

**“Victims and Victimizers”**  
**Genesis 38**

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**Derek McCollum**

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This story branches off somewhat from the narrative of Joseph. In Chapter 37, we are told that “these are the generations of the family of Jacob.” It’s the story of Jacob’s family, and although the rest of Genesis will revolve around his son Joseph, this story focuses on Judah, his life, and both the healing and challenging nature of God’s grace. And this chapter represents about 20 years of activity. It’s a parallel narrative that overlaps the next few chapters of Genesis.

This chapter revolves around 2 people. It’s around these two characters that we most clearly see the challenging and healing grace of God at work in this story. These are also two characters I think we can identify. Although their stories are extreme, we can all benefit from seeing both the challenge and the healing that God offers in these verses. Let’s dig in.

We’ll start our character study with Tamar. Her name means “palm tree”, which in those times would have brought the connotation of both beauty and fruitfulness. We will see, however, that her life is far from beautiful, and she remains barren for the majority of it. In those days, a woman (and a man) would have been married earlier than we typically expect—probably mid-teens. Likewise, in that culture, the marriages were arranged, so her husband was chosen for her. Unfortunately for Tamar, she gets a dud of a husband. The first thing we are told about Er, Tamar’s husband (Judah’s son), is that he was wicked in the sight of the Lord. So wicked, in fact, that the Lord puts him to death. Though God has exacted his holy judgment on groups of people earlier in Genesis, this is the first time we see him bring the death penalty on one person. Er was wicked, and he was punished for his wickedness. Tamar, of course, lived her married life with an evil man, and it’s only reasonable to assume that his wickedness had an effect on her. Many of you, unfortunately, know what it is like to live with someone who is cruel, selfish, dishonest, or unfaithful. You have felt the deep wounds of sin against you, and those wounds still fester.

Er was evil, and the Lord put him to death. This, of course, may have felt like a great mercy to Tamar at the time. No longer does she have to live with an evil man. But widowhood in that culture was not the same as it is in ours. Widows often had no land to support them. And with no children, there was little hope of future joy and provision.

This solution was solved in that culture by what is called “Levirate marriage”. It is part of God’s law in Deuteronomy, but the cultural foundation is seen here. In order to both protect the widow and to protect the family of the deceased, the next of kin would marry the widow and produce children for her that *would be counted as the deceased husband’s children*. That way, the family line would continue. This is what Onan, Judah’s second son, is commanded to do. It’s his duty to care for his brother’s wife and raise up his brother’s sons to carry on that name and inheritance. We also should see the theological overtones to this. God has promised Abraham that his offspring would be the Lord’s vehicle of blessing to the world. Abraham’s family is to be fruitful and multiply the Lord’s blessing to the whole world.

But Onan seems to be as wicked as his brother. He is selfish, and does not want to produce and raise someone else’s children. So he participates (and the implication is frequently) in the pleasure of the marital union while avoiding the responsibility of it. This is clearly sexual abuse. Onan is seeking pleasure for himself while taking advantage of Tamar and shirking his duty to his brother. So the Lord puts Onan to death also.

Now we find Tamar alone again. Two wicked husbands and now her second widowhood. Still young, but widowed twice and left without children. Treated poorly, taken advantage of, and now left alone. And now Judah, seeing that his first two sons have died, promises Tamar to his youngest, Shelah. But we know that Judah has no intention of ever giving Shelah to Tamar. She is sent back to her father’s house to live as a widow. It’s a double-whammy for Tamar because she is a widow but also betrothed to a man not ready to marry (and not intending to marry her even when he’s old enough). So for what looks to be around 20 years, her betrothal keeps her from seeking another marriage and her widowhood keeps her from the promise of children. She is a picture of an abused and forgotten woman. She is truly a victim.

In a church of this size, the statistics will tell us that quite a few women gathered here today can identify directly with Tamar. You've been hurt. You've been victimized in some way. Some have been abandoned. Some have been physically or sexually abused. Lied to. Cheated on. Taken advantage of. Some have felt these things in even greater ways what Tamar must have felt and some have experienced these things in smaller ways, but in ways no less destructive. We have victims among us today.

If that's you, you may be wondering the same thing that Tamar probably wondered... Is there anyone who can identify with me? Furthermore, is there anyone who protects the rights of the victimized? And is there anyone who can heal these wounds that run so deep and continue to provide so much pain? Let me assure you that there is someone. But first, let's take a look at our other main character, Judah.

Judah is the victimizer. He is the perpetrator in this story. We begin by seeing him leave his family and move to a foreign place. He marries a Canaanite woman, which we have been told over and over in Genesis was a bad idea (we can only assume that this would have been against his parents' desires, as it was with Isaac and Jacob). Judah raises two wicked sons, which says very little about his parenting abilities. And when those two sons die, we do not see him mourn their loss. He seems at first to care for Tamar, but as the story moves on, it's clear that he sees her as the *problem* rather than the victim. He seems to believe that she's the reason his sons keep dying and so he withholds his youngest son out of fear. His story provides a stark contrast to that of Joseph. Richard Pratt points out these key differences between them: Though Joseph separates himself from the foreign woman, Judah marries one. Though Joseph is sexually moral, Judah is immoral. Joseph bears a woman's false accusation and Judah *gives* the false accusations. Joseph is the victim in the story and Judah is the victimizer. He is displayed here as a cruel and selfish man.

Have you ever known someone like this? If I'm honest with myself, I see glimpses of this man in the mirror quite often. I seek my own good, and I do it at the expense of those around me. I use my power not to empower others but to hold them down. I sacrifice others at the foot of my idol of acceptance and pleasure.

Have you even seen yourself in Judah? Is there hope for someone like this? Is there hope for those who have victimized others? And furthermore, can God accomplish his plan of salvation through someone with my past... or my present?

Before we answer those questions, let's take another look at the climax of this story. After the death of his wife, Judah goes with his friend Hirah to shear his sheep. Commentators will tell you that sheep-shearing would have been quite an event and probably would have been surrounded by some sort of festival or party. And the wine would have flowed freely. On the road that connects where he lives with where the sheep-shearing was happening, he comes upon Tamar. But he doesn't know it is Tamar. She's gotten word that Judah will be traveling that way and she's veiled herself and gone out to meet him. Judah thinks that she is a prostitute and he makes her a proposition. In exchange for her services, he'll send her a goat (which is a nice payment). But he doesn't have it with him, so he needs to leave her a pledge—his seal, his cord and his staff. The seal would have been his personal mark, something that a rich man like himself would have had so that he could put his mark on his belongings. The cord held the seal and the staff was a symbol of power and would have also carried his mark. They are quite personal items. It was like leaving his license and credit card with her as a security deposit.

Judah later sends his friend Hirah back to give her the goat that was promised and to get back these very personal items, which he was undoubtedly eager to receive. But she's not there. Rather than risk being found out and made a fool, he drops the whole business.

Meanwhile, in the Lord's sovereign plan, Tamar becomes pregnant. Not through Er. Not through Onan. Not through Shelah. But through Judah, her father-in-law. And of course, it's not that easy to hide a pregnancy, so eventually she is found out. She's a widow and she's betrothed. So being pregnant, she is immediately accused of immorality and is brought before Judah to receive judgment. And judgment he gives. "Burn her!" he decrees, "she's been immoral!" This was a harsh punishment. In fact, it was much harsher than what was called for. The cruel Judah sees that this is the time he can finally get rid of Tamar and he strikes as hard as possible.

And then she drops the hammer. She lays out his license and credit card and says, “it’s by this man that I am pregnant.” “You”, she says, “are the man.”

In a church the size of this one, there are both Tamars and Judahs. There are women who have been abused and there are men who are abusers. There are women who have manipulated and men who have been wounded. There are children who have been abandoned, abused, or discarded. There are parents who have acted in harm to their children. There are those who have felt the sting of cruelty at work and there are managers who have acted cruelly to those under them. In a church this size, there are both victims and victimizers. In fact, in each of us, there is both victim and victimizer. What we need as a church, and what we need individually, is a gospel that both heals the deep wounds of sin done against us and challenges the deep sin we have inflicted on others. We need a King who judges justly and who vindicates the victim. We need a savior who calls us to repentance and offers forgiveness for sin. We need someone who can renew us, change us, heal us. We have that person in Jesus Christ.

If you have been wounded, you need to know this morning that Jesus offers tender compassion and real and deep healing. He understands what it means to suffer. He has been a victim. He has been abused. He has been abandoned. And He can draw near to you and heal the deep pain you carry.

If you have wounded others, you need to know that Jesus is calling you to repentance. He is calling you to fall on your knees and cry out to him for forgiveness. And he stands with arms stretched wide, ready to freely cover all of your sin. You need to know that he is a just judge who will not let sin go unpunished. But he is also a merciful savior who has taken punishment for sin upon himself. Though Jesus was righteous, the Lord saw fit to put him to death—the punishment of our sin coming upon him. There is none so bad that they cannot receive the great forgiveness of Christ.

But let me also remind you that there is more to this story. Sometimes we have the view that people don’t really change. That doesn’t seem to be the case here. When the good news of forgiveness of sins and imputed righteousness gets ahold of someone’s heart, that person’s life changes. At the end of this story, we see Judah on his knees admitting his sin. He’s finally humble. And if you look ahead to

chapter 44, you see Judah having changed drastically. The brothers have come to Egypt and they are pleading before Joseph to let them take back their youngest brother, Benjamin. And here is what Judah says:

“So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father, and if my father, whose life is closely bound up with the boy’s life, sees that the boy isn’t there, he will die. Your servants will bring the gray head of our father down to the grave in sorrow. Your servant guaranteed the boy’s safety to my father. I said, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, I will bear the blame before you, my father, all my life!’ **“Now then, please let me remain here as your slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers.** How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come on my father.”

He’s no longer fighting for his own life, but he’s fighting for another. And he’s willing to lay his own life down for the sake of someone else. That’s the promise of real and lasting change, even to such a victimizer as Judah.

What about Tamar? Sometimes we feel, especially as victims, that we are damaged goods. There’s nothing the Lord can do with me. But that is far from the truth. Though her situation is broken, look at how the Lord creates beauty. Her son, Perez, ends up being the ancestor of Boaz, who is the ancestor of King David! And of course, that line would continue to include the King of all Kings, Jesus, the *Lion of Judah*.

Did you hear the passage that Nathan read earlier? Against what would have been tradition at the time, Matthew lists not **one** but **five** women in the genealogy. And the first out of the gate is Tamar. She is a foremother of Christ.

God can work his redemptive plan through the most terrible of circumstances. If he can bring about beauty, redemption, and change in characters like these, don’t you think he can do it in you and I? We all need the challenge of the Gospel and the call to repent and turn to Christ. And we all need the healing balm of Jesus’ great love and mercy. We need a King who has come to establish justice and one who has come to forgive, heal, and enable us to change. Hallelujah! That King has come!