



Tamar

Woman of Honor, Resilience, Faith, Wisdom, and Courage

The Story of Tamar

Genesis 38:1-11

About this time Judah left home and moved to Adullam, where he visited a man named Hirah. There he met a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua, and he married her. She became pregnant and had a son, and Judah named the boy Er. Then Judah's wife had another son, and she named him Onan. And then she had a third son, she named him Shelah. When the oldest son, Er, grew up, Judah arranged his marriage to a young woman named Tamar.

But Er was a wicked man in the Lord's sight, so the Lord took his life. Then Judah said to Er's brother Onan, "You must marry Tamar, as our law (Levirate Marriage Law) requires of the brother of a man who has died. Her first son from you will be your brother's heir." But Onan was not willing to have a child who would not be his own heir. So whenever he lay with Tamar, he spilled his seed on the ground to keep her from having an heir who would belong to his brother.

But the Lord considered it a wicked thing for Onan to deny a child to his dead brother. So the Lord took Onan's life too. Then Judah told Tamar, his daughter-in-law, not to marry again at that time, but to return to her parent's home. She was to remain a widow until his youngest son Shelah, was old enough to marry her. But Judah didn't really intend to do this because he was afraid Shelah would also die, like his two brothers. So Tamar went home to her parents.

Genesis 38:12-19

In the course of time Judah's wife died. After the time of mourning was over, Judah and his friend Hirah the Adullamite went to Timnah to supervise the shearing of his sheep. Someone told Tamar that her father-in-law had left for the sheep shearing at Timnah. Tamar was aware that Shelah had grown up, but they had not called her to come and marry him.

So she changed out of the widow's clothing and covered herself with a veil to disguise herself. Then she sat beside the road at the entrance to the village of Enaim, which is on the way to Timnah. Judah noticed her as he went by and thought she was a prostitute, since her face was veiled. So he stopped and propositioned her to sleep with him, not realizing that she was his own daughter-in-law.

"How much will you pay me?" Tamar asked. "I'll send you a young goat from my flock." Judah promised. "What pledge will you give me so I can be sure you will send it?" she asked. "Well, what do you want?" he inquired. She replied, "I want your identification seal, your cord, and the walking stick you are carrying."

So Judah gave these items to her. She then let him sleep with her, and she became pregnant. Afterwards she went home, took off her veil, and put on her widow's clothing as usual.

Genesis 38:27-30

About three months later, word reached Judah that Tamar, his daughter-in-law, was pregnant as a result of prostitution. "Bring her out and burn her!" Judah shouted. But as they were taking her out to kill her, she sent this message to her father-in-law. "The man who owns this identification seal and walking stick is the father of my child. Do you recognize them?" Judah admitted that they were his and said, "She is more in the righteous than I, because I didn't keep my promise to let her marry my son Shelah." But Judah never slept with Tamar again.

In due season the time of Tamar's delivery arrived, and she had twin sons. As they were born, one of them reached out his hand, and the midwife tied a scarlet thread around the wrist of the child who appeared first saying, "This one came out first." But then he drew back his hand, and the other baby was actually the first to be born. "What!" the midwife exclaimed. "How did you break out first?" And ever after, he was called Perez. Then the baby with the scarlet thread on his wrist was born, and his name was Zerah.

Ruth 4:12

Many years later... And may the Lord give you descendants by this young woman who will be like those of our ancestor Perez, the son of Tamar and Judah.

Study Guide

Read the story of Tamar, and discuss the following questions. Keep in mind there is more to the story of this woman than what is presented in the few short verses.

1. What incident led Judah to leave his own land and marry a Canaanite woman?

- The guilt and pain he had inflicted on his father, Jacob, by selling his favorite son, Joseph, to merchants on the road.

2. Were his sons honorable and following the laws of Judah's faith?

- Er was described as a wicked man that God killed.
- Onan was also wicked, and was also killed by God.
- Shelah, as the next oldest, was not chosen to be an ancestor of Jesus, but was passed over for a more honorable son, Perez.

3. As a young Canaanite woman did Tamar have any say in who she would marry and when?

- Her father would have made the arrangements, and benefited from them. Tamar had to do as he said and not dishonor him by refusing to go.

4. What prompted Judah to turn a blind eye on the treatment Tamar received from his family and to not intercede on her behalf?

- Judah was burdened with guilt and grief over what he had done to Joseph and to his father Jacob. His wife was a Canaanite and he had allowed her to raise her sons to be Canaanites as well. His sons were vile and wicked and his wife was unpleasant as well. He was not happy, and may have spent much time alone. If he ignored Tamar, he didn't have to feel guilty about how she was treated.

5. When Judah lost his sons Er and Onan, who had both married Tamar, he sent her back to her parents instead of allowing her to marry his one remaining son, Shelah. How would this reflect on Tamar, how her family viewed her, and consequently how they would treat her?

- To be sent home, childless, would be an insult to her parents. She would be considered a failure and a burden. They would see her return as something she did wrong that made Judah want to get rid of her. As an unwanted, disgraced woman, she would have a position closer to that of a slave than a daughter.

6. When Tamar saw Shelah was a grown man of marrying age and yet Judah had not called her back to marry him, she knew he was not going to keep his promise to her. She had a hard choice to make; one that would change her life or end her life. How did she go about implementing her choice?

- She found out Judah would be traveling along a certain road on the way to the sheep shearing. She dressed herself up in a prostitute's costume with a veil so he would not recognize her and waited for him to pass by. When he saw her, he propositioned her to have sex with him, resulting in her becoming pregnant.

7. Under what circumstances would Tamar find an outfit with a veil in her parents' home that would identify her as a prostitute?

- Because her parents were pagans and idol worshipers, they may have given one of her sisters to the local temple as a temple prostitute. The mother would have made a temple costume for her daughter each year. The veil was so no one could see their face when they had sex on the alter during fertility rituals.

8. When her family learned she was pregnant and had further disgraced them, they wanted her killed. As her father-in-law, it was left to Judah to decide her fate. Did he agree that she had broken the law and should be killed?

- Despite hiding his own sins, he did agree that she should be killed.

9. What saved Tamar from death?

- Tamar sent word to Judah that the father of her baby was the man who owned the seal, cord, and walking stick that she had in her possession.

10. How was Tamar rewarded by God for her faith and courage?

- She had wished for a son and was given two sons, whom she brought up to be men of faith, not like the other sons of Judah. Her son Perez is a direct ancestor of Jesus.

11. If Tamar had not fulfilled her destiny, how might God's plan for the line of Abraham and Judah been different?

- It very likely would have ended with Judah as his other son, Shelah, was no better than his brothers, Er and Onan.

12. As you complete this study guide, do you feel the abuse suffered at the hands of her husbands, Er and Onan, her father-in-law, and family are similar to what you or someone you know may be going through? What can you learn from Tamar's faith and courage?

- If we keep our faith in God, he can change our life. Though Tamar endured much abuse, she kept her faith in her destiny and God provided her a way to fulfill it. It meant risking her life, but she had enough faith to take the chance. Her actions benefited her, but also had far-reaching benefit to Judah. According to the law at that time, Judah was breaking the law by not taking her in. She put him in a position to remedy his lack of commitment to her, but it also caused him to repent and resume living in faith. He most likely never would have without the action Tamar took.

13. Often, in the stories from the Bible, the simplest of people are instrumental in God's bigger plan. Each of us also has a destiny to follow, usually with some type of risk involved. If you lack the courage, faith and conviction to follow what your heart is telling you to do, how will the bigger plan you are to play a part in change?

- No one is insignificant in God's eyes. If you don't follow your destiny and do what you came here to do, then whatever you do instead will never be as satisfying or fulfilling because a part of you will always wonder "What if?". We must remember that each of us touches many other lives, and some of those other lives are waiting for us to show up so they can fulfill their destiny.

What If...

When Judah began to seek a wife for his oldest son Er, a beautiful young woman named Tamar caught his eye. Tamar was Canaanite and probably just of child-bearing age, 12 to 14 years old. Despite knowing his son Er to be a vile and wicked man, he arranged for the sweet and innocent Tamar to be his wife in the hope that Er would be a better man with her as his wife. Er would not have treated Tamar with love, respect or gentleness. Though Tamar was obviously abused, Judah, her father-in-law, did nothing to intercede on her behalf. So God took Er. Judah told his son Onan, "You must marry Tamar and give her an heir for your dead brother to secure his inheritance." Onan married Tamar, sexually abused her, and denied her a child. Because of his wickedness, God also took Onan. Judah was afraid to give Tamar to his only remaining son Shelah as he was afraid he may also die. Using the excuse Shelah was too young to marry, he sent Tamar back to her father's home where she was to wait for him to reach marrying age.

To be the mother of many children brought a woman honor, love, and security. Inability to have children was a stigma of the worst kind. Tamar would be returning home a disgrace to her family, where she would be despised. At that point, what kind of future did Tamar have to look forward to? Tamar was treated cruelly by Er, abused by Onan, and rejected and dishonored by Judah. After Judah's wife died, Tamar took control of her own destiny and the destiny of Judah's line.

Tamar dressed herself like a temple prostitute and sat by the side of the road where she knew Judah would travel on his way to the sheep shearing. Judah approached her and asked how much she would charge to have sex with her. Tamar was clever, courageous, and wise, allowing Judah to name the price; one young goat. Judah agreed to have the goat sent to her. She asked for his seal and cord along with his walking stick to guarantee payment. He agreed and gave them to Tamar. After their encounter, Tamar found that she was pregnant. About three months later when it was apparent to all, her family and Judah ordered her to be killed for being a whore. Her quick thinking to have secured Judah's seal, cord, and walking stick saved her when she sent a note to Judah stating the father of her child was the man to whom the items belonged.

Tamar took a huge risk by taking matters into her own hands to see justice done and to protect her family rights. Despite Judah allowing his sons to do whatever they wanted to Tamar and then sending her home as damaged goods, Tamar's courageous actions caused Judah to confess and return to living as a man of faith. Judah was reconciled with his brother, Joseph, and his father, Jacob, who on his deathbed blessed him with the promise "your descendants will always rule."

Tamar had twin boys, Perez and Zerah. Perez is the ancestor of David, Israel's greatest king, and the ancestor of Jesus the Messiah.

Notes
