

Judah and the Neglected Wife *Genesis 38*

Introduction

The story of God's people is best described as dysfunctional. From Adam and Eve to Noah's family, from Abraham to Isaac and Jacob, each generation reveals broken relationships and deep moral failure. The way the patriarchs treated their wives, the way their wives treated them, and the way their children behaved all display humanity's constant struggle with sin.

Last week we looked at Jacob's life and the painful dynamics of his two marriages. Deceived into marrying Leah while his heart belonged to Rachel, Jacob loved one wife and merely endured the other. Leah was the unloved wife, while Rachel was beautiful and favored.

Between his two wives, Jacob fathered seven children with Leah (six sons and one daughter) and two with Rachel—Joseph and Benjamin. Both wives also gave their maidservants to Jacob, through whom he fathered four more sons, bringing the total to twelve. Out of all of them, Jacob's love for Joseph was unmistakable, and his favoritism fueled jealousy and hatred in his other sons.

Before he ever met Rachel, however, God had already spoken a promise to him in a dream: **"I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth... and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go... for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you"** (Gen. 28:13–15).

Jacob worked many years for Laban to marry Rachel, and nearly fifteen years passed before Joseph was born. Around six years later, Jacob wrestled all night with a "man" he later realized was God, who said, **"Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have contended with God and with men, and have prevailed"** (Gen. 32:28). Soon after, Rachel gave birth to Benjamin, though she tragically died in childbirth (Gen. 35:16–21).

One of Israel's greatest flaws was his failure as a father. Because Joseph was Rachel's firstborn—the son of his old age—Jacob loved him more than all his other sons. **"Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his other sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a multicolored tunic. And his brothers saw that their father loved him more... so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms"** (Gen. 37:3–4). Their jealousy soon grew into hatred (see Gen. 37:5–8).

That hatred turned to violence. The brothers conspired to kill Joseph, but Reuben persuaded them not to shed blood. Instead, they threw him into a pit, and while Reuben was away, Judah convinced them to sell Joseph to passing Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:18ff.). Believing him gone forever, they deceived their father: **“They took Joseph’s tunic, slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the tunic in the blood... ‘We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son’s tunic or not.’ Then he examined it and said, ‘It is my son’s tunic. A vicious animal has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!’”** (Gen. 37:31–33). Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned for his son many days, refusing to be comforted. Meanwhile, **“the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh’s officer, the captain of the bodyguard”** (Gen. 37:36).

It is in the aftermath of this dark moment—Joseph sold and Jacob deceived—that Scripture turns our attention to Judah. In Genesis 38, we are given a window into the moral and spiritual condition of the man through whom the Messiah would one day come.

Sin Without Repentance Leads to Ruin (vv. 1-11)

Throughout the Old Testament, God warned His people not to adopt the ways of the Canaanites, lest they turn from Him. **“You shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons”** (Deut. 7:2–3). Yet Judah did what God forbade. **“Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. Judah saw there a daughter of a Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her as a wife and had relations with her”** (vv. 1–2). Together they had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah (vv. 3–5).

Judah’s moral decline continued when he chose a Canaanite wife for his firstborn, Tamar. Their marriage ended tragically: **“But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life”** (vv. 6–7). Following custom, Judah told his second son, Onan, **“Have relations with your brother’s wife and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up a child for your brother.”** But Onan refused; **“when he had relations with his brother’s wife, he wasted his seed on the ground so that he would not give a child to his brother”** (vv. 8–9). Because of this, **“what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He put him to death also”** (v. 10).

In those days, a woman’s security depended on her husband and sons. A widow without children had no protection or inheritance—the deceased man’s property passed to other male relatives. The practice of *Levirate marriage* was designed to protect such widows: **“When brothers live together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a strange man... the firstborn to whom she gives birth shall assume the name of his father’s deceased brother, so that his name will not be wiped out from Israel”** (Deut. 25:5–6).

After Onan's death, Judah promised Tamar she could marry his youngest son, Shelah, once he was grown. But fearing he might lose him too, Judah had no intention of keeping his word. Thinking only of his own household and not Tamar's future, he sent her away to her father's house—leaving her abandoned to widowhood and shame.

Desperation Without Faith Leads to Deception (vv. 12-23)

“Now after a considerable time...” — we are not told exactly how long Tamar waited after Judah sent her away, but by the time we come to verse 12, Judah's youngest son was grown, and there was still no word from his father. It became clear that Judah had no intention of keeping his promise or fulfilling his duty to care for his daughter-in-law. Judah wanted to forget Tamar existed.

After Judah's wife died, Tamar learned that he was going to Timnah to shear his sheep. Knowing Judah's character, she devised a desperate plan: **“She removed her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in the gateway of Enaim”** (v. 14). Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute, knowing her father-in-law's moral flaws, hoping to secure the child and security she had been denied. When Judah saw her, **“...he assumed she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. So he turned aside to her by the road, and said, ‘Here now, let me have relations with you’; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said, ‘What will you give me, that you may have relations with me?’”** (vv. 15–16).

When Tamar asked, **“What will you give me?”** He promised a young goat in exchange for sex, but Tamar, knowing that he was not a man of his word, demanded a pledge—his **seal, cord, and staff**—each a personal identifier (v. 18). If her plan worked, these would prove Judah's guilt. Even more disturbing is that Judah believed her to be a **“cult prostitute,”** revealing just how far removed he was spiritually from Abraham, Isaac, and his father Israel.

To be clear, Tamar is no saint either. She used deception and sexual sin to gain what was she believed was rightfully hers. Yet Judah fares no better: he pursued his passions, disregarded God's covenant, and failed in every moral responsibility as father and leader. The descendants of Abraham were called to pursue justice, truth, and righteousness—virtues Judah utterly lacked.

Grace Without Limit Leads to Redemption (vv. 24-30)

Three months later, Judah learned that Tamar was pregnant: **“Your daughter-in-law Tamar has prostituted herself, and behold, she is also pregnant by prostitution.”** (v. 24). His response exposed his hypocrisy: **“Bring her out, and have her burned.”** The man who ignored Tamar's suffering now demanded her death and the death of her unborn child, hiding his own sin behind false righteousness.

But as she was being brought out, Tamar sent Judah his own pledge with the message, **“It was while she was being brought out that she sent word to her father-in-law, saying, ‘I am**

pregnant by the man to whom these things belong.’ She also said, ‘Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?’” (v. 25). The Hebrew word for “**examine**” means *to recognize or discern*—it is as if Tamar were saying, “*Look at yourself; see your own sin.*”

Then comes Judah’s turning point: “**And Judah recognized them and said, ‘She is more righteous than I.’”** (v. 26). The one who held the power to condemn her, instead declared her righteous. In that moment, Judah encountered both conviction and grace—the same kind of divine confrontation experienced by Abraham on Mount Moriah when he laid his son Isaac on the altar and Jacob at Peniel when he wrestled with God. Though Judah was deeply flawed, his confession points forward to the need of a greater righteousness—one found only in the coming Son of Judah, whose righteousness is perfect in every way.

Afterward we read, “**...he did not have relations with her again.**” This brief note signals repentance and transformation. By Genesis 44, we see a changed man—no longer self-serving but self-sacrificing, willing to give his life for his brother’s freedom. Through the tangled sins of Judah and Tamar, God’s grace “broke through,” preserving the line that would one day bring forth the Redeemer Himself. Tamar was not only pregnant with one child, but pregnant with twins!

When the day came that Judah’s two sons were born, they not only served to replace the two sons he lost to death, but they served as a way for redemption:

It came about at the time she was giving birth, that behold, there were twins in her womb. Moreover, it took place while she was giving birth, that one baby put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, “This one came out first.” But it came about as he drew back his hand that behold, his brother came out. Then she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” So he was named Perez. Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah. (Genesis 38:27–30)

The name “Perez” means “breaking through.” This is how the grace and mercy of God invaded the lives of both Judah and Tamar: It broke through into their hearts and lives in such a way it changed them forever. The grace and mercy of God “broke through” into Tamar’s life with the redemption of what she lost as a widow through the birth of her first born. The grace and mercy of God “broke through” into Judah’s life by forcing him to see his heart for what it was and compelling him to repent and become a new man.

The Lion of Judah and the Triumph of Grace (Conclusion)

About 20 years or so after what happened between Judah and Tamar, we come to another scene where a great famine brought Judah and his brothers before a powerful Joseph who God had elevated second to Pharaoh for such a time as this, to shelter, protect, and preserve the 12 tribes of Israel (see Gen. 42-47)!

Joseph's brothers stood before him not knowing that it was their younger brother, the one they sold into slavery that was before them while Israel and his youngest and now favored son, Benjamin was back in the famine-stricken land of Canaan. Through a series of events, Joseph tested his brothers to see if they had changed, so he had them go back to Canaan to bring Benjamin back with them to prove that they did not kill the youngest brother like they had intended to kill Joseph.

When Benjamin arrives in Egypt, Joseph threatened to keep the son who was loved by their father, accusing him of taking what did not belong to him. Unknown to all the brothers, Joseph had a silver cup put in Benjamin's sack to make it appear that he committed a crime. It appeared to Judah and his brothers that Benjamin was guilty and that Joseph was justified in keeping Benjamin.

It is at this point in the story that Judah stood up to offer himself as a substitute to rescue the son who was loved by his father (see 44:1ff)! Judah, now a changed man, who was completely innocent of the crime Benjamin was accused of, offered himself up in Benjamin's place to rescue the son whom his father loves. Upon hearing Judah's sacrificial offer, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers and they were reconciled to the brother they once sought to kill.

After Israel was brought to Egypt to be with his sons, he pronounced a blessing upon each of the sons. The blessing that was pronounced upon Judah, the son of the ugly wife, was to become the son of preeminence:

“Judah is a lion's cub;
From the prey, my son, you have gone up.
He crouches, he lies down as a lion,
And as a lion, who dares to stir him up?

The scepter will not depart from Judah,
Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
Until Shiloh comes;
And to Him shall be the obedience of the peoples.” (Gen. 49:9-10)

Judah could not have understood all that God was doing in and through his life, but through the ugliness of sin and the actions of both Judah and Tamar, God brought forth a son of promise! From Perez, the son of Judah and Tamar, would come Boaz, and out of Boaz would come King David, and out of David would come Jesus who would become the substitute for a sinful people in the darkest night of sin!

There is a story similar to Judah and Tamar's story. Only the prophet Hosea was told to marry a promiscuous woman by the name of Gomer, and the LORD God said to his prophet Hosea, **“Go, take for yourself a wife inclined to infidelity, and children of infidelity; for the land commits flagrant infidelity, abandoning the LORD.”** Hosea obeyed the LORD, and it was not

long before Gomer, the wife of Hosea, prostituted herself into slavery. In Hosea 3:1-3 we learn that God told Hosea to purchase (redeem) Gomer and to clothe her in white and to love her, and this is what Hosea said to his wife: **“You shall live with me for many days. You shall not play the prostitute, nor shall you have another man; so I will also be toward you”** (Hos. 3:3).

The apostle Peter borrowed language from Hosea’s story and applied it to our story, the story of Christ’s church: **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a Holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy”** (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

Brothers and sisters, there is a true and better Judah who was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life in our place, died for our sins as our substitute, and rose from the grave! He is the One we read about in Revelation 5: **“Behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome...”** (v. 5). He is also the Lamb who became our sin, in our place, of whom all of heaven rejoices, **“Worthy are You to take the scroll and to break its seals; for You were slaughtered, and You purchased people for God with Your blood from every tribe, language, people, and nation”** (v. 9).