

## Unexpected Righteousness

Genesis 38:1-30

### Introduction

**Explicit Content Warning:** “What in the world did I just read?” After today, no one can question whether we preach the hard passages. Faith exists in the real, broken, sinful world (“hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints”). **The Bible is not PG.**

- We have RH Kids downstairs every week, you don't *have* to send your kids, but you *can* (we sent our 9yo who normally is up here). *Some of you might want to go.*
- I want to teach this passage directly, with clarity, saying what the Bible says, but not being crass.

**Hints of Significance:** An unavoidable interruption of Joseph's narrative (chs. 37-50; almost 25% of Genesis). It's like one of my children's toys, there's no way to walk through Genesis and Joseph without tripping over this chapter. When we get to chapter 39 it'll be “back to our regularly scheduled programming.” A twenty year interlude.

- It highlights Judah in a *less-than-flattering* kind of way. And this would matter to the original audience of Genesis, the Israelites.
  - Judah was the largest tribe. After the split, the Southern Kingdom is, simply, Judah with it's capital being Jerusalem.
  - Judah is the tribe through which David and the great kings come from (the kingly tribe).
- So, for an Israelite reading this, they would see a story that highlights how the line of Judah was saved and its future guaranteed (in a particularly unexpected way)?

**Keep Your Eye Out:** Today's story could **upend a lot of your expectations** of Scripture and the way that God goes about accomplishing his plans and promises. I think, as the shock wears off, we will be able to orient our minds to God's way of doing things. It will **humble and encourage** us. And for those of us who who feel discarded, we'll find that our weakness is the perfect avenue for God to use us.

### 1. An Unrighteous Patriarch (vv. 1-11)

<sup>1</sup> It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. <sup>2</sup> There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, <sup>3</sup> and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. <sup>4</sup> She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. <sup>5</sup> Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him. <sup>6</sup> And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. <sup>7</sup> But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death. <sup>8</sup> Then Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.” <sup>9</sup> But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to

give offspring to his brother. <sup>10</sup> And what he did was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also. <sup>11</sup> Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, “Remain a widow in your father’s house, till Shelah my son grows up”—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father’s house.

**Judah’s First Mistake(s):** Things already start on the wrong foot, as Judah **separates** from his brothers (cf. tribes of Israel separating). He becomes *friends* with a man (Hirah) from a Canaanite city (Adullam). \*This friend shows up later in the story.

- This has echoes of Lot buddying up to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Then he marries the unnamed daughter of a Canaanite (Shua).

- For those of you that have been paying attention as we walked through Genesis, this should set off “textual alarm bells.” Isaac got a wife from Abraham’s family, not the Canaanites. Jacob was sent to Rebekah’s family to get a wife, not from the Canaanites. Judah is not consulting who he should marry, but marrying *who he wants*.
  - We will see in this passage that *a lot* of Judah’s life seems to be lived according to *his* passions rather than *God’s* promises.
- Judah has cozied up to the locals, rather than staying with the people of God.
  - Israel is not a nation, but a tribe living among other nations and tribes who worship false gods (they apparently have fertility gods and cult prostitutes as evidenced in this story).
  - It’s not their ethnicity that is a danger to Judah, it is their worship of false gods (and this is always the case in the OT).

Judah has left his brothers and turned aside. He has separated from his family and is “doing his own thing.”

- This whole section is not *directly* saying he’s doing anything wrong (yet), but you can tell by the tone that it’s letting us know he’s doing something wrong (e.g. like the ominous music of a movie soundtrack letting you know something bad is about to happen; don’t go in there!).

**Unrighteous Family:** This text goes to extreme lengths to show that **Judah and his sons are unrighteous**. We are going to see some things that **Tamar** does, and they seem particularly shady to us from our modern viewpoint. But the text is not commenting on those things *per se*. Judah and his sons are the ones who are wicked.

- He has three sons, **Er, Onan, and Shelah**. At least Er and Onan are described as wicked. It doesn’t say what Er did that was so wicked <sup>7</sup> But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death.
  - God can kill you, and not just in the OT (e.g., Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5).
  - The wickedness of Er and Onan doesn’t mean that Judah is necessarily wicked, but it hints at it.

**Onan’s Sin:** To understand Onan’s sin and, soon, Judah’s sin, we have to understand a little something about widows and ANE social services. **Levirate marriage** was the way the ANE and the OT deemed for women to be cared for in the event that their husband died and they had no son.

- You see, in a **patrilineal, patriarchal** society, a woman's existence and *safety* was inextricably tied to her men. She was under the house and protection of her **father** until she was married and under the house and protection of her **husband** after she got married. And if her husband dies she is taken care of by her **son**.
- When a woman got married her allegiance transferred to her new husband's household. Her father and brothers no longer cared for her once she was married. She no longer belonged to her father's house.
- Effectively she was her **father's daughter**, then her **husband's wife**, or and then her **son's mother**. But what happens if her husband dies and there is no son?
  - The rights and inheritance passed from father to son. So without a son, she had no family to take care of her. She has no inheritance, no safety net, and no one to take care of her in her old age.
  - The best a woman could hope for would be to "glean the fields" (*a la* Ruth). But what do you do when you're too old to glean?
  - "A woman widowed prior to bearing a son was a woman in crisis. And a woman without father, husband, or son was destitute; without the charity of strangers, she would starve."

So the system we see enshrined in Deuteronomy and common in the ANE that was invented to take care of these childless widows was **Levirate Marriage**.<sup>1</sup>

- Now, this will sound bizarre and weird to our Western ears but this was the way it was done and it was quite effective (**it worked!**). If a woman's husband died, her brother-in-law married her and provided her a son. There was no surrogacy as such. That son would be **legally considered** the son of her deceased husband (his deceased brother). This is so common that a single Hebrew verb is translated in English "perform the duty of a brother-in-law."<sup>2</sup> They have a word for this!

So, what was Onan's sin? He refused to take care of his sister-in-law. As James 1 reminds us, there are few things more closely related to the gospel than the care of those who can't care for themselves, like widows and orphans.

- He deliberately avoided giving her a son. Why? Presumably, because that son would be considered the son of his deceased elder brother. That means this son would inherit his *father's* estate. The son would inherit the estate of Judah rather than he.
- His sin was less sexual and more selfish.<sup>3</sup> Onan doesn't want to rob himself! If his older brother has a son, then he'll lose the inheritance to his nephew! This child will not enrich him, it will enrich his Sister-in-law
  - Does this stop him from sleeping with her? No. He takes part in the sexual gratification but refuses to give her the gift of a child.
- <sup>10</sup> And what he did was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and [God] put him to death also.

**Judah's Sin:** So Tamar is left childless, and helpless. And Judah sends her to live with her Father. It would have been a disgrace to "remain a widow in [her] father's house". This would

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<sup>1</sup> Deut 25:1-10

<sup>2</sup> יבם

<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the meaning of the term "onanism."

have been unheard of in the ANE. It was not common practice and would have been particularly unrighteous. All of this would be appalling to Moses' audience.

- As the narrator explains and we'll learn more about, Judah had no intention of giving his youngest to Tamar. Like his father, he was a deceiver. Tamar is on the receiving end of abuse.
- And Judah doesn't get it! He is "afraid" that his youngest will die like his other two sons. His assumption is that something is wrong or cursed about Tamar rather than him and his sons!
  - "The sin that will undo me is my own, not my [someone else's]" no matter how bad I think theirs is (Butterfield).
- Judah is unrighteous. His family is unrighteous. Though a patriarch of Israel, he is not a paradigm of morality. And where moral decline increases, faith falters.

## 2. A More Righteous Prostitute (vv. 12-26)

<sup>12</sup> In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. <sup>13</sup> And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," <sup>14</sup> she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage. <sup>15</sup> When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. <sup>16</sup> He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" <sup>17</sup> He answered, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." And she said, "If you give me a pledge, until you send it—" <sup>18</sup> He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him. <sup>19</sup> Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood. <sup>20</sup> When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. <sup>21</sup> And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute who was at Enaim at the roadside?" And they said, "No cult prostitute has been here." <sup>22</sup> So he returned to Judah and said, "I have not found her. Also, the men of the place said, 'No cult prostitute has been here.'" <sup>23</sup> And Judah replied, "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." <sup>24</sup> About three months later Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." <sup>25</sup> As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "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." <sup>26</sup> 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.

**Tamar's Plan:** Tamar realized that Judah was not sending his last son to her. We already knew this would happen! She is desperate for a son, both to preserve the family line of her husband

(and presumably her Father-in-law) and to provide for herself. She was deceived, used, discarded, and (essentially) left for dead.

- Her plan is unconventional, audacious, risky, and certainly born out of desperation. Putting morality aside, it certainly would take courage. She has been backed into a corner and feels she has no more options.
- So, she identifies herself as a prostitute by putting on a particular veil and standing in a particular place. The veil hides her identity from Judah.
- How did she know Judah would proposition her? Judah knew where to look (*as if he'd been there before*) and he knew what to say (*as if he'd done this before*). Judah knew exactly how this arrangement works. This was probably not a one-time-foible but a persistent pattern. I don't think it's unbelievable to think that Tamar knew of his indiscretions.

**Judah's Sin:** Judah (predictably) fell for it. He had no "cash" on him, so he promised to send her a young goat. Promises don't pay the bills. He offers collateral. He is not thinking wisely.<sup>4</sup> She asks for his signet, cord and staff. These would have been personal items that identified Judah and that he used to sign and seal business transactions (library book stamp).

- This would be like the modern equivalent of giving her his credit card.
- Judah has traded three important things for something sinful, trivial, and temporary. **This is what sin always does: it takes you further than you want to go, keeps you longer than you want to stay, and costs more than you want to pay.**

**Shed Your Western Eyes:** This is not meant to excuse prostitution. It's meant to highlight Tamar as a widow with no other options. According to the **logic** of the text and the **customs and boundaries** of the day, **Judah was the cause and initiation of the problems.** Without an heir, Tamar was destitute. Judah is the one breaking the law by not caring for Tamar. We can't deal with *her* sin until we deal with *his*. Without excusing her behavior, it seems obvious that Tamar would have never resorted to this had Judah done what is right.

- If we want to get the point of the text, then we have to be **bothered by what the text is bothered by** before we jump to any sort of modern understanding and application. The point of the text is Judah's failure.
- Judah's failure threatens to thwart God's promise. His sin is putting God's plan in jeopardy.

**Tepid Response to Sin:** You can see just how unserious Judah takes his sin.

- (1) He sends his friend pay the prostitute. Won't even go himself! Is that a good friend? Good in the sense he'll do your dirty work. But good friends don't help friends cover sin, they call them out on it.
- (2) His friend is too embarrassed to say what *really* happened. He asks where the "cult" prostitute is. But that's not who he saw, he saw a regular prostitute.<sup>5</sup>
  - Cult prostitutes in that pagan culture were *respectable* and *acceptable*. Either Judah's friend had no idea he saw a "real prostitute" or he was too embarrassed

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<sup>4</sup> Thinking with the wrong brain.

<sup>5</sup> "Cult harlot" (*qedeshah*) vs. the narrator's frank "whore" (*zonah*).

to admit it. He might just be substituting the more tasteful term for the narrator's frank and honest term.

- Neither option is great: (1) either he visited a socially acceptable prostitute as an act of idol worship to a false God or (2) he visited a non-cult prostitute as an act of sexual deviousness.
- No one is aware of a cult prostitute (because they haven't been one there).
- Hirah reports to Judah that he can't find the woman to pay.
- Judah, rather than admit his *sin*, says she can just keep the stuff.
  - The public shame is too great a risk, so he abandons his collateral.
  - **You can't repent of something you don't think is wrong. You can repent of something you won't admit you did.**
- He's ready to cut his losses! Sin doesn't work this way (e.g., Pilot washing hands). Something has got to give. You can't just pretend something didn't happen.
  - Sin always costs someone something. Either Judah has to pay or Tamar has to pay. The beauty of the gospel is not that God doesn't arbitrarily cancel our debt of sin but that *he pays it with his own life*.

**Hypocrisy:** Someone reports to him that his daughter-in-law has been immoral (\*any sex outside of marriage is immoral). She is pregnant but shouldn't be. Now we see Judah's hypocrisy on full display. His response is rich.

- Immediately he says to "Bring her out, and let her be burned." Hey pot, this is kettle. Or, as Jesus describes, this is a "log and speck" moment.
- Why is her immorality worthy of punishment but not his? Why is her sexual activity worthy of punishment but not his? The instinct is still the same when we blame prostitutes and not the men that frequent them, or unwed and single mothers and not the fathers who impregnate them.
- His position of power insulates him from punishment. His sin is *more* heinous but *less* visible. She can't hide.
  - The temptation is to rail against visible sins only. Someone's sin isn't worse just because it's harder to hide. And you're not off the hook for your sin just because you can hide it easier.
- By nature we are all hypocrites. GOP staffer criticizes Obama's teenage daughters for minor teenage stuff even though she was *arrested* as a teenager.
  - How can we look past our sin and be so condemning to others? The gospel frees us to admit our sin and offer grace rather than condemnation. The gospel says we are worse than we'd dare admit but loved more than we could hope.

**Judah's Repentance:** Tamar boldly lays the trap. We see in her behavior the same "indominatable spirit of" other women of God in the Hebrew Bible, such as "Esther [and] Jael" (Kidner). On the way to her public execution she coyly brings out the items of the man who impregnated her. At this point, Judah has been caught. "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num 32:23). He realizes his hypocrisy and admits his sin, and we see a significant change in him.

- The text hints at this change in that he doesn't continue to "know" Tamar.



- Her public rebuke is a gift to him. We should be thankful for these moments when our sin is undeniable and the prophetic call pierces our hearts.
  - If your sin is exposed, consider it a blessing. Don't hide it. Don't justify it. Admit it and repent.
- And the Judah who wants to sell Joseph into slavery for profit (Gen 37) is the Judah who offers his own life to protect his younger brother Benjamin (Gen 44).
- He recognizes Tamar is more righteous than [him].

**Hope of Salvation:** Both Judah and Tamar offer us a reminder of the gospel: "We either proudly believe we are too good to be judged, or we proudly believe we are too bad to be saved. So the gospel is a continual surprise, and we need to hear it again and again" (Ray Ortlund).

- Judah is a reminder that none of us is above judgment.
- Tamar is a reminder that we are not beyond salvation.

### 3. A God of Restoration (vv. 27-30)

<sup>27</sup> When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. <sup>28</sup> And 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." <sup>29</sup> But 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. <sup>30</sup> Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.

**The Long-Awaited Child:** Tamar's despair is turned to joy. She needed and wanted a son and God gives her *two* sons. I think of the prophet Isaiah: Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion; instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot; therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion; they shall have everlasting joy (Is 61:7).

- The birth of these twins recalls the struggles of Jacob and Esau, hinting at the importance of these boys to the line and legacy of the people of God.
- Tamar's vindication is seen not only in the immediate blessing of these children but in the line of Judah that is continued through them.
  - The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples (Gen 49:10). Jacob's blessing to Judah, to be the house of royalty, is only possible because of Tamar! And that blessing is not just for the moment but for the "days to come" (Gen 49:1) (i.e., "the latter days").
- Perez ends up being in the line of the great king of Israel, David (Ruth 4:18) and when we get to the first chapter of the NT we see exactly what that means, Tamar is in the line and lineage of Jesus, the Messiah.
  - **Tamar is vindicated. She has her sons and she has an eternal legacy.**
- The long story of redemption is not fully accomplished in Genesis 38 but the Gospels. The blessing to Tamar is fully revealed in the birth of Jesus.

Sometimes we read the Bible so clumsily and macroscopically and superficially that we miss how these themes and promises and doctrines hinted at here are fully developed there.

Scripture is a coherent story of God's promise to rescue and redeem his people.

- If all we had was this story of Tamar, we would be left scratching our heads. But we have the full story of how God used the complicated faith of discarded and abused woman to preserve and protect the lineage of God's people through which he would send the Savior of the world.
- So, maybe Judah is speaking more than just morally, but prophetically about the righteousness of Tamar.
- The Bible is not a book about moral people who lived perfect lives worthy of emulation. Instead, we see how God uses broken people to bring about the only righteous person who has ever lived – Jesus.

**Tamar's Tears:** But I'm still drawn back to the messy reality of Tamar's life. The oppressive and abusive world she was in. The despair she must have felt. Whatever she did, you can't imagine she enjoyed it. **The tears she must have cried.** It is in her weakness that we see real faith and strength.

- Tamar is in a long line of women, weak and washed up in the eyes of the world, that God uses to accomplish redemption. Women like Rahab, Ruth, and ultimately, Mary, the mother of Jesus. All of these seemingly disreputable women are proudly proclaimed in the genealogy of Jesus!
  - In some sense, Tamar, this Gentile woman, has more faith in the promise of God than Judah. Despite different details, we see the same faith displayed in Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho and Ruth the Moabite widow.
  - The gospel is not just good news for those capable of keeping close to God and behaving themselves. It's good for those who are suffering and broken. "God did not choose you because you had it all together and God will not forsake you because you've fallen apart" (Capps).
- They lived out the truth of the gospel that God's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).
  - Maybe you feel lost and forgotten. Maybe you feel helpless and rejected. Maybe you have been abused and thrown aside. God sees you, he knows you, loves you, and he wants to use you for his glory.
- Tamar is remembered, she gets something better than Judah, she becomes a distant matriarch of Jesus, the Lion of Judah. And it is he who will wipe every tear from her eye. As John tells us in Revelation: "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered" (Rev 5:5). That's a reunion I would love to see.
  - The scarlet thread of our shame has been removed by scarlet stripes of her Savior. In our mess, we can trust the righteousness of God in Christ to redeem and restore.