup> She gave birth to still another son and named him Shelah. It was at Kezib that she gave birth to him.

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

<sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> What he did was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death also.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep," <sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. <sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> "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.

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> After she left, she took off her veil and put on her widow’s clothes again.

<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> 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.’”

<sup>23</sup> 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.”

<sup>24</sup> 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!”

<sup>25</sup> 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.”

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. <sup>28</sup> 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.” <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> Then his brother, who had the scarlet thread on his wrist, came out. And he was named Zerah.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

We have major problems in this story...

Problems that are noticeable and on the surface—

The tip of the iceberg—

And problems that are massive and underneath the surface.

Let's start with the obvious problem:

Judah and his family are wrecking the life of Tamar.

They've sucked her into their dysfunction.

Tamar is a young woman, most likely Canaanite...

Who marries into this prominent Hebrew family.

She's probably excited to marry Judah's firstborn...

Being put a good position to produce a descendant...

To be mother of the heir.

We don't know much about Er or Tamar's relationship with him...

But it probably wasn't what Tamar expected...

Because he's wicked and put to death by the Lord.

Great! Get rid of this wicked guy...

And now maybe his brother will be better...

Maybe they'll have a son who will become the heir...

And carry on the family line.

See, under Jewish law (levirate marriage, cf. Deut 25:5-10)...

A brother of the deceased was supposed to marry her...

And produce a child.

Well, this one doesn't work out well either.

This next son, Onan, is willing to have sex with her—

He's willing to use Tamar—

But he's unwilling to get her pregnant....

Because this would reduce his shot at a double inheritance.

Another dud of a husband!

The third and final son isn't old enough to marry...

So Judah sends Tamar to live with her dad:

“Live as a widow until Shelah grows up.”

This would have been okay...

Except Judah has no intention of giving his last son to Tamar.

The Lord killed his other two sons because they were wicked...

But Judah thinks it's because of Tamar.

So Judah essentially wrecks Tamar's chances of having a life...

Having a family to provide for her.

He could have released Tamar and said:

“You're free to go back to your family and start your life anew.”

Instead, he says, “Live as a widow.”

“Do not give yourself in marriage to anyone else.”

“Wait until my other son is ready.”

Essentially saying, “Let's keep you in a holding pattern until the day you die...”

“You're not going to marry my last son...”

“But I'm not going to free you to marry anyone else.”

This puts Tamar in a vulnerable position:

In this culture she's dependent on the men in her life to care for her...

But they're not!

Tamar's in a desperate position...

So she does something desperate.

We read it:

She takes off her widow's clothes;

Disguises herself with a veil;

And heads out to the entrance of the town...

Where a prostitute would be.

Sidebar: How does she know Judah would want to sleep with a prostitute?

We're not told...

But we can guess that this was his tendency.

Judah takes the bait...

Unknowingly sleeps with his daughter-in-law...

And gets her pregnant.

The shows you watch on Netflix don't even get this scandalous!

This is a messy and terribly broken situation...

But this is just the tip of the iceberg...

The injustice to Tamar is only the beginning.

Under the surface lies an even bigger problem...

Something that impacts not only Tamar...

But the whole world.

To see underneath the water at the scope of this problem—

How big this iceberg is—

You have to understand who Judah is.

Judah's dad is Jacob...

Jacob's dad is Isaac...

And Isaac's dad is Abraham.

And to Abraham, God said:

"I'm going to bless the world through your seed..." (Gen 12:3)

"Through one of your descendants, I'm going to set everything right."

That's a big promise!

That's an important promise!

That's a promise you don't want to mess with...

You want to do everything in your power to make sure that promise happens...

You want to keep this family line intact and faithful.

But Judah is messing with the promise...

Jeopardizing God's promise to bless the world.

How's he jeopardizing the promise?

First, we see Judah's family fragmenting—

Breaking apart.

See, right before this story—

In Genesis 37—

Judah and his brothers throw their little brother Joseph in a hole...

Then they sell him into slavery...

Thinking that they'll never see him again.

After this, Judah leaves his brothers...

Maybe in an attempt to escape the guilt...

Or so he won't be caught.

In any case, we have family fragmentation as Judah leaves.

Second, we see Judah marrying a foreign woman...

A Canaanite.

Both his great grandpa, Abraham, and his grandpa, Isaac...

Made a big deal of marrying women from the family line. (24:3; 28:1)

If they married a Canaanite woman...

She might lead them to worship a God other than the Lord.

Judah, however—

After throwing Joseph into the well—

Goes down to Adullam and marries someone outside the family line...

A Canaanite.

Once again, putting the promise in jeopardy.

Third, we see that Judah's parenting skills aren't too great.

It seems that he hasn't raised up faithful boys.

So goes the father, so goes the family??

Both of his sons are put to death by the Lord...

Because both are wicked in God's sight.

It's hard to have an heir to the promise if no one is left!

Abraham and Isaac are probably rolling in their graves...

Watching Judah fumble this precious promise of God to bless the world through their line.

There is so much brokenness in this story:

In Judah...

This older man driven by his lust;

Two sons put to death for their wickedness;

Paranoid that his daughter-in-law is cursed;

Unwilling to provide for someone under his care...

Faithful in his pledge to a prostitute...

But not to his daughter-in-law.

Resorting to extreme punishment when someone he's supposed to be caring for commits the same crime as he himself commits.

And brokenness in Tamar...

Living in a society where she's dependent on men...

Men who are wicked and selfish;

Widowed without any children;

Locked into a status she is unable to get out of...

Suffering injustice after injustice.

There are major problems in this story—

This situation is a big mess—

But God works with messes...

This is his specialty.

Despite the overwhelming sin in the story...

God continues to carry out his promise...

And he transforms his people in the midst of it.

First, we see God using Tamar to change Judah's life.

When Tamar is brought out to be burned...

She reveals the identity of the man who impregnated her...

And Judah is confronted with his sin.

Not just the sin of going to a prostitute...

But the sin and injustice of not caring for his daughter-in-law...

Not watching out for the vulnerable under his care.

Confronted with his sin, what does he do?

Judah actually repents:

"She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her my son."

"Her actions are better than mine," he's saying.

"I acknowledge that what I did was wrong."

Judah's life was on a very dangerous trajectory at this point—

A trajectory that was taking him away from the Lord—

He was making and about to make some awful decisions.

But this confrontation—

The actions of Tamar—

It changes something inside of Judah.

A few chapters later in Genesis—

When Judah and his brothers are in Egypt—

They unknowingly stand before Joseph...

The brother they threw into a well and then sold into slavery.

Joseph is the 2<sup>nd</sup> most powerful man in Egypt...

And Judah has every right to be afraid of him.

But something has changed in Judah.

Judah actually offers his life...

For their youngest brother, Benjamin.

Do you see the similarity?

In our passage Judah doesn't recognize Tamar...

And makes the choice to sleep with her...

Committing a selfish act.

After the confrontation with Tamar—

After his sin is exposed and he repents—

Judah doesn't recognize Joseph...

But now he's willing to give up his life for someone else.

A selfless act...

A changed man.

God uses the bravery, desperation, and deceit of Tamar...

To shape and transform this broken man, Judah.

Tamar likewise is changed by this situation.

She goes from childless widow—

A vulnerable woman with no inheritance—

To a woman carrying the heir of a priceless inheritance.

Not only does the Lord bless her with one son—

Something that has eluded her for many years—

She is blessed with two!

The Lord's favor is poured out over Tamar...

And she is graced to carry on the family line.

But this isn't just any family line...

This is *thee* family line.

This is the line that God chooses to use to bring forth a Savior.

Tamar becomes the first woman named in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew:

“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.”

Women were not named in genealogies back then...

It didn't happen!

So why is she named?

We're not told, but we have some ideas:

Tamar is included in the genealogy to honor her.

Matthew could be saying, “Remember Tamar?!”

“When Judah and his sons were wicked...”

“Remember Tamar's bravery?!”

“Remember how she risked her life to carry on the family line?!”

In Jewish history and tradition...

Tamar isn't remembered as the woman who tricked her father-in-law into sleeping with her.

She's remembered as the heroine who was faithful to Abraham's line.

Being included in the genealogy of the Savior is the highest honor.

But more than honoring Tamar...

This tells us of God's character.

God is faithful to his promise...

Even when his people are not.

Even when his people sin and turn away from him...

God is still full of grace.

Naming specifically Tamar in the genealogy...

Matthew is saying, “Remember this messy situation?”

“God used it.”

“God used it to keep the promise alive.”

God used the deceit, courage, and desperation of this woman...

To eventually bring about the Savior of the world...

The long-awaited Messiah.

Now, we're not that different from Judah, his sons, or Tamar—

We struggle to do the right thing;

We fail to take care of the vulnerable;

We suffer abuse at the hands of others;

We give into our lust and our passions;

We struggle to wait on the Lord and instead take situations into our own hands...

Making poor or questionable decisions;

In anger we make reactionary judgements;

We have double standards;

We deceive people for our own gain—

We do this as God's people...

As inheritors of the promise...

People called to walk in the newness of life in Christ.

We still create or find ourselves in big messes with our lives.

Some of you may feel like you're in a big mess now...

Or that your life has been one giant mess.

What this story tells us...

Is that God specializes in cleaning up messes.

God works in the midst of our broken lives.

We don't live sterile, perfect lives—

This is real life we're talking about here—

And this is where God does his work.

God doesn't stand at a distance so as not to get dirty...

No, God *enters into* our mess to clean things up.

God promised that he was going to bless the world through Abraham...

And he was faithful to that promise...

Because from Abraham's line—

As broken and as messy as it was—

Jesus Christ came to dwell among us.

God himself came and lived in and clean up our mess.

This is the first week of Advent...

A month of waiting and preparation.

Advent originally started out as a time of reflection...

A time to examine our lives and our need for a Savior.

So, as you look at your life—

As you think about some of the messes...

The dumpster fire that is your life—

Be confident that this is God's specialty...

God continues his grace in our brokenness.

Jesus Christ has come into our lives once—

Born into our world to bring freedom from sin—

And God promises that he will come again to bind up everything that is broken.

May this be our hope as we enter into this season:

That no matter how bad things may seem...

Christ has come to dwell among us...

And God promises to restore us when he comes again.

By the power of his Spirit...

May we know his grace in our need.

Amen.