

eDevotions for Growing Christians

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XXXVII-1 2009/2010

Genesis 38:1-30

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 took his life. 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 took his life 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 dwelt in her father's house. ¹² After a long time Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, died. When Judah had recovered from his grief, he went up to Timnah, to the men who were shearing his sheep, and his friend Hirah the Adullamite went with him. ¹³ When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep," ¹⁴ she took off her widow's clothes, covered herself with a veil to disguise herself, and then sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that, though Shelah had now grown up, she had not been given to him as his wife. ¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. ¹⁶ Not realizing that she was his daughter-in-law, he went over to her by the roadside and said, "Come now, let me sleep with you." And what will you give me to sleep with you?" she asked. ¹⁷ "I'll send you a young goat from my flock," he said. "Will you give me something as a pledge until you send it?" she asked. ¹⁸ He said, "What pledge should I give you?" "Your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand," she answered. So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she became pregnant by him. ¹⁹ After he left, she took off her veil and put on her widow's clothes again. ²⁴ About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant." Judah said, "Bring her out and have her burned to death!" ²⁵ As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. "I am pregnant by the man who owns these," she said. And she added, "See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are." ²⁶ Judah recognized them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." And he did not sleep with her again. ⁷ When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. ²⁹ [and the firstborn] was named Perez.

THE STORY OF JUDAH AND TAMAR

Introduction:

The story of Judah and Tamar is certainly not the most pleasant story in the Bible. In fact, most commentaries on the book of Genesis don't spend much time on this chapter. After all, the story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50), has a lot more preaching material and great spiritual lessons!

Why did the Holy Spirit choose to include the sordid story of Judah's adultery and Tamar's "prostitution" as part of the inspired text? You probably haven't heard too many sermons preached on this chapter, right? Genesis 38 tells us about people who are in the Messianic line. That important lineage is covered in the genealogies of Jesus Christ. But the fact that God included this chapter in His Holy Word means that it contains teaching that God wants us to learn. He included it for our instruction.

Background Notes:

The first part of this chapter revolves around what became known as the "Levirate Law" of marriage. The word "levirate" has nothing to do with Jacob's son Levi. It comes from the Latin word for "brother-in-law." This law stated that if a married man died without an heir, his next-in-line eligible brother was to marry the widow in order to produce an heir who would receive his brother's inheritance and carry on his brother's name. The widow would have the joy of motherhood, and have a child who could care for her in the future. God approved of this practice, because it was later included in the Mosaic Law. (See Deuteronomy 25.)

Judah had three sons. The first son, Er, married a woman named Tamar. The Lord took Er's life because he was "wicked in the Lord's sight." We don't know what Er's sin was, but it must have been very serious. Judah instructed Onan, his second son, to fulfill his duty to his older brother by producing an heir with Tamar. Onan, however, didn't want to raise up an heir for his older brother, probably because if no heir was born to his brother then that part of the inheritance would go to him. So he deliberately "spilled his seed" on the ground so that Tamar would not become pregnant. The Hebrew language used here makes it clear that this was not a one-time event. Well, God disapproved of Onan's attitude, and He took Onan's life also. (Incidentally, verse 9 has nothing to do with God's approval or disapproval of birth control. To use this verse for that purpose 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 with his promise.

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 so the inheritance and blessings of the covenant could continue, but she went about it the wrong way. After Judah's wife died and his period of mourning was ended, Judah went to shear sheep with his friends. Sheep-shearing was a happy time, with a party-like atmosphere, and during this time Tamar was able to seduce Judah by pretending to be a prostitute.

"Religious" or shrine prostitution and fornication were part of the worship of the pagan Canaanite fertility gods, so in that time and culture it was not unusual for a prostitute to sit by the roadside. However, just because this type of sin was culturally acceptable does not mean that Tamar was justified in using this method to attain her goal of having a child. And just because prostitution was culturally acceptable does not mean that Judah was justified in using a prostitute for his lustful desires. Although this passage of Scripture does not appear to condemn Judah or Tamar for their sinful behavior, God certainly does not take sexual sin lightly. Throughout Scripture, God condemns adultery and fornication as serious sins.

Judah promised to send the "prostitute" a young goat as payment for her services, but Tamar insisted that Judah give her his seal and his staff as a pledge that he would fulfill his promise to pay. So Judah gave her his seal (or signet), cord, and staff. The seal was probably what is known as a cylinder seal, which was worn around the neck on a cord in ancient times. This seal was a small stone cylinder that was engraved with the owner's distinctive design, like a signet ring. When it was rolled over wet clay or wax, it was almost as good as a fingerprint as the identifying mark of its owner. Tamar wanted Judah's distinctive seal as proof of his identity. Judah's staff would also have his own identifying markings. So when Tamar was found to be pregnant, there would be no mistake – Judah was the man who was responsible.

Doctrinal / Teaching Points:

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

Genesis 38 is like a parenthesis in the story of Joseph, which begins in Genesis 37 and continues in Genesis 39. Again we might wonder -- why did God interrupt the account of faithful Joseph with the sordid account of Judah's sin? Let us suggest two reasons, although there may be more.

One reason might be to show us why God led the people of Israel down to live in Egypt -- where they would eventually become slaves! Why would God allow His chosen people to end up in bondage in a foreign land?

In Genesis 38:2, we see that 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 and his family down to Egypt, Judah's intermarriage with a pagan woman would have been repeated many times by Abraham's descendants. Thus God's chosen people would no longer have been distinctively Jewish, and the faith of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, would have been contaminated and polluted with the idolatry and the immorality of the Canaanites. The Egyptians detested the Hebrews (Genesis 43:32; Genesis 46:34), so in Egypt there was very little intermarriage. Living in Egypt, the nation of Israel was actually sheltered from contamination by the idolatry and immorality of the Canaanites!

A second reason why Genesis 38 is included in the Joseph story is that the sad story of Judah and Tamar magnifies the faith and the faithfulness of Joseph. Joseph's faith in God and his outstanding moral character are highlighted and enhanced in contrast to the lack of faith and immoral character of Judah.

This, by the way, is a structural motif that is 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 is highlighted and contrasted to the lack of faith of Judah. The story of Judah and 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. It includes broken promises, deception, immorality, and incest -- but through it all 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 genealogy of our Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 1, we

find the names of Judah and Tamar.

Romans 5:20 says, "Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more..." We certainly see that truth 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 -- these women were most likely all Gentiles, and three of the four were certainly not models of perfection! But God, in his wonderful grace, overruled in each of their lives and situations.

In spite of the sinful events of Genesis 38, Judah was not removed as a progenitor of the Messianic line. The line of the Messiah did not come through Joseph, as we might expect -- it came through Judah and Tamar! God did not condone their wrongdoing, but this fact clearly demonstrates His amazing grace.

The wonderful grace of God is seen at work in Judah's life throughout Genesis 37-50. In Genesis 37, Judah was willing to betray his younger brother and sell him into slavery -- but he wasn't willing to kill him. In chapter 38, Judah was willing to confess that he was the primary wrong-doer in his dealings with Tamar. And later, in dealing with Joseph as governor of Egypt, Judah was willing to give up his freedom -- and even his own life! -- for the sake of his brother Benjamin and his father Jacob. The story of Judah and Tamar magnifies the wonderful grace of God.

Practical Applications:

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

When Judah heard that Tamar was expecting a child, he was very 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 accuse other people of wrong-doing! It's very easy to do. Although we may not be involved in sins like those of 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's 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).

Let's be more aware of our own sinfulness and failings, and not be too quick to point the finger at other sinners!

2. Do you keep your promises?

Judah promised Tamar that if she waited,

Shelah would become her husband, but Judah didn't keep his promise. He had his reasons, of course. He thought Tamar was the "kiss of death," since two of his sons had already died while married to her. But Judah was wrong about the reasons for his sons' deaths, and he was wrong not to keep his promise.

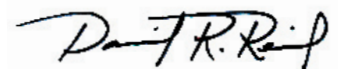
Do you keep your promises? God expects us to honor the promises we make! What about your promises to love, cherish and be faithful to that special person whom God gave to you in marriage? What about your promise to faithfully give of your time and money to the Lord? What about that promise you made to someone who needed your help, and then you conveniently "forgot" to follow through? Do you keep your promises?

3. Fulfill your family obligations!

The responsibility to fulfill family obligations is another application from the story of Judah and Tamar. Onan had a responsibility to raise up a descendant for his brother Er, but for selfish reasons Onan refused to perform his duty. Onan's failure to fulfill his family obligation was serious enough that God disciplined him with death.

Furthermore, Judah had an obligation to marry Shelah, his third son, to Tamar -- in fact, he promised Tamar that she would be married to Shelah as soon as he became an adult. But Judah failed to fulfill his responsibilities as father and father-in-law. This serious failure to meet family obligations led to Tamar wrongly taking matters into her own hands.

From God's perspective, fulfilling our responsibilities to our family members is very important. This truth is taught in both the Old and New Testaments. Our responsibilities within the immediate family are found, for example, in Ephesians 5:22-6:4. 1 Timothy 5:8 gives us a graphic warning about fulfilling our obligations to our families, including extended family members: "if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." As obedient believers, let's fulfill our family responsibilities!



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