

“SKELETONS IN JESUS’ FAMILY TREE” **(Genesis 38:1-30)**

I recently ran across a TV show some of you might have seen called *Finding Your Roots*, where a team of researchers digs up information on the family backgrounds and ancestry of various celebrities. Every celebrity guest is surprised to hear things about their family they never knew. More than a few discover that their ancestors were slave owners – some find out for the first time that one of their parents is not their biological parent – or that their grandfather had a secret family. Every family has some skeletons in the closet – secrets they’d just as soon no one find out about.

One of the things that speaks to the authenticity of the Bible is that it doesn’t gloss over the secrets and imperfections of its heroes, including the people that make up Jesus’ family tree – and today we come one of those stories that we’d just as soon want left out of the Bible.

I have a feeling that most of you have never heard a sermon on the passage we have before us today, and that’s because most pastors skip right over it for a couple of reasons. The first reason is that it interrupts the story of Joseph, and doesn’t seem all that relevant. The second reason is that the subject matter of Genesis 38 is R-rated and not entirely pleasant to talk about. The easiest thing to do is move right on to chapter 39.

Everything in the Bible, however, is there for a reason, and chapter 38 – as we’ll see – is an important piece in telling the overall story of the Bible. We know from Genesis 3 that God made a promise that the offspring of Eve will crush the head of the serpent and bring redemption to the world – and we also know in Genesis that God made a promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that it is their family line that will fulfill that promise. Jacob has twelve sons, and it is through one of these sons that the hope of the world lies. If Jacob’s family does not make it to the end of Genesis, the world is doomed.

But Jacob’s family is a mess. Jacob favors his eleventh born son Joseph, which creates jealousy and strife in the family. The jealousy of the brothers culminates in them selling Joseph as a slave who ends up in Egypt. In chapter 38 the focus shifts temporarily from Joseph to Judah, the fourth-born son of Jacob. For reasons we’ll see later, the people of Israel needed to know this story in order to make sense of God’s plan for their nation. We’re first going to walk through the story, and then draw out the reasons chapter 38 is in the Bible and what it means for our lives today. So let’s dig in.

The chapter begins with the word “at that time.” Joseph is now gone to Egypt, and Judah takes the spotlight. In verses 1-5 we read... “At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah. There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. He married her and made love to her; she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, who was named Er. She conceived again and gave birth to a son and named him Onan. She gave birth to still another son and named him Shelah. It was at Kezib that she gave birth to him.”

The chapter begins on an ominous note – Judah leaves the family to live among the Canaanites. That’s not good. Judah’s family was in a covenant relationship with God – they were set apart from the world to be God’s special people – and the Canaanites were a wicked, pagan people God wanted His people to keep separate from. The first thing Judah does when he goes to the Canaanites is he marries a Canaanite. That’s the one thing his great-grandfather Abraham and his grandfather Isaac were so committed not to do that they made great efforts to find wives for their sons who feared the Lord. The one thing God’s people were not to do, Judah does.

The same is true for God’s people today – if you’re a Christian, God intends for you to marry a Christian because the most important thing in a marriage is sharing a mutual relationship with Christ and living your lives together for His glory. That was God’s intention for Jacob’s family and Judah has already departed from that.

Verses 6-7 says... “Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the Lord’s sight; so the Lord put him to death.” Judah continues his intermarriage with the wicked Canaanites by getting a Canaanite wife for his firstborn son Er. But Er is so wicked that God takes him out. That’s a little sobering. What did he do? We don’t know, but we do know that God holds everyone accountable for their sin, and sometimes that accountability comes through an early death – like Ananias and Sapphira in the book of Acts who tried to deceive the church and God struck them dead. 1 John 5:16 talks about sin that “leads unto death.” When a believer willfully continues in sin without repenting, there may come a point when God may decide to take their life. Our culture lures us into thinking that sin is no big deal, but a passage like this reminds us that God takes sin very seriously and God will not be mocked – whatever we sow we shall also reap.

With Er’s death, his wife Tamar is left a widow, and in that culture there was no such thing as Medicare or Social Security, you were completely dependent on your family to survive. One of the ways the law sought to protect vulnerable people was if a man died without any children, his nearest relative was to marry his widow and raise up children on his behalf – so that a portion of his inheritance would pass through his children and the needs of the widow would be met through their children.

Now that Er has died, it was up to the second-born, Onan, to step up, take his brother’s place, and marry Er’s widow Tamar. Verses 8-10... “Then Judah said to Onan, ‘Sleep with your brother’s wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother.’ But Onan knew that the child would not be his; so whenever he slept with his brother’s wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from providing offspring for his brother. What he did was wicked in the Lord’s sight; so the Lord put him to death also.”

Onan is just like his dad – he’s a selfish man – he’s not interested in the wellbeing of his brother’s wife – he’s for sure not interested in sharing his portion of the inheritance with a son who’s legally not going to be counted as his. So he does what wicked men do – he enjoys sexual pleasure, but shirks the responsibility that comes with it. And God puts him to death as well.

Judah's decision to go live with the Canaanites is coming back to haunt him, and all this is being used of God to get his attention. Sometimes that's what it takes, doesn't it? Some call this God's "severe mercy" where He uses the natural consequences of our actions to bring us to our senses and draw us to Him. But Judah is still hardened.

We know that God has promised to redeem the world through a human being, and we know that human being is going to come through the descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If Judah believes God and believes the promises of God, the one thing he should be seeking to do is to grow his family because that's how redemption is going to come to the world. He should be giving Tamar in marriage to his youngest son Shelah, as God's law required and as he promised he would do.

But he's not doing that. He's somehow reasoned out that Tamar is the problem. Verse 11... "Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, 'Live as a widow in your father's household 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 household." Judah thinks, "This lady is bad luck – my first two sons died because of her, so I'm not about to give my third son to her."

After Tamar goes back to live with her father, she waits for Shelah, the third-born, to grow up. He does grow up, but Judah doesn't follow up on his promises to give Shelah to her as a husband. When she recognizes this, she decides to take matters into her own hands. Verses 12-15... "After a long time Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, died. When Judah had recovered from his grief, he went up to Timnah, to the men who were shearing his sheep, and his friend Hirah the Adullamite went with him. When Tamar was told, 'Your father-in-law is on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep,' 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. For she saw that, though Shelah had now grown up, she had not been given to him as his wife. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. 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.'"

These verses remind us how thoroughly Judah has become a Canaanite – a man of the world. His wife just died, and he immediately seeks solace in a prostitute. But who he thinks is a prostitute is actually Tamar, who deceives him into sleeping with her by using a veil to disguise herself. This continues a long line of deceit in Jacob's family. He disguised himself as Esau to deceive Isaac, and Leah – you'll remember – disguised herself as Rachel to deceive Jacob. Last week we saw how Joseph's brothers put goat's blood on Joseph's coat of many colors to deceive Jacob into thinking Joseph was dead.

Tamar's intent is to have a child, and since Judah would not fulfill his obligation as her father-in-law to give her Shelah, she concocts a ruse to have a child through Judah himself and continue the family line. One can fault her for the way she goes about it, but you can't fault her rightful quest to have a child.

By right she should be in the line of promise – she should be bearing the firstborn of the next generation. But because of Judah’s wickedness she’s living as a widow in her father’s house, cut out of the line of promise. So if you ask: who in this story believes the promises of God enough to act? It’s not Judah – the answer is Tamar.

As we pick up the story at the end of verse 16, Tamar – disguised in her veil – negotiates with Judah... “And what will you give me to sleep with you?” she asked. “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. He said, “What pledge should I give you?” “Your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand,” she answered (16b-18a). As part of her ruse, Tamar asks Judah for a pledge – some collateral that he will follow through on his payment. “What do you want?” “How about your seal and cord and your staff,” she said.

A seal was a person’s form of identification – kind of like a driver’s license. It was usually a small stone marked with your unique identification that you would press into wax to verify a document or transaction – it was kind of like your signature. The stone hung on a cord bearing colors unique to you, and every walking staff had some unique characteristic that made it easily identifiable. As part of her plan, Tamar gets Judah to leave these personal items with her, and we’ll find out why in a bit.

Her plan works. Verse 18b-24... “So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she became pregnant by him. After she left, she took off her veil and put on her widow’s clothes again. Meanwhile Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite in order to get his pledge back from the woman, but he did not find her. He asked the men who lived there, ‘Where is the shrine prostitute who was beside the road at Enaim?’ ‘There hasn’t been any shrine prostitute here,’ they said. So he went back to Judah and said, ‘I didn’t find her. Besides, the men who lived there said, ‘There hasn’t been any shrine prostitute here.’ Then Judah said, ‘Let her keep what she has, or we will become a laughingstock. After all, I did send her this young goat, but you didn’t find her.’ About three months later Judah was told, ‘Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant.’ Judah said, ‘Bring her out and have her burned to death!’”

Judah tries to pay his debt to the “prostitute” and get his personal things back, but Tamar can’t be found. He says, “Fine, she can keep it,” and forgets about it. Three months go by, and he receives news that Tamar is pregnant. That can only mean one thing – since she is not married it must mean that she has been immoral. Judah is enraged and says, “Burn her – tie her to a stake to burn her to death!”

The double-standard, of course, is glaring. Judah can be with a prostitute, but Tamar acting as a prostitute warrants the death penalty. Judah is an Old Testament Pharisee – he can clearly see the sin of others, but he can’t see his own sin. He can see the speck in Tamar’s eye, but he can’t see the log in his own eye. His response is very much like King David’s response when the prophet Nathan told him about a rich man who had stolen a poor man’s lamb, and David burned with anger and said, “That man should be taken out and put to death!” Neither David nor Judah recognized their own sin. But God saw to it that both would.

Verse 25... “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.’” This is a Perry Mason moment that leaves no doubt as to the identity of the father. Not only that, but this moment marks the turning point in Judah’s life and God’s plan of redemption through Jacob’s family.

Verse 26... “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.” As you look back on your life, you recognize key moments that determined the course your life would take. This was the key moment in Judah’s life. Judah had condemned his daughter-in-law of being worthy of death, but now recognizes that she is the righteous one while he stands guilty – “I’m the one who needs mercy.” This is the moment where Judah’s character begins to change. And the change comes right away when it says he did not sleep with her again. He had dishonored his daughter-in-law, and now takes steps to honor her.

And this is not the only changes in Judah’s life. Later in the story he’s going to take the lead among his brothers, and he’s going to be willing to go to prison so that his youngest brother Benjamin can go free. He also takes the lead in repenting for what he and his brothers did to Joseph. That’s the kind of change that God’s grace works in the life of a repentant person – grace can take hardened people and turn them into soft people – grace can take self-righteous people and turn them into gracious people – grace that can take self-centered people and turn them into others-centered people.

But the story’s not over yet. Verses 27-30... “When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. 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.’ 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. Then his brother, who had the scarlet thread on his wrist, came out. And he was named Zerah.”

This reminds us of another set of twins – Esau and Jacob – who wrestled in their mother’s womb. In that culture, the first twin to be born not only received the bulk of the family inheritance, but was honored as the future leader of the family. One twin, named Zerah, stuck out his hand and a scarlet thread was tied around it by the midwife assuming that he would be born first. But, as it turns out, the other twin – named Perez – was born first.

That’s our story – and it brings us back to our original question: why is Genesis 38 in the Bible? Why is this not a chapter we simply skip over to continue reading Joseph’s story? There are three key reasons the story of Judah and Tamar is recorded...

Number one, **it provides a crucial link in the story of Jesus**. The original readers of Genesis were Jews who had just come out slavery in Egypt, and Genesis is written so that they would know their heritage and God's plan for their people. Without chapter 38 they would not understand why Judah comes to be the preeminent tribe of Israel and the line through which God's promise of redemption would come from. They would read about Joseph and naturally think, "Why isn't he the son of promise? Why is his story interrupted with this story?" The answer is that God sovereignly choose Jesus to come through the line of Judah.

When we come to the end of Genesis – chapter 49 – Jacob is lying on his death bed and gathers his twelve sons around him to give his final blessings and prophecies regarding each son. The firstborn is Rueben, who is naturally in line to be the son of promise, but Rueben disqualified himself in chapter 35 when he dishonored his father by sleeping with his concubine. Next in line are Simeon and Levi, but they disqualified themselves in chapter 34 when they acted rashly and massacred the men of Shechem.

Jacob then turns to his fourth-born, Judah, and says... "Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you. You are a lion's cub, Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his" (Genesis 49:8-10).

Unlike Rueben, Simeon, and Levi, Jacob does not mention Judah's past sins because he had repented and become a different man. And so the mantle of leadership fell on Judah, and his tribe would go on to be the largest and most honored tribe in Israel. When Israel marched towards the Promised Land, the tribe of Judah marched first, in the place of honor. When they arrived in the land, Judah was the first to receive their inheritance. David, the greatest king of Israel, was from the tribe of Judah – and every king that sat on the throne after David was from Judah's tribe.

Jacob described Judah as a lion, which speaks of strength and power. The lion is the king of the jungle that everyone bows down to. In verse 10 Jacob prophecies that the scepter – a symbol of authority and honor – would not depart from him until he to whom it belongs shall come. Who is He talking about?

We find out in the very first chapter of the New Testament. Matthew 1 begins with the genealogy of Jesus, and it's tempting to skip over this and get to the Christmas story of Christ being born in a manger, but this genealogy is an important link between the promises of the Old Testament and their fulfillment in the New Testament. Matthew 1 begins like this... "This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar" (Matthew 1:1-3a). Without Genesis 38 we'd say, "Who is Perez and Zerah, and who is Tamar?" Jesus is a direct descendant of Perez, the firstborn son of Judah and Tamar – and without Perez being born there is no Savior and there is no good news.

And the influence of this story reaches all the way into the future where we read in Revelation 5 that Jesus will one day restore the world and usher in His everlasting kingdom. Revelation 5 the Apostle John sees a search taking place in heaven for someone to open a scroll containing the judgments of God upon the earth. John weeps when no one is found worthy to open the scroll and bring about restoration. But then in verse 5 John receives good news ... “Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.’” The meaning of Genesis 38 extends all the way to the future when Jesus returns to earth as the Lion of Judah, and every knee will bow to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. That’s pretty cool.

Number two, Genesis 38 **shows us that God disciplines those He chooses**. In this story Judah and his sons all make choices that threaten to derail God’s plan of redemption. Judah chooses to leave his family and live among the Canaanites, and goes a step further in marrying a Canaanite. His firstborn, Er, chooses to immerse himself so deeply in Canaanite sin that God takes him out. Onan chooses to be selfish and not fulfill his responsibility to have a child with Tamar, and God takes him out as well.

When we do not reap the consequences of our sin right away, we deceive ourselves into thinking that we’ve gotten away with it, but Numbers 32:23 says, “Be sure you sin will find you out.” Judah had been living outside of God’s will for so long that he had grown immune to the Canaanite culture. It took something dramatic to shake him from his rebellion and bring him back to the spiritual roots of his family. It took Tamar holding up his seal, cord, and staff declaring him to the father of her child that got his attention and turned his life around.

Number three, Genesis 38 **shows us how God can rewrite our story**. Jacob’s family was a mess. Joseph is in Egypt, and Judah – representing the future line of the family – goes off to live with the Canaanites, and fails to provide Tamar with child through his third son – and then spends the night with who he thinks is a prostitute. But chapter 38 shows how God can take a very flawed person and a tangled-up mess of a story and begin rewriting Judah’s story.

This story is good news for flawed people because the only people God uses are flawed people – through Jesus, He saves them He changes them, He sets them free, and He gives them a brand new story. Seeing a change in the life of somebody like Judah ought to give you a lot of hope that God’s grace can work in your life and change your heart and trajectory in life. That change can begin today, right now, by humbling your heart to God, confessing your sin, and beginning a new path, a new story, that is dedicated to loving God and fulfilling His purposes in your life.