

The Great Canadian Bible Study, 2017

Tamar, the Righteous

Written by Faye Reynolds for Canadian Baptist Women

I confess that I have never really understood the story of Tamar as found in Genesis 38. It is such a strange tale stuck in the middle of the life account of Joseph with all its unpleasantness and apparent immorality. What could possibly be admirable about her actions that would warrant her a place in the listing of the genealogies of Christ? And so I must give credit to Carolyn Curtis James for the insights found in her book, *Lost women of the Bible: Finding Strength and Significance through their stories*: ©2005 Zondervan Press. Her explanations of the historical practices and implications were profoundly helpful in gaining understanding of Tamar as a definition of righteous and I pray that I accurately convey these insights to you.



Begin together by reading Psalm 11. As you reflect upon it, think of the wicked environment that Tamar was forced to live in and consider if there is anything within your environment of family, work or community that is displeasing to God that you face regularly. Pray silently for the situations that come to mind, asking for God's protection and guidance.

READ Tamar's story found in Genesis 38

Most of us are aware of the practice of arranged marriages that were the norm of ancient eastern cultures and continue to be prevalently practiced today. Most marriages were based on political alliances to protect family fortunes and had little if anything to do with romantic attraction. Families worked out a deal that would be in the best interest of both parties and that was the end of it, especially when it involved the first-born son as the primary heir. We do see in the Biblical narrative that men could be attracted to a woman and choose her, but whether the woman was attracted back is rarely considered. And so we see that Judah was attracted to the daughter of Shua and a marriage took place without much influence from Jacob, because Judah was fourth son of Leah and not really on Jacob's radar any more after he had fled to the land of Canaanites. We never know his chosen wife's name, the quality of her character or outlook on life. All we know is that she bore three sons to Judah and those sons didn't turn out very well. At least two of the three were deemed wicked by the Lord.

Though Judah chose a woman he was attracted to, for his eldest son, Er, "he took a wife" for him. As the first-born, Judah wanted the best family match for the estate and so the marriage is arranged. Judah may also have been aware of Er's errant nature and thought it wise to make this decision rather than trust Er to choose. We already have seen in Genesis 37: 26 – 27 that Judah has some business savvy. It doesn't appear to be for compassionate reasons that he saves Joseph's life, but rather he sees a better financial asset if sold rather than killed.

1. Imagine the family into which Tamar has been placed. Remember that in Genesis 2:24 it states that a man is to *leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife and they become one flesh*. The woman was to stay in the protection of her family and the

husband was to leave his roots behind to join the woman. It doesn't take long before this practice is abandoned and the vulnerable woman is pulled from her home to live at the mercy of the man's family as property. *Discuss all of the things that would be hard for Tamar right from the start.*

2. The Lord puts the wicked Er to death before any children can be conceived. For the significance of this event, it is important to understand the inheritance laws of the day. Upon the death of the patriarch, the estate was to be equally divided among the male children, with the eldest receiving two portions so that the majority of the family land would continue to prosper. In this case, with three sons, the land was divided into 4 sections, with the eldest receiving 2 sections and the others each receiving one section. Male children were essential for this system to continue, and so if the eldest son died before having a son, then it was the duty of the second son to take the widow as his own wife to produce the needed son to carry on with the inheritance. (The Levirate Law) This duty fell to Onan and Tamar is simply passed along as the tool necessary to fulfill the task. Onan is no financial dummy and fully understands that if he is left as the eldest son, the four-way settlement becomes a three-way settlement, with Onan receiving 2/3's of the inheritance rather than the initial quarter. It is clear why Onan was not crazy about Tamar bearing a child. Onan may have had good reason for not wanting a new heir on the scene, but his treatment of Tamar is disgusting. *What is happening to Tamar here?*
3. Once again, the Lord steps in and puts the wicked Onan to death leaving Tamar's fate uncertain. By law, she should be given to the third son to once again bear an heir for her first husband Er, but this son is too young to marry. Also, Judah is now wondering if the fate of his sons is more connected to Tamar than to their personal wickedness. *From his part in the story of Joseph, to his moving to Canaan and now this action with Shelah, what are you gleaned about the character of Judah so far?*
4. Tamar is allowed to go back and live with her own family while she waits for Shelah to become old enough to marry. She returns twice widowed and childless. *What would her life be like back at home? What hope does Tamar have for a positive future? What might drive her to a desperate act?*
5. Shelah has now grown but there has been no call from Judah for Tamar to return and marry the third son. *What is Judah's procrastination about?* Judah and his family would likely be happy if Tamar just disappeared from their lives but the law has bound their fates together. It seems like a lose-lose for everyone. Shelah would love to be the only heir and to marry the wife of his own choosing but instead he is honor-bound to produce a child with Tamar. But Tamar is also not free to marry a man of her own choosing. She is "used goods" and of little worth to anyone, including her own family. Imagine the despair facing all involved. *What is at the root of the problem here and is there any situation today that might be similar where the laws or the rules make it difficult for everyone involved?*
6. Tamar has been a simple pawn in all of the events taking place, but we finally see her make a decision to determine her own fate. In our modern day context we cannot imagine how she came up with her plan to prostitute herself and how any good might come from this scheme. Even using the word "scheme" paints the act in a certain light. *What are your initial thoughts and feelings regarding what she is about to attempt?*

What might be some of the reasons that women have entered prostitution today because of feeling helpless? Are there any stories to be shared where you have had to take back control, having realized that you were allowing others too much power over your personal life?

7. We cannot understand the culture, the moral structure or taboos of that day with our modern mindset yet it is obvious that Tamar is flirting with danger, knowing full well if she is caught, it is certain death. Betrothed to Shelah, she cannot marry another. Childless, she has not fulfilled her destiny. Feeling trapped and hopeless, she sets her own trap. *What does Tamar know about Judah's present circumstance and his vulnerabilities? What else might Tamar have known in order for her plan to succeed?*
8. So many factors needed to fall into place for this plan to work. First of all, Judah had to give into this temptation along the roadside. Secondly, he had to fail to have payment with him, so that Tamar could bargain the collateral in lieu of cash on hand. She had to get pregnant after one encounter. Judah had to be so enticed that he was willing to leave behind his personal seal (signet), the cord it was attached to (*bracelets* is an inaccurate translation) from around his neck and his staff. Tamar reveals herself as a strategic thinker with an aptitude for business securing her payment. In effect she actually takes his symbols of authority away (like leaving his I.D. and credit card) – the very authority that has harmed Tamar's life. *In what way is Tamar claiming personal empowerment over such authority?*
9. *Yes, Tamar executes her plan but what evidence do you see that perhaps God's hand was in the outcome as well?*
10. Everything does go according to plan and in three months when Tamar begins to show and the rumors start to fly, she puts the final act into motion. Accused of her harlotry, she produces the evidence as to the father of her expected child. Judah, who is ready to burn her for her transgressions, is suddenly faced with a consequence of his own. *Discuss the double standards that existed then and still exist today.*
11. Judah makes the most amazing declaration by bestowing the word *righteous* upon Tamar when he realizes what has taken place. *How would you define righteousness? Why is Tamar righteous?*
12. Up to this point, Judah has not been rightly following the ways of the God of his ancestors. He betrayed his brother, Joseph. He moved away from the family into a land of foreign gods and married outside of the clan. We have no sense of Judah ever calling upon his God and he certainly did not raise God-fearing children. Tamar pulls away the blankets of deception and Judah is left facing the truth. Everything that Judah has done has been from selfish motives for personal gain. *Think of a time and possibly share any experience where someone outside of the Christian faith has exposed the actions and attitudes of a believer as lacking in love or compassion or other attributes of righteousness. OR what are the ways that society has pointed out failings within or outshone the church.*
13. Tamar, on the other hand, has acted sacrificially to fulfill her obligation to Judah in providing an heir. It is this act that is righteous and puts Judah to shame. This woman who did not know our God, reared in a different religious culture and brought into a

family that showed no evidence of worship or faith somehow managed to do the right thing, in spite of everything about it seeming to be wrong! *Tell of someone that you recognize follows the teaching of Jesus more righteously than those who testify to be Christian. Why is salvation more than just being good? On the other hand, discuss examples of followers of Jesus who truly live according to the example of Jesus in sacrificially laying down their lives for the sake of others.*

14. *Why might Tamar be interested in the God of her oppressor, Judah? Consider the African slaves brought into the Southern Confederate States. Why did so many of slaves adopt the Christian faith of their oppressors? How can God work in people's lives in spite of the horrid examples set by his supposed followers?*

Tamar took a huge risk but she also took charge of her own life and destiny. Her courageous act allowed God to bless her with twins and continue the line of Judah. She became the matriarch of the Jewish race today, warranting her place in the genealogy of Jesus. Her actions also made Judah into a better, Godly man. In Genesis 43 and 44, we see a humbler man, ready to die to protect his brother, Benjamin. We see him back with the family and ready to face the one he had sold into slavery.

Quote from pg 118 of *Lost women of the Bible: Finding Strength and Significance through their stories*: ©2005 Zondervan Press. Carolyn Curtis James

"Tamar shatters the traditional definition of what it means to be a woman by standing up to the most powerful man in her life – her father-in-law and the tribal patriarch. For a time, she takes the symbols of authority away from the man who tells her whom to marry and where to live – a man who can sentence her to death without answering to anyone. Before returning the articles Judah had given her, she pointed Judah back to the God of the covenant, the only true authority over both their lives."

15. *In what ways can the faith and actions of a woman bring change into her immediate and extended family? Share any stories of how the righteousness of a woman you know brought salvation to her family.*

As you close in prayer, remember the women who do not always have the same choices that many of us with a Christian upbringing have had. Remember the women caught in the cycle of poverty, abuse, drug use and prostitution that God might intervene and bring salvation. Ask that we all might be more aware of those on the margins and be open with grace and mercy.