

Judah's Sin with Tamar

Genesis 38

Genesis 38:1-11 - *"It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers, and visited a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. ² And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and went in to her. ³ So she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. ⁴ She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. ⁵ And she conceived yet again and bore a son, and called his name Shelah. He was at Chezib when she bore him.*

⁶ Then Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. ⁷ But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD killed him. ⁸ And Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother." ⁹ But Onan knew that the heir would not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in to his brother's wife, that he emitted on the ground, lest he should give an heir to his brother. ¹⁰ And the thing which he did displeased the LORD; therefore He killed him also.

¹¹ Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house till my son Shelah is grown." For he said, "Lest he also die like his brothers." And Tamar went and dwelt in her father's house. ¹² Now in the process of time the daughter of Shua, Judah's wife, died; and Judah was comforted, and went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. ¹³ And it was told Tamar, saying, "Look, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep." ¹⁴ So she took off her widow's garments, covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place which was on the way to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown, and she was not given to him as a wife. ¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, because she had covered her face. ¹⁶ Then he turned to her by the way, and said, "Please let me come in to you"; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law.

So she said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" ¹⁷ And he said, "I will send a young goat from the flock." So she said, "Will you give me a pledge till you send it?"

¹⁸ Then he said, "What pledge shall I give you?" So she said, "Your signet and cord, and your staff that is in your hand." Then he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. ¹⁹ So she arose and went away, and laid aside her veil and put on the garments of her widowhood.

²⁰ And Judah sent the young goat by the hand of his friend the Adullamite, to receive his pledge from the woman's hand, but he did not find her. ²¹ Then he asked the men of that place, saying, "Where is the harlot who was openly by the roadside?" And they said, "There was no harlot in this place." ²² So he returned to Judah and said, "I cannot find her. Also, the men of the place said there was no harlot in this place." ²³ Then Judah said, "Let her take them for herself, lest we be shamed; for I sent this young goat and you have not found her."

²⁴ And it came to pass, about three months after, that Judah was told, saying, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; furthermore she is with child by harlotry." So Judah said, "Bring her out and let her be burned!" ²⁵ When she was brought out, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "By the man to whom these belong, I am with child." And she said, "Please determine whose these are—the signet and cord, and staff." ²⁶ So Judah acknowledged them and said, "She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son." And he never knew her again.

27 Now it came to pass, at the time for giving birth, that behold, twins were in her womb. 28 And so it was, when she was giving birth, that the one put out his hand; and the midwife took a scarlet thread and bound it on his hand, saying, "This one came out first." 29 Then it happened, as he drew back his hand, that his brother came out unexpectedly; and she said, "How did you break through? This breach be upon you!" Therefore his name was called Perez. 30 Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand. And his name was called Zerah."

Background Notes

Genesis 38 is not an easy chapter in the Bible to preach from. However, God included this chapter in His Word for our instruction, so it's important not to skip over it in our "Talks from Genesis." The first part of the chapter revolves around what is known as the "Levirate Law" of marriage. God approved of this law because it was later included in the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 25).

The word "levirate" has nothing to do with Jacob's son Levi. It comes from the Latin word for "brother-in-law." The Levirate Law stated that if a married man died without an heir, his next-in-line eligible brother was to marry the widow and raise up an heir to receive his brother's inheritance and carry on his brother's name.

Judah had three sons. His oldest son, Er, married a woman named Tamar, but the Lord took Er's life because he was "wicked in the sight of the Lord." We don't know his specific sin. The next brother in line was Onan, and he didn't want to "raise up an heir" for his older brother, probably because if no heir was born to his brother, Onan would get his brother's part of the inheritance. So he deliberately "spilled his seed" on the ground so that Tamar would not become pregnant. And the Hebrew makes it clear that this was not a one-time event. God disapproved of this attitude, and He took Onan's life also. And by the way, verse 9 has nothing to do with whether God approves or disapproves of birth control. (That would be **bad** hermeneutics!!)

After Onan's death, Judah told Tamar to wait until Shelah, the third son, was old enough and then he would be married to Tamar. But Judah did not follow through. Because Judah was not faithful to his promise, Tamar decided to take matters into her own hands. Her goal was to rightly preserve the line of Judah, but she went about it the wrong way. Judah's wife had died, and Tamar was able to seduce Judah during sheep-shearing time - a happy time, with a party-like atmosphere. Tamar pretended to be a prostitute, and her father-in-law chose to sin by responding to the lure of a woman he thought was a prostitute.

As a pledge for future payment for her services, Judah gave Tama his signet (or seal), his cord, and also his staff. The seal was probably what is known as a cylinder seal, worn around the neck with the attached cord. A cylinder seal was engraved with the owner's distinctive engraving, just like a signet ring, and when it was rolled over wet clay it was almost as good as a fingerprint. It was used as we would use a legal signature today, and that's why Tamar wanted Judah's distinctive seal as a pledge. Judah's staff would also have identifying markings proving it belonged to Judah. So when Tamar was found to be pregnant, there could be no mistake - Judah was the man who was responsible.

Doctrinal Points

1. The story of Judah and Tamar magnifies the faith of Joseph.

Genesis 38 is like a parenthesis in the story of Joseph. Why did God interrupt the account of faithful Joseph (Genesis 37-50) with the sordid account of Judah's sin in Genesis 38? I'll suggest two reasons, although there may be more.

One reason might be to show why God allowed the people of Israel to go into bondage in Egypt. Judah married a pagan Canaanite. We know from Scripture, and archaeology backs it up, that the Canaanites were very idolatrous and immoral people. If God had not brought Jacob's family (the future nation of Israel) to Egypt, Judah's intermarriage with a pagan woman would have been repeated many times by the descendants of Abraham.

Thus the faith of the fathers would have been contaminated and polluted with the idolatry and the immorality of the Canaanites, and the Jewish people would no longer have been distinctively Jewish. However, in Egypt there was very little intermarriage, because the Egyptians detested the Hebrews (Genesis 43:32 7 46:34). Egypt was actually a shelter from the contamination of the Canaanite idolatry and immorality!

A second reason why Genesis 38 is included in the Joseph account is because the sad story of Judah with Tamar magnifies Joseph's faith and his obedience to God. When compared to the lack of faith and the immoral character of Judah, Joseph's faith and moral character are highlighted and enhanced.

This, by the way, is a structural motif that God used throughout the book of Genesis. Abel's faith is contrasted to the lack of faith of Cain. Abraham's faith is contrasted to the lack of faith of Lot. Jacob's faith is contrasted to the lack of faith of Esau. And here, Joseph's faith and obedience is enhanced by Judah's lack of faith and obedience. The story of Judah with Tamar magnifies the faith of Joseph.

2. The story of Judah and Tamar magnifies the grace of God.

The story of Judah and Tamar is not a pleasant story - broken promises, deception, immorality, and incest. But through the sordid details, we see the grace of God. In fact, the grace of God is magnified in this story, because Jesus Christ the Messiah is a descendant of Perez, one of the twins born to Tamar through this immoral relationship with Judah! In the Matthew 1 genealogy of our Lord Jesus Christ, we find the names of Judah and Tamar. What amazing grace!

Romans 5:20 says, "*Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, **grace abounded much more...***" That truth is certainly illustrated in Genesis 38! Tamar is one of the four women mentioned in the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. All four of these women were most likely Gentiles, and three of the four were certainly not models of moral perfection. But in his wonderful grace, God included them in the genealogy of the Savior!

In spite of the sinful events of Genesis 38, Judah was not removed from the Messianic line. The line of the Messiah did not come through Joseph, as we might expect - it came through Judah and Tamar! This certainly does not condone their wrongdoing and sin, but it clearly demonstrates the amazing grace of God. The story of Judah and Tamar magnifies the grace of God.

Practical Applications

1. Do you keep your promises?

Judah promised Tamar that if she waited, Shelah would become her husband. But Judah didn't keep his promise. Obviously he thought Tamar was a so-called "black widow" or the "kiss of death," since two of his sons had already died while they were married to her. But Judah was wrong about this - and he was wrong not to keep his promise.

Do you keep your promises? What about that promise you made to help someone out with a difficult job, and then you conveniently "forgot" to follow through? What about your promise to be faithful to that special person whom God gave to you in marriage? What about your promise to faithfully give of your time and money to the Lord? Do you keep your promises?

2. Don't be too quick to point the finger at other sinners!

When Judah heard that Tamar was expecting a child, he was angry. *"Bring her out and let her be burned!"* he exclaimed! But he pointed the finger too quickly. It wasn't long before he had to acknowledge that **he** was the bigger sinner.

Don't be too quick to point the finger at other sinners! It's very easy to do. Although we may not be involved in sins like Judah and Tamar, we are **all sinners**.

It is human nature to easily see the sins of others, but be blind to our own sins. That is why the Lord Jesus said, *"And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me remove the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the plank that is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck that is in your brother's eye" (Luke 6:41-42).*

Don't be too quick to point the finger at other sinners!