

Genesis 38:1 – 30

¹ And it came about at that time, that Judah departed [literally, *went down*] from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. ² Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her and went in to her. ³ So she conceived and bore a son and he named him Er. ⁴ Then she conceived again and bore a son and named him Onan. ⁵ She bore still another son and named him Shelah; and it was at Chezib that she bore him. ⁶ Now Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. ⁷ But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life. ⁸ 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.' ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He took his life also. ¹¹ 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. 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. ¹³ It was told to Tamar, 'Behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep.' ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, for she had covered her face. ¹⁶ 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?' ¹⁷ 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?' ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ Then she arose and departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow's garments. ²⁰ When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite, to receive the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. ²¹ 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.' ²² 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.' ²³ 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.' ²⁴ 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!' ²⁵ 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?' ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ It came about at the time she was giving birth, that behold, there were twins in her womb. ²⁸ 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.' ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah.

Historical and Cultural Background

- Judah literally 'went down' to visit an Adullamite. Joseph had just gone down into a pit (Gen.37:19 – 24), and then was taken 'down' into Egypt (Gen.37:25). Their father Jacob had said he would surely 'go down' to Sheol in mourning (Gen.37:35).
- Names:
 - Er might mean 'guard' but is the word 'evil' backwards.
 - Onan might mean 'vigorous.'
 - Shelah might mean 'drawn out' (of the womb).
 - Tamar means 'palm tree.'
- Surrogate fatherhood: Culturally, the brother of a deceased man without children had the responsibility of 'Levirate marriage' – which is, impregnating his widowed wife and being a surrogate father. The inheritance of the deceased brother would then pass down to that child / those children.
- The Canaanite women – the daughter of Shua, and Tamar – probably knew about the interactions between this family and the Canaanites: Abraham rescued Sodom from the kings of the north (Gen.14), his God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for their hostility towards the family (Gen.19), Shechem raped Jacob's daughter Dinah, provoking Simeon and Levi to trick and massacre the town in retaliation (Gen.34).
- 'Seal, cord, and staff': The ancient equivalent of a man's driver's license, credit card, and personal stamp. They are identity markers.
- Notice the repetition of 'please examine' in Joseph's story and Judah's story:
 - Joseph's story: ³¹ So they took Joseph's tunic, and slaughtered a male goat and dipped the tunic in the blood; ³² and they sent the varicolored tunic and brought it to their father and said, 'We found this; *please examine* it to see whether it is your son's tunic or not.' ³³ Then he [Jacob] examined it and said, 'It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!' (Gen.37:31 – 33)
 - Judah's story: ²⁵ 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?' ²⁶ 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. (Gen.38:25 – 26)
- Twin sons: This is a sign of divine favor. Esau and Jacob were twins (Gen.25:21 – 23).

Questions

1. Why in the world is this story here?
 - a. It builds suspense so that we don't know what happens to Joseph and want to find out
 - b. It takes up the story of Judah, who is the next son of Leah, after Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, all of whom sinned significantly.
 - c. Judah, along with Reuben, didn't want to actually kill Joseph. But he did want to sell Joseph into slavery and be rid of him. So it is somewhat natural in the narrative that we pick up with Judah...
2. What does Judah do that reflects his character?
 - a. He leaves his brothers and his parents behind geographically – an interesting suggestion of leaving them in a relational sense. In fact, he seems to stay apart for a significant amount of time. Is he leaving God?
 - b. He falls into sin. Notice the repetition of the language of the fall: 'saw...took' is negative (Gen.3:6; 6:2; 12:15; 34:2, cf. Judg.14:1 – 2).
 - c. He marries a Canaanite woman (Shua) and encourages his sons to marry Canaanite women (Tamar). What might have been his motivations?
 - i. They seem pretty crude. The word 'marry' or 'marriage' is not even found here. Only 'he took her' (v.2) and 'he took a wife' (v.6).
 - ii. Is this Judah's further betrayal of his family? Just as he betrayed Joseph into slavery?
 - iii. Then again, who else are the guys supposed to marry? Laban has no more daughters. So they were supposed to be discipling the people around them and inviting them to worship the God they are getting to know.
 - d. Judah cares – at first – about the responsibility of Onan to his brother Er's memory. But he later changes his mind. Why did he change his mind?
 - i. Perhaps he thought Shelah would die also?
 - ii. Perhaps he thought he would give all his inheritance to Shelah anyway, and not to Tamar and Er's side of the family.
 - iii. Perhaps he had come to dislike Tamar?
 - e. Imagine being Tamar after her husband Er dies, and after Judah seems to not care about her anymore. Why would she want to be part of this family, anyway? The text doesn't say, but we can infer...
 - i. There was an inheritance that she had the right to claim
 - ii. She wanted children
 - iii. She wanted to participate in the blessing God was going to show this family, and the blessing that God wanted to make of this family
 - iv. This episode showed that Tamar understood that God's blessing would have to be shared through this family. She believes in the promises of this God, and therefore wanted to be part of this family and have her children be heirs of the promise as well. Notice that she must have understood, therefore, that this God would welcome Canaanites and bless them if they repented and came in faith and into the community of Israel.
 - v. She is a precursor of the Canaanite woman whose faith drew Jesus to her all the way in the north near Tyre (Mt.15:21 – 26; Mk.7:24 – 30). Judah is a precursor of Jesus in a very preliminary way. He finally understands that God wants to bless the Gentiles, in particular the Canaanites. Even their children.
3. What do you think of her disguising herself as a prostitute?
 - a. Very risky
 - b. She was determined to implicate Judah, her father-in-law!
 - c. She takes what she actually wants: to be part of Judah's family, and participate in God's blessing
 - d. Who else used clothing to trick another? Judah and his brothers used clothing to trick their father Jacob (Gen.37)! So Judah has got to recognize the turnabout. Before that, Rebekah and Jacob had used clothing to trick (kind of) Isaac, who was blind, to pass on the blessing of God (Gen.27:16). That echoed God clothing Adam and Eve with animals skins after the fall, to protect them and foreshadow how he will clothe them in new life and new innocence (Gen.3:21).
4. Do you think Judah had a sinking feeling when she disappeared?
 - a. Something about his identity was taken
 - b. He could have reflected on how something about Tamar's identity had been taken from her, implicating Judah

- c. He could have reflected on how something about Jacob's identity (Joseph) had been taken from him, implicating Judah again
 - d. He could have reflected on how something about Joseph's identity (sonship, family) had been taken away from him
 - e. It's possible that Judah did consider these things.
 - f. In any case, Judah says that Tamar is more righteous than he was. 'Righteous' means caring about God's covenant and promises.
5. Why does Judah admit that Tamar was more righteous than him?
- a. Tamar wanted to be part of God's blessing of Abraham even more than he did
 - b. The word 'righteous' refers to upholding the covenant that God began with Abraham. It involved the family of Abraham, was centered in the creation order for marriage, and linked to children as the blessing that God ultimately wanted.
 - c. Judah was letting go of his third and last son, Shelah, for God's purposes. There is a theme of fathers having to let go of their sons. Cain did not let go of his son Enoch (Gen.4:16 – 26). Abraham let go of Ishmael and then Isaac (Gen.21 – 22). Isaac had to let go of Esau and then Jacob. Jacob had to let go of Joseph. Judah will be the one to encourage his father Jacob to let Benjamin go down to Egypt. He learns that here.
 - d. Tamar is like Rebekah! But perhaps even greater. Rebekah was distantly related to Abraham, whereas Tamar was not. Rebekah wanted to be part of the family God would partner with to undo the fall and renew the world. Tamar did too. Rebekah used clothing to trick her husband to be faithful to God's word. Tamar used clothing to trick her father-in-law to be her 'husband' in a sense and be faithful to God's word – that the 'seed of the woman' promise that God made needs to be taken seriously, and that she could be the bearer of it. Turns out she would be, because she is a foremother of Jesus (Mt.1:1 – 17).
6. Why is there a parallel between what happens to Joseph/Jacob and what happens to Judah? What are the parallels in the first place?
- a. Joseph went 'down' and Judah 'went down'
 - b. Articles of clothing used to deceive: coat for Joseph to deceive Jacob, veil for Tamar to deceive Judah
 - c. The phrase 'please examine' occurs when Jacob examines Joseph's coat (Gen.37:32) and when Judah examines his identity objects (Gen.38:25)
 - i. Judah must have to think about his brother Joseph, and his responsibility in the crime of betrayal and exclusion. Now Judah has to include Tamar in the family. It is ironic that the phrase 'please examine' triggers this realization.
 - ii. This partially explains why Judah steps forward later, sacrificing himself, when he stands unknowingly before Joseph.
 - iii. Judah was the one to sell his brother Joseph to slave traders (Gen.37:26 – 28). Judah also sold his own identity by indulging himself and denying Tamar. But now he is willing to be taught by a Gentile, a Canaanite woman, about what it means to participate in God's plan to bless the world. He will be willing to be taught by a 'Gentile', the second highest official in Egypt who turns out to be his brother, about what it means to participate in God's plan to bless the world.
 - d. The motif of twins occurred before – Esau and Jacob, where the younger rises to preeminence – as in this story of Zerah and Perez. This suggests that God is at work in Judah's family, making even the very imperfect Judah into a fit firstborn son, and a conduit of the Messiah Jesus.
7. Application: What happens when we try to *exclude* someone – passively or actively – from God's family and God's blessing?
- a. Illus: Perhaps one thing that will happen to us is that we will be excluded from something. When we try to create an exclusive community that is centered around 'my own needs and desires,' that community will eventually implode.
 - b. Illus: I've seen two occasions when Christians were in a fellowship or church group. They didn't want to reach out to other people outside the group because of their 'feeling of community' and how it might change. But in both cases, people were just putting themselves first, not the Lord. In one case, there was a break up between a couple who was dating, and the two people just couldn't handle it, and it split the people. In the second case, there was another conflict that couldn't be

resolved, and it split the people. When we put ourselves first, even 'our feeling of community,' we do not put the Lord first.