

Genesis 38, Tamar

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Date: 08 December 2019

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[0 : 00] Again, the scripture text is Genesis 38 on page 36 of the White Bibles. Please stand for the reading of God's Word.

It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adulamite, whose name was Hira. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shua.

He took her and went into her, and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Ur. She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah.

Judah was in Kazib when she bore him. And Judah took a wife for Ur, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Ur, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death.

Then Judah said to Onan, Go into 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.

[1 : 09] So whenever he went into 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.

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.

In the course of time, the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. But when Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheep shearers, he and his friend Hurah, 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 Aniam, 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 into you.

[2 : 15] For he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, What will you give me that you may come into 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 into 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. When Judah sent the young goat by his friend, the Adullamite, to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her.

And he asked the man of the place, Where is the colt prostitute who was at Aniam at the roadside? And they said, No colt prostitute has been here. So he returned to Judah and said, I have not found her.

Also, the men of the place said, No colt prostitute has been here. And Judah replied, Let her keep the things as her own, or we will be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her.

[3 : 17] 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. When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb.

And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, This one came out first. But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out.

And she said, What a breach you have made for yourself! Therefore his name was called Perez. Afterward his brother came out with a scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah. [4 : 16] Matthew 1 can be found on page 895 of the White Bibles. I'm going to read the first three verses. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Thank you.

Christmas, as it is commonly celebrated in our day, has become so sentimentalized, so sanitized, which are far more dangerous than Christmas becoming so commercialized, that we arrive at a time in history where we've lost the real thing.

Perhaps that's why God gave us Christmas texts like Genesis 38, and later would make sure that Tamar's name found her way into Jesus' Christmas genealogy that opens up his gospel.

It's a text that you've heard read today that I doubt you've heard read publicly in an assembly before. But in having it read, you must concur that it arrests the mind.

[6 : 24] And this might be God's design to free us from our collective delusion on what is and is not Christmas.

Here is a text that is as surprising as it is scandalous. Surprising and scandal.

I want to talk about those two words and what it means for you and me today in the recovery of Christmas as God gave it to us.

The surprise is that what is this text doing here? But even more than that, what is it doing here at this point in Genesis?

If you've never had the privilege yet of reading Genesis, you'll want to keep that white Bible open to this so you can see it for yourself.

[7 : 33] Chapter 38 is an interruption into the Joseph story. And it interrupts it with this kind of tawdry chapter spent on Judah and Tamar.

By the time you return to chapter 39, you're back to Joseph. In fact, Joseph is going to carry the weight, the freight of the text for 13 chapters.

And so the surprise, at some level, is a literary one. What is this text doing? And what is it doing here?

Here. When I began to wrestle with that question, I began looking a little differently at the story of Joseph.

Let me give you some clues that might make you think we've missed the Joseph story all along. Clue number one.

[8 : 49] Even the Joseph story is embedded within a narrative that is concerned with his father, Jacob. Take a look at chapter 37, verse 1.

Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojourning in the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Jacob. Jacob. And then arrives the Joseph narrative.

But Jacob will return on the backside of the narrative. And you will see the blessing he gives to his sons. And the time will be spent on his own death and his own passing.

So Joseph himself is not necessarily the center of gravity at this moment in the text. He's embedded within the writer's concern for Jacob.

Clue number two. The second clue is that Genesis readers would already have a certain conception of the role of Jacob in the plot.

[10 : 01] Jacob was the son of Isaac. Isaac was the son of Abraham. Abraham had been given a promise in Genesis 12 that through his own sons would come one who would bring refuge to all the families of the earth.

So the entire book of Genesis is the unfolding of God's rescuer, son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That will bring relief to all of humanity through a ruler being born. Third clue.

What then is the role of Judah in the bringing forward of a ruler? You've got to see this with your own eyes. But in Genesis 49 verses 8 through 10, There is a prophetic word that Jacob will give to

his son Judah.

This unrighteous character in our own text. Now you'll remember that in Genesis 37, Joseph had a dream that all the brothers would bow down to him one day.

[11:21] But listen to what Jacob says when it's all said and done. Verse 8, chapter 49. Judah, your brothers shall praise you. Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies.

Your father's son shall bow down before you. Judah surpasses Joseph as the one through whom rule will come.

He likens him in verse 9 to a lion's cub. That they will stoop down to. And notice verse 10. The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

In other words, the narrative is not so much about Joseph as it is about Jacob. The narrative is not so much about Jacob as it is about the ruler that will come forward, son of Isaac, son of Abraham. And that, by Jacob's prophetic discourse, falls to Judah. That's what he is doing here. That is the surprise of the text, and the surprise of Christmas.

[12:40] We have misread the Joseph story. We have thought he was at the center. In actual fact, Joseph is here because Judah must be here.

God's plan to bring a ruler into the world would have failed through starvation of his people. So Joseph was not merely securing seed to be eaten in Egypt for his family.

He was securing that the seed of the promise would endure beyond that very moment in time. In other words then, embedded in the Joseph story is an unrighteous man named Judah through whom God is accomplishing scandalous mercy to the world.

Let me put it to you this way. Could it be that we've made a mistake in turning to the character of Joseph to teach men how to handle their bodies because he's always the righteous one when actually in the text we've got the unrighteous Judah himself who is transformed from the beginning into a righteous man?

Is he the lesson? Certainly he is unrighteous by his own admitting. The climactic moment of the text. She is more righteous than I am.

[14:00] She's the one woman in the Old Testament flat out called righteous one. She's the heroine of the whole story. And he's the unrighteous one. And he recognized that.

But you know he's unrighteous at the beginning of the narrative in the first 11 verses because he moves from his brothers to dwell among himself. That's what men do. They isolate themselves from their family.

He marries in an ungodly marriage. And then his sexual mores are completely abandoned in any decent way where he begins to view women as objects to satisfy his own sexual lust.

And indeed one of the worst treatments you have in the text is his unjust treatment of Tamar, a righteous widow who suffers at his hands because he will no longer even give a son to her when the custom of the day was if you were a woman and your husband died, his brother would then take you as a wife so that you would have some offspring.

That's the great hideous nature of Onan's sin. He knew that his own inheritance was going to be halved because if he had a child by her it would actually go to Tamar's family and he wanted everything for himself as men do.

[15:23] Judah is unrighteous. Not only that, follow the narrative though of his transformation. Turn to chapter 42 and verse 31.

You know he's unrighteous because he's still saying things with his brothers like we are honest men. Even though he knows he's a sinner.

Even though he's already said I'm unrighteous. He's still duplicitous. He's still caught up in his sin. He's still attempting to cover the moral discrepancies of his life.

But he moves in the text from his unrighteousness to his duplicitousness to in one sense now finally in the right way becoming selfless. Look at chapter 43 and verses 8 and 9 as we follow him hidden as he is in the Joseph narrative.

chapter 43 verses 8 and 9 and Judah said to Israel his father send the boy with me and we will arise and go that we may live and not die both we and you and also our little ones.

[16:36] I will be a pledge for his safety from my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you then let the bear the blame fall on me forever.

forever. In other words what is he doing here? For the first time in his life this man is now selfless. He's pledging himself. There's an irony. Having given Tamar these pledges of his own self he's now pledging himself he gave pledges to satisfy himself he's now pledging himself to protect one of his brothers. The man is being transformed over a long period of time but it's in motion. One of the climactic moments in Judah's transformation comes in chapter 44 and in verse 14 when finally now this fourth born son is listed first. It says when Judah and his brothers came. He's now a man among men who is taking personal responsibility for others. [17:40] First time. and then the beautiful climactic moment in chapter 44 verse 33 the transformation of Judah he says now therefore please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my Lord.

In other words he moves from an unrighteous man to a duplicitous man to a selfless man to a responsible man to a man who is actually willing to be a substitute a substitutionary atonement for his own family.

Now what's that got to do with Christmas? let me say a word to any man here. In the character of Judah you have Christmas hope.

Transformation of life is possible. God doesn't look the other way but through repentance through confession I am unrighteous.

Through moving away from duplicity I am dishonest. By embracing the Son of God Jesus and beginning to repent and live under his word there is gospel hope.

[19:12] Judah himself carried this out over probably a 20 to 25 year period the way the text reads. But if there is hope for him there is hope for any individual in our midst.

Secondly I want to say that God must take pleasure in hiding his Christmas work. I mean Judah is only hidden in the narrative of 13 chapters.

You know the scripture says in Proverbs 25 2 it is the glory of God to conceal things but the glory of kings to seek them out. God is like a magician in the sense that he does sleight of hand.

he creates a massive stir on the scale of human history that we all pay attention to but it's what he's doing embedded in and through it wherein he's actually accomplishing his work.

So that when Christmas comes all the attention is on Herod who's going to count all the people of the world or let's give our attention to the wise men who get on their plane and travel across the world but all the while five miles southwest of Jerusalem in a little town of Bethlehem is the mysterious hidden workings of God.

[20:53] That ought to be an encouragement to us living in the day in which we live and seeing all the things that we see and all the massive news events that capture our attention and we wonder where is God?

Let me tell you he takes joy in hiding himself in your muck and in the muck of human history. This much for the surprise.

What about the scandal? If the surprise was kind of a literary one the scandal is a licentious one. If Judah's transformation is a surprise then Tamar's patient forceful tested righteousness is the scandal.

And it's a glorious scandal to be treasured. Let me talk to you about Tamar. She's one of my favorite women in all the scripture.

We haven't baptized a Tamar yet to my knowledge. You'd have to be pretty gutsy. The first 11 verses of chapter 38 put in your eyeballs back on that you see Tamar's humiliation.

[22:20] Here's a woman whose marriage to Ur must have been entirely an unsatisfying union from the start for he was an evil man. her union to Onan only brought her into greater humiliation to the point when the third son wasn't given to her for Judah's fear either that he would lose all three sons or that Tamar was the trouble in his household.

she silently endures this patriarchal spiritually pugilistic family without a stain on her character. she is subject to social disgrace at the hands of Judah. Her rights have been denied. She's been banished.

In one sense she is now outside all the promises. So much for humiliation. And oh how many women can identify with her.

In 12 to 23 though you move from her humiliation through what you can only call her interpolation. This self insertion.

[23 : 49] This pressing in to the narrative of her own accord. Now her actions on the side of the road and the union with her father-in-law must be understood in the context of the sins that have been committed against her and the obligations of that family to secure offspring for her.

So she is righteously desperate to secure what ought to have been hers to the point of interpolating herself into the narrative.

asserting herself at the feet of her father-in-law seeking a pledge. And she does receive a pledge, a signet which is a hollow little cylinder with markings on the exterior that would have been placed within a cord hung around your neck which would have been the individual's seal rolled across things for either payment or authority.

And the staff itself, the seat of power and strength. In other words, as Robert Alter has said in his own notes on this chapter, when she received that pledge, it is the equivalent of taking this man's passport, driver's license, and all his credit cards.

That's why he brings this gift back the next day. And she was so beautifully attached to doing that because she knew that that was her only hope in a court of law that would indicate or free her from being an unrighteous woman.

[25 : 48] And so she did. And when they sent her out for stoning, she moved from humiliation to interpolation to what you can only call climactic vindication.

Take a look at verse 26. It is the high water mark of the unit. Judah identified them and said, she is more righteous than I since I did not give her my son Shelah and he did not know her again.

So much for the scandal. Tamar's children, twins, I don't know if it is to counter loss of two husbands, are eventually born and Perez, the second, finds himself ten generations in front of David and David himself will find himself in the line of Jesus and Christmas.

I know the text defies your moral sensitivities, but when you consider Christmas, let me ask you this, how else did you think he would get here?

for God to enter into a universally sinful world as the promised king and ruler, to whom Matthew says will be given all authority, how else would he come but to somehow miraculously be born of the seed of a woman who is only depicted as righteous and in the lineage of sinful man that he would identify with our condition.

[27 : 54] You want the scandal of Christmas? This story only sets you up for Mary, the young virgin who is impregnated mysteriously by God's interpolation decision to faithfully press in on our ungodly world in ways that he can be pure and yet the purifier.

That is the scandal of Christmas. The birth of Jesus. Emmanuel. God with us.

I'm done with a sanitized sentimentalized least of my worries commercialized Christmas.

I want the real surprise. God fulfilled a promise. I want the real scandal that he'll take you as his offspring.

Our heavenly father, we give ourselves to you this Christmas looking to be arrested from our delusion on what we are getting ready to enter into these next 10 days.

[29 : 28] We give ourselves to you in Jesus name. Amen.