

Text: Genesis 38

Theme: A significant interlude.

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi at Evening Worship on 29th April 2012 at 6pm.

What will happen next? What will become of Joseph? Will he ever see his family again? Would he want to? As with all good storytellers, the author leaves his readers on tenterhooks, anxious to hear. But the next scene in this drama (Genesis 38) answers none of these questions. This unedifying episode concerning Judah is all about sex and violence and at first sight appears to be a random interruption to the story.

Judah, the fourth-born son of Jacob through Leah (Reuben, Simeon, and Levi were before him) had not yet distinguished himself as someone great among his brothers. He was the one who suggested they sell Joseph into slavery (Genesis 37:26). Through an ungodly and unwise marriage to a Canaanite woman, Judah fathered three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah.

It isn't hard to see the sons of Israel rapidly being corrupted by their Canaanite neighbours, and what the future will bring if they continued in that land. God had a plan to bring them out.

Joseph has already appeared as a fine, upstanding boy. His character is here being contrasted with this up-close-and-personal look at the character of his brother Judah. In this chapter Judah will succumb to sexual temptation, whilst in the next Joseph will resist this very same temptation.

God had promised that through Abraham's seed all nations of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Joseph's story so far prompts the question, 'Can God really use this family to bring blessing to the world?' In many ways this unedifying story of Judah and Tamar is one of the last things we might expect the Bible to record. Yet by including this story of God's dealings with Judah, Moses is giving us a further insight into the family from which King David, then ultimately, the Messiah would be descended. As with Abraham and Isaac, the firstborn sons of neither Jacob nor Judah continue the line of promise leading to David.

The sad tale of Tamar and Judah confirms the fact that God often uses the most unlikely people, who come from less than perfect backgrounds, to accomplish His purposes, for His glory. It may be that you feel your past is too messy, your family too dysfunctional or your record too unsatisfactory for God to be able to use you. But read this and be encouraged that nothing and no-one is impossible as far as God is concerned. This interlude in chapter 38, in which Joseph himself is never mentioned, allows the spotlight to fall on Judah, which is surprising since he was only son number-four in the family, one of Leah's children. Yet it is this man whom God, in His mysterious providence, is preparing to use.

Genesis 38:1 tells us a lot about what was going on in Judah's life. He 'went down geographically, but Moses is also stressing that he 'went down' spiritually. *How far down was Judah going to go?*

"There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. He married her and lay with her" (verse 2). Judah leaves the Promised Land and settles among the Canaanites. He deliberately turns his back on the promises of God by turning away from the chosen family. As the years go by it must have seemed that God was blessing Judah. His marriage lasted, and

three sons were born. However, it seems that not only did Judah fail as a believer, but he also failed as a father:

Verse 7: “Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the LORD’s sight; so the LORD put him to death.” We are never told what Er’s wickedness was, but obviously it was bad enough that God brought immediate judgment upon him. Growing up with a father from such a messed-up family and with a mother who was a Canaanite did not lead Er in a godly life. Sin brings a penalty, either now or later, for ‘the wages of sin is death.’ It still is! What our race needs is a remedy for the penalty for sin.

When Er died, his brother Onan was told to go in, and “do the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for his brother.” (verse 8). This seems like a strange arrangement to us, though it was both familiar and quite legal in the society of those times. According to the custom of levirate marriage (later codified into law in Deuteronomy 25:5-10), if a man died before providing sons to his wife, it was the duty of his brothers to marry her and to give her sons. This was done so the dead brother’s name would be carried on. But also it was so the widow would have children to support her. Apart from this, she would likely live the rest of her life as a destitute widow.

Onan understood this; he “knew that the offspring would not be his.” (Verse 9). For Onan it was a birthright issue. Er was the firstborn son and therefore was entitled to the birthright. If he had no male heir, that right would pass to Onan, but if Tamar were to have a son, the boy would inherit his father’s estate. Onan refused to take this responsibility seriously. He was more than happy to use Tamar for his sexual gratification, but he did not want to give Tamar a son he had to support but would be considered to be the son of Er. But his selfish action denies his deceased brother the opportunity of a name and an inheritance. Inevitably, there are consequences for Onan’s actions and Onan too dies.

Poor Tamar! She had now lost two husbands. Some might say she was careless! Others might suggest, more maliciously, that she was jinxed.

In fact, in sending Tamar back to her family to live in isolation and disgrace, Judah was simply airbrushing her out of the family picture, sending her away in the hope that she would disappear quietly – out of sight, out of mind! One can understand Judah’s hesitancy to give his last son as a husband to Tamar. God already judged two of her previous husbands. Judah essentially vowed he would not give Shelah as husband to Tamar as custom and righteousness commanded, but he would simply put her off on the issue.

Tamar’s revenge

As the years passed and Shelah grew to manhood, Tamar knew that Judah had reneged on his promise: “She took off her widows garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah” (Verse 14).

Judah can’t pass up the opportunity of a fling, even though he doesn’t have his equivalent of a credit card with him to pay for her service. The staff was his symbol of authority in the clan. This woman has stitched him up big time! Although the text stresses that Judah was not aware he was sleeping with his daughter-in-law, nonetheless he does, and Moses simply records the incident without moral comment.

Judah said, “Bring her out and have her burned to death.” (verse 24). It is galling to see the double standard at work here. There is one law for men and another for women! The irony is sharp: When Judah saw her as a prostitute (verse 15), he used her; when he sees her in this capacity as his daughter - in - law, he condemns her. Clearly Judah applies a double standard.

For the first time in the narrative we find a chink in Judah’s armour. This public exposure touches something deep within him. He is convicted of sin and he says so. His confession of sin is a sign that God is working within him. It is always this way. In the New Testament the apostle John says:

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

Judah confesses his sin and the first step is taken towards a transformation in this man’s life. His story, like that of his great descendant David, takes a turn for the better when he admits his sin. And no doubt, like David, he is forgiven, for God forgives those who repent, and his repentance is real, for he “did no know her again” (verse 26).

When she was in labour, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, ‘This one came out first.’ But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out” (Verse 28-29). The firstborn’s name was Perez, founder of the line from which David the king and ultimately the Messiah was to be born.

In Matthew’s genealogy of Christ, only five women are mentioned. They are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. Tamar posed as a prostitute, Rahab was a prostitute, Ruth was a pagan Moabitess, Bathsheba was an adulteress, and Mary was wrongly regarded as immoral because no-one would believe her story. It is a pointer to the humility and grace of the Messiah that He should choose to be identified with such as these. God took the son of this ungodly situation and put him in the family line of the Messiah, despite the fact that neither Judah nor Tamar were examples of godliness.

This is a glorious example of grace. God chose them despite their works, not only to be in the line of the Messiah, but also to have a role in God’s plan of redemption. It also reminds us that these sons of Israel were by no means an “all-star team.” They were a corrupt and problem-filled family.

The next time we see Judah in this story he will be a prince among his brother, willing to sacrifice himself rather than his youngest step-brother, the chief carer for his father and willing to die so that his family may be spared.

It may well be that there are skeletons in your cupboard and scandals you are running from. Yet do not doubt that God can both save you and use you, whether you are an incest survivor like Tamar, or an immoral failure like Judah. People can change, and God is in the business of making all things new.