

If God is For Us: The Life and Trials of Joseph

Shaming the Strong (Genesis 38:1-30)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 28, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ This morning's passage is another great example of why we're committed to expository preaching through whole books of the Bible. Because I can guarantee that – if I were just choosing what I feel like preaching each week – you will never hear a sermon out of Genesis 38. This is one of those chapters in the Bible that surprises you. It catches you off guard.
 - I remember, when my oldest was just a child, I thought it would be a good idea to read to her the Joseph story. Not out of her kid's story bible but from the real thing. And Genesis 37 starts off great! We're tracking with this story about this little brother with big dreams that draw the ire of his older brothers. There's lots of exciting drama.
 - But by the next chapter, two paragraphs in and I'm like, "Um, where's your *Jesus Storybook Bible*?" This is not bedtime reading for a five-year-old. Not saying you should never read it to a child. Just saying you better be ready for all the questions, and just know that kid ain't going to sleep anytime soon!
- ❖ But this is what I love about the Bible. **It's not afraid to give us raw and honest portrayals of our forefathers of the faith, warts and all.** That's a strong apologetic for reading the stories in Genesis as true, historic accounts and not ancient myths about the heroic feats of their religious forbearers. If that all Genesis is, then there wouldn't have been a Genesis 38.
 - **The way this chapter starts off, it does Judah no favors.** He's one of the early patriarchs, immediately following Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I know the rest of Genesis focuses on Joseph and his story. But as the overall story goes, the Messiah doesn't come from the line of Joseph. But the line of Judah. **Judah is the one who bears God's covenant promise to bring forth a Messiah who will undo the curse of sin that befell all of creation back in Genesis 3.**
 - But Judah himself is portrayed as a selfish, no good, deadbeat dad. His story arc swiftly descends into a sordid mess of sin and shame. It's rather shocking. **But by chapter's end, Judah has been confronted by his sin. His shame has been exposed. But God's grace is still there.** Like it is in every story in Genesis. And Judah goes through a transformation that explains the profound change in him the next time he appears in the narrative. Later in Genesis 43.
- ❖ **So while our chapter seems out of place since it pivots away from the main plot line focused on Joseph, there is good reason for its inclusion.** It's instrumental in setting up the narrative when it comes to Judah later on in the book. And it's vital for telling the larger story of Scripture when it comes to the hope of a promised Savior to be fulfilled in Christ Jesus.
 - As we study this chapter, we'll consider three major plot points: (1) A vindication for Tamar. (2) A breakthrough for Judah. (3) A salvation for God's covenant people.

A Vindication for Tamar

- ❖ Let's go over the entire story with a particular focus on the heroine of the story. By the story's end, we're going to see a vindication for Tamar.

- ❖ Now the chapter begins telling us that these events occurred around the same time as the events in Genesis 37. *“It happened at that time.”* That time was when Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery to traders headed to Egypt. Now notice how around that same time, *“Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.”*
 - When the text says Judah went down, he did that literally. He would’ve had to descend down from the heights of Hebron to the lowlands of Canaan. **His geographic descent was meant to symbolize his simultaneous moral descent.** Abandoning God’s covenant people to live among their pagan neighbors.
- ❖ Commentators have noted that the text says Judah went down *“from his brothers,”* which is not what you would’ve expected. You’d expect it to say he went down from Hebron or from his father Jacob. **The specific mention of leaving his brothers leads some to speculate that, after the events of Genesis 37, Judah wanted to distance himself from his brothers.** Not because he was opposed to what they did to Joseph or disgusted by their behavior.
 - In fact, selling Joseph into slavery was Judah’s idea. We can only speculate. **But it’s not hard to imagine him being ashamed of what he did.** And not wanting to be around his brothers anymore because they were a constant reminder of his shame.
 - We do that too. Sometimes we avoid certain people. Not because they’re bad people. Not because they hurt us. But simply because they remind us of our shameful past. It feels like an easy solution. But it always fails to adequately deal with shame. We still carry it within us wherever we flee.
- ❖ **Now without much detail, with an economy of words, we’re told that Judah befriended a Canaanite man, Hirah, and married a Canaanite woman, who goes unnamed.** In v2, it says he *“saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite . . . He took her and went in to her, ³and she conceived and bore a son.”* The Hebrew for *saw* and *took* are the same words, in the same sequence, as Genesis 3:6 when Eve saw and took the fruit. Or in chapter 6:2 when the sons of God saw and took the daughters of man. Or in chapter 34:2 when Shechem saw and took Dinah. **In each instance, the actions were driven by illicit and inordinate desires.**
 - And so it was for Judah. Intermarriage with the Canaanites was the one thing his father and grandfather were careful *not* to do for the sake of preserving their covenant allegiance to the LORD God (Gen 24:3; 28:1).
- ❖ **So it seems like Judah wanted nothing more to do with God’s covenant promises.** He didn’t care that he was next in line to inherit the covenant blessings first given to Abraham. His older brothers Reuben, Simeon, and Levi had already disqualified themselves by their previous actions in the story. And Jacob’s beloved son was now gone, enslaved in Egypt. So Judah was next in line. But that seemed to matter very little to him at this moment. He purposely moved away from the covenant people of God to live among the Canaanites.
 - **The lineage of promise looked on the verge of being snuffed out.** It would’ve ended if not for the bold, risky actions taken by Tamar. She makes sure that the messianic line will continue to the next generation.

- ❖ We're told that Judah had three sons. In v6, it says he married his first son Er to Tamar, which most commentators think was a Canaanite herself. Before they were able to bear a child, Er was put to death by the LORD. Now this is the first instance in the Bible of the LORD directly slaying someone. We're told that it's because he was wicked in God's sight.
 - **So Judah tells his second son Onan to fulfill his brotherly duty of a levirate marriage.** That's an ancient custom where the brother of a deceased man is expected to marry his brother's widow and sire offspring on behalf of his dead brother. So any child that Onan bears with Tamar would still be counted as his older brother's. If it's a boy, that son would receive Er's share of the inheritance (the double portion reserved for the firstborn). So Onan has a strong financial incentive to keep Tamar childless. Which explains his actions, which we don't need to go into.
 - Suffice it to say, Onan has no problem sleeping with Tamar. The text would suggest that it was on more than one occasion. But he had a big problem sharing the inheritance. **Through his deception, he not only abused Tamar. He abused this ancient social safety net put in place to care for widows and to preserve the inheritance of the deceased.** For all that, the LORD God put Onan to death as well (v10).
- ❖ **By this point, Judah is hesitant to marry Tamar off to his youngest son Shelah.** So he instructs her to go back to her father's house and remain a widow until Shelah comes of age to marry. He promises to her his youngest son, but as readers, we know he has no intention of fulfilling that promise. We're told that he fears that Shelah would die just like his older brothers. In other words, he blames Tamar. He thinks she must be cursed. **He probably doesn't see it at this point, but like his son Onan, Judah is sinfully and selfishly withholding from Tamar the blessing of offspring.**
- ❖ Now in v12, some time has passed. Judah's nameless wife dies, and after a period of mourning, he joins his Canaanite friend Hirah in the town of Timnah just in time for the sheepshearing festivities. **Sheepshearing season, back then, was a time of intense labor but also intense celebration. Where it was not uncommon for men to celebrate a successful season by visiting prostitutes.**
 - Hearing that Judah is on his way, Tamar seizes the moment. She realizes, by now, that Judah has no intention of fulfilling his promise. So she takes matters into her own hands. She takes off her widow's garment and covers herself with a veil. She sits at the town entrance, on the side of the road, waiting for Judah to arrive. It's not clear to commentators whether wearing a veil was a clear signal of being a prostitute. Definitely she wore one in order to conceal her identity from her father-in-law.
- ❖ It was more likely her location on the side of the road, by the town's entrance, that led Judah to presume she was a prostitute. In v14, it says she was at "*the entrance to Enaim*," referring to a gate. The irony is that that phrase in Hebrew literally translates to "*the opening of the eyes*." **At the Opening of the Eyes, Judah's eyes are closed – not just to the identity of the one he's soliciting for sex – but closed to the depths of sin to which he's descending.**

- ❖ Now they agree on the price of a young goat, but this was an impulsive act of lust on Judah's part so he wasn't prepared with one. Instead he offers a pledge of payment. I'll give you something of value, which you'll hold on to until I pay you what you're owed. **So Tamar asks for Judah to leave, as a pledge, his signet and cord along with his staff.**
 - She was asking for Judah's seal. Which included the signet – a cylindrical piece of metal or stone personalized in such a way that you'd press it into clay to seal and sign an ancient document. And there would've been a cord connected to the signet, so Judah probably wore it around his neck. And his staff would've been intricately carved and recognizable as belonging to him. **So in asking for his seal and his staff, it was like asking for his driver's license and credit card.** Not smart on Judah's part, but when you're deep in sin, you make foolish decisions.
- ❖ Now after the deed is done, we're told that Tamar conceives and returns to her father's house and Judah goes home too. He asks his friend Hirah to go back to Timnah to help him exchange the young goat for his seal and staff. But he's unable to locate her and all the townsfolk don't know who he's talking about. So when he reports back to Judah, he tells his friend in v23, *"Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her."* In other words, oh well we tried our best. But notice his concern *not* to become the laughingstock. Not to be shamed in the eyes of others.
 - **Now three months pass by, and Tamar's pregnancy begins to show.** Judah is told that his daughter-in-law is pregnant by immorality. His response in v24 is extremely blunt, *"Bring her out, and let her be burned."* That entire phrase in Hebrew is just two words. Burn her! Which was out of proportion to the supposed crime. And apparently he wasn't waiting for the accusation to be verified by two or three witnesses as prescribed by Law. **Judah saw this as a convenient opportunity to rid himself of Tamar, so he could marry off his son to someone else.**
- ❖ But in a moment similar to Genesis 37, when Judah and his brothers asked their father to identify Joseph's robe, Tamar asks Judah to please identify this seal and staff. Look at v25, *"By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant." And she said, "Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff."*
 - In that moment, what Judah so greatly feared and tried so hard to avoid, finally confronted him. **He had to face his shame. It was exposed for all to see, and he became that object of ridicule and scorn.** Humbled and humiliated, he acknowledged that they belong to him. That he was the one who impregnated her. Listen to v26, *"Then Judah identified them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not know her again."*
- ❖ **Literally, Judah says, "She is righteous. Not I." He vindicates her in the eyes of others.** She was right. That is, she was right to take drastic measures to open Judah's eyes, which were previously closed to his unjust treatment of her. The story is *not* endorsing prostitution or incest in any form. **But it is vindicating Tamar. Treating her as a heroine.** As the one who preserved the messianic line. Who propelled herself into the genealogy of Christ.

A Breakthrough for Judah

- ❖ So we already walked through most of the chapter, looking at it with a particular focus on the vindication of Tamar. That was the first plot point. Here's our second. Let's look back at the story again and we'll see a breakthrough for Judah. That's language I'm borrowing from our text. From the name of Judah's firstborn with Tamar.
 - Let's look back at the text, at where we left off in v27, we're told that Tamar was having twins. **Two boys were struggling in her womb. Does that remind you of another story?** Think back to Jacob and Esau. Here we have another situation involving competing twins, the color red, and the younger supplanting the older.
 - Listen starting in v28, *"²⁸And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, 'This one came out first.' ²⁹But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, 'What a breach you have made for yourself!' Therefore his name was called Perez."*
- ❖ The name Perez means *breakthrough*. It signifies the breach or breakthrough he made to be the firstborn. **But his name also signifies a spiritual breakthrough for Judah.** Because of Tamar's bold actions, Judah was confronted with his sin and shame. All of his failures were exposed to public view and public shame.
 - **Judah failed as a son.** Having deceived his father about Joseph's fate. Having intermarried with the Canaanites. **Judah failed as a brother.** Having betrayed Joseph and having abandoned the others. **Judah failed as a father.** Having raised two wicked sons that had to be taken out by the LORD. **Judah failed as a father-in-law.** Having deceived, abused, and abandoned Tamar.
- ❖ **And yet, in spite of all his sins, Judah was shown grace.** God didn't strike him down dead like he did to his two oldest sons. I find it hard to believe that the sins of Er and Onan were that much worse than their father's. **That means Judah deserved to die as much as his two sons.** He knew it. And so when he's confronted with his sin and shame. When he confesses that he is *not* righteous. **He realizes he's been a recipient of amazing grace.** He's still alive when he should be dead!
 - **This confrontation with his sin and shame – and this experience of God's grace – is the explanation for the character transformation that's observable in Judah the next time we encounter him in Genesis 43.** By then, he's reconnected with his brothers and with his father Jacob. And in the course of events, later on when their brother Joseph – who's now ruling Egypt – is testing them and demands that they don't return without bringing their youngest brother Benjamin – Jacob is unwilling to part with Benjamin. He fears losing another son of Rachel.

- ❖ There, in Genesis 43:9, we read of Judah assuring his father that he will personally ensure Benjamin's safety and his return home. **And he specifically says to his father, “*I will be a pledge of his safety.*”** A pledge! And in Genesis 44:32, he uses the word again. At that point, Joseph is threatening to keep Benjamin in Egypt while sending the rest back. But Judah tells Joseph (who he still doesn't recognize) that he is a pledge for the boy's safety, and he offers to take Benjamin's place. “Let the boy go, and please take me as a pledge.”
 - **I don't think there's any coincidence in the fact that the word *pledge* reappears here and only here in all of Genesis.** The author is making a connection between the two episodes. In Genesis 37, Judah is selfishly selling out his little brother. **So what can explain his self-sacrificial willingness in Genesis 44 to take another little brother's place in captivity?** Clearly, it was his Genesis 38 experience. It was a humiliating encounter where his sins were confronted and his shame exposed. **God was shaming the strong.** That's never fun. That never feels good. But, by his grace, he uses that to humble you and transform you into someone new.
- ❖ In fact, when you look back on Judah's life, you can see now how God was using all the hardships to humble him and help him to sympathize and identify with those he had hurt in the past. With those he needs to be reconciled with.
 - **Think about how he now can identify with his father Jacob, the one he deceived and betrayed.** Like Jacob, now Judah knew what it was like **to lose a son**. Like Jacob, now Judah knew that his efforts **to shield his youngest son** could come at the expense of hurting others. Like his father, now Judah knew what it felt like **to be deceived by a mysteriously veiled woman**. Recall Jacob's encounter with Leah. Or **to be deceived by use of a young goat**. Recall how Judah and his brothers used a young goat to deceive Jacob into thinking Joseph was dead.
 - My point is that it was through a confrontation with his own sinfulness and the experience of God's grace (he didn't die like his two sons) – through these encounters Judah was transformed into a new man. Which prepared him to reconnect with his family and restore a broken relationship with his father.
- ❖ Friends, I hope this is an encouragement to you. **Perhaps you've gone through a similar humbling experience or you're going through it now.** Where you've been forced to face your sins. Where the shame you've privately carried around has been publicly exposed. Maybe you were caught in a lie. Maybe you were revealed to be a fraud. Maybe you were called out for a sin that you were basically blind to.
 - **Like Judah, perhaps you had an experience that was so humiliating but, at the same time, so eye-opening.** Because, after having gone through it, you've come to realize that you weren't just lying to others – you were lying to yourself.
 - **Be encouraged to know that that shameful experience doesn't have to define you.** That's the good news. You don't have to be defined by the worst mistake in your life or your most shameful moment.

- ❖ Look at Judah. **I'm guessing if it weren't for this sermon, your first thought of Judah would've probably been his association with Jesus.** You would've known him as a key figure in Jesus's genealogy (in Matthew 1). You would've heard of Jesus being described as the Lion of Judah (in Revelation 5). **In other words, Judah – who experienced the lowest of lows in Genesis 38 – is, in the bigger picture, defined positively in relation to Christ.**
 - The same could be said of you. You don't have to be defined by your most shameful moment. **You can be defined positively by your association with Christ.** That's the change in Judah's life. And it all started with this humbling experience in Genesis 38.
- ❖ So here's the question for you: **Has your humbling experience transformed you into someone new?** Have you recognized the evidences of God's grace – that he's doing something good through it all? **God wants to use that experience to shape you into a person of peace, an agent of reconciliation.** Someone willing to take the place of others, to bear their burdens, to even lay down your life for theirs.

A Salvation for God's People

- ❖ God's trying to make you more like his Son. Because Jesus is the one this story has been pointing to all along. This leads to our third plot point – a salvation for God's people. **Just consider how Genesis 38 connects with the larger gospel story that the Bible is telling.** Remember, in this episode, there are two brothers who die, leaving their wives childless. And then through some purposeful maneuvering, a barren Gentile widow is able to conceive and bear a son by means of another kinsman. What other story does that sound like?
 - **When you arrive at the book of Ruth, it introduces us to a family who moves away from the people of God to live among the nations.** Two sons die leaving their wives childless. And then through some purposeful maneuvering, a barren Gentile widow is able to conceive and bear a son by means of a kinsman redeemer.
- ❖ **But in Ruth's story, Boaz treats her with dignity and respect.** There was nothing illicit or shameful with their encounter. Ruth and Tamar's stories are similar in many ways but completely different in tenor. Ruth's story is much more wholesome and far more hopeful.
 - **The book of Ruth ends with a genealogy of King David.** One that starts with none other than Perez (Ruth 4:18-22). That genealogy is meant to prepare readers for the birth of ancient Israel's greatest king. **But ultimately it's there to prepare us for Matthew's genealogy in the beginning of his Gospel.** Which includes Judah and Perez, as well as Tamar and Ruth. They all play a role in preserving the messianic line until it finally concludes in yet another conception of a child under questionable circumstances. But this story is holy and pure. And points us to the hope of the world, to our Savior, Christ Jesus the Lord.
- ❖ According to this gospel story, the Son of God took on flesh. **And lived the life we should've lived. And died the death we should've died.** Because of our sin and shame. And then he rose again on the third day to demonstrate his resounding victory over sin and shame. So now he reigns as both the Lion of Judah and the Lamb who was Slain.

- ❖ Judah predates Jesus by multiple generations. **But Jesus surpasses Judah in both his glory and his grace.** He's different than Judah. Judah tried to lay the blame of his sins and his sons' sins on Tamar. He considered her cursed and at fault for their deaths.
 - **Jesus, on the other hand, was willing to take the blame and bear our curse.** By dying for us, he atoned for our sins and covered our shame. And gave us the gift of his righteousness. So as he hung there on the cross, it's like he looked at us and proclaimed to the world, *"They are righteous. Not I."*

- ❖ Jesus is the fulfillment of this chapter and every other in the book of Genesis. And of every other book in the OT as a whole. It's all about Jesus and his promised salvation. **So my question to you is simple: Do you trust in Jesus and have you received his salvation?**
 - The reality is that, on the final day, all of us will stand before the Creator and King of all the Universe. And he will judge the living and the dead. **And all of our secret sins and all of our private shame will be exposed. Nothing will be hidden from sight.** And everyone will have to give an account.
 - **But for those who are covered by the righteousness of Christ, our sin and shame will prove to be covered by our Savior's blood.** And like Tamar we will be vindicated before all. That's the hope of the gospel that is only shared by those in Christ. Just call out to him, from the depths of your heart, asking to be saved. He is faithful and he will surely do it.