

Judah and Tamar

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 May 2020

Preacher: Vijay Henderson

[0 : 0 0] Good morning everyone, great to be here. Let me add my welcome to Andrews. I'm Vijay, I'm one of the pastors here at the church and if you could please keep Genesis chapter 38 open. And one of the things we'll have to figure out if we want to be really good Bible handlers is why Genesis 38 is in the Bible at all. And I'm not referring to the gory details, all the death and the incest.

I'm actually talking about the story of Judah and Tamar. It diverts us from the real story about Joseph. You see at the very end of last week we left Joseph in verse 36 of chapter 37.

Meanwhile the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. But then look over in your Bibles to chapter 39 verse 1. It says almost the same thing.

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt to Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. And those two verses are on the slide on your screen right now.

And you can see that these verses, they scream out that Joseph is in trouble. He's enslaved for a top official of Pharaoh himself and he is in Egypt. Spiritually and physically, Joseph seems a million miles away from God. And this trouble, it top entails chapter 38 in the middle.

[1 : 3 3] Because before we make sense of Joseph in Egypt, we need to learn the lesson of brother Judah in Canaan. And even though this might seem backwards, because if you remember last week, Joseph was the golden boy. Well, this week Judah is the absolute worst. In our story, he has almost all of the sins covered. Lying, cheating, debauchery, sexual immorality, hypocrisy. We will see it all.

And I wonder what it would take to change him. Maybe you know a Christian like Judah. Maybe you are a Christian like Judah trapped in sin. What's it going to take for you to change? A good life lesson, perhaps? Maybe a strong word from a loved one? Maybe the slow passage of time? Or do you need a rude awakening like a near-death experience? What would it take to change a really rank sinner?

As we go through Judah's story and we catalog his sins, remember that the lesson we're learning is what Joseph needs as he's dragged off to Egypt. And so please keep Genesis 38 open. We're at verse 1.

At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adalim named Hira. There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. He married her and made love to her.

She became pregnant and gave birth to a son who was named Ur. She conceived again and gave birth to a son and named him Onan. She gave birth to still another son and named him Shelah. It was at Kezib that she gave birth to him. Judah has three sons in three verses. Ur, Onan, and I'm going to say Shelah, but it's a boy. Shelah, that's what I'm going to say. Ur, Onan, and Shelah. And it appears that Judah is aligning himself to God's promises. Remember, God promised to bless the world through this family.

[3 : 44] And here is Judah playing his part, having a family of his own. But if we read closer, something much worse is going on. Verse 1 says Judah left his brothers. That is, he deserted his family.

That he went down to stay with a pagan, a Canaanite. See, Judah has turned away from God and his people. He's a sinner on the run. In verse 2, he marries a Canaanite woman. But for this family, Abraham gave clear instructions that Isaac was not to marry a Canaanite. Isaac gave clear instructions that Jacob was not to marry a Canaanite. Esau, he turns away. He marries a Canaanite. It is always wrong for God's people to marry outside of God's family. And that's just what Judah does too. He marries the daughter of Shua and associates with Herah, the Adulamite. He's now living amongst the pagans.

The correct translation of verse 2 is this. Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite and he took her. Judah saw and he took. Does that sound familiar to you? Do you remember where we've seen that before?

It is the same sequence of verbs from Genesis chapter 3. Eve saw and took the fruit. It's Genesis way of describing sin and rebellion to see and to take. In verse 6 to 10, let's see if Judah's offspring are any better. So verse 6, Judah got a wife for Ur, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Ur was wicked in the Lord's sight, so the Lord put him to death. 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. And back in those days, it was a custom that if your brother dies, the other brother would have to marry his widow and raise up offspring on his behalf. But in verse 9, Onan, he's not happy with that arrangement. So he does that primitive form of contraception. Clearly, Onan doesn't care whether God's promises flow through this family. Verse 10, what he did was wicked in the Lord's sight, so the Lord put him to death also. And it's clear already that with Judah's sons, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Because in verse 11, Judah says to Tamar, the daughter-in-law, live as a widow in your father's household until my son Shelah grows up. You see, instead of looking after Tamar,

Judah cooks up a lie to get her out of the house. Just live with your father. Stay over there. Shelah's a bit too young. I'll call you when he's old enough. But really, Judah blames Tamar for the fact that his sons keep dying. And as long as she's in the house, verse 11, Shelah may die too, just like his brothers. But in verse 12, after a long time, Judah's wife, the daughter of Shelah, died. You see, clearly someone else is causing death. And you'd think that with all that death in the family, that would be enough to cause Judah to change, to give him a rude awakening, to change his ways. But not even close. Because in verse 12, it's shearing time in Canaan.

[7 : 24] Shearing time in Canaan meant pagan festivals and drinking and debauchery. And so Judah takes his best mate, Hera the Adulamite. It seems the best way to get over your wife's death is with a boy's weekend. And so far, how do you think running away from God is working out? What hope do you have for Judah's future? You see, having a future is everything to the children of Israel. They were holders of God's promises, a land, offspring, and blessing. But Judah has left the promised land.

His offspring are almost all dead. And on a boy's weekend, he will struggle to be a blessing to anyone. You see, Judah is a picture of a Christian who runs away from God. He thought that if he ran far enough away, God wouldn't be able to see him. Then he could see and take whatever he wanted.

His life has become a downward spiral, a hopeless dead end, with no future in mind. God has done this.

You see, Judah forgot the first rule about God from Genesis chapter 1 verse 1, that he made the heavens and the earth. Running away is futile because God sees everything and he's in control in his world.

Did you notice verse 7 and verse 10? It says, Judah's sons were wicked in the Lord's sight, and so the Lord put them to death. God sees and acts as well.

[9 : 05] You see, in our hands, these verbs describe sin, but in God's hands, these verbs describe his sovereignty. God sees, God acts. And this is the main event today, because in his sovereignty, God is able to use terrible people like Judah for good. You remember that Judah's father is Israel.

But once upon a time, Israel was called Jacob. Jacob was a liar and a cheat and a scoundrel, really rotten stuff. He cheated brother Esau out of birthright and blessing. But God used Laban to give Jacob a taste of his own medicine. In his sovereignty, he was able to flip and reboot and change Jacob to become the head of Israel. And so look what God does to Judah. Verse 13.

When Tamar was told, your father-in-law is on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep, she took off her widow's clothes, covered herself with a veil to disguise herself. You see, Tamar won't settle for the life Judah has relegated her to, abandoned and motherless.

Verse 14. For she saw that though Shelah had now grown up, she'd not been given to him as his wife. She realizes that she's been conned, that Judah has been deceiving her the whole time.

But she knows her man. He loves drink. He loves women. And so she plans a trap. And in verse 15, thanks to her veil and probably all the wine Judah has drunk, Judah can't recognize her. Which is a delicious irony because that's exactly how Laban trapped his father, Jacob, with a veil and with lots of alcohol. What's even more ironic is that Judah thinks God can't see him in Canaan. Yet here, Judah can't even see his own daughter-in-law when she's standing in front of him.

[11 : 10] In verse 16, he takes the bait. Judah went over to her by the roadside and said, Come now, let me sleep with you. Verse 17 to 18. Tamar negotiates a guarantee for her services.

Your seal and its cord and the staff in your hand, she said. And these items, they're the equivalent of a man's wallet or his credit cards today.

But what's really funny is that a staff refers to someone's tribe or offspring. And the words for seal and cord sound like the Hebrew for father-in-law and simpleton.

So to put it another way, as a guarantee, Tamar says, Give me your offspring, father-in-law, you simpleton. Verse 18. So he gave them to her and slept with her.

And she became pregnant by him. In verse 20 to 22, Judah needs his personal items back from the prostitute. So he sends best mate Hira, the Adalamite, to do his dirty work.

[12 : 13] But of course, Hira can't find her. So verse 23, Judah says, Let her keep what she has. You see, there's only one explanation for why a prostitute has a man's wallet.

And if Judah does, sorry, Judah says he doesn't want to be a laughingstock. But what he does next is shocking. Verse 24.

About three months later, Judah was told, Your daughter-in-law, Tamar, is guilty of prostitution. And as a result, she's now pregnant. Judah said, Bring her out and have her burned to death.

I think it's quite sickening how quickly he calls for Tamar to be killed. And to people around, Judah is appearing to protect the family honor.

But really, he's covering his own sin. Remember, he failed to do his fatherly duty and give her to son number three. But with Tamar dead, no one will be any wiser.

[13 : 15] Bring her out. Have her burned to death, he says, just to cover his tracks. Verse 25. As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law.

I'm pregnant by the man who owns these, she said. And she added, See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are.

Boom. See, in one fell swoop, Judah sees everything clearly. Remember last week, he used Joseph's personal robe to deceive his father.

Today, his personal stuff is being used to expose his deceit. Last week, Judah said to Jacob, See if you recognize whether this is your son's robe.

This week, Tamar says, verse 25. See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are. God has done this.

[14 : 17] Verse 26. Judah recognized them and said, She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son, Sheila. You see, taking control, manipulating others and deceit were handy sins in getting Judah what he wanted.

Until Tamar gave him a dose of his own medicine. God has done this. And even though Tamar uses deception, Judah gives the verdict.

She is more righteous than I. It's not that it's suddenly okay to deceive people. But righteousness here is Tamar acting in line with God's promises.

She is totally determined that this family has offspring. Whereas Judah himself, verse 26, wouldn't give her to his son, Sheila.

You see, finally Judah is on the receiving end and realizes how terrible his sin is. He finally confesses how unrighteous he has been.

[15 : 20] And that she is more righteous than I. And even though he's not a finished work, from now on, we'll have our eyes fixed on him.

Because it's clear that God has begun to change him for good. You see, that's what verse 27 to 30 are all about. Judah gets, sorry, God gives Judah two new sons.

Two new sons to replace two wicked ones. Two new sons for a totally new Judah. And Judah's twins are born exactly the same way as Jacob and Esau.

Both times, the first baby out was a red baby. Esau, red hair. Zerah has a scarlet thread tied to his wrist.

Both twins work in reverse order. Younger Jacob, stronger than older Esau. Younger Perez, it says, breaks out against older Zerah.

[16 : 21] And crucially this. Just as younger Jacob will become a great nation, so too younger Perez will further that nation as well.

On the screen is a slide from Ruth chapter 4. Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.

God has done this. You see, Judah thought that if he ran far enough away from God, that he wouldn't be able to see him. That if he immersed himself in a pagan lifestyle, he'd finally be free of God's plans for his life.

But God still sees and acts. He took Judah's worst sins and made an elegant trap to flip him around. God changes Judah by giving him a dose of his own medicine at the hands of Tamar of all people.

You see, Genesis 38 is a test case for God's sovereignty. As they drag Joseph from the beginning, as they drag Joseph off to slavery, he needs to learn that if God can still see Judah in Canaan, then he can still see Joseph in Egypt.

[17 : 40] If God can use terrible Judah for good, then he can take all the terrible things about to happen to Joseph and use them for good too. And for us, Genesis 38 equips us for our own times of trouble too.

Last week, we were specifically talking about the virus, but it occurs to me that there's so much more going on in people's lives. Money and career, parenting and health, marriage and singleness, grief and anxiety.

For despairing Christians who are facing all these troubles, perhaps you are wondering whether God still cares. This passage says, we need to know that he sees and he acts, that he hears our prayers, that he's so sovereign that even our struggles are part of his plan, that even our struggles can be used for good, for proud, two-faced Christians, ones who put on a veneer of righteousness for the public, all the while running away from God.

We need to know that God sees and God acts, that he will humble us, maybe via a dose of our own medicine, like Tamar to Judah, or maybe on that final day, he will humble us, he sees and he acts.

To those Christians who are fed up like Judah, fed up of following Jesus, those who want to see and take and sin like everyone else, it might look more exciting, it might seem like a free life, but it is wicked in the Lord's sight.

[19 : 32] It is a downward spiral to a hopeless dead end, and one with no future. But as we finish, I want to look at Tamar.

Tamar was a pagan and an outcast, miles away from God, just like our loved ones. We need to know that he can not only bring them into his family, but allow them to play an instrumental role in his plans for the world.

Just listen to how God uses Tamar in salvation history. On the screen is our New Testament reading, which Dorothy brought us.

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah, and his brothers Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.

And it goes on actually, Perez the father of Hezron, the father of Ram, Aminadab, Nashon, Salmon, Boaz, Obed, Jesse, and Jesse, the father of King David. It goes on to be the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is called the Christ.

[20 : 51] Look at how God honors Tamar. Let me pray. And Father God, as Joseph faced trouble in Egypt, and as we face trouble in our lives, please teach us the lesson of Judah, that you see everything, and you act.

We're so grateful that it's you, and not us, who is the sovereign one. Thank you for how beautifully you used Tamar, and how powerfully you changed, a sinner like Judah.

Father, even though we don't know how, help us to trust that you are able to use, all harm and hopelessness, for our good. In Jesus name, Amen.