

The Story of Joseph

The Lion Sleeps

Part 11 – April 15, 2012

Warning: chapter 38 is usually censored from the Joseph story because of its adult content. But, chapter 38 is crucial! Chapter 37 shows *how* God gets Israel into Egypt; but chapter 38 shows *why* it's necessary! This 20-year account of Judah shows how Jacob's sons are conforming to the surrounding pagan culture. The nation of Israel/Jacob is fizzing out before it even begins.



Let's review: son #1 (Reuben) defiles Jacob's bed, and forfeits his birthright to Joseph. Then, #2 and #3 (Simeon and Levi) slaughter the men of Shechem (using the seal of God's covenant as a weapon!) turning Jacob into a "stench" among the very people they've been called to influence. And when the boys sell Joseph and lead Jacob to believe he's dead, the distressed father would naturally turn to #4, the "crouching Lion", (Gen 49:9) for strength and courage.



And just when he's needed most, Judah turns his back, moves to a nearby Canaanite city, and partners up with a Canaanite pal named Hirah. He turns his back on his faith and *marries* an unnamed Canaanite. Judah's rebelliousness in 38 provides an incredible contrast to Joseph's faithfulness in 39. Joseph will stand out from the pagan culture that surrounds him, even as Judah blends in with his.

One interesting comparison between Judah and Joseph is that they *both* marry pagan wives. Flash-forward to Egypt in 13 years or so ...

Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath [Egyptian for "Belonging To (the goddess) Neith"] daughter of Potiphera, ["He Whom Ra (the sun god) Gave"] priest of On. [A city in northern Egypt] – Genesis 41:50 NIV



God loves the Egyptians *and* Canaanites; what He hates is when His people allow themselves to be *influenced* by ungodliness. The contrast here is that even though Joseph marries the daughter of a pagan priest, Joseph is the spiritual influence in his home. And he trains his two sons to worship God. Whereas Judah, after marrying what's-her-name, is so spiritually feeble that his oldest son becomes *inexcusably wicked*, and his early demise is seen as a fitting divine judgment.

And suddenly Judah knows the searing pain of losing a son. And whether he wants to or not, he's beginning to relate to his dad. He's also going to relate to the anguish of having a son who battles over his brother's birthright, and defiles a family bed.

The oldest son left a childless widow, named Tamar, who agrees to a “levirate marriage” with her dead husband’s brother, in order to produce an heir. (Deut 25:5-6)



We discussed this in the last episode; if you weren’t here ... just go with it. A son can soon provide income and security in an era when the two main options for single women are begging and prostitution. But the 2nd oldest, Onan, doesn’t want Tamar to bear an heir to the birthright. So, he exploits the law, and repeatedly uses the distraught widow as a sex object while refusing to impregnate her. Deuteronomy describes the punishment for a man who refuses to obey the levirate law.



His brother’s widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, [Symbolic of his brother losing his inheritance/standing in the family] spit in his face and say, “This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother’s family line.” That man’s line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandaled. – Deuteronomy 25:9-10 NIV

Sons were such a crucial part of the social safety net, that this brought incredible social pressure and public disgrace. And it was one of the very few rights and entitlements a woman had. Onan and Tamar were technically married. He thought his little scam could go on forever ... and *it could have!* So God killed him. Now the plot thickens. It was the father-in-law’s *duty* to ensure that his sons fulfilled the levirate marriage. If they didn’t, he was *bound* to fulfill it himself. And this is where we’ll pick up the story. The only son Judah has left is his youngest, Shelah.

Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, “Live as a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up.” [This is a formal engagement ... and a deception. He wants to get rid of Tamar without the scorn of the community. This’ll buy him time until nobody remembers or cares anymore] For he thought, “[Shelah] may die too, just like his brothers.” – Genesis 38:11 NIV

Judah doesn’t know how Tamar was wronged. And he doesn’t really want to know. Because on some level, Judah fears that his sons have paid the ultimate price for his own rebelliousness. And a great way to avoid our moral failings, responsibilities, and a better grasp on truth, is to just put the blame on someone else: “She’s jinxed! She’s cursed! There’s something wrong with her. Maybe she’s a *witch*.” Rather than turning to God, Judah turns to superstition and accusation. That’ll work! It’s amazing how far we’ll go to avoid looking at and dealing with the sins under our own roof. Judah’s great grandfather, Abraham, was willing to offer *his* son as a *sacrifice*. Judah’s too feeble to offer *his* in *marriage!*

So Tamar went to live in her father’s house. After a *long time* Judah’s wife, the daughter of Shua, died. [She’s about 35. Suddenly he knows the pain of losing a beloved wife, like dad. And he knows the pain of widowhood, like Tamar; but he’s even more resolute. “Shelah’s all I got left!” And suddenly, he’s favoring and shielding his youngest son, just like dad] When Judah had recovered from his grief, he went up to Timnah, to the men who were shearing his sheep, [Sheep-shearing was a big payday and a big, nasty, Canaanite party for shepherds. The cultic revelry involved ritual sex as fertility magic] and his friend Hirah the Adullamite went with him. [Hirah’s probably like, “You gotta get out there, dude! Get over this grief. Get back in the game!”] – Genesis 38:11c-12 NIV

So, instead of turning to God, Judah now turns to the distractions of the Canaanite culture to numb his pain. That'll work! Timnah is where Samson would later meet Delilah ... and his destruction. (Judges 14:1)



You know *we* live in Timnah, right? Where wrong is right and good is bad; where Debauchery and depravity are awarded, and virginity and purity are ridiculed; where porn is healthy, and self-control is injurious. Where abortion is sensible and caring, and opposing it is crazy and cruel; where experimentation is natural, and innocence is weird; where promiscuity is praised, and modesty is mocked. And where sexual pleasure is worshipped as the highest good.

Guard your heart against the ungodly influences that surround us. And don't surround *yourself* with ungodly influences – that's anyone who's ungodly choices and actions influence *yours*. Flash-forward to what Judah's great^{x8} grandson, Solomon, wrote ...

“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.” – *Proverbs 4:23-27 NIV*

We're not above the temptation that's waiting on the path. Don't dabble. Don't believe the lie. Don't walk on the edge. Which path are your close friends encouraging you to follow?

When Tamar was told, “Your father-in-law is on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep,” she took off her widow's clothes, [The period of mourning is long past; she's broadcasting to the community that she's owed and deprived] covered herself with a veil to disguise herself, and then sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. [She knows what's in Judah's immoral mind, and what he's anticipating on the path, and that he'll hit on the first harlot he sees as he nears Timnah. And a woman sitting alone at a city gate means she's open for business. You have to wonder how many men she had to turn down while she waited! Maybe she hid] For she saw that, though Shelah had now grown up, she had not been given to him as his wife. – *Genesis 38:13-14 NIV*



Tamar knows she's been tricked out of her legal, ethical, and crucial right to a son. And she knows she's not cursed, other than by the selfishness of Judah and his deceased sons. So, she decides to deceive this deceiver into doing the right thing. After all, the law and social pressure are on *her side*. Judah's encounter with Tamar is a stunning contrast to Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's wife. And obviously this ain't his first time.

When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. Not realizing that she was his daughter-in-law, he went over to her by the roadside and said, “Come now, let me sleep with you.” – *Genesis 38:15-16a NIV*

Judah approaches Tamar. It's his decision. And he won't be able to later accuse her of seducing him. Hirah was probably elbowing and encouraging him to, "Go for it, dude!" Hey, whatever happens in Canaan!"



"And what will you give me to sleep with you?" she asked. ["Hmm, I seem to be all out of goats at the moment"] "I'll send you a young goat from my flock," he said. ["How'd you know I wanted a kid?"] "Will you give me something as a pledge until you send it?" she asked. He said, "What pledge should I give you?" "Your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand," she answered. – Genesis 38:16b-18a NIV



Seal impressions were used to authorize transactions, contracts, and correspondence. They came as signet rings or cylinder seals. Rings could be worn, and both could be hung from a cord.

By this time, Joseph had received a signet ring of his own.

Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. – Genesis 41:42a NIV

PHOTOS: Tutankhamun Signet Ring c. BC 1330; Ancient Akkadian Cylinder Seal; Egyptian Staff c. BC 1450

The staff would've been distinctively carved or painted to identify the prominent man's name and clan or position. Joseph had received something similar.

Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah [ZAF-ee-nath-pan-EE-uh] ... And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt. – Genesis 41:45 NIV

And while Joseph reaps the reward of standing firm in his faith in extended adversity, Judah trades his identity and authority for a one-night-stand, to briefly numb the pain of rebellion.

So he gave them to her and slept with her, [It's not really a one-night-stand, it's a roadside-stand!] and she became pregnant by him. [Joseph is released from a cage while Judah, the Lion, is trapped by a Tamar!] – Genesis 38:18b NIV

Now he'll know what it's like to be deceived, just like dad. And he'll know what it's like to sleep with someone you failed to recognize, just like dad did ... with Judah's mother, Leah!

After an unjust imprisonment for resisting the sexual conniving of Potiphar's wife, Joseph is blessed with an honorable name, and authority, and a wife, and two sons. During this same period, Judah loses two sons, and a wife; and after yielding to the sexual conniving of Tamar, he loses the symbols of his honorable name and authority. And when the famine hits, Judah won't even be able to feed himself. But Joseph will be ready to feed the entire known world!

One is the delayed but inevitable reward of devotion; the other, the delayed and equally inevitable result of defiance. And while Joseph is going throughout the Land of Egypt, with the symbols of his good name and authority, Judah will be scouring the countryside, in a vain attempt to get his back. And this is where we have to close God's story for today.