

Who Do You Think You Are? (1) Tamar

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] Who do you think you are? It could be spat rudely at you, that question, couldn't it? Who do you think you are? Or it could be an invitation to reflect more deeply, how do we know who we really are?

Who do you think you are? It's a question that grips us, isn't it? At the TV show, Who Do You Think You Are? ran its 20th series this year, because we never get tired of discovering who people we think we know really are.

If you've not seen the program, each episode features a celebrity, a well-known person, and a team of researchers go back through their family history to dig up maybe a historical gem or two to present to this celebrity and to us viewers.

Because one way we find out who we are is by asking, who do we come from? We have this deep sense, don't we, that our family history isn't just dry, dusty documents or all black and white photographs, but somehow can reveal something about who we are now.

Hence the title of the show, Who Do You Think You Are? The blurb on the BBC tells us that the participants follow in their ancestors' footsteps with stories of bravery, loss, heartbreak, sacrifice, resilience, and joy filtering down through the generations.

[1 : 41] Well, this morning we're starting a Who Do You Think You Are? series of our own, but with only one person in mind. The most famous person who's ever lived.

We're going to take a few weeks to dig back through his family's past to find out who this man we think we know really is by seeing who he comes from.

Who do you think you are? Jesus. Jesus. We heard earlier how Matthew starts his gospel with Jesus' genealogy. We looked at it as a whole not so long ago on a Sunday, but we're going to go back to it to dig a little deeper.

And Matthew helpfully shows us where to start. It's as if he's found where the treasure's buried, but he's given us the map to go and unearth it.

Because into that genealogy, perhaps you noticed he's dropped the names of five women. Five times he expands on what he's there to say.

[2 : 46] Now, in his time and culture, he didn't need to do that. And in fact, if Matthew had wanted to present a kind of clean and whitewashed history of the family of Jesus, well, he would have buried these names even deeper.

He wouldn't have put them out on the surface for anyone to see. So why include the names of these women? Well, going back to see who they were, their stories, how they get involved in this family will help us to uncover the story that Matthew wants to tell us about Jesus.

To him, their place in Jesus' past is unmissable. In their stories, his story is revealed. So who do you think you are, Jesus?

Or more to the point, who do you think he is? We're going to take the Sundays up to Christmas to see it. And we start in surely one of the most dark and dirty corners of the Old Testament, in Genesis 38, with the story of how Judah and Tamar came to have Perez.

Let's admit that this is not where we would choose to start our Advent series. It's a horrible place for digging up the backstory of Jesus Christ.

[4 : 09] There is mess everywhere. And that's only on the surface. We start digging and we find yet more mess. But Matthew says, dig even deeper.

Dig down, and you will find buried treasure. So let's start digging. To help us as we dig, we're going to hear a soundtrack this morning.

It's the song we find each of these characters singing. It's the Sinatra classic. I did it my way. I did it my way.

The first verse and chorus is sung by Judah, one of the 12 sons of Jacob. If you've seen the musical Joseph, it's that same family we're dealing with here in the last chapter.

Judah and his brothers decided to throw Joseph into a well and pretend to their dad that he had been killed. But it gets worse. Then they see some slave traders passing by and they think, no, we won't leave him to die.

[5 : 11] We'll get him up and we'll sell him into slavery. Not to save his life, but to line their own pockets. The only brothers who come out of that in any way positively are Joseph himself and perhaps the oldest brother, Reuben, who secretly plans to go back and rescue Joseph a bit later.

But Judah, who we meet here, is one of the brothers who plotted his brother's death and sold him into slavery and lied to their dad about it.

He is not a guy that we would want to get close to. But then he goes further, 38 verse 1.

He left his brothers and went to stay with his pal somewhere else. Now, what's wrong with that? These are nasty people.

The problem is, this is the family of God. God, the creator, the redeemer of the universe, made promises to their great-granddad Abraham and their granddad Isaac and their dad Jacob to be their God and the God of his children.

[6 : 28] So by walking away from this family, what's he saying? I will do it my way. And he takes another step further when he meets the daughter of a Canaanite man, marries her, sleeps with her, and has children with her.

So not only has he left God's family, now he has his own pagan family. His decisions scream, I don't want God to be part of my life and my family.

I will do it my way. It would be a little bit like if a member of the church, one of you, disappeared one day and someone from your life group, one of the elders, got in touch and said, how's it going? We've not seen you for a few weeks. And you say, no, I've got a girlfriend. We're settling down. You won't see me back in church. Or that is, if you reply or pick up the phone.

Often it's a relationship. It could be something else. But this happens. People in churches still do. Verses one and two. Why?

[7 : 42] Because in our hearts, we still want to be able to say, I'll do it my way. I'll do it my way. Now the next verse and chorus of the song go to Judah's sons.

Inevitably. Where do the kids learn to sing this song? They learn it at home, don't they? Their dad's decision has shaped their destiny very much for the worse.

Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the Lord's sight, so the Lord put him to death. We were not told in what ways he was wicked, not told how the Lord put him to death, simply that he was wicked in God's sight.

Like father, like son. And Judah's second son isn't better. Judah, the young, Tamar, the young widow, marries the next brother, Onan.

Now, to the first readers of this, that's actually the most normal bit of this chapter. Okay, it's strange to us. But it's spelled out in Deuteronomy 25, it's called Leveret Marriage.

[8 : 53] So the idea is that if a husband died, his brother, if he had one, would marry his widow in order to have a child and carry on the family.

So the child would take the first husband's name to carry on the family. Now, Christmas bells should be ringing in our heads at this point because, of course, we know where this story ends.

How important is it for us that Judah's family carries on? It is vitally important that Judah's family carries on.

So Judah says to Onan, the brother of verse 8, sleep with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother. But Onan is still singing the same song that got his brother put to death.

I did it my way and in the most graphic and messy way. He insists. He will do it his way. He's got no problem marrying Tamar.

[10 : 02] He doesn't even have a problem sleeping with Tamar. But having children for his brother, no way, no how. But doing it his way doesn't work for him any more than it did for his big brother, does it?

What he did was wicked in the Lord's sight. So the Lord put him to death also. This is the irony, isn't it?

That the sharp twist of the blade is that you can do it your way for as long as you want in any way that you want the most obscene and creative ways but you still won't get what it is you're living for. I guess Er and Onan wanted long lives. Children of their own, good friends, everything that their dad had and more, what they got was God's settled opposition and in the end his punishment. When we do it our way, friends, whether we know it or not, we are forfeiting our lives. people sometimes say if God was so offended by my sin, why is life so good?

[11 : 20] You know, I don't feel his anger. I don't see his judgment in my life. Life just goes on and I'm doing it my way. Well, so were these brothers until they weren't.

if you're not right with God, that does not mean that God is okay with what you're doing, that you are not wicked in his sight.

It means that you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day when he does take your life and you stand before his throne. Now, if that's where this chapter ended, it would be pretty bleak and hopeless, wouldn't it?

But there's one more person in this chapter who joins the chorus, Tamar herself. Now, if there's anyone in this chapter we feel sorry for, it must be her, mustn't it?

She's been married to not one, but two husbands so wicked that the Lord ended their lives. And so Judah sent her back to her father, but with a promise that when his third son Shelah had grown up, she would marry him and he would carry on the family with her.

[12 : 37] I don't know about ye, but if I was Tamar, that prospect wouldn't fill me with excitement, given the track record. In fact, Judah even worries, doesn't he, perhaps Shelah will die just like his brothers.

which suggests that he's cut from just the same cloth. And so Tamar goes home and years pass. After a long time, verse 12, Judah's wife dies and he goes up with his pal from verse 1 to shear the sheep and take his mind off it.

In passing, be careful who your friends are. Right? Now when Tamar hears this, she has an idea. She takes off her widow's clothes and covers herself with a veil to disguise herself.

Now why has she done that? Verses 14 and 15 tell us, for she saw that though Shelah had now grown up, she had not been given to him as his wife.

In short, she has been left on the shelf. It's a bit like if a guy proposed to a woman and then disappeared and never came back to set the date for the wedding.

[13 : 55] And in that culture, it was still worse because now Tamar risks never marrying again, which would leave her in this horrible position when her own dad died of having no family, no income, and no property to her name.

You know, our hearts do go out to her, don't they? It's a horrible place to be. But as much as we feel for her, she too is singing that same song as Judah and her two husbands because we learn she's done what she's done, verse 15, so that when Judah saw her, he would think she was a prostitute because she covered her face.

She's heard her father-in-law's coming, so she disguises herself as a prostitute to wait for him by the side of the road. I'll do it my way, my way.

And it works. Judah goes over to her and they negotiate a price. He doesn't have a young goat on him, so she asks for an IOU until he can send the payment. What about your seal and its cord and the staff in your hand, she says?

It'd be a bit like leaving your credit card and driving license at the car showroom when you take the car for a test drive. These are things that you can be tracked down with.

[15 : 17] This is your ID. So Judah hands them over and slept with her and she became pregnant by him. Now, if that wasn't bad enough, just see in verse 21 that detail that when he tries to send the payment, who's he searching for?

He's searching for a shrine prostitute. That is, a prostitute you slept with as an act of worship to try and get the pagan gods to bless your land and livestock with fertility.

So not only is Judah's sexual sin obscene, he's actually, in the act of doing it, turning to pagan gods to seek their influence and interference in his life.

And in the end, his pal doesn't find Tamar. They decide to draw a line under it and forget it, but he won't be allowed to do that. About three months later, verse 24, and word reaches Judah that Tamar, his daughter-in-law, is guilty of prostitution and as a result is now pregnant.

And Judah's response would be funny if it weren't quite so serious. Bring her out and have her burned to death.

[16:46] See the irony? It's commonly believed myth that people who do it their way only want others to be able to do it their own way too, right?

You do you. Don't judge. Let's just coexist, rub along, except when what you do offends me, then you can't do it your way anymore, right?

When I decide that you doing it your way is a problem, well, I will stop you from doing it because I'm doing it my way and I want to carry on doing it my way without you interrupting me or getting in my way.

It's a great double standard, isn't it? No matter how much we say it or how much we want it to, it doesn't work both ways. You do you, I do me.

In the end, it just doesn't work. If I'm doing it my way, there will come a point when you can't do it your way without me not doing it my way.

[17:52] And at that point, the conflict, the clash, it becomes clear that I'm not only claiming moral authority over my own life, what is right and wrong for me, I'm actually claiming moral authority over your life too, what's right and wrong for you because if I'm doing this, you have to stop doing that.

See, Tamar's pregnancy is that point for Judah. So it has ever been. Right? He can leave God's family, settle down with a woman, have kids, sleep with prostitutes, worship idols, but for her to have prostituted herself and gotten pregnant outside of marriage, well, she deserves to be burned alive.

But Judah's about to see the problem because, verse 25, the big reveal, Tamar produces his driving license and credit card and says, the father of the child is the guy who owns these.

See, if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff they are, unlike that, the song screeches to an end because this is where doing it my way breaks down.

Judah sees it in verse 26. Judah recognized them and said, she is more righteous than I since I wouldn't give her my son Shelah and he didn't sleep with her again.

[19:31] It's a blinding ray of light, isn't it? In a dark and a bleak chapter when Judah sees that he's in the wrong. I'm the problem.

It's not hard to be more righteous than Judah, is it? It doesn't clear Tamar of doing wrong but that he sees that he is the problem is incredible. I wonder, have you reached that point yet?

Have you seen it? You know, I hope we can see it in this twisted and dark episode in the history of God's family that simply because we are here in church or we've never slept with a prostitute or we've never worshipped idols that we're not immune from the problem which is what?

The voice in our hearts that sings along. I'll do it my way. I'll do it my way. Now, I don't know how that works its way out in your life and your decision making.

it might be as simple as insisting that I just need a bit of time to myself at the neglect of your family or friends or others that you could serve.

[20:49] It could be as basic as keeping people or keeping God at arm's length from certain parts of your life that you don't want anyone else to see, that you don't want to be honest about and you don't want God to work in.

What parts of your life or times in your day could this be the soundtrack? I'll do it my way. Now, for Christians, the answer is less and less of our day and our time, right?

But surely not none of it. Slowly, but surely, serving my own desires has less and less taste for us. Our hearts recoil from it more and more, but not completely.

Judah and his sons and Tamar are at the far end of that self-loving, self-serving spectrum, but let's not kid ourselves that we ourselves are not at a point on that same spectrum.

Have we never sung that song? we've all done things, all wanted things, we'd be ashamed to admit, things that you would be horrified for someone to produce the evidence like Tamar does.

[22:15] I've got a photo of that time that you wrote down what you said, that time when you, we can all think of times, can't we?

So where do we go from here? Well, remember the reason that we're in Genesis 38 is not first and foremost to hold up a mirror to our own hearts and lives, but because these very people, this Judah and Tamar, form a link in the chain that leads to the birth of Jesus.

Having heard it, how can that possibly be true? Because in a chapter where everyone does it their own way, everyone, God is quietly, sovereignly doing it his way.

This is our second, our briefer point this morning. God does it his way. They were surely what Judah and Tamar would have called a mistake, but the twin boys in Tamar's womb were no accident.

They were conceived in terrible sin. They were conceived in God's incredible grace. It's possible to imagine, isn't it, that their one-night stand could have ended there.

[23 : 37] That would have been the end of the story. If Tamar hadn't gotten pregnant, it wouldn't have made what they did any better or any worse. But if she hadn't got pregnant, what they did couldn't ultimately have been forgiven.

they couldn't ultimately have been redeemed because one of their twins, one Perez, carries on the line that would one day lead to the birth of Jesus so that as Joseph the brother would say at the very end of Genesis, what you brothers intended for evil, and they did.

God intended for good to bring about what's now being done, the saving of many lives. Out of Judah and Tamar's sin, God brought the greatest good that we could ever hope for, the saving of many lives for eternity.

Where sin abounded, grace super abounded, says Paul in Romans chapter five. Friends, God's sovereign grace is at work in history.

See that? To bend even the very worst of our sin to the greatest good that we could ever, imagine the coming of the Lord Jesus to save us.

[24 : 55] Having spent some time in Genesis 38, we can see how unbelievable it is that Matthew would put the names of Judah and Tamar in his genealogy at the start of his gospel.

If he was interested in trying to show that Jesus had this kind of clean and shiny family background, well, he would have buried this, wouldn't he? just leave the skeletons in the closet.

If he was interested in inventing a great genealogy for Jesus, surely Judah is not the brother you would have picked. Joseph's the obvious choice, maybe Reuben at a distant second, but never Judah.

But come from Judah and Tamar, he did. and Matthew doesn't bury it, he puts it on display. And now we know what happened, why would he do that?

Because he's not trying to whitewash Jesus' background. He's not trying to present this clean and shiny and tidy version of Jesus' family.

[26 : 03] It's as if he deliberately digs out the dirtiest and the darkest episodes in his family to show us exactly what sort of family God chose to send his son into.

Not a tidy, put-together family. Not a religious, church-going family. But the sort of family that we are actually part of, a twisted, complicated, messy, broken family of sinners.

Matthew wants us to see that God chose Judah and Tamar on purpose, to be part of the family of Jesus, because the kind of people Jesus came from are the kind of people Jesus came for.

God had the choice of anyone he wanted, anyone he wanted, and he chose Abraham. He could have given Abraham any son he wanted, and he gave him Isaac.

He had the choice of Isaac's two sons, and he chose Jacob. He had the pick of Jacob's twelve sons, and he picked Judah. He had the choice of any woman he wanted, and he chose Tamar.

[27 : 23] God had the choice of any family he wanted to be the family his son was born into, and he chose this one. Think of it, the months and the years adoption agencies spend, raking through the family paper, getting to know people, to judge, can we entrust this child into the hands of this family?

They would not let Judah and Tamar near a kid, would they? But this is the family God chose to adopt his son. So if God chose Judah and Tamar, and that dark and dirty moment by the side of the road, to be the link in the chain that leads to Jesus, what do we learn?

That there is no one with a record too stained. That there is no one with a past that is too messy. There is no one with a family that is too broken.

There is no one that God could not choose to bring into his family. Whoever you are today, understand that he can choose someone like you to be part of his family.

Because he sent his son Jesus into a family of people like you and like me to rescue and forgive and heal and redeem people like you and people like me.

[28 : 52] Is that who you thought Jesus was? This was an episode of Who Do You Think You Are? Would you be shocked? Would your view of Jesus be changed by what you've seen his distant ancestors did and got up to you?

I hope so. Jesus had a reputation in his day of spending time with the wrong sort of people, people everyone could see were sinners, too far gone.

Don't spend time with them, Jesus. Have we lost that vision? Are we out of touch with the Savior? You seeing the family he came from, is it any wonder that he opened himself up to harden sinners more so than he did with the religious rulers who pretended that everything was okay?

You friends, we are his people. We are the family he chooses. We are the family he claims. For that, he was hated.

The question was spat at him, wasn't it? Who do you think you are, Jesus? Who do you think you are? But he knew exactly who he was. And he knew exactly who he came for.

[30 : 06] If you are not yet part of his family, where does that leave you? Well, know today that it is not because you have done too much wrong.

It is not because of something in your past that you cannot forget. If you are not part of Jesus' family, it is only your decision to keep doing it your way, and not turn and trust in him, and be saved by him that is keeping you outside.

Because he came into a family of people like you, and he came for you. Would you be part of his family today? Would you come to him, trust him, ask him to save you?

me. He came to you and me. Let's thank him for that together now as we pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Thank you.