

Genesis 38: Judah and Tamar

An Outline

- I. Judah marries a Canaanite woman and births three boys from her (38:1-5)
- II. The Crises of Judah's Three Sons (38:6-10)
 - A. Er marries Tamar but is killed by God for his wickedness (38:6-7).
 - B. Onan is killed by God for refusing to bear children for his brother (38:8-10).
 - C. Shelah is withheld by Judah from Tamar (38:11)
- III. Judah's Canaanite wife dies, and he sleeps with his daughter-in-law (Tamar) disguised as a prostitute (38:12-23).
 - A. Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute (38:12-14).
 - B. Judah sleeps with Tamar and gets her pregnant (38:15-18).
 - C. Judah discovers there was no prostitute (38:19-23).
- IV. Tamar is pregnant with twins by Judah (38:24-30).
 - A. Judah decides to stone Tamar for prostitution (38:24).
 - B. Tamar accuses Judah of prostituting her (38:25).
 - C. Judah repents of the evil of not giving his son to her (38:26).
 - D. Tamar gives birth to Perez and Zerah (38:27-30).

Observations

1. **Why is this story of Judah and Tamar placed in the midst of Joseph's story?:** It does seem unusual that right after we learn about Joseph's plight with his brothers and his being sold into slavery, the developing plot is interrupted by a seemingly unrelated story. The plot will continue in ch. 39, but before that, we have a scandalous subplot involving Judah and his daughter-in-law. While no explanations are given in the text, perhaps there is a foreshadowing of things to come. In the near future God would take the people of Israel into Egypt, where they would be free from the immoral and evil influences of the Canaanites. We will discover that because the Egyptians were so prejudiced against the Hebrews, there was no risk of intermarriage and assimilation, such that the people of God did not get absorbed into Egyptian idolatry. The relevance of this is plainly seen in Judah's marriage to a Canaanite woman, contrary to the example and counsel of his fathers, Jacob, Isaac and Abraham. Judah's mistake is immediately evident as God strikes down his first two sons because of their wickedness. Trying to keep his third and only son Shelah from a similar fate, he keeps him from fulfilling his duty in Levirate Marriage to his daughter-in-law Tamar. Tamar poses as a prostitute and becomes pregnant by her father-in-law and births twins. Judah's intermarriage to a Canaanite woman reveals the danger of Israel living among the people of Canaan. The children of Israel would likely have assimilated with the Canaanites in their culture and idolatry before God could fulfill His promise to them to make them His great and holy nation. Thus, His sending them to Egypt was an act of grace. God had already prophesied this to Abraham in Genesis 15:13-14.

Another purpose of Judah's story may be to provide a contrast between Judah's folly and Joseph's wisdom. Judah was unfaithful to God in marrying the Canaanite and then sleeping with a prostitute, but Joseph remained faithful to God in spurning the amorous advances of Potiphar's wife, not wanting to sin against God.

2. **Does Onan negate the use of contraception?** In short, no. Remember, he was told by Judah to fulfill his obligation under the Law of Levirate Marriage, which would be codified by Moses in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. This law required the living brother to bear children for his deceased brother through his brother's living wife, so that the name of the dead brother could be preserved. Onan did not want to honor this law, so every time he slept with his brother's wife, Tamar, he spilled his seed to the ground – a rather crude form of contraception. However, the Lord deemed this wicked. The wickedness was not in the contraception but rather Onan's selfish refusal to honor his brother. The morality of contraception is not addressed directly in Scripture, but right motives, responsibility and selfless love are.

3. **Subtle clues reveal the sinful slide of Judah.** Genesis 38:1 says that Judah "left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah." Judah left the Covenant People of God to live among the Canaanites, a people God deemed wicked and nearly ripe for destruction. Hirah would not be such a godly influence on Judah. He may have been influential in introducing him to Shua's daughter. He may also have introduced him to the shrine prostitutes in the land. He helped Judah pay off one such prostitute, who would turn out to be his own daughter-in-law in disguise. Genesis 38:2 says, "Judah saw there was a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua." Unlike the NIV, which simply suggests that they met, the literal wording is that Judah "saw" the Canaanite woman. It is the same Hebrew word (ra'ah) used of Eve, when she "saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food" (Deuteronomy 3:6), which led her to take and eat it in disobedience to God. It is the word used of Lot, when he "saw" the land of Sodom (Genesis 13:10). And it is the same word used of King David, when he looked over his balcony and "saw Bathsheba bathing" (2 Samuel 11:2). The slide into sin starts with a choice. The choice to leave familiar surroundings for a "more exciting" life. The choice to taste, look or try something when the Spirit says, "No!" As is often the case, it is God who intervenes with grace to make right what we make wrong. God resolved the issue of Judah's Canaanite marriage and his encounter with his prostitute daughter. Out of the wicked and dysfunctional events, Perez was born, through whom would come the likes of Boaz, King David, and ultimately the Messiah.

4. **Judah was not unacquainted with sexual immorality.** The way he smoothly approached, negotiated and fulfilled his dealings with the prostitute suggests that this was not Judah's first encounter with a prostitute. He also applied a double standard, such that while he was ready to burn Tamar for acting the prostitute, he was not willing to face the same punishment for his own actions. What makes things worse is that Judah probably had an ulterior motive for his quick judgment of Tamar. He had the mistaken notion that his sons died on account of her rather than for their own wickedness. He may have thought that if he could be rid of her, he would not be obligated to give his son Shelah to her in marriage in compliance with the Law of Levirate Marriage. Despicable! Remember also, Judah was complicit with his brothers in their desire to murder their brother Joseph. His idea to sell Joseph into slavery did not lessen his guilt but amplified it with the sin of greed. There is very little to commend Judah, even though he was an ancient ancestor of our Lord and Savior. We recognize that God's sovereign grace and providence brought good out of the otherwise wicked and dysfunctional history of the patriarchs. Furthermore, we observe that no one is immune from temptation and sin. As the Scriptures warn, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:12). On the other side of Judah, we find Joseph, who in chapter 39 will spurn the sexual advances of his master's wife, showing that it is *possible* to resist temptation and remain faithful to the LORD.

5. **Why does God punish Er and Onan but not Judah and Tamar?** A very good question. The Bible says that God shows mercy on whom He chooses to show mercy:

It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For Scripture says to

*Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?" But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' " Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use? What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—**prepared (middle voice: they prepared themselves) for destruction?** What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom **he prepared (active voice: God prepared) in advance for glory—** (Romans 9:16-23).*

We cannot speak out of both sides of our mouth, condemning one while justifying the other. Er and Onan and Judah and Tamar were all guilty of sin and worthy of condemnation; however, God chose to show mercy on the latter while He judged the former. There is no evidence that Judah and Tamar humbled themselves or repented of their sins, but God extended His mercy and grace toward them as a sovereign decision. This was the same reason God rejected Pharaoh even before he was born, choosing to harden His heart rather than leading him to repentance. He does the same with respect to Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus. Judas was born for damnation (John 17:12). There was no hope for him. Consequently, it is not accurate to say that everyone has the same opportunity to repent, but we can say that all are born guilty before God. If you were born in Dallas, Texas, you certainly have much more opportunity to hear the Gospel than if you were born in Indonesia or Saudia Arabia. Before the Gospel spread to all the world, there were many nations of people, who lived and died without any hope of salvation. This is tough to swallow if we see our salvation as the central theme of the Bible rather than what truly is the central theme of the Bible, namely, the glory of God. God is glorified both in our salvation as well as in the damnation of the wicked, among whom we all lived at one time. Romans 9 says that while those condemned are self-condemned (i.e. "prepared *themselves*" in the middle voice), those saved have been saved by God (i.e. "he prepared" in the active voice). The expression "in advance" suggests that God *predestined* them for salvation *before the creation of the world* (cf. Ephesians 1:4-5; Romans 9:29-30).

Now, while he did not die like Er and Onan, Judah did not go without God's discipline. It was *his* first two sons who died. He bore the shame of birthing children by his daughter-in-law, who played the prostitute. He along with his brothers would eventually bow before Joseph, whom they had sold into slavery. In time, all of Israel would suffer four hundred years of bondage in Egypt. God's grace doesn't eliminate His holiness. He judges sin. Yet, in spite of the sins of His people, God fulfills all His promises to them.

6. **The Canaanites would be judged by God en masse.** The corruption of Judah through his marriage to a Canaanite woman was an early signpost of the greater judgment to come upon all the Canaanites when their sins would reach full measure (Genesis 15:16), just as the sins of the people of earth reached full measure to usher in the Great Flood. Likewise, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah reached the tipping point, bringing the firey judgment of God.

In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure (Genesis 15:16).

The second generation of the people of Israel coming out of Egypt would be the ones to execute this judgment on Canaan. The Amorites may have represented both the strength and wickedness of the people of Canaan (descended from Ham and Canaan as recorded in Genesis 10:15-16). They were the dominant peoples of Syria and Canaan at the time. The "land of the Amorites" was the Promised Land

that God would give to the people of Israel. Most of them would be destroyed through the conquest of the land by Joshua. The remainder would be enslaved under Solomon (1 Kings 9:20-21). The last mention of the Amorites is Amos 2:10 after which they either died out or were absorbed into the culture of Israel.

7. **Great illustration of bad choices leading to a meaningless and self-destructive life**

The well-known writer, Ernest Hemingway, was raised in a solidly evangelical home in Oak Park, Illinois. His godly grandparents had graduated from Wheaton College. His grandfather, Anson Hemingway, shared a close friendship with the evangelist, D. L. Moody. Ernest's physician father had wanted to be a missionary doctor, but his mother was too much of a city girl, and refused to go. But Ernest was raised in the church where he tithed his allowance, sang in the choir, and read completely through his King James Bible and passed a comprehensive exam on it.

After high school, he moved to Kansas City to become a reporter. He stopped going to church and began drifting from his upbringing. He enlisted in World War I, was wounded, and took to drinking to ease the pain. He once offered his sister a drink. When she refused, "he told her not to be afraid to taste all of what the world has to offer just because Oak Park had labeled it sinful and off-limits." He married a worldly woman and moved to Paris to further his writing career. Totally alienated from his parents, eventually he would go through four wives. He was notorious for his drunkenness. In his late years, "he grew distant from everyone. He would not stand up straight and, he stopped communicating verbally." A friend said that his "every hour was filled with the pain of being truly lost and alone." Hemingway's own description was, "I live in a vacuum that is as lonely as a radio tube when the batteries are dead and there is no current to plug into." Finally, on a sunny Sunday morning in Idaho, at age 61, Ernest Hemingway put a shotgun to his head and pulled the trigger. ("Ernest Hemingway: Tragedy of an Evangelical Family," by Daniel Pawley, *Christianity Today* [11/23/84], pp. 20-27.)

Hemingway's tragic life did not have to go that direction. He made some bad choices: to distance himself from God's people; to marry outside of the faith; to be conformed to this corrupt world. He could have availed himself of God's grace and been conformed to Jesus Christ. His godly children and grandchildren could have followed in his steps. Instead, his beautiful, famous granddaughter took her life in 2012. His descendants are far from the Lord.

Contrasting testimonies by Super Bowl Champion Quarterbacks:

Non-Christian Tom Brady of New England Patriots: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UHSfiKAtPzk>

Christian Nick Foles of Philadelphia Eagles: <https://vimeo.com/233892883>

Discussion Questions

In light of 1 Cor. 15:33, when should we pursue a friendship with an ungodly person and when should we drop it?

How can we live in this evil world and yet avoid being corrupted by it?

If D. L. Moody were to step into our century, at which points would he say the American church has become corrupted?

How can we maintain God's grace without licentiousness and His holiness without legalism?