

FGBC: Our Stories Begin: The Beginning of the war on Injustice

Genesis 37:1-38:30

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Go ahead and open your Bible to Genesis 38. If you are looking for terrible stories in the Bible this one is at the top of the list. Its embarrassing. It's shameful. It's one everyone would rather forget. But instead of being forgotten it got recorded in the Bible.

Imagine you got a story in the Bible – one story – and the story they chose to remember you by was the worst moment of your life. That's this story.

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So over the last nine weeks we've been looking at the worldview that Genesis lays out. And over the last four we've zoomed in on the fact that our God is a relational God who created people for relationship. And this started with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

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And we are continuing this line by looking at the next link in the chain of relationship and the next generation in the lineage of God's Seed that is going to be the answer to everything bad that has become of the world because of our sin. And the next link in this chain is Judah. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah.

Now next week Spencer is going to conclude this series looking at Joseph – Judah's brother. He's an amazing guy. He's the guy you would think would be Jesus' ancestor. But he's not, Judah is. And Judah is a mess. Let me read you what is quite possibly the worst chapter in scripture. Genesis 38. The story starts in verse 1, but we are going to pick it up in verse 11.

[Read Genesis 38:11-19; 24-30]

It's quite a story! Isn't the Bible a wonderful book full of inspirational stories to imitate? No! The Bible is not that book! Be careful when you read the Bible, because the Bible is full of stuff we aren't supposed to do. And this is one of those chapters.

So Judah is Abraham's great grandson. And in Genesis 17 God told Abraham:

“I am El-Shaddai—‘God Almighty.’ Serve me faithfully and live a blameless life.... you and your descendants after you... This is the everlasting covenant: I will always be your God and the God of your descendants” (Genesis 17:1-7)

So the stipulation to the covenant was that Abraham and his children would live faithful and blameless lives. How's Judah doing? Not good! He's so messed up that Tamar, an expert in sexual entrapment, is the protagonist or hero of the story.

Now obviously both Judah and Tamar are broken people. The Bible is not endorsing either of their behaviours. But this story isn't in the Bible by accident. We are supposed to see ourselves here – in fact that's the point of the story, but we will get to that in a minute. But let me tell you where we are going.

The Judah/Tamar story is a story of breakthrough. It's a story where two sinners end up finding God's heart and being transformed. And we get this at the end of the chapter.

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So in verse 29 Tamar has twins and one gets his hand out first, but then the other – Perez – gets born. And Perez means “breakthrough.” So this is a gospel story about how the grace of God breaks through brokenness to save unworthy people. Do you know that story? Tamar and Judah are these people. And if you're saved then you're one of these people too.

So let's look at Tamar's breakthrough.¹ And let me start by filling you in on the context we skipped at the beginning of the chapter. Now this is a PG 13 story... so if you are sitting beside someone who can't handle this just put your hand over their Bible so they don't see anything bad. I'll just hint at it.

So Tamar marries Judah's oldest son – a guy named Er. Tamar is probably about 14 when this happens because people got married as soon as they hit puberty. But something bad happens. Er is a wicked dude. We don't know what he did but God killed him for it – that's what the text says.

Now being a widow was a devastating thing 4000 years ago. You didn't just go get a job at Starbucks if you were a single used-to-be-married girl. You would be destitute. And so the custom was that if a husband died without producing a son who could provide for you then the father of the husband – your father-in-law – would take you in. And this would include giving his next son to you as a husband. And his job would be to produce an heir who would take his brother's name. This is how you wouldn't starve.

Well the next brother in line was Onan and he didn't want to produce an heir for his brother so every time he had sex with Tamar he made sure this didn't happen. And this made God mad so God killed him too. Read the text for the gory details if you are older than 13. But that's when we get to verse 11 and the story goes on.

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So Judah had a third son named Shelah who was probably about 12 – not quite old enough to marry. And in verse 11 Judah promises him to Tamar after he grows up a bit. But the bottom of the verse tells us he's lying and has no intention of following through. Why?

Well Judah's a faithless blameworthy man who's living in denial that his sons were so wicked God killed them. He's living in denial that he no doubt played a role in their upbringing and so he's looking for someone to take the blame. And he decides Tamar is that girl. “It's got to be her fault my boys are dead.” And so instead of taking care of her Judah sends Tamar to her father to wait forever for Shelah.

¹ Outline adapted from Tim Keller's sermon [“https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/tamar-5252/”](https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/tamar-5252/) (Accessed November 15, 2018)

In verses 12 to 14 maybe 4 or 5 years have passed which means this whole story likely takes place while Tamar is a teenager. Well Tamar realizes what Judah is up to. He's not going to fulfil his responsibility to take care of her, and so she cooks up a plan to pursue justice herself. It's aggressive, it's calculated, but it's built of a desire for justice.

So in verse 13 she hears that Judah is headed on a trip to her city, and so she takes off her widows clothes, dresses up as a prostitute, covers her face, and sits by the gate where he is going to pass.

And Judah sees her and doesn't recognize her. And so he has sex with her and tells her he's going to give her a goat as payment. Cool. But of course he doesn't have one with him so he leaves her his seal, cord, and walking stick as collateral.

This is like if you are in a restaurant and then you realize that your debit card is in the car so you have to leave without paying. And so you give your wallet to the waitress and tell her you will be back. It's a move full of honest intentions.

But let's not forget that we are talking about prostitution and incest here. What's going on?

Well Tamar is going after justice. Justice was that Judah was supposed to take care of her. He was supposed to fight for her. But nobody is fighting for Tamar. And so she uses the only thing she has – her sexuality – to fight for herself ironically against the one who is supposed to image God to her – Abraham's great grandson. This is #metoo 2000BC.

But the foundation for Tamar's fight is not that woman are valuable – though that is true. She is appealing to God's deep love for the poor and the destitute. You see throughout scripture God commands His people to take care of the needy because His people are supposed to look like Him. And our God is a God who hates injustice. Friends, if you hate injustice you are like our God. But if you turn a blind eye to it you are nothing like Him at all. So for example Psalm 146 says:

[God] gives justice to the oppressed
and food to the hungry.

The LORD frees the prisoners....

The LORD lifts up those who are weighed down....

The LORD protects the foreigners among us.

He cares for the orphans and widows (Psalm 146:7-9)

There are tons of verses like this in scripture. This is the God of the Bible. And God has always wanted His people to defend the defenseless like He does. And widows were among the most defenseless in this society. There was no way for them to overcome on their own. Without assistance they would be destitute. And so God says defend the widow. But Judah won't.

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And so Tamar uses something else she knows about Judah to gain a breakthrough for justice. She knows Judah's got a total sexual double standard. He's a guy who has sex whenever he wants, but he's got a different standard for women. And so she knows he isn't going to be happy when she gets pregnant. And she's right. In verse 24 he judges "burn her to death."

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Now this is a brutal ruling. Execution wasn't uncommon for the sin of adultery at that time. But usually it was by stoning or the sword which were much more humane ways to die than being burnt. But Judah is so clouded by his own issues that he doesn't see how great an injustice he is about to perpetrate.

Now here's the thing about injustice. It's culturally invisible until people expose it. So think about the Jewish Holocaust. We know it was injustice today, but at the time it was presented to the German people as righteousness. The Jews were bad and deserved to die. Injustice is always culturally invisible until someone exposes it.

And throughout scripture we see that our God is committed to exposing and rooting out injustice, and so His people are to care about this too.

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Now widows aren't the most vulnerable people in our society. They can get jobs at Starbucks. But there are others in PG who can't overcome on their own. So just think of the home you were raised in. Think of the education you received. Think of the opportunities you were born into. How much of that came to you because of your own virtue? Sure you worked hard, but if your parents hadn't provided what they did and pushed you would you have achieved what you have? The answer is everyone has an upbringing they had no control over and it affects us.

So imagine someone who didn't receive what you received growing up. Imagine someone whose family didn't know to raise them in the way you were raised. Would it be the fault of the youngster? Would it be their fault if they didn't achieve what you've achieved?

Now at this point it isn't helpful to say "Well sooner or later people need to take responsibility for themselves." That's incredibly easy to say from the position of white advantage. But the point is that if we are going to be God's people our job is not to judge the downcast but fight for them. Our job is to search out injustice and destroy it.

But Judah won't do this. Judah owes Tamar care, he owes her his son in marriage. But he's withholding justice because of his own hang ups – he's blamed her for the death of his sons when she had nothing to do with it.

And so Tamar risks her own life to set up a situation where Judah will be forced to come to grips with this. It's an incredibly brazen move. The sexual entrapment she uses to put her plan in motion is not condoned by God. But it's the only tool she has access to. And she uses it to ensure that justice prevails. And when the seal and stick are revealed Judah does come to this conclusion. Look at verse 26

[Read Genesis 38:26]

So Judah realizes that justice is on Tamar's side. He's been guilty of oppression. He's turned a blind eye to the desperate needs of the one God wanted Him to protect. And so he says "she is more righteous than me." And he gives himself to protecting her for the rest of her life.

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Now does this mean Tamar's sexual entrapment of Judah is righteous? No. Look how the Bible nuances this. Judah doesn't say "Tamar is righteous," he says "She is more righteous than me. She is guilty, but I'm guiltier."

Here's what the passage wants us to see, injustice towards the poor and oppressed, is a grave injustice. Yes, personal sin, sexual sin, is sin. Run from it. But don't make your passion avoiding personal sin and pointing out sin in others. Make your passion the eradication of injustice. This is what our God cares most about. So if you are a have help the have nots. If you have opportunities and abilities then your job, if you are going to be children of our Father, is to use your privilege to alleviate the suffering of those around you. That's why we have what we have.

Friends, our wealth, our abilities, our achievements are not our blessings, they are our responsibilities. If you are God's child then look like God and use what He has given to help those around you.

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Now I just want to give a plug for something Lighthouse is up to. A pivotal part of Lighthouse is something we call our Missional Community Groups. These are groups of people who meet together with the sole purpose of shining the light of Jesus into Prince George. And so on a monthly basis they are involved in some form of blessing the city. And so for the next month they are going to be manning some of the Salvation Army Kettles around town. And they are doing this because this is a way for us to feed the poorest people in our city. And God cares about this. So if you see a big group of our young people out there be sure to drop something in the pot.

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So Tamar goes after justice. And she breaks through and gets it. And as a result Tamar the unlikely becomes one of the great grandmothers of Jesus – the greatest warrior against injustice.

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Now Judah gets a breakthrough as well.

So Judah starts out incredibly broken as we've seen. He's got a total double standard on sexuality. He's a man of injustice. And he is full of anger.

In verse 24 he says "Take her and burn her." Judah is so disproportionately angry and full of hate here that he is totally blind to his injustice. He is even overjoyed by the fact that he finally gets to get rid of Tamar.

Now this is terrible, but is it more terrible than anyone else? You see what Judah is doing here is turning a blind eye to injustice and seeking to justify himself. But haven't we all done this? Haven't we all, as children of privilege, turned the blind eye on injustice? Haven't we all been prone to point out the sins of others while crediting ourselves with hard work and virtue? And haven't we pointed the finger when the fault may have been our own? Of course we have!

Now Judah's culture allowed him the opportunity to do some wicked things to Tamar that our own culture won't allow. We don't burn adulterers. But history tells the story that all of us rise to the level of wickedness available. It isn't personal righteousness that holds us back. We aren't better than other people. We just haven't had the opportunity to run a residential school or command an SS unit. If we had our story would likely be different.

Think of this, in Judah's day no one on earth knew more about God than his family. He was the son of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He's been born into incredible privilege, and yet look at what he is capable of. And think of what you are capable of. And here's the gospel, Judah was delivered from this, and we've been delivered as well.

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So as Judah was about to do a terrible injustice to Tamar we get vs 25. Tamar says "Don't kill me yet. I've got a message for my father in law. I'm pregnant by the guy who gave me these. Do you **recognize** these things."

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Now her words here are very specific. She isn't just asking about his cord and staff she is asking "Do you recognize yourself here? Do you recognize what you have become?"

And as she says this, by God's grace, Judah does recognize himself. And Tamar is saved, and Judah is saved too. Judah is saved from committing a terrible injustice. He recants before he acts.

This is Judah's breakthrough. He has a spiritual awakening. This is what "recognize" means. He is transformed. Or you could say he is born again.

Here's the gospel take away. It doesn't matter who you are. If you are a desperately broken person like Judah, or a moral upstanding one, regardless of who you are you need a spiritual awakening to alert you to the fact that you are not good enough for God.

This is why Paul says:

"No one is righteous— not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one."

(Romans 3:10-12)

So let me ask you, are you included in that “no one”? Even if you’ve never done what Tamar or Judah did? Friends, the gospel is that no one measures up to God’s standard. And it is only at this realization that we can receive a Saviour who saves people who don’t deserve it. And only when you’ve received grace can you give it to the people around you.

Friends, God uses the Tamars and the pain of the world to bring this to our attention. And it hurts when our brokenness is brought to our attention, but it’s grace because it saves us from more injustice.

So when Tamar brings the seal and staff out and Judah recognizes them this isn’t the only time this has happened. There are two other times. And these two other points of recognition show us what God has done in Judah’s heart.

The first is in chapter 37 when Joseph the dreamer is stripped of his multi-coloured coat and thrown in the well. Judah devises the wicked plan – this is where he starts to go bad. He tears up the coat and dips it in goats blood and then asks his father – Jacob – do you **recognize** this coat? And Jacob replies yes, it’s Joseph’s coat. A beast has torn him up.

Then we get chapter 38 and the **recognition** that leads to transformation in Judah. And then we see what God has done.

A bit later when Joseph is next to Pharaoh in Egypt and his brothers come to get food they don’t know it is him. And so Joseph sends them back to their father but says “I’m going to keep Benjamin here. And Judah responds, “No, keep me instead. Lock me up. Let Benjamin go free.” Judah is a changed man who sacrifices himself to fight injustice.

And it is at that point that Joseph replies “Don’t you **recognize** me?” You see, by God’s grace Judah recognized himself in this encounter with Tamar and he was transformed into the father of the Seed. He’s the next one in Jesus’ lineage. The God who would give up His privilege to fight for justice on our behalf.

So brothers and sisters, let God use your brokenness to help you recognize yourself. Recognize how much you need and still need a Saviour. And recognize that your Saviour died to make you His son or daughter.

And then decided to turn out the grace you have received to become an agent against injustice in the place you’ve been put. Search it out and destroy it.