

---

# Be Sure Your Sins Will Find You Out

## Genesis 38

**Introduction** I am one of a great company people who is intrigued by a set of TV shows on today. CSI – Las Vegas, New York and Miami all portray the behind the scenes work of Crime Scene Investigators. With their technology and skills, no criminal is able to get away with a crime. It is built on the premise that it is almost impossible to do a crime without leaving behind some trace that can be tied to you. Part of the interest in watching the show, aside from the technology which fascinates me, is the satisfaction in seeing justice done. This sense of wrongs righted as also made the Law and Order series one of the television’s greatest dynasties.

Well, God does not have a CSI unit to figure out what happened when we did wrong. His all seeing eye never blinks. He knows our thoughts before we think them. His omniscience is never added to. The hound of heaven is on the trail of sinners. He ensures that our sins will be find out, that justice is always done. So far the truth of God’s sovereign providence has been a comfort – today, it will be a challenge.

The theme of Genesis has been obstacles and advances, the progress of God’s purposes. We have seen how often trouble, disobedience and judgment have seemingly threatened God’s plan. Yet, advances are made. Obstacles are overcome. Out of trouble emerges some of the most amazing advances.

This at first appears to be an odd, out-of-place digression. But the similarities to the initial Joseph account and the contrast it provides for what follows shows that God will preserve his people in general and maintain His particular purpose, the lineage of Judah to David and then to Christ. As Ross writes in the *New Bible Commentary*, “The story of Tamar and Judah is not irrelevant to the main course of the narrative. In many ways it relates to the rest of chs. 37–50 in themes and phraseology. It is concerned with how the promise of descendants for the patriarchs should be fulfilled. It shows how the hard-hearted Judah was stopped in his tracks, and prepares us for the new compassionate Judah of ch. 44. It tells of yet another twin birth in which the younger overtook the older.”<sup>9</sup>

The story also anticipates the book of Ruth. Here, the line is maintained by what appears to be a sordid entrapment. There, the line is maintained by what is surely a sweet romance. Yet all through these tangled troubles, God is working His decreed will.

But let us take heed as we think through this troubling text. Proverbs reminds us of what is certainly true here, be sure your sins will find you out.

---

<sup>9</sup>Carson, D. A. *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*. Rev. ed. of: *The new Bible commentary*. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970. 4th ed., Ge 38:1. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

## **A Drift into Worldly Values**

**(v.1-11)**

This story is taking place while the whole rest of the Joseph narrative is unfolding. Against this sorry background, Joseph shines even brighter. Judah is dazzled by the possibilities and pleasures of the Canaanites. Joseph, will endure and thrive as God's man in the midst of Egypt. So Judah drifts away from God into worldly ways.

### **In His Disallowed Marriage**

**(v.1-5)**

Against the wisdom of his grand-father and father, Judah marries a Canaanite woman named Shua. Moses is carefully pointing out the consequences of inter-marriage with unbelievers. Like Dinah whose fascination with Canaanite women and their way of life, Judah falls in love with a woman whose worship and walk, whose gods and lifestyle would have been pagan and unbecoming a follower of Yahweh. Judah's unbelieving wife bears him three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah. Judah is living in a city of the Moabites. He is being slowly assimilated into the Canaanite culture. What a fool is about to make of himself as a result.

We must take careful note of this as Christians. Interest in and dating an unbeliever is a symptom of worldliness. Marrying an unbeliever is sin (1 Corinthians 7:39). The consequences are enormous. I know that the challenges for singles, widows and widowers is great – but commit yourself to being pleasing to God.

### **In His Extended Family**

**(v.6-10)**

Er, Judah's eldest, reaches marriageable age. In that culture, marriage was often at much younger ages than we are accustomed to. Judah selects Tamar to be Er's wife. But Er is judged by the Lord for some unrecorded sin and dies.

In the culture of the day and in some cultures today, this idea of Levirate marriage exists. If a man dies without children, then his brother is allowed or required to marry the widow. The children that are born to them are accounted the children of the deceased husband. This practice was later brought into the Law, codified as the Kinsman-Redeemer and becomes the background for the book of Ruth. Interestingly, the Gentiles Tamar and Ruth are in the Davidic lineage through this practice. Since the Lord has come and the preservation of a single Messianic line is no longer necessary, we believe that this practice is no longer allowed.

Judah sends Onan in to fulfill his responsibility, however without the benefit of marriage. Onan did not want to have children by Tamar that would not be his own descendents. He has sexual intimacy with her, but withdraws and will not allow her to become pregnant. He pursues his pleasure without regard to his responsibility. This direct act of disobedience to his responsibility with the effect that it may well end what would be the Davidic line incurs the wrath of God. Onan then is judged by the Lord and dies.

### **In His Deceiving Fear**

**(v.11)**

Two of Judah's sons have been judged by the Lord and killed. This is a terrible time of grief, confusion and growing concern. His line is in serious jeopardy. He does not want Shelah also to fail, be judged and possibly die. So he makes plans that will postpone the responsibility and possibly protect his remaining son.

He sends Tamar back home to live with her father. He hides his true intention by telling her that she will remain there until Shelah is old enough. But he has no intention of sending his remaining son in to Tamar. To make matters worse, according to the Hittite Law, number 193, Judah is responsible in the absence or inability or immaturity of his son, to continue the family line with Tamar. While this practice is later rejected and denounced in the Mosaic Law, the continuation of the family line is of paramount importance and was allowed at this point. But Judah has no intention of following the law, obeying God or fulfilling his personal obligation.

So here is the man who participated in the plotting of his brother's death and his selling into slavery. He has married an unbeliever, moved into a Moabite city, watched his sons die under God's judgment and is now avoiding his responsibility to Tamar. We are warned by this kind of drift into disobedience to careful attention to our hearts. What do we believe, doubt, crave and are mastered by that makes the world attractive? Where are we dazzled by the possibilities and pleasures held out to us as treasures and temptations?

## **A Disgrace by Sexual Sin**

**(v.12-23)**

Drift into worldly values often will land believers in disgrace and discipline. Judah follows that same path. It was not such a move in his heart from marrying an unbeliever to sleeping with a prostitute.

## **Through a Clever Entrapment**

**(v.12-19)**

Tamar has little or no recourse against the unjust and sinful neglect of her father-in-law. It is now evident that Judah has no intention of Shelah and Tamar marrying. So, she has planned and carries out a clever entrapment.

Judah's wife, Shua has died. The time of mourning has passed. Judah decides to go up and see the shearing of his sheep at Timnah where they are pastured. He doesn't want to go alone, so he takes a Canaanite friend, Hirah, with him. The word of this trip reaches Tamar. She has decided to trap Judah into fulfilling his obligation himself, according to Hittite Law. So, she changes out of her widow's garb and puts on a prostitute's attire. She veils her face and waits for him at the gate of Enaim, on the road to Timnah.

Judah, not recognizing her, mistakes her for a prostitute and propositions her, like the foolish men in Proverbs. They negotiate a price of one new goat from his flock. But he will have to send it later. So, what pledge or guarantee will he give that he will do what he has said? He will leave her his signet, neck cord and shepherd's staff. He has effectively handed her his Social Security number, driver's license and password to his business network. The signet was used to press his seal into wax for official communication. The cord was his family identity and authority. The staff, usually uniquely carved so as to clearly identifiable as to whose it was, represented his vocation, his business. He has handed her his identity.

He sleeps with her, still not recognizing her. Again, in a culture where women are generally veiled and tents or houses are dark, this is not as strange as it

seems. I wonder what his friend is doing – just waiting outside for him to done? Does Hirah secretly smile a bit thinking to himself that it is good for Judah to get on with life? But Judah has gotten Tamar pregnant. After he leaves and continues on his journey, she changes back into her widow's garments and returns home.

### **With a Failed Agreement**

**(v.20-23)**

Once Judah arrives at Timnah, he selects out a goat to send to Tamar. Hirah agrees to go and deliver it for him and to retrieve his signet, cord and staff. When Hirah arrives at the city, he searches and cannot find her. He inquires of the men standing around to see if they are familiar with her or know where he can find her. They have not seen her – in fact, they have not seen any of the cult prostitutes out at all. This is telling – Judah has not only committed fornication, but he has, as far as he knows, slept with a pagan, temple prostitute and handed over his identity to a cultic priestess.

Well, Hirah goes back to Timnah to report on his failed mission. Can you imagine Judah's consternation? But what is he going to do? How foolish is he going to appear – because how foolish he has been! He will be a laughing stock. Plus, Hirah is witness that he tried to keep the agreement.

I wonder if Judah is waiting for the next shoe to drop!

### **A Disclosure in Humbled Chastening**

**(v.24-26)**

Well, God is not finished with Judah. He is moving through these circumstances to humble and change Judah into the man he appears to be in Genesis 44. There, he is tender and compassionate, with a heart for his father, brother and their situation. The next two scenes are the mighty hand of God breaking Judah.

### **By the Consequence of Sin**

**(v.24)**

The time has passed for Tamar to begin showing. Three months have passed. It is evident that she is pregnant. Since her husband is long dead and her brother-in-law, not only failed to do what is right but is also now long dead, then she is accused of being immoral. She has become pregnant by her immorality and thus has polluted the family line.

### **With a Self-Righteous Indignation**

**(v.25)**

O, the self-righteous indignation! Judah, as the tribal leader, condemns her. Bring her out and let her be burned. The Mosaic Law will also enact the death penalty for a woman's immorality while living in her father's household. Tamar stands condemned as shaming her father and polluting the family line. So, Judah calls her out to be executed.

Either her father or representatives of Judah take her out to be executed. Judah is not even present. Can't you see the scene? Sadly, it is almost clearer in our eyes now because of the coverage of some of the Islamic practice which is so close to this. She is drug out of the tent or house. But clutched in her hands are a signet, a cord and a staff. Can't you hear her call out, "Wait! I have the identity of the man who has gotten me pregnant! Here are his signet, his cord and his staff. By these

you will know who he is. Send them to Judah. You will see that this is not a capital offense. I have only exercised my rights as a widow. I had to do this because the man identified by these objects would not do what he was supposed to do and left with no justice, no recourse and no sons.”

### **To a Confession of Wrong**

**(v.26)**

So they take the items to Judah and ask, “Whose are these?” O, can’t you see the shock on his face! Does his heart sink? Is he smitten in conscience? Yes. He knows these are his. He knows that three months ago he went in to the “prostitute” by the wayside. He knows that he has done wrong by her in several ways. He stands condemned. She has not committed immorality. Their sexual intimacy was permitted by law and by God, at this point.

Judah is humbled and confesses his wrong. Even though she went about it in a wrong way she, Judah recognizes her heart to propagate the line and to get Judah to do what is right. I think that he is greatly humbled and crushed. His sins have caught him out. His daughter-in-law is more righteous than he. And since she is now expecting and the responsibility to produce an heir is fulfilled, he is honorable and is not intimate with her again.

Well, there are lots of questions here, aren’t there. The sexual shenanigans here seem sordid and sorry. Surely, God does not intend approval on anyone here! Judah’s sons are wicked – that is clear from the text. The middle son’s act is wicked in God’s eyes and he is condemned. Certainly, Judah’s going in to a prostitute is sin. It may even be worse, if that is possible, because he believes he has gone in to a cultic prostitute. But what about Tamar? What does it say about Judah that she believes he will succumb to this temptation? Are his sons falling very near the tree?

Moses offers no direct condemnation of Tamar. That is not to say that the way she goes about it is OK. Tamar is Gentile and a Canaanite pagan. Her behavior is not unexpected. This is how unbelievers act. If you marry one or approve your believing children to marry one, then this is what you can expect. But Judah, a believer, is expected to act with righteousness. His sons are held to the standard of God’s revealed will. But Judah has reached the sad, humbling point that a pagan, unbelieving, daughter-in-law has acted even in this way, with more righteousness than he. Here is the point for all God’s people. Obey God. Fulfill your responsibilities. Don’t get sucked into the world’s way. Don’t dishonor our God with shameful conduct.

### **A Descendent through Difficult Births**

**(v.27-30)**

But the story does not end there.

#### **With Evocative Trouble**

We have twins again. It runs in the family. As she is in labor, surely they are telling the stories of Esau and Jacob. Will these births come with their own evocative trouble? Yes. During the labor, one of the twins hand comes out first. The mid-wife ties a scarlet thread onto his wrist to identify him as the eldest. Yet, he draws his hand back in does not come out. The second twin, as the text puts it and as his name says, “bursts through” instead. He is named Perez, which means

*breach*. Then the one with the scarlet thread on his wrist is born. He is named Zerah.

### To Continue the Lineage

So what is so important about these twins? According to Matthew 1:2-6, David, the king comes from Judah through Perez. Listen to that text and see if you detect something else also significant.

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, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, 4 and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5 and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, 6 and Jesse the father of David the king. [ESV]

Do you see it? Matthew points out that there are three significant women in the David and Messianic lineage. They are Tamar, Rahab and Ruth. Why are these three singled out? Because they are all Gentiles. Three Gentile women are brought into the people of God and become part of the Messianic lineage and hope. Here is expectation for the Gentiles. We will become part of the Messianic fulfillment by coming in as the bride and eventual spouse of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus. As Paul puts it in Romans, using another analogy, we, both Jew and Gentile will be grafted into the true vine, the Lord Jesus. O, be thankful. God has raised up the dead and fallen, has brought us into true union with Christ and has given us the salvation He has promised to all His people.

Let me summarize some important lessons from this sorry story.

### Lessons

Believers should not date nor marry unbelievers. Listen to me carefully. The New Testament is clear that believers can only marry, in the Lord. Now they can marry any other believer (of the opposite sex). This is not a wisdom nor a preference issue. It is a command, a precept in the Scriptures whose enforcement in consequences and chastening is abundantly illustrated. Wisdom would also dictate then that you do not date an unbeliever, as well.

Let us beware of temptations to pleasure without the accompanying shouldering of our responsibilities. We will often them to be sin. Judah and his sons are willing to take sexual advantage of Tamar and avoid their responsibility. When we are offered shortcuts or to take advantage of a situation or a person's vulnerability, we should be alerted that somewhere in this, we are being offered the opportunity to sin against God and others.

Never think that you will get away with your sins, even the most secret of them.

Be willing to admit your fault, even when it is exposed by unbelievers. When those moments happen, God is humbling us so that we will be changed and become useful for His glory later.

Rejoice in the Tamar, the Rahab, the Ruth of the Bible. We can enter in. We can become a part of God's people. The New Covenant is for us. Our salvation is sure through our Redeemer and Ruler, our great high priest and sovereign king, the slaughtered lamb and risen One. Believe, bow – today.

