



# DIGGING DEEPER WEEK 1

## *The Story Within the Story*

Joseph's story begins in Genesis 37 and continues in Chapters 39-50. So why does Chapter 38 veer away from Joseph to focus on Judah? For those who like things to go in order, this seems like a rogue chapter outside the flow of the storyline. What can we learn from this story of Judah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar?

Shortly after Joseph was sold to Potiphar in Egypt, Judah moved away from his family to the land of Canaan. This wasn't a common practice unless famine or trouble forced separation. Though we don't know for sure why Judah left, it's possible that watching his father grieve over Joseph wasn't easy for him. When we feel guilt or shame over sin or watch others suffer, knowing we've been the cause, sometimes it can seem that running away might ease our pain. Usually we find the hurt traveling right along with us, snowballing along the way with added difficulty.

Away from his family, Judah married a Canaanite woman and had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. He arranged a marriage for his first son, Er, to a Canaanite woman named Tamar. Women in this culture lacked freedom in many ways. Their fathers arranged their marriages to exact a bride price. A woman's most important role was producing an heir. Having sons meant bringing honor to a family and having someone to provide for them in their old age.

In Genesis 38:7 we learn that Er was a wicked man. Having married a Canaanite wife, perhaps Judah didn't teach his sons the ways of his God. It's possible that his wife worshipped idols and influenced her sons to do the same. Or Judah might have taught his sons the ways of God but they chose not to follow his God. In either case, the text says that God took Er's life because of his wickedness.

According to Israelite law, a widow was to be married to the next oldest brother to produce an heir in the dead husband's name. This was a Canaanite practice as well. So Onan was given in marriage to Tamar. However, Onan didn't want to provide a son who would inherit the family wealth in his brother's name. Genesis 38:9 tells us he actually had sex with Tamar but took measures to prevent her from becoming pregnant. The next verse tells us that God considered it evil for Onan to deny a child to his dead brother, so God took Onan's life, too.

I can imagine Judah's wife mourning her two sons and looking for a person to blame. Even Judah was afraid that if he gave his last son, Shelah, to marry Tamar, something bad might happen to him. Perhaps Canaanite superstition had rubbed off on him. So he sent Tamar back to her father's house—with the shame of two dead husbands and no children—to wait until Shelah was old enough to marry. (Tamar could have been quite young, since fourteen to sixteen was the typical age for girls to marry in this culture.) However, the text tells us Judah never intended to honor his promise to Tamar. This would have been a precarious position for a young woman in her day.

We don't know exactly how much time passed, but we learn that Judah's wife died and Shelah was grown yet Tamar was still at her father's home. Tamar heard that Judah would be traveling to the town of Timnah to supervise the shearing of his sheep. She took off her mourning clothes, put on a veil to disguise herself, and sat beside the road on the way to Timnah. Judah then propositioned her as a prostitute, offering her a goat from his flock in exchange for sex. She asked for his identification cord and seal as an assurance that payment would come.

Tamar became pregnant from this encounter with Judah. The land of Canaan was filled with prostitutes at the time, many of whom were temple prostitutes. The people worshipped gods of fertility and saw this as a form of worship. (While this seems foreign in our culture, we also live in a land where sexual images are portrayed and worshipped in a much more subtle way.) Other private prostitutes, such as the one Tamar pretended to be, were paid by individuals. When Judah sent the goat in an attempt to retrieve his personal belongings and identification, he was told that there never had been a prostitute in that area of town.

Three months later Tamar was discovered to be pregnant. When Judah was given the news, he planned to have her stoned according to the law for committing adultery. It seems like a double standard because Judah had initiated an act with a prostitute, and logic would infer that he might have had a reputation for this practice since Tamar dressed up for the sole purpose of meeting Judah. Yet when he heard of Tamar's indiscretion, he was ready to kill her. Sometimes the sins we struggle with can cause us the most agitation when we see them in others.

Even so, Tamar had the seal and cord to identify Judah as the father. Judah's response showed a humble spirit as he admitted that he was in the wrong. He said, "She is more in the right than I am, because I didn't keep my promise to let her marry my son Shelah" (Genesis 38:26).

When the time came for Tamar to deliver, she gave birth to twins. They were named Perez and Zerah, and the gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us that Perez was included in the genealogy of the Messiah. This tells us that Tamar's twin boys were given full rights as heirs in Judah's family. They were not treated as illegitimate.

At first blush, this story seems like a puzzling incident of family dysfunction with characters who don't seem to have much impact on the Joseph story. However, as we continue with Joseph's encounters in Egypt, the story within the story of Judah and Tamar, nestled in Genesis 38, gives us additional insight into Joseph's big brother Judah, who will emerge as the leader among his brothers.

Here are some things we learn from this chapter:

- **God doesn't approve of prostitution or any other sin, but He will redeem even our worst struggles and use them for good. We will find the theme of God making use of situations intended for evil throughout the narrative regarding the sons of Jacob.**
- **Marrying an unbelieving spouse can impact our lives.**
- **Even biblical men and women of faith struggled with obedience.**
- **God included foreigners like Tamar in the line of Christ.**
- **No matter how far we've strayed, God can grow us into great leaders when we follow His ways.**

