

Bite Size Bible Study

Judah & Tamar #121

By Pastor Lee

The Bible often teaches us life lessons by showing how NOT to do something. The story of Judah and Tamar is one example. This story in Genesis 38 is hard to make sense of in our modern culture. For instance we wouldn't usually praise a woman who deceives her father-in-law into sleeping with her, and we don't expect the father-in-law to praise the daughter-in-law who does as righteous. But that's what happens here. Let's see why and what lesson is being taught.

Judah marries the daughter of a Canaanite. She joins his household and gives birth to three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. Er, the firstborn, marries Tamar and brings her into his father's (Judah's) household. Then Er dies without bearing a son. According to the levirate marriage laws, Tamar should become the wife of Er's next older brother – Onan. This means she remains in Judah's household and protected and provided for. Her firstborn son from her marriage to Onan would carry the family name of Er, her first husband. Er's name and inheritance rights would be passed on to this son. But Onan is happy to sleep with Tamar but purposefully prevents her from getting pregnant because he knows the son will not carry his own name, but rather the name of his late brother (Gen 38:9).

More than just naming rights are involved here. Without an heir to Er, Onan becomes the firstborn, and he gains the double portion of the inheritance. He is keeping the firstborn's share for himself. Onan's greed shames Tamar, because she appears to be barren. He shames his dead brother, Er, by stealing his birthright and not providing Er an heir. Onan's actions are wicked in the Lord's eyes and God puts him to death.

Judah, the head of the household, tells Tamar, his daughter-in-law, “*Stay a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up*”; for he thought, “*I don't want him to die too, like his brothers.*” So Tamar went and lived at home with her father. Gen 38:11(CJB). Tamar should have continued to live in Judah's household but Judah is failing in his responsibility to her. Being put out of Judah's household leaves Tamar nowhere else to go. She returns to her father's household, where she no longer has any rights, any place and only minimal support.

Ancient people were very superstitious. Two dead husbands seem too much for a coincidence. Judah may believe she is the reason his first two sons died. So she waits and when Shelah grows up, Judah doesn't arrange the marriage to Shelah.

Tamar was told, “Your father-in-law has gone up to Timnah to shear his sheep.” So she took off her widow's clothes, completely covered her face with her veil, and sat at the entrance to Einayim, which is on the way to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah had grown up, but she still was not being given to him as his wife. Gen 38:13-14(CJB).

With her face covered, Judah thinks she is a shrine prostitute. He asks her to sleep with him and agrees to give her a goat as payment. *He answered, “What should I give you as a guarantee?” She said, “Your seal, with its cord, and the staff you're carrying in your hand.” So he gave them to her, then went and slept with her; and she conceived by him.* Gen 38:18(CJB). Tamar becomes pregnant.

About three months later Y'hudah (Judah) was told, “Tamar your daughter-in-law has been acting like a whore; moreover, she is pregnant as a result of her prostitution.” Y'hudah said, “Bring her out, and let her be burned alive!” Gen 38:24(CJB). Prostitution was not acceptable behavior for a daughter-in-law. The community, though, is shaming Judah, not Tamar, by noting his failed responsibilities: *your daughter-in-law has been acting like a whore*, this was done in the ancient world to survive.

As the father of her household, Judah has responsibility for Tamar—to provide her with protection, support, and moral guidance. He also failed as the father of his household because he didn't give Tamar her rightful inheritance (through Shelah). Next, Judah uses his authority to call for Tamar to be killed, since he feels she hasn't been faithful, forgetting his unfaithfulness to her.

When she was brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law: “I am pregnant by the man to whom these things belong. Determine, I beg you, whose these are — the signet, the cords and the staff.” Then Y'hudah acknowledged owning them. He said, “She is more righteous than I, because I didn't let her become the wife of my son Shelah.” And he never slept with her again. Gen 38:25-26(CJB)

Certainly, Tamar should not have slept with Judah, but he carried responsibility for her and did not provide it. Judah acted unjustly by not giving Tamar to his third son, which was her right, and excluded her from his household and his protection. She didn't have many, if any, other options. Without a household, Tamar was vulnerable and disempowered. The Bible uses this story to show that Judah had not acted honorably toward his family, his dead sons, or his widowed daughter-in-law.

Cornerstone Community Church

PO Box 654 Lemon Grove, CA 91945-0654 – www.cornerstonecommunityonline.org