



THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF LOYAL LOVE

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

Catalog No. 1434

Genesis 38:1-30

34th Message

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October 27th, 2002

Last Sunday, I met a delightful woman who is new to our body here at PBCC. She told me the story of a conversation she had with a pastor at an East Coast church where she attended. She asked him why he didn't preach more from Genesis and the Old Testament. He replied that these stories are too old and no longer are relevant to our lives. She replied that she thought they were very relevant. The pastor said, "I have a seminary degree. Do you have a seminary degree?" Well, I haven't been to seminary, and I don't know any better, so we're going to study Genesis 38 today.

Following the intensity of chapter 37, and the narrator's final words about the selling of Joseph to the house of Pharaoh's officer, we would expect a scene shift to Egypt. But, out of profound family conflict, and the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers, the spotlight instead shifts to Judah, the very one who proposed Joseph's sale. This is the record of the generations, or sons, of Jacob, not just the story of Joseph.

Reuben, Jacob's oldest, attempted to take leadership with his brothers, and in fact saved Joseph's life. But he failed in his mission to restore Joseph to his father, and into the leadership void stepped Judah. After Judah led the plan to sell Joseph, the brothers then deceived Jacob into thinking that wild animals had killed Joseph. When we left the story, Jacob was mired in inconsolable grief.

Are these stories relevant? Do they have a word for us today? Does God still speak through these ancient stories of his people, called out to be a new nation that he would use to change the world? Chapter 38 is a carefully crafted story. Certain elements here are repeated in reverse parallel fashion, a structure that heightens tension, draw us into the story, and helps us to understand.

I. Judah Goes Down to Canaan (38:1-11)

A Judah parts from family—three sons born (38:1-5)

And it came about at that time, that Judah departed (went down) from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her and went in to her. So she conceived and bore a son and he named him Er. Then she conceived again and bore a son and named him Onan. She bore still another son and named him Shelah; and it was at Chezib that she bore him. (Gen 38:1-5, NASB)

Immediately, the text gives several indicators that, as we suspected from chapter 37, all is not well with Judah. This son of Jacob, fourth in the birth order, has left the family altogether and literally "gone down" to Adullam, right in the middle of Canaanite territory. Judah has not only descended from the heights of Hebron to the Canaanite plains below, but also seems to be in a spiritual descent. Judah has now exchanged his brothers in the family of promise for a pagan best friend.

Next we note in short order that he sees a Canaanite woman, takes her and has intercourse with her. This is a swift and one-dimensional description, intensified by the fact that we

are not even given her name, nor actually told that she becomes his wife, although that is the implication of the word translated as "take." Judah is forsaking the covenant family, denying who he really is, and freely adopting the Canaanite culture. With this woman, whom he apparently hardly bothered to court, Judah has three sons, the last one born at a place called Chezib, in what later became known as the plain of Judah. Chezib comes from a word meaning lie or deception. Indeed Judah is walking away from God and embracing a life of lies.

B Family line in peril—two sons killed / Tamar put aside (38:6-11)

Now Judah took a wife for Er his first-born, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's first-born, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life. Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother. But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He took his life also. Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up"; for he thought, "I am afraid that he too may die like his brothers." So Tamar went and lived in her father's house. (38:6-11)

Judah's oldest son has grown old enough now to be married, so he takes a wife for Er. Notice that, unlike Judah's taken one, Er's betrothed is given the title of wife, and more importantly, we are told her name, Tamar. Immediately we sense that her role will be more significant in this story. Next we learn that her husband Er is evil, and the Lord takes his life. We are not told why, but God obviously deems him unfit to carry on the line of Judah. His name Er just happens to be the inverse of *ra*, the Hebrew word for evil.

As the action intensifies, the narrator zooms in and we get direct dialog and inner thoughts. Judah instructs his second son Onan to take Tamar into his household as a wife and father children in the name of his brother. He was calling upon Onan to fulfill the duty referred to as *yibum*. This was part of conventional morality of the day, prescribed by God in Levirate law. The brother of the deceased was to play the role of kinsman redeemer. He would take the childless widow into his home as his wife and raise up children in the name of his brother. As Alter says, "The dead brother would be provided a kind of biological continuity, and the widow would be able to produce progeny, which was a woman's chief avenue of fulfillment in this culture."¹ Onan, however, violates his responsibility by repeatedly spilling his seed when having intercourse with Tamar. He is willing to take the pleasure but not the responsibility.

Unfortunately for Onan, in addition to violating legal and ethical obligation, he was in opposition to promises to the patriarchs and a divine agenda. God indeed was not pleased.

Verse 10 records the end of the brief albeit interesting story of Onan.

Understandably, Judah is a little shaken. He sends Tamar back to her father's household with a hollow promise that when his third son comes of age, he will be given to her as her husband. The narrator makes us privy to his thoughts: he superstitiously fears that Tamar is just bad luck. Unfortunately, Judah, like his father, is detached and distant. He has no insight, no clue as to the evil of his sons. With his dignity, status and wealth, Judah is expected to care for this defenseless widow. Instead, he shifts her problems back to her father, and in the process deals a devastating blow and social disgrace to this young woman. She is instructed to live as a widow, and in fact does so, and wait for a promise Judah does not intend to keep.

Here ends the first major segment of this narrative. The scene is set, tension is high: two dead sons, and a third who is not yet old enough to marry, a father-in-law making promises he does not intend to keep, and a disgraced and defenseless widow.

II. Tamar Deceives Judah (38:12-30)

C Loss of a wife, celebration after mourning (38:12)

Now after a considerable time Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died; and when the time of mourning was ended, Judah went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. (38:12)

Much time has passed, so much in fact that it is time for Judah to deliver on his promise. Instead we learn that his wife has died, and when the prescribed amount of time passes for his mourning, he goes on a road trip with his friend Hirah. The keynote here is where these two men are headed: to the sheepshearers. Sheep shearing is a time of great festivity. The food is plentiful, the drink flows, and the celebration is hearty. The problem is, Judah should be throwing a wedding feast, not attending the sheep shearing feast.

But Tamar is not silent, nor is she passive:

D Tamar informed, initiates deception (38:13-14)

And it was told to Tamar, "Behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep." So she removed her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in the gateway of Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah had grown up, and she had not been given to him as a wife. (38:13-14)

We don't know how Tamar is told about Judah or by whom, but it has become obvious to her that he has no intention of fulfilling his promise and is headed off to Timnah. She removes her widow's garments, and it becomes clear that she is the only one who is grieving. She is the only one who has shown integrity and remained faithful to what is right and true. Tamar substitutes her widow's garments with a veil and wrap and hurries on ahead to station herself at the gateway of Enaim, which means "Two Springs." It is only when Judah passes by and sees her that we learn of her plan:

E Judah's sexual appetite aroused (38:15-16)

When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, for she had covered her face. So he turned aside to her by the road, and said, "Here now, let me come in to you"; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" (38:15-16)

Now we understand what Tamar is up to. Having no legal recourse to bring about Judah's fulfillment of his promise, she determines to enter his world and risk her reputation and future by playing the role of a harlot in order to cause him to fulfill his responsibility.

This is a very difficult passage. While we can rightly question Tamar's manipulation and methods, her commitment to Judah's family is strong. Her desire to raise up children is resolute and legitimate, and her case against Judah is just. The narrator is content to allow us to live with this tension, neither lauding nor condemning Tamar for her actions.

Judah falls for the ruse. He turns aside and propositions Tamar. The narrator is careful to make sure we understand that Judah did not know her identity. He is about to do what he should be sending his son to do. Tamar responds by asking Judah, "What will you give me?" She lets Judah begin the negotiation. He responds in what is the central dialog of the story:

X Central dialog—wages and pledge (38:17-18)

He said, therefore, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." She said, moreover, "Will you give a pledge until you send it?" He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" And she said, "Your seal 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. (38:17-18)

So Judah responds, "a kid from the flock." As he falls for Tamar's deception, note the two main props: once again, garments and a goat. Yet again, the deceiver becomes the deceived.

Tamar knows that Judah cannot be trusted, and she recognizes that she has the upper hand in this negotiation. She knows she can extract a significant pledge, as Judah is under the influence of his passions, not reason. So she asks for a highly substantial pledge, Judah's seal, cord and staff. In today's world, this would be like a man giving his driver's license, credit card and social security number. Just as Judah walked away from his family, his heritage and his promises, he is willing to give away the symbols of his identity for a few moments of passion. Like Esau selling his birthright for stew, Judah sells his for sex.

At this center-point of the story we get to the core issues and the tension at hand. God's chosen man has chosen to walk away, forsaking his calling and identity in exchange for feeding his passions. In contrast, we see a pagan woman, outside of God's chosen family, who understands at a base level what is right and is willing to hold fast to that. While her methods are questionable, she is the only one in the narrative who demonstrates faithfulness. What is God up to here? How will he redeem this situation? What's to come of this one of the family of Jacob who betrayed his brother into slavery? Most important, will there be offspring? Will the family continue?

Before we move on, we must note that, almost matter-of-factly, the narrator indicates that indeed, Tamar conceives as a result of this liaison.

D' Tamar completes the deception (38:19)

Then she arose and departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow's garments. (38:19)

In rapid-fire succession, the narrator relates Tamar's actions. Mission accomplished, she arose, departed, and removed. Tamar has not forsaken her identity. The question is: what will she do with Judah's items of identity? What will be-

come of this woman in mourning who is now pregnant with his child?

C' Judah loses prostitute and pledges (38:20-23)

When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adulamite, to receive the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. He asked the men of her place, saying, "Where is the temple prostitute who was by the road at Enaim?" But they said, "There has been no temple prostitute here." So he returned to Judah, and said, "I did not find her; and furthermore, the men of the place said, "There has been no temple prostitute here." Then Judah said, "Let her keep them, otherwise we will become a laughingstock. After all, I sent this young goat, but you did not find her." (38:20-23)

First we note that Judah sends his friend Hirah to take care of the unseemly business of paying off the harlot. We also see his motivation: not to fulfill his obligations, but to retrieve his identity "papers." Not finding her, Hirah asks around. But the men reply, "no prostitute here!" Hirah returns to Judah, and rather than put out an all-points-bulletin on this woman, Judah decides to keep it quiet and lie low. He is willing to allow her to keep his identity items in exchange for his not becoming a laughingstock in his community. He is resigned to simply letting it be, having no idea of what is about to happen to him next.

B' Family line saved—Judah exposed, Tamar restored (38:24-26)

Now it was about three months later that Judah was informed, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot, and behold, she is also with child by harlotry." Then Judah said, "Bring her out and let her be burned!" It was while she was being brought out that she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "I am with child by the man to whom these things belong." And she said, "Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?" And Judah recognized them, and said, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not have relations with her again. (38:24-26)

The narrator jumps forward three months, about the time when a pregnant woman would start to show. Judah, informed of Tamar's condition, with no reflection and no sense of his own sin, pronounces the death sentence. His speed at pronouncing judgement is breathtaking, with a severity reserved for only the most atrocious of crimes. It appears that Judah has retained legal jurisdiction over Tamar in spite of the fact that he has not fulfilled his promise to her. He leaps at the opportunity to rid himself of this bothersome woman.

But Tamar holds the trump card. As she is being brought out, she reveals her possession of Judah's identity items, saying, "please examine and see." She utters the same words spoken to Jacob when Joseph's bloodied coat was taken to him. Tamar confronts Judah with undeniable evidence, in the same fashion as Judah and his brothers confronted their father with their deceit.

What follows is a significant moment in the life of Judah, for it marks an important turning point. Judah of course immediately recognizes his possessions and is humbled by the implications. "She is more righteous than I," he responds, or as Bruce Waltke translates the line, "She is righteous, not I."² Confronted with his failure and deception, Judah owns up to the fact that he is wrong. The term he uses, *tsadaq* in the Hebrew, translated righteous, is typically a legal term. But Judah does not stop there. He goes on to confess his sin, admitting

his wrong in not giving his son Shelah to Tamar. While this certainly does not mark a complete turning, it nevertheless proves to be a critical moment of transformation in Judah's life, as we will see in the coming weeks.

So God uses a young Canaanite woman with a burning desire to have children within Judah's family, to confront Judah with his unrighteousness and begin a transformation that would change him into a man suitable to carry on God's chosen seed.

This act of the drama ends with the birth of not one, but two boys to Tamar:

A' Judah's line lives—two sons born (38:27-30)

It came about at the time she was giving birth, that behold, there were twins in her womb. Moreover, it took place while she was giving birth, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, "This one came out first." But it came about as he drew back his hand, that behold, his brother came out. Then she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" So he was named Perez. Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah. (38:27-30)

Tamar is blessed with two sons. In the midst of giving birth we are reminded of God's sovereign hand working behind the scenes to orchestrate life according to his plans. One of the boys extends a hand and, to identify it as the firstborn, the midwife ties a red thread around his wrist. Where have we seen red before? Isaac's firstborn, Esau, he of the red hair and red stew. But it is the other boy who actually comes out first, causing the midwife to exclaim, "What a breach!" or "What a breakthrough!" It is the second son who breaks through to preeminence. Where have we seen this before? Jacob, Judah's father.

I am convinced that the motifs of twins, red, and the second son rising to preeminence, are reminders, to Judah and to us, that God is firmly in control of time and events. He is carrying out his plans, in his timing, in his ways. These twins are symbolic of God's remarkable and generous blessing. The details surrounding them a clear indicator of his hand at work. God's fingerprints are all over this story.

III. The Transforming Power of Loyal Love

A story like this, with characters like these, raises many difficulties. Judah, one of the sons of promise, one of the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel, God's chosen man to carry on the seed of promise, is a downright troublesome character! As Waltke says, he is a slave trader who has turned his back on God's visions. He is callous toward his father and the covenant family. He forsakes his family and enters into intimate relationships with the Canaanites. He fails as a father. He sees no connection between the sins of his sons and their deaths, but instead superstitiously blames Tamar. He shows little grief over the deaths of his sons and wife. He is a profane fornicator who is quick to condemn a defenseless widow for the same crime.³

As for Tamar, she looks like a heroine by comparison for her faithfulness to Judah's family and her tenacious desire to hold fast to the promises she has been given. But we have to question her scheme to manipulate the situation, her taking on the role of a prostitute, though not actually becoming one, and the incestual nature of her liaison with Judah—although some would say that was a logical extension of her legal right failing the provision of a son to marry. Israelite tradition holds her as a heroine. In fact, Matthew gives her a place of

honor in the genealogy of the Messiah, alongside Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, three others outside of the family of promise, grafted in by God's gracious hand. In the end, however, we have to be content with the tension we find in the character of Tamar, for the narrator remains neutral, communicating her role, but not commenting on her motivation or character.

So who emerges as the real hero in this story? Certainly not Judah. And Tamar is flawed, at best. I would offer then that the real hero is none other than the Lord himself, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The God who would not be deterred by the failings and unfaithfulness of his chosen man. The God who would not disqualify a young woman due to her manipulations and schemes, but instead covered both with grace, mercy and loyal love. The Lord God was and is so committed to his plan of salvation for mankind that he was not going to allow the human failings of these characters to deter him.

So what do we take away from this story? What difference does this make in our lives today? I would offer the following:

1. Coming face to face with our sin is redemptive, not vindictive

I am persuaded that this act in the story of Jacob's sons reminds us that our sin will always come full circle, and with it we will come "face to face." We fight exposure of our sin. Like Judah, we fear becoming a laughingstock, we fear the shame of exposure. But God is not a vindictive God. He does not bring us face to face with our sin for his perverse pleasure. He brings us face to face to humble us and to redeem us.

In the courtyard of the High Priest, Peter, like Judah, turns away from his Lord, vehemently denying him three times. Peter then has a face to face moment. As the cock crows, he is confronted with his sin. Profoundly humbled, he leaves and, according to Luke, he "wept bitterly." But his devastation is not the end, not the defining moment; it is but the beginning of transformation. By bringing him face to face with his sin, Jesus does a great redemptive work in Peter, preparing him for ministry in which thousands would come to Christ through one sermon. I can't help but think of that poignant but tender moment when Jesus probes Peter's heart: "Do you love me?" he asks three times, redeeming Peter's three denials and commissioning him to tend the sheep, God's people.

Will we come face to face with our sin? Will we allow God to humble and transform us? Or will we run and hide from God's redemptive love?

2. God will accomplish his will in spite of us, not because of us

I want to dispel the notion that somehow, some way, we can manipulate God's will, that we can scheme God into action, that we can somehow become good enough for God to accept and use. God will accomplish his will in spite of us,

not because of us. God's plans are God's plans and he will accomplish them. The amazing thing is that he desires to take us along, to draw us in to his working out of redemption in people's lives. That is why Jesus gives us the great commission to make disciples of all the world—not because he needs us, but because he wants us!

So do you know what that means?

3. God's perfect plan uses imperfect people

Satan likes nothing more than to make us feel disqualified to be a part of God's work. I take great encouragement from this and other texts in God's word. If he can turn an arrogant, brash youngster like Joseph and a deceptive old schemer like Judah into critical pillars of his salvation plan, then he surely can use me too! We all want to be useful; we all want our lives to be meaningful in the end. Observe how Jesus initiates and loves and ultimately redeems the lowly Samaritan woman by Jacob's well. In the eyes of the world she was absolutely nothing. Her life was a mess of brokenness, divorce and sexual immorality. But she was so important in her Heavenly Father's eyes that he sent his son for a divine appointment to love her with a real and endless love, a love that lifted her head and redeemed her, and then revolutionized her entire city!

The Son of God and our Heavenly Father have always been in the business of redemption and transformation. While we need to press on through the Joseph story to understand how it all turns out, the narrator never lets us forget that God is all about redemption. God's sovereign, redemptive hand is everywhere. Satan hammers us with the lie that we are disqualified. In God's eyes, there is no such thing. That's why he sent Jesus Christ to live and breathe and die and come back to life. The cross and the empty tomb are constant reminders that we are never disqualified, just as Joseph, Judah, and Tamar were never disqualified, just as the Samaritan woman and Peter were never disqualified. Through Jesus Christ we are eminently qualified to be called sons and daughters of the living God and set about to do his purpose. He takes the good, the bad and the scandalous and transforms it all for his eternal purposes.

That's the power of God's loyal love: the power to save, the power to transform, the power to give us a hope and a future.

God has a divine appointment with you. Will you be there?

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1. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 218.
2. Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 513.
3. Waltke, *Genesis*, 508.