

### Week 3: Tamar and Judah

**Connect:** choose 1 *Connect* question and discuss for 5-7 minutes.

- Share one high and low from your week.
- Describe your place in your family of origin (Who is your family?) What was it like for you growing up?

**Read these passages aloud:**

**Genesis 38** - Judah and Tamar

**Engage the text as a group:**

1. What do you **observe**?
  - Who is Judah? Who is Tamar?
  - What does Tamar need? Is she able to see it accomplished?
  - What are the differences between men and women's roles as we can see in this passage?
2. What **questions** arise for you from the text?
  - How is Tamar righteous in her actions, though very unconventionally?

### Why does Tamar and Judah matter?

Tamar's story with Judah is important in the way it shows how very human and flawed and yet chosen is the family through whom God would bring about redemption for the world. It shows that God works through messy human situations, including sexual relationships to bring about God's will. Judah, the son of Jacob, from whom Jesus would be descended, is in the wrong. He withholds his youngest son from Tamar, though the law requires that son to marry Tamar to continue the family line of the eldest brother now deceased. In doing this, Judah denies Tamar a life and a future, since women in this time made a place for themselves only through marriage and bearing children, through having a family. He was in essence sentencing Tamar to a lack of life, a shameful existence by not giving his last son to her.

Tamar's agency and intelligence in doing what she did, though it may seem off to us—we need to understand she saw it as her only option to reclaim what should have been given to her but was unjustly withheld, a place in the family and children. Tamar "played the prostitute" but we see, as Judah says that "She is more in the right than I." At the end of this story, we see that Judah is the unjust one, the one in the wrong, not Tamar.

This story teaches us especially about *shalom*, the Hebrew word for the wholeness, peace, righteousness, goodness, and wellbeing of God towards which God is drawing the world. We see from the text that Tamar is not seen as in the wrong before God or the law, but that Judah is, because Tamar's actions draws the family of Judah closer to *shalom*. Judah sees the wrongness of his actions and treats Tamar rightly from then on; and so the family is drawn closer to *shalom* through Tamar's actions. Through Judah & Tamar's descendants, eventually Jesus Christ would come, and it is Jesus who draws creation profoundly towards *shalom*.<sup>1</sup>

Tamar's story also matters in that it draws out a mother of the faith, whose agency and action preserved the family line that Jesus would eventually come from, and who restored a

---

<sup>1</sup> Chelsea Harmon, "Beyond the Lectionary Text: Genesis 38," *Center for Excellence in Preaching*, <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/non-rcl-starters/genesis-38/?term=genesis%2038>.

family broken by death and injustice. It's important to see how God redeems—no matter the situation or circumstance—and to see God's agency in the lives of women as well as men in a culture and time where men dominated over women, often resulting in abuse or neglect, as Tamar's situation shows.

### HOW DO JUDAH AND TAMAR POINT US TO JESUS?

Judah and Tamar are the very ancestors from whom Jesus would descend. Again, God shows himself faithful in the lives of unfaithful people, drawing out good from bad and unjust situations.

The Hebrew conception of righteousness isn't divided morally into simple categories of right/wrong or good/bad, but instead refers to what draws communities and people toward *shalom*. Morally, we can look at Tamar posing as a prostitute and having sex with her father-in-law as wrong, period. But that would be to miss something important in what she is doing—trying to restore some order, to right the wrongs done to her by Judah in denying her his last son. Tamar's unconventional action draws the family of Judah and their whole community more towards *shalom*, because Judah then recognizes his sin, and begins to treat her rightly, and she bears twins who would carry on the family name.<sup>2</sup> Judah repents of his sinful ways when God humbles him through Tamar, and he is transformed. It's through his line, of all his brothers, the twelve sons of Jacob, that God would redeem the world through Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

In the same way, Jesus' birth and life draws the community and the whole world towards *shalom*. The circumstances around his birth were also questionable—a young, unmarried girl suddenly becoming pregnant; and, when Jesus began his ministry, the religious leaders really did not care for what he had to say because it offended their moral sensibilities, though it was all true and proclaiming the kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup>

Tamar's story points us to Jesus in the way that God chooses to work through people and their messiness to bring about God's will for redemption. Not only does God use human families and situations, but God *joins* the human family and situation in Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> In becoming incarnate, Jesus Christ draws creation and humankind closer to *shalom*; and it is through Christ that *shalom* will prevail and the kingdom of God will come in its fullness.

3. What **applications** to our lives and context might this have?
  - Where have you felt confined by unjust circumstances that you can't control in your life?
  - Where have you seen *shalom* in unexpected places?

**6 Tools for interpretation:** read through the 6 Tools (if time allows) or take-home and read.

**Literary:** Genesis is a narrative.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Chelsea Harmon, "Beyond the Lectionary Text: Genesis 38."

<sup>3</sup> Ibid; Matthew 1:2-3

<sup>4</sup> E.g.) Matthew 12:1-8; Matthew 15:1-20.

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:6-8.

<sup>6</sup> Refer to "Week 1: Hagar" for more on the **6 Tools for Interpretation** for Genesis.

**Historical:** Judah is the son of Jacob, Tamar, his daughter-in-law. Judah's sons were Er, Onan, and Shelah.

**Theological:** God preserves the line of the family of Judah, the son of Jacob, through whom Jesus Christ would come. God works outside of the cultural order of the day to achieve God's purposes.

**Cultural:** A brother marries the widow of his brother to give offspring for his brother. A woman/wife is given in marriage or received in marriage; her primary family role is to conceive and bear sons; this is how her family line is preserved.

**The bigger story:** Judah's is the family line through which Jesus comes; Tamar is named in Jesus' genealogy.<sup>7</sup>

**Holy Spirit:** Tamar is vindicated, Judah is convicted and correct, and the line of Judah is restored so that there are heirs to continue the family name—the Spirit at work.

**Close in prayer:**

Name some messy situations in life that you know of where you can see God's presence. Do you see how God might be working for *shalom* in these situations?

*God of shalom, thank you for your mercy in not only using but being with us in our messy lives and broken relationships. Bring your healing, bring your peace, bring your justice through your Holy Spirit. Draw us near to you in Jesus Christ; teach us your ways of life and righteousness and peace, and show us where we have gone astray. Right what is wrong, make just what is unjust, and heal what is broken using your people, O Lord. Through Christ we pray. Amen.*

---

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 1:3