

Genesis 38-39  
Psalm 1/24  
Matthew 1

“Two Women”

December 6, 2009

We are singing Psalm 1 in response to the OT reading.

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.”

The blessed man – the one who prospers in all that he does –  
is the LORD’s anointed – our Lord Jesus Christ.

Joseph was a picture of that man.  
But only Jesus *was* and *is* that man.

And I am here to tell you that *he* is the center of history.  
What happens to us only has meaning and purpose because *he* is that blessed man.  
And yet, for those who are in Christ – for those who believe in him –  
you have been joined to the life of that blessed man,  
and so therefore his blessing comes to rest upon you as well.  
You are blessed because *he* is the one who did not walk in the counsel of the wicked.

So let us sing Psalm 1.  
Read Matthew 1

### **Introduction:**

- 1. Two Descents (38:1-5 and 39:1-6)**
- 2. Two Attitudes toward Wickedness and Duty (38:6-11 and 39:6b-10)**
- 3. Two Women with Garments (38:12-19 and 39:11-18)**
- 4. Two Judgments Twice Over (38:20-30 and 39:19-23)**

Genesis 37 has left us expecting to hear about Joseph in Egypt.  
But instead we are told about Judah in Canaan.

Why?

Genesis 38-39 are stories told in parallel.  
They probably occur roughly at the same time –  
and they certainly have a lot of parallels in the way that they are told.  
So let’s look at these two chapters together.

### **1. Two Descents (38:1-5 and 39:1-6)**

*38:1 It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. 2 There Judah saw the daughter of a certain*

*Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went 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 Chezib when she bore him.*

In 38:1, Judah went down from his brothers.

In 39:1, Joseph is brought down to Egypt by the Ishmaelites.

The same verb “to go down” is used in both places.

Many of the parallels between Joseph and Judah are contrasts.

Judah descends to the Canaanites and intermarries with them –

that sounds good at first – until you remember that intermarrying with Canaanites  
is to come under the curse of God!

Joseph descends to Egypt and becomes a slave –

and that at first sounds bad – until you learn that the LORD blessed Joseph.

At first this sounds somewhat confusing.

Judah is in the promised land, the land of blessing – yet he is cursed.

Joseph is in Egypt, the land of cursing – yet he is blessed.

What God is teaching his people – and what God is teaching you! –

is that it really does not matter *where* you are,

it matters *who* you are!

The land is not holy and blessed in itself.

The land is only holy and blessed because of *who* you are.

If you are the holy seed, then your presence makes the land holy.

If you are not the holy seed, then your presence makes the land unholy.

And – to Israel’s surprise and ours – *Judah* is not the holy seed!

at least not yet!

As we keep seeing over and over again,

before the seed can be holy, the seed must die.

Isaac passed through death on Mt. Moriah.

Jacob passed through death in his exile from the land.

And Judah, before he is ready to become the royal heir,

must first pass through death –

and in this case, a death of his own making.

Judah is a reminder to us that God does not merely use holy and blameless instruments.

I have no doubt that Noah, Enoch and Abraham had their own struggles with sin –

but scripture doesn’t tell us anything about their struggles.

So if all we had in scripture were people like Noah, Enoch, and Abraham,

it would be easy to think “but I’m just not good enough!”

But Judah starts off *very* poorly in life.

He may not be quite as bad as some of his brothers:  
he is only a kidnapper who sells his brother into slavery –  
at least he's not a murderer!

(How would you like that on your tombstone: "at least he's not a murderer!")

But here at the beginning of chapter 38 Judah only gets worse.

He marries a Canaanite.

And the way in which the story is told reminds us of Eve, who saw, took and ate the fruit,  
or the wicked sons of God in Gen 6, who saw and took the daughters of men,  
or Pharaoh in Genesis 12, who saw and took Sarah, Abraham's wife.

Now Judah saw...and he took a Canaanite wife,  
and she bore three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah.

Three sons might be a promising beginning –  
if it weren't for all the foreshadowing of trouble ahead:

He is the seed of the Woman – the son of God –  
and yet he is marrying a Canaanite – the seed of the serpent.

It appears that once again the sons of God are going into the daughters of men –  
once again humanity is turning away from God's covenant.

Judah's leadership would have resulted in the family becoming assimilated by the Canaanites.

Chapter 39 also opens with Joseph's descent into Egypt:

*39:1 Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. 2 The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. 3 His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. 4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. 5 From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. 6 So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.*

But "the LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man."

Even in the midst of difficult circumstances,  
the LORD is with Joseph.

As Paul puts it, "if God is for us, who can be against us?"

Joseph is a slave, and yet Joseph quickly rises to be "overseer of Potiphar's house."

There is a verbal parallel – or rather, a verbal contrast – here between Judah and Joseph,  
that uses the language of seeing.

Unlike Judah who “saw and took”  
Joseph “found favor” in the eyes of his master.

It is the same phrase used in Genesis 6  
where Noah “found favor in the eyes of the LORD,”  
or when Abraham asks the three messengers to stay and eat in Genesis 18,  
“if I have found favor in your sight.”

There can be no accident that Judah is described in terms of the rebellious sons of God in Gen 6,  
while Joseph is described in terms of Noah.

Clearly the fact that Joseph finds favor in the eyes of his master  
is because the LORD is with him.

This is the very heart of the Abrahamic blessing.  
If God is with you, then everything else will follow.  
It may not look like it at the time!  
But if God is with you – then you need not fear what man can do to you!

And because God is with him, as verse 5 says,  
“the LORD blessed the Egyptian’s house” [notice how that is said!  
Not just “Potiphar’s house” – but “the Egyptian’s house”!  
It doesn’t matter who Potiphar is – it matters who Joseph is!]  
“the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field.”  
All Potiphar had to worry about was what he was going to eat for dinner.

When the Seed of the Woman, the Seed of Abraham rules your house,  
you will be blessed.

And the blessing of Abraham begins to take effect:  
“those who bless you will be blessed...and in your seed all nations will be blessed.”

Egypt begins to receive the blessing of the LORD as the seed of Abraham is blessed.

## **2. Two Attitudes toward Wickedness and Duty (38:6-11 and 39:6b-10)**

The contrast between Judah and Joseph is also seen in two different attitudes  
toward wickedness and duty in 38:6-11 and 39:6b-10.

*38:6 And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. 7 But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. 8 Then Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.” 9 But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. 10 And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. 11 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.*

Er, Judah's firstborn is said to be “wicked in the sight of the LORD.”

Back in Genesis 3 we heard about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

That same word for “evil” is used in Genesis 6 when it says  
that the thoughts of man's heart is only *evil* all the time.

Also it is used in Genesis 19 to describe the men of Sodom.

Now it is used of Er, the firstborn of Judah.

In other words, the house of Judah has become utterly corrupt –  
like humanity before the flood –  
like the men of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And so (just as in the flood and at Sodom), the LORD put Er to death.

So Judah told his second son, Onan to “perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her,  
and raise up offspring for your brother.” (v8)

But Onan understood the principle of levirate marriage.

The children would not be considered his.

They would instead continue the name of his brother.

Why is that a problem?

Because if Er has offspring, then that will divide the inheritance!

There is more “stuff” for him if he “fails” to produce a son for Er.

So he wasted his semen on the ground,  
so as not to give offspring to his brother. (v9)

And we are told that *what he did was wicked in the sight of the LORD.*

This is the verbal form of the word “evil” that we saw in verse 7.

Onan is as bad as Sodom as well.

“And he did evil in the sight of the LORD,”  
*and he put him to death also.*

In case you hadn't figured it out yet –  
the house of Judah has become as corrupt as Sodom  
because they have joined themselves to the Canaanites.

In verse 11 then Judah tells Tamar to remain in her father's house  
until Shelah is old enough for marriage.

There is an ambiguity here:

technically she is still part of Judah's house,  
but because she is physically in her father's house,

she might have had the option of walking away from Judah's family.  
On the other hand, because Judah has promised Shelah to Tamar,  
he still has jurisdiction over her.

But Judah does not intend to honor his word.

After promising her Shelah,  
he turns his back on her –  
as he has turned his back on Joseph –  
and as he has turned his back on Jacob, his father –  
as he has turned his back on the covenant promise of God!

And worse yet, he blames her for the death of his sons.

Beware of judging when you do not have all the information!

Judah and his sons have become no better than the Canaanites.  
They dwell in the promised Land, but like Esau before them,  
they have no interest in the promises of God:  
they are conformed to the loves and passions of this world.

What drives Judah in this passage?

Sex.

Fathering sons.

And making a place for himself in the land.

In other words, Judah is obsessed with land and seed!

What's so bad about that?

Isn't that what God promised?

But land and seed is not given to Abraham for his own selfish pleasure!

Remember the third point:

“and through you all nations shall be blessed!”

Land and seed – and the blessing to the nations –

all comes to pass through the presence of God:

“I will be your God, and you will be my people.”

Joseph has no land – and no seed – he has been dispossessed of everything –  
except he has the presence of God.

Tamar has also been dispossessed.

She *went and remained in her father's house*.

But unlike Judah, Tamar is faithful to her word.

This Canaanite woman considers herself to be a part of Judah's family.

She has embraced the covenant promises.

Judah's sons may have been wicked like Sodom,

but by faith, Tamar sees the promises of God.

And in this respect, Tamar is like Joseph.

*39:6b Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. 7 And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." 8 But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. 9 He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" 10 And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.*

In Genesis 39:6b we hear that Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.

We were told in Genesis 29:17 that Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance.

Now we are told that her son is also beautiful in form and appearance.

Joseph is a good looking man.

And his master's wife noticed him –

literally, she lifted up her eyes to Joseph.

We usually call her "Potiphar's wife" –

and that is who she is –

but the text always refers to her as "his master's wife,"

as if to remind us that she is off limits to him.

But unlike Er and Onan, Joseph understands his duty.

Potiphar has entrusted everything to Joseph –

everything, that is, except his wife.

"How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"

In contrast to the house of Judah,

Joseph will not walk in the counsel of the ungodly,

or stand in the way of sinners,

or sit in the seat of the scornful.

And in response to temptation, Joseph says "no."

There is something to the advice, "just say no."

If something is sinful, then there can be only one response:

*NO!*

Our problem is that we say "yes" to sin and "no" to God.

Joseph understands that there is only one answer to sin:

NO.

But he has another problem:

his source of temptation is his master's wife.

Day after day she keeps coming after him.

What would you do?

It would be great if you could just avoid the temptation entirely –

but what if you can't?

Joseph is persistent in his refusal to dabble with sin.  
He will not listen to it.  
If you toy with sin and play with it,  
then it will devour you.

Joseph understands, however, that it is not just his master who would be offended:  
“How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?”

If you are only concerned about offending others,  
then your public image will be squeaky clean –  
but your private life will be a mess.  
Don’t worry about what others think of you:  
be concerned with what *God* thinks of you!

### **3. Two Women with Garments (38:12-19 and 39:11-18)**

Our third contrast is found in 38:12-19 and 39:11-18 –  
with two women with garments.

Last time I suggested that we need to “follow the robe.”

If you look at what Joseph is wearing, you will understand what is happening.

*39:11 But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, 12 she caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me.” But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house. 13 And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, 14 she called to the men of her household and said to them, “See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. 15 And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house.” 16 Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, 17 and she told him the same story, saying, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. 18 But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house.”*

This time, let’s start with Joseph in chapter 39.

Because one day Joseph has to go into the house to do his work.

And she “caught him by his garment” – a violent act with overtones of rape –  
and he, unwilling to consider for a moment the possibility of giving in,  
he fled and out of the house,  
leaving her with his garment –  
the same word used of Tamar’s garments in chapter 38.

But Joseph’s garments also identify him as the ‘guilty’ party  
(even as Judah will leave Tamar with his signet, cord and staff).

Having been foiled in her schemes thus far,

his master’s wife turns against Joseph and accuses him falsely:



what is more, she even accuses her husband of complicity:  
*The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us...*

So Potiphar's wife uses garments in her deception of her husband.  
Twice now Joseph has been stripped of his garments and mistreated.

Garments are also important for Tamar in chapter 38.

*38:12 In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. 13 And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," 14 she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, 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. 15 When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. 16 He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" 17 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—" 18 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 in to her, and she conceived by him. 19 Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.*

When Tamar realizes what Judah has done to her,  
she "took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil,  
wrapping herself up..." [like a prostitute] v14-15 and v19  
And she goes and meets him at the entrance to Enaim,  
literally, "the opening of the eyes."  
Ironic place name, eh?

At the "opening of the eyes," Judah is blinded!

Verse 12 indicates that Judah's wife has died.  
He grieves for a while and then decides to find a prostitute.

Just a question here:  
how did Tamar know that this was going to work?  
She's a part of Judah's family.  
She knows how he operates.  
She knows that if he has opportunity, he'll take it.  
(Unlike Joseph, who regularly has opportunity, but fears God more).

But *why* does she do this?  
Tamar is not merely interested in having children.  
She wants to see Judah's line continue.  
Like Ruth, she has embraced the very covenant

that her husband and father-in-law have rejected.

As Bruce Waltke says,

“Like Ruth, who will choose her flawed Israelite family over her Moabite roots,  
Tamar remains true to her Israelite family in spite of its glaring failures  
and becomes absorbed into it...

In this light, her deception as a Canaanite prostitute  
to snare her widowed father-in-law into fathering covenant seed  
should be evaluated as a daring act of faith.

Her ‘faithful deception’ wins her a place in the messianic lineage  
along with the ‘faithful treachery’ of Rahab.

In her daring ruse she acts quickly, decisively, and shrewdly,  
qualities also commendable in a king.” (Waltke, 508)

In terms of ethics, Tamar’s actions are perfectly consistent with ancient near eastern laws:  
both Hittite and Assyrian law said that if a married man died  
and no brother was available,  
then “his father shall take her.”

The Mosaic law did not prescribe this,  
but when Moses says “the widow must not marry outside the family” (Dt 5:5)  
and the father is the last member of the family,  
then Tamar’s actions become entirely understandable.

Judah’s actions, on the other hand, remain reprehensible.

As far as he knows, he sees a prostitute by the side of the road,  
and so he says,

*Come, let me come in to you,  
for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law.*

In this way, Judah is like Potiphar’s wife.

And he offers her a young goat in payment –  
but he doesn’t have one with him.

And Tamar, not being an idiot,  
insists on a pledge far more valuable than a goat:  
his signet, cord and staff  
(the emblems of a wealthy man in the ancient world).

And she conceived.

#### **4. Two Judgments Twice Over (38:20-30 and 39:19-23)**

Our final point is to see the two judgments that are rendered –  
because there are two judgments in each case.

There is the initial judgment – the judgment rendered by the “man of the house” –  
and then there is the judgment of God.

In chapter 39 Joseph's master condemns him on the false accusation of his wife.  
And so Joseph was thrown into prison.

(In Egypt, attempted rape was a capital offense –  
the fact that Joseph is only imprisoned  
suggests that Potiphar may have suspected the truth...)

*39:19 As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, "This is the way your servant treated me," his anger was kindled. 20 And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. 21 But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. 22 And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. 23 The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.*

But the verdict of his master is overturned by God.

*But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love  
and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.  
And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners.*

Just like it was in Potiphar's house, so also in the prison.

The prison keeper paid no attention to anything under Joseph's charge  
because the LORD was with Joseph.

And once again –  
if your house is under the rule of the Seed of the Woman –  
the Seed of Abraham  
you will be blessed (even if your house is a prison!).

The point is not that you need to be like Joseph –  
the point is that you need someone like Joseph to rule over you –  
someone of whom it can be said – the LORD is with him!

*38:20 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. 21 And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute who was at Enaim at the roadside?" And they said, "No cult prostitute has been here." 22 So he returned to Judah and said, "I have not found her. Also, the men of the place said, 'No cult prostitute has been here.'" 23 And Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her." 24 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." 25 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." 26 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.*

Back in chapter 38 we hear Judah's initial judgment.

Judah was told that "Tamar is pregnant by prostitution." (v24)

Of course, Judah was also guilty of lying with a prostitute,  
but as was generally the case in such societies,  
the man gets away with it and the woman suffers.

And so Judah condemns her to death.

As the "betrothed" of Shelah, she is still part of his family,  
and any sexual activity on her part would be considered prostitution.

Indeed, Judah seems rather glad to get rid of this troublesome daughter-in-law

But as she was being taken to her death (note that she waits at least a while –  
perhaps long enough for a crowd to gather)

she sends word to him,

*By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant.*

*Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.*

Probably the story of Joseph was known to Judah's family:

how Joseph had been slain by wild animals,  
and how they had taken the robe to their father  
and asked him to identify whose it was.

One doubts that Tamar knew the *true* story of Joseph –

but her message could only have ripped into the heart of Judah:

*Please identify...*

And as Judah stands holding his own signet and cord and staff –  
the symbols of his identity –

he sees what they represent:

his identity is that of a kidnapper, a liar, a covenant breaker,  
one who sells his own brother into slavery and deceives his own father,  
one who treats his daughter-in-law like a prostitute and breaks his word.

And so Judah confesses:

*She is more righteous than I.*

This has a stronger force in Hebrew than it may sound in English.

This is not a simple comparison.

It is a contrast:

What is more, this is a judicial verdict:

"She is righteous – not I."

She is in the right.  
I am in the wrong.

In confessing his own sin before Tamar –  
and indeed before all the people who were gathering for her execution –  
Judah begins the journey of repentance.

If you watch the timeline carefully,  
you begin to see that the birth of Perez and Zerah must be right at the same time  
that Judah is preparing to go back to Egypt to buy bread.  
The 20-25 years of chapter 38  
will take us to the famine of chapter 42.

This is the key moment in Judah's life.  
Without Tamar, the rest of Genesis doesn't happen.  
Without Tamar's unconventional confrontation of Judah,  
then Judah may not humble himself before his father,  
and Benjamin may not go down with his brothers,  
and the story comes to a screeching halt.

If it were not for Tamar, Judah would not be the ancestor of David – or of Christ.

Genesis 38 concludes with the birth of Zerah and Perez:  
*38:27 When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. 28 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." 29 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. 30 Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.*

Perez another younger twin who takes over the position of eldest –  
while Zerah, the one with a red thread (remember Jacob and Esau),  
is displaced.

The two wicked sons who were slain by God  
are now replaced by the sons of faithful Tamar.

Judah is *finally* beginning to look like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.  
All because of the last thing anyone would have expected:  
a righteous Canaanite woman!

And if you had any doubt about how God views Tamar,  
remember that at the end of Ruth,  
Tamar is praised by the elders of Bethlehem  
"May the LORD make Ruth like Rachel and Leah...  
and may your house be like the house of Perez,

whom Tamar bore to Judah...”  
And in Matthew 1, Tamar is included among those faithful few –  
the blessed women who are named in the genealogy of our Savior:

Tamar the Canaanite,  
Rahab the Canaanite harlot,  
Ruth the Moabite,  
Bathsheba “the wife of Uriah”  
and Mary.

And that is why this whole story is truly an Advent story –  
because it was through Tamar that our God brought forth the Messiah –  
the Immanuel (God with us)  
so that even as the LORD was with Joseph  
he might now be *with us* as well.