

Tamar: The Grime At The Heart of Christmas

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[0 : 00] Good afternoon and a very warm welcome to the lunchtime service here at the Tron. Now we are into December and we're beginning a little series here in the book of Matthew, looking at Matthew's genealogy. So it'd be good if you could turn to that with me, Matthew chapter 1, and that's on page 807 if you're using one of the visitor Bibles there.

Now just before I read a few of those verses, just one or two notices this afternoon. The first is to say that we are having the lunchtime carol service on Wednesday the 20th of December, so that's two weeks today. We'll have our carol service and that will begin at 1 o'clock.

So if you turn up at 1.15, we'll be underway. So we start the carol service at 1 o'clock on the 20th, we'll have a few more carols to sing and there'll be mince pies served afterwards.

So that's Wednesday the 20th, starting at 1 o'clock. And also that day we'll be taking up the Christmas offering. So this year the money that we're collecting as a congregation, as a church, will be going to some of our gospel partners in Pakistan.

And there'll be more information on that next week on your seats. So two weeks down the line we'll do the offering for the Christmas offering. And more information to follow next week.

[1 : 28] Good. Well we turn to God's word now and Matthew chapter 1. I'll be reading verses 1 to 6 and then verse 17.

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 Aminabad. And Aminabad, the father of Nashon. And Nashon, 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.

[2 : 29] And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah. And then down to verse 17. So all the generations from Abraham to David were 14 generations.

And from David to the deportation to Babylon, 14 generations. And from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ, 14 generations. Good.

Let me pray and then we'll think about this together. Our father in heaven, thank you so much that you care for your creation.

You care for the people you made. And even though humanity has rejected you again and again in the face of all your abundant provision. Thank you that we can at this time of year remember with fresh astonishment the incarnation.

The second person of the Trinity born as a baby. The promised one who brings frail and fallen people like us great and certain hope. For he came to save his people from their sins.

[3 : 42] With his coming. With his coming. With his coming. With his coming. We feel the warmth of the sunrise. For he is the promised light. Come into our dark world bringing grace and mercy for all who call on him.

So thrill our hearts again this lunchtime. Thrill our hearts with your grace. Open our minds.

Unblock our ears. Soften our hearts for we ask it. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Well Christmas is very much upon us isn't it?

It's a time of color and celebration and a fair bit of consumerism. As we walk around, as we look around the town, at the shop windows, everything's in its place isn't it?

Everything's looking wonderful. The adverts on TV they show us the ideal Christmas scene with the snow swirling. The fire lit. A gathering around of impossibly good looking people around a Michelin star lunch.

[4 : 56] But the presentation of the perfect Christmas we see on TV is a long way from reality isn't it? And particularly if you're alone and in the late or autumn winter of life.

It's far from what we see on TV isn't it? Or perhaps you'll be hosting family this Christmas time and you feel that pressure to match the Christmas we're presented with on TV and make sure that it's perfect.

That there are no arguments. That the roast potatoes are as good as Delia's. There's that great pressure isn't there? And with all the festivities, there is that temptation to ignore reality and to paper over some of the muck and mire of real life.

And whilst I'm all for enjoying this time of year, we mustn't forget that at the heart of Christmas is the coming of Christ, which far from paping over the cracks, far from pushing reality to the side, it was dealing with reality.

It was a coming marked by muck and mire. It was a coming to deal with muck and mire. And that is abundantly clear as we read these opening verses in Matthew's gospel.

[6 : 15] Now you might think as we read that, pretty barren territory as we read these opening words of Matthew's genealogy. Of Jesus' royal family tree. But far from it.

Family trees are enjoying something of a resurgence in recent years, aren't they? I'm sure many of you have seen the odd episode of *Who Do You Think You Are* on the BBC. And on that program, a relatively famous individual traces their family tree back a few generations to discover some of their roots.

And usually interest and scandal are uncovered along the way. And what at first glance seems to be a dull list of names springs to life as stories are uncovered.

And that is what we'll be doing over these three Wednesdays as we look at some of the names in Jesus' family tree. Here at the start of Matthew, there are a few surprises.

A few persons of interest. A few outsiders. And a few scandals. And it's three outsiders in particular that we'll focus on.

[7 : 28] I don't know if you noticed, but Matthew's genealogy, in addition to Mary, Jesus' mother, contains four women. Which in itself is surprising.

At the time Matthew wrote, the convention was to name the fathers only. So for him to mention four women, well that was very unusual indeed. And in the six short verses I read earlier, we encounter all four of those women.

All of them outsiders. All of them were pagans. And not only that, but each of them had shady backgrounds. In each of these stories, there's some sort of sexual indiscretion.

But in each case, these four women play a crucial role in God's plans and purposes for the human race. To bring about the promised seed of the woman who would rescue his people, bring salvation, and defeat our great enemy.

It really is staggering when you think about it. That God would use such people in his plans.

[8 : 41] But not just that, but that he would so clearly and unashamedly declare it. Here they are in the first few verses of the New Testament. Not hidden away in some footnote.

Not relegated to the appendix. But there, right up front at the start. The Bible deals with the real world. With real people.

And God is not afraid to get involved and stuck into the muck and mire of this world to achieve his saving purposes. And that's the focus on these Wednesdays in the run-up to Christmas.

Now, we've only got time to look at three of these women. These three women who saved Christmas. So, consider the first of those women today. And that's Tamar there in verse 3.

Now, you can read all about Tamar in Genesis chapter 38. Now, I don't propose to read that lengthy chapter. But what I will do is summarize some of the story for us.

[9 : 44] Make a few comments along the way. And then draw some conclusions in light of Matthew's purposes here at the start of his gospel. Why does he mention Tamar in the royal line of the promised King Jesus?

Why does he mention her? Well, Tamar's story begins just after Joseph has been sold into slavery by his brothers. Now, remember, these are the descendants, the great-grandchildren of Abraham. And it was in these brothers that the future of God's people lay. This was the family through whom God had chosen to bless the nations.

Those great promises made to Abraham a few years beforehand. It was in these 12 brothers that the future lay. But gosh, what a family.

In the previous chapter, Genesis 37, they planned to kill their own brother. But instead of that, they climbed down from that. And instead, they just sell him into slavery. And chapter 38, which contains the story of Tamar, it's one of those chapters that you kind of wish wasn't in the Bible at all.

[10:58] Here, all the sin and dirt and grime of the human condition is on show. The Bible is a profoundly realistic book, isn't it?

God deals with this world, his world, as it really is, not like how we would like it to be. And that is, as we'll see, a great comfort to you and I.

So, in Genesis 38, we read of Judah, one of the 12 sons of Jacob, and a brother to Joseph, the one who he just sold into slavery.

And Judah is, as you read on through the account, remarkably, he's going to become one of the key figures in bringing about the salvation for his people along with Joseph.

And it's particularly remarkable, given what you read in Genesis 38. But this chapter is a real turning point for him. So what happens?

[11:55] Well, Judah, he leaves his brothers. He flees from them after they sold Joseph into slavery. And he departs from them, and he goes and settles with some of the Canaanites.

And he marries one of their women, and he has three sons. And his eldest son marries Tamar. That's the Tamar we read about there in Matthew.

But this eldest son, he was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. Now, we're not told exactly what he did that was so wicked, but it was so serious, so severe, that the Lord thought it appropriate to put him to death.

So Tamar, well, she's left a widow. No children, no inheritance to speak of. And so Judah does the right thing for his daughter-in-law.

And he says to son number two, go into your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her and raise up offspring for your brother.

[13:03] Now, this whole concept of what Judah asks son number two to do, it all seems very alien to us, doesn't it? It makes us a bit uncomfortable.

But it was a recognized custom at the time. And indeed, it's incorporated into God's law in Judah and Monarch chapter 25. And it's called the Levirate marriage. And the whole purpose of it was to honor the family name of the man who had died so that you would ensure that his name lives on. It also honored the man's widow so that she would have children and wouldn't be left without any inheritance. And that explains the actions that happen next in the story of Tamar.

Son number two, we read about in Genesis 38, we read this, Now, his actions were entirely selfish, weren't they?

He didn't want Tamar to have any children. If she did, then the inheritance that was due to him that would have been his would have to go to her.

[14:26] He would have to share his inheritance. He didn't want Tamar to conceive, and so he took the appropriate action. And in the very next verse, we read about the Lord's take on his actions.

What he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. It wasn't just that he was enjoying the sex and denying Tamar children.

He was defying the Lord. The Lord who had made great promises to this family. Promises of offspring. Offspring that would bless the nations.

And so son number two was doing all he could to prevent God's plans, and God would not allow his plans to be thwarted. So Tamar, so far, she's been treated appallingly, hasn't she, by the two elder sons of Judah.

So awful have they been that the Lord has put them both to death. And at this point, she is alone. No children. No guarantee of an inheritance.

[15:35] And so she's forced to take matters into her own hands, and in a sense, who can blame her? She really has been mistreated and abused. But in the midst of all of this, God is at work.

Even in the midst of this mess and dirt, he is at work, and his great promises, promises of a seed, of children, would not be thwarted.

So what happens next? Well, there is a son number three, but at this point, he's too young. He's just a boy.

And so Judah sends Tamar way back to her own father, and says, just wait, Tamar. Wait till my youngest son is old enough, and then you can have your children.

But Judah had no intention whatsoever to allow son number three anywhere near Tamar. He had seen what had happened to his eldest two sons, and he perhaps thought that Tamar was the problem.

[16:40] Well, not at all. His eldest two sons were so awful, so wicked, that the Lord put them to death. Judah just couldn't see the real problem lay closer to home with his own sons, not with Tamar.

And so, time goes by. Tamar never hears a word, even though son number three has grown up. So what does she do? She's been treated awfully.

She's been discarded by Judah, waiting, hoping, that son number three would come along. Well, to her credit, Tamar takes matters into her own hands.

Not that her actions are particularly praiseworthy at all. She's deceptive. There's all sorts of sin going on. But she does it in order to gain for herself a child, an inheritance.

But not only that, in the grander scheme of things, as we see in Matthew's genealogy, she is, through her actions, ensuring the royal line of succession that will one day lead to the great promised king, the promised savior of the world.

[17:52] So Tamar, she learns that Judah, whose own wife has died by this point, he learns that Judah is heading up to this sheep-shearing festival.

Now, it's not just a time of sheep-shearing. It's a time of general festivities and revelry. And she knows that she has an opportunity. And so Tamar, she disguises herself as a prostitute.

She seduces Judah into sleeping with her. And she takes his seal, his staff, as a down payment. And through this, Tamar conceives.

And a few months later, the scandal erupts. Tamar's pregnant. And Judah is furious. He didn't know it was Tamar.

And when he hears about this, he's furious because, in a sense, Tamar was still his, part of his family. And she's gone and got pregnant. He's furious and he demands that the punishment be given without any sort of trial.

[19:04] And it's a punishment by burning. He wouldn't hear the evidence. And at that point, Tamar plays her trump card.

She sends the seal and the staff that Judah had left with her that time. Judah has been found out. He's been exposed.

He's the father of Tamar's child. Now, to his credit, Judah owns up. He speaks truly when he says that Tamar is more righteous than he.

And the text says that he knew her no more. So there does seem to be, on Judah's part at least, some degree of real repentance, a real turning point.

But it took great public humiliation to reach that point. Nothing else could have forced him to consider his true sinfulness and force him to seek his refuge in God's grace.

[20:09] And as you read on later on in the story, Judah is the pivotal man along with Joseph in the salvation of that nation. And so, we have here in the story of Tamar a real mess, don't we?

a pagan woman is treated in the most awful way by these men of Israel, men who should have known better, men who did all they could to prevent God's plans and purposes for their own selfish ends.

But God would not, he does not, allow his plans to be thwarted. He does not allow the schemes and sin of man to derail his plans.

Tamar, remarkably, does all that she can to bring the child that was rightly hers into the world. She was determined to have that inheritance. She was determined to play her role in God's plans.

And in light of Matthew's genealogy, which we read at the start, in light of that, which features Tamar right there at the start, we know that she was a key person, a key woman in God's plans to bring about his promised offspring, to bring about the promised Messiah that's at the end of this family tree, the promised saviour of the world, the promised Messiah.

[21:40] Tamar is right there in the middle of all that. So, as we come to our close, two key implications for us, two lessons this afternoon as we consider the story of Tamar in light of Matthew's gospel.

First, God's purposes will not be thwarted by man's grime. God's purposes will not be thwarted by man's grime.

The big story of the Bible is the big story of everything. God created the world and he set mankind apart to rule over it, to subdue it, to extend his kingdom to the ends of the earth and to do so in perfect relationship with him and with each other.

But that all came crashing down when man decided to do things his own way. Satan and sin enter the picture and ever since there's been this great fracture between God and his creation, between God and humanity.

And you and I know all about that, don't we? We experience the fallout, the grime in everyday life. But God's purposes have not been thwarted.

[23 : 03] Right there in the moments after the fall, God promised that one day the seed of the woman would crush Satan's head.

One day there would be a child born to a woman who would bring about the salvation and restoration that the world that you and I cry out for. And ever since that day, creation has been waiting for the coming of that promised seed.

Even though man has done his best to thwart and stop his plans and purposes, nothing will derail God's plans. Now the seed of Abraham, which we read about here in Matthew's gospel, they were a very unpromising bunch, weren't they?

Just read through Genesis. All the scandal, all the issues, and we've seen that with the grime and dirt in Tamar's story, haven't we? But God is not limited by man's sin and failings.

No, he will work through even our best efforts to obstruct his plans and purposes. Here is Tamar, listed as one of the ancestors of the Lord Jesus Christ, the great promised serpent crusher.

[24 : 20] Tamar, and all this mess and grime, yet God used her. Isn't that astonishing? And isn't that an encouragement to you and I as we look at our own lives, the lives of those around us, even those who are strangers to the promises of God?

His purposes will not be thwarted by our mess, by our grime. Indeed, he even works out his purposes in this world through people like you and me, people whose lives are marked by grime. That is how God works in his grace. And nothing will stop his plans. But second, God doesn't just work through our grime.

The whole purpose of the coming of the Lord Jesus was to deal with the grime at the heart of man. That's our second implication. God's purpose is to deal with the grime at the heart of man.

If you scan down in Matthew's Gospel, past the genealogy and on to verse 21, we read the angel's words to Joseph that Mary would bear a son and that Joseph was to call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.

[25 : 41] And this is Jesus' key task. He was a saviour. That is what the name Jesus means. It derives from Joshua, a name which means the Lord saves.

And Jesus was the one from the very beginning who was promised. The great serpent crusher who would rescue his people from their sins. He would deal with the grime that is at the very heart of the human condition.

The grime that is in every one of us. He came to deal with that. And that rescue that Jesus brings, it is the great rescue that was needed then and is needed now.

The greatest problem and need for all people and in all places at all times is the forgiveness of our sin. Every human being that has ever walked this planet is by nature a sinner.

And we desperately need salvation from our bondage to sin and from the consequences of sin. We need rescued, we need saved.

[26 : 54] We need rescued from the grime and the great encouragement from Tamar's story is that no one is beyond that rescue. Even a pagan like Tamar, even someone who's been treated so poorly, was not beyond the reach of God's grace.

And that is at the very heart of Christmas. That is the message at the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ, his coming. God has in the coming of Jesus Christ reached down into this world of grime and in his grace has provided a way for the grime that miles each and every one of us to be dealt with.

That is why Jesus came. And so the Christmas season that we're now in the midst of, far from being an opportunity to plow headlong into escapism and unreality.

Well, it's the opportunity to face fully the reality of our plight and to look for the solution in the one place that we are guaranteed to find it.

In God, come to earth, in the Savior Jesus Christ, descendants of Tamar. Let us pray.

[28 : 19] our Father God, we thank you for your amazing grace that you condescend to use people, people like us, people like Tamar, for your great purposes of salvation.

thank you that you not only work through our grime, but you work to rescue us from it. And so help each of us this Christmas to look to you alone, to trust in you for salvation, for only you are able to rescue us.

So help us fix our eyes upon you this Christmas time, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.