

Welcome to the Garden

Imagine entering heaven for the first time. Brightness penetrates everything, but it doesn't hurt your eyes. The colors around you are hues that you've never seen before. A luminous garden surrounds you with beauty that escapes your ability to describe.

Warmth surrounds you like a gentle hug. Although uncertain of your surroundings, you know you are safe.

Delicious fragrances penetrate your senses, welcoming you to a place that feels like home. These glorious scents waft through the air, enticing you to explore. Excitedly, you move forward, recognizing this temporary visit may hold beautiful surprises ahead.

In the distance, you hear voices speaking in unfamiliar dialects. Compelled by curiosity, you search out the sources of this conversation.

As you round a corner, you see five women sitting on a stone wall. Their comfortable chatter fills the air. As you approach them, they greet you in their original language, and suddenly you understand their words.

One by one, they introduce themselves: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. Slowly, you understand their significance in the greater story God is writing. Although each woman lived in a different time, they share one thing in common: they are ancestors of Jesus.

You will interact with each woman and learn their significance in God's greater story. Tamar, found in Genesis 38, reveals God's redemptive power when rejection plunges her into despair.

Rahab, recorded in the book of Joshua chapter 2, reminds us that God teaches us faithfulness through stories of steadfast love. Others took the time to tell Rahab of God's great power, instilling in her the courage to step out in faith.

Ruth's story, told in the book of Ruth, shows us that all are welcome into the family of God. Her declaration of faith painted a picture of God's saving grace.

In 2 Samuel and 1 Kings, we find Bathsheba, a woman who rose from shame to nobility in the house of David. Finally, we meet Mary, the mother of Jesus; her story is laced throughout the New Testament, declaring that age does not dictate our usefulness to God.

Throughout our reading, we will encounter other influential individuals. Men like neglectful Judah, son of Jacob, and Salmon, the father of Boaz. Naomi, the embittered mother-in-law to Ruth and Ruth's Kinsman Redeemer, Boaz.

We will catch a glimpse of Uriah, the seasoned warrior, and Bathsheba's first husband, as well as the complicated King David. Joining Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan, and her beloved son, King Solomon. Nathan's kindness helped Bathsheba negotiate a difficult political storm with grace.

Mary will be joined by her cousin Elizabeth, who supported Mary at a crucial time in her life. Elizabeth encouraged Mary when others sought to shame her. And through them and with them we see our Lord, Jesus.

Within their accounts, we see God used the willing older generations to support the younger. Those who were supported avoided some of the traumas inflicted on those who traveled life alone. These are the women we will get to know, learn through them, and learn a little more about ourselves.

Let's turn to the book of Matthew and find these women in chapter 1. Why were they there? In a patriarchal society, one where men hold the power, what story did their lives tell that allowed such an honor? In this devotional, we will learn from each remarkable woman included in Jesus' lineage. Each name mentioned teaches us the rich heritage that we share as children of God.

This thirty-day devotional will highlight one woman of Jesus' lineage for six days. You can read at your own pace, one a day, one a week, or multiple in one sitting; it is up to you. You will get to know each woman individually. I hope you will think of these women as friends, as I do. Their compelling stories will enrich our lives and deepen our empathy for those around us. Let's dig in!

Slowly read through the lineage in Matthew 1. What do you notice? Who seems to be missing? Why do you think these women are listed?

Matthew 1:1-16 (NLT)

The Ancestors of Jesus the Messiah

*1 This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham: 2 Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers. 3 Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah (whose mother was **Tamar**). Perez was the father of Hezron. Hezron was the father of Ram. 4 Ram was the father of Amminadab. Amminadab was the father of Nahshon. Nahshon was the father of Salmon. 5 Salmon was the father of Boaz (whose mother was **Rahab**). Boaz was the father of Obed (whose mother was **Ruth**). Obed was the father of Jesse. 6 Jesse was the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon (whose mother was **Bathsheba**, the widow of Uriah). 7 Solomon was the father of Rehoboam. Rehoboam was the father of Abijah. Abijah was the father of Asa. 8 Asa was the father of Jehoshaphat. Jehoshaphat was the father of Jehoram. Jehoram was the father of Uzziah. 9 Uzziah was the father of Jotham. Jotham was the father of Ahaz. Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah. 10 Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh. Manasseh was the father of Amon. Amon was the father of Josiah. 11 Josiah was the father of Jehoiachin[g] and his brothers (born at the time of the exile to Babylon). 12 After the Babylonian exile, Jehoiachin was the father of Shealtiel. Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel. 13 Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud. Abiud was the father of Eliakim. Eliakim was the father of Azor. 14 Azor was the father of Zadok.*

Zadok was the father of Akim. Akim was the father of Eliud. 15 Eliud was the father of Eleazar. Eleazar was the father of Matthan. Matthan was the father of Jacob.

*16 Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of **Mary**. **Mary** gave birth to Jesus, who is called the Messiah (emphasis added)*

1. Of the five women named, which name is new to you?
2. Whose name surprised you?
3. Who do you want to learn the most about?

Day 1 - Victim to Righteous Victor:

Genesis 38:6 (NLT) *In the course of time, Judah arranged for his firstborn son, Er, to marry a young woman named Tamar.*

Tamar's story:

Tamar (Matthew 1:3) lived a complicated story. Why is Tamar and not Sarah, Rebekah, or Leah also in Christ's lineage but not in Matthew? Sarah, described as the mother of the nation Israel, is not mentioned. Beautiful Rebekah, the beloved wife of Isaac, doesn't appear. Mistreated Leah, the mother of Judah, the line of Jesus, is also left out.

Genesis 38 opens with Judah leaving his brothers after selling his brother, Joseph, as a slave. He convinced his siblings not to murder Joseph but sent him to a life of servitude instead. Traveling about eight hours on foot, he married an unnamed Canaanite woman. Fathering three sons, he built a life for his family in Canaan.

Turning to Tamar, you gush, "Oh, what a wonderful privilege to be included in this list! What did you do to earn such a reward?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Tamar begins retelling her life story. A slight breeze moves her hair from her face. Her eyes emit a moment of sadness, but then her lips form a gentle smile.

"Truly, it is a reward that I don't understand. My story begins like many young women of my time."

Marrying Er, son of Judah, brought her hope for a new life. She dreamed of a future filled with children, especially boys! Oh, what joy sons brought to their mothers in the time of Genesis. She believed she would pour into these beautiful youngsters, and they would be her comfort in old age.

"I was raised to be a wife and a mother, but my husband Er and then his brother Onan didn't see it that way," she explained. "They died and left me childless."

Their sin left her alone in a world run by men for men. Sent away in shame, she struggled to find her place. Destined for the lineage of Jesus, Tamar battled difficult circumstances before this honor could occur.

As she tells her story, you realize she did what she thought she had to do. An abandoned woman, in a desperate situation, felt compelled to act.

Shock pours over you as you recognize Tamar's dilemma. There was no career path for her. There was no plan B to fall back on. There was no local church to guide and help her as she got back on her feet. There was no government support to buy her food or nonprofits to take her in. Culturally speaking, her future security rested only in motherhood.

She does not share her faith story with us. Canaanites found in Genesis were polytheistic, but her personal faith at that time remains a mystery. But God had a different plan.

There is no mention of Tamar interacting with any other woman throughout her narrative. Certainly, they were there, but they left no notable significant impact. I wonder how differently her story would be if an older woman had positively interacted with her. We see powerful matriarchs influencing others throughout Scripture, but not here.

Judah, Tamar's future father-in-law, ran to Canaan, possibly escaping the shame of his mistreatment of Joseph. As we learn later in Scripture, Joseph's apparent death weighed heavily on their father Jacob. Maybe that grief was more than Judah could bear.

Leaving his family, Judah did not bring the perseverance found in his mother, Leah. Leah endured a loveless marriage as Jacob was tricked into marrying her. But when Leah became a mother, bearing seven children, she rediscovered her joy. As Leah's last child, Judah means praise.

Genesis 29:35 (NLT) *Once again, Leah became pregnant and gave birth to another son. She named him Judah, for she said, "Now I will praise the Lord!" And then she stopped having children.*

The lessons of joy Leah carried were left behind as Judah traveled to his new home. He robbed Tamar of this joy by ignoring his responsibilities to Tamar. Perhaps if Tamar had known Leah and learned from her, Tamar's life would have missed some of its trauma. But like many of her time, she was ashamed and left to fend for herself.

I find myself rooting for her as her story unfolds. I can't imagine the loneliness she faced in her struggle to save herself from desolation. Oh, the desperation she must have felt!

People will fail us in this life, even those we trust. Throughout Tamar's account, we see the fallibility of man. Recognizing this truth can cause us to lose hope, but thankfully, our hope is not in our circumstances or people. Our God will come through. Our hope is in God.

Thankfully, Tamar's story doesn't end in loss and abandonment. With a sheepish grin, she encourages you to choose a different tactic than the one she used to alleviate her stress. This reminds you of your many options in today's culture. No matter the sins inflicted upon us, we each have the choice to choose Jesus.

Your Story:

If you find familiarity in her story, first, I want you to know I am sorry. Whatever level of trauma you have experienced, may you find victory as Tamar did.

The same God who redeemed Tamar's story is working to redeem yours. Trust Him with that healing. Please don't hesitate to seek counseling if you are dealing with unresolved painful experiences.

Brace yourself as you read about Tamar's tumultuous life in Genesis 38. Do not miss the thread of redemption that weaves throughout Scripture. I hope you find joy in her triumph over her mistreatment. The first woman of Matthew 1 reveals God in a traumatic tale of victimization that ends in a great victory.

Let's pray: Father, thank You for sharing Tamar's story with us. Help us to find the deeper meaning as we work through this chapter of Genesis. We ask You to bring victory where there was victimization, so that You may be glorified and the victims may be redeemed. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Read Genesis 38

1. What are your first thoughts as you digest her story?
2. Where is the hope in her story?
3. What uncertainties are you feeling today? Take a moment to entrust them to God?