

## Genesis, Part 33

We left our story with Joseph having been sold by his brothers to a caravan on their way down to Egypt to trade. The last verse of Chapter 38 was, “Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.”

Genesis 38 and the bizarre event with Judah and Tamar seem at first glance to intrude on the story of Joseph. However, it serves an important purpose in Genesis. It confirmed God’s plan of selecting the younger over the elder. With this unexpected interruption of the story of Joseph, Genesis keeps us in suspense. We will have to wait a little longer to see what happens to him down in Egypt.

The story of Tamar and Judah is relevant to the main course of the narrative. In many ways, it relates to the rest of Chapters 37–50 in themes and phraseology. It is concerned with how the promise of descendants for the patriarchs should be fulfilled. We will see the hard-hearted Judah stopped in his tracks, as we are prepared for the new compassionate Judah of Chapter 44. And we will see yet another twin birth in which the younger overtakes the older (38:27–30).

**Genesis 38:1** It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. <sup>2</sup> There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, <sup>3</sup> and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. <sup>4</sup> She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. <sup>5</sup> Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him.

Judah turned aside (separated) from his brothers and went to Adullam (about 15 miles northwest of Hebron). There he married a Canaanite woman named Hiram the daughter of Shua. The ESV says “he took her” and the NKJV says “he married her”. The word is *laqach* /law·kakh/ and it does mean to take away or to take to oneself, and is used for marriage elsewhere in the OT. It would appear that he did marry her.

Intermarriage with the Canaanites had been avoided, but not here. Hiram is a Canaanite woman, and Judah is marrying outside the covenanted people. God did not want His covenanted people to intermarry with unbelieving, heathen idolaters, and break the line from Eve to Christ. This account of assimilation with the people of the land helps one understand why God would later settle His young nation in the safety of Egypt for its growth. He is in the process of moving the family of Isaac out of the land temporarily and into Egypt where they herded sheep, a profession despised among the Egyptians. There they could be kept a pure race for His purposes.

A lot is about to take place, and one might wonder if there is enough time for the events in Chapter 38 to occur. Given that people usually married soon after puberty in Bible times, it would be possible to suppose that everything in Chapter 38 occurred within the space of about twenty years. According to 37:2, 41:46–47, and 45:6 twenty-two years elapsed between Joseph’s sale into Egypt and his brothers’ discovery of him there. While these events here in Genesis 38 are taking place, the story of Joseph is continuing down in Egypt. We will resume that in the second half of today’s study.

**Gen 38:6** And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. <sup>7</sup> But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. <sup>8</sup> Then Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother’s wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.” <sup>9</sup> But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother’s wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. <sup>10</sup> And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. <sup>11</sup> Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, “Remain a widow in your father’s house, till Shelah my son grows up”—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father’s house.

Judah’s first son Er married Tamar, but he died because he was wicked, “and the Lord put him to death”. Judah then told Onan, another son, to take

Tamar for his wife to fulfill the obligations of the custom of the levirate. The word comes from the Latin *levir*, “husband’s brother”) and refers to the custom of the law of marriage. The second son, Onan, was to marry Tamar, the widow of his brother, and raise up offspring for his brother. However, Onan repeatedly used that law simply for sexual gratification by practicing a form of contraception. He took advantage of the situation but refused the responsibility that went with it. So God took his life too. Given the two deaths, Judah refused to give his third son Shelah to Tamar. Not only did Judah fear that his third son might die because of Tamar, but Shelah was not yet grown up. That was the excuse Judah used to withhold Shelah from Tamar, and even later when he was older, Judah still refused. That moved the childless and desperate Tamar to an extreme plan.

Both sons, Er and Onan, were “put to death” by God because of their wickedness. Er’s wickedness was not explained, but Onan manipulated the system for his own satisfaction. What we are seeing in these two incidents is what is generally called “the sin unto death”.

### **The Sin Unto Death**

The fact that this form of discipline even exists may be shocking to some, but there are clear cases of it being administered in the Bible. The name comes from First John 5 of the KJV.

**1 John 5:16** If any man see his brother sin a sin *which is* not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death. (KJV)

“A sin until death” (KJV) or “There is sin that leads to death” (ESV). The word translated “leads” or “unto” is *pros* and usually translates as “unto” or “towards” and means to, towards, with, or with regard to. Note that there is no specific sin mentioned but simply “sin that leads to death”. It usually isn’t just one sin that triggers the sin unto death, but it is generally the result of a habit or pattern of sinning. The discipline is administered only when that pattern of sinning creates a situation where the sinning believer’s witness is so damaged that they become a threat to the Plan of God and are beyond repentance. There are other references to this in Scripture.

**1 Cor 11:27** Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup> Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. <sup>30</sup> That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

Some in this church at Corinth practiced a Lord's Table meal where the members brought food for a supper but did not share with those who were poor. The wealthy ate well, and the poor who could bring little or nothing went without. The "celebration" of the Lord's Table for some deteriorated into a drunken feast. The "many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" are those in the church at Corinth who were under this penalty for abusing the Lord's Table – some have died and some are deathly sick because of this abuse. Their lives were sinful and their remembrance of what Christ did on the Cross was disrespectful at best. Such practices brought judgment upon the congregation, and "That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died."

**Acts 5:1** But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, <sup>2</sup> and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. <sup>3</sup> But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup> While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." <sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. <sup>6</sup> The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. <sup>7</sup> After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." <sup>9</sup> But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." <sup>10</sup> Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last.

The incident with Ananias and Sapphires involved the sale of some property. This couple, in an attempt to gain favor in this young church, gave only some of the proceeds to the church while claiming that had “graciously” given all of it to the church. This was a blatant lie. The sin was not the holding back of the money which was theirs to give or keep but rather the lie concerning it. The judgment is God’s judgment. It is important to note that the point is not that God demands our financial accounts be in order, but rather that God hates hypocrisy of any kind. “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?” (v. 9).

The severity of the couple’s judgment is as disturbing to us as it was to their contemporaries. That severity is because this incident took place in the very early church when such damaging behavior could not be tolerated by God. It is seen as having lied to the Holy Spirit.

### **Tamar Humbles Judah**

Now back to the story of Tamar and a very disturbing incident in the life of Judah. Her first husband died because “he was wicked” and “the Lord put him to death”. Under the custom of Levirate Tamar was passed to the next oldest son to give her heirs, but he was also wicked, and “the Lord put him to death.” This system was later codified by Moses for the sake of preserving the name of the deceased (Deut. 25:5–10). That left only the youngest son, Shelah who was too young to marry so Tamar was told to retire to her father’s house and wait for Shamar to grow old enough to marry. In verse 14 below we will see that at this point in the story, Shelah has grown up and is old enough to marry, but “she had not been given to him in marriage.” Judah fears for his son’s life, probably thinking that anyone who marries this “cursed woman” will surely die. Tamar hatches a plan of revenge.

**Gen 38:12** In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua’s daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. <sup>13</sup> And when Tamar was told, “Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep,” <sup>14</sup> she took off her widow’s garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on

the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage. <sup>15</sup> When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. <sup>16</sup> He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" <sup>17</sup> He answered, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." And she said, "If you give me a pledge, until you send it—" <sup>18</sup> He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him. <sup>19</sup> Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

Judah's wife died and he went to his sheep shearers with his bud Hiram the Adullamite. Tamar gets word of this and takes off her mourning attire and dresses as a Canaanite temple prostitute with a veil over her face. She sits at the gate of Enaim and awaits her father-in-law, who in due time arrives and notices the disguised Tamar at the gate. He immediately propositions her. The text does not give details of the encounter beyond the negotiations. Did she expose her eyes and flutter them at Judah? Was Judah in need of some "female comfort" and was looking to find some? The text doesn't say.

The two enter into negotiations, and Tamar is to be paid a kid goat for her favors. No fool, she, Tamar asks for collateral to hold until the goat is delivered. She asks for, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." (The signet hung from a cord around his neck.) After the transaction, Tamar changed back into her mourning dress and returned to her home.

**Gen 38:20** When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. <sup>21</sup> And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute who was at Enaim at the roadside?" And they said, "No cult prostitute has been here." <sup>22</sup> So he returned to Judah and said, "I have not found her. Also, the men of the place said, 'No cult prostitute has been here.' "

<sup>23</sup> And Judah replied, “Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her.”

By his Adullamite friend, Judah sent the goat payment to the “temple prostitute” as promised, but she was nowhere to be found. Not wanting to make an issue of it and bring shame down upon himself, Judah gave up on retrieving his property.

**Gen 38:24** About three months later Judah was told, “Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality.” And Judah said, “Bring her out, and let her be burned.” <sup>25</sup> As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, “By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant.” And she said, “Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.” <sup>26</sup> Then Judah identified them and said, “She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not know her again.

Judah lacked integrity, and now he is seen to be a hypocrite. Tamar is pregnant by Judah. When she is three months along Judah is told she is pregnant. Not knowing she was the “temple prostitute” he had relations with, he charges her with being immoral and calls for her to be burned.

As she is being carried out she reveals the truth that Judah was the guilty partner which she proved by the seal, cord, and staff belonged to him. Tamar had won the right to be the mother of Judah’s children, though in a deceitful way. Her action was desperate and risky.

**Gen 38:27** When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. <sup>28</sup> And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, “This one came out first.” <sup>29</sup> But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” Therefore his name was called Perez. <sup>30</sup> Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.

This final part of the story provides the significance of the whole account. God gave Tamar twins, and the line of Judah continued because of her. But

in the birth of the boys, an unusual situation occurred, paralleling the births of Jacob and Esau. After one twin's hand came out the other made a breach and was born first, so he was rightly named Perez ("breach"). Then the second twin was named Zerah ("scarlet") because of the scarlet thread the midwife tied on his wrist. It is as if the oracle concerning Jacob's ruling over his older brother (27:29) was being seen in the line of Judah. What was so significant was the connection with Judah's dealing with Joseph (37:26–28). He and his brothers sold their younger brother into Egypt, thinking they could thwart God's design that the elder brothers would serve the younger Joseph. Yet in Judah's own family, despite his attempts to hinder Tamar's marriage, God's will worked out in a poignant confirmation of the principle that the elder would serve the younger. The line of promise would carry on through Perez (cf. Matt. 1:3), for God's program cannot so easily be set aside.

What purpose does Genesis 38 serve? It underscores the contrast between the immorality of Joseph's brothers, and the high standards of Joseph himself, as recorded in the following chapter. Still more important, the chapter points out the imperative of getting the covenant family out of Canaan. The family was becoming submerged in Canaanite culture. A stay in Egypt was part of God's providential plan to maintain the purity of his people. Egyptians despised shepherds, and Jacob's family would be left relatively free from the corrupting influence of idolatry.

### **Meanwhile, down in Egypt...**

**Genesis 39:1** Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. <sup>2</sup> The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup> His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. <sup>4</sup> So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. <sup>5</sup> From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. <sup>6</sup> So he



left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate ...

After the important digression in the family history of Judah (chap. 38), the narrative returns to Joseph who had prospered under God and had become the attendant or steward over Potiphar's household. Potiphar was captain of the guard for Pharaoh. This Pharaoh was probably Sesostri II (1897–1879 B.C.).

The statement in verse 3 "His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands" probably does not refer to Potiphar being a believer in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but rather he was recognizing the work of the Lord in blessing Joseph without attributing it to any divine source.

Step by step Joseph rose to prominence, from:

1. Potiphar's attendant
2. To the chief of household servants
3. To the manager of the entire estate.
4. Everything was entrusted to his care.

The Egyptian came to trust Joseph implicitly, and the Lord showered blessing upon Joseph and, by association, on Potiphar's house.

### **Blessing by Association**

Blessing by association is the overflow of divine blessings imparted to the mature believer. Every mature believer has people associated with them, believers or unbelievers, who receive blessings as a result of their association. This is one of the reasons why the wicked prosper.

Direct blessing from God goes to a person in association with a mature believer being blessed. Indirect blessing from God occurs because the mature believer provides the blessing from his own prosperity and, in fulfillment of Romans 12:13, he "contributes to the needs of the saints." The mature believer gives of his time, wealth, success, love, personality, or whatever the category of his prosperity might be.

Just one mature believer under God's grace can bring blessing by association to his family, place of employment, friends, and even his nation. Even after death, the mature believer can still be a blessing to those associated with them. Though their numbers were only a fraction of the total population, the United States was blessed by association with a strong pivot of believers. But that has changed because the pivot of mature believers has shrunk in this country. That historical blessing by association in America is being changed into discipline today because of the failure of Christians to reach spiritual maturity and influence the nation's culture. Look around you. Evil is called good and good is called evil. We are a nation under discipline, and where that ends includes the potential destruction of the nation.

### **Joseph's Temptation**

**Gen 39:6** ... Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. <sup>7</sup> And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." <sup>8</sup> But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. <sup>9</sup> He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" <sup>10</sup> And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

Joseph displays his integrity in this passage. He is doing exceedingly well in Potiphar's house even though he is a slave. He has demonstrated an ability to lead and manage affairs and has been given additional responsibilities so he is in complete charge of all of Potiphar's property, excluding, of course, his wife.

Potiphar's wife is smitten by Joseph's good looks and attempts to bed him, an offer which Joseph refuses. He says, "This great wickedness" would be a sin against Potiphar and his God. He could not betray the trust of his master, and he could not sin against God.

Accustomed to getting her way, she doesn't give up and badgers him "to lie beside her or to be with her."

**Gen 39:11** But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, <sup>12</sup> she caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me.” But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.

One day Joseph found himself alone in the house with Potiphar’s wife, and she grabbed him by his garment and demanded, “Lie with me.”

If the wife of your boss, who happens to have the authority of life or death over you, corners you and virtually demands you bed her; what do you do? With no options, Joseph decamps but must shed his cloak to do so, leaving it as “evidence” to be used by the unfaithful wife.

**Gen 39:13** And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, <sup>14</sup> she called to the men of her household and said to them, “See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. <sup>15</sup> And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house.”  
<sup>16</sup> Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home,

The rejected wife wants revenge now. She has Joseph’s garment and uses it for that purpose. She calls to the servants and charges Joseph with attempted rape. She explains he would have succeeded had she not cried out for help, “Oh! And look! He left his garment in his hasty retreat?” – or words to that effect.

**Gen 39:17** and she told him the same story, saying, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. <sup>18</sup> But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house.”

<sup>19</sup> As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, “This is the way your servant treated me,” his anger was kindled.

Potiphar returns home from a hard day at the office expecting his supper to be ready and a cocktail awaiting him. Instead, he finds his wife waiting to

unload on him, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me.” In other words, “He tried to violate me, and it is all your fault!” And she tells the same story she told the servants. “Here’s the proof,” she likely said, indignantly pointing at that “offensive” garment.

Her accusations were a travesty of the facts, but they were sufficient to convince Potiphar. Or were they? He did not execute Joseph, as would normally have happened in rape cases, so perhaps he had his doubts about his wife’s tale.

**Gen 39:20** And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. <sup>21</sup> But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. <sup>22</sup> And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. <sup>23</sup> The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph’s charge because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.

Potiphar immediately had Joseph tossed into prison. I’m sure that this Egyptian prison was a lot worse than Angola was in its worst days and not someplace you would ever want to be. “ But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison” (v. 21). The Lord is blessing Joseph even in prison. The warden was so impressed with Joseph that he put him in charge of the whole place. “And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.” More blessing by association.

This chapter shows that Joseph was a faithful servant of God. With the dreams of the promises of prosperity in his memory (37:6–7, 9) he remained loyal to God rather than yield to temptation. Wise rulers recognize that allegiance to God is the first requirement of an ideal king. Israel too would learn that she should remain faithful to the Lord despite the consequences, which included the suffering of the righteous.

## **Conclusion**

This story is similar to the advice given frequently in Proverbs by King Solomon. It is folly to yield to the temptations of a flattering woman or man and ruin all prospects of a life of service to God. The way of wisdom is to consider the cost of sin. Joseph did not yield to temptation because he was convinced God had something marvelous for him to do. Joseph would not throw away God's blessings for the pleasures of sin. Nor was he troubled because he suffered for his faithfulness. God would ultimately honor him as He had promised.