

**The Joseph Story:  
Leaving God and Forsaking Family  
Genesis 38:1-30**

*Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness,  
but instead expose them...  
when anything is exposed by the light,  
it becomes visible.  
(Eph 5:11, 13 ESV)*

What happens when a prominent leader in the community forsakes his faith and abandons his family for wealth and pleasure? It happens so often these days, it is easy to become callous, until it happens to you and your world is turned upside down. What do you do if you are the victim and isolated, cut off with no support? Who will rescue the family and have the courage to confront the abuse? In the aftermath, who will be honest to tell the truth—the whole truth?

Most of us grew up with a glamorized view of our national and spiritual heritage and become surprised, if not shocked, when we discover the injustices and atrocities that occurred and went unchallenged. The Scriptures, on the other hand, hold nothing back in exposing the depravity of the forefathers of our faith.

**Abraham** lies to Pharaoh and throws his wife under the bus to save his own skin.

**Isaac** uses his manly son as a tool to feed his sensual appetites for “game” and, like Esau, throws his birthright away for a single meal.

**Jacob** shows no compunction lying to his father in God’s name as he manipulates his grip on the sacred blessing.

The purpose of the exposure is not to promote a self-righteous, condemning spirit, but rather to humble us by giving us a sobering look at the deceptive power of sin and how, if not checked, escalates from one generation to the next (Exod 20:6). This is God’s righteous tool to bring us to repentance.

Given the history, it shouldn’t surprise us that **Judah** makes his appearance on the stage as a slave trader, who sells his brother for a price and is callous and unmoved by his father’s inconsolable grief. Our text this week traces his further decline to the bottom of the abyss. Like Esau, Judah casts off all restraints and marries into a Canaanite family infamous for bold and unblushing wickedness. If there is any hope for this family, it must come from an unconventional source.

## I. Judah: Leaving God and Family (38:1-11)

### A. Judah's leaving and cleaving (38:1-5 adapted from the ESV)

**1** Now it was at about that time that Judah went down, away from his brothers and pitched (his tent) beside an Adullamite man—his name was Hirah. (38:1)

At the time Joseph is sold into slavery, Judah **leaves** his brothers feeding their father's flocks and descends from the Hebron heights to Adullam on the Canaanite plains below. The physical descent mirrors the downward spiral of his heart to the bottom of the abyss. There he **pitched** his tent "next door" to a man named Hirah, who befriends him like a brother, and plays a supporting role in both scenes.

**2** There Judah **saw** the daughter of a Canaanite man—his name was Shua, he **took** her (as his wife) and **came** in to her, **3** and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. **4** She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. **5** Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Kezib when she bore him. (38:2-5 ESV)

Having found a home in Canaan, Judah wastes no time producing a family. The quick succession of verbs in verse 2 — *he saw...took...came into her*—depict a man who is driven solely by his lusts, while his wife is reduced to an object without a name, though her father is properly given a name. In verses three to five, she is the subject of eight verbs, which suggests that Judah is becoming increasingly distant with each new birth, until at the third, he is not even present. We have no idea what he is doing in Kezib, though the Hebrew root of the name means "deception," a notable theme in Jacob's family and brings to mind much of what happens in Las Vegas. [This is a marriage based solely on functionality with none of the honest, playful and intimate dialogue of the Song of Songs.](#)

### B. Persistent pleasure or personal responsibility (38:6-11 NIV)

**6** Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. **7** But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death. **8** Then Judah said to Onan, "Sleep with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother." **9** But Onan knew that the child would not be his; so whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from providing

offspring for his brother. **10** What he did was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death also. **(38:6-10)**

When Er, Judah's firstborn, was grown up, Judah gave him a wife named Tamar. That fact that she is given a name suggests she will play a significant role in the story. Shortly after their marriage, God put Er to death because he was evil. We're not told the nature of his transgressions but, as "this is the first text to state explicitly that God put someone to death,"<sup>1</sup> they must have been exceedingly grave.

Israel's law did not permit a man to marry his brother's wife, unless the brother died without children. In that case his brother closest in age was to marry her in order to raise up seed in the brother's name and so give him social immortality (Deut 25:5-6; Ruth 4:5, 10, 17) and his widow social status. When Judah asked Onan to fulfill his duty as Tamar's brother-in-law, he knew the children would not legally be his. With nothing in it for him, Onan habitually "abuses familial loyalty for his own sensuality. As Simeon and Levi desecrated circumcision Onan desecrates a sacred duty. He abuses his brother and his wife."<sup>2</sup> If that troubles you, you're in good company. God's wrath was immediate and he killed him. [sit with that for a minute, consider how sacred human beings are in the eyes of God, violations] – rare thing for God to step in, it becomes exemplary of what his holiness demands. Normally

**11** Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow in your father's household until my son Shelah grows up." For he thought, "He may die too, just like his brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's household.

Judah's response is revealing. He has **no spiritual insight** to connect the death of his sons with their evil character, which is in fact a mirror of his own. Instead he blames Tamar and sends her shamefully back to her father's home after having been married twice. Given that he had status and security, he was legally responsible to protect and care for her. But Judah has no intention of risking the life of his third son for the sake of the community. He denies her right to well-being and social status in the community, confining her to endless years of social disgrace.

## **II. Tamar's Bold Initiative (38:12-23)**

### **A. Tamar takes matters into her own hands (38:12-14)**

**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. **(38:12-14)**

Years pass and Judah endures yet another death, that of his wife, whose name we will never know. Once the days of mourning are past, Judah is eager to move on and celebrate life with his Adullam buddies. The occasion of sheepshearing in Palestine was the ancient Near Eastern equivalent of Germany’s Oktoberfest or our Super Bowl festivities with their abundant food and drink, celebrations and entertainment.

In poignant contrast to Judah’s joyful stride to Timnah is Tamar, who still remains dressed in her widow’s garments after the deaths of her husbands. After years of inaction by her father-in-law, it was clear to this widow that no one in this family is going to take responsibility to care for her or her husband’s name. With uncanny courage she decides to take matters into her own hands. Tamar knows full well what drives her father-in-law. Hearing the news that he is on the road to Timnah, she springs into action and sets the trap. She removes her widow’s garments and veils herself like a prostitute. Then she places herself strategically by the entrance of Enaim on the road to Timnah. Robert Alter notes that “If, as is quite likely, this place-name means ‘Twin Wells,’ we probably have here a kind of wry allusion to the betrothal type-scene: the bridegroom encountering his future spouse by a well in a foreign land. One wonders whether the two wells might resonate with her two marriages, or with the twins she will bear. *In any case, instead of a feast and the conclusion of a betrothal agreement, here we have a brusque foods-for-services business dialogue, followed by sex.*”<sup>3</sup>

#### **B. Judah taken in by Tamar’s deception (38:15-19)**

**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.

The minute Judah sees her alongside the road, he takes the bait, not knowing the one veiled as a prostitute is his daughter-in-law. His *turning aside* to speak to her is the same verb (*na.ta^* - stretch out, spread out, extend, incline) used to introduce the story and depicts Judah's habitual weakness of *turning aside* to wicked ways. His speech, though it is introduced with "please," it is brutally direct, crude and explicit, showing no restraint or even a polite greeting. The Hebrew idiom, used repeatedly used in this story, says literally, "let me come into you."

Tamar plays her role as a bold and enterprising business women and starts the negotiations for the right price. Judah did not anticipate hiring a prostitute, so he offers to send her a young goat from the flock, a handsome price from a wealthy shepherd. Tamar is not satisfied with Judah's word; she demands a pledge for "she realizes it is crucial for her to retain evidence of the paternity of the child she may conceive."<sup>4</sup> Judah opens the door wide open,

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 she left, she took off her veil and put on her widow's clothes again. (38:15-19)

The seal was a cylinder seal, usually of stone or metal, attached to a cord and worn around the neck. When it was rolled over documents incised in clay, it was a way of affixing a kind of self-notarized signature. The staff was a "symbol of authority and had a mark of ownership etched on top of it."<sup>5</sup> To demand that Judah relinquish his seal, cord and staff would be like asking you to hand over your passport, driver's license and credit card.

Judah doesn't flinch at the price and immediately gives Tamar all that he should have freely given her as a daughter. She departs with everything and Judah leaves with nothing. Like Esau who sold his birthright for a meal, Judah gave away his name, his status and honor for a few minutes of sordid pleasure.

### **C. Judah unable to find the woman and retrieve his pledge (38:20-23)**

20 Meanwhile Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite in order to get his pledge back from the woman, but he did not find her. 21 He asked the men who lived there, "Where is the shrine prostitute who was beside the road at Enaim?" "There hasn't been any shrine prostitute here,"

they said. **22** So he went back to Judah and said, "I didn't find her. Besides, the men who lived there said, 'There hasn't been any shrine prostitute here.'" **23** Then Judah said, "Let her keep what she has, or we will become a laughingstock. After all, I did send her this young goat, but you didn't find her." (38:20-23)

Judah needs to close the books on his transaction and sends a young goat **by the hand** of his new best friend, Hirah, in order to take back the pledge from **the woman's hand**. With painful irony Judah honors his word to a prostitute, while he grants no honor to his daughter-in-law. Hirah's search for the woman is reminiscent of the previous scene where Joseph was sent by his father in search of his brothers, for he was worried about their welfare in Shechem. Joseph is found by an anonymous man, who kindly gives Joseph the necessary information with which he is able to find his brothers. But it turns out exceedingly bad for Joseph.

In this scene, Judah sends his Adullamite buddy in search of a woman to take back the pledge from her hand. Like his father, he has cause for worry, but it's all about his reputation. To preserve his anonymity he sends Hirah and, to place his transaction in a more favorable light, he instructs Hirah to refer to the woman, not as a *zonah* ("whore"), but as the more acceptable *qedeshah*, (lit. "the consecrated one") "a woman sacred to Astarte, a goddess of the Canaanites... was regarded as the most respectable designation for public prostitutes in Canaan."<sup>6</sup> When Hirah asks the men of the place, "Where is the shrine prostitute who was at Enaim?" the men answer truthfully, "There hasn't been any shrine prostitute here." It makes us wonder what they might have answered if he had asked "Where is the *zonah*?"

Hirah returns with his goat and no pledge. For the first time in the story Judah reacts with emotion. He who is cold and callous to the feelings of others, now quakes at the thought of his reputation being tarnished in the community.

### **III. Judah Exposed, Tamar Vindicated (38:24-26)**

**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

righteous, I'm not, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah. " And he did not sleep with her again. (38:24-26)

After three months, Tamar is showing and her pregnancy exposed. When Judah hears the news, "he leaps at the hearsay evidence to get rid of his bothersome daughter-in-law...since she is betrothed to Shelah, it is wrong (**would be a crime**) for her to have sex with anyone else."<sup>7</sup> As the one who has legal responsibility for Tamar and with the authority as head of the tribe, Judah demands that she be brought out to the city gate to be burned, a sentence even more severe than the law demanded (Deut 22:21, 24; Lev 21:9, 20:14). Judah gives voice to the age-old double standard of righteousness in a male dominated world.

But Tamar has played her cards well. As she is being escorted from her home, she sends Judah the items she had kept as a pledge with the message, "See if you **recognize** whose *passport, driver's license* and *credit card* these are." Judah recognizes them and owns up to his guilt without any qualification: "**She is righteous, I'm not.**" (In Hebrew grammar this is called "a comparison of **exclusion**, where the subject alone possesses the quality connoted by the adjective, to the exclusion of the thing compared").<sup>8</sup>

In passing sentence on Tamar, Judah condemned himself. His sin is far more serious than giving in to his lusts with a prostitute. It is the damage done to the community by years of abusive neglect of his daughter-in-law, blaming her for the death of his sons and breaking his promise to give his son Shelah as her husband. Under Judah's rule, she would have been a childless widow all her life, in opposition to God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He exalts Tamar as the true hero, the one willing to risk her life for the future of the family, the one who is in fact raising up seed for Judah's line.

**Was the deception wrong?** The issues are complex, but one factor to consider is the nature of warfare. One of the components of war is deception. If you were living in occupied France during WWII and the Nazi's knocked on your door and asked you if you were hiding Jews, would it be wrong to deceive them? When sheep are sent out among wolves, Jesus said, they must be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." (Matt 10:16) When investigators for International Justice Mission (**IJM**) are preparing to rescue victims of sex trafficking, they must first enter brothels, posing as potential customers in an attempt to gather sufficient evidence to stage a rescue. In like manner,

Tamar is using deception to raise up seed from the dead and receives no censor from the narrator.

#### **IV. Tamar Restored by the Lord (38:27-30)**

27 When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. 28 As she was giving birth, one of them put out his hand; so the midwife took **a scarlet thread** and tied it on his wrist and said, "This one came out first." 29 But when he drew back his hand, his brother came out, and she said, "So this is how you have broken out!" And he was named Perez. 30 Then his brother, who had the scarlet thread on his wrist, came out. And he was named Zerah. (38:27-30)

The scene closes with God's seal of approval on Tamar's risk-taking faith. The Lord blesses her with not one, but two healthy sons. Waltke suggests that "The twins were perhaps a gift from God to Tamar to compensate her for the lack of children from her two husbands as well as a sign to Judah, who lost two sons due to their wickedness, that his sins are forgiven and a new day is dawning under God's favor."<sup>9</sup>

The births of Perez and Zerah are strikingly similar to those of Jacob and Esau and the struggle over the right of the firstborn. Zerah manages to get his hand out first, but is overtaken by Perez, who makes a "breach" or "breaks forth" and wins the race. "The births match Tamar's own struggle for children. She has **broken out** from Judah's deceitful binding of her." "The name Zerah means 'shining,' as in the dawning of the sun and is linked with the scarlet thread on his hand."<sup>10</sup> Tamar's triumph in remaining true to her Israelite family in spite of its faithlessness has brought about a new day of hope and restoration for this broken family.

#### **V. Reflections**

##### **A. God's holy zeal for his image**

Unlike all other religions and their gods in the ancient world, the God of the Bible consistently reinforces woman's equality in nature and in dignity with men. Our text today shows how God's holy zeal burns when a woman's dignity is violated and her worth demeaned. The first two times in the Bible when God directly intervenes to impose the death penalty occur here in the context of marriage to rescue a Canaanite woman from unspeakable "evil" and sexual abuse. Though Tamar never told Judah what his son was doing to her, God knew and he acted decisively. Though these divine encounters are extremely rare, they are exemplary of God's outrage whenever his image

is demeaned, marred or mistreated and the reaction he expects of us as advocates and protectors of his cherished creation.

So the question is, Why didn't God kill Judah?

### **B. God's way of transformation**

God is righteous and just, but he is also loving and wishes that no one perish (2 Pet 3:9). In God's sovereign justice, "his punishment is not immediately retributive, but he teaches the man a lesson in 'reaping what you sow,'"<sup>11</sup> as the sins of the fathers are visited on the children, the grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren who become mirrors of our deviant choices. This does is not teaching **fatalism**, that the sins of the fathers predetermine the behavior of sons; nor does it imply that children pay for their parents' sins (Ezek 18:20). But what it does suggest is that sin is not only dangerous, it is also highly contagious and, like the Corona virus, it mutates into a more deadly disease as it is passed on.

In this passage Judah's downward spiral descends to an abyss that would have shocked Abraham. He has forsaken his faith, abandoned his family, he is a failed and callous father, a profane fornicator, and a worthless and abusive father-in-law, who self-righteously condemns his innocent daughter-in-law to death.

**And then he recognizes** his passport, driver's license and credit card. His true self is exposed for all to see. But the exposure is not designed to be vindictive. As Judah gazes at Tamar, he taken aback with a renewed vision of the glory of the image of God in a human being. This is what he is supposed to be and still can be, if will just repent and come home. "**She is righteous, I'm not.**"

This is the beginning of twenty-plus years of Judah being transformed under God's mighty hand from one who sells his brother as a slave to one who is willing to be the slave for his brother. This is the amazing transforming power of God's grace.

Why didn't God kill Judah?

He loved him. But it took a Canaanite woman for him to see it.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 510.

<sup>2</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, 510.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, A Translation with Commentary, Vol. 1* (New York: Norton & Norton, 2019),146.

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<sup>4</sup> Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Vol 1*, 147.

<sup>5</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, 513.

<sup>6</sup> C. F. Keil and Delitzsch F., *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. 10 vols.; (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), paragraph 518.

<sup>7</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, 513.

<sup>8</sup> Though most translations read, "She is **more** righteous **than** I," but at Waltke and Fokkelman suggest it is better translated, "**She is righteous, I'm not!**" In Hebrew grammar this is called "a *comparison of exclusion*, [where] the subject alone possesses the quality connoted by the adjective or stative verb, to the exclusion of the thing compared." *IBHS*, §14.4e

<sup>9</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, 513.

<sup>10</sup> Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Vol 1*, 149..

<sup>11</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 418.