

# THE KINGDOM OF GOD

..... *GENESIS* .....

## **God's Care for Kingdom Heroes: Genesis 38**

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Throughout Genesis, we have seen from various angles the brokenness and unrighteousness of God's people. Fear manifested itself in lying and deceit in Abraham's life, Isaac's life, Jacob's life, and in the lives of Jacob's sons, while Isaac and Jacob both showed favoritism with devastating results. Cowardice was a common theme in Jacob's life, and hatred filled Jacob's sons. God's people are broken. That detail has been clear to us. Therefore, when we approach Genesis 38, we are likely not surprised by Judah's awful sin or his sons'.

Although we are not surprised by Judah and his sons' sins, something should surprise us: the righteousness of the story's hero, Tamar. Tamar's righteousness is surprising because Tamar is an unexpected hero. She is a childless widow living in the house of her father with little economic and social status.

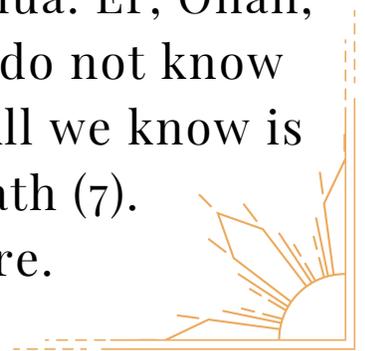
Judah and his sons, those who were obligated to care for her, have neglected her. To the kingdom of this world, Tamar is insignificant and powerless. Yet, to the kingdom of God, she is a model hero with eternal significance and mighty power.

However, this sermon's main idea is not Tamar's heroism or Judah's and his sons' terrible neglect of her; instead, the main idea is that the God of the kingdom cares for Tamar. Although Judah, a man of God's kingdom, neglected Tamar, God never did. God cared for and blessed her. The sin of Judah and his sons and the righteousness of Tamar shine a bright light on our God. They allow us to see once again that what man meant for evil, God intended for good. Although Judah and his sons intended evil – they neglected Tamar – God intended good – he intended to exalt Tamar as a model hero of the faith.

Let's then investigate Judah's and his sons' evil intentions and the mighty strength of Tamar that we might see the glorious, good intentions of our great God.

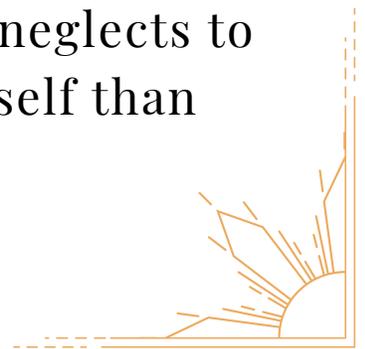
## ER'S AND ONAN'S SIN (1-11)

Jacob had three sons with the daughter of Shua: Er, Onan, and Shelah (2-5). Er and Onan were evil. We do not know much about the nature of Er's wickedness. All we know is that he was evil, and the Lord put him to death (7). We should notice a few important details here.

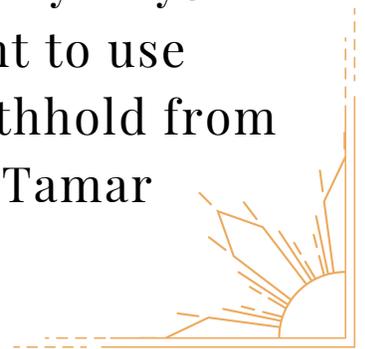


First, see how the Lord is the subject of the verb – “put to death.” Moses does not merely tell us that Er died. That would have been a true thing to say, but there is more for Moses to say. Er did not only die, God, killed him. If Moses said that “Er died,” Moses would merely be stating a fact. Moses, however, does not do that. Instead, he says, “The Lord put him to death” (7). By saying this, Moses does not merely state a fact about Er, but a truth about God. God is just so wicked Er died. We are a people who love to think about God’s character. The same God who woe sinners like you and me by his grace is the same God who executes judgment on sinners not covered by his grace. This reality should motivate us to praise and pray. Let’s praise God for his grace to us and pray that God would extend grace to sinners who do not yet know his grace.

Second, although we do not know Er’s wickedness's details, we know its effects: Tamar is now in a very venerable spot. Er likely did not think about this as engaged in his evil. He probably never thought that his sin would lead to God killing him and Tamar being left destitute. That is the point, though: Er neglects to do good to Tamar. He’d rather indulge himself than care for his wife. This is awful.



Unlike Er, Moses provides us with details about the nature of Onan's wickedness (8-11), and we rightly cringe when we read about it. Judah tells Onan, the second-born son, to marry Tamar and raise children for Er since Er had no children with Tamar. Although a younger brother's duty to marry the widow of an older brother is foreign to us, this practice was vital to Israelite society. This practice's purpose was that the deceased older brother's family would continue through his younger brother (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Moreover, the goal was to care for the widow, who was now in a very vulnerable place economically. Obeying God, however, was costly to the younger brother since the family birthright would now not pass on to the younger brother, even though his older brother had died, but through the son that the younger brother would have with the widow. A younger brother who obeyed God in this act trusted loved God more than his economic future. Onan did not love God more than money, so he does something heinous. (9). He goes to Tamar to be with her but does withhold from her an offspring. This act was an egregious act against Tamar since her economic and social future in many ways depending on a son's birth. Onan is content to use Tamar for his sexual pleasure and then withhold from her any offspring. He cares nothing about Tamar but only himself.

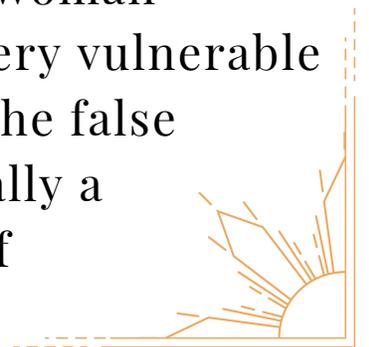


God responds rightly in verse 10. He puts Onan to death for this covenant faithlessness. He has not treated his brother or his sister-in-law in truly human ways. Instead, he has treated them as the snake would: as objects for his advancement and pleasure. This image is snaky, not godly, and God executes judgment on the snake's image. Onan, like Er, does not care for Tamar.

## JUDAH'S SIN

Judah's sin, too, is immense in Genesis 38. First, he lies to Tamar (11). After Er and Onan died, Judah should have permitted Tamar to marry his third son, Shelah. The law required this for the good of Er and Tamar! Judah understands this and promises that in the future Tamar would marry Shelah, but his promise is empty. Instead of honoring God at this moment and caring for Tamar, Judah cares for himself. He is afraid that if he gives Shelah to Tamar, he will die too (11).

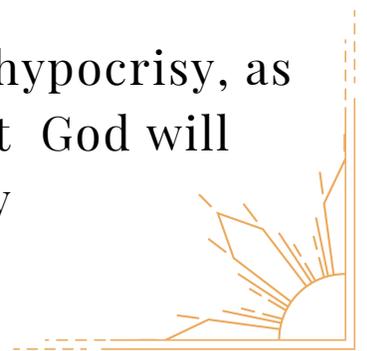
Judah's lie is devastating. In the ancient Near East, women depended in many ways on an adult male such as a father, husband, or son. The prospect of Tamar not having a son was, therefore, terrifying. Her husband was dead, and her father was likely not going to outlive her. A woman without a father, husband, or son was in a very vulnerable place in ancient Israel. Judah's lie gave her the false hope that she'd have a husband and potentially a son; yet, it seems that he had no intention of following through on this promise.



Second, he is intimate with a woman whom he believes to be a cult prostitute. Prostitution falls drastically short of God's standard for sexuality. We already saw this in Genesis 34 when Shechem was intimate with Dinah. The brothers claim that Shechem's actions were dishonorable since he treated Dinah as a prostitute: an object of his pleasure (Gen 34:31). Judah was happy to use Tamar as an object to serve himself. Like, Er and Onan, Judah is not thinking of Tamar at all. Judah's act, like Er's and Onan's, is directed toward the self. This behavior is not covenant faithfulness. He does not care for Tamar.

Third, Judah is a hypocrite. When he learns about Tamar's unfaithfulness, he passes severe judgment on her: she must burn. Israelites mainly reserved the punishment of burning for daughters of priests who have had sexual intimacy outside of marriage. This act profaned their fathers (Lev 21:9). Judah, however, is not a priest, so this verdict seems incredibly harsh. Regardless, Judah is downright hypocritical here since he is forcing Tamar to live according to the law in the strictest way; yet, he has not given Tamar his third son as the law required. Tamar was upholding her obligation. She was waiting to marry Shelah. Judah was not.

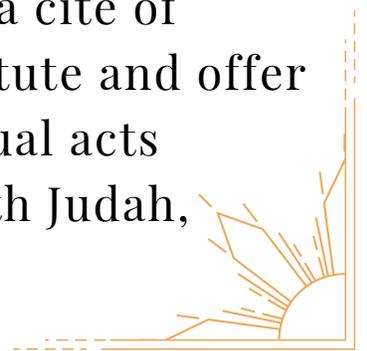
Church family, God disapproves of Judah's hypocrisy, as Hosea tells us in Hosea 4:14. Hosea says that God will not punish the priests' daughters when they commit prostitution since their fathers are



sexually immoral (Hosea 4:14; see Deuteronomy 23:18). Judah is happy to enforce the law even though he has fallen drastically short of it. Judah does not care for Tamar.

**Tamar's Response** Tamar is in a dire situation because of Er's sins, Onan's sins, and Judah's sins. Er's wickedness caused God to kill him. He probably never thought about how his sin would affect Tamar. He probably never thought that about how his unrighteousness was put Tamar in a vulnerable situation. Likewise, God killed Onan because of his sin. Again, Onan was not thinking about Tamar at all. Moses tells us that he was only thinking of himself (38:9). Judah is similarly guilty. He moves on with his life unconcerned about Tamar. Moses gives us no indication about Judah doing anything to support or care for her. When he learns of her unfaithfulness, he shows no thought to her situation: how she was economically vulnerable, destitute without any way to continue her life. The sin of these men has put Tamar in a challenging position.

Tamar's plan is less than ideal, but life in a fallen world is often less than perfect. She disguises herself as a cult prostitute. A cult prostitute was not just an ordinary prostitute, but one that was consecrated to a cite of worship. People would come into the prostitute and offer sacrifices to the gods while committing sexual acts with her. She hopes to become pregnant with Judah,

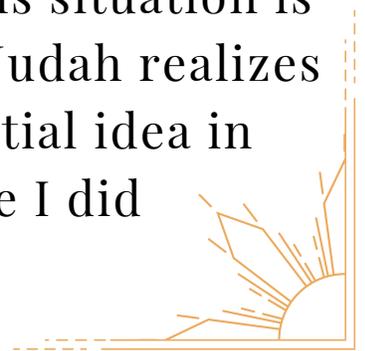


as is apparent in her acceptance of a pledge that would easily indicate who the children's father was (38:18).

Er's sin, Onan's sin, and Judah's sin led Tamar to this point. The best way forward for her was to pretend to be a cult prostitute and hope that she would become pregnant with her father-in-law. She is in a state of her distress. Do not be deceived, church family. Tamar was not excited about this plan: no woman would be, but she had no other hope. Er and Onan did not care for her, and neither did Judah. A man who has authority over a woman in ancient Israel could devastate that woman by their sin of selfishness, pride, and neglect, and this is what has happened to Tamar.

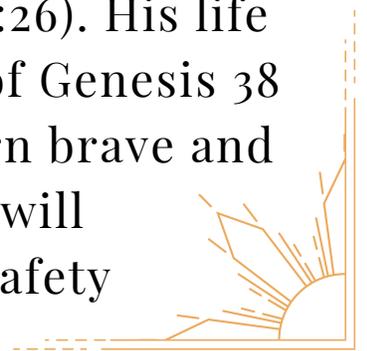
Similarly, wives, daughters, mothers, and grandmothers can be devastated by the men's sins in contemporary life. Men, this must be motivation for us to pursue holiness! Each time you sin, remind yourself that this sin has the power to devastate the women in your life.

Tamar's plan worked. She became pregnant, and just as she expected, her situation just got even direr. Judah announces that she is to be burned (24). This situation is why she asked for Judah's items, and once Judah realizes what has happened, he announces an essential idea in the text, "She is more righteous than I since I did not give her to my son Shelah" (26).



It is a sad reality when Tamar's pretending to be a cult prostitute to become pregnant with her father-in-law is the most righteous act of a story, but that is the situation of Genesis 38. The men of Jacob's family objectified Tamar and neglected her; yet, Tamar's righteousness shines through these men's sin. Tamar was righteous because she did not turn to prostitution in her distress. Judah did. Tamar trusted God in her grief, Judah did not. Still, Tamar did what was right in her pain, and this forced Judah to do likewise. Let's now turn to this point.

It is not surprising that Moses adds the detail that Judah did not "know her again" (26). This act is righteous. Judah never again used Tamar as an object for his sexual pleasure. This detail is important because it indicates, in my opinion, the important truth that a woman's righteousness spreads to the men in her life! In other words, Tamar's righteousness encouraged Judah to be righteous. Although Tamar was powerless in many ways economically, she had great power spiritually. By her righteous act, she empowered Judah to walk in righteousness. Before this event, we saw Judah shamelessly announce to his brothers that they should traffic Joseph as a slave to Egypt (Genesis 37:26). His life up to this point is unrighteous. The details of Genesis 38 prove this. Yet, after this event, we only learn brave and noble things about him! For example, Judah will bravely pledge his own life for his family's safety

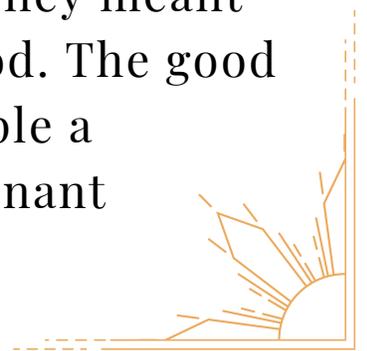


(43:8-10) and followed through on this promise when pleading for Benjamin's life in Egypt (Genesis 44:24-34). Verse 26 is the turning point in Judah's life. Tamar's righteousness spreads to Judah, and that is the point of verse 26.

## TAMAR AS A HEROINE OF THE OT

Tamar is a heroine of the OT. This detail is evident when we observe the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew. The pattern of this genealogy is a father has a son, who has a son. We should notice, though, that Matthew mentions several women: Tamar (3), Rahab (5), Ruth (5), the wife of Uriah (6), and Mary (16). Now notice what women Matthew does not mention. There is no mention of Sara, Rebekah, Rachel, or Leah: instead, Matthew mentions Tamar. Tamar is a hero who enters into Jesus' genealogy because of her righteousness.

Last week, we saw the theme that what we intend for evil, God intends for good (Genesis 50:20). We observed that theme in Jacob's favoritism and the brother's hatred of Joseph (Genesis 37). We observe the same thing this week, but we get to observe it from a different angle. The angle this week is Er's, Onan's, and Judah's sins. They meant evil by their sin; yet, God intended it for good. The good God had in mind was to establish God's people a picture of heroism that would motivate covenant righteousness for future men and women.



Let's remember that Tamar was a Canaanite. She was an inhabit of the land (38:5). God was establishing a beautiful picture of righteousness in the life of Tamar. When God's Israel looked to the heroes of the faith that saw Tamar: a Canaanite. Indeed, this should have cultivated compassion. Unfortunately, it did not. Let's let this reality move us to compassion.

## PRAYER

God help us to be the men and women you have called to be. Help us to treat one another in truly human ways for your glory. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.