

The Belonging: A Study in Genesis 37-50
Lesson 2 - Judah: An Emerging Tribe
Genesis 38

We are about to embark on a lesson that is cringe-worthy at best. Genesis 37 ends with a broken-hearted father who has just been led to believe that his favorite son, Joseph, has been killed by wild animals. We would expect Genesis 38 to be a continuation of the story of Joseph, but Moses takes a detour and inserts a story about Judah, putting his sin and deepest shame on full display. John Phillips says,

The Bible does not shun telling the whole, sad truth about human nature. Human nature, as a result of the Fall, is raw...Indeed, that God should pick a man like Judah and make him a prince in Israel, and then send His own Son into the world, not merely from Judah's line, but from the outworking of the very events recorded in that chapter, is nothing less than a miracle of grace. (*Exploring Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, p.303)

Amen to that!

As we study this incident in Judah's life, keep in mind that the tribe of Judah is emerging into the forefront of biblical history. Judah has, even though unofficially at this point, assumed the role of the first born as Reuben, Simeon, and Levi have fallen out of favor due to incest and treachery.

I. Judah and His Sons (Genesis 38:1-11)

It appears likely that a guilty conscience begins to make Judah restless. He watches his aging father's inconsolable grief etch lines of sorrow into his face. When sleep mercifully comes to Judah, we can assume the scenario of tossing Joseph into the pit and hearing his pitiful cries infiltrate his dreams. Surely Judah wakes up drenched in sweat and trembling at the memory, wishing he could go back and have a chance to make things right.

As he imagines the horrors of Joseph's life in his current situation, Judah can no longer stand the weight of his part in the treacherous ruse. He does what most do when stricken with guilt, he runs, erroneously thinking he could outrun his misdeeds.

Genesis 38:1 tells us that "Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah." While there, Judah purposefully violates God's command and takes a Canaanite bride, Bath-Shua (see 1 Chronicles 2:3). She is a pagan, a member of a sin-cursed race that practices a religion of utter wickedness. The birth of three sons quickly follows. Judah's Canaanite wife seems to have no interest in surrendering to his God and to make matters worse, it appears the sons take after their mother.

When his firstborn son Er is of marriageable age, Judah arranges a marriage with Tamar. John Phillips explains the meaning of her name and her character:

Her name means "Palm Tree," suggestive of beauty, slenderness, grace, and usefulness. From the rest of the story, and from the position God gave that woman in the Messianic line, we conclude she must have been a woman of high character and noble aspirations despite her pagan birth and background. She seems to have entered into the Messianic hope of which, no doubt, Judah had spoken to her when negotiating the

matter of her marriage to his oldest son (John Phillips, *Exploring Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, p. 304).

Er is exposed to the teachings of the One True God, but he rejects them outright. Instead, he holds fast to his mother's pagan influence. So great is Er's wickedness that "the Lord took his life" (Genesis 38:7). What a staggering obituary!

Because Er died without an heir, what happens next is a common practice in the ancient world known as a levirate marriage.

In ancient times, if a man died without a child, it was common for the man's unmarried brother to marry the widow in order to provide an heir for the deceased. A widow would marry a brother-in-law, and the first son produced in that union was considered the legal descendant of her dead husband. (<https://www.gotquestions.org/levirate-marriage.html>)

Levirate marriage would become a part of the Law in Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

Judah instructs his second son, Onan, to perform his duty as a brother-in-law to Tamar and raise up an offspring of his dead brother, Er. It seems Onan was just as wicked as his elder brother, perhaps even more so. To fulfill his own sexual desires, he was more than willing to sleep with Tamar, but he had no desire to father a child with her. He purposefully "wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother" (Genesis 38:9). This displeased the Lord "so He took his life also" (Genesis 38:10).

The seeds of Judah's sinful participation in his brothers' scheme to get rid of Joseph are beginning to bear fruit, compounding his problems and destroying others' lives in his wake. Galatians 6:7-8, often referred to as "the law of the harvest," says, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life."

Judah now has only one remaining son, Shelah. He was still quite young, but Judah promises that Shelah will fulfill the conditions of the levirate marriage to Tamar when he becomes of age. However, Judah never intends for that to happen. He fears if he gives Shelah to Tamar, the young man will suffer the same fate as his older brothers. So, Judah tells Tamar to return to her father's house until his son is old enough to provide an heir, although he has no intention of fulfilling this promise.

II. Judah and His Sins (Genesis 38:12-23)

After a considerable time has passed, Judah's wife dies. When the time of mourning is complete, Judah goes to shear his sheep with his friend, Hirah the Adullamite. This is the second mention of his ungodly friend who seems to have great influence on Judah. John Phillips comments on this relationship writing, "First he was Judah's acquaintance, then he became Judah's associate, and he ended up by becoming Judah's accomplice." (John Phillips, *Exploring Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, p.304)

“Don't be deceived! Evil companionships corrupt good morals.” 1 Corinthians 13:33.

In the ancient world, “sheep shearing was frequently associated with festivity and licentious behavior characteristic of pagan fertility-cut practices.” (John MacArthur, *John MacArthur Study Bible*, p.52 quoted in *The Belonging*, p.81). What follows next leaves us wondering about the spiritual state of Judah.

Years have passed without Judah fulfilling his promise to Tamar to provide a heir through his youngest son, Shelah. When she hears Judah is going to Timnah to shear his sheep, she disguises herself as a temple prostitute. The fact that Tamar knows Judah has a habit of visiting temple prostitutes reveals much about Judah's character. It has been said, “Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.” Oh Judah, how your sin has blinded you!

Judah does not recognize Tamar through her disguise and promises to send her a young goat in exchange for her sexual favors. Knowing Judah is not a man of his word, she wisely asks for a pledge. Judah hands over his seal, his cord, and his staff. The tryst results in a pregnancy.

Judah tasks his friend, Hirah, to return to the pagan temple with a young goat in exchange for his personal identification. Hirah returns to tell Judah that there was no temple prostitute there. Judah says, “Let her keep them, otherwise we will become a laughingstock” (Genesis 38:23). Little does Judah know that his chickens are about to come home to roost!

III. Judah's Seed (Genesis 38:24-30)

Three months pass before the gossips circulate news of Tamar's pregnancy. Judah's indignation erupts, most likely the fruit of a guilty conscience, and he demands that she be burned to death because of her immorality. Judah's secret tryst with a temple prostitute is weighing on him, but in his mind, his secret is safe with some random harlot in Timnah. He shakes off his guilt and soothes his troubled soul with the knowledge that Tamar, the woman he has come to dread and dislike, will finally be out of his life for good. And he must be exceedingly grateful that Shelah did not have to fulfill his role to Tamar.

As Tamar is apprehended, she is able to produce the items belonging to Judah. Judah says, “She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah” (Genesis 38:26). Judah is not once named in the events that follow. It appears he has washed his hands completely of the woman who brought such shame to his family name. He seems unaware or uninterested that one of the sons born to him will stand directly in the Messianic line. In Judah's backslidden condition he cannot believe that God could be a God of such grace as to redeem this situation for His glory.

Twins are born to Tamar. One baby, named Zerah, extended his hand and the midwife tied a scarlet thread around his wrist. This would identify him as the firstborn, with all its privileges. But this little one withdraws his hand and his brother makes his entrance first. So they called him Perez. The name *Perez* in Hebrew means “breach” or “he who bursts forth,” and it refers to how he was born (<https://www.gotquestions.org/Perez-in-the-Bible.html>).

From this child with the unusual birth story, the line of Christ was carried forward for another generation. Such was the grace of God to Tamar and to Judah as well. In the biblical genealogies, Perez is listed as an ancestor of Boaz, King David, and the Lord Jesus.

Make no mistake. Tamar and Judah were both guilty before the Lord. Tamar became consumed with her rightful place as the matriarch of Judah's oldest son and took matters into her own hands. Judah did not fulfill his God-given responsibilities, either to raise his boys in the faith or to honor their roles in the levirate marriage. Tamar and Judah sinned in their immoral union. but God sovereignly worked through their sinfulness to bring about the Lord Jesus Christ through their bloodline (see Ruth 4:18-22; Matthew 1:3; Luke 3:33). In Revelation 5:5 the Messiah is called the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, having descended from Judah through Perez. Only God can take our sinful bent, our poor choices, and our self-righteous tendencies and use them to move His plan forward. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Beloved, just think about it. One glorious day, all who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, will be gathered together to spend all eternity with the Lord. And we will finally be home where we BELONG!