

Judah and Tamar
Genesis 38:1 – 30
Matthew 1:1 – 3

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
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We believe that the Bible is God's word to us. The Bible teaches us truths about our world, human history, God's nature and his will for us. At the same time, some Bible passages are easier to grasp and understand than others. Indeed, some Bible stories can be downright puzzling. This is one of them.

Why is this story included in Genesis? And, why is it told to us at this point? The previous chapter, Genesis 37, introduces us to the story of Joseph and of how his brothers sell him into slavery. The chapter ends with Joseph's brothers deceiving their father, Jacob, into believing that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. In Genesis 38 there is no mention of Joseph. We will not pick up his story again until chapter 39. What is going on? Where is God's message to us in this rather sordid story of Judah and Tamar?

First, we note Judah's many moral and spiritual problems.

Judah's many moral and spiritual problems – vs. 1 – 11

It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside

Before we take a look at Judah's moral failings, I think it important to take careful note of the opening words of this chapter: It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned. In chapter 37 we are told of the brothers selling Joseph into slavery. Now we are told that Judah separates from the rest of the family. He goes to reside among the Canaanites. He turns aside from his brothers. He marries a Canaanite woman. We are even told the name of his Canaanite friend, Hirah.

Why does Judah separate himself from his brothers, from his family, from the covenant community? I think that it is reasonable to conclude that Judah feels uneasy, guilty, regarding how he and his brothers treated Joseph. Originally, the brothers intended to kill Joseph. It is Judah who saves Joseph's life, but his motive in doing so is not commendable (37:26 – 27). Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. Judah separated himself. People who are lost often separate themselves from loved ones. The family is the first line of protection and defense in God's economy. If we do something to betray the fundamental loyalties of family, it is to be expected that we will pull back, disassociate ourselves from those who remind us of our sin, our moral failure. Judah has had enough. He was part of the conspiracy that betrayed Joseph. He washes his hands of the family. He leaves the people of the covenant, the people of God, behind. He starts anew, among the Canaanites.

This is a common temptation for God's people: to wander away from the people of God, from the community of the covenant. When I meet someone new, I often ask, "Are you part of a church community?" The most common response I receive to that question is, "No. I used to be." Sin threatens the covenant community. What the brothers did was wrong. Judah separates in part because he feels the guilt of their action, the consequence of sin. That in turn means for Judah that now the things of God are of little importance. Sin breaks family ties and connections. It leads to an unwise friendship – the Canaanite Hirah. And, it leads Judah to marry a Canaanite woman. Recall Abraham's insistence that Isaac not be wedded to a Canaanite woman; and of how distressed Rebekah was when her son Esau took a Canaanite wife.

The spiritual corruption spreads. Judah has three sons: Er, Onan and Shelah. Like father, like son: Judah marries the first son, Er, to a Canaanite woman named Tamar. However, Er is described as *wicked*, and God puts him to death.

At this point, we must pause and take note of an ancient custom called Levirate marriage. The expectation was that if the oldest son of a family were to die childless, his younger brother would be expected to take the older brother's widow as his own wife. This sounds very strange to we moderns. The key thing to note regarding Levirate marriage is that it secured the continuation of the family line and the rights of inheritance. This explains the nature of the sin committed by Judah's second son, Onan. Being a surrogate, Onan knew that any child conceived from he and Tamar's union would not be his, but would instead carry on his deceased brother's line. A son born to Tamar would have the privileges of the clan, of birthright and blessing. Onan enjoys the pleasure of intimacy with Tamar, while acting in a manner to prevent the possibility of pregnancy. He is a hypocrite. He gives the appearance of doing his duty, while in fact not accepting the responsibility of marriage. Onan has a duty to God, to the lineage of his father Judah, to Tamar, to the family and to future generations: but he will not accept it. God judges Onan and he too dies.

Judah's spiritual blindness is complete. He does not perceive the wickedness of his sons. Judah has wandered from the people of God, from the covenant community, and he cannot see the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of his household. Instead, he blames Tamar. He believes that she carries a curse; that Tamar is the problem. He treats Tamar unjustly: he promises to give Tamar his third son, Shelah, when he is of age, but Judah has no intention of keeping that promise. He sends Tamar away, sending her back to her father's family.

Thankfully, for both Judah and Tamar, from God's perspective, both Judah and Tamar are part of the covenant community, the people of God. Judah is not interested in justice at this point, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is very much interested in justice. God lays before Judah a road to self-discovery. It is not a pretty road. But it is a road that leads to spiritual transformation for Judah – and Tamar.

Judah's God-given road to self-discovery – vs. 12 – 23

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

Tamar is owed a husband. She is widowed, twice over. She, and the family, needs a son. She has no future without a son. She is off limits to any other family, to any other man. A son would be her form of Social Security. Her protection in old age. And Judah, the man who should be watching out for Tamar’s interests – and his own! – has no care or concern for her. Verses 12 – 23 lay out how God will turn Judah around. Though he is not named in these verses, God is at work. He is a God who cares about widows and orphans. He is a God who wants to see justice done.

Tamar learns of the planned sheep shearing festival, near Enaim, Judah will attend. The shearing will be hard work, but also festive. There will be drinking and merry making. Tamar calculates that the festivities will help. The name, Enaim, is ironic. It means *two eyes* and refers to *seeing*. But Judah, as we have seen, is spiritually blind. He did not see the wickedness of his sons. Now, he will not perceive his own daughter-in-law dressed as a temple prostitute. Judah sees her and negotiations begin for an intimate encounter. Tamar asks, “What will you give me, that you may come in to me?” Judah should have given her Shelah as a husband. Instead, in exchange for a sexual encounter, he gives her his walking stick, his signet and his cord. This is the ancient equivalent to handing over his wallet. These were things that were unique possessions of Judah. They were his and his alone.

God has placed Judah on a road to self-discovery. The end of the road is near as we read of Judah’s self-condemnation.

Judah’s self-condemnation – v. 24

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.”

As Tamar hoped and intended, she becomes pregnant as result of her incestuous liaison with Judah. She returns to her father’s home and time passes. In time her pregnancy is evident. The word spreads. She has no husband, so the explanation for her pregnancy must be immorality her part.

Judah, when he hears the report, flies to a murderous rage. We are told he said, “Bring her out, and let her be burned.” In Hebrew, Judah utters only two words: “Bring” “Burn.” Judah was unwilling to support Tamar in her need as a widow. But he is quick to condemn her in his anger. We must all beware of quick judgment.

God, in his grace, meets Judah to turn aside his rage. God brings Judah to a life changing moment of self-discovery.

Judah’s self-discovery – v. 25

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

The overall message of the movie “Signs,” directed by Philadelphia filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan, transforms as you watch the last scene unfold. For most of the film, you the viewer believe that the story is about cryptic messages, alien invaders and crop circles. Mel Gibson plays Graham Hess, a former Episcopal priest, a man who has lost his faith. In the very last scene of the movie, Gibson turns toward the camera, and we see that he is wearing his clerical collar again. The “Signs” of the movie’s title are not crop circles, but the details of the story that have led a fallen priest to return to faith and belief.

Tamar is prepared for Judah’s summons. She produces her signs – the walking stick, the signet and cord – and asks Judah to identify them. At this moment, Judah looks into a mirror. He sees himself as the moral and spiritual failure that he is. Now Judah sees. Now things become clear. At Enaim, Judah had been blind. He did not see his own daughter-in-law in front of him. Now he sees. This is a necessary step to any true conversion. We must see ourselves as we are. God must reveal us to ourselves. At this moment, God reveals Judah to Judah. Judah needs his conversion experience to see himself as he truly is: a sinner.

Our human problem is that it is sin that blinds us. Until this moment, Judah was blind. Judah now sees that it was not Tamar who was cursed, but his sons who were wicked. Judah now identifies the baby as his own. He knows that he, Judah, was wrong and that Tamar has been treated unjustly.

This is how God works graciously in our lives. To see ourselves as we truly are is painful. Judah’s moment of self-understanding unmask all the spiritual compromise, falsehood, deception, and injustice that had marked his life since he left his brothers, his family, the community of the covenant.

This, in turn, brings Judah to his moment of conversion. He declares of Tamar, “She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.”

Judah’s conversion – v. 26

“She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.”

Earlier we asked the question, “Why is this story told at this place?” “Why is the story of Joseph interrupted by the story of Judah and Tamar?” Let me answer that question now. The book of Genesis tells us of the twelve sons of Jacob, who in turn will become the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Visit Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem and you will find there a synagogue with twelve stained glass windows, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, created by Marc Chagall. The colors and depiction of the stained glass captures the character and personality of each of the twelve sons and the tribes that flowed from them. The twelve sons and their clans each have their distinctive

character. But among the twelve sons, which son and clan will lead the covenant community? As we saw last week, looking at the story of Joseph, Joseph is the favored son of his father Jacob. He is the one whom Jacob would choose to lead. And, when Joseph foolishly tells his brothers the story of his dreams, it is clear that he too thinks he ought to be the leader of the tribe. Reuben, as the oldest, has the claim of primogeniture. But, while good hearted, Reuben lacks strength and leadership. He is inept. The next two sons in line, Simeon and Levi, reveal themselves to be violent hotheads, troublemakers (see Genesis 34). They too are not qualified. The next in line is Judah. Judah, of course, also is not qualified to lead the clan – until his conversion. His conversion puts him on the path to lead the clan. Judah, a man of many mistakes and moral failings, is now the one set apart to lead. Why is this story told here? We might think that it is Joseph who will lead the clan, especially after he become the second in command in the country of Egypt. But this story sets it straight. Judah will lead. But, before Judah can take his place in leadership, his heart must be changed. And God uses the remarkable Canaanite woman, Tamar, to bring about that change of heart.

We have walked through the story of Judah and Tamar. What spiritual truths do we take away from his surprising biblical story?

What do we learn from the story of Judah and Tamar?

First, the story of Judah and Tamar reminds us that all scripture is spiritually profitable.

All scripture is spiritually profitable – 2 Timothy 3:16 - 17

¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Granted, some passages of scripture yield their fruit more easily than others. But there is spiritual wisdom to be found in every passage of scripture. The story of Tamar and Judah is surprising, even shocking, yet it offers spiritual insight to those willing to seek to unlock it. If you find yourself encountering a challenging passage from the Bible, be willing to make use the many resources available to help you understand it. A good study bible will have notes built into the pages. Read them. There are also commentaries that can prove to be helpful guides. Many find the book of Job to be challenging. My friend Pat Glennon found the commentary by Christopher Ash to be very helpful in comprehending this challenging biblical book. All scripture is profitable, but some may demand more effort from us before it reveals its secrets.

The next thing we learn is that not all conversion stories are the same.

Not all conversion stories are the same

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.”

This past week the Session of Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church met with our newly elected officers. Among the things we asked of each new officer was this: “How did you come to faith in Jesus Christ?” It is always a delight to hear people tell the story of how they came to faith in Christ. No two stories are the same. Every person’s conversion is his or hers alone.

The book of Genesis hides its spiritual message to us in plain sight. We have looked previously at the story of Judah’s father, Jacob, and noted that Jacob did not come easily to faith. The story of Jacob’s coming to faith begins with the vision he is given of a ramp between earth and heaven and the spiritual exchange taking place between earth and heaven. Jacob’s conversion is not completed until twenty years later when he spends a night wrestling with the angel of God. The wrestling match that night is a metaphor of Jacob’s entire life wrestling with God. Jacob’s conversion is finally complete after the wrestling match that evening, but story of his conversion has been unfolding slowly through the years.

Like his father before him, Judah too needed to be converted. But Judah’s conversion is more dramatic, more unexpected. Until this point, Judah has resided among the Canaanites, and not among his brothers, the people of the covenant. In this chapter we see how far Judah has wandered from God, from his family, from the covenant, and from faith. Unlike Jacob, Judah is not wrestling with God. Judah has bid God a fond farewell. For this reason, when Tamar produces Judah’s staff, signet and cord, Judah immediately realizes that something more is going on in his life. Judah, perhaps for the first time, sees God’s hand at work in his life, through the witness of Tamar. Jacob wrestled with God. Judah gets smacked on the side of the head. The one whom he sought to condemn is used by God to bring him to faith in God. This is a life changing event for Judah. He will not be the same man after this. Study Judah’s life prior to his conversion, and then afterwards, and it will appear that you are studying two different men. He is not the same man after today.

All scripture is spiritually profitable. Not everyone’s conversion experience is the same. Next, encountering God will change your life.

Encountering God will change your life

²⁶ Then Judah identified them and said, “She is more righteous than I

Judah, prior to his conversion, had a sin problem. Sin is blinding. If sin were easy to spot, he might have seen the problem regarding his sons and corrected them. But sin is deceptive. We lie to ourselves about sin. We do what we need to do to make it seem all right in our eyes. It is only by the grace of God we are brought to perceive ourselves truthfully. In this story, Judah sees himself clearly for the first time. He realizes that he is the one who has been unjust and immoral – not his daughter-in-law Tamar. And it is a

life changing event. It had been Judah who had suggested selling Joseph into slavery. Judah left father and brothers to live among Canaanites. Not surprisingly, he also married a Canaanite. He gave his sons to a Canaanite woman in marriage. After the death of his two older sons, he treats his daughter-in-law with contempt. After his wife dies he visits a prostitute.

Nonetheless, confronted with his sin, Judah becomes a changed man. He changes forever. He becomes the leader of the tribes of Israel. It is from Judah's lineage that the kings of Israel will descend. And, ultimately, it will be from the tribe of Judah that the Messiah will come. Because of his conversion, Judah's line becomes the premier line of the twelve tribes.

This leads to our last point today: Judah's spiritual legacy.

Judah's spiritual legacy – Matthew 1:1 - 3

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

² Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar

Chapter 38 ends on an odd note. Tamar delivers twin sons. But the delivery is a curious breech birth. The first born son, Zerah, sticks his hand out of his mother's womb, and he is marked with a scarlet cord, but then, he pulls it back in. After this, his brother Perez, is born. Tamar makes a pun in his name regarding this son's birth. Perez means "breach."

In this story of the twins born to Tamar, it is the birth of Perez that is highlighted. Perez is identified as the son who will be significant. Indeed, it is so. From the line of Perez will come the kings of Judah. From this line comes **The** King of Judah, the Messiah. From this line comes the King of kings. It is from the line of Perez, the breach baby, that one day will come a child who will change human history. Jesus Christ came into our world through sinners and for sinners.

I am inviting you to place your faith in Jesus Christ, the descendent of Judah and Tamar. The wickedness of Judah was not the final word. In his conversion, Judah is given a dignity he did not deserve or earn. He is saved by grace. He is redeemed by grace. The grace Judah received is that same grace that you and I need. It is the grace of God who will reach out to us while we are lost sin. It the grace of God that holds a mirror to us, to enable us to see ourselves for who we really. It is the grace of God, revealed in the death of Christ on the cross, that paid the penalty that we could not pay. It is the grace of God the covers our sin and clothes us in Christ's righteousness.

Turn to him in believing faith today.

Say "Amen" Somebody!

38 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.