

## Tamar's Story; Joseph Sent to Prison (Genesis 38-39a)

### Expository Lessons from the Book of Genesis

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#### I. Background and Introduction

- a. Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers; bound for Egypt.
- b. Ironically, the two most famous stories in the Bible of sons deceiving their father both involve Jacob (in **Genesis 27** and **Genesis 37**).
  - i. As a young single man, Jacob as a son deceived his father (Isaac), regarding his brother. (He pretended to be Esau to steal the blessing.)
  - ii. As an old man, Jacob is deceived by his own sons. They deceived their father regarding their own brother (pretending that a wild animal devoured Joseph).
  - iii. Both deceptions involved killing a kid of the flock.
    1. A kid from the sheep killed by Jacob, pretending that it was a wild animal from which a stew would be made, to deceive his father; and
    2. A kid from the goats killed by the brothers of Joseph so that Joseph's tunic could be dipped in blood to pretend that it was a wild animal that killed Joseph.
  - iv. Both stories involved a prophecy about brothers bowing down before another brother.
    1. In the stolen blessing given to Jacob, Isaac said "Let peoples serve you and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brethren. And let your mother's sons bow down to you."  
(**Genesis 27:29**, LXX, OSB)
    2. Joseph recounts two dreams in **Genesis 37:5-11**. The first dream involved sheaves, and the second one had the sun, moon and stars in it. Both foretold of his brothers bowing down to him.
  - v. In both cases, when the brothers heard about this prophecy, they wanted to kill the one who it was prophesied they would have to bow down to.

1. What to make of this?
  - a. Deliberate parallels between Jacob and Joseph?
  - b. Or is this a situation where both are foreshadowing something else yet to come?
  - c. Or is this justice being done in the end, where Jacob is paid back in the same way for the deception he played on his own father? (Another example showing that, in the end, no one really gets away with anything? That God takes care of justice in his own way and in his own time?)

## II. The Strange Story of Judah and His Daughter-in-Law, Tamar (Read Genesis 38)

- a. Why is this story in the Bible? What is the significance of this story to us?
- b. Summary of the storyline
  - i. Judah, one of the 12 sons of Jacob, marries Shua, a Canaanite woman.
  - ii. Judah and Shua have three sons (in order): Er, Onan and Shelah.
  - iii. Judah arranges for his oldest son, Er, to marry Tamar.
  - iv. Er “was evil in the sight of the Lord, and God killed him”.
  - v. Judah tells his second son, Onan, to marry Tamar and to raise up children for his deceased brother.
  - vi. Judah has relations with Tamar but makes sure she will not get pregnant. God finds that evil, and kills Onan.
  - vii. Judah tells Tamar to wait until son #3 (Shelah) gets old enough, at which time he will have him marry Tamar. However, Judah is lying; he is afraid son #3 will die if he marries her. Judah has no intention to give Shelah to Tamar.
  - viii. Judah becomes a widower when his wife, Shua dies.
  - ix. Shelah (son #3 of Judah) grows up, but is not given for Tamar to marry. She becomes aware of that, and concocts a strange plan.
    1. Tamar covers herself with a veil, “makes herself beautiful”, pretends to be a prostitute, sits down by the gate past Timnah where she expects her father-in-law Judah to pass.
    2. Judah thinks she is a prostitute, asks to lie down with her and offers to send a young goat afterward for payment.
    3. Tamar asks for Judah’s own ring, staff and cord as a pledge to be redeemed at payment.
  - x. Judah lies with Tamar, but does not recognize his daughter-in-law.

- xi. Judah sends a messenger back with the promised young goat, but there is no prostitute to be found.
  - xii. Tamar conceives by Judah. Three months later she is found pregnant and is accused of fornication. When Judah is told of this, his response is, "Bring her out and let her be burned".
  - xiii. Tamar says she is pregnant by the man who owns the ring, cord and staff that she produces. Judah recognizes them as his and responds, "She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah".
  - xiv. Tamar gives birth to twins.
    - 1. Zerah sticks his hand out from the womb first, and a scarlet thread is put on it.
    - 2. Perez actually comes out of the womb first, followed by his brother with the scarlet thread.
  - xv. Judah never again has intimate relations with Tamar.
- c. Are there any heroes in this story?
- i. The first two sons of Judah are so evil that God puts them to death.
  - ii. How do we find Judah here?
    - 1. Judah lies to Tamar about planning to give his third son to her for a husband.
    - 2. He commits fornication.
    - 3. He is a total hypocrite, lacking mercy (wants to burn someone for fornication, when he did the same thing three months earlier).
- d. What about Tamar? What was she thinking? Why did she do that with her father-in-law?
- i. Before you throw stones at her, imagine her situation.
    - 1. First husband is evil; killed by God.
    - 2. Second husband uses her, refuses to raise up children for his brother. He also is evil; killed by God.
    - 3. Her father-in-law Judah blames her for the death of his two evil sons. Then he lies to her; tells her to wait at her father's home until his third son is old enough to be married. Then withholds his third son but never tells Tamar.
    - 4. Perhaps we might have some sympathy for Tamar.
  - ii. But why did she want to have intimate relations with her father-in-law?

1. I was mystified. Could not think of why she would want to do such a thing (could not even imagine her motivation). Then I asked my wife, Alison.
2. Alison's response: She just wanted to become pregnant so that she could raise up children.
  - a. Not having children was a disgrace in those days. No offspring, no legacy. Alone, and no one to take care of you in later years, too.
    - i. Consider reactions of Rachel, the one Jacob loved most, when she was childless: "Give me children or else I die" (**Genesis 30:1**, LXX, OSB)
    - ii. Consider reaction of Hannah. Her husband loved her more than her rival. Yet because Hannah was childless at the start of **1 Samuel 1** (this book is called **1 Kingdoms**, of 4, in the LXX), it says she was broken-hearted, wept, was grieved in her spirit and would not eat.
  - b. The details of her plot (including capturing the ring, staff, etc. of Judah as evidence to protect herself) bear out her motivation and objective. Tamar just wanted to have a child, and she was desperate.
- e. What about the unusual account of the birth of the twins to Tamar? What is this about the hand sticking out first, the scarlet thread, etc.?
  - i. In our lesson on the first half of **Genesis 25** on the birth of Jacob and Esau, we discussed that at least four early Christian writers commented on this two-sibling pattern (where the younger supplants the first one) as foreshadowing the Christians supplanting the Jews.
    1. Recall that in **Galatians 4:21-31**, Paul told us that the two sons of Abraham (Ishmael and Isaac) represented the two covenants (son of the bondwoman Hagar representing the law = Jews; son of the free woman Sarah representing the promise = Christians)
    2. Recall that in the story of the birth of the twins Jacob and Esau, the Lord revealed to their mother Rebekah that the ones struggling in her womb were in fact *two nations*, and that the older would serve the younger. (**Genesis 25:22-23**)
      - a. As we mentioned in the **Genesis 25** lesson, early Christian writer Irenaeus also saw this two-sibling pattern foreshadowing Jews vs. Christians, in the story

of the birth of Jacob and Esau. (Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* book 4, chapter 21; ANF vol. 1, p. 493).

3. Also, both Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, saw the two wives of Jacob (Leah and Rachel) representing the two covenants. Leah, the first wife = Jews; Rachel, the second wife, the one loved the most = Christians. (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ANF vol. 1, p. 266; Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, ANF vol. 4, p. 493)
- ii. Irenaeus, an early Christian writer (c. 130-200 AD) was overseer of the church in Lyon, in modern-day France. He had been taught by Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John. In his work *Against Heresies*, he wrote:
  1. “This fact is indeed set forth by many other [occurrences], but typically by [the history of] Thamar (*Tamar*), Judah’s daughter-in-law. For when she had conceived twins, one of them put forth his hand first; and as the midwife supposed that he was the first-born, she bound a scarlet token on his hand. But after this had been done, and he had drawn back his hand, his brother Phares (*Perez*) came forth the first; then, after him, Zara (*Zerah*), upon whom was the scarlet line, [was born] the second: the Scripture clearly pointing out that people which possessed the scarlet sign, that is, faith in a state of circumcision, which was shown beforehand, indeed, in the patriarchs first; but after that withdrawn, that his brother might be born; and also, in like manner, him who was the elder, as being born in the second place, [him] who was distinguished by the scarlet token, which was [fastened] on him, that is, the passion of the Just One, which was prefigured from the beginning in Abel, and described by the prophets, but perfected in the last times in the Son of God.” (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*; Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 496)
  2. According the Irenaeus, the birth of these twins (Perez and Zerah) to Tamar was one more type of the two covenants, and two peoples (Jews and Christians).
    - a. Scarlet sign = circumcision (given to the one considered to be firstborn). This sign was shown first but later withdrawn, that the other brother might be born.
    - b. Zerah = the Jews (elder brother who ended up coming in the second place).
    - c. Perez = the Christians (in reality the firstborn; in the favored position).

- f. Another significant thing from this story: four characters from it show up in the beginning of the New Testament.
  - i. “Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers. Judah begot Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez begot Hezron...” (**Matthew 1:2-3**, NKJV)
  - ii. Jesus, as well as David, Solomon and all the kings of Judah were descended from Judah and Zerah, and this strange relationship. So, God definitely used it for His own purposes!
  - iii. Tamar has the honor of being the first woman mentioned in the New Testament.

### III. Joseph Tempted, Unjustly Accused and Sent to Prison (Read Genesis 39)

- a. The Genesis account returns to the story of Joseph. A summary of the facts of the story:
  - i. Joseph has become slave in the house of Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh, in Egypt. The LXX account says that Potiphar is a eunuch, even though he has a wife.
  - ii. God blesses Joseph, and everything he does prospers. Potiphar trusts Joseph so much that he places Joseph in charge of everything he has.
  - iii. Joseph is a handsome young man. Potiphar’s wife takes notice of him and tries repeatedly to seduce him. Joseph refuses her advances.
  - iv. Finally, one day when no one else is in the house, Potiphar’s wife grabs Joseph by his garment and insists. Joseph flees, leaving his garment behind, in the hands of Potiphar’s wife.
  - v. Scorned again, she is upset and makes up a story that Joseph had tried to seduce her; but that she screamed, and he fled, leaving his garment behind.
  - vi. When Potiphar, her husband hears her story, he is angry with Joseph and has him cast into the prison.
  - vii. God is with Joseph in the prison; he is blessed even there. The keeper of the prison trusts Joseph and puts him in charge of the prison and the prisoners.
- b. Is Potiphar a married *eunuch*?
  - i. In the LXX account, it clearly says that Potiphar, who has a wife, was a eunuch. This is the same word used in **Acts 8** regarding the Ethiopian eunuch. It is the same word used (repeatedly) where Jesus says,
    - 1. “For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made

themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it." (**Matthew 19:12**, NKJV)

- ii. I have been told that the word used in the Hebrew text (saris) is generally translated as 'eunuch' where it occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament in modern English translations. And a few English translations from the Hebrew, as well as Jerome's Vulgate, have rendered it 'eunuch' here.
    - 1. The word is rendered 'eunuch' also in: Douay-Rheims, Geneva Bible, Young's Literal Translation
  - iii. Perhaps we may look at Pharaoh's wife in another light now?
  - c. Joseph is in a bad situation, first as a slave in a foreign land and then as a prisoner who had been falsely accused and sentenced. Nevertheless, it says twice in this chapter, in both circumstances, that "the Lord was with Joseph", and the Lord made his work prosper.
    - i. What does it mean that the Lord was with him? Isn't God everywhere, and with everyone?
    - ii. Does the expression of God "being with" someone refer to some kind of feeling, sense or experience that a person has? Does it mean just *feeling or sensing* the presence of God?
    - iii. Clearly, having the presence of God did not eliminate all Joseph's problems in life (abandoned by hateful brothers, isolated, sold into slavery, falsely accused and thrown into prison).
    - iv. Can God "be with" me, in the same way he was with Joseph? If so, what is the key to that?
      - 1. From the time when Asa was king of Judah, during the Divided Kingdom period: "Now the spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded. And he went out to meet Asa and all Judah and Benjamin, and said, 'Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin. The Lord is with you while you are with Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you, but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you.'" (**2 Chronicles 15:1-2**, LXX, OSB)
        - a. Azariah the prophet, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, laid down an important principle with wide application. This was not just for King Asa; it also applied to all the rest of the people.
        - b. The invitation is wide open, but with one condition: God will be with us when we are with him. (And if we forsake God, he will forsake us.)
2. Read **Joshua 1:1-9**

- a. The Lord tells Joshua, “as I was with Moses, so I will be with you”.
  - b. God promises that his presence will bring protection and success to Joshua in the all trials ahead; wherever he will go.
  - c. Joshua is told to do two things:
    - i. Meditate on the Word of God day and night, to understand what it means. (Also the message of **Psalm 1**); and
    - ii. Do everything it says.
3. This also is the third part of the Great Commission given by Jesus in **Matthew 28**:
- a. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
  - b. teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;
  - c. and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.” (**Matthew 28:18-20**, NKJV)
4. Let us strive to live our lives so that when we look back, we can say “the Lord was with us” just as he was with Joseph, Moses and Joshua.