



Lesson 23

Judah and Tamar

Genesis chapter 38 is an unusual chapter and it is difficult to understand. It interrupts the great drama that is unfolding in chapters 37 and 39 – the drama about Joseph and his brothers and the way they betrayed him.

Judah was the very best of Joseph's brothers as we shall see later, however, in this chapter he is shown to be a man who disregards his grandfather's and father's advice and their examples.

Abraham and his family had kept apart from the other tribes, the Canaanites, who lived in the same territory. These people were worshippers of idols and not the one true God. Abraham's family were forbidden to intermarry with them in case they were corrupted by them and turned away from God. However, Judah ignored this.

"It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.

There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er."

Genesis 38:1-3

Er married another Canaanite called Tamar but both Er and another son born to Judah and Shuah, who was called Onan, were wicked men and God took their lives away. They were not worthy of being part of this family that were God's special people and they died childless.

It was the custom at that time that, if a man died without a son to follow him, his brother should marry his widow and raise up children to continue the dead man's name. Shuah bore another son to Judah, his name was Shelah, and Judah asked Tamar to wait until Shelah was old enough, then she should marry him and he would give her a son.

Tamar was very patient and waited many years until Shelah was old enough to marry her – but Judah did not fulfil his promise and allow this to happen.

Tamar then tricked Judah, she pretended to be someone else and tricked Judah into having a sexual relationship with her, she became pregnant and bore twin boys, Pharez and Zarah. When Judah knew she was pregnant, he was very angry and wanted to punish her severely, putting her to death.

"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."

Genesis 38:24

However, when he learned that he was the father he said:

"She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah."

Genesis 38:26

We know from Matthew's Gospel that Pharez was an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ. What we learn from this strange episode is that God accepts people if they have faith in His promises – even if they behave in bad ways at times. Tamar tricked Judah into making her pregnant by pretending to be a prostitute but she did it because she believed that the family she had married into was God's special family and she wanted to part of it and have a son to continue the family line.

She should not have behaved as she did but God forgave her because of her faith.

