

A Scandalous Christmas Story

Unlikely Family Tree

[Genesis 38](#), [Matthew 1:6](#)

The **New Testament begins** with these words:

[Matthew 1:1-6 \(ESV\)](#)

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by **Tamar**, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by **Rahab**, and Boaz the father of Obed by **Ruth**, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon **by the wife of Uriah**,

[Matthew 1:16](#) (ESV)

and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of **Mary**, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

This **genealogy** that **shows** Jesus descended from King **David** and traces his ancestors all the way back to **Abraham** lists **five women**. The answer to why reveals a critical piece of the whole Christian message and directly relates to the Christmas story. They have one detail in common. **Each woman was suspected of illegitimate sexual activity related to childbearing. In some cases, the suspicions were well earned. In others, they were unfair. Such suspicions affected even Mary the mother of Jesus.**

But right in the beginning of this first book in our NT the Holy Spirit saw to it this was stated like a bold placard so that we can't miss it, like a big sign right at the doorway. So, what does it mean?

Today, I'm going to tell you the story of **Tamar**, the first woman in the list. When I read the text, you **may blush or cringe**. There's a term in the text I've never spoken in a public setting. When our kids were smaller and we were reading through Genesis, I tended to skip this passage. I now think that was a mistake. It shows that **God speaks to every aspect of our lives**. The **Bible does not flinch from dealing with what's real**.

The text shows that **God can bring transformation to the most distorted circumstances** imaginable. It may help you to **feel better about your story**. You may even think, “good grief, I **thought my family and friends were messed up**.” This series is just the message we need to have the full impact of the Christmas event to explode the way we see the world and see our lives.

We all have stories about our lives we don't discuss. Some conversations are best kept between the closest of friends or in the pastor's or counselor's office.

How can we experience that Jesus came to heal our darkest secrets and that no one is beyond his reach?

We move from the first book of the NT to the first of the OT. Genesis begins with creation and moves through Adam & Eve. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel and his 12 sons are the 12 tribes of Israel. His 4th son was named Judah.

1. Don't mistake that God takes sin seriously

Genesis 38:1-5 (ESV)

It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, and she **conceived** and bore a son, and he called his name Er. She **conceived** again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him.

This Judah went down from his brothers, all of them, including this same Judah, **conspired to sell their youngest brother Joseph** into slavery. Reading along, we are left to wonder what happened to poor Joseph, the son of Jacob. Not Joseph, the husband of Mary. The events of this chapter cover around 30 years.

What a **mess** this family was, but it gets worse. Judah moves away from them and becomes friends with an Adullamite man named Hirah.

In that area **Judah saw** the **daughter** of a **Canaanite man named** Shua. The text **implies Judah saw her and was attracted to her appearance** and though the law of Moses was yet to come, evidence existed already in his family that he should not marry a person of **another**

religion. She was a **Gentile.** This story also helps us to see that the concern was not racial but religious, because offspring that will come through this Gentile woman will become part of God's family.

Judah married this woman, but she is **never named.** They had three sons. Er, Onan, and Shelah. The text takes pains to say she **conceived and bore, she conceived and bore.** The promise from God through the book of Genesis is that God would **bless the world through Abraham's seed,** his offspring. The text focuses on the offspring from Judah through this woman. Keep in mind this focus on God's promise to provide offspring when you hear the next part of the incident.

[Genesis 38:6-11](#)

And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was **Tamar.** But Er, Judah's firstborn, was **wicked in the sight of the LORD,** and the **LORD put him to death.** Then Judah said to Onan, "**Go in to your brother's wife** and **perform the duty** of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." But Onan **knew that the offspring would not be his.** So whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. And **what he did was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also.** Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up"—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father's house.

The **law of Moses** would clarify that a brother was to marry his brother's childless widow so that a family line would not die out in Israel. That's what's behind the scene.

Judah instructed Onan to carry out his responsibility to take his brother's widow as his wife and provide offspring in his name. We get a **sense of how different our culture is** because such involvement from a parent in our time would be seen as wildly out of bounds. **Onan didn't like it either. But he ultimately rebelled against God, refusing** to provide offspring for his brother. He did this out of selfishness, knowing that the children would not really be his. He **attempted to interfere with God's purpose** to provide offspring for Jacob.

So, Judah wanted Er to have offspring, but he didn't want to lose a third son. In his mind he **blames Tamar** for his son's deaths, rather than their own reckless wickedness. The Lord put them to death. Their deaths were just. **The only reason we do not die immediately when we sin is because of God's mercy. We deserve God's wrath. The wages of sin is death.**

So, Tamar went home and lived with her family of origin.

The message of this text reveals that **Jesus came to heal our darkest secrets, and no one is beyond his reach. But that's not because he takes sin lightly.**

2. Know that nothing is hidden from God's sight

The story gets worse.

[Genesis 38:12-19](#)

In the course of time the **wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died**. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and **his friend Hirah the Adullamite**. And when **Tamar** was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage. When **Judah saw her**, he **thought she was a prostitute**, for **she had covered her face**. He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" He answered, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." And she said, "If you give me a pledge, until you send it—" He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and **she conceived by him**. Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

Judah's wife died. After a season of mourning, Judah went up to Timnah to his sheep shearers, he and his friend Hiram the Adullamite. Sheep shearing time was a well-known celebration and Tamar learned that Judah, her father-in-law would be there. So, she took off her widow's garments, that was a thing, and she covered herself with a veil disguising herself and she sat at a specific place where she knew her father-in-law would pass by. She believed she could get his attention.

Covering herself with a veil implied she was a prostitute. She took these actions because she saw that Judah's youngest son was grown, she had not been given to him in marriage.

Judah sees Tamar but does not recognize her as his daughter-in-law. He does think she is a prostitute, and he crassly requests her services.

For those who see the Bible as a book disconnected from the dark grittiness of the world, they simply don't know what's in it.

Tamar haggled with him for payment. "What will you give me, that you may do this?" He offers her a young goat. And she said, "ok, but I don't see the goat so what will you give me to guarantee that you will honor your word."

He asked what she wanted, and she asked for his signet cord and the staff that is in your hand. She knew that if her scheme worked these would identify him as the father. It was something like the equivalent of a signature or even a fingerprint in our time. One commentary said it would be like giving her all of his credit cards.

Tamar conceived a child from their incest. It's interesting that the text confirms from God's perspective what we know biologically now. She conceived in that moment. The text mentions that a child began to form in her womb right away, before it mentions that she left, took off her veil and put back on the clothes that identified her in that culture as a widow.

One commentator states her actions more positively saying that she's the only person in this instance still fighting to cooperate with God's promise to provide offspring, however wrongheaded her methods.

God's word tells the truth about the real world. Part of the purpose of this story is so that regardless of how you were conceived, regardless of what you have chosen to do or what's been done to you, God reveals through the story of Christmas that he came to not just identify with us in our shame, and all of their sordid details, he came to heal us from what we've done and what's been done to us.

But we have become very respectable.

This has been relaxed some, but previous generations believed you should wear your best to church on Sunday and that became so ingrained that it would appear you were not being faithful to God if you failed to dress in your Sunday best. There's nothing wrong with dressing our best. I actually like to suit up. **However, an overemphasis on that practice can have the effect of giving the impression that you need to have the means to dress well to belong. That's bad. But worse,** we may give the impression that we have to get ourselves cleaned up spiritually and only then you come to faith in Jesus and become a part of his church.

Jesus needed to say to the religious people of his day, I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Listen, you and I, **we have more in common with Judah and Tamar and his Adullamite friend Hirah, who seemed to have helped arrange this sexual liaison, than we do with the sinless spotless son of God.** Every single one of us requires what God did through Jesus regardless of the nature of our sin.

This story fuels humility for those proud of their good and moral life.

This story fuels a sense of dignity and hope and belonging to those who feel used up and disregarded by the world.

The story brings both together to experience unity in local churches where everyone understands that the only way into God's family is through Jesus. And just as Jesus came into the world vulnerable and helpless and dependent on inexperienced and young parents, so we come to God vulnerable, acknowledging our sin, helpless with no way of healing our sin, and totally dependent on the mercy of God to make us well.

How can we experience that Jesus came to heal our darkest secrets and that no one is beyond his reach?

3. Trust that God can bring good out of the worst circumstances

[Genesis 38:20-30 \(ESV\)](#)

When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute who was at Enaim at the roadside?" And they said, "No cult prostitute has been here." So he returned to Judah and said, "I have not found her. Also, the men of the place said, 'No cult prostitute has been here.'" And Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her." About three months later Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality." And Judah said, "**Bring her out, and let her be burned.**" As she was **being brought out, she sent word** to her father-in-law, "**By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant.**" And she said, "**Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.**" Then Judah identified them and said,

“She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not know her again.

When the time of her **labor came**, there were **twins** in her womb. And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, “This one came out first.” But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” Therefore his name was called **Perez**. Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.

Judah’s friend knew all along what was going on as he conspired to secure this experience for Judah and to clean up his mess in the end. He went to find the woman to pay her, but he couldn’t find her. That Judah didn’t go himself shows he knew his actions were shameful. He sent his friend to do his dirty work for him.

Judah said “let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. **His concern was not God’s honor but his own.**

His order to have Tamar brought out, publicly shamed, and burned reveals a stunning level of cruel hypocrisy.

The details of this story would have made an episode on Jerry Springer or one of the other trashy afternoon talk tv shows. I know Jerry has died; I don’t know if there’s anything like that anymore. I hope not.

The thrust of the Christian faith tends to teach people to develop good work habits that often enable them to flourish, teaching them to enjoy the good life and become more respectful, more highbrow, more committed to the clothing and the cars and the houses that more stable wealth can bring. If we are not careful, we could become a highly respectable club, with a smattering of the Bible thrown in. This Christmas season, we are throwing the equivalent of a Biblical grenade into that mindset.

Out of this scandalous evil, God brought great good. God made this tragedy and injustice part of his plan for how he would welcome the world to himself. It was not just by sending Jesus as a baby that he revealed himself to be not just approachable but touchable, vulnerable, even weak. But also, long before that manger, his family tree was designed to say to us, “It doesn’t matter how sinful you are, what you’ve done or what has been done to you. The qualifications are not a spotless record, the qualification for entry is to admit that you don’t have a spotless record.

Judah's repentance may not seem like much. She, Tamar, is more righteous than I because I did not provide my 3rd son to her as a husband. And he halted her execution. But there's more transformation here than meets the eye.

If you were to keep reading you would learn that he went through a transformation, but it didn't come all at once.

He sold his brother into slavery.

His sexual appetite controlled him so that he chose a wife purely on her appearance.

He failed to care properly for his daughter-in-law by giving her his youngest son in marriage.

His sexual appetite continued to control him as a much older man. He crassly and successfully propositioned a prostitute who turned out to be his daughter-in-law.

When he learned his daughter-in-law was pregnant, he showed cruelty and outrageous hypocrisy, calling for her to be publicly shamed and burned.

But after all that, he was revealed to be the father of her and that began a turn. You can't see it all here. We have no record of him going into a long confession of all his wrongdoing like in a 12-step program. But he spares his daughter-in-law and twin grandsons are born. One of them, Perez, is listed in that genealogy.

A few chapters later we read that this same Judah has been dramatically transformed into a man who will lay down his life in suffering for the sake of his brother.

What's your story? You got something worse than this one? Even if you think you do, Jesus demonstrates that he came to bring good out of the worst situations. The greatest example was his own death. He who knew no sin was made to be sin so that we might become the righteousness of God.

And don't think you've got to figure out how to clean up all your mess right now. You can't. Make the turn toward Jesus. He will walk with you through the rest.