

## Chapter 3: More Righteous than I

*Genesis 38:1–30*

Joseph’s story pauses on a cliffhanger. We read at the end of Genesis 37 that Joseph has been sold into slavery in Egypt to a man named Potiphar, who is an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard (Gen. 37:36). Genesis 37 raised so many questions about the trajectory of Joseph’s life: Will Joseph overcome his adversity? Will the brothers ever repent from their sin? Will Jacob ever be comforted, or even reunited, with his beloved son? We would expect, then, that the narrative would move straight forward in handling these questions about Joseph. Instead, the narrator leaves us in suspense, giving us Genesis 38 first before returning to deal with the rest of Joseph’s story.<sup>1</sup>

Why, then, does Genesis 38 appear before the continuation of Joseph’s story? In addition to leaving us in suspense, we should also remember that the narrator actually told us that this is *Jacob’s family*, not the story of Joseph alone: “These are the generations of Jacob” (Gen. 37:2).<sup>2</sup> While Joseph takes center stage through much of this last stretch of Genesis, the narrator is telling us about the outcome of all Jacob’s children. Ultimately, this passage plays a critical role in filling out the character of Judah, who first spoke up in Genesis to propose selling Joseph into slavery (Gen. 37:26–27). As the story continues, Judah’s role will become increasingly significant, even stretching forward beyond this story to the birth of David, and, ultimately, the Lord Jesus Christ himself.<sup>3</sup> In Genesis 38, we see more the depravity of Judah more clearly than we did even in the last chapter, but we also see the beginning of Judah’s eventual transformation.<sup>4</sup> Genesis 38, then, shows clearly how *God opens our eyes to our unrighteousness*.

### Blind Eyes (Gen. 38:1–11)

As the narrator introduces us more fully to Judah, one of his chief priorities is to demonstrate the parallel, although reversed, paths of Judah and Joseph. This begins immediately when we read that Judah “went down from his brothers” (v. 1). In the same way, Joseph was carried off by traders who were “going down” to Egypt (Gen. 37:25, 28; 39:1)—and at Judah’s suggestion, no less.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in the next chapter we will see the chastity of Joseph against the repeated attempts at his seduction by Potiphar’s wife. Here, we see Judah’s repeated failures of sexual morality.<sup>6</sup>

Along these lines, we see Judah’s first failure immediately, when Judah “sees” and “takes” a Canaanite

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<sup>1</sup> Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 198.

<sup>2</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 364–65.

<sup>3</sup> Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 199.

<sup>4</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 364.

<sup>5</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 714.

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 432.

woman, the daughter of Shua (v. 2). The language of “see” and “take” narrates sin in a number of contexts throughout the book of Genesis, beginning with the very first sin in Genesis 3:6.<sup>7</sup> Here, Judah ignores the promises that God made to dispossess the Canaanites from the land, and to give it to Abraham’s offspring. For this reason, Abraham and Isaac warned that their offspring should not intermarry with the Canaanites (Gen. 24:3; 28:1).<sup>8</sup> Although Judah is an heir to the promises, he willfully ignores the promises by intermarrying with the very people that God promised would not receive the promises. His actions parallel Esau, whose intermarriage with Canaanites and with Ishmaelites play a role in his disqualification to receive God’s promised blessing (Gen. 26:34–35; 28:6–9). Thus, the introduction of children through Judah’s marriage raises a serious question: Would these children be blessed because of their father, Judah, or cursed because of their Canaanite mother?

Very quickly, we get the answer: the Lord rejects these children.<sup>9</sup> First, the Lord rejects Er, putting him to death because he was “evil in the eyes of the Lord” (v. 7). There is a play on words here, since the name “Er” (ער) is the word “evil” (רע) spelled backwards.<sup>10</sup> Gordon Wenham suggests translating this verse as, “Er erred” to bring the Hebrew wordplay into English.<sup>11</sup> Second, the Lord also rejects Onan, putting him to death because he too does evil in the eyes of the Lord (v. 10). We are not told the exact nature of Er’s evil, but we do learn where Onan sinned. Judah instructs Onan to “perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother” (v. 8). Specifically, Judah instructs Onan to enter into a levirate marriage with Er’s widow Tamar, a custom where a brother marries his dead brother’s wife, so that the child born from that union would be counted as the deceased brother’s child (cf. Deut. 25:5–10).<sup>12</sup> Onan would have had the right to decline this duty, but doing so would have meant public shaming, including having Tamar spit in his face for refusing to build up his dead brother’s line (Deut. 25:9).<sup>13</sup> Onan is willing to use Tamar sexually, and the Hebrew suggests that Onan “went in” to her on a number of occasions (v. 9).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Onan knew that any “offspring” would not be his (v. 9), but would belong to his brother. Since Er was the firstborn, he had the birthright from Judah. If Er died childless, then Onan would gain the birthright, so that giving Er a child through a levirate marriage would endanger Onan’s inheritance.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Onan wasted his “semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother” (v. 9). This is selfish sexually, as well as materially as Onan sought to keep Judah’s inheritance to himself. For this reason, the Lord struck him dead, like his brother before him.

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<sup>7</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 366.

<sup>8</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 433.

<sup>9</sup> “Moses, therefore, justly regards it as a fault, that Judah should entangle himself in a forbidden alliance; and the Lord, at length, cursed the offspring thus accruing to Judah, that the prince and head of the tribe of Judah might not be born, nor Christ himself descend, from this connection.” (Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:278–79.)

<sup>10</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 434n27.

<sup>11</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 366.

<sup>12</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:716.

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 435.

<sup>14</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 367.

<sup>15</sup> Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 668.

Who, then, is this woman Tamar? The narrator does not identify Judah's wife by name, but tells us that she is a Canaanite (v. 2). Inversely, the narrator tells us Tamar's name, but does not tell us whether Tamar is a Canaanite or a Hebrew (v. 6). Although many assume Tamar to be a Canaanite, it is significant that the narrator does not confirm this point.<sup>16</sup> As John Sailhamer writes, "Since we are told that Judah's own wife was a Canaanite (38:2), we should probably assume that had Tamar also been a Canaanite, the author would have mentioned it in the narrative."<sup>17</sup> This point is critical: by destroying Judah's offspring from his marriage to a Canaanite, God was ensuring that the promises would not descend to the offspring of a Canaanite woman. Instead, through the course of this story, the Lord appoints offspring for Judah through a woman who is not associated with the Canaanites: Tamar. After the deaths of Er and Onan, Judah promises Tamar that he will give her in marriage to his third son, Shelah. The narrator, however, informs us that Judah has no intention of keeping this promise: "for he feared that he would die, like his brothers" (v. 11).<sup>18</sup>

Before moving on with the story, we should pause to make a few observations about Judah's character so far. First, we see that Judah acts impulsively and faithlessly by "taking" the Canaanite woman he "sees" in marriage (v. 2). Second, in contrast to Jacob's refusal to be comforted by the death of his son, Joseph (Gen. 37:34–35), we do not read that Judah mourns at all at the death of his two sons (cf. v. 12).<sup>19</sup> Third, we see Judah lying to Tamar to get rid of the woman whom he wrongly believes is the cause of the death of his evil sons (v. 11). Gordon Wenham rightly summarizes the sense we get from this: "Judah seems to be a hard and callous man."<sup>20</sup>

## Opening of the Eyes (Gen. 38:12–23)

The fact that Judah must be "comforted" at the loss of his wife (v. 12) only underscores his absence of grief for his deceased sons.<sup>21</sup> After this period of mourning, Judah goes to Timnah for shearing his sheep. When Tamar discovers that her father-in-law is headed to Timnah, she quickly implements a plan to deceive him so that she can seduce him. Tamar's quick response to news of her father-in-law's movements suggests that her plan was long in the making. The end of v. 14 gives us the rationale: "For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage." So, Tamar removes her widow's garments and covers herself with a veil that suggests her to be a prostitute. Importantly, Tamar deceives Judah just as Judah had deceived his father, Jacob.<sup>22</sup> In the same way, after Jacob deceived his own father, Isaac (Gen. 27:35), Jacob was himself deceived (Gen. 29:25) by Laban, who gave him Leah in marriage, rather than Rachel. Both Jacob and Jacob's son, Judah, are deceived into sexual intercourse with women who conceal their identities.<sup>23</sup>

There is a deeper irony, in that Tamar does this at "the entrance to Enaim" (v. 14). In Hebrew,

<sup>16</sup> e.g., Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 434; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 366.

<sup>17</sup> Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, 209–10.

<sup>18</sup> Kidner, *Genesis*, 200.

<sup>19</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 432.

<sup>20</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 364.

<sup>21</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 439.

<sup>22</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 441.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 617.

the word Enaim (עֵינַיִם) means “eyes,” and “entrance” might be translated as “opening.” So, Tamar is sitting at “the opening of eyes” when Judah “sees” her (v. 15), and mistakenly believes her to be a prostitute.<sup>24</sup> And again, Tamar does this because she “saw” that Judah did not intend to give her to Shelah as a wife (v. 14). Tamar’s eyes are wide open to the situation; Judah sees Tamar at the entrance to Enaim, but his eyes are blind to what is happening. On this point, it is perhaps significant that the Lord put both Er and Onan to death because they did evil “in the eyes of the Lord” (בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה; *bēʿenē YHWH*; v. 7, 10). Not only does Tamar see Judah’s injustice, but the Lord’s eyes are always open as well. This connection in this passage between the “eyes” of the Lord and Tamar’s ability to “see” may underscore what Judah says at the end of this passage: “She is more righteous than I” (v. 26).

On the surface, Tamar’s seduction of Judah is another parallel to Joseph’s life, when Potiphar’s wife similarly attempts to seduce Joseph in the next chapter.<sup>25</sup> There are at least three contrasts between these two scenes, however. First, the purposes of the two women could not be more different. Lust for Joseph, “handsome in form and appearance” (Gen. 39:6) drives Potiphar’s wife, while maternal desire to continue the lineage from Abraham drive Tamar.<sup>26</sup> Second, while Judah succumbs to temptation (v. 18), Joseph withstands it (Gen. 39:12.<sup>27</sup> Third, while Judah will be convicted because of his guilt (v. 26), Joseph will be convicted despite his innocence (Gen. 39:13–20).

Judah’s bartering with Tamar for her sexual services is also highly ironic. Judah promises to send a young “goat” from his flock as payment. Just as Judah and his brothers deceived Jacob with clothing and a goat (Gen. 37:31)—and just as Jacob had used Esau’s clothing and a goat to deceive his father, Isaac (27:15–16)—so a goat and Tamar’s changed clothing play a role in her deception of Judah.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Tamar also asks for a pledge to hold onto until the payment is made (v. 17). For this pledge, Tamar asks for Judah’s signet, cord, and staff. These items, which functioned “as the legal surrogate of the bearer would have been a kind of ancient Near Eastern equivalent of all a person’s major credit cards.”<sup>29</sup> Although the price was steep, Judah foolishly complies with the request in order to get what he wants out of the exchange.

Judah does indeed attempt to pay his debt, but we should notice that he sends his friend to make the payment, rather than going himself (v. 20)—from shame?<sup>30</sup> When the Adullamite is unable to find the woman to pay the debt, Judah insists that the woman should keep them as her own, “or we shall be laughed at” (v. 23). In this, we see that Judah has no real remorse over what he has done, but that his only concern is “the maintenance of his own reputation.”<sup>31</sup> Even so, Gordon Wenham points out that “Judah’s fear was well founded, for if he was not already a joke, in three months he certainly would be!”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 440.

<sup>25</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 432.

<sup>26</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:704.

<sup>27</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 432.

<sup>28</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 364.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Rev. & Updated ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 8.

<sup>30</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 368.

<sup>31</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 448.

<sup>32</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 368.

## Opened Eyes (Gen. 38:24–30)

In the course of three months, news reaches Judah that Tamar has become pregnant. Gordon Wenham explains the subtle nuances of the legal case against Tamar:

Since she was in effect betrothed to Shelah, she should have had intercourse with no one else. But clearly she has had, so she is in effect guilty of adultery. Hence Judah can legitimately, if in this case unfairly, demand the death penalty (cf. Deut 22:23–24). Deut 22:21 envisages stoning for adultery during betrothal in a case similar to Tamar’s. But to demand death by burning was extreme; that is reserved in Lev 21:9 for a priest’s daughter, because such behavior by her was particularly disgraceful.<sup>33</sup>

Judah’s harsh attitude toward Tamar contrasts with his quick willingness to dismiss his own role in the matter earlier (v. 23). Once again, we see the coldness of Judah coming through in the way he treats other people without consideration or compassion.

When Tamar is being summoned for her execution, she brings out the identifying tokens that she had earlier received from Judah in pledge. Here, we see the final major connection to the previous story, when Tamar asks Judah to “please identify” the items, and then we read that Judah “identified them” (v. 25–26). The same two phrases appeared when the brothers asked Jacob to “please identify” Joseph’s coat, and then when Jacob “identified” that it belonged to his son (Gen. 37:32–33).<sup>34</sup> From beginning to end, Tamar has tricked Judah with all the features that marked Judah’s own deception of his father.

It seems, though, that Judah recognizes this fact for himself. He remarks, “She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah” (v. 26). This does not necessarily declare Tamar’s actions to be entirely praiseworthy. Nevertheless, Judah recognizes that what Tamar did, she did out of desperation to accomplish the right goals. Gordon Wenham explains Judah’s comments this way: “She is innocent, he admits, because I forced her to take this action by refusing to give my son Shelah to her in marriage. She, unlike me, was concerned to perpetuate the family line, to produce descendants for Abraham....Tamar, through her determination to have children, secured for Judah the honor of fathering both David and the Savior of the world.”<sup>35</sup>

As we have observed, Judah has been a hard-hearted, depraved, remorseless sinner. We saw this in the last chapter in the way he treated his brother Joseph, and we saw it throughout this chapter. Over time, Judah’s eyes will continue to open. Later on, he will not be offering a “pledge” for the services of a prostitute (v. 18), but offering *himself* as a pledge for the safety of his younger brother Benjamin, Jacob’s other son born by Rachel (Gen. 43:9). Furthermore, he will make good on his promise not only to escape being laughed at (v. 23), but with such sincerity that he will offer himself as a substitute slave to protect Benjamin (Gen. 44:18–34). It is here, though, that we see the first

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<sup>33</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 369.

<sup>34</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 431.

<sup>35</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 370.

moment of repentance from sin and transformation of life.<sup>36</sup> Just as Laban’s trickery played a significant role in the transformation of Jacob (cf. Gen. 31:4–13), so Tamar’s trickery plays a significant role in the transformation of Judah.

The epilogue to this story narrates birth of Perez and Zerah in v. 27–30. As with Jacob and Esau, Perez and Zerah are twins in the womb struggling to gain ascendancy over the other.<sup>37</sup> Also, as with Jacob and Esau, the younger is blessed above the older, so that while Zerah came out first (v. 28), it is Perez who eventually gains the right of the firstborn (cf. Num. 26:20).<sup>38</sup> The important point for now, though, is that Judah’s line will not end with Shelah. Through Tamar’s heroic efforts, the Lord has continued to fulfill the promises he made to Abraham, that his offspring would be fruitful and multiply. Eventually, it will be by Judah’s son Perez that David is born (Ruth 4:18–22), and ultimately the Lord Jesus Christ as well (Matt. 1:3; Luke 3:33).

## Discussion Questions

1) How is Judah blind at the beginning of this story? How was Judah blind in the previous story (Gen. 37:25–27)? How does the narrative show the irony of Judah’s spiritual blindness by repeated references to how Judah “sees”? How also did the original sin begin by blinded “seeing” (cf. Gen. 3:6)? What might this tell us about human abilities to “see” in this world? In what ways are we able to “see” clearly? In what ways are we blind?

2) What promises had God made to Abraham and to Abraham’s offspring about the land of Canaan (cf. Gen. 15:18–21)? What significance is it for Judah to marry a Canaanite, when God had promised to dispossess the Canaanites from the land? What promises has God made to you that you struggle to believe, practically speaking? In other words, where might you intellectually believe something, but act in ways that undercut or contradict faith in those promises?

3) How does God open Judah’s eyes in this passage? Specifically, how does God use Judah’s sin as the means of helping Judah to see his sin for what it is? In this light, what should we make of Tamar? Why does the rest of the Bible celebrate her inclusion in the lineage of David, and, ultimately, of Christ (Ruth 4:12, 18–22; 1 Chron. 2:4; Matt. 1:3)? As we think about this story, how does the text guide us toward evaluating her actions separately from her motivations (v. 26)?

4) Which features of Jacob’s deception of his father, Isaac, in Genesis 27 reappeared in the brothers’ deception of their father, Jacob, in Genesis 37? How did the features of Jacob’s deception in Genesis 37 reappear in this story of Judah’s deception in Genesis 38? Through this, how does God both rebuke Judah for his sin, while at the same time also encouraging Judah toward repentance and holiness? How have you seen God rebuke you for your sin, to lead you to repentance and holiness?

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<sup>36</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 364.

<sup>37</sup> Kidner, *Genesis*, 201.

<sup>38</sup> Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 210.