

## God is with the Righteous: Even Scandalous Outsiders Genesis 38

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### I. God Interrupts

Please turn in your copy of God's Word to Genesis 38.<sup>1</sup> You are a citizen of Israel, a small nation of stiff-necked and resilient people, living in first century Jerusalem under Roman rule. You worship the Lord, the One True God and Creator. Life has been full of unexpected turns and at times, looked very bleak, but, God has lovingly preserved your people and mercifully kept his promises every step of the way.

Today, you gather in a synagogue to hear the public reading of Moses's writings, and you expect the narrative to continue where it left off last time with one of Jacob's favorite sons, Joseph. But God, the Divine Author, interrupts this section featuring Joseph by interjecting some awkward and sordid accounts about one of Jacob's other sons.

### II. Judah Ventures Away (v.1-11)

*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.*

#### A. His House is Blessed (v.1-5)

Judah is the fourth son of Jacob and Leah. The last time we heard from him, he devised a plan whereby he and his brothers could profit by selling Joseph into slavery. Soon after this transaction, Judah ventures away from his family about one day's journey to a town called Adullam and befriends a foreigner named Hirah.<sup>2</sup> Here, away from his people, Judah sees a Canaanite woman, takes her for his wife, and she bears him three sons.

There are two things to note about his relationship with this Canaanite woman. First, though the story doesn't highlight it here, marrying a Canaanite was historically a shameful act in Israel. Abraham and Isaac forbade their sons to marry Canaanite women, and presumably Jacob felt the same way, but Judah proceeded with the marriage despite the weight of his family's history.<sup>3</sup> Second, if the account of their relationship sounds mechanical, especially in comparison to the warmth of the Isaac-Rebekah and Jacob-Rachel relationships, you've picked up on the first hint that this relationship is more a product of Judah's lusts than true love.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the birth of three sons is an incredible blessing in their culture because family lineage is passed through sons. So, despite leaving his people and marrying a Canaanite, it appears Judah's future is secure, and he'll have a number of heirs to bequeath the wealth and lineage of his fathers. But, that quickly changes, and his household is turned upside down.

*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.*

### **B. His House is Turned Upside Down (v.6-11)**

There are two unfamiliar cultural practices in this passage that we must understand to appreciate all that's going on between Judah and his foreign daughter-in-law, Tamar.

The first unfamiliar practice is arranged marriage where typically, the couple have never met and the bride is purchased for a price. Arranged marriage was commonplace for people in that time, and it was an important way to insure family lines continued to the next generation.<sup>5</sup> Here, Judah takes a step to perpetuate his family line, but God puts Er to death because of his wickedness, and Judah is once again without heirs beyond his two remaining sons.

As a result, Judah commands his next son, Onan, to perform a second cultural practice that is certainly unfamiliar to us (and maybe even a bit repulsive) called levirate marriage. This is where a man is obligated to marry his deceased brother's childless wife in order to, once again, preserve the family line. Later on in Israel's history this practice would be codified into law as written in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, but at this point, levirate marriage was obviously in effect.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible tells us in no uncertain terms that Onan merely went through the motions of levirate marriage, but never actually followed through on his obligation to father a child for his brother because he "knew that the offspring would not be his." But what exactly does that mean? It means that when Er died, Onan stood to inherit all the benefits and privileges of being Judah's firstborn because he was the second son. Any child he fathered with Tamar would "count" toward Er's inheritance, thereby diluting his own share and

causing leadership of the tribe to pass through the child rather than him. The sin of Onan, then, for which the Lord put him to death, was that he acted like he was following the levirate duty, but he, in fact, avoided his obligations to perpetuate the family line all from desires of greed and power.<sup>7</sup>

What is Judah to do now that two of his sons are dead? Does he follow through on the obligation of levirate marriage and give Tamar to his only remaining son? No, he sends her back to her father under the pretense that Shelah hasn't reached marriageable age. On the surface this sounds like a reasonable request, but The Bible cuts away Judah's facade and reveals that he simply lied because of a superstitious fear that the foreigner, Tamar, is cursed. He has no intention of giving Tamar to Shelah and, really, he shows the same lack of concern for perpetuating his family line as Onan. Will the Lord put him to death for such wickedness? Is Tamar really "cursed?" Will another suitor come for her?

### III. Judah's Line is Secured (v.12-26)

*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.*

#### A. By an Unexpected Conception (v.12-19)

Time passes, people age, Judah's wife dies, and he moves on. Make no mistake: Judah is a calloused man. Compared to Jacob's intense sorrow in the previous chapter, Judah appears indifferent at best over the death of his wife and two sons.<sup>8</sup> What better way to mourn the loss of your wife than to be with a trusted friend? Except, what kind of friend is Hirah? His entrance onto the scene is foreboding. Judah acted on his lusts and married a Canaanite woman those many years ago, and it appears not much has changed since then.

Meanwhile, Shelah has reached marriageable age, and Tamar knows it. What is she to do when her father-in-law won't act? She has waited patiently for years and is poised to provide an heir for the family of Judah. A childless widow in her

situation is extremely vulnerable without a husband and children. She hears the news of Judah's latest journey and sees an opportunity to fulfill the levirate marriage that was promised to her, but not in the way we expect.

Tamar strikes on an unbelievable plan to deceive Judah by posing as a prostitute and tempting him on the route to Timnah. She looks to capitalize on the fact that his sexual appetites are running high since his wife is deceased and wool harvest is a time of feasting and merriment. They agree on a price, but he doesn't have payment. So, she requests three possessions that are solely linked to his identity, and Judah gives them without hesitation. It's amazing what a man will give up in order to feed his appetites.

Earlier, I mentioned a subtle hint that Judah is steered by his lusts, but this scene makes that characteristic abundantly clear. The Bible tells us that on that night Judah unknowingly fulfilled the levirate duties that Onan refused and Judah had promised in Shelah so many years ago. His lineage once again *appears* to be secure thanks to an unexpected conception with Tamar. She leaves with his identity before he is able to learn her's. I don't begin to think I understand how this could happen, but God allowed her plan to work. The only problem is that Tamar and the new life inside her are in very grave danger.

*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.*

### **B. Through an Unexpected Verdict (20-26)**

Judah attempts to show he's an honorable man by fulfilling his end of the bargain with the prostitute. He sends a goat by way of Hirah, but she's nowhere to be seen and neither are his articles. Scouring the area for a prostitute that outsmarted him would be shameful, so they give up the search.

Tamar has known for a few months that she is pregnant, but now she's showing and it's obvious to everyone. Judah hears the news and charges her with infidelity, which would've been a serious offense during the betrothal period.

Then, as she's led toward a gruesome death, Tamar and the life within are rescued through an unexpected verdict. She presents Judah's articles to prove that he is the father, which forces him to admit that withholding Shelah was wrong and that she was justified to take matters into her own hands. By an act of Divine Justice, she is freed because she is righteous.

I want to pause for a moment and reflect on Judah. He is a hard, licentious, and deceitful man, and we see these attributes intensify over time. He led his brothers in profiting from Joseph's slavery and lying to their father. A few decades later, he deceives the community and is prepared to kill not just Tamar, but the unborn life within her. He seems indifferent over the death of his two sons and wife. His relationships with two women in our passage are governed mostly by his sexual appetites rather than a concern for their wellbeing.

Sadly, all of these qualities masquerade as masculinity in our own time, even in the church. But the Apostle Paul when writing to Titus, admonishes Christian men to renounce such ungodliness, and instead, to cultivate self-control, love, faithfulness, and dignity.<sup>9</sup> Jesus is the embodiment of all these virtues, and the New Testament is replete with examples of him forgiving people of every background and class for their sin and calling them to live accordingly. Men, God calls us to protect the most vulnerable and look out for the best interests of women. Young men, especially, you must exercise self-control and speak truthfully; when pursuing a woman, keep your word and preserve her purity and honor, even when it comes at great personal cost and inconvenience.

The final verses are easy to gloss over in the wake of the dramatic scene that preceded, but our narrative isn't over! We still have an unanswered question: what will happen to the family line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah?

#### **IV. Tamar is Blessed (v.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, 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.*

##### **A. With the Birth of Twins**

Wow, how merciful is God here?! He blesses Tamar with twins—one to replace each of Judah's wicked sons that were put to death. Rather than being put to death for infidelity, she is declared righteous because of her long-suffering concern to perpetuate the family line of Judah and produce descendants for the people of Abraham. The account of Tamar is even more amazing when we look at the New Testament, where, in the first chapter of the Book of Matthew, she

features prominently as the first of five women mentioned in Jesus's genealogy.<sup>10</sup> I commend it for your reading.

## V. Reflect and Respond

These wonderful connections display God's incomparable genius as the Divine Author of Scripture, but we'd be remiss if we stopped here. There are three important points for us to consider from this passage.

First, do you see the hand of God in Tamar's life in order to accomplish his redemptive purposes? What about your own life? Does the eye of your mind scan for God's mercy in the midst of your sin and being sinned against? Know that God's kindness is meant to lead us to repent of sin and turn to Jesus by faith.

Second, we need to embrace the uncomfortable truth that God often works his redemptive purposes in our lives, and those around us, in the tangled mess of what is seen as public "scandal." Most times, our knowledge of people's sin is extremely limited, but there are instances when personal sin becomes very public, and this can lead to debilitating shame and isolation. Do you know someone whose sin is public? See that as fertile soil for the Gospel and humbly come alongside that person with love and meekness. Or perhaps *your* sin is public. The temptation will undoubtedly be to isolate and pull away from God's people, but I implore you, "Please, don't sequester yourself. Walk together with Christ and his people." You see, believing that God works in scandalous waters requires Christians to humbly wade into the unknown clinging to Jesus for help and hope.

Finally, the greatest scandal in all of history is not that some of Jesus's ancestors weren't Jews, or that they lied, or that they prostituted themselves, or that they had children out of wedlock. No, the greatest scandal in all of history is that God would send his own Son to die for a people that rebelled against him, and that these rebellious sinners could receive Jesus's righteousness by faith. We are these people. We are ones on the path to a fiery death that God mercifully and unexpectedly pronounces "righteous" through the work of Jesus...yes, even scandalous outsiders like us.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible English Standard Version* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), Genesis 38.

<sup>2</sup> Aharoni, Yohanan and Avi-Yonah, Michael, *The MacMillan Bible Atlas*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968), 58.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 15-60, vol. 2* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1994), 364.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, 366

<sup>5</sup> Dvora E. Weisberg, *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism* (Hanover/London: University Press of New England, 2009), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Dvora E. Weisberg, xix.

<sup>7</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, "The Book of Genesis." In *Genesis Chapters 18-50, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 435.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, 364.

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<sup>9</sup> See Titus 2.

<sup>10</sup> See Matthew 1:1-17.