

Genesis 38 - Tamar and the Sin of Judah

A. Tamar's widowhood and Judah's unfairness.

1. (1-5) Judah and his three sons.

a. **Judah departed from his brothers . . . And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her:** Through an ungodly and unwise marriage to a Canaanite woman Judah fathered three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah.

i. It isn't hard to see the sons of Israel rapidly being corrupted by their Canaanite neighbors, and what the future will bring if they continued in that land. God had a plan to bring them out.

b. **Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite:** Judah, the fourth-born son of Jacob through Leah (Reuben, Simeon, and Levi were before him) had not yet distinguished himself as someone great among his brothers. He was the one who suggested they sell Joseph into slavery (Genesis 37:26).

2. (6-7) Er's marriage to Tamar and his death.

a. **Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD killed him:** We are never told what Er's wickedness was, but obviously it was bad enough that God brought immediate judgment upon him.

3. (8-10) Onan's refusal to raise up offspring for Tamar.

a. **Go in to your brother's wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother:** According to the custom of levirate marriage (later codified into law in Deuteronomy 25:5-10), if a man died before providing sons to his wife, it was the duty of his brothers to marry her and to give her sons. The child was considered the son of the brother who died (**Onan knew that the heir would not be his**) because the living brother was only acting in his place.

i. This was done so the dead brother's name would be carried on. But also it was so the widow would have children to support her. Apart from this, she would likely live the rest of her life as a destitute widow.

b. **When he went in to his brother's wife, that he emitted on the ground, lest he should give an heir to his brother:** Onan refused to take this responsibility seriously. He was more than happy to use Tamar for his sexual gratification, but he did not want to give Tamar a son he had to support but would be considered to be the son of Er.

i. Onan refused to fulfill his obligation to his dead brother and Tamar.

4. (11) Judah's unfair dealing with Tamar.

a. **Lest he also die like his brothers:** One can understand Judah's hesitancy to give his last son as a husband to Tamar. God already judged two of her previous husbands. Judah essentially vowed he would not give Shelah as husband to Tamar as custom and righteousness commanded, but he would simply put her off on the issue.

b. **Tamar went and dwelt in her father's house:** This was no place for a young, childless widow to be, when there were additional brothers in her husband's family who could fulfill the obligation they owed to their late brother. None of this was the fault of Tamar. All the blame belonged to the sons of Judah.

B. Tamar bears a child by Judah.

1. (12-14) Judah's wife dies, and Tamar realizes Judah will never give his last son to fulfill the obligation to her.
 - a. **She saw that Shelah was grown, and she was not given to him as a wife:** Tamar did not want to face what would be a very difficult existence in that culture or in any culture: life without any husband or children.
 - b. **She was not given to him as a wife:** Tamar didn't have the option of just finding another man to marry. She was under the headship of her father-in-law Judah, and he had to *give* her a husband. *He* determined whom and when she could marry.
2. (15-18) Tamar sets a trap for Judah, and he has sex with her.
 - a. **When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, because she had covered her face:** After negotiating the price, Tamar demanded a pledge for the future payment of the agreed-upon price (**a young goat**).
 - b. **Then he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him:** When Tamar conceived, it certainly was not intended by Judah, but it was definitely planned by both Tamar and God.
3. (19-23) Tamar disappears.
 - a. **Judah sent the young goat by the hand of his friend the Adullamite, to receive his pledge from the woman's hand, but he did not find her:** Judah sends a friend to pay Tamar, and to retrieve the pledge he left with her. Because Tamar has disappeared, he gives up the pledge, leaving it in her hands.
4. (24-26) Tamar is vindicated and Judah is reproved.
 - a. **Please determine whose these are:** Tamar makes the logical appeal of noting that the one who hired her is just as guilty as she.
 - b. **She has been more righteous than I:** however, even Judah could see through to the real issue. He was at fault for not providing for Tamar a son through his last son Shelah.
5. (27-30) Tamar gives birth to twins, Perez and Zerah.
 - a. **Therefore his name was called Perez . . . his name was called Zerah:** Matthew 1:3 and Luke 3:33 each list **Perez** as an ancestor of Jesus the Messiah. God took the son of this ungodly situation and put him in the family line of the Messiah, despite the fact that neither Judah nor Tamar were examples of godliness.
 - i. This is a glorious example of grace. God chose them despite their works, not only to be in the line of the Messiah, but also to have a role in God's plan of redemption.
 - ii. It also reminds us these sons of Israel were by no means an "all-star team." They were a corrupt and problem-filled family.

Genesis 39 - Joseph in Potiphar's House

A. Joseph in Potiphar's house.

1. (1) Potiphar, an Egyptian official, buys Joseph.
 - a. **Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him:** The name **Potiphar** means "devoted to the sun." It was a name connected with the Egyptian religious system.
 - b. **Captain of the guard:** The idea behind this title means "chief of police," or probably more precisely, Potiphar was head of Pharaoh's "Secret Service," his personal security force. He was a highly trusted official in the government of Egypt.
2. (2-3) God is with Joseph.
 - a. **The LORD was with Joseph:** Joseph's trial was probably worse than any of us have gone through. Yet God did not abandon him even in the smallest way. If God allowed Joseph to be a slave, then he would be a **successful man**, even as a slave.
 - i. We often complain to God that He put us in a terrible or difficult place. Yet God's will is that we trust Him to bless us and make us successful (as *He* measures success) wherever we are.
 - b. **He was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian:** Even at this early point when it seemed Joseph had no control over his circumstances - and indeed, he had none - God overruled the evil or capricious choices of man to accomplish His eternal purpose.
 - c. **And his master saw that the LORD was with him:** By his trust in God, diligent work, and blessing from God, Joseph showed Potiphar that God was real. Our bosses should see the difference Jesus makes in our lives by the way we work.
3. (4-6) God blesses Potiphar for Joseph's sake.
 - a. **He made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority:** Because of God's blessing and Joseph's faithfulness, God made sure Joseph was advanced in his position, even as a slave.
 - i. It would have been easy for Joseph to do what we so often do: "write off" his present position because it seemed so bad (he was a slave, after all). But Joseph believed God could bless him right where he was, so he didn't wait for a better situation to be blessed by God.
 - b. **The LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake:** This same blessing can be brought upon our workplace because of our presence of godliness.
 - c. **Thus he left all that he had in Joseph's hand:** Clearly, Joseph rose to the top, but it took a while to happen. Joseph was 17 years old when he was sold into slavery (Genesis 37:2). He was 30 when Pharaoh promoted him (Genesis 41:46), and had been in prison for two years before that (Genesis 41:1). So, he was in Potiphar's house for 11 years. It took 11 years for the full measure of God's blessing to be accomplished in Joseph's life.
 - i. Many think if advancement is from God, it must come quickly. Sometimes this is the case, but not normally. God allows good things to develop slowly. It takes many years for an acorn to become an oak; a squash grows overnight.

d. **He left all that he had in Joseph's hand:** Imagine Joseph as a hard worker. When he came to Egypt, he was at a great disadvantage. He knew nothing of the language, culture, customs, or ways of doing business. He had to get up early and stay up late to both do his job and to learn Egyptian ways.

i. Luther said, "Accordingly, Joseph was not only good and chaste, and not only diligently poured out prayers to God for his master, for the king, and for the whole land of Egypt, but he was also a most vigilant overseer and manager of the domestic tasks."

e. **Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance:** Joseph's appearance is of special note. The Bible only calls two other men beautiful: David (1 Samuel 16:12) and Absalom (2 Samuel 14:25).

B. Joseph's resistance to temptation and its aftermath.

1. (7-10) The invitation of Potiphar's wife and Joseph's resistance.

a. **His master's wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me."**

Potiphar's wife was undeniably forward towards Joseph.

i. Of course, Joseph was an attractive man, and this had something to do with it. That he seemed "out of reach" to Potiphar's wife surely was a factor. She would not be the first or last woman who desired to seduce a man out of a sense of challenge.

ii. Also, it seems that in the ancient world, the code of morality for women in Egypt (even married women) was loose. Egyptian women had a reputation for immorality in the ancient world.

b. **Lie with me:** This was bold and strong temptation to Joseph. It reminds us that when we face strong temptations, other have faced the same. Satan wants you to think your temptation is terribly unique; that no one you know could understand what you are going through. But there is no temptation that has overtaken us except what is common among men (1 Corinthians 10:13).

c. **She spoke to Joseph day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her or to be with her:** Joseph showed remarkable faithfulness towards God, Potiphar, and himself by resisting this temptation for so long - perhaps up to 11 years.

i. *Joseph let his faith be known.* Potiphar (and others, presumably) knew Joseph was blessed because of his relationship with God (Genesis 39:3).

ii. *Joseph kept busy.* You don't advance the way he did unless you are a busy worker.

iii. *Joseph was careful to never be alone with his temptation.* Joseph wisely even avoided being alone around Potiphar's wife (**or to be with her**).

iv. *Joseph called the act what it was: sin.* He referred to this sin set before him as **this great wickedness and sin against God**. We want to call sin by another name. Hostility and temper are “self-expression.” Pride is “self-esteem.” Gluttony is “the good life.” Covetousness is “trying to get ahead.” Perversion is “an alternative lifestyle.” Adultery is “a cry for help in a bad marriage.”

v. *Joseph knew how greatly his sin would affect others.* Often times we want to deny the harmful effects our sin will have. When we look at a charred mountainside, and all there is left is ashes and ruin, we despise the careless person who started the fire. Sin is no less destructive. Joseph never gave in to the illusion that he could do this and never be discovered, or somehow it wouldn't matter.

vi. *Joseph knew that his sin was a sin against God.* One might justify sinning against another person who has done us wrong, but how can we sin against God? David reflects this same heart in his prayer of repentance: *Against You and You only have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight* (Psalm 51:4). Of course, David had also sinned against Uriah, against Bathsheba, against their child, against his family, and against his people; but those were of far less consequence than his sin against God.

vii. *Joseph just said “No!” He refused.* Sometimes it just comes down to that. We have to refuse and say “no” to sin, even when we *feel* like saying “yes.” Knowing the fleshly inclination of men - their ability to detach sex from romance and love, and be promiscuous - this is wonderful obedience on the part of Joseph.

2. (11-12) Joseph resists her brazen attempt at seduction.

a. **When Joseph went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house was inside, that she caught him:** Potiphar's wife knew Joseph was avoiding her, so she made a deliberate plan to entrap him. Surely, it was she who made certain **none of the men of the house was inside**.

b. **She caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me.” But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside:** Joseph resisted this tremendous moment of temptation when he **ran outside**. Joseph did what we are all supposed to do when faced with this kind of situation: he **fled and ran**. 2 Timothy 2:22 makes it clear: *Flee also youthful lusts*.

i. If we are not actually running towards sin, we have a tendency to at least linger in its presence. But we are commanded to do the only safe thing: run away from these lusts of the flesh, and run as fast as we can.

c. **He left his garment:** The idea is not that he ran away naked, but that his outer garment was stripped off. Essentially, he left in his underwear.

d. **Fled and ran outside:** Joseph had to know this stand for purity would cost him dearly, but he considered it worth it.

3. (13-18) Potiphar's wife falsely accuses Joseph before Potiphar.

a. **He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice:** It must have offended and grieved Joseph to be accused under such an outrageous lie. Yet he did not seem to defend himself against this false accusation.

4. (19-20) Joseph is sent to prison.
- a. **Then Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison:** It seems that Joseph was given a sentence of life imprisonment. This was a hard penalty, but the normal punishment for such a crime (attempted rape) by a slave upon a high official's wife would likely be death. Joseph was given a merciful sentence.
 - b. **His anger was aroused:**
 - i. "Death was the only penalty Joseph could reasonably expect. His reprieve presumably owed much to the respect he had won; and Potiphar's mingled wrath and restraint may reflect a faint misgiving about the full accuracy of the charge." (Kidner)
5. (21-23) Joseph prospers, even in prison.
- a. **But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy:** If God blessed Joseph in the pit, if He blessed Joseph the slave, we are not be surprised to see Him bless Joseph in prison. None of these terrible circumstances derailed God's plan for Joseph's life.
 - i. The dominating theme is Joseph succeeded because of the blessing of God:
 - *The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man* (Genesis 39:2)
 - *His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand* (Genesis 39:3)
 - *The LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; and the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had* (Genesis 39:5)
 - ii. Even after Joseph is falsely accused and thrown into prison, God still blesses:
 - **But the LORD was with Joseph** (Genesis 39:21)
 - **The LORD was with him** (Genesis 39:23)
 - iii. "It is but of little consequence where the lot of a servant of God may be cast; like Joseph he is ever employed for his master, and God honours him and prospers his work." (Clarke)
 - b. **The keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing:** As it was in the house of Potiphar, Joseph rose to the top, becoming the chief administrator of the prison.