

# A Bad Family Tree

by Jim Cymbala

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*Jesus came to forgive and transform us, making our old name and person totally gone.*

**Duration:** 33:56

**Scripture:** Psalm 32:5, Matthew 2:4-6, John 3:16, 2 Timothy 3:16, Revelation 5:5, Revelation 21:5

**Topics:** "Family"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of recognizing the reason why Jesus had to come. He highlights the guilt and shame that sin brings and uses the story of Tamar to illustrate this. The speaker also discusses how Jesus can not only forgive our past sins but also transform us into new people. He concludes by emphasizing that it doesn't matter what we have been or what our current state is, what matters is what God can make us into.

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## Transcript

A couple weeks ago was my mom's birthday, she turned 100, and at the party, one of my cousins who I haven't seen in lots of years, who lives in the Midwest, she had this most interesting picture. It was a picture from Pennsylvania, from a small mining town, where my grandfather was a miner, and then in that picture, I see my grandfather who died of black lung disease from just working endless hours in those mines, and there was my grandmother, my sweet grandmother, my mom's mom, and there, standing around them, were the 10 children that were in the Sleva, S-L-E-E-V-A family, all 10 of them. They're all gone, except for my mom and one younger sibling, the youngest of the girls that was born to those parents.

And I started thinking, I wonder what my grandparents' parents look like. How many knew your grandparents fairly well? Lift your hand if you knew your grandparents. How many of you ever met your great-grandparents? Anybody? Oh, that's a good number.

Well, we were able to take a picture of the whole family and my children, my children's children, and all that. I started thinking as I looked at that picture, a picture I've never seen, I studied it, I was looking at it again yesterday. I wonder what my ancestors were like.

Like, if you went back to the 1700s or 1800s in this poor little Polish town called Nowy Sącz, right near Auschwitz, the infamous concentration camp, death camp, really. And some people I know tell me, because I come from peasant stock, to look at it that way, to use that word, but some people I've met tell

me, my great-great-great-grandfather, you know, my ancestors came across on the Mayflower. Someone must be lying, because so many people say that, that Mayflower had about six million people on one ship.

And others say, no, my great-great-great-whatever was a cousin of Abraham Lincoln or this and that. Carol has family, her ancestry, they fought in the Civil War. In fact, some of her grandfather, great-grandfather, and their siblings, they marched with General Sherman in the Civil War and burned down Atlanta in the South, fighting for the North.

When you do talk about your relatives and your ancestors, what you try to do is hopefully link yourself to somebody who did something outstanding, because that gives you, because we're all egotistical, that gives us some feeling of self-worth. Like, no, no, no, my great-great-grandparent or my great-uncle did something. And that brings us to one of the most difficult things to understand when we see the genealogy, this is a Christmas message, the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

It was common in the Jewish culture to give all the ancestry of where you came from. So you'll see in the Bible, it'll say Joshua, son of Nun. It's just not who you were, it's who you were the son of.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, three generations down, right? And the Jewish people could claim our forefather Abraham, et cetera. So then what are you gonna make of this? Let's look at the beginning of the New Testament, which I hope possibly I will start a series on in the new year and we'll study the life of Jesus from the book of Matthew. But let's look right now at Matthew one.

This is the genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. So notice Matthew being Jewish and this gospel being called the Jewish gospel, the one that is most Jewish in its flavor, wants to show everyone that this Jesus was the promised Messiah, the one the Jewish people were waiting for. He didn't come out of nowhere.

He had been talked about, prophesied about, and he was very Jewish. And when you believe in Jesus, you don't lose your Jewishness, you increase your Jewishness because Jesus was Jewish. All the early apostles were Jewish.

So notice he's the son of David, he's called that often, and the son of Abraham. David was the second king, but the first special king that God really chose. Then Abraham was the father of the Jewish people.

So let's, then he go back, Matthew goes back to the beginning. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob. Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah the father of Perez and Zerah. Now we have two sons, not just one, whose mother was Tamar. Now what's interesting there is Tamar is a woman and she's mentioned in the genealogies and you're not supposed to do that.

In a Jewish list of ancestors, you're supposed to just mention the men, not any women. And in fact, in the genealogy, if you read all of Matthew one, there's four women who are mentioned, very unusual. So this makes us stop and say, why would God mention a woman? Why would he break into this genealogy and say, oh yeah, and the mother was Tamar? As he does elsewhere.

And that's an interesting question. Judah the father of Perez, who was the oldest, and Zerah, they were ancestors of Jesus. Jesus came through the line of not just Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but Jacob had 12 sons, and the one that Jesus came through was not Issachar or Benjamin or Simeon, it was Judah.

And the ancestry line after Judah was he was the father of Perez and Zerah, who were born twins, and the mother was Tamar. Now why in the world would God not try to pass that story by? Because that's not nice reading. No, if you go back to Genesis 38, you learn all about Judah and Zerah.

And Perez, whose mother was Tamar. Isaac, as I said, had 12 sons. And if someone reading this genealogy said, I wanna follow this back and find out whence cometh Judah, it's bad reading.

I don't suggest it before you go to bed. You should read it when you study the Bible. But let me tell you the story in all its gory details.

First of all, Judah was one of the brothers of Joseph. I told you Jacob had 12 sons. And Judah and his other brothers hated Joseph because Joseph had dreams from God.

And Joseph was naive enough and possibly lacking wisdom to share these dreams with his siblings. On top of that, Jacob favored Joseph. It's not good to favor one child.

It's not wise to favor one grandchild so the others feel left out. All in favor say aye. We did a survey the other day of how many were the favorite of their mother or the favorite of their father.

Let me just do it with the choir. How many were your mother's favorite? Lift your hand. How many were your father's favorite? How many were like me and you just lost out? Yeah, middle child or one of many.

Well, Joseph was favored by Jacob and the brothers in Genesis 37 see him coming and plan to kill him. Judah is the one who speaks up and says, no, don't kill him. He's flesh and blood.

I got a better idea. Let's sell him as a slave to some traders. We can make a buck and then make a story that he died, killed by some animals.

Sure enough, that's what they did. And they came back and they told this crazy story to the father. Look, we found this robe.

You recognize this robe? Oh yeah, that's the robe I gave Joseph. Ah, but alas, it's covered with blood. They got animal blood, covered it to make it look like Joseph had met a sudden and horrible end.

The very next chapter tells us more specifically what we just read. Judah may be out of guilt or just out of this roaming spirit that it seems the brothers had. He drifted away from living with the other brothers and he went and he lived in a place away from where they had grown up.

And he married a Canaanite woman, which you weren't supposed to do. There was warnings from God, even back then, that marrying people who were idolaters and didn't worship the same God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was not a good idea. And that is still a very good warning to all of us.

Don't be unequally yoked. So he married a woman who was a Canaanite and they had a son. Their son name was Er, E-R.

Not a good name to have. Because every time someone went Er, and they went, I'm here. So he had a son and then he had two more sons.

One was the youngest, the third one. Well, he went out and got a wife for his oldest son. When he got older, he got a son for Er.

And her name was Tamar. Well, Er, the Bible says, was very wicked. Obviously, Judah didn't have a good influence on him and neither did his mother, but he was so wicked that the Bible says he lost his life.

God punished him and he died. Judah, following the tradition of that day, went to his second son and said, now I want you to cohabit and have relations with Tamar so that she can have a child because my oldest boy died, your brother died, didn't give her a child, and now she'll have no seed. She'll have no children to dote over and raise.

Onan was the second son. He didn't like that idea. He might have resented his brother, but he made it so that even when he had relations with her, he made sure she didn't get pregnant.

He was wicked in other ways. Judah had some family and the Lord took his life, the Bible says. So now there's only one brother left, one son left, but he was young.

Judah got it in his head, this lady Tamar, whomever she marries, they die pretty quick. So I'm gonna hold back my third son, although she had the right to cohabit with him so that she could have children. Well, years went on.

He held that third son back, and then Judah's wife died. So now he's a widower. We've got Tamar with nobody, and we've got Judah now a widower, her father-in-law, and Tamar, in the Bible, concocts this ridiculous plot.

She finds out that after the funeral of Judah's wife, that her father-in-law would be at a certain area. So she took off her mourning clothes and she put a veil on, which was the symbol back then of being a hooker, a prostitute, and went by the side of the road that she knew Judah would be coming down. She had the veil on.

And Judah now walks by, sees that she's a prostitute, and Judah, the ancestor of Jesus Christ, went over to this prostitute and said, what do I have to pay to sleep with you? I'll give you a goat from my herd. Money wasn't used back then. Things were paid for in produce or something like that.

She said, how do I know you'll pay that? This woman with the veil, who's a prostitute, he thinks, but it's really his daughter-in-law. He says, what do you want me to give to guarantee that I'll send a servant back and pay you? She said, give me your ring, your signet ring, that you stamp things and it certifies that you're doing some deed, you're signing something, and the cord that goes with the signet ring, and also give me your staff as a down payment, as security. He says, fine.

He gives her all of that, and then he sleeps with her. And lo and behold, she gets pregnant. She gets pregnant by her father-in-law, but he doesn't know that.

So time goes by, he goes home, and he remembers his word to the prostitute. So he tells his servant, here, take the goat and go back to where I was and find the prostitute. Probably she's connected to one of the local shrines or idol temples, and give her the goat and get back my ring and the cord and get back my staff.

When the servant goes and he asks around, where's the temple prostitute that cruises this area? They go, oh, there's no, there's no, there's no prostitute that works here. Well, he looks around, can't find anyone, goes back and tells Judah, Judah, there is no prostitute where you said there'd be one. Judah said, well, put the goat back in the herd.

She'll keep my signet ring, and she'll keep my staff. I don't know why she didn't want the goat. It's more valuable, but let's not make an embarrassment and shame myself that I didn't pay the woman.

I did try to pay her. You know, I'm good that way. I pay my bills.

About three months later, the Bible says some servants come to Judah and say, Judah, you won't believe this. Your daughter-in-law has played the whore. Those are the words used in one of the translations.

She's played the whore. She's been sleeping around, and she's pregnant. He went, what? My daughter-in-law, who's married to my oldest boy, she, it's gonna be that way with her? Okay, take her out and kill her, punish her, kill her.

Tamar, when they go to get her, takes the ring and the cord and the staff and says, tell Judah before they kill me. He might wanna know who got me pregnant. And they bring the ring and the cord and the staff to Judah.

What a mess. And Judah says, she's more righteous than me. And then it came time for her to deliver the baby, but it wasn't a baby, it was two.

And they were like fighting inside of her, the Bible says. And it ended up that Perez came first. He was the oldest.

And Zerah was born a minute or two later. And that's how Tamar gave birth to Perez, who's an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Does that make any sense to you to put that in the Bible? If that was one of our ancestors, we would just glide over it and say, wait a minute, didn't you have a great, great, great, great, great grandmother named Tamar? No, I don't remember that name, Tamar.

I don't think that's in my family tree. And wait a minute, you mean out of the 12 sons of Jacob, the one that Jesus has as his great, great, great, great, great, great on and on grandfather is Judah? The one who was colluding with his brothers to kill Joseph, then sold them into slavery. And he's the guy who slept with his daughter-in-law, who he thought was a prostitute.

No, you don't tell that story. You shouldn't even put it in the Bible. But then again, we're not God, are we? So what's the purpose of all of that? The Bible says all scripture is inspired by God and is profitable.

Don't you get it? That was put in there as a prophecy of why Jesus had to come. He had to come to clean up the messes that you and I make. The Bible put that in there so that we would recognize why Jesus was sent by the Father, who loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten son.

What do I mean by that? When you look at that story, think of the guilt and the shame that sin brings. Think of the guilt and the shame. Think of Tamar's shame.

Think of her first husband, then this other brother. They're so wicked, they die before the Lord. And then Tamar disguises herself as a hooker so that she can con her own father-in-law.

And her father-in-law, who's the great grandson of Abraham who walked with God, his grandfather was Isaac, his father was Jacob, who wrestled with God and said, I won't let you go until you bless me. You mean Judah ended up paying for a hooker so that he could have some pleasure and ended up impregnating his daughter. I mean, you can't even make that up.

If that wasn't in the Bible, you wouldn't even believe it. But why would God soil the pages of scripture with such a story? Is this what you'd read to an eight-year-old before they go to bed? I don't think so. You gotta get a little older to understand that.

But some of us don't understand it. Don't you get it? Jesus came so that he could get rid of the shame and the guilt of the sins of people like not just Judah, but all his ancestry, all those kings and all those peoples whose names are listed in that genealogy found in Matthew chapter one. Jesus came to let us know and said, no, mention that.

God said, mention about Tamar, mention that story because that's why I'm sending my son because no matter how much guilt and shame there is, when you put your faith in my son, Jesus Christ, he lifts all the guilt away, he takes all the shame away. He bore, listen, he bore our guilt on the cross. He bore our guilt.

He's the only one who can take guilt and take it away. He's the only one who can cleanse, the Bible says, our conscience so that you can have peace no matter what you've done in the past. I know that for a fact because I had lunch in the prison on Monday and Tuesday with five men who are all in for murder charges except one, Sidney DeLoach, my friend, who's served 30-something years on a sexual assault charge.

And when you talk with them and you interact with them, they are so full of Jesus. They're not living anymore with the guilt and the shame of the horrible thing they did. They know that when you confess your sin, God is faithful to wash us and cleanse us.

Can we put our hands together for all of us and celebrate that? Who the Son sets free is free indeed. The guilt and the shame that could ruin your Christmas this year, it's just one prayer away from being lifted if you call on Jesus and confess your sin. If you hide your sin, if we hide it and don't bring it, don't confess it, don't humble ourselves, then even God himself can't help us.

Did you know that? God himself can't help us. But if we confess our sins, he's faithful and just. No matter what you've done, look at that story.

I mean, there's not one redeeming person in the whole story. It just ends with a mess. That tells us another thing, why Jesus came and why he doesn't mind that we have this name in the genealogy.

It's because that story illustrates human weakness. Brothers and sisters, look at me, those watching on the webcast. I don't care how long you've been going to church.

I don't care who you are. Are we not all weak without the Lord's help? Lift your hand if you know how weak you are without the Lord's help. You could look at that story and go, my, my, my.

You know, and that's another thing about that story. Isn't it interesting that Judah, when he hears that Tamar is pregnant, what a hypocrite. What an absolute hypocrite.

Take her out and kill her. Dude, you're the father of the two babies. But isn't that like us? Some of us are so good at judging others.

And we're complicit with our own disobedience. It must make heaven like the angels must just go like, I can't believe this. When you and I judge other people and are so quick to have an opinion about everyone, and who are you to judge anyone? And who am I? Have you been so spotless? Have you never failed? Anybody here been so spotless, never fail, that you could be judge of the universe? Why don't we leave

the judgment with God and just work on our own lives? How many say amen? I wonder sometimes as I think about this story and about why Jesus came.

You know, I don't like violence, I don't like guns, I don't like drugs. Story of this kind of immorality is not good. I wonder what grieves God more.

Human mistakes like that, or people who judge everyone with a self-righteous attitude. I don't know, I don't know the answer to that. But that must just grieve his heart because he knows who you and I are.

He knows things about you and I that only he knows about you and I. Am I right? And he's been so merciful and patient and then he hears us giving our opinions about everyone. You would think all of us would just tape our mouth shut for the rest of our lives and just say thank you Jesus. Just leave enough room to just say thank you Jesus, thank you Jesus, thank you Jesus.

Everybody say thank you Jesus. You would think that's all we would be able to do, talk about good things and lovely things and wholesome things but no, all of us have Judah in us. We're guilty as sin ourselves but we're very quick to say my, my, my, can't believe about Tamar.

Knew there was something wrong with that girl from the very beginning. What human weakness we have and that's why Jesus came. Listen, he not only forgives the past, he can change you and make you new.

I tell you how new he can make you. How he can transform you so that your old name and your old person is totally gone. Let me tell you how he can.

In the book of Revelation, in that scene in heaven where that worship is going on, that song that has no end, right? In one of the passages there, they all cry out, Jesus, the lion of the tribe of, please, don't mention that name in heaven, please. Just say he's the lion. Don't link it to Judah, no, but right in heaven.

He's the lion of the tribe of Judah because it doesn't matter what you are today or what you've been. What matters is what God can make us into, amen? Come on, let's say amen to that. That's the hope of the gospel.

That's the hope of the gospel. One other thing I wanna just say why Jesus wants us to read that and think about Tamar. The guilt and the shame of sin can be lifted.

Nothing else can do it. Nothing else can do it. No one else can do it but Jesus.

Listen, his name shall be called Jesus, the angel said to Joseph, for he shall save his people from their sins. Notice who will save them. Not a church, not by trying to be better.

He will save his people from their sins. Jesus alone can take away guilt, take away shame. He bore our shame.

That's why he let them spit at him. That's why crucifixion, I won't go into all the details, but the victim was stripped basically naked and took the nails and hung there, was ridiculed and mocked. Why did he take that? So you and I wouldn't have to bear shame for what we did.

He bore the shame. He took our shame away. He took our guilt away.

He is strong. When he rose from the dead, he proved it so he can make us different. He can make you a different person.

He can make me strong where I've been weak because it's his strength. But the other thing that I love about Jesus and this story tells us is he can bless your mess. He can take your mess.

If there is one messy situation in the Bible, if there's one story that you go, yuck, it's that story, and let's not talk about it and let's not mention Tamar's name and just don't say Judah. No, God says, no, put Judah and Tamar in the genealogy of my son because I want everyone to know no matter how big a mess it is, God can clean it up. Aren't you happy God can clean up? He specializes in cleaning up messes.

Come on, let's all just say thank you, Lord, by clapping our hands. Financial messes, human messes, emotional messes, and here's the thing. Don't get into victimization here.

This mess comes from Judah who made the mess. Tamar made the mess. Jesus wants us to know when you're stewing in your own juice and you've made a mess of things and you've sowed and now you're reaping, in the middle of that mess, if you'll just look to Jesus, he can take you out of that mess, change that mess around, and make it so that in the book of Revelation, Jesus is called the lion of the tribe of Judah.

Man, if Judah was my ancestor, I would forbid anyone to even mention his name, and Jesus is proud to call. Jesus is amazing. Brothers and sisters, I want to be sure before we end here, this is a good story for all of us, to love him more.

Don't you love him more than when I started preaching now? Guilt and shame, gone through Jesus. Human weakness, overwhelmed by his strength if you'll just trust him. Your mess, if you'll just give him your mess.

Now, if you try to fight out of your mess, then you're on your own. He's a gentleman. He doesn't come in and accept where he's invited, but when you invite him in, he changes your mess into a blessing.

Listen, just give your mess to the Lord today. Look, you're in a mess. Judah was in a mess.

Tamar made the mess, and God can take your mess and turn it and make it a blessing, but listen, it only comes through Jesus Christ, a relationship with him. Do not do Catholicism or Protestantism. Don't think that by coming to the Brooklyn Tabernacle, your mess will become a blessing.

You must come to Jesus. You must come to Jesus. And this thought struck me so hard last night.

Let me just add it as a postscript. When the wise men came to Jerusalem and said, where is the one who's born King of the Jews? We saw his star, and we've been following it, and you remember Herod got nervous. What king? I'm the king.

What kind of king you talking about? So he went to the religious leaders, and he said to the religious leaders, yo, where is the Messiah gonna be born? And this hit me. I never saw this before like this. They all went, what? Of course, Bethlehem.

Out of Bethlehem will come a deliverer. Bethlehem will be the place. The religious leaders knew where he would be born, but when he got older and they saw him, they rejected him and said, crucify him.

You can have religion and not Jesus. You can know the Bible and not have Jesus. You can go to church on Sunday, you can watch a webcast and not have a personal relationship with Jesus.

You can argue about scripture and not know Jesus. They knew where he would be born. They knew the promises of the Messiah, but when he stood in front of them and said, come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Get out of here. We don't want you to rule over our lives. We wanna run the show.

So today, just let's give it to Jesus. Nobody can bless us like Jesus. No one can save but Jesus.

Let's close our eyes together. If you'd like me to pray that you will start or renew your relationship with Jesus, not gonna call anyone forward, I don't think, but I would like you to stand so that I could pray for you. If you have never had a relationship with Jesus, I'm not talking about religion now.

I'm not talking about the Brooklyn Tabernacle. I'm not talking about you own a Bible. I'm talking about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

I don't care how long you've gone to church. He's either the center of your life or he's not. He deserves to be center.

He wants to be the center. You will enjoy, you will be blessed when he's the center, and you'll live forever after you die. Or maybe you once had a relationship and now it's gone south, it's gone sideways.

It's not like it was any more intimate and childlike. If you'd like me to pray and just ask Jesus to come and reconnect with you or connect with you, to enter your life, to remove the guilt and the shame, to bring strength where there's been weakness, to take your mess and change it. Just stand where you're sitting.

Just stand right where you're sitting, and I will pray for you. I will pray for you. I promise I'll pray the best prayer I can pray.

Just stand where you are. Yes, I see you. Just keep standing, I see you.

What good is coming to church if it's not hook up with Jesus? What good is knowing the Bible and reading it if you don't have a daily walk with Jesus? The leaders who later, maybe 30 years later, actually plotted his death, they knew where he was to be born. Can you imagine that? You know the Bible, but you don't know Jesus. Those of you that are standing, come quickly to the front.

Come on. Let's pray. Repeat after me, folks in the front.

Repeat after me. Dear God, thank you for the good news that you love me, that Jesus loves me. Forgive me for my sin.

Wash away my guilt. Change my life. Make me that new person that you want me to be.

I receive you today as Lord of my life, Savior of my life. I give you my mess. I give you my life.

I give you my past. I give you my future. I give you today.

Wash me. Cleanse me. Give me the joy of salvation.

I'm gonna trust you now to do what you promised, that if I confess my sin and I call to you, you will come and help me. Thank you, God. In Jesus' name.

And everyone in the church said. Amen. Everybody hug somebody, okay? Come on, stand up and hug somebody.

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