

Judah and Tamar: God's Amazing Grace

Genesis 38

James 4.17 says, "To one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin." God's perspective on sin, and His ability to sovereignly bring good out of a corrupt situation, is on display in our passage today – the scandalous story of Judah and Tamar.

Family Ties: Judah embraces Canaanite ways (1-11)

- *Like father, like sons: Sin spreads* (1-10)
- *Deception and a desperate daughter-in-law* (11)

Judah Corrupt, Caught; Confessed, Changed (12-30)

- *Tricking the trickster: Tamar seduces Judah* (12-19)
- *Condemnation turns to confession* (20-26)
- *The blessing of life – and a peek at the future* (27-30)

Applications

- Bad company corrupts good morals (1 Cor. 15.33)!
- Confessing sin leads to transformation of heart.
- God's restoring grace is truly amazing!



Does God love me? That is a question that uncomfortably bubbles to the surface in our minds, then we quickly bury it again because of unsettling doubts. After all, we know ourselves too well. And since God is God, He knows us, too. He knows what we've done. He knows what we'll do tomorrow. *Surely He can't love someone like me. Why would He?*

Our deepest desire is to know that the God who created the universe, and us, *really loves us*. Yeah, we know the Bible says that *God is love*, and that He *loved the world*, but somewhere we heard a preacher say or read in a book that God only loved some of us enough to save us, or that if we struggle with sin, that shows we aren't really saved.

Then there's the whole idea of *love* today. We've reduced it to a feeling or an act of sexual passion. How many have experienced the pain of discovering love didn't last? And if what we call love can get trampled on, why not God's love as well? Why should His love be any different?

But our hearts grasp for hope that He does. We remember the Apostle Peter: He stuck his foot in his mouth so often he had tread marks! Once Jesus said to him, *Get behind Me, Satan!* He walked on water, then looked down and sunk! The night Jesus was betrayed, Peter denied Him three times! Not something you'd want on your resumé. But God certainly never stopped loving him!

Then there's David. He committed adultery and murder, yet God calls him *a man after my own heart* (Acts 13.22), and he's in the 'Hall of Fame' of faith (Heb.11)! If God loved him, maybe He could love me too?

But of all the rotten characters in the Bible, and the most sordid stories, few compare with Genesis 38, the story of Judah and Tamar we are looking at this morning.

Family Ties: Judah embraces Canaanite ways (1-11)

- *Like father, like sons: Sin spreads (1-10)*

As our story opens, the narrator makes it clear that Judah is *not* walking with God, and is an unsavory character. In v1, he leaves home and becomes BFFs with a Canaanite named Hirah. God didn't want His chosen people to get involved with the Canaanites, because they were wicked and idolatrous. In v2, Judah marries a Canaanite woman, and he subsequently has three sons with her.

When his oldest son Er was of age, Judah arranged for him to marry a Canaanite woman named Tamar. But Er was wicked, reflecting godless Canaanite society, and God took his life. That made Tamar a childless widow.

According to *levirate law*, the next son was supposed to take her as his wife and raise up children for his brother, to keep his line going. Tamar could have abandoned the family, but she is loyal to her dead husband, and Judah's family. But the second son, Onan, didn't want to have children for his brother; they would get his father's inheritance, and he wanted that for himself. So when it was time to get her pregnant, he prevented conception from happening; he was wicked. God saw what he did, and took his life.

This brings us to a critical juncture in the story. Tamar is a widow twice over, without children. Through no fault of her own, she is in desperate straits.

- *Deception and a desperate daughter-in-law (11)*

She's stuck for life to Judah and his family; her hopes lie in having children by Judah's youngest son, Shelah, but Shelah is too young to marry. She must wait, agonizing about her future. And she has a bigger problem.

In v11, the narrator tells us that Judah secretly is planning not to give his youngest son to marry Tamar. He blames Tamar for his sons' deaths, instead of their wickedness. His plan is to let her die a widow. The scene is set for her to take a radical risk.

Judah Corrupt, Caught; Confessed, Changed (12-30)

- *Tricking the trickster: Tamar seduces Judah (12-19)*

Verse 12 begins with the words *Now after a considerable time*; it is probably about two years later. Shelah was now old enough to marry Tamar, but Judah shows no signs of giving him to be her husband. In desperation, she comes up with a plan – one that seems very 'unbiblical'!

She dresses as a prostitute, veils her face to hide who she is, and takes her place on the road Judah will take on the way to shear his flocks. She must have known that Judah was promiscuous and could be seduced. Judah, does not recognize her with her veil and falls for her trap. She asks what he will pay. He offers to give her a young goat, but he doesn't have it with him.

So she asks him to leave two items he would value, his personal seal that hung around his neck, and his staff, as surety that he will return with a young goat. Judah has sex with Tamar, and goes on his way.

- *Condemnation turns to confession (20-26)*

Later, he sends his friend Hirah with a goat to recover his seal and his staff, but the woman is gone. Tamar has gone home. Judah knows he's been had; a prostitute making off with his valuable possessions makes him look like a fool for entrusting them to her! *He is like a respectable man who leaves his credit card in a brothel (Waltke, 513).* In v23 he says, *Let her keep them, or we will become a laughingstock.*

About three months later, it becomes clear that Tamar is pregnant. Judah self-righteously accuses her of immoral relations; he is quick to condemn others for sins he has also committed, and calls for her to be put to death. At just the right moment, Tamar acts. In v25 we read,

As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. "I am pregnant by the man who owns these," she said. And she added, "See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are."

Judah immediately recognizes them. He could have tried to finagle his way out of this, but he doesn't. In verse 26 he confesses: *She is the righteous one; I am not, because I would not give her my son Shelah.* Judah owns up to his sin.

- *The blessing of life – and a peek at the future (27-30)*

This story – with everything bad that has happened, ends up on a positive note. People react differently to getting caught in sin: Some cover it up or excuse themselves, but Judah did not. He immediately came clean. This proves to be a turning point in his life.

The chapter ends with Tamar giving birth to twin boys, Perez and Zerah. And as abruptly as Tamar appears on stage of Genesis, she disappears for nearly 2000 years.

In the first century A.D., the book of Matthew records the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Savior of the world. The third verse of the New Testament tells us that Jesus was in a direct line from Judah and Tamar, and their son Perez. And now you know *the rest of the story.*

Applications

- Bad company corrupts good morals (1 Cor. 15.33)!

What lessons does God weave into this story that we can apply to our lives? First off, we should learn from Judah that if you hang out with people who are wicked, it will always rub off on you. In 1 Cor. 15.33 Paul warned the Corinthian Christians of this very thing: *Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals."*

Judah lived with the Canaanites and under their influence wandered away from God for more than twenty years. He lost two of his sons as a result. We can have good morals, but bad company will corrupt them.

It's like the boy who slipped and fell outside, and one of his hands fell in mud. His mother told him to go wash his hands. He came back a few minutes later and both hands were dirty. "I thought I told you to wash your hands!"

"I did," the boy replied. "I took my clean hand and wiped my dirty hand." The problem is, dirt rubs off. If you want to be clean, hang out with clean folks.

- Confessing sin leads to transformation of heart.

A second application for our lives is this: *Confessing sin leads to a transformation of the heart.* We don't find out for another four chapters, but when Judah confessed his sin, it was a turning point in his life. He recognized his tendency to sin, and came clean with God. He returned home to his father Jacob, and became a leader in his family. We see this all through the Bible.

Hiding sin leads to guilt, and more sin. But when we lay open our lives before God, He can transform us from the inside out. *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1.9).

- God's restoring grace is truly amazing!

But the most compelling message from this story is about God. For if you or I were God, we'd never look at Judah and Tamar as candidates to be in the line of the Messiah! We'd look for someone with a spotless record, who never got out of line – and certainly not someone who messed up as bad as Judah, or prostituted herself like Tamar!

But think about it: Isn't that what God's in the business of? He takes the ashes of our lives, and by His 'amazing grace' He transforms us into people who have a heart for Him. The whole world may give up on you, and *you* may give up on you...but God will never give up on you.

I've seen it thousands of times. People whose lives were a mess...in prison, on drugs, addicted to porn, alcoholics, depressed, lonely, unloved. But one touch of God's grace turns it around, and another life is rescued.

You may not be any of those things...maybe you're just 'stuck in neutral' – but wherever you are, the message of the story of Judah and Tamar is that God's grace can do something in your life you can never do yourself. I know it's true; I see it every time I look in the mirror.

God's restoring grace is truly amazing. Come clean with Him today, and let Him do something great in your life!

Digging Deeper

1. The story of Judah and Tamar isn't found in children's Sunday School books – it's "R rated"! But while it is scandalous on its surface, it is instructive in its heart. Gen. 38.1-11 presents the setting: What do the details about Judah's life reveal about his spiritual condition? It's often observed that *like father, like son*: God's assessment that the oldest, Er, was evil, speaks for itself. What character flaws does the next son, Onan, display?
2. In Gen. 37 we saw how sinful action (selling Joseph to slavery) led to deception (making Jacob think his son had been killed by wild animals). How is this pattern replicated in v.11? Judah made Tamar utterly dependent by keeping her in his house, but he never intended to give her his third son, Shelah, in marriage. Instead of seeing his own sin (and that of his sons), he blames his misfortunes on her, and denies her the well-being and status she deserved. How does knowing this affect your view of Tamar luring Judah as a prostitute in verses 14ff?
3. Pious Christians loudly condemn sexual immorality; this story is a critique of our haste to judge worldly society. C. S. Lewis once wrote, *The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual: the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and back-biting: the pleasures of power, of hatred.* How does Jacob reflect this? How does the inspired narrator assess the relative guilt of Tamar and Judah? How would you?
4. Imagine for a minute that God asks you to oversee His 'Human Resources' department, and Judah and Tamar are applying for a position. What spiritual roles would you recommend them for? What chance for spiritual success would you give them? In your eyes, what actions would disqualify them? Compare your assessment with God's: See their names in Matt. 1.3 and Luke 3.33, and Judah's name in Rev. 21.12! If God's grace can do that with Judah and Tamar, imagine what He can do with you!