

“OUR LORD’S IGNOMINIOUS ANCESTRY”

I. Introduction

- A. The genealogy that opens the Gospel according to Matthew traces Jesus’s ancestry across forty-two generations of Israelites.
1. There are only four women named in this genealogy, each of whom is either a non-Israelite or associated with scandal.
 2. The women named are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah’s wife (Bathsheba).
 3. Matthew’s inclusion of these particular women indicates that he wants to highlight the fact that Jesus’s ancestry had a fair amount of ignominy, or disgrace.
 4. This is also evident in the fact that Jesus was descended from Judah, the main character in today’s sermon text.
 5. We would expect that the Messiah would come from Joseph’s line.
 6. Not only is Joseph the most upright of Jacob’s twelve sons, but he also functions as a type of Christ in his role as a rejected deliverer.
 7. Nevertheless, Jacob’s prophetic blessings upon his sons at the end of Genesis revealed that Judah would be the royal tribe.
 8. This means the messianic line was perpetuated by a man having sexual relations with his widowed daughter-in-law because she disguised herself as a prostitute.
 9. The fact that Jesus was descended from such ancestors is one aspect of what the apostle Paul is talking about when he says in Philippians 2 that in taking on our flesh Christ “made himself of no

reputation.” (Phil. 2:7 KJV)

- B. The sordid story about Judah and Tamar is inserted right into the middle of the Joseph narrative.
1. This calls our attention to the striking contrast between these two brothers, especially since the very next chapter tells of how Joseph ran away from sexual temptation.
 2. The events recorded in Genesis 38 took place over a period of more than twenty years.
 3. Judah essentially left the faith during this period of time.
 4. He intermarried with the Canaanites.
 5. He produced wicked offspring.
 6. He developed a brutal sense of justice.
 7. And he participated in the debauched cultic practices of the people around him.
 8. This picture of Judah’s depravity prepares us to see the transformation that the Lord will eventually bring about in his life.
 9. It also shows us that, even though the wickedness of Judah and his sons nearly resulted in their line dying out, the Lord kept the line alive by working through Judah’s degeneracy.
 10. Here is yet another instance where we see the Lord working out his redemptive purposes through people who are deserving of judgment rather than blessing.

II. Bad Company, Bad Morals

- A. Our text begins by saying that Judah left his brothers and lived among Canaanites from the city of Adullam, located about twelve miles northwest of Hebron, where Jacob had settled.
1. Though he traveled in a northwesterly direction, Judah's relocation is described with the verb "went down" because he left the heights of Hebron and went to live in the lowland territories.
 2. His geographical descent paralleled his spiritual decline.
 3. Judah separated himself from the covenant people and took up with the people of the world.
 4. These were the very people whom God told Abraham would eventually be cast out of the land because of their great wickedness.
- B. Moses intends for us to see Judah's decision to leave his family as a turning away from the Lord.
1. One of the ways we are clued in to this is by the allusion to Eve's sin in the garden.
 2. The text says that Judah *saw* the daughter of a Canaanite and *took* her.
 3. The same verbs were used in Genesis 3 to describe Eve's decision to eat the forbidden fruit.
 4. She *saw* that it was good, and then she *took* it.
 5. Like that sin, Judah's decision to take a Canaanite woman in marriage had disastrous consequences, both for him and for his posterity.
 6. It resulted in his family becoming enmeshed with the ungodly people around them.

7. This is why Abraham and Isaac had gone to such great lengths to ensure that the heirs of the covenant did not marry Canaanites.
 8. When you look at the actions taken by Judah and his sons in this passage, you can see that their character was by no means upright.
 9. They had blended in with their ungodly culture.
- C. After the Lord put Judah's firstborn son Er to death for his wickedness, it was the duty of Er's brother Onan to produce offspring for his brother through Er's widow Tamar.
1. This practice is now known as levirate marriage, a name that comes from the Latin word for 'brother-in-law.'
 2. This practice was fairly common in the ancient Near East.
 3. The law of Moses would later set forth statutes to regulate levirate marriage (see Deut. 25), and we find an example of the practice in the book of Ruth when Boaz fills the role of kinsman-redeemer for Ruth.
 4. The purpose of levirate marriage was to preserve the line of a man who died before being able to produce an heir.
 5. The firstborn son of a levirate marriage would be reckoned as the heir of the deceased brother.
 6. This helps us to see why Onan's actions were so wicked in the sight of the Lord.
 7. He was taking advantage of the benefits of the levirate law without fulfilling his responsibility.
 8. He was willing to have sexual relations with Tamar, but he took measures to avoid producing an heir for his brother.

9. In all likelihood, he did this because he wanted to keep the firstborn portion of the inheritance for himself.
 10. For that selfish act, the Lord put him to death.
- D. The wickedness of Er and Onan reflect poorly upon Judah.
1. It was his decision to take a Canaanite wife and raise his children among the Canaanites.
 2. That being the case, he bore a measure of responsibility for the kind of men his sons grew up to be.
 3. We should also note the way Judah responds when his sons die.
 4. This stands in contrast with the way Jacob responded when he was told that Joseph was dead.
 5. Jacob was overcome with grief at the news of the supposed death of his son, but there is no mention of anything like that with Judah.
 6. On top of that, instead of acknowledging that Er and Onan deserved to die because of their wickedness, Judah seems to place the blame upon Tamar.
 7. He sees her as bad luck, and this leads him to avoid giving her to his third son.

III. Bad Morals, Bitter Fruit

- A. As we see in our text, Judah's actions cause Tamar to take matters into her own hands.
1. As the wife of Judah's firstborn son, she had the right to be the mother of Judah's heir.

2. Because of this, Judah was obligated to have his third son perform the duty of a brother-in-law for Tamar.
 3. But when Judah reneges on this, Tamar determines to secure what she is entitled to by deceiving her father-in-law.
 4. And Tamar's plan provides further evidence of the degree of Judah's depravity.
 5. She knew that when her father-in-law went to the sheep-shearing festival, he would have his eye out for a prostitute he could hire.
- B. The phrase "cult prostitute" points to an aspect of Canaanite religion.
1. This gives us insight into just how wicked Canaanite culture was.
 2. Prostitution was an important component of their religious system.
 3. Canaanite religion was a fertility religion.
 4. That is, they looked to their gods to cause their crops and animals be fruitful.
 5. Of course, God is indeed the ultimate source of such fruitfulness.
 6. This is something that all people know through the light of nature.
 7. But that knowledge was grossly distorted by the Canaanites.
 8. They believed that if they had sexual relations with cult prostitutes, they could incite their false gods to have sexual relations and thereby produce fertility.
 9. By putting this religious veneer over prostitution, the Canaanites made it so that people could actually feel pious for engaging in something sordid and evil.

10. We see the same phenomenon in our culture today, where people can attain a virtuous standing in the eyes of men by expressing their approval of things that are perverse and vile.
- C. The fact that Judah would participate in such an abominable practice shows us how far he had strayed from the way of the Lord.
1. We should also note that Judah was such a slave to his passions that he did not even let his lack of funds prevent him from hiring this prostitute.
 2. He was willing to leave his signet, cord, and staff with her as a pledge.
 3. In that culture, these items functioned as the equivalent of a signature for the various transactions that a person would need to make.
 4. One commentator likens Judah's willingness to give these items to Tamar to leaving all of your credit cards with someone.
 5. It was in doing this that Judah fell right into Tamar's trap.
- D. The story comes to its conclusion when Judah learns that Tamar is pregnant.
1. His response to this news is exceedingly harsh.
 2. He says, "Bring her out and let her be burned."
 3. This went well beyond the forms of capital punishment that were later prescribed in the law of Moses.
 4. This is yet another example of the kind of man Judah had become.

5. He had adopted the brutal attitudes of the people among whom he lived.
- E. But before Tamar can be put to death, she reveals the truth.
1. The fact that she is in possession of Judah's signet, cord, and staff shows that he himself is the father of the child she is carrying.
 2. This revelation marks a turning point in Judah's life.
 3. It is at this point that Judah begins to see the reality of his spiritual condition.
 4. We see this in his response to what Tamar revealed.
 5. He says, "She is more righteous than I."
 6. Stop and think about those words for a moment.
 7. Think about who Tamar was and what she had done.
 8. In addition to being a Canaanite, she posed as a shrine prostitute in order to trick her own father-in-law into having sexual relations with her so that she could get pregnant by him.
 9. Judah says that this woman is more righteous than he is.
 10. This is quite an admission.
 11. It suggests that Judah's eyes have been opened to see the ugliness of his sin.
 12. This marks the beginning of the transformation that the Lord is going to work in his heart.

- F. One lesson that we learn from this passage is how dangerous it is to separate ourselves from God's people.
1. If a professing Christian lets himself drift away from the church, he is likely to become enmeshed with the unbelieving world, just as Judah did.
 2. Instead of being transformed by the renewing of his mind, he will be conformed to the pattern of the world.
 3. His decisions and actions will begin to look more and more like the decisions and actions of the people of the world.
 4. And in the end, if he does not repent, he will end up sharing the fate of the world, just as Er and Onan did.
 5. Those men may have considered themselves to be part of God's covenant people.
 6. But they came under divine judgment because their character had been shaped by the ungodly culture in which they lived.
- G. A second lesson we learn from this text is that the Lord is an exceedingly gracious God.
1. This chapter provides us with a picture of the kind of people Jesus came to save.
 2. Judah and Tamar were used by God to build his kingdom.
 3. The Lord Jesus was a direct descendant of Perez, one of the sons produced through the union of Judah and Tamar.
 4. As we noted earlier, while we might see this as something to downplay, Matthew calls our attention to it.

5. He could have named Judah without making any mention of Tamar.
6. But he wants us to see that the Messiah came into the world through this particular line.
7. In other words, Jesus's birth came about because of what happens in Genesis 38.
8. Had Tamar not done what she had done, and had Judah not done what he had done, Judah's line would have ended.
9. Even though the characters in this story were looking out for their own interests and were acting on their own desires, the Lord was there all along, working out his purpose.

IV. Conclusion

- A. The story of Judah and Tamar is parenthetical in this section of Genesis.
- B. The main focus in these chapters is upon Joseph.
- C. Nevertheless, the story of Judah and Tamar is reflective of the key theme in this part of the book.
- D. This episode shows us that God is able to take the evil things that men do and use them for good.
- E. As amazing as it is to us, God used the sins committed by Judah and the other characters in this passage as part of the means through which he brought our Savior into the world.
- F. God works out his plan of salvation in this way because he wants us to see that we cannot take any of the credit for our redemption.
- G. Like Judah, the role we play in the outworking of our redemption only serves to demonstrate why we need to be redeemed in the first place.