

Chapter 38 – Tamar is more righteous than Judah

Introduction:

This chapter deals with the sin and the shame of Judah. This leads me to say that the sons of Jacob were certainly not very much of a comfort to him. It looks as if all the sons were problem children, with the exception of Joseph and Benjamin. And Joseph was no comfort because his father was heartbroken about his disappearance. All of this reveals to us that Jacob spent too much time in Padan-aram accumulating a fortune rather than teaching his children. How different he was from Abraham. You remember that God had said of Abraham: “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him” (Gen_18:19).

Well, Jacob didn't do that. He was so busy down there contending with Uncle Laban that he didn't have much time for his boys. That was tragic, because each one of them seemed to have gotten involved in something that was very sinful.

There is, I believe, a further reason for including this chapter in the Word of God at this juncture. Beginning with the next chapter, we go down to the land of Egypt with Joseph. God is sending Joseph ahead, as he very clearly detected from the fortuitous concurrence of circumstances in his life, to prepare the way for the coming down of the children of Israel into Egypt. It would preserve their lives during the famine in Canaan, but more than that, it would get them out of the land of Canaan from the abominable Canaanites into the seclusion of the land of Goshen in Egypt. Had Jacob and his family continued on in Canaan, they would have dropped down to the level of the Canaanites. The chapter before us reveals the necessity of getting the family of Jacob away from the degrading influence of the Canaanites.

This is the story of Judah, whose line will be the kingly line among the tribes of Israel. - McGee

The sordid story of Judah's sin with Tamar serves to magnify the grace of God when we remember that the Lord Jesus was descended from Judah (Luk_3:33). Tamar is one of five women mentioned in the genealogy in Matthew 1; three of them were guilty of immorality—Tamar, Rahab (v. 5), and Bathsheba (v. 6). The others are Ruth, a Gentile (v. 5) and Mary, a godly virgin (v. 16). – Believers Bible Commentary

Gen 38:1 *It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers, and visited a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah.*

Gen 38:2 *And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and went in to her.*

Gen 38:3 *So she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er.*

He went down to do business with a certain Adullamite, and when he got down there he saw this Canaanite woman, and he had an affair with her. Judah called his name Er—and Judah certainly had *erred*; he had sinned. - McGee

Gen 38:4 *She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan.*

Gen 38:5 *And she conceived yet again and bore a son, and called his name Shelah. He was at Chezib when she bore him.*

Gen 38:6 *Then Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.*

This is the first appearance of Tamar. She gets into the genealogy of Christ this way! Now, look at this family. It is just loaded with sin. - McGee

Gen 38:7 *But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD killed him.*

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Gen 38:8 *And Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother."*

Gen 38:9 *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.*

Gen 38:10 *And the thing which he did displeased the LORD; therefore He killed him also.*

This reminds us of the present hour when there is so much emphasis on sex. – McGee

Notice: The closer you are to Christ the higher the obedience required. This is a principle you will see throughout scripture. Many of us today want a tight relationship with the Lord and He is willing, but we unfortunately are not willing for that level of obedience. How about you?

Gen 38:11 *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.*

Gen 38:12 *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.*

Gen 38:13 *And it was told Tamar, saying, "Look, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep."*

It was the custom of that day that when a man died, his brother was to marry his widow. Onan refused to do it, and he was smitten with death. Now Judah has another son who is growing up, and he tells his daughter-in-law to follow the custom of returning to her father's house until the younger son is ready for marriage.

Apparently this deal that Judah had, which concerned seeing this Adullamite by the name of Hirah, was in connection with sheep. They were raising sheep and must have had a tremendous flock together. Judah goes up there to shear them. In the meantime, Tamar has been waiting all this while at home. She comes to the conclusion that Judah is not going to give Shelah to her as her husband. - McGee

Gen 38:14 *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.*

Gen 38:15 *When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, because she had covered her face.*

Gen 38:16 *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?"*

Shelah was, of course, the third son of Judah. Tamar sees that Judah doesn't intend to give her to him as his wife; so she takes action. She takes off her widow's clothes and sits by the wayside with her face covered as was the custom of harlots. We get a picture of Judah. He had propositioned the Canaanite woman, Shuah's daughter. Now he does the same thing with Tamar. This is a very black picture and an ugly story that we have here. Judah thought she was a harlot. She saw the opportunity of taking advantage of him, and she did it. - McGee

Gen 38:17 *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?"*

Gen 38:18 *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.*

Gen 38:19 *So she arose and went away, and laid aside her veil and put on the garments of her widowhood.*

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When Shelah grew up and Judah still did not arrange his marriage to Tamar, she decided to "hook" Judah by laying a trap. She dressed as a harlot and sat in an open place on the road to Timnah, where Judah was going to join his sheepshearers. Sure enough, he went in and had illicit relations with her, not knowing it was his own daughter-in-law. The agreed fee was a young goat from the flock, but until he could send it to her, the "harlot" demanded Judah's signet, cord, and staff. The cord may have been the string by which the seal-ring was suspended. When Judah tried to deliver the kid and have the pledges returned, he couldn't find the "harlot." - Believers Bible Commentary

Gen 38:20 *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.*

Gen 38:21 *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."*

Gen 38:22 *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."*

Gen 38:23 *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."*

Gen 38:24 *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!"*

Gen 38:25 *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."*

Three months later, Tamar was accused of playing the harlot because she, a widow, was with child. Judah ordered her to be burned. At this point she returned the pledges with the announcement that their owner was the father of her expected child. They furnished positive proof that Judah had had sex with her. Walter C. Wright describes the scene vividly:

The companions of Judah bring him word that his daughter-in-law, Tamar, has played the harlot. His judgment is quick and decisive: let her be burned. There is neither hesitation nor compromise. As he utters this fearful sentence, we cannot detect even a tremor in his voice. The Israelitish society must be preserved from such folly and wickedness. The word goes out; the day is fixed; the preparations go forward; the stake is planted; the pile is arranged; the procession forms; the crowd gathers; the woman walks to her apparent doom. But she bears in her hands the tokens; the pledges are with her; she carries the staff and the ring. And the staff is the staff of Judah, and the ring is his ring! The pledges become the accusation of her judge. What weight will his sentence have now? – Believers Bible Commentary

Application: Do you pass judgement on others while not holding yourself to the same standards?

Notice: Tamar's actions are shocking, but it is clear God judges the heart, and she, unlike Judah, was found righteous in this situation. She makes the list of one of only five women listed in Jesus's genealogy. God works in and through humans for His Will. She may well have heard of the Abrahamic covenant promises and took her responsibility to heart.

Gen 38:26 *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.*

This was repulsive even to Judah, but we can see how he adopted some of the customs of the Canaanites.

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May I pause for a moment to make an application? Remember, all these things are written for our learning. They are examples unto us. Today we hear that if we are going to witness to this generation and if we are going to communicate to them, we've got to get down to their level. I disagree with that. God has never used that method to witness. God has always, under all circumstances, asked His people to live on a high and lofty plane. – McGee

Notice: There is a balance we need to reach people, but not descend to their sin. Paul explains it in:

1 Corinthians 9:21-23 Amplified Bible, Classic Edition

21 To those without (outside) law I became as one without law, not that I am without the law of God and lawless toward Him, but that I am [especially keeping] within and committed to the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law.

22 To the weak (wanting in discernment) I have become weak (wanting in discernment) that I might win the weak and overscrupulous. I have [in short] become all things to all men, that I might by all means (at all costs and in any and every way) save some [by winning them to faith in Jesus Christ].

23 And I do this for the sake of the good news (the Gospel), in order that I may become a participator in it and share in its [blessings along with you].

Gen 38:27 Now it came to pass, at the time for giving birth, that behold, twins were in her womb.

Gen 38:28 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."

Gen 38:29 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.

Gen 38:30 Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand. And his name was called Zerah.

When Tamar was giving birth and a baby's hand emerged, the midwife tied a scarlet thread on it, thinking that it would be born first. But the hand withdrew and another baby was the first to come forth. She named the firstborn Perez (breakthrough) and the other Zerah. Both twins are mentioned in Mat_1:3, though the Messianic line goes through Perez. Zerah was an ancestor of Achan (Jos_7:1). "It is simply astonishing" comments Griffith Thomas, "that God could take up the threads of this very tangled skein, and weave them into His own pattern."

Judah's marriage to the Canaanite woman (v. 2) was a first step in the intermingling of God's people with a race that was proverbial for its gross immorality. Israel would become contaminated by the unspeakable enormities of lewd nature worship. God is a God of separation; when we fraternize with the world, we pay an awful price. – Believers Bible Commentary