

Genesis 38 • Judah and Tamar

Introduction

This week's study is from chapter 38. It is the story of Judah and Tamar. As we read this story, we want to remember the purpose of LogosWalk: hearing God's voice through His Word. Therefore, we must always be asking the question, "How is God speaking to me in this passage?" Our study is to be incarnational in nature; that is, is for us to be changed in some way from the study of God's Word, whether it be our values, our behavior, our relationships, or our understanding of how God interacts with us.

¹And it came about at that time, that Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. ²Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her and went in to her. ³So she conceived and bore a son and he named him Er. ⁴Then she conceived again and bore a son and named him Onan. ⁵She bore still another son and named him Shelah; and it was at Chezib that she bore him.

[Read v.1-5]

Q: What is the man Judah's history up till now? You will need to review some passages.

- He is the 4th son born to Leah, behind Reuben, Simeon and Levi (Genesis 35:23).
- He is, at the least, a profiteer. It was his idea to sell his brother Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver (Genesis 37:26). It may have been economically advantageous for him to relocate to Abdullam.
- He, like Reuben, fears shedding his brother's blood, so he has some semblance of conscience, though, as we will see, it is not his greatest asset (Genesis 37:27).

Q: What do verses 1-5 tell us about Judah's choice of a business associate, a place to settle, and about his choice for a wife?

A: Judah's choices were questionable. Note the phrase, "*Judah departed from his brothers...*" Judah developed a business relationship with an obviously prestigious man named Hirah who was an Adullamite; that is, from the city of Abdullam, a small Canaanite city-state located southwest of Jerusalem, about 30-40 kilometers from Hebron, his home., Judah took a Canaanite woman for a wife who bore him three sons. Judah eventually settled in a nearby town called Chezib (most likely the home of his wife, a daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua).

Application: Based on God's Word, how is He speaking to you now about the risks of separating yourself from the church, from Christian fellowship, from your Christian home, from others who might hold you accountable?

⁶Now Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. ⁷But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life. ⁸Then 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." ⁹Onan 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. ¹⁰But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He took his life also.

¹¹Then 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.

¹²Now 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. ¹³It was told to Tamar, "Behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep." ¹⁴So 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.

¹⁵When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, for she had covered her face. ¹⁶So 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,

[Read v.6-11]

Q: What does God's Word say was the reason the Lord took Er's life?

A: The Scripture doesn't say that Er, Judah's firstborn and therefore heir to his line, did an evil deed. The Scripture clearly states that Er "was evil in the sight of the Lord." Whereas good men, such as David, can commit evil deeds for which God will allow painful consequences, in this case the Bible says that Er's very nature was evil. The reason why God took Judah's firstborn's life and ended this line from Judah will be clearer in a few verses.

Q: What is the reason that Judah instructed Onan to take Tamar as his wife?

A: It refers to an ancient practice called "levirate law." Later to be formalized in the Law by Moses, it was the practice that if a man died without leaving a male heir, it was his brother's duty to produce an heir through the widow. This would ensure that the widow would eventually have a son to care for her in her old age. However, even though the surviving brother was the biological father, the inheritance of the deceased brother, including land, would belong to the widow (in Onan's case, a Canaanite). On the other hand, the surviving brother would be responsible for providing for the widow and raising the child as if he were his own, until such time that the son could take care of himself and his mother. In the case of Onan, he himself may have had no sons, so that if he died without an heir, everything he owned, including his own inheritance, would go to the son of Tamar. It is no wonder that he was hesitant to obey Judah.

Q: In verse 10, what are the consequences of being only partly obedient to God's plan?

A: Onan did what he was told. He slept with Tamar but failed to follow through completely (partial obedience). The phrase, "...he wasted his seed on the ground" is critically significant to the principle that God is teaching us here.

[Read v.12-19]

Q: How well did Judah follow through with his promise to Tamar?

A: Not only was Judah disobedient, but he was dishonest and failed to keep his own word.

Q: In verses 13 and 14, the text indicates that Tamar knew exactly what to do to get Judah's attention on the road to Timnah. What does this tell us about Judah's moral life?

A: It must have been well known that Judah often sought the company of prostitutes.

Q: What are some of the moral lapses characteristic of Judah's life?

1. He was a scoundrel toward his own brother.
2. He sought the company of and formed business partnerships with pagans.
3. He failed to keep even his own word.
4. He sought the company of prostitutes.
5. He appears to have no inclination whatsoever toward the God of his father.

that you may come in to me?"

¹⁷He said, therefore, "I will send you a young goat from the flock."

She said, moreover, "Will you give a pledge until you send it?"

¹⁸He 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. ¹⁹Then she arose and departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow's garments.

²⁰When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite, to receive the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. ²¹He 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."

²²So 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.'"

²³Then 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."

²⁴Now 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!"

²⁵It 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?"

²⁶Judah 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.

Q: If you knew Judah personally, what level of respect would you have for him?

A: Judah does not fit the profile of a godly man.

Application: Up to this point, what is God telling you about His ability to use imperfect men to accomplish His plan? Is God speaking to your heart about whether or not He can use you?

[Read v.20-26]

Q: In verse 24, what double standard does Judah employ?

A: He condemns Tamar for becoming pregnant and pronounces her guilty of sin.

Q: What pronouncement upon Tamar does Judah give when he discovers that he is the father of Tamar's child? What does this tell us about Judah's sense of right and wrong?

A: He states that she is "more righteous" than he. Even though Tamar deceived Judah, he realized that she had only done what was the right thing to do. Even though there was deception involved, because both Judah's and Tamar's spouses are deceased, there has been no adultery. Tamar, in fact, has caused Judah to act righteously in spite of himself, for even though his son Shelah was passed over, it was, according to levirate law, his duty to produce a son for Tamar. Thus, Tamar the Canaanite who saw that righteousness prevailed.

²⁷It came about at the time she was giving birth, that behold, there were twins in her womb. ²⁸Moreover, 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.” ²⁹But 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. ³⁰Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah.

[Read v.27-30]

Q: Who was the firstborn son of Tamar, and what was his position as a descendant of Judah?

A: The son's name was Perez. It is Perez, the son born through an act of righteousness, that becomes the chosen descendant of Judah.

Q: This brings up an important concept called the “seedline to the Messiah.” Is it Shelah or Perez who continues the seedline leading to Jesus Christ?

A: The Old Testament is, amongst other things, a record of the seedline descending from Adam that would eventually lead to the Messiah. This seedline is also known as the genealogy of Jesus Christ (see Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38). The seedline started with Abel, but Satan entered Cain to kill him. Seth would later become the descendant.

The history of the OT is also a record of Satan's attempts to destroy the seedline through murder, sin and idolatry. One could say, in fact, that the raising up of the nation of Israel was to preserve the seedline that would eventually lead to the salvation of mankind.

Perez becomes the seedline descendant of Judah (see Matthew 1:3 and Luke 3:33). The genealogies in Matthew and Luke are slightly different from David to Joseph because one genealogy traces Mary's line (Luke) and the other, Joseph's (Matthew).

Now we know why Onan's indiscreet act was so offensive to the Lord. Er was by nature evil, and God would not allow the seedline to pass through him. Onan “wasted” his seed on the ground. God bypassed Judah's sons by his wife in favor of a son born to one, even a Canaanite, who, of all the persons mentioned, had the keenest sense of righteousness.

Overall Application

- 1. What is God's voice teaching you now about His sovereignty and providence?*
- 2. What is God's voice teaching you about His power to “make all things work together for good” in your life?*
- 3. What is God's voice teaching you about the need to remain faithful and to remain in a right relationship with Him?*
- 4. Do you suppose that Judah or Tamar had any inkling of the importance of what God was doing in and through their lives? Do you have any inkling of what God could possibly do through your life if you remain “more righteous” than others?*