

## Tamar

### *The Mothers of Jesus 2022, Pt.1*

Good morning everyone. I want to start off our talk this morning by jumping right into the text. I have a story to tell you. It's found in **Genesis chapter 38** and we'll pick it up in v.11. *"11 Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up." For he thought, "He may die too, just like his brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's house. 12 After a long time Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, died. When Judah had recovered from his grief, he went up to Timnah, to the men who were shearing his sheep, and his friend Hirah the Adullamite went with him."*

*"13 When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep," 14 she took off her widow's clothes, covered herself with a veil to disguise herself, and then sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that, though Shelah had now grown up, she had not been given to him as his wife."*

*"15 When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. 16 Not realizing that she was his daughter-in-law, he went over to her by the roadside and said, "Come now, let me sleep with you." "And what will you give me to sleep with you?" she asked. 17 "I'll send you a young goat from my flock," he said." At this point let me stop and say something to the single ladies in our midst...it's worth more than a goat my dear sisters.*

*"Will you give me something as a pledge until you send it?" she asked. 18 He said, "What pledge should I give you?" "Your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand," she answered. So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she became pregnant by him. 19 After she left, she took off her veil and put on her widow's clothes again."*

In the next few verses, Judah tries to send the goat, but no one can find the prostitute so he just forgets about it. Jumping down, *"24 About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant." Judah said, "Bring her out and have her burned to death!" 25 As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. "I am pregnant by the man who owns these," she said. And she added, "See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are." 26 Judah recognized them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." And he did not sleep with her again. 27 When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb."*

*"28 As she was giving birth, one of them put out his hand; so the midwife took a scarlet thread and tied it on his wrist and said, "This one came out first." 29 But when he drew back his hand, his brother came out, and she said, "So this is how you have broken out!" And he was named Perez. 30 Then his brother, who had the scarlet thread on his wrist, came out and he was given the name Zerah."*

Merry Christmas! What...the...holly, jolly mistletoe does this have to do with Christmas!? What in the world does this story have to do with *anything*? Why in the world would I ruin your festive holiday mood with this strange, sordid, odd story? Well, I'll tell you later about how it relates to Christmas but right now, let's jump into the overall message. This made it into the Bible, what are we supposed to learn from it?

Well, this is not the main point, but it's a good reminder that you cannot read the stories of the Bible, like most people want to, as inspirational stories filled with moral examples for us to imitate. That's what most people think the Bible is. "Oh, the Bible is a wonderful book. It's filled with noble and inspirational stories, filled with moral examples for us to imitate." Where? Have you *read* this book?

Here's Judah. Judah is the great grandson of Abraham. Abraham is the one to whom God came and said, "Abraham, I'm going to save the world through your family. I'm going to make you the father of a great nation – the Jews. One of your descendants is going to be the Savior of the world, so I want you and your descendants to know me personally, walk before me in the ways of justice, peace, truth, and right, pass the faith down to the next generation." And Judah, in this story, fails in *every*

single respect. *Every* one of those things. So you're not going to find any moral examples with him.

What about Tamar? Obviously, we'll see she's the protagonist in this narrative, and yet is *she* your moral example? Is sexual entrapment and incest okay in the right circumstances? Is that what we're supposed to get out of it? No, of course not. So what *is* the theme of this story? In a way, it's the theme of all the Bible stories.

At the end of the story, Tamar names one of her kids Perez, and the name Perez means "breakthrough" or "breakout". Here is the moral of all Bible stories; the moral of all Bible stories is morals will never save you. You'll never be right with God if it's through morals and moral performance. The theme of this story, of all the Bible stories, is not, "Here's how you can live a good life and get God to bless you," but rather, "Here's how the grace of God *breaks out, breaks through*, into lives of people who otherwise would sink under their corruption and their brokenness." This is a story about breakthroughs and we actually see three of them in our text and they all have something important to teach us.

**The first one is The Breakthrough of Tamar.** To give you her background, let me tell you what happens in the first 10 verses of Genesis 38. Tamar marries Judah's oldest son – a man named Er - and we know almost nothing about the details. We are only told that Er was an extremely wicked, cruel person and that he dies under the hand of God's judgment. That's all we know – don't know how he died or what he did to deserve it, only that he was wicked and God killed him. Then, we're told Tamar marries Judah's second son – Onan - and for basically the same reasons, the same thing happens – he's wicked, God kills him.

So when we pick up the story, we see, (v.11b) "*Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up."*" If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. What's going on here? Well, we have to understand a little bit about Tamar's situation. First of all, Tamar, at least in verse 11, is probably about 15 years old. In the ancient world, people married almost right after puberty - 14, 15, 16, something like that. Teenagers, don't get any ideas – things have changed in the last 4,000 years. But probably by the time the rest of the story unfolds - when Shelah has grown up and she realizes she's not getting him – she's probably about 4 or 5 years older.

But most likely Tamar, all through this text, is a teenager. The other thing we know, though, is Tamar is a widow. And if MTV had existed back then you *know* there'd be a reality show called "Teen Age Widows". In fact, Tamar would be the star of the show because she's *twice* a widow. And let's face it, the circumstances don't exactly look good on a dating profile. "I like animals, jogging, both my former husbands were killed by God for being wicked, gardening..." Wait, go back...that's a red flag! She's not exactly going to have a lot of options – very unlikely that a man is going to choose her.

This is not a free-market economy where people go out and get jobs. Certainly, a *woman* couldn't go out and get a job, and so a widow – much less a widow in these circumstances - was in an enormously vulnerable position both economically and socially. And therefore, there was an extremely important law to protect widows in those societies, and this was called the "levirate marriage law".

It comes from the word *levir*, which is Latin for "brother-in-law" – I spent Thanksgiving with my *levirites*. So the levirate law stated that the father-in-law - the father of the dead husband – had an obligation to be the defender and provider for his son's widow, for his daughter-in-law. And if he had any other sons, he was to provide her another husband from among them. That was his obligation.

And on the surface, Judah seems to be doing that, “Wait until my third son, Shelah, grows up a little more.” He couldn’t be too far behind Tamar, probably 10, 12, something like that. So he says, “Go home to your father, and don’t call us; we’ll call you.” However, the second half of the verse tells us Judah is being dishonest, **v.11b**, “*For he thought, ‘He may die too, just like his brothers.’*” What does that mean? Judah is in denial. Judah is blaming *her* for the death of his sons. Dad does not want to admit what a mess they were. He does not want to admit their corruption and brokenness. He does not want to admit what a mess of a father he must have been. So on the outside he smiles and says all the right things, but inside he thinks she’s bad news.

So he sends her away to her father, which, evidently, was pretty far away, with absolutely no intention of ever talking to her again or ever giving her his son. And eventually, Tamar sees the writing on the wall and realizes Shelah had grown up, and Judah was not going to fulfill his obligation so she goes into action. In verse 14, there is a string of Hebrew action verbs that come along - *bang, bang, bang* - to convey just how decisive and how active and assertive and aggressive she is. Tamar had become something of a feminist hero in theological circles. She’s really fascinating.

So she hears her father-in-law is in town, gets all dolled up and sits along the side of the road like, “Hey sailor!” Judah comes by, sees her, thinks she’s a prostitute, has sex with her, not knowing it’s his daughter-in-law, and leaves his seal, cord, and staff as a pledge of payment. The seal was something only a wealthy man would have had; it was basically a kind of signet on a little cylinder, and it was what you used to put your stamp on things. It was a way of making contracts, proved your identity. Think of it as leaving your driver’s license with them when you rent the bowling shoes. So once he leaves, Tamar takes it and goes home.

Now, let’s stop this story right there and ask, “What in the world is she doing?” And the answer of the text and the answer of the Bible and the first thing we learn is she is absolutely going after justice. She wants justice and she is defying all the social norms to get it. Let me show you what I mean. First of all, Tamar brilliantly and ingeniously uses the sexual double standard of Judah and that society against him. What’s a sexual double standard? One standard sexually for men and another for women.

You notice Judah has sex when he wants. He's on a business trip and he hooks up. How would Tamar know that if he saw a prostitute on the road, he'd go to her? You have to realize her whole strategy is based on the fact that she can count on that. She'd been around the family; she knew the patterns. Judah had sex *when* he wanted it with *whom* he wanted...but the minute he finds out Tamar has had sex outside of marriage, he wants *her* executed. That, my friends, is a double standard. And she brilliantly uses that against him, but there's much more going on here.

She's not *just* protesting a double standard. The Bible - especially all through the Old Testament, but in the New Testament too - the Bible is enormously concerned for the welfare of widows. And we have to dig on this, because our society has evolved - at least in this area of women's rights - and the widow status doesn't necessarily mean for us what it did for them. All through the Bible, there are an enormous number of statements that tell us God is concerned for, and he wants *us* to be concerned for, the welfare of widows.

So for example, **Psalm 146:7-9**, we read that God, "*...upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry...the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down...The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless **and the widow**...*" Or **Psalm 68:5**, "*A father to the fatherless, a **defender of widows**, is God in his holy dwelling.*" Or the command of **Isaiah 1:17**,

*"Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; **plead the case of the widow.**" "Seek justice..."* And the prophet goes on to say that because Israel's leaders are *not* doing this, God is going to "turn his hand against them". The Bible takes matters of justice very seriously.

Now, here's what we know. In every single society, there are certain requirements that open the door for well-being, dignity, and inclusion. Back then, an education meant almost nothing. To be included in that society, to be functional, to be accepted, to have dignity, it wasn't education; you had to have a spouse and children, period. That was the way it was. It was an agrarian society. It was a family-oriented society. Patriarchal society. The more sons, the more workers on the farm. All right. Let's not judge it at this point. But that's what was necessary, not an education.

Today what is it? It's not necessarily all that important, or certainly nowhere near as important, to have a spouse and kids, but you'd *better* have an education. Because if you were raised in an inner-city neighborhood, or poor rural town, with family who didn't care about your education, attended incompetent schools, so that by the time you get to, say, eighth grade, ninth grade, tenth grade, you are functionally illiterate...there's almost no hope for them to ever overcome that, they lack a key requirement in our society for them to experience well-being, inclusion, and dignity.

They're going to be marginalized. They're going to be alienated. They are our "widows" in a sense. I mean, every society has people who don't have what's necessary for inclusion in that society, and we're told when God sees the people who have the resources not aiding the people who *don't* get them – who, let's be frank, don't even have a shot at getting them - God does not call that stinginess; He calls that "injustice."

What Judah is doing is he is depriving this widow of justice. He has something only he can give her. Only he can give it to her, and he's obligated to give it to her so that she can be brought in and function in society. She realizes that out of his indifference, and out of his selfishness, and out of his need to blame her for what happened to his family, he has relegated her to an absolutely dead-end life. But she's not going to stand for it, and what is she after? She's not after a handout; she's after justice.

And I can show you where the text confirms that. We're going to get to the end, but let me just scroll ahead for a second. When Judah sees the whole situation, he says, (v.26a) "*She is more righteous than I...*" Isn't that a strange word to use? The reason it looks strange to us is because the translators weren't really quite sure how to get this across. He uses the word *tsadaq*, which is the word that means "just."

It was a word that was used by a judge, and clearly, this is a kind of courtroom situation. She submits evidence and he renders a verdict. What is his verdict? *Tsadaq*. When a judge is listening to the parties, the question on his mind must be, "On whose side is justice?" That's the job of the judge. "Is this person telling the truth or is that person telling the truth? Is this person innocent or is this person guilty?"

At the very end, the judge's job was to say to one side or the other, "*Tsadaq*. Justice is on your side," and that is what Judah says. Judah looks at what he has done to her and looks at what she is demanding, and he says, "She has justice on her side. She is after justice, and she's right. I have been guilty of injustice. I have been guilty of oppression; I was wrong and she is right."

Now, here's how this story just busts everybody's paradigm. The Bible has something to challenge everybody regardless of your ideology or political party or social worldview. It's an equal opportunity offender. See, some of you are going to say, "Righteous? Incest? Sexual entrapment? Prostitution? How is that righteous?"

Look carefully at how, not only Judah, but I'll show you in a minute how the Bible nuances this. It's remarkable. He does not say she *is* righteous. In other words, he does not say, "She is guiltless and I am guilty." Nor does he say, "She is innocent, and I am not innocent," or anything like that. "She is *more* righteous than I," which is remarkable.

What he's saying is, "She is not completely righteous. She is guilty but...I am *more* guilty. She has done wrong, but I have done the *greater* wrong. She has done sexual sin, but I have done social injustice, and my sin overshadows hers in this case."

See, this has something to drive everyone nuts. Because the liberal take is, "She is an oppressed woman. She didn't do anything wrong. It's her body. She has to do what she wants. She got him back. She stuck it to the man who was oppressing her, and therefore, she didn't do anything wrong." That's the liberal take on it.

The more conservative take is, "Sexual sins are a bad thing – maybe the worst thing." It's interesting, when you talk to someone about "traditional values", are racism and social oppression usually on that list? Not so much. But adultery is on that list and fornication is on that list, and all sorts of other things. But do you see? Here we have not the liberal take that says, "This isn't a sin," or the conservative take that says, "This is the worst sin, and she needs to be punished." Instead, this unbelievable nuance.

He says, "Because I oppressed her, though she is wrong, she is guilty, she did wrong, and there's no justifying of that, and yet *I'm* the one with the power, I hold all the social cards, so I'm the one who is even *more* guilty," and that mitigates the situation. She's wrong for acting out sexually, but you're more wrong for putting her in the position where she felt she had too. Ooo, see, this is not a conservative or liberal position. This is not a Blue or Red position. This is not just sort of a conservative approach that looks at the personal sins like sex and ignores racism and social oppression, or the liberal approach that condemns social sins like racism and social oppression and ignores the personal.

It doesn't even make them equal in this case, but it says in some cases, a person who has been oppressed may do wrong things - and they are still wrong - and yet we need to be understanding in the broader context of the oppression. If you think I'm reading into this, there is another place in the Bible that refers to this very incident. It alludes to it, and it's a word from God to the people of Israel through the prophet Hosea, many years later, about the social decay of their society, and in it this is what **Hosea 4:14** says. This is God's Word to the people. "*I will not punish your daughters when they turn to prostitution, nor your daughters-in-laws when they commit adultery, because the men themselves consort with harlots and sacrifice with shrine prostitutes - a people without understanding will come to ruin!*"

Here's God saying, "What they're doing is *adultery*." He's not saying it's not sin. "What they're doing is *prostitution*." He's not saying it's all right, but He says, "I'm mitigating your punishment." Why? He says, because the men have corrupted the society to act this way. It's the same thing. "This is sin, Tamar, you are guilty, and yet in the broader context, he's *more* guilty because of his position, because of what happened." That's what Judah says. More importantly that's what *God* says.

Here's what this means. Social injustice is a big sin. That's all I'm saying. That's all this is telling us. It's wrong to arrest the prostitutes and not the johns. When you have what enables you to be included in society - when you have the ability, when you have the money, when you have the education, when you have the wherewithal, when you have the connections, when you have the privilege - when you have that and you see other people without that and you're not making an effort to help them get it...

*You* could have been born there, but you weren't. What'd *you* do to keep from being born in one of those slums in Haiti? In other words, be careful about thinking, "Well, the reason I'm okay is I pulled myself up by my bootstraps." That presupposes you have boots!

You had all sorts of privileges, some more than others. Some worked harder for it than others, but the fact is God holds you responsible, if you have, to share with the have-nots, or it's injustice.

It's such a serious sin. It could overshadow the sins of the people you might have a tendency to look down on. "Look at all those people out there cavorting and doing all these licentious things out there." Very interesting. Tamar goes after justice, and she should. She is right to do so. Do you have the same kind of passion for justice? Do you see oppression and social injustice as that serious of a sin, or not? That's Tamar's breakthrough. She breaks through and gets justice.

That point's for my liberals. I love by the way that we have a purple church – we buck the national trend of politically homogenous churches and I am glad for that. It means I have twice as many people to make uncomfortable! So if you're a liberal type person, politically, ideologically, temperamentally, you love point number one. You may *hate* **point number two** because the gospel doesn't fit into any particular category, because the next thing we look at is **The Breakthrough of Judah**. What is Judah's breakthrough?



Let's look at the last part of the story now. They have their road-side rendezvous. She goes home. She has his stuff. In **verse 24** we read, "*About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant." Judah said, "Bring her out and have her burned to death!"*" In Hebrew there are only two words, *take...burn*. He's very brief, "Take her...burn her." Now, what we may miss – because let's be honest so much of the Old Testament seems kind of brutal anyway – but we miss something the readers back then would have not missed, and that is what Judah does here is *enormously* hateful.

It is disproportionately angry, because almost no one was ever executed through *burning*. To be burned to death was reserved for the most heinous crimes, and therefore, the average reader listening to this would be amazed. "Why in the world would Judah demand that? It's a torture as well as death." Stoning adulterers is bad enough, but burning alive...Here's the answer. See, this is almost inexplicable unless you remember verse 11.

What was the reason he decided to deprive her and oppress her and just put her on the shelf and dump her? Remember? He needed to believe bad things about her in order to justify in his own mind what happened to his sons. "*She's the reason somehow.*"

So over the years, he's been harboring his bitterness, mentally sticking little pins in her. He *has* to if he wants to hide his own failure as a father, to justify himself, to stay in denial from the reality of his own sins and his own flaws and failures and those of his sons'.

He has been stewing on it, and stewing on it. And now murderous hatred spews out. Why? He's probably happy. He needs to believe something bad about her – dehumanize her so he can keep killing her in his mind - and now he has it. This is confirmation. "I knew it! Burn her. She's a whore. I knew it all along."

What does this tell us? Was Judah a horrible, wicked person? Judah is about to do a horrible, wicked deed. He is about to take a girl who is absolutely innocent, who has done absolutely nothing to him or to his sons or to anybody else, and he is about to torture her and kill her. I want you to know, if he does this, it's not just Tamar who's on her way into the flames; it is Judah as well. If he carries through with this he'll either have to continue justifying what he's done until his heart is hard as a rock, or he'll have to open his eyes and be devastated. You don't just walk away clean from something like that.

Is he a terrible person? Is he a monster? Be careful! Judah has in his heart the same thing you and I have in our hearts. Every single human heart needs to justify itself. It needs to shift the blame. It needs to shield itself from the reality and the fact of just how selfish and stupid and bad and lazy and wrong we are, and so we say, “Well, I couldn’t help it,” or, “It was a bad day,” or “She made me do it,” or “He made me do it,” or “It wasn’t so bad,” or “I’m not as bad as they are.” You can justify all day long, but please know what it lead’s to.

So they are *both* headed for the flames, and then suddenly Tamar in **verse 25**, this is awesome, “*As she was being brought out...*” - literally as she was being dragged to the fire - “*...she sent a message to her father-in-law...*” - think of how dramatic this was – “*“I am pregnant by the man who owns these,” she said. And she added, “See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are.”*” Boom! Gotcha! You gonna learn today!

In Hebrew, her message is, *Hakker-nâ*. It’s *the* critical word in this whole text, and it links us to a number of other texts in Genesis. I want us to say it together. *Hakker-nâ* means “recognize”. “Do you recognize these?” When she confronts him with his stuff she is calling him, she is forcing him, by God’s grace to recognize *himself*. *Hakker-nâ* – You better check yourself for you wreck yourself!

She is not just saying, “Do you recognize these things?” She is saying, “Do you recognize *yourself*? Do you see who you are? Do you see what you’ve become? Do you see the sexual hypocrisy? Do you see the hardness of heart? Do you see the delusion? Do you see the murderous hate in your heart? Do you see where you’re headed? Do you see what you are?”

And by Gods grace, he *does*. The same word, “And Judah *did* recognize...” Do you see? Then he says, “She is more righteous than I.” What’s going on? This is *Judah’s* breakthrough. He was on the verge of going all the way under, but in this moment he has a spiritual awakening. That’s what the word “recognize” means. “Wake up! Open your eyes! Look and see who you really are!” It’s only because of that that he has a turnaround.

See, the first point is a great point if you’re a liberal, “Social justice is overwhelmingly important, and we need to be active in getting it.” But the second point...”you must be born again” - it doesn’t sound like a very liberal point, does it? That it’s not enough to be a very good person, a very moral person, a very socially responsible person...you must have a spiritual awakening, you must have God break-in to your life, or the natural self-justification, the natural self-centeredness of the human heart can lead you into absolute hardness no matter how altruistic you appear on the outside.

You cannot possibly make it without a spiritual awakening of some kind. You cannot possibly make it without some grace intervening from the outside to wake you up to who you really are. Look at the need for spiritual awakening here. First of all, think of who Judah is. In the whole history of the world up to this time, *this* family - the family of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob - knows *more* about God and *more* about God's ways. They have more spiritual privileges than *any* other family, *any* other place in the world, and yet look what Judah is capable of. Look where he's going. Look what he's about to do. Trying harder won't be enough. Just being a good person isn't enough.

Let me put it this way. Right now, the sin in your life, the character flaw in your life, the deficit in your life, that is most hurting you and the people around you is the one you can't see, by definition. That's why it's hurting you the most. Does that make sense? The one you can't see, and you're not looking for it. If you were looking for it, it wouldn't have the power it has. It's the enemy you *don't* see that'll kill you. Your only hope is that God, through the Tamars of the world, or through other awful, painful things, will wake you up. We need initiating grace from God.

Do you understand the nature of spiritual awakening? It's very humbling. It comes when you begin to see – when you *recognize* - that you're no better than the people you used to despise. When you come to see the category of sinners you used to despise, that you're actually no better than they are - in fact, you're *worse* in your own way. *Then* you're on your way to spiritual breakthrough.

Let me put it this way. Since I've already dug my hole with this liberal/conservative thing this morning. If you're a blue-stater, spiritual awakening begins to happen when you come to realize you are as bigoted and as narrow-minded, in your own way, as the bigots you have despised. “Those damnable fundamentalists!”

If, on the other hand, you're a red-stater - a traditional, very squeaky-clean, follow all the rules - you are on your way to spiritual awakening when, and only when, you begin to realize your own self-righteousness and pride and self-centeredness means you're just as bad, in your own way, as the people out cavorting and having sex in the streets. “Those damnable hippies!”

Only when that begins to happen, when the people you used to despise and look down on, you begin to start to look up at because you see your own flaws and your own fighting of God and your own spiritual weakness - until that happens, you are not spiritually awake. How does it come? It comes through very, very, very painful situations and experiences. This is a public humiliation for Judah. He's never going to live this down - he's humbled - but it's the only way he could be brought back from the destructive path he was heading down.

I wish I had the time to set this story in its greater context in Genesis. This is right in the middle of the Joseph story - some people say it's an interruption, but no, it's crucial to the overall story. If you remember, Joseph was the precocious dreamer who was his father's favorite of the 12 sons - the coat of many colors? And his brothers got jealous and faked his death and sold him off in slavery to Egypt - classic story. Well, Judah was Joseph's older brother. In fact it was *his* idea to sell his little brother and tell their dad he died. How hardhearted is that?

In the chapter right before this, Judah takes his brother's coat, covers it in goat blood, and brings it back to his father and says, "Hey dad, there was an animal attack and we found this bloody coat, do you...*recognize* this?" *hakker-nâ* And it says his father did *recognize* the coat and he is undone, "My son is dead! My son is dead!" This is Judah.

In the Middle Ages, there's a Hebrew rabbinical commentary on Genesis 38 that says something like, "The Holy One, praise be he, said to Judah, 'You deceived your father with a goat? Tamar will deceive you with a goat. You said to your father, "*Hakker-nâ*.'" By your life, Tamar will say to you, "*Hakker-nâ*.'" In Genesis 37 Judah is a hard guy. He was on his way to really being lost. In Genesis 38 he has an awakening. And so at the end of the Joseph story, when the brothers reunite...but they don't *recognize* it's Joseph - oh my God it's so brilliant! But it's Judah who offers to give his life in place of his little brother's - because he knew his father could not survive another loss. There's a transformation. Something has changed in Judah.

But it didn't come easily. Judah needed an incredibly painful process of spiritual awakening so that eventually he could become the vehicle for Jesus Christ to come into the world because, you see, he is a father of Jesus. Jesus came into the world through his lineage. And for him to become like Jesus Christ - one who was willing to give up his life for another - it took a very painful series of spiritual awakenings. By the way, if you and I are going to be vehicles for Christ in the world, it's going to take the same thing for us.

And that brings us to the final point - **The Last Breakthrough** - and it will explain what all this mess has to do with Christmas. At the end of the story, Tamar says to one of her children as he comes out, “So this is how you have broken through!” She names him Perez. Do you know that in the genealogy of Jesus, in Matthew chapter 1 - right before the Christmas narrative, right before the shepherds and the angels and the manger and the wise men - Matthew gives a genealogy of Jesus, as a way to show who Jesus is and why he came.

We’ll talk about it more in the coming weeks, but the genealogy has something almost no genealogies had back then. It has a woman’s name, and the woman’s name is Tamar, (**Matthew 3:1**) “*Judah the father of Perez, whose mother was Tamar...*” This was the line of the Messiah. Judah was a father of Jesus, and Tamar was a *mother* of Jesus. Why and how do Tamar and Judah point to Jesus?

Here’s how. Tamar got her life back when Judah looked at her and said, “In spite of your sin, you are righteous.” Right? “In spite of your sin...all this incest and this deception...” He covered it, didn’t he? He says, “In spite of all your sin, you are righteous,” and she got her life back. Her life was saved.

Judah is pointing to the *ultimate* Judah. He’s pointing to his descendant, because what you and I need, the thing that’ll make us able to work for justice...and the thing that will make us able to admit the depth of our sin...is we need to hear the ultimate Judah - Jesus Christ - to look at us and say, “Truly, in spite of all your sin, you are righteous.” How can Jesus do that? The answer is he’s the *opposite* of his ancestor Judah.

Because do you know what Judah was doing to Tamar? He was punishing *her* for *his* sins, but the real Judah, the real Jesus, took the punishment *himself* for *our* sins. That’s the reason why he can look at us like Judah looked at Tamar with all the sin and say, “*Tsadaq*. Righteous.” You have to know that kind of acceptance. You have to *recognize* that. The story of Judah and Tamar and Perez points to the great Judah, the Judah who historical Judah *should* have been.

When, and only when, you know that kind of absolute acceptance and love, then you’ll be able to go after justice like Tamar...and you’ll be able to accept what God is telling you about your heart and go through the journey of repentance like Judah...and ultimately breakout to become someone great. That’s the hope that became possible at Christmas.

Let’s pray...