

## On Your Own 12-16-07

Genesis 38

We had just begun the wonderful drama of Joseph and suddenly we take a step back into his dysfunctional family. After the attempted fratricide and selling Joseph into slavery, and all the other sordid affairs of this family, we are ready for a break from the lesson of how depraved man can be. But here is another. God strikes people dead for their wickedness. There's fornication, denying of obligations, and an all too eagerness to stone an abandoned widow. Did God really inspire this chapter to be in sacred Scripture? If I were making the decision, I'd have vetoed this chapter. Good thing I'm not God, because 2000 years later it would become very significant. This just reminds us of our last study, that God's invisible hand is at work even in the midst of our depravity. We can no more trace it than we can guess what tomorrow holds. We just stand back and marvel at what God works out of our selfish behavior. (Psalm 111:2-3)

Our chapter begins with Judah taking leave of the clan of Israel. <sup>1</sup> *At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah.* He moved into the Canaanite town of Adullam. This is only a few miles from where David will one day fight Goliath, and not far from the Philistine city of Gath. It is the area in which David and his men hid in caves from King Saul. In the time of Judah there was a prosperous Canaanite city there. Apparently Judah had taken his inheritance and gone to live among them, striking up a friendship with Hirah.

Did the guilt of suggesting they sell their brother become too much for him? Or did he just want to see the world and experience life in another culture? The author again leaves us to guess. But leaving the family is a sure sign of something about to go terribly wrong. Later in the history of the Hebrews, the men of Israel were not to take foreign wives lest they lead them into idolatry. (Ezra 10:11) Israel will almost face extinction because of the acceptance of idolatrous religions. The New Testament gives us the same warning for the same reasons. (2Corinthians 6:14) When we marry outside our faith, we are setting ourselves up for the watering down or even abandoning of our faith. God warns us out of love. He knows the heartache that can come of a marriage of believer and unbeliever and forbids us from entering into such a relationship for our own well-being.

If we were to pick which brother would head out on his own, most of us would have guessed it would be Reuben, the one who has lost his birthright and gained the disfavor of his father because of his indiscretion with Bilhah. But for those of us who know the rest of the story, we would probably not pick Judah. Judah is the promised line of the Messiah. The kings of Israel and eventually the King of kings will come from him. If he melts into the barbaric Canaanite culture, all is lost, and it looks like that is the direction he was headed.

<sup>2</sup> *There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. He married her and lay with her;* The matter of fact wording of this verse sounds like "lust at first sight". Remember that Isaac and Jacob were forbidden to marry Canaanite women

**Commented [notes1]:** 2 Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them.  
3 Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever.

**Commented [notes2]:** 11 Now make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives."

**Commented [notes3]:** 14 Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?

(24:3;28:1), but the possibility of finding a wife from Laban's clan has been cut off by the way Jacob departed from him. (Genesis 31:52-53) Canaanites had vile religious practices that would make us cringe in disgust. That was the choice of Judah. The daughter of Shua remains unnamed in the story. She gave Judah three sons, Er, Onan, and Sheilah.

<sup>6</sup> Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. <sup>7</sup> But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death. Does the LORD take life? According to the Scriptures, He gives it and He takes it away. (Job 1:21) Most of us can accept that, but we have a hard time accepting that the LORD would take a life because of wickedness of that life. There are numerous examples in the Old and New Testament of God cutting short the life of individuals because of their actions. In every case that I can think of, it was because they were perverting what was sacred, directly and intentionally defying God. (Leviticus 10:1-2; Acts 5:4-5) Yet, we have numerous individuals that do things that we would judge even more serious who live long lives.

As we saw last week, God alone can see the outcome of actions. He alone knows where we are headed. What may seem like a blessing can be a curse and vice versa. All we mortals, with our limited understanding, can do is trust the character and nature of God. We can question, but it does us little good, as we will probably not see the whole picture until the silver cord is loosed and we stand in His presence. (Ecclesiastes 12:6-7) Somehow I don't think we will be questioning then.

Pastor Tulley's sister-in-law's brother was killed instantly a few weeks ago when he was walking with his family. A passing dump truck took his life in a heartbeat. He was taken and Kathy was spared. We can only say that God knows and God decides. In Er's case, it was because of wickedness. Why him and not a wicked Canaanite? I would guess it was because he knew better, but that would only be a guess from my limited perspective. (Luke 12:48) We are held accountable for what we know. In all these situations, we have to rely on the character and justice of God.

<sup>8</sup> Then Judah said to Onan, "Lie with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother." In the ancient world, women were completely dependent on men for their support. A person's property went to the male children. If a man died without having an heir, his brother was to take his wife as his own and the children were to be called the sons of the dead father. The inheritance then would go to them. Since Er was firstborn, he had double the inheritance of his brothers. This would go to his son. Onan would be decreasing his own inheritance if he had children through Tamar. It was his societal duty to care for her and see that she had a male heir, but it was definitely not in his financial interest to do so. (1Timothy 6:10)

Like so many decisions of this family in the past, he chose what was best for his own selfish financial interests. <sup>9</sup> But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so whenever he lay with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother. This passage is used to villainize birth control and other sexual behavior, but that is taking it out of context. Onan's sin was

**Commented [notes4]:** 52 This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not go past this heap to your side to harm you and that you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me. 53 May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us." So Jacob took an oath in the name of the Fear of his father Isaac.

**Commented [notes5]:** 21 and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised."

**Commented [notes6]:** 1 Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. 2 So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

**Commented [notes7]:** 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.

**Commented [notes8]:** 6 Remember him--before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, 7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

**Commented [notes9]:** 48 But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

**Commented [notes10]:** 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

one that is all too common, selfishness. He was willing to use Tamar sexually, but didn't want it to cost him financially in producing an heir for his dead brother.

He may not have thought it was a big deal, but God did. <sup>10</sup> *What he did was wicked in the LORD's sight; so he put him to death also.* What he did was use a woman he had a societal obligation to and then deny her the fulfillment of having a child because of his selfish financial greed. He certainly knew better. And after seeing what happened to his brother, you would think he would have some respect for the justice of God. (Deuteronomy 32:29) It doesn't look like he gave it a second thought. Do we? When you start to do something that you know is wrong, are you restrained by the fact that God is just and that you will be required to give an account for that action? (Romans 14:12) This thought is almost completely lost in today's culture.

**Commented [notes11]:** 29 If only they were wise and would understand this and discern what their end will be!

**Commented [notes12]:** 12 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

If God is not just, if He does not balance the books, if evil is left unrestrained and never dealt with, then you can expect eternity to be something akin to hell. Surely you realize that if we have no consequences for murder, rape, theft, or violence then crime would dominate our world. The belief that anarchy is somehow going to bring utopia is not only naïve, it just completely ignores all history and personal experience. Thank God that He is just. Thank God that He requires evil to be dealt with. When and how is up to Him and best left in hands of God and His ordained governments. (Romans 13:3-4)

**Commented [notes13]:** 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. 4 For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

As a culture becomes increasingly godless, you will notice the inequity of a crime and its punishment either in severity or lenience, but usually in lenience. We don't want others punished severely because we may be next. We think any selfish behavior is normal, so why be so harsh. Righteousness and justice go hand in hand. (Psalm 7:11)

**Commented [notes14]:** 11 God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day.

<sup>11</sup> *Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up." For he thought, "He may die too, just like his brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's house.* Judah pretended to be doing the right thing, but he was afraid for his son. He completely relieved the family of any financial burden by having her go to live with her father. As I explained before in the story of Jacob, the bride-price paid by Er was to be an insurance policy in case of his death. The father retained it to care for her in case she was widowed. So she went home and waited and waited and waited.

In the meantime, Judah's wife died. It became obvious that Sheilah was not going to marry Tamar, so when Tamar heard that Judah was going to shear his sheep, <sup>14</sup> *she took off her widow's clothes, covered herself with a veil to disguise herself, and then sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah.* Prostitutes hid their identity with a veil. It was a completely different reason than the Muslim veil of today.

<sup>16</sup> *Not realizing that she was his daughter-in-law, he went over to her by the roadside and said, "Come now, let me sleep with you." "And what will you give me to sleep with you?" she asked.* Prostitution was legitimized in Canaan by having women who devoted themselves to a particular god become shrine prostitutes. Since most of the shrines had to do with fertility, the sex act was an act of worship for them. The act

was supposed to assure your herds and crops of being productive. This demonstrates the affect of the culture on Judah. As we saw in the case of Lot and his daughters, you can't live in the sewer and stay clean. God calls us out of the world and its ways. Though we live in it, we are not of it. Our soul is to be separate from the worldliness around us. We are to live in the culture of God. (2 Corinthians 6:17)

<sup>17</sup> "I'll send you a young goat from my flock," he said. "Will you give me something as a pledge until you send it?" she asked. Tamar had tricked him into thinking she was a prostitute. Three generations of deception have now all involved a goat. Jacob deceived Isaac with goat skins and goat meat, the 10 sons of Jacob deceived him with goat blood on Joseph's coat, and now one of them is deceived as he offers the payment of a goat from the herd. Tamar agreed to the price of a young goat, but wanted insurance that she would get paid. Actually she had a plan. She needed proof that if she became pregnant, the father was Judah.

<sup>18</sup> He said, "What pledge should I give you?" "Your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand," she answered. So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she became pregnant by him. These items were unique to each individual and tribe and would identify Judah and Judah alone. Her plan worked. He left his ID in the brothel! She did become pregnant. In the midst of man's depravity God's plan was coming to pass.

Certainly what was going on was wrong. It was sin to leave her without support in the care of her father and give a false promise. It was sin to take a prostitute, especially one he thought was a shrine prostitute. It was sin for her to deceive her father-in-law. Yet, through all these sinful acts of man, God was at work, keeping his promise. One of the children in her womb would end up being the line of the Messiah. (Matthew 1:3)

Again, if I were to pick which of Judah's children would be the line of Messiah, I'd have picked the line of Sheilah, but God picked, and He picked a child of Tamar, the abandoned widow of the wicked Er. This tells us something of God's heart for the neglected.

When Tamar's belly began to enlarge with twins, neighbors were quick to point the finger and cry, "Prostitute!" The news came to Judah who was quick to judge. <sup>24b</sup> Judah said, "Bring her out and have her burned to death!"

It was time for Tamar to play the trump card. Out came the signet and staff. "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?" Now who was embarrassed? In trying to get out of his obligations, he welcomed the thought of being rid of Tamar. Now he is the laughingstock he feared he would be, only worse. His ill treatment of Tamar was brought to the fore so that all could see. The Scriptures warn us that we can be sure our sin will find us out. (Numbers 32:23) Tamar had her male heir.

<sup>26</sup> Judah recognized them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." And he did not sleep with her again. Judah faced up to

**Commented [notes15]:** 17 "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."

**Commented [notes16]:** 3 Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram,

**Commented [notes17]:** 23 "But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the LORD; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out."

his sin. It is the first sign that he is changing. It couldn't have been long after that that he returned to his family, leaving life with the Canaanites behind. At least he woke up to the fact that he had strayed from where he should be and was willing to correct his path. Before the end of Genesis, we will find him in a heroic role.

Jacob's narrative began with wrestling of twins in the womb and now the scenario is repeated. <sup>28</sup> *As she was giving birth, one of them put out his hand; so the midwife took a scarlet thread and tied it on his wrist and said, "This one came out first."* <sup>29</sup> *But when he drew back his hand, his brother came out, and she said, "So this is how you have broken out!" And he was named Perez.*

It is amazing to me that Jewish exegetes see so much in the Torah. They certainly are the experts when it comes to the minutia of the Law. A number of the ancient exegetes see Perez as a forerunner of the Messiah. He is indeed the line from which Jesus would be born. To these Jewish commentators, the breaking out is symbolic of the Messiah breaking out of the boundaries of the Law. The Torah has 613 laws, but there has always been a sense of them being a burden. In the age of the prophets, there was an attempt to summarize the Law in simpler expressions. That is why we see people asking Jesus about which is the most important Law. (Matthew 22:36) The exegetes saw the breaking out as a breaking out of the boundaries of the Law to something even better, purer, simpler. So in that sense, they saw Perez as prophetic of the Messiah that was to come.

Jesus indeed broke the boundaries of the Law by living it for us. He made it possible for us to be filled with the Spirit, so that instead of the cold stone letters, we have the Spirit of the Law living in us to guide us. (Ezekiel 36:26) And so Rabbi Saul wrote, "If we are led of the Spirit, we are not under the Law." (Galatians 5:18)

So what has this chapter I would have edited out taught us? Judah's move away from his family teaches us the dangers of flirting with the world. The story shows the incredible sovereignty of God. It shows that salvation is a gift from God, not of deserving men. It shows us God's love for the neglected and despondent. It shows us that the coming Messiah would liberate us from hundreds of rules to a Spirit led life. We can see that now. I just don't understand why in the world Moses included it. But of course, God is sovereign.

God is sovereign today in having this story coincidentally be our introduction to next week's Christmas message. You see, Tamar has the distinct honor of being the first of the four women in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. All four were Gentiles, all with "highly irregular and potentially scandalous marital unions" (Victor Hamilton). Why weren't the honorable Sarah, Rachel and Rebecca mentioned? As Simeon quoted the prophet Isaiah, the Messiah was to be a light to the Gentiles. (Isaiah 49:6) It was always God's plan to include the Gentiles. *For God so loved the world...* The Tamar story coming on this Sunday just reminds us that God is still sovereign over every detail. It also reminds us that the Messiah Savior was born to save all who will come to Him, Gentile and Jew, clean living people and selfish scoundrels. He came for us all. What an amazing story. What an amazing God! Tamar has the distinct honor of being the first of the four women in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel.

**Commented [notes18]:** 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

**Commented [notes19]:** 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

**Commented [notes20]:** 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

**Commented [notes21]:** 6 he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."