

“God’s Dirty Laundry” (Genesis 38:1-30)¹

Today, you may have been expecting to hear from Pastor Keith. However, your pastor asked me to speak to you instead. He believes that what I have to share will have a lasting impact on you. Let me introduce myself. My name is Judah. I am one of the 12 sons of Jacob. My name means, “praise.” Unfortunately, my life has not always lived up to my name. To be honest, I have made many mistakes in my life. I have many regrets. Genesis 38 records a scandalous story from my life that exposes some of the skeletons in my closet. I’d like to share this story with you and impart some of the lessons I’ve learned.

Scene 1 (38:1-11)

To begin with, I have the infamous “claim to fame” of persuading my brothers to sell our younger brother, Joseph, into slavery (37:26). I suggested this because I wanted a “profit” and didn’t want to kill Joseph. After committing this atrocity, I left my brothers’ company (38:1).² I just didn’t want to live a boring life like my grandfather, Isaac, or my father, Jacob. I wanted some adventure and enjoyment out of life. I can tell you now that this was a grave mistake (cf. 1 Cor 15:33). Even though at this point my brothers were not a godly bunch, I moved away from the covenant people of God. In doing so I forsook any possible hope of accountability (cf. Heb 10:24-25).

I moved to Adullam and developed a friendship with a man named Hirah. In Adullam, I met a Canaanite girl, the daughter of Shua (38:2). It was “lust at first sight.” She was stunningly beautiful so I married³ her. To be honest, my sole attraction to this woman was purely physical. She was not devoted to God and had no interest in spiritual things. What a mistake it was to hook up with this woman (cf. 2 Cor 6:14-15). Sadly, I have no one to blame but myself. My grandfather, Isaac, and great grandfather, Abraham, made it clear that God’s people were not to marry Canaanites (24:3; 28:1). But I had to learn this lesson for myself. I came to understand that a spiritually mixed marriage will erode one’s faith.

Anyway, we had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah (38:3-5). Yes, Shelah is one of my sons. His name means “a son of Judah.” I found a wife for my firstborn, Er (38:6). Her name was Tamar. Tragically, my son, Er, was “**evil in the sight of the Lord, so the LORD took his life**” (38:7).⁴ The Bible does not say anything more than that, so I won’t either. But let me assure you that Er was not a godly young man. God was justified in taking his life. So I went to my next son, Onan, and asked him to marry Tamar and produce offspring for his deceased brother (38:8). While this must sound strange to your ears, this was a common practice in the Near East during the time I lived. This also became a part of God’s law (cf. Deut 25:5-10). It was called a “levirate marriage.” The word “levirate” comes from a Latin word meaning “husband’s brother.” In a levirate marriage, a brother would father a child through his brother’s widow and the child would take the name of the deceased husband, care for his mother in her old age, carry on the name of the deceased brother, and receive all of his inheritance. The purpose of this custom was to ensure that no line of the family would become extinct.⁵

Unfortunately, my son Onan did not fulfill his duty as a brother and brother-in-law (cf. 38:8).⁶ Don’t get me wrong; he did have sex with Tamar.⁷ He was willing to gratify his desires, but was not willing to do the responsible thing. He refused to impregnate her (38:9).⁸ His reason was simple: Any kids that would come from their union would not be his! This was a birthright issue. Er was the firstborn and entitled to the birthright. If he has no offspring, the birthright will transfer to Onan. If, however, Tamar bears a son that is considered Er’s, the birthright will pass to that son.⁹ Of course Onan did not want this. His selfish heart had no love for his brother. Instead, he wanted what would have gone to his older brother’s heir. Needless to say, it greatly displeased God that Onan was deliberately frustrating the fulfillment of His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (cf. 11:4). Descendants were important in God’s plans for His people. As a result, the Lord took Onan’s life also.¹⁰

Through the actions of my son, Onan, I now realized that I was being treated the same way that I had treated others, especially Joseph. I taught my sons the art of selfish living...and they paid with their lives. I failed to raise my sons to know and obey the Lord. Raising godly children is one of the greatest privileges God has given mankind. Moms, don't ever believe Satan's lies about the value of what you do in raising your children. And husbands don't ever believe the lie that raising children is women's work! (Cf. Eph 6:4) Fathers and mothers have a unique calling to raise their children in the Lord.

After losing my sons, Er and Onan, I started thinking: Two of my boys have been involved with Tamar and they are both dead! Mama didn't raise no fool! I was beginning to see a pattern! I concluded that Tamar was the problem. She was jinxed! So I sent Tamar back to her parent's home and told her that I would get back to her when Shelah, my last remaining son, was old enough (38:11).¹¹

I made a promise I had no intention of keeping. I looked Tamar right in the eye and lied to her! I promised her Shelah but was not going to let him get close to her. I sinned against Tamar by forcing her to live as a widow. I should have made certain that she had another legitimate opportunity to bear children. I should have cared for this defenseless widow. I was wicked to withhold my third son from Tamar...and now I was about to behave even more wickedly. Once we begin to compromise, further compromise gets easier and easier. In this story, my first crime led to a second.¹²

Scene 2 (38:12-19)

After some time had passed, my wife died (38:12). I was about 50 years old at this time. After the period of mourning ended, I decided that it was high time to get on with my life. So my friend Hirah and I went to my sheepshearers at Timnah. Now I need to be honest and tell you that sheep shearing was a time for partying and celebration (cf. 1 Sam 25:11, 36; 2 Sam 13:23, 28).¹³ In fact, sexual temptation was everywhere due to the Canaanite, fertility, cult practice of ritual fornication. I walked into this knowing full well what I would encounter. But I was lonely and was seeking an out-of-town rendezvous.¹⁴

Before I knew it, I came upon a prostitute on the road to Timnah. She was dressed in seductive clothing and had a veil over her face. I was immediately intrigued. I had to have her. So I turned aside to her by the road and propositioned her. The prostitute said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" I replied, "I will send you a young goat from my flock." A goat of all things! I can't believe I offered her a goat with my family history. My father, Jacob, deceived my grandfather, Isaac, by wearing a goatskin (27:9-10, 16). I deceived my father by dipping Joseph's robe in goat's blood (37:31). A goat? But at this moment, my hormones ruled me and I wasn't thinking clearly. The prostitute countered, "Will you give a pledge until you send the goat?" I inquired, "What pledge shall I give you?" And she said, "Your seal and your cord and your staff." The seal was a stamp engraved with a design that was uniquely mine. It was my identification and was used for all transactions. I wore my seal around my neck on a cord.¹⁵ I gave my identification to a prostitute in exchange for her body. What a travesty. After I committed this sinful act, I felt some remorse; however, I was able to get over it relatively quickly.

Scene 3 (38:20-26)

Quickly, I realized that I needed to pay the prostitute and retrieve my seal, cord, and staff. In my embarrassment and shame, I sent Hirah. I did not want anyone to catch me in the company of a prostitute. The only thing that I was concerned about was my reputation. Hirah took the goat¹⁶—the agreed upon price, but he could not find the prostitute (38:20). When he asked the men of the city where the temple prostitute was, they told him that there had been no temple prostitute in the region (38:21-22).

What was I to do? I had no choice but to let her keep my seal and staff. I had to drop the matter. After all, who in his right mind is going to call the authorities to report a robbery under these circumstances? I didn't want to be a laughing stock (38:23).

Three months later, I was informed that my daughter-in-law, Tamar, had played the prostitute and was pregnant (38:23). I was incensed! I was repulsed! No daughter-in-law of mine was going to be a pregnant, out-of-wedlock whore! In my rage, I yelled, **“Bring her out and let her be burned!”** (38:24)¹⁷ I continued to spew out venomous words. I was grateful to finally be rid of this nuisance!

As Tamar was on her way out to be burned she sent me a message. The message was straight to the point: “I am with child by the man to whom this seal, cord, and staff belong” (38:25). I was breathless upon hearing Tamar’s words. I felt as if I had been kicked in the stomach.¹⁸ My gaze fell on my personal seal, cord, and staff. You can’t imagine the horror of this moment! (Cf. 2 Sam 12:5-7) I realized I was a total hypocrite! (See Rom 2:1; Luke 12:2-3) I had slept with my daughter-in-law! Fortunately, I responded as well as I could. I acknowledged that Tamar was righteous, not I. Please understand, I was not saying that Tamar was righteous. It would be impossible, by any stretch, to consider her actions as righteous.¹⁹ But in comparison to me, she was practically an angel! (Cf. 1 Sam 24:16-18)

Now I know what you’re all thinking: How in the world did this happen to me? Well, when I took off for my excursion in Timnah, word traveled to Tamar that I was going up to shear my sheep. Upon hearing this, she removed her widow’s garments,²⁰ put on new clothes, and covered herself with a veil. She obviously had some idea of my sexual inclinations or she would not have tried this risky plan.²¹ No doubt, she felt like she had no other choice, because my son Shelah had grown up and I had not given her to him as a wife (38:13-14). In my pathetic and sinful state, I had the honor to keep my obligation to a prostitute, but not to my own daughter-in-law.²²

Although Tamar’s actions may seem strange to you, there is evidence that among ancient Assyrian and Hittite peoples, part of the custom was that the levirate responsibility could pass to the father of the widow’s husband, if there were no brothers to fulfill it. Thus, Tamar was only trying to acquire that to which she had a legal right.²³ After we exchanged services, she arose, departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow’s garments” (38:15-19; cf. Prov 6:25-29, 32-33; 7:10).

I have to hand it to Tamar—she was loyal to her deceased husband, my son, by trying to raise up seed for him.²⁴ She had not married another Canaanite.²⁵ Furthermore, she qualifies as a heroine in the story, for she risked everything for her right to be the mother in the family of Judah and to protect the family.²⁶

The good news is: I can honestly tell you that God broke me through this tragic event. I repented and I demonstrated my repentance by not sleeping with Tamar ever again. Moreover, my dad did not exclude me from receiving a special blessing as he did Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. Because I humbled myself God raised me to be the chief of the house of Israel and blessed the children that I fathered, even though they were a result of my sin. The next time you will read about me is in Genesis 43 where I am back with my brothers and father. And in Genesis 44, I pled for the welfare of my brother, Benjamin, and offer my own life as a pledge to save him. God turned my life around.

Scene 4 (38:27-30)

Tamar and I had two sons: Perez and Zerah (38:27-30).²⁷ I believe the twins were God’s gift to Tamar to compensate for the lack of children from her two husbands. Additionally, since I lost two sons to wickedness, I think the twin boys were also a sign to me that my sins were forgiven and a new day was dawning under God’s favor.²⁸ Perez was the first of the twins born.²⁹ Though born of an adulterous and incestuous relationship, Perez became the ancestor of David (Ruth 4:18-22), who in turn became the ancestor of Jesus Christ (Matt 1:3).³⁰ Tamar and I were not examples of godliness, but both of us are in the family line of Jesus Christ the Messiah, through Perez (Ruth 4:12; Matt 1:3).³¹

This is nothing short of astonishing! Why in the world would God bless such sinful and unfaithful people with the privilege of being in the line of Christ? It is a glorious example of God's amazing grace! (See 1 Cor 1:26-31)

Maybe you can identify with my story because you feel you have made a mess of your life. You have made bad decisions. You knowingly went down a wrong path. You sinned in some horrible way and have concluded that God could never love you or do anything through you. I hope my story will encourage you! The God who forgave me will forgive you. The God who transformed me will transform you. The God who used me will use you. It doesn't matter where you have been. It doesn't matter what you have done. What matters is where you turn now. Anyone who trusts Jesus Christ, the lion of Judah, with the shambles of their life will be received and remade. When Jesus died, He died for your sin. He died for mine. He paid the price so that we could have a new beginning and a new destiny!³² Please always remember that *God's grace can cover your sin and change you from the inside out!*

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Notes

¹ This chapter seems at first out of place since it interrupts the story of Joseph, but remember that this is the *toledot* of Jacob. This is the story of what happened to his whole family, not just Joseph. The central problem with which the chapter deals is childlessness. The events of this chapter must span at least 20 years—years during which Joseph was lost to his family (cf. 37:2; 41:46-47; 45:6). Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Genesis* (<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf>, 2005), 234.

² Why did Judah leave? Here are several possible reasons: (1) Because of his guilt over selling Joseph. (2) Because of the overall dysfunction of his family. (3) Because of his father's unending grief—it was a depressing environment. Judah chose to exchange the fellowship of his brothers and father for fellowship and union with the ungodly people of Canaan.

³ The Hebrew word *laqach* (“took”) is the normal expression for “marry” (Gen 4:19; 11:29). Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 509.

⁴ This is the first text that states explicitly that God put someone to death. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50*: NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 434.

⁵ This practice continued into the time of Jesus (Matt 22:23-30; Mark 12:18-25; Luke 20:27-35).

⁶ The fact that the Hebrew verb rendered, “perform your duty as a brother-in-law,” is a single word would tend to support the idea that this was a standard practice at this time. See S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “Judah and the Messianic Succession,” *Believers Bible Bulletin*, Genesis Lesson 54:

<http://www.believers-chapel.org/bulletins/genesis/genesis.html>.

⁷ With the exception of the NET Bible, English versions fail to make clear that this was his persistent practice. The word “when” should be translated “whenever.” Derek Kidner, *Genesis: Tyndale OT Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1967), 188.

⁸ This is not, as some might suggest, a proof text against birth control or masturbation.

⁹ John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 668.

¹⁰ In this story, Judah comes across as a hard and callous man. He had previously suggested selling Joseph into slavery to make money from him and deceiving Jacob despite Reuben's protests (37:26-27, 29-30). Now he showed no grief over the deaths of his sons, in contrast to Jacob who mourned inconsolably over Joseph's apparent death (37:34-35). Judah also later ordered the burning of his daughter-in-law (38:24).

¹¹ Could it also be that in Judah's more honest moments he feared that Shelah might follow in Onan's footsteps and God would have to kill him too.

¹² Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 148.

¹³ Waltke, *Genesis*, 511.

¹⁴ I don't think Judah would have ever considered sleeping with a prostitute if he was still at home where people knew him (see Job 24:15).

¹⁵ Walton, *Genesis*, 669.

¹⁶ Three generations of deceit were now complete. Jacob deceived Isaac by wearing a goatskin (27:9-10, 16). Judah deceived Jacob by dipping Joseph's robe in goat's blood (37:31). Tamar deceived Judah with a disguise and a goat. R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 454. Also Jacob used a garment to deceive his father, Isaac, and Judah and his brothers used a garment to deceive Jacob (37:32). Now Tamar used a garment to deceive Judah (38:14). We reap what we sow.

¹⁷ In the Mosaic law the penalty of burning was only for a priest's daughter who had become guilty of prostitution (Lev 21:9). The usual mode of death was by stoning (Deut 22:20-24; cf. John 8:4-5).

¹⁸ Judah's hedonistic willfulness in this chapter contrasts with Joseph's self-control in sexual temptation in Genesis 39. Here promiscuous Judah grasps Tamar's seductive offer and enlarges his family. Later chaste Joseph resists Potiphar's wife's seductive offer and ends his career (temporarily) in prison. God corrects those who disregard His plan and pursue lives of self-gratification often using talionic justice (i.e., reaping the same kind of punishment as the sin that we sow) in His discipline.

¹⁹ Davis poses the following challenging questions, “Is Tamar right to do what she does? If so, would you encourage people today to engage in a sin in order to achieve the greater good? Note: This, of course, assumes that what Tamar does by having sexual intercourse with her father-in-law, Judah, is considered to be a sin. There is, however, no condemnation of her actions either in this passage (apart from Judah's rash and later regretted judgment against her—38:24) or elsewhere in Scripture.

If not, why later in Israel's history do the elders and citizens of Bethlehem include Tamar's action as part of their blessing to Boaz for his marriage to Ruth (Ruth 4:12)?" Barry C. Davis, *Genesis* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Biblical Seminary unpublished class Notes, 2003).

²⁰ Contrast Judah with Tamar, who is still dressed as a widow from the much earlier deaths of her husbands. Waltke, *Genesis*, 511.

²¹ Obviously, Tamar knew Judah well enough to know that moral purity wasn't one of his virtues and that if she could just look the part of a prostitute, he would most likely take the bait. Interestingly, the text doesn't evidence any of the awkwardness of someone who was having his first experience.

²² Waltke, *Genesis*, 513.

²³ See also Susan Niditch, "The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," *Harvard Theological Review* 72 (1979): 143-48.

²⁴ Just as in Genesis 20 where the seed of Abraham was protected by the "righteous" (*saddiq*, 20:4; NIV, "innocent") Abimelech (cf. also 26:9-11), it is the woman Tamar, not Judah the patriarch, who is ultimately responsible for the survival of the descendants of the house of Judah. John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis: EBC* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic ed.

²⁵ Waltke, *Genesis*, 512.

²⁶ Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988 [2002 ed.]), 612.

²⁷ Once again, "the elder served the younger," for it was the one who put out a hand first who was the ancestor of Jesus (see Ruth 4:18; Matt 1:3; Luke 3:33). Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through the Bible: Genesis 24-50* (Kent, England: Sovereign World, 1999), 77.

²⁸ Waltke, *Genesis*, 514.

²⁹ Perez means a breach or one who breaks through. Moses may have included the unusual circumstances surrounding the birth of these twins in the record to emphasize God's selection of the son through whom the line of blessing would descend.

³⁰ Three of the four OT women listed in Matthew's genealogy, Tamar, Bathsheba, Rahab participated in immoral sexual relationships. Ronald F. Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 250.

³¹ When God chose to send Jesus through one of the tribes of Israel, He did not choose the tribe of the favorite, Joseph. He chose the tribe of Judah! (cf. Rev 5:5)

³² Revised and adapted from Bob Hallman, *How to Goof up Your Life* (Genesis 38:1-30):

http://www3.calvarychapel.com/kauai/teachings/genesis_pdf/gen_38_notes.pdf.