

Genesis 38:1-30**Introduction: The Consequences of Judah's Choices**

The passage begins, *It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hiram. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her* (Genesis 38:1-2). That *Judah went down from his brothers* recalls the previous chapter where Judah had recommended to his brothers that they sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites (Genesis 37:26-27), which they did for twenty shekels of silver. Judah and his brothers dipped Joseph's multi-colored coat in the blood of a goat and took it to their father, Jacob, allowing him to believe a fierce animal had taken Joseph's life. Joseph was sold by the Midianites to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. While Joseph was going down to Egypt, Judah was going down to Adullam in search of a wife, leaving behind his brothers and his grieving father.

Recall that Abraham had compelled his servant to swear an oath that he would not take a wife for Isaac *from the daughters of the Canaanites* (Genesis 24:3). Remember that Rebekah loathed the Hittite women and could not imagine her son, Jacob marrying one of them (Genesis 27:46) and how Isaac prohibited Jacob from taking *a wife from the Canaanite women* (Genesis 28:1). There was a clear expectation among the patriarchs that Abraham's descendants should not marry foreign women despite the fact that they lived in a foreign land, but should take wives from among their own people. The issue here, of course, was not interracial marriage, but interfaith marriage. The Canaanites were pagan. They worshiped Baal and Asherah, false gods. Intermarrying with them posed a threat to the worship of the one true God. Judah ignored that threat and the wisdom of his ancestors by marrying the daughter of Shua the Canaanite. Judah and the Canaanite woman have three sons together: Er, Onan, and Shelah (Genesis 38:3-5).

Genesis 38:6-7 records, *And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death.* We will return to a consideration of Tamar's situation, but for the moment I want us to focus on how Moses, the author, describes the firstborn of Judah and the Canaanite woman: *Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord.* Don't miss this. The Scripture is clear. It's not just that Er did evil; he was evil. The firstborn son of Judah is an evil person in God's sight, so evil that *the Lord put him to death.* Certainly Er must have made his own wicked decisions in life, but if the text shines any light on the origins of his spiritual condition, it is his father, Judah, who is illuminated. Judah was in on the discussion of putting his brother, Joseph, to death. Judah's only reservation in putting Joseph to death was the fact that he would not profit from Joseph's death, so he convinced his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery. Judah participated in the lie about his brother's fate to their father and needlessly drove his father to despair. Then he turned his back on his family's way of life and on the purity of worshiping YHWH by marrying an idolater. Surely it's not a stretch to say that the wickedness of Er is sourced in the wickedness of Judah. Judah's sinfulness is sown in and reaped by his sons in great measure. The instability that comes to Judah's lineage is owed to his own rebellion against the Lord and his ways.

Layers of Loss: The Affliction of Tamar

We are reminded of the ordinary nature of arranged marriage by the nonchalant nature of the description in Genesis 38:6, *And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn and her name was Tamar.* Her name means *palm tree* and his name means *awake* or *watcher*. Er was awake to the evil in his family's life and he opened himself to its full development in him. Tamar is often considered to be a Canaanite because she was not called an Israelite, but there is no textual basis for a decision either way; it would be just as legitimate to argue she was an Israelite given that Judah's wife was specifically labeled a Canaanite and Tamar was not. If this story is considered at all, Tamar usually comes out as the wicked party in the story, the only consideration being that of her disguise of herself as a prostitute and her deception of her father-in-law in order to conceive a child. Such an interpretation completely avoids Judah's declaration in Genesis 38:26, *She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.* The entirety of the story down to its graphic details must be considered in order to arrive at a right interpretation of this passage, beginning with shining light on the affliction of Tamar.

Tamar was afflicted by grief. Genesis 38:7 says, *But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death.* Tamar had been given into an arranged marriage. Her father-in-law, Judah, had worked out the details with her own father. She had no say in the matter. That was the nature of marriage in that time and place. The

woman depended on a man—either her father or her husband—for protection and provision. Er was going to be her protector and provider. Only he wasn't. Tamar married into a band of men who did not take seriously their relationship to the LORD and lived without regard for the wellbeing of those around the. Certainly Er was such a man. While we do not know what the nature of his sin was, that Er should have been so wicked in the sight of the LORD that the LORD put him to death demonstrates the depth of his depravity. The LORD is slow to anger, merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. He is long-suffering in his patience toward his people. So the fact that Er's immoral living was so great that it extended further than the patience of God speaks to how wicked he must have been. So take that - Tamar has lost her personal choice to make a way for herself, she has been given as a wife to a man who is abundant in his wickedness, and then she is forced to face his death, a death that comes directly from the hand of God. Can we think for a moment about the emotional rollercoaster Tamar was on? Even if there was no real love lost, in her day her ability to survive was tied to her marital status. Even if he was a scumbag, Er provided some sort of life for Tamar and now that was gone.

She was afflicted by sexual abuse. Consider Genesis 38:8-10, *Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also.* Though no clear command is found until Deuteronomy 25:5-10 concerning a Levirate marriage, Judah's response to the loss of Er indicates it was the custom in cases where a man died without children for his brother to rise up and take the man's widow as his own in order to sire children to preserve his brother's name. The term **levirate** comes from the Latin word *levir* meaning *husband's brother*. However, Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. The child would not preserve his name, but his brother's. The child would not be responsible ultimately to care for him, but for his mother. There might even have been issues of property transfer tied up in this, as there were in the book of Ruth with the nearest kinsman who would not redeem her. Rather than tell his father that he would not honor the custom, Onan went into to Tamar time and again (that's the sense of the language here—it wasn't once, but repeated) and engaged her in a sexual relationship, each time ending the relationship in a way that there was no possibility of Tamar conceiving a child. Tamar's dignity was tied to her ability to bring forth children. Instead of honoring her dignity and giving her the chance to conceive, Onan intentionally, willfully, and repeatedly abused Tamar. Let us make no mistake. Onan's sin was not that the spilling of his seed, but the willful, ongoing sexual abuse of Tamar. To deal with the offender and demonstrate his overwhelming intolerance for sexual sin, God brought an end to Onan's life.

She was afflicted by abandonment. Think about what happens next: *Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up"—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father's house* (Genesis 38:11). Having lost her choice, her husband, and her dignity, Tamar then lost her hope. Rather than carry the custom forward, compelling his third son, Shelah to go into Tamar, he compelled Tamar to remain a widow in her father's house for a time under the pretense of Shelah being too young. However, the writer makes clear that Judah had no intention of seeing Shelah and Tamar joined for he feared she was the reason his first two sons had died. As time went on, Tamar lost hope of being joined to Shelah and bearing a child by him. She had been abandoned to her father's house without any hope of longterm protection or provision.

The Me Too Movement: Shame and Salvation in the House of Judah

Tamar endured a wicked husband then lost him before he gave her children. She was subjected to sexual abuse (marital rape), her husband repeatedly using her sexually but ensuring she would have no children before finally being put to death by the Lord like his older brother. As if this wasn't enough, Tamar was lied to by her father-in-law, told she would be given in marriage to his youngest son when he grew up, when in reality he was abandoning her to the life of a widow no one would want, effectively ensuring she was without longterm protection or provision.

All of that is in the background of what happens next. Moses writes in Genesis 38:12-19, *In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is*

on the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" He answered, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." And she said, "If you give me a pledge, until you send it—" He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him. Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

The writer explains that after the death and customary mourning of Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, Judah made his way to Timnah to the sheep shearers. Ligon Duncan writes, *in that culture, that was the spiritual Mardi Gras of the day. You remember these are Canaanites, and Canaanites follow a fertility cult. They have temple prostitutes. The temple prostitute is mentioned here twice. They thought that Tamar was the temple prostitute in the area. In those days, as part of invoking the gods to cause your flocks to be fruitful and your lands to be fruitful, people engaged in ritual fornication with temple prostitutes* (Duncan, "The Shame of Judah," March 19, 2000).

Tamar had finally seen through Judah's scheme and knew that he had no intention of allowing this cursed woman to marry his only son. When she was told that he was going up to Timnah, she disguised herself with a veil and waited along the path for him in an effort to seduce him. The writer is clear that the reason Tamar goes to such incredible lengths is because she knows Judah has no intention of allowing her to join Shelah - he is grown and yet they have not been allowed to wed. Therefore, in her effort to raise up a child for her late Er, in an effort to find protection and provision which this family owes her, she does the only thing she can - she seduces her father-in-law.

Having seduced Judah, Tamar demanded a price for the encounter, a price that would later prove his guilt and save her life, namely his signet, his cord, and a staff until the time that he should send her a young goat from the flock. After their encounter, Tamar returned to her widowhood, while Judah's friend the Adullamite was unable to find her in order to make the exchange and give her the goat.

Genesis 38:24-26, *About three months later Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant." And she said, "Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." Then Judah identified them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not know her again.*

Three months later, Judah was told that of Tamar's pregnancy and his immediate response was that she was an adulteress and should be burned. However, as she was being taken to be executed, she sent word to him that she was pregnant by the owner of the signet, the cord, and the staff. Only then, in the near loss of her life, was Tamar somewhat vindicated as her father-in-law declared her to be more righteous than himself.

What do we learn from this story?

1. **Our sins don't just affect us.** The actions of Judah's sons are not surprising. They grew up in the home of a slaver, a liar, an adulterer, and a pagan. Judah lays a faulty foundation for his sons and they build rebellious lives upon it.
2. **Sexual abuse is not overlooked by God and must not be overlooked by God's people.** Onan abused Tamar. Every other interpretation of this passage fails to acknowledge all of the pieces of Genesis 38:8-10. Onan wanted the bulk of Judah's estate for himself. Rather than being honest with his father about that, he took Tamar as a wife, using her for his own sexual gratification but preventing her from conceiving children. He didn't do it once, he did it repeatedly. That's sexual abuse. It's marital rape. And God saw it as a sin so grievous that he put him to death. Surely if God was unwilling to overlook the sin sexual abuse, God's people must be equally unwilling to overlook it.
3. **We must own our sins without condemning others.** Judah, when he was found out, managed to accept personal responsibility for his actions and to convey a measure of honor to Tamar. Rather than being the harlot he'd thought she was, he says she was more righteous than himself; the text can actually be translated *she is righteous (innocent) and I am not*. Judah's example reminds us that we answer for our own sins before the Lord, not for others.