

Genesis 38:1-26

A few years ago my daughter was telling me about some people she knew, and trying to give me character sketches so I could appreciate the story. She came to George, and she said, [long pause] "George is a person in the world." It is with this kind of helpless neutrality, or inability to draw a conclusion, that I discuss for you today the story of Tamar and Judah. I am just not sure this story gives us a clear villain, though it certainly highlights the injustice of a social system that makes women so vulnerable.

The linchpin of this story is Levirate marriage. That is the law, spelled out in Leviticus, that if a man dies before having a son, his brother should marry (or sleep with) the widow, and any son born from that union will be regarded legally as the first husband's son. This is all well and good, and definitely a lifeline for the widow, who would otherwise have no one to provide for her in old age. But it has a downside too, as we see in this story.

Judah--one of the brothers of Joseph, so head of one of the tribes of Israel--has three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. Er marries Tamar, but displeases the Lord and dies. So it's Onan's duty to impregnate Tamar and give his older brother a son. What this means for Onan is that he and his family will not inherit Judah's property. Just as if his brother Er had lived, the inheritance will all go to Tamar and her son. Levirate marriage is not a good thing for a younger brother. So Onan "goes in" to Tamar, but avoids impregnating her. God is displeased, and Onan too dies.

Now it would be Shelah's turn to marry Tamar, but he's too young. One wonders also if Judah, his father, might be afraid that everyone who marries Tamar dies. The text doesn't say that, but you can see how he might see a pattern and just worry. Plus, Judah himself has been bereaved, losing these two sons. He's in pain too, though not vulnerable as Tamar is.

So Judah puts Tamar into a holding pattern. She is to wear widow's clothing and live at her father's house. At some later date he'll have Shelah marry her. But that "later date" is vague and hand-wavy, and it becomes clear to Tamar that Judah is not going to do a damn thing unless he is forced to. So she tricks him into having sex with her and getting her pregnant. Then she proves that he was the father.

I would love to make Judah the villain of this story but I can't quite. He's not a great guy, for sure, but he's lost two sons and it's understandable why he might avoid taking the step that could rob him of his last son. I will also freely acknowledge that he enjoys privileges that are unavailable to Tamar. His period of mourning his wife is time-limited, and when it's over he goes on this sheepshearing junket with his pal. Tamar's period of widowhood is indefinite, open-ended. Judah, on his junket, seems to feel no compunction about picking up a strange woman outside the gates of Naim. The text doesn't tell us that Tamar dressed provocatively--in fact, she put a veil over her head--but maybe just sitting outside the gate made her seem available. Or men just made those assumptions without a lot of pushback.

Tamar sets him up by asking him for (essentially) ID, to be redeemed when he delivers the promised payment of a kid. When he goes to deliver the kid and can't find the prostitute, he decides to let it go, fearing that he would be laughed at if he keeps looking for her. The report that comes to Judah, three months later, is that his daughter-in-law has "played the harlot." What the reporter knows, actually, is just that she's pregnant, but they jump to the assumption that she's been promiscuous. Tamar is therefore to be burned to death. But wait! She has Judah's ID. He's the father of her child. So the worst thing that could happen to Judah out of this whole charade is that he could be laughed at, but the worst thing that could happen to Tamar is

that she could die. Hugely, monstrously unfair . . . but it's not Judah's fault, it's just a situation of privilege for him. So again, I can't condemn him as a villain, though I can definitely praise Tamar for her boldness and ingenuity.

Recently Dr. Tim Keller died. I don't imagine many people here knew who he was, but in the conservative Christian world he was kind of a rock star. He was a conservative Presbyterian minister and theologian, and he maintained his conservative theology while avoiding the kind of hatefulness and apocalyptic threats that characterize so many in that community. He was, by all reports, a genuinely kind and intellectually honest man. But. He was also part of a system, even supportive of a system, that continues to wreak spiritual abuse and trauma on many vulnerable people.

Sarah Bessey [identifiers] writesⁱ,

I've sat with what this has stirred up in me for a few days now. I have earnestly prayed for Keller and now for his family and friends. I can acknowledge what his work meant to many, particularly a certain generation of Reformed folks, and the good that was done directly and indirectly because of his ministry. I don't want to diminish the importance and value of that in people's lives, it does matter.

And I've also sat with the realities of his complicated legacy. I hold space for those who were harmed by his influential theology and practice, leadership and even his well-documented winsomeness even while espousing damaging patriarchal and non-affirming theology which has real lived consequences, and his steady lack of accountability or acknowledgement for associations with some truly egregious abusers like Mark Driscoll and others. This also matters.

She goes on to ruminate on ambiguous legacies and ambiguous grief, quoting the Rev.

Alicia T. Crosby Mack thus: "Someone's work and words can inspire some while also deeply wounding others. People are not due in death what they denied others in life. **The person whose legacy helped you may just be the architect of someone else's hell.**"

Bessey points out that most of us will leave a complicated legacy. We have each helped people and hurt people, sometimes without knowing either. She suggests that to recognize this is not to say it's all okay, but to mitigate the temptation to put everyone in categories of us vs. them. She says, "**We can make room for our realities while acknowledging our story isn't the only one in the room.**" Why is this important? I think it's important because we have to be able to recognize ambiguity and tolerate ambiguity in order to make the world a better place.

Sarah Bessey says she's sad for Tim Keller's family and friends, sad for those who experienced harm and were rejected when they said so, and "**sad for those who live with the real consequences of kind and gentle oppression especially women, people of colour, and/or LGBTQ+ folks who wonder when the time is right - it never seems like the "right" time - to say out loud, "this hurt me and this hurt people I love."** I'm sad for those whose version of their beloved leader or guide is complicated because that's disorienting, too, I've been there myself."

Ultimately, she wants to bless the grieving, however that manifests, and extend grace to each one: **Grace for our heroes, yes, and grace for the ones our heroes hurt.**

Grace for the grieving, yes, and grace for the ones who experienced harm and loss.

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Grace for those of us who need four-letter words for our rage and grief, be blessed because there is a long and holy lineage of this.

Grace for the low bar of being a decent human: grace for those of us who clear it and those who stumble

Grace for the ones who found a path towards healing and grace for the ones who ran out of road. Grace for complicated legacies and also accountability for being spectacularly, millstone-levels of wrong on some things.

This is where I think we should land on Judah and Tamar. Not because there's nothing in Judah to call out. Not because there's nothing in Tamar to celebrate. But we should land on grace for them, and for Er and Onan and Shelah and Judah's wife and Tamar's father, because life is complicated and the low bar of being a decent human being is sometimes too high for us too, and because when we can hold imperfection lightly and see it as it is, we see more clearly. If I can see my own implicit bias without becoming defensive about my imperfection, I'm better able to overcome that bias. If we can see our state's shortcomings without catastrophizing or despairing or making it all about us, we're better able to contribute to improving it. Grace is liberating. It does not excuse wrong, but it frees up our hands so we can make things better. And things will never be perfect, so God bless Tamar and God bless Judah, and may the social structures that entrapped them and the relationships that diminished them cease from this earth.

ⁱ Sarah Bessey, *Field Notes*, "Grace for Our Heroes, Yes, and Grace for the Ones Our Heroes Hurt." Substack, June 6, 2023.