

Tamar: Persevering in the Shadows

By Rebecca Rhee

Read Genesis 38:1–30

Centuries before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah wrote that the Redeemer of the world would have “no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him” (Isaiah 53:2–3). From the gospels, we learn that Jesus spent years living in obscurity before His public ministry began. These truths reveal that, however the Messiah planned to fulfill His mission, it would involve working in the shadows as well as stepping into the light.

Should we be surprised, then, that the first ancestress of Jesus lived her life along the same trajectory: moving from darkness into light, battling evils until she triumphed? The evils? Marriage to two brothers, Er and Onan, sons of Judah, who so offend God that He executes them. While we don’t know Er’s trespass, we do know Onan wastes his seed instead of impregnating Tamar with offspring that are hers by right of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25, Ruth 4). Furthermore, Judah compounds his sons’ sins by refusing to marry his remaining son to Tamar for fear he will die too. And he nearly burns his daughter-in-law to death when he discovers she is pregnant.

Thus, Tamar must overcome two hardships that seem unconquerable: the death of husbands, whom she depends on for her livelihood as wife and mother, and degradation, being misperceived as a person of little worth who can be cheated, murdered, or blamed for others’ sins.

Tamar copes by disguising herself as a prostitute and retaining Judah’s seal, cord, and staff after their encounter. She saves herself from death by producing them as evidence of Judah’s involvement in her condition. It is she who controls the outcome of sex this time, not another.

Moreover, she forces Judah to publicly exonerate her, reinstating herself as someone worthy of carrying Abrahamic seed (Genesis 15:5,18).

Tamar allows the catastrophes in her life to become clay in God’s hand. Don’t we all wish to persevere in the shadows until we see our crises reverse course?

Tamar is tied to Jesus by so much more than blood. She foreshadows His ability to persevere with God so that life springs forth from death, hope from despair, redemption from sin.

Questions:

1. Do you have difficulty with Tamar’s place in Matthew’s genealogy because her ploy was sexual in nature?
2. Why is it important to persevere in hardship?
3. What does Tamar’s story demonstrate about faith, hope, and redemption?

Tamar: Overcoming and Taking Risks

By Rebecca Rhee

Read Genesis 38:11–19, Philippians 2:5–8, Isaiah 53:10

Like Ruth, one of Jesus' other ancestresses, Tamar knows what it's like to fall from a high place to an abysmally low one. Married to Judah's oldest son, Er, she likely would have benefited from the economic and social stability firstborns were afforded by their families.

Her security is short-lived, however, as Er and Onan die in quick succession and Judah dismisses her to live in her father's house. Her fall does not stop there, and she temporarily exchanges her widow's garments for a prostitute's to obtain seed from Judah. Only by humbling herself in the extreme does she obtain her objective: offspring of divine promise.

Philippians 2:5–8 tells us that Jesus' descent to earth was especially meteoric. Choosing to relinquish His equality with God, He exchanged the garments of His divinity for those of humanity, choosing to humble Himself "by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." His objective? The same as Tamar's: to obtain offspring who would produce an ever-expanding family in the Kingdom of God (Isaiah 53:10).

In our current passage, we learn that Tamar is so determined to obtain the offspring due her that she takes at least three risks.

First, she dresses up like a harlot, banking on the fact that Judah has been widowed for some time and may be feeling his physical needs acutely.

Second, she stations herself at the gateway of Enaim, where she hopes to catch Judah's attention.

Finally, she bargains with Judah until his identifying markers are hers—the linchpin upon which her plan depends. She must produce them later to escape death and save herself as well as her unborn babies.

Questions:

1. Have you ever experienced a dramatic fall? Did you decide to pursue help, either by praying to God and/or speaking with a trusted individual?
2. In Hebrew, the name Enayim literally means "eyes." Tamar's choice to wait at the Gateway of Eyes seems a symbolic gesture—her attempt to control how others perceive her. Have you ever felt unfairly misperceived? How much would you risk to redeem your reputation?
3. Is there an exchange you can commit to pursuing: despair for hope, isolation for relationship, passivity for pro-activity?

Tamar: Acting Outside the Line

By Rebecca Rhee

Read Genesis 38:20–30, John 8:1–11

It might seem surprising that Tamar is listed as the first of Jesus' ancestresses because she definitely acts "outside the lines" of what many think proper. What should we do with her as a lead character in her story? Emulate her? Condemn her? Pass her by in favor of less confusing characters?

While the writer of Genesis could have outrightly declared Tamar's actions as evil—as he does Er and Onan's—he does not. And, Judah himself does make a direct statement concerning Tamar, declaring her "more righteous" than himself. His words seem to ring with divine authority, considering the preeminence of his tribe as the origin of the Messiah.

In John 8:1–11, we see how slow Jesus is to condemn even those who seem to deserve it. To the woman caught in adultery (another sexual offense), he merely offers a question: "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" Whereas her accusers would have executed her for her sin, Jesus offers sweet release from it: "Neither do I condemn you; go your way and sin no more."

In addition, two events in Tamar's story suggest that God sees and strongly supports her (2 Chronicles 16:9).

First, it only takes one encounter with Judah for Tamar to conceive, which shows that only God has the power over life and death.

Second, Tamar gives birth to not only one child in the line of Abraham, but two! The storyteller presents this "double blessing" as a little tale in its own right.

When we read Tamar's story, perhaps we should slow down and empathize with the afflictions she faces and how few resources she has to face them. We can consider how her gambit as a harlot might be descriptive (painting a picture) rather than prescriptive (recommending a path we should follow). When it comes to Tamar, we should imitate the Lion of Judah—reserving judgment and offering compassion.

Questions:

1. Have you ever felt too broken to be worthy of God's blessings? Like you always occupy second (or last) place in His plans?
2. How does God's apparent support of Tamar affect you? Are you surprised? Doubtful? Encouraged?
3. How can we learn to have more mercy on ourselves? Can we ask God what factors may have contributed to us making a wrong turn, rather than skipping straight to condemnation?