

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

Philippians 2:4-5 ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,

Philippians 2:19-21 ¹⁹ I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. ²⁰ For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹ They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

How many people do you know who are genuinely concerned for your welfare?

Would anyone say “of you”, that you are genuinely concerned for their welfare?

Many who are rejecting the Gospel will say that it is due their having been hurt by the selfishness of Christians.

True selflessness is rare, even within the Church.

But the One person in all of history who has devoted Himself entirely to your welfare is Jesus Christ.

There is no one like Him.

We are surprised to find that chapter 38 does not follow Joseph down to Egypt.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

Instead, we are treated to an incredible story of faith. And we are surprised to see this faith living in a Canaanite woman named Tamar.

Read Genesis 38:1-5.

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.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

Chapter 38 begins with Judah traveling down the road to apostasy. Judah is acting very much like Esau, who also became a covenant breaker before him.

He departs from his brothers. He is more concerned for his own self-interest than he is for following God or seeking the welfare of his brothers.

God's plan is to train the brothers to love one another. Instead, Judah is departing from them.

Add to this that Judah takes a Canaanite wife, and our hearts begin to churn that Judah is on the road to destruction. He is walking away from the promises of Abraham.

We should be afraid for Judah. His eternal soul is on the line. But we should also be fearful that the promises given to Abraham will not be fulfilled.

Joseph has been sold into slavery.

Judah is well on his way to becoming a Covenant breaker!

The number of God's fullness is now down by 2, from 12 to 10.

The promises of blessing given by God to Abraham appear to be on the verge of collapsing.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

We are not told the name of Judah's wife. But she gives Judah 3 sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah.

When Judah's firstborn is old enough for marriage, he finds for him a wife.

Read Genesis 38:6.

6 And
 Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn,
 and her name was Tamar.

The fact that we do not know Judah's wife, but we do know the name of his son's wife is very purposeful. Tamar is the heroine of this story. And she will be included in the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

At this point, all we know little about Tamar is that she is a Canaanite.

Read Genesis 38:7.

7 But
 Er,
 Judah's firstborn,
 was wicked in the sight of the LORD,
 and the LORD put him to death.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

We are not told of Er's particular sin, or sins, just that he was wicked in the sight of the LORD.

And because of his wickedness, the LORD immediately puts him to death.

It is possible that Er was more wicked than others in the story. But we know from the whole of Scripture that God does not grade on a curve. Judah's actions are also wicked. Er's death is a reminder to us all that our sins are worthy of condemnation.

God could just have easily eliminated Judah!
It is mercy alone that will alter Judah's destiny.

Read Genesis 38:8.

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."

This is where we say, "Wait... what?"
Did he just say what I thought he said?

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

Judah tells his son to “perform the duty of a brother-in-law”.

The Latin word for “husband’s brother” is “levir”. And so, this duty of the husband’s brother is sometimes called “levirate law”. This has nothing to do with “Levitical Law”, the law of the priesthood.

Levirate law is confusing.

Every time it is mentioned in the Bible, which is not often, it seems to have slightly different rules.

It is mentioned here, and later in Deuteronomy 25. And then it is the law assumed in the book of Ruth.

And when the Sadducees attempt to trick Jesus, they bring up this law.

For years I have struggled to understand how this law points us to the Gospel.

I think I finally get it.

Levirate law states that it is the duty of a living brother to provide a son for his deceased brother, so that the inheritance of the dead brother will not be lost.

Deuteronomy 25:5-10 ⁵ "If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. ⁶ And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

Ruth 4:10 ¹⁰ Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers

The dead father lives on through his son. The son bears his name and therefore through the son, the father continues to enjoy a place in the Land of Promise.

Without an heir to inherit the land, the name of the father would be lost, and his stake in the inheritance would be lost.

We do not easily understand this, because we do not see our inheritance as being connected to a specific piece of land. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ has altered our perception of how the promise of land will be fulfilled to us. We inherit the New Heavens and the New Earth.

We also do not view our inheritance as being enjoyed generationally. Every Christian receives their inheritance because they are united to Jesus Christ and are sharers in His inheritance.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

I will connect all of this to Jesus as we go along. But if you are going to be able to rightly make these connections, you must first enter back into the world of Tamar and Judah. We must try to understand their thoughts and motives.

Judah is walking away from the Covenant promises given to Abraham. He does not care about knowing the God of the Covenant. And he is not looking for any heavenly home. But he does care about the here and now. And Jacob has grown in material wealth.

Judah knows that he stands to receive a share in his father's estate. He wants to have an heir through whom his name can live on.

It is important to see that levirate law was not unique to Israel. Other nations had their version of this law. Tamar may even be more influenced by her own family's thinking than what we see in Deuteronomy and Ruth. Those come much later.

While Judah has only his father's material estate in mind, Tamar is thinking of much more. This will become clear as we walk through the passage.

Judah has no doubt as to his responsibility after the death of Er.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

It is his duty as father to ensure that his second son will carry out his duty to give Tamar a son who will become the heir of her first husband – Er.

I know this seems to contradict everything we believe about sexual morals. Our natural reaction is to be grossed out. But, as much as I feel this reaction with you. I want you make an effort suppress these emotions so that you can focus on important Gospel lessons.

It is critical that you see that Judah is telling Onan to carry out a very unselfish act towards his brother Er.

What is unselfish about fulfilling “levirate” law?

Er is the firstborn. Therefore, he is entitled to a greater inheritance than that of his brothers. If he had a son before he died, all his “greater inheritance” would go to his son. But, since he did not have a son, the entirety of that inheritance would now be transferred to the second son, Onan.

Onan stands to gain a pretty sum because Er did not have an heir.

Judah is not telling Onan to take care of Tamar and include her in his now increased inheritance.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

He is telling Onan to give Tamar a son that will bear the name of Er.

This son will be given Er's "greater inheritance," and Onan will be back to receiving the portion of the second born.

Onan stands to lose, big time.

So, Judah is asking Onan to do a very unselfish act of love towards Er, his brother.

And Onan wants no part of such unselfish love.

Read Genesis 38:9-10.

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.

It is not clear what would have happened to Onan if he outright refused his father's command. During the time of Ruth, one would simply be shamed for acting selfishly.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

But Onan has no intention of openly disobeying this law. Instead, he wants to give the impression that he is acting in unselfish love. But in reality, he is making certain that Tamar does not have a son to him. He uses and abuses Tamar.

God perfectly sees the actions and the motives of Onan. And God judges them as wicked. Onan suffers the same fate as Er.

So far, this story presents to us an anti-Gospel attitude. The Gospel depends on brotherly love: one brother acting without regard for his own welfare to ensure the blessing of another brother.

Onan failed to act in unselfish love towards his brother. Maybe Judah will be different. He will now face his own opportunity to act unselfishly.

It is Judah's duty to give his youngest son to Tamar just as he did Onan.

But Judah does not want to do this.

Read Genesis 38:11.

11 Then
 Judah said to Tamar
 his daughter-in-law,

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

"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.

Instead of giving Shelah to Tamar to produce an heir for Er,
Judah tells Tamar to go back to her father's house.

The excuse he gives is that Shelah is too young to produce an
heir. But this is only a concocted lie, designed to get Tamar out
of the picture.

Why does Judah do this?

He is afraid that Shelah will die like his two older brothers. And
then, Judah will not have any heir.

The inheritance of Er is not nearly so valuable to Judah as is his
own inheritance.

If Shelah dies, then Judah's own name will be blotted out. Judah
was willing for his second son to do his duty. But if his last son
were to fulfill his duty, he might also die, and then Judah would
be left without an heir.

And Judah thinks Tamar is the problem.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

He does not even consider that the problem might lie with his sons, or even with his own selfishness.

Judah fails to act unselfishly. When push comes to shove, he thinks only of himself.

Read Genesis 38:12-14.

12 In 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.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

For she saw that Shelah was grown up,
and
she had not been given to him in marriage.

Tamar follows Judah's instruction and returns to the home of her father.

Eventually, it becomes clear that Judah has no intention of giving Shelah to Tamar. So much time passes that Judah's wife dies. He goes through the period of mourning, and then he decides to visit his old Canaanite friend and live it up during one of the yearly feasts.

When Tamar is told that Judah will be passing nearby, she immediately puts into action a plan of great faith.

Judah and his sons represent God's covenant people. They are to be a light to the dying world around them. Those outside the Covenant could see something of the goodness of Yahweh reflected through His people, specifically – through their unselfish love.

Tamar would have heard stories about how God had called Abraham out of the land of Ur and gave to him great covenant promises. She would have also heard how those promises were now given to Jacob.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

Her father-in-law is also the rightful heir to these promises and his sons. But rather than being a reflection of God's goodness, Judah and his sons communicate the exact opposite of God's character. Judah cares nothing for the spiritual heart of the promises. He cares only about himself and the outward crust of the promises – the material wealth of this life.

But while Judah is like Esau, Tamar is like Ruth.
Against all odds, Tamar believes in the Promises.

Only I believe Tamar's faith is even more amazing than that of Ruth.

Why?

Because Tamar was the brunt of the selfishness of God's covenant people over many years.

Her husband was selfishly wicked.

His brother uses her sexually without any thought of giving her an heir.

Her father-in-law lies to her and casts her aside.

Can you imagine how you would feel if you were Tamar?

You would not only hate Judah and his family, but you would also hate the God who had joined Himself to such a selfish family.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

How often do people say that they want nothing to do with Christ, because all they have ever experienced from Christians is selfishness and condemnation?

The fact that Tamar continues to want anything to do with the inheritance of Judah is remarkable.

She could have remained in the security of her father's house. Or she might have been married to one of her fellow Canaanites.

Instead, she is willing to risk everything, including her very life, to have a portion in Abraham's inheritance.

Judah is casting aside his inheritance, while Tamar is tenaciously seeking it.

What is Tamar's plan?

Since Judah will not give Shelah to her to produce an heir, she devises a way to trick Judah into giving her an heir.

Read Genesis 38:15-19.

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

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar
She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

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

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar **She is More Righteous than I**

Genesis 38:1-30

she arose
and
went away,
and
taking off her veil
she put on the garments of her widowhood.

As we have seen before, there are many details that are governed by God's sovereign hand.
So many things might have gone wrong with her plan.
Judah might have just passed her by.
Judah might have had some means of payment with him.
Judah might have been unwilling to leave his personal items with Tamar.
Judah might have recognized her.
Tamar might not have become pregnant.

If Tamar is discovered, she knows that she will likely be killed.
Tamar is willing to risk everything because she believes the covenant promises are worthwhile.

God will honor her faith.

More than a secret encounter that might have been later denied by Judah, Tamar must secure tangible proof that the child within her belongs to Judah.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

Judah gives her three proofs of his identity. These are pledges that he will give her payment.

A short while later, Judah tries to pay his fee and retrieve his items of identification.

Only Tamar cares nothing about payment. The only payment she wants is a share in the Covenant Blessing.

Read Genesis 38:20-23.

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.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar
She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

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."

Judah is outwardly honorable. But inwardly he is a scoundrel.
He cares nothing about the spiritual promises of blessing.
He is selfish.

And he has cast aside Tamar.

And he is arrogant and self-righteous.

Read Genesis 38:24.

24 About three months later
Judah was told,
"Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral.
Moreover,
she is pregnant by immorality."

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

And
Judah said,
"Bring her out,
and
let her be burned."

Word comes to Judah of Tamar's pregnancy.

As soon as he hears of it, he is ready to condemn her.

But even his self-righteous judgment is motivated by selfishness.

He is not concerned so much about morality. He was just engaged in prostitution himself.

He wants to use morality for his own selfish purposes.

As long as Tamar lived, she was a constant reminder that he had not fulfilled his obligation to give Shelah to her.

But now he had a legitimate excuse to remove Shelah altogether. Shelah would be free of his duty and Judah's inheritance would remain intact.

Only, Tamar has already thought everything through.

Judah is carrying out her plans like they are scripted.

Read Genesis 38:25-26.

25 As she was being brought out,
she sent word to her father-in-law,
"By the man to whom these belong,

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar
She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

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.

Now Tamar lays down the gauntlet!
I am pregnant by the man who owns these!
Judah recognizes his signet and cord and staff immediately.
It does not take him long to realize what has happened.

And his statement is powerful!
She is more righteous than I.
In the LXX he says, "She is righteous, not I."

Judah is simultaneously recognizing his own guilt and Tamar's
righteousness.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

God uses Tamar to bring Judah to recognize his own sin.
She has sought the Covenant Promises while he cared nothing
for them.

Brotherly love has meant nothing to him.
His selfishness has been exposed.

This moment of admission of guilt is the turning point in Judah's
life.

We will see in the coming chapters that Judah will begin to act
unselfishly.

But what brings about this change?

It is the mercy of God alone.

God might have judged Judah for his wickedness.

Instead, God brings Judah to see his need for a Savior.

Judah is graciously given the gift of repentance.

And Tamar's faith is the means that God uses.

Read Genesis 38:27-30.

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,

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar
She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

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.

God honors Tamar.

Rather than bearing the name of Er, she bears the name of Judah.

It is not through Shelah that the Messiah will come.

It is through one of Tamar's children: Perez.

The fact that she has twins and it is from the younger of the twins that the Messiah will come, reminds us again of God choosing Jacob over Esau.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

This whole story reeks of God's sovereign grace.

But how does this whole story lead us to Jesus Christ?

Because in Jesus Christ, we finally have the brother that cares more about the welfare of his brothers than His own.

In Jesus Christ, we have One who gives up His own inheritance to win an inheritance for us.

Philippians 2:5-8 ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Everywhere we look in the world, we find selfishness.

It is true that God's grace is training us to be more like Christ.

Our constant prayer should be that the attitude of Jesus Christ might more fully live in us.

But our hope does not lie in the unselfishness of the Church.

Our rests in Jesus Christ alone.

In Jesus Christ, we have the One Man who is utterly devoted to our welfare.

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

It is Jesus' devotion to the welfare of Judah that did not allow him to continue down the road to apostasy.

It is Jesus Christ who graciously opened the eyes of Judah to his own selfishness.

It is Jesus Christ who brings Judah to repentance and faith.

It is Jesus Christ who suffers and dies on the cross in the place of Judah.

And it is Jesus Christ who convinces Tamar that God's blessing was worthwhile, even after she had been treated selfishly by God's own people.

Jesus is the author and finisher of faith. Tamar's faith was authored by Christ.

Tamar is the heroine of this story, but not because of her greatness. She is the heroine because she continued to look to the unselfish promise of God. Tamar's hopes are fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, she has found the brother that cares for her.

Are you trusting in Jesus to provide for your welfare?

Or are you still striving to look out for yourself?

The Saga of Joseph – Interlude of Tamar
She is More Righteous than I

Genesis 38:1-30

Only as you become more assured of His absolute devotion to your welfare, will you be able to think of the interests of others.

Amen!