

“Until His Righteousness Fills the Earth”
Pastor Sam Richards
July 26, 2020

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. v.8. Psalm 32

I am so very grateful for this promise, especially when I come to a chapter as challenging as Gen. 38! This chapter causes me to groan. I understand why it is among the least preached upon passages of scripture. So I read and prayed and read some more. And, as God would have it, the Spirit led me to focus on Tamar. Approach this chapter as being about her and not Judah's apostasy and depravity. Take your eyes off the lewdness and immorality, see what I am doing through Tamar. That is what I have to share with you this morning. When I was grammar school, my parents gave me a microscope (50x/100x/200x powers) for Christmas. I had the thrill of preparing slides, examining the delicate structures of butterfly wings and flower petals—of looking closer and closer. I saw for myself single cell organisms from pond water. Amazing. I was experiencing science and observation first hand—still have that microscope, in its small wooden box. By changing the lens, you changed your perspective. But all of that viewing depended on a reliable and strong light source which could be focused by adjusting the mirror on the slide/specimen. Well, something like that happens when you look at scripture, too.

Gen. 38 under 50x reveals a moral view of things. 100x displays the root of sin, the sinfulness entailed in the chapter. But 200x opens to view the deep things, the evil behind the sin which the morality skims over. The passage is superficially disgusting (truly and really disgusting); but the sinfulness takes you from disgust to dismay. It is dismaying to see how far from God (and promise and family) Judah has strayed; he is a prodigal son. BUT that is not Tamar's journey. She comes, as it were, to the light from the dark side of Canaanite culture (its idolatrous and vile religious practices). She departs from wickedness and is used of God despite her origins in the story of our great redemption. She passes on the seed of promise, she is in the genealogical line of King David, and, of Jesus, the Christ, David's incomparable successor! That's what appears when you focus on Tamar.

I used the parable of “The Prodigal Son,” from Luke 15:11-31 (which we heard read this morning, with a view to understanding Judah's apostasy (**Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside** (which we may take as resided awhile, or tarried with an Adullamite, Hirah, **his friend!**) where *he saw a woman* (an euphemism for his wantonness, or lust¹), **the daughter of a certain Canaanite**. (v.2) Judah's behavior

¹Now it parallels to the story of Samson, **who saw a woman** and sought to marry her, come to our mind, that is a good thing because the phrase **saw a woman** is used here to convey a certain wantonness, or male lust. Although I must add that both Judah and Samson sought marriage before consummation(!)—this unfolds despite the prohibition of marrying Canaanite, or Philistine women (*lest you get tangled up with their gods and abandon the one true God*). Abraham warned against intermarrying with Canaanites whose religion (fertility cult) was a total abomination to God. And by the time of Judges, this was written in the Law of Moses! We call Judah's turning away from family and God apostasy (a falling away from the faith).

parallels that of the prodigal son. There is in Luke 15:20 a very rich allusion to the story of Judah: the elder son says, **Look, these many years I have served you** (father/God) **and I never disobeyed your command** (this is very questionable(!) but that is another story) **and you never gave me a young goat** (Look! The very purchase price of sex with Tamar, offered by Judah! That's the allusion! The clue that this parable is a *reprise* of the Judah story with which Jesus assumes his audience is quite aware. Furthermore, this is the classic complaint of man against God as planted by Satan—God is withholding the best from you, he is stingy, cheap) **that I might celebrate with my friends**. (Here is another, quite subtle, allusion to Judah's story. First we note the reference to **my friends**. Hirah was Judah's friend². What is more, and this gets to the celebration piece, we read that Judah, after he finished mourning the death of his wife (Bath-Shua) **went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers** (a clue to his occupation/wealth/livelihood and explanation for the staff requested as a pledge for payment (of a **young goat**). The time of sheep-shearing was a festive occasion (rather like our fall fairs) and this event coincided with the religious celebration of Baal worshippers! Translation: Judah was returning to Timnah, to join in the religious rites of the Canaanites there, including cult prostitution (fornication was part of their worship) rather like a dog returning to its vomit.) He was going to start the whole depraved cycle over again but God stepped in and made a different use of his lust.)

What is it, in Luke 15, that conveys this sense of things to Judah's return to Timnah (Gen. 38:12-13)? It's Luke 15:30: **But when *this son of yours* has devoured your property** (wealth/prosperity/livelihood?) **with prostitutes, you have killed the fatted calf for him**. Killing the fatted calf, the veal critter, was only raised by the wealthiest of persons, and only slain for celebrating the visit of some eminent personage ties together the lust, the prostitutes, celebration with earthly friends and a young goat. *Do you see how deftly Jesus weaves together what they know, what they should remember—familiar religious lore—in an imaginative way to both remind them of who they are, where they have come from, with some fresh, vital truth, with what they need to know?:* **God seeks lost sinners (Christ's mission!) . . . There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who need no repentance!** Oh, we say, making application, what the prodigal son needed to do was repent . . . what Judah desperately needed to do, was repent . . . what I need to do, is repent!

We have already noted that Judah was apostate (that is worthy of repentance!), and the prodigal son needs to repent of turning his back upon a loving father/God, too. The elder son needs to repent of accusing his father of being stingy and ungenerous (remember “All that is mine is yours.” v.31?) and a kill-joy.

So, let's turn up the spiritual magnification, shall we? I think that is what the Spirit meant when he said, “Focus on Tamar.” It is only when we focus on Tamar that the depth of what Judah needs to repent of comes into view. And it's deeper than drunkenness, illicit religion and fornication. When we take off the blinders of sexual

² The text does not explicitly say that Hiram was involved in either Judah's marriage, or in the selection process for Judah's son, Er. But if my read on his Jonadab role is accurate this involvement would be a safe inference. Hiram was to Judah what Jonadab was to Amnon (in the famous rape of Tamar incident, Amnon's lovely half-sister, 2 Samuel 13:1-6). After he took advantage of her, his lust turned to disgust and contempt—he spurned her.

immorality, and turn up the light, focusing the mirror, what appears is something very evil.

Tamar, as a woman, has a God-given right to family, to child-bearing, yes, and to all that motherhood entails: to position, status, honor, legacy, the reward and fruit of her womb. To lose sight of a woman's right to family is one thing, but to actively oppress her, and deprive her of that right is a very great evil. This right from God came to her by virtue of her marriage to Er. He died. She was left childless. Er's name, family line of Judah was in the balance as a result. Onan was supposed to perform the husband's duty, impregnate Tamar, ***so that the first son she bore*** was to be the first-born heir of Er. ***And the inheritance came through this son benefitting her and her family.*** Thus her right to family was hedged about with what we call "levirate marriage," a customary form of surrogacy which, though strange to our ears, was instituted by God to insure the woman's right to family. This right held implications for the woman's widowhood. God intended it to shield the woman from destitution, from the marginalization that might follow if this provision were not there to protect her right to family. Every woman, I stress, has this right from God.

Now that, as we say, is a game changer!

Read from Tamar's point of view, Genesis is about securing her right to her family. God is looking out for her in a world sorrow and danger. It is impossible to appreciate what it means to be married to a man who is so **wicked in sight of the Lord** that God takes him out (v.7) as she was. Judah's second son, Onan, is no improvement on Er. Both of Judah's sons by Bath-Shua are evil men—beyond bad, immoral. ***They are cut off in divine judgment.*** So Tamar, childless by Er, is supposed to be impregnated by Onan but he, by preventing her from getting pregnant³ is also **wicked in the sight of the Lord** so **God put him to death also**(v.10). Then Judah, apparently, holds her somehow responsible for the death of his sons *when they had only their excessive wickedness to blame*. Judah seeks to ostracize Tamar, as if she were a black widow of some sort! As a disgraced wife, or shamed woman! On the promise of impregnation (a pretext!) by his third and now only son, Shelah, he says: **Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers.** (v. 11) Judah acted wickedly in using the promise of an heir to put her away, *and to deprive her of her right*. This is wrong, yes; wicked, that too and evil. He knows what is her due and he acts to deprive her of it. Years pass. Bath-Shun dies.

³ This act not only betrayed a want of affection to his brother, combined with a despicable covetousness for his possession and inheritance, but was also a sin against the divine institution of marriage and its object, and was therefore punished by Jehovah with sudden death. The custom of levirate marriage, which is first mentioned here, and is found in different forms among Indians, Persians, and other nations of Asia and Africa, was not founded upon a divine command, but upon *an ancient tradition*, originating probably in Chaldea. It was not abolished, however, by the Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 25:5.), but only so far restricted as not to allow it to interfere with the sanctity of marriage; and with this limitation it was enjoined as a duty of affection to build up the brother's house, and to preserve his family and name (see my Bibl. Archologie, 108). K&D, Bible Commentary.

Onan knew that **the heir would not be his**, that the first-born's portion would be double what he could hope for, so, being greedy, he did evil. Not to mention exploiting her, measuring himself at her expense—impoverishing and robbing her through sex.

And after Judah has finished the **many days** of mourning (he **was comforted**), he makes plans to join the festivities at Timrah, the sheep-shearing Mardi Gras of his day (occurring around the end of March). **When Tamar was told** his plans, she, realizing that Judah cared less about her rights than meeting his own pleasures, *she decides to take advantage of his lust to obtain her right!* We are told that Shelah was grown-up but the promise of Judah had been broken. She was a wronged, deprived and oppressed woman.

She took off her widow's garments. (It was honorable in that she was honoring her deceased husband's rights *as well as her own*) And she put on a veil: "Tamar apparelled herself in the guise of a religious prostitute (kedêshah, Genesis 38:21), one who dedicated herself to the goddess Astarte, the Babylonian *Ishtar*. The veil was one of the symbols of Ishtar." (CBSC) This detail is significant because Judah, for his own part, wears a piece of garment (sash, cord, handkerchief?) which is the insignia of the cult of Ashotoreth (yes, the very Baal-ish fertility cult that God condemns(!)—that is how far his apostasy had taken him!). "The cord" is referred to as **thy lace** (the Heb. word, *quedeshah* stands for the insignia of one consecrated to the worship of Ashtoreth!)⁴

Interference with God's provision (a family for the woman) did not stop with the Old Testament days. If we transition to the New Testament, we find Jesus inveighing against the scribes for taking advantage of widows, **devouring their estates** for personal gain—stealing from them what their deceased husbands had provided, as it were, after the fact. Those who prevented the woman from getting her family, and those who stole the benefits of her having had a family, were wicked thieves! (See Mark 12:40) The social problem of a large, impoverished widow population is to be laid at the feet of evil, feckless men—opportunists. God had made provision—both family and access to the inheritance—to stave off the possibility of an impoverished, vulnerable and lonely widow population. There were thousands of widows on the treasure of the Temple in Jesus' day. It was one of the stellar missions of the early church that they addressed this injustice and showed mercy to the oppressed. Those who had been denied their rights, and those abandoned to die alone found mercy because God raised up the church. It (widow relief) is not supposed to be a governmental function.

Back to Tamar. This is where Tamar comes in. She is like unto Esther, a real woman who was raised up for such a time as this. She is in an elite group—first of the four women mentioned in Jesus' genealogy (a rare occurrence!). She is a heroine of the proportion of Deborah, Jael (who slew Sisera) and Ruth. Why is she overlooked? Why isn't Genesis 38 entitled "Tamar and Judah?" For Tamar is the woman who redeems the line of Judah, she restores righteousness to Judah. She is only a daughter-in-law yet she births Perez and through this surrogate son/grandson, the line of Judah is established! She injected Canaanite blood into the line of our Messiah!

I would suggest that one reason Tamar doesn't get more play is that Gen. 38 is assumed to be about Judah and is viewed from the male point of view: property rights,

⁴ It is an indication of assimilation to Canaanite religion—which opens up the possibility that Judah was engaged in this Baal business as far back as the time of Jacob's residence at Shechem. It takes some of the mystery out of why Dinah wanted to see the women of the land in that her brothers were engaged with the Canaanites already. She wanted to know what was up. God used that crisis to move Jacob out of Shechem.

primogeniture and the rights of the first born. This creates a blind spot, or diverts our attention.

But, after noting that, according to the law, Tamar does nothing wrong—she only claims/takes what is her due—we discover Tamar standing on her right to family! And she does so bravely, and astutely—she accomplishes what only a woman of God could do, yes, and she does it as only a real woman could. What a gift! What a vindication of divine justice.

I mentioned Tamar's astuteness. I want to follow up on that. Tamar requests his cord, his signet ring and his staff as a pledge (earnest, or downpayment on the young goat—promised for their sexual relations). These personal items each carried significance: the cord, as we learned, signified his cult identity (his new gods), his ring signified his personal identity (his legal signature as it were—she could sign in his name!) and his staff (his livelihood). If this sounds rather like what Esau gave up for a bowl of bean soup, we are very close. She took his gods, his identity and his livelihood—everything that pertained to *the inheritance which was rightfully hers* through her first marriage to Er, the first born, who was deceased. Judah was willing to give up all that to satisfy his physical lust?! Yes. And it was the crushing weight of that realization that came down on him when he found out who it was that he was about to consign to fire for “shaming the family.” Friends, that was his own crime! He acted shamefully and when he looked at the very pregnant Tamar (carrying twins), I have to wonder if he saw the face of Joseph whom he wanted to kill, but didn't. Maybe he had a crisis of conscience that was electrifying, and transformative—I think that is what Tamar did for him. She humbled herself to have sex with him, although it was her due, and she gave birth to his sons, Perex and Zerah who did more for the kingdom than all his prior wicked, Canaanite brood ever did. Suddenly Judah becomes a family man against, courageously preserving the family of his father Jacob, having returned to God. Tamar, who was accused of harlotry actually performed the duty of a daughter-in-law despite opposition, against the odds. I don't think she went to that trial afraid. Her secret weapon was she knew who the father of her children was—the one who hated, despised and stood ready to execute her.

By the man to whom these belong, I am with child . . . please determine whose these are. (v. 25) ***She appeals to Judah for her defense?! After all the neglect, she is still willing to trust him to do what is right? Her feminine courage awakens a sleeping justice in the heart of Judah. PRAISE GOD.*** I find that gracious, moving, astonishing . . . what a steady hand God has, what redeeming mercy . . . what forgiveness. All in the evidence. Let the evidence speak for itself.

She has been more righteous than I (What humility!) At last he humbles himself before a woman who moments before he was willing to have burned as a harlot! Before Tamar. What a winner of a woman! **Because I did not give her Shelah my son.** (v.26) **And he never knew her again.** I take that as sign of respect. It certainly seems to have healed matters. Tamar goes on to give birth. And, curiosity as well as appropriately, ***this birth is a breakthrough event. That is literally what the name Perez means.***

God preserved the seed of promise through Tamar

God terminated the curse of Cain (Gen. 9) through Tamar. [Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brothers. Those who justified slavery through the curse of Cain must have missed this bit!]

God re-established the right to woman to family and all that follows from that!

Amen