

## RUF Bible Study – The Gospel in Genesis

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### Genesis 38– Judah and Tamar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>ESV</sup> **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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> In 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. <sup>20</sup> 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." <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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.

What in the world in Genesis 38 doing in the Bible? Thematically in Genesis it seems like an oddball passage, misplaced perhaps. But remember that what follows Genesis 37:1-2 is the account of Jacob. Jacob. So this continues with the theme of Jacob's sons. The two that will come into the forefront in this last third of fourth of Genesis are Joseph and Judah.

This chapter then serves several purposes. First, it heightens the suspense of what will happen with Joseph by delaying the rest of the story until we finish the chapter. Second, it contrasts with the life of Joseph. Third, it explains what is happening with the other sons while we await their arrival back into the Joseph narrative. And fourth, it is an essential component in understanding how Judah can get to his character change at the end of the book. Remember that it is Judah who sacrifices himself so that Benjamin can be saved. It's Judah who emerges as the leader of the family. We've already seen the downfall of Simeon and Reuben, so why might Judah be any different. This chapter explains it for us.

We also need this chapter in our Bible for a few other reasons. It blows away our prurient, pietistic conceptions of the way God works. This is another of those R-rated stories in the Bible<sup>3</sup>, the kind that won't make it into your children's illustrated Bible. I doubt there is a Precious Moments Tamar figurine. This story reminds us what the Bible is about. Many of us have been trained to read the Bible looking for noble stories and people to imitate. Who would you imitate in this story? Judah? Tamar? No, the moral of the Bible (as Tim Keller points out) is that morals won't save you. The moral of the Bible is that grace breaks out in people's lives and that is what saves you.

Let's look at the story and then the characters in it.

#### *The Story*

We start quickly and find out that Judah has moved to a Canaanite land. He takes an unnamed wife from there and the verbs lead us to believe this might not have been the best arrangement or most loving union of all time. Whenever we read, "He saw... and took her" we're suspicious of his motives and heart and have the right to be. Judah and his wife had at least three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah.

Er and Tamar<sup>4</sup> married. The author is straight up honest and doesn't pull any punches when he writes, "*But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death.*" This is the first time in the Bible we read of God putting someone to death for his sins. Not a Romans 3:23 "the wages of sin is death" but actual, immediate physical death.

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<sup>2</sup> Sources: Waltke, Kidner, Wenham, Alter, Calvin, Gibson and DeGraaf.

<sup>3</sup> Yep, you read the word "semen" in this story.

<sup>4</sup> Tamar's name means "palm tree," which doesn't appear to have any significance in this story.

But this appears to be hidden from the actors in the story. So Er dies. As is the custom of the day, later codified in Deuteronomy, the law of Levirate (from the Latin word for “brother-in-law”) kicks in and Tamar marries Er’s brother, Onan. The idea is that the male offspring of this union would be considered the son of the deceased brother, and thus he would inherit the estate of the dead man and carry on his name. But Onan didn’t go for that. The only reason the text indicates that he didn’t want to father children with Tamar is that he didn’t want Er’s estate to get away from him. If Tamar didn’t bear a son, then Onan would get to keep it all.<sup>5</sup> (This might be a text to help explain how babies are made.)

God didn’t take too kindly to this: *And what he did was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also.* Two down, one son left. But by this time, Judah thinks the problem isn’t his sons. It *can’t* be that. The only other common denominator is – Tamar! She’s the culprit. So he says that she must wait for his third son, Shelah, who must be just a little too young to get married.

Tamar waits. And waits. And she finally realizes that this Shelah thing isn’t going to happen. The text doesn’t indicate her thought process, but she could have stayed with her father and perhaps forged a new life there with him in the pagan culture. But she doesn’t do that. She stays connected with her new heritage, the one that would have her be cast aside as meaningless without children, uncared for and irrelevant.

When it was time to shear the sheep, Tamar springs to action. Sheep shearing was hard work but was accompanied by considerable revelry and drinking. She’d been still mourning, but took off those clothes and covered herself with a veil and went to the place she must have known Judah would go.

Judah sees her, thinks she is a prostitute and wants to sleep with her. He apparently doesn’t have the right kind of money (something Tamar seems to be counting on) and they strike a deal whereby Judah leaves his staff, cord and signet which would have been the equivalent to leaving your credit cards at the counter as collateral.

The Bible is its typical brief self when it says, *So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him.* There you have it. She’s pregnant.

Tamar puts her widow’s clothes back on and goes home. Meanwhile, Judah sends an emissary to deliver the promised payment but can’t find the woman so he gives up and returns home, figuring it doesn’t really matter and he doesn’t want to make a scene and get laughed at anyway. He drops it.

In three months, Judah gets word that Tamar is pregnant, and that it isn’t by proper means. Of course not, since she hasn’t been with Shelah. Judah furiously demands not only judgment but super judgment by saying that she should be burned. Later the penalty for adultery would be stoning and burning is reserved for worse crimes than that. But Judah wants hell to pay. He brings her, ready to let her have it.

As she’s being brought out, she pulls out the credit cards: *By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant.* Gulp. Oops. With a brilliant move at the last second, Tamar turns the judgment back around on Judah and forces him to deal with his own issues if he’s going to mess with her. Judah can’t squirm out of it. He’s caught red handed and admits it all: *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.*

Tamar delivers two sons: Perez and Zerah.

And thus the story ends. Now, if the point of the Bible is that morals can’t save you, what can we learn from this text?

### ***The Breakthrough of Tamar***

Let’s look at Tamar first. By the time we get to verse 11, Tamar would have been about fifteen years old or so, and twice widowed. We only know two things about her marriages – she didn’t have children and both of her husbands died because of God’s punishment. That’s all we’ve got. At this point Tamar is the most socially and economically vulnerable member of the society. Now she wishes to marry again and appeals to Judah to do so with Shelah. The father of the dead husband had a job to defend and provide for the daughter-in-law.

Judah *says* he’ll do it, but he thinks he sees a pattern here and thinks his son will die. Why does he withhold Shelah from Tamar? Judah blames Tamar for the death of his sons. He is in denial for the mess ups of his sons. He thinks that she is the problem and sends her away without intending to talk to her again.

When Tamar springs to action with her plan, what are we to make of what she’s doing? She is pursuing justice.

Tamar uses the sexual double standard of Judah against him. Judah has sex whenever and with whomever he wishes, and Tamar knows that she can count on Judah having sex with prostitutes. That’s the only way her plan can work. She can count on Judah’s behavior and knows what he will do.

Although Judah feigns concern for this young woman, the Bible is greatly concerned for the welfare of widows.<sup>6</sup>

*Psalms 146:5-9* <sup>5</sup> *Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God,* <sup>6</sup> *who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever;* <sup>7</sup> *who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free;* <sup>8</sup> *the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.* <sup>9</sup> *The LORD watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

*Isaiah 1:16-17* <sup>16</sup> *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil,* <sup>17</sup> *learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.*

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<sup>5</sup> So he practiced *coitus interruptus*.

<sup>6</sup> Thoughts from Rev. Tim Keller

**Hosea 4:14** <sup>14</sup> *I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore, nor your brides when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go aside with prostitutes and sacrifice with cult prostitutes, and a people without understanding shall come to ruin.*

These texts are staggering and indict men like Judah. Social injustice is a big sin, and God takes it very seriously. Why do widows garner so much attention from the Scriptures?

Every society has things that provide for you functionality, well-being, inclusion and dignity. In Israel it was a spouse and children. These are the essentials, especially for women in order to be valued in their culture. The central problem of chapter 38 is childlessness, for that is what precipitates all the maneuverings we see in the text.

Childlessness is still an issue, but not nearly the societal problem today as it was then. What are these essentials today? It seems to be some sort of education; without a high school education you'll be marginalized and alienated. This is the unfortunate fate of the illiterate. I know some of you are thinking about the millions of people who have bettered themselves even though they were born in bad situations. And of course there is hard work and resisting temptation. But you have to realize that thousands of young girls are forced into prostitution because of "the system" in Malaysia. That in many inner cities you have to join a gang just to survive. Education is barely an option. Are we redeeming these systems?<sup>7</sup>

What should we do for these people? People who have the resources should help those who don't to get them. To not do this is not stinginess, it is injustice. It's a wider issue than just a person-to-person sin. We can participate in social sins at a much higher and wider level even though we didn't personally do anything wrong. We can confess those sins, care about education, give money to those who teach in inner cities and participate in tutoring even where we are.

Tamar knows that Judah has relegated her to a marginalized life by his decision. She won't stand for it, and she demands justice. This is why she does what she does. "Tamar responds like a hard-headed businesswoman."<sup>8</sup>

And in the end Judah sees it. What does he say? "*She is more righteous than I.*" She is more *just* than I. This is language of courtroom justice. Judge Judy. Judge Wapner. Judah sees it and realizes that he has participated in wrongness and evil.

But does that mean what she did was right? That sexual entrapment is okay?

Judah does not say she is guiltless or innocent. He says, She is more righteous than me. She isn't completely righteous. She is guilty, but I am more guilty. She has done sexual sin, but I have committed social injustice.

The socially liberal take on this passage would be that she didn't do anything wrong; she's stuck it to "the man" who oppressed her.<sup>9</sup>

The traditional/conservative take would be that the sexual sin is far worse than the social sin. Every one is completely responsible for his or her own actions and no one can claim any cultural factors in sin.

But the Bible says that both Judah and Tamar were wrong. Judah declares that she was wrong for turning to sexual sin to accomplish her desires. But he also says that he was the one with power and was *more* guilty as a result.

This is not the conservative view that looks at personal sins but ignores social sins. It's not the liberal view that loves to look at social sins but not personal sins. Both are sin.

When you have all that you have to be included in society and you don't help them, you are sinning. Do you have the same type of passion for social injustice? Do you see that the Bible doesn't call all that Tamar has done as wrong? That at least part of it is right and even righteous?

There's another breakthrough.

### ***Judah's Breakthrough***

Now let's look at Judah. "If Joseph enters the spotlight as an arrogant tattletale, Judah enters as a cold and selfish man who has cast aside Abraham's God-given vision for a covenant people. In these twenty-plus years, however, he is being transformed under the mighty hand of God."<sup>10</sup> We've mentioned his actions already in hiding Tamar away and falsely promising his third son for her.

And then he went and slept with someone he thought was a prostitute but ended up being his daughter-in-law. This is Jerry Springer type stuff, completely embarrassing for Judah, and very different from what we'll read about from Joseph. "By contrast [with Joseph], Judah is in Canaan, and has nothing to gain from his dalliance except possibly a few moments of pleasure. But he sins! He goes to an apparent prostitute with as much ease as a person today might hail a taxi."<sup>11</sup>

Judah did try to find the woman he slept with. "Whereas he had reneged on his solemn promise to give his son Shelah to Tamar in marriage, he is very anxious to pay the goat he had promised to a common prostitute. And his concern here seems to have no higher motive than the return of his pledges. Furthermore, the furtive way in which he sends his friend to make the payment, rather than go himself, shows the disreputable status of prostitution."<sup>12</sup>

In verse 24, Judah finds out Tamar is pregnant. The text is short and sweet says only two one-word sentences: "Take. Burn." What Judah does is enormously hateful. Burning isn't the usual death sentence. That would be reserved for the most heinous crimes. Why would Judah demand this torture? Verse 11b says that the reason he did this was because he needed to

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<sup>7</sup> Think of how you cheered on William Wallace, though he killed *hundreds and thousands* of people in standing up to "the man."

<sup>8</sup> Wenham, 367

<sup>9</sup> I'm thinking of the sympathy the mass murderer pictured in *The Monster* garnered.

<sup>10</sup> Waltke

<sup>11</sup> Boice, 894

<sup>12</sup> Wenham, p. 368

believe bad things about her to ease the conscience of his own mind.<sup>13</sup> She's sort of like his real-life voodoo doll because he can't deal with his own flaws and failures with his sons. He's going to take it out on her now that he has the chance to really get her.

And here's his big break – Tamar is brought out as an adulterer. There's no mourning here. No sadness of her place and what's happened. He's happy to have all his thoughts confirmed. I knew it! She's a whore! I knew it all along.

I've had a year-long saga with a dog we named Cosmo. We picked her up from the pound, gave her a home, food and a yard to roam in. We trained her a little, but not nearly enough. And what did we get in return? Pain, misery, torture. This dog is demonic, and I assure you it wasn't just "normal" dog stuff. So we decided to take it back to the pound, which was a hard decision but the right one.

We were glad to hear that someone had called about the dog within the week – until we found out it was Julie's mom. She had followed the story all the way from Hawaii, where she was stationed as a traveling nurse. She arranged to have Cosmo boarded for about six weeks until she got back (this costs considerable money each day) and then set up shop in her efficiency apartment.

How is it going? Pretty terrible, we hear. Last weekend, she told us how Cosmo had chewed through her leash and wandered the neighborhood until caught. That sounded pretty typical. So what was my response? Delight, actually. I had chased her and should have mourned my mother-in-laws pain and suffering. I should have been sad, but I was happy to have my thoughts confirmed. I was glad to hear of the demonic dog provoking others to anger too.

It was a very Judah-like moment for me.

Was Judah a terrible, wicked person? No, but here he is about to take a girl, an innocent girl, and torture and kill her. Think of the character in *Braveheart* who slits the throat of William Wallace's wife? Judah is in the same position as that man.

Just think, if he does this, it's not just Tamar who is going into the pit. It's Judah as well. "Judah, in sentencing her to death, has also condemned himself to the same fate. At the last moment, Tamar makes her point, proving that Judah was indeed the father of the child. Judah admits his guilt, 'She is in the right, not I,' (38:36). She is innocent, he admits, because I forced her to take this action by refusing to give my son Shelah to her in marriage. She, unlike me, was concerned to perpetuate the family line, to produce descendants for Abraham."<sup>14</sup> If he does this he has to all his life continually justify what he did; or else admit that what he did was wrong and he's never the same again. Is he a terrible person? He has the same thing we all have in our hearts – blame shifting. He has to justify why bad things are happening to him.

But then in verse 25, as she was being dragged to the fire, she sends a message to her father-in-law. Wait! She pulls out a package and says, "Recognize." She asks, do you recognize these? Not just physically see, but to discern, to realize, to recognize.

She asks, By the way, the man who impregnated me deserves to go into the fire with me. Don't just recognize these *things*, but recognize *yourself*. Do you see the hypocrisy, the delusion, the murderous hate; do you see what you really are? And by God's grace, Judah did recognize. "Jacob had deceived his father Isaac. He in turn was deceived by his son Judah, and now Judah himself is deceived by his daughter-in-law."<sup>15</sup>

Judah was on the verge of going all the way under, but he has a spiritual reawakening. A turnaround.

The first point about social justice was just great if you're a liberal. And, of course, as we said, social justice is really important. But here's the second point – *you must be born again*. Even a good person can be led into absolute hardness by the justification of your own heart when you face failure. We all have need of a spiritual awakening.

Think about this and where we are in Genesis. Judah *is* the family of God. This family knows about God than any other family in any other place in the world. But then, remarkably, look at what he's capable of. Bad parenting, adultery, blame-shifting, hatred and a desire for murder. Trying harder isn't enough. Being a good person isn't enough.

And Judah just can't see it. He's blind to all of this. So it is for you. Right now the sin, the flaw, the character problem in your life that is hurting you and others the most is the one you cannot see. It's unseen by you. And you're not looking for it. Your only hope is that the Tamar's of the world will wake you up. That's the nature of spiritual awakening and it's something none of us like at the time it happens.

When you see that you're really no better than the people you used to despise, in fact you're worse, then you're on your way to spiritual awakening. If you're liberal, you have to see that *you're* bigoted and narrow-minded in your own way, just as much as the people you have despised. It's really tough to be a true liberal, because you're supposed to love everyone and of course you don't, not even close. If you're conservative, then when you realize that your own self righteousness and pride and self-centeredness in your own way means you're just as bad as the people out frolicking and having sex in the streets. You judge the very things you do; perhaps to a lesser extent but perhaps just as much.

Your own flaw and fighting with God is what you have to see through painful experiences. This is public humiliation for Judah. And for you. And it's so good.

When I was on staff with The Navigators in Stillwater with Oklahoma State, I used to do two things with students that I guess no one does any more. We'd go rollerblading and play wallyball. Forgotten activities of a bygone era... Once, while playing wallyball with a coed group, one of the guys in my Bible study thought it would be funny to de-pants me. So he did and there I was for just a second with my shorts to the ground. It wasn't nearly as funny as he had thought it would be, however, and everyone was embarrassed – mostly him. That incident led to a change in his heart. Am I really this way?, he thought. Don't I respect

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<sup>13</sup> Again, thoughts from Keller.

<sup>14</sup> Wenham, 370

<sup>15</sup> Wenham, 364

people? Am I stuck in eighth grade? He opened up to me and we began really working on some things in his life because of what happened that day.

There is a slow power of God's spiritual awakening, often finalized by a quick strike. In Genesis 37, the sons of Leah do terrible things to Joseph. But at the end of Genesis, when they stand in front of their brother, whom they don't recognize, Joseph says he'll keep Benjamin, and Judah steps up and says "Take me instead. I'll be the one put into Egyptian slavery so that the one my father loves might be saved." That's when Joseph says, "Don't you recognize me?" Something's been happening in your life, Judah. "In its biographical sketches, character change is what Genesis is all about: Abram becomes Abraham; Jacob becomes Israel. Particularly in Jacob's family we see examples of character change: Reuben, violator of his father's concubine, later shows great concern for both Joseph and his father, while the upstart, cocky Joseph becomes the wise statesman who forgives his brother. Thus, this chapter has a most important role in clarifying the course of the subsequent narrative; without it we should find its development inexplicable."<sup>16</sup>

Judah had to have this event in Genesis 38 happen so that he could be transformed. He had to be transformed so that he would ultimately be the father of Jesus, the vehicle for Jesus to come into the world. For him to become someone who would be like Jesus, being willing to give up his life for another, he had to go through very painful spiritual awakening. "He stands as a witness to God's amazing grace. He fails as a son of the covenant (i.e., intermarrying with Canaanites and behaving like them), as a father (i.e., his sons are wicked), and as a father-in-law (i.e., deceiving Tamar). Even the worst sort of sinners can enter heaven by God's redemptive grace."<sup>17</sup>

Friends, what spiritual awakening might you need to have in your life? Can you see yourself as Judah here? Are there embarrassing things that God might providentially bring about in your life, things that you might look back on years later and be thankful for? Might you ask your spouse, your parents, your friends, your pastors, your small group what those blind spots could be in order to prevent that awful moment when you are exposed? Can you understand that your decisions build on each other and that you need to take sin seriously, own up to your faults instead of blaming other and repent early and often?

### ***The Third Breakthrough***

Okay, we've got to tie this together and make some sort of connection to Jesus here. Tamar gets pregnant by her father-in-law, Judah, and has two sons. One is named Perez, which means "You have broken through." Perhaps not the normal name these days. Breakthrough. Could be sort of cool though. So Perez. Breakthrough. How can we make this meaningful?

Simple. We turn to Matthew 1:2-3: <sup>2</sup> *Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,* <sup>3</sup> *and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram,*

Wow. "Tamar, through her determination to have children, secured for Judah the honor of fathering both David and the Savior of the world."<sup>18</sup> In the genealogy of Jesus Christ, our Savior, the one whom we celebrate this very upcoming weekend, we read about Judah and Perez. I have to admit, if I were to read the book of Genesis and were told to guess who would be one the last ancestor of the Messiah in the book, I'd guess Joseph and I bet you would too. The most upstanding son of Jacob has to be Joseph. "All of these incidents of anointed kings disobeying the commandment of God and taking Gentiles to wife are indicating that the Lord Jesus Christ himself would turn to all the families of the world, and that the church of Jesus Christ would include not merely the physical sons of Abraham, but the Gentiles."<sup>19</sup> Though Joseph does have his faults, it's Judah who is the son through whom the Messiah comes. Jesus comes through Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. Jesus comes into the world through Gentiles, born through sin and because of sin and yet without sin.

Tamar got her life back when Judah looked at her and said, In spite of all your sin, you are righteous. All of this incest and deception Judah covered. When Judah stands up and covers his sins and Tamar's sins, he is pointing to his descendant. We need to hear the ultimate Judah say the same thing.

How can Jesus do that? He's the opposite of his ancestor. Judah was looking at Tamar and punishing her for his sins. But what we need, the thing that will make us work for justice and admit the depth of our sin is the real Judah. The real Judah took the punishment for our sins. He can look at us with all the sins and say, Righteous. You have to know that sort of acceptance. It all points to the Great Judah.

"Luther said that the story of Judah and Tamar was included in Genesis for two purposes: first, to rebuke presumption, and second, to challenge despair. It rebukes presumption in that if Judah – who was an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ and was instructed, as he must have been, in the religion of his father Jacob and of his ancestors Isaac and Abraham – if he sinned so easily in going to Tamar, then any of us can likewise sin, regardless of our background, privileges or training. We must confess our sinful natures and stay close to God, from whom alone the strength to resist temptation comes.

The story challenges despair, because in the midst of the great sin we nevertheless see the great mercy of God. Luther wrote, "The church of God has great need of these examples. For what would become of us? What hope would be left for us if Peter had not denied Christ and all the apostles had not taken offense at Him, and if Moses, Aaron and David had not fallen? Therefore, God wanted to console sinners with these examples and to say, 'If you have fallen, return; for the door of mercy is open to you. You, who are conscious of no sin, do not be presumptuous; but both of you should trust in my grace and mercy."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Wenham, 364

<sup>17</sup> Waltke

<sup>18</sup> Wenham, 370

<sup>19</sup> Boice, 902

<sup>20</sup> Boice, 898

Are you presumptuous this Christmas season? Are you thinking of presents under the tree, of carols and traditions, of how you *deserve* to have Christ in your life? How you are a part of the family of God? This text tells you that you are a sinner in need of redemption, of spiritual awakening. You may have that come slowly and subtly, or it may come dramatically and with great embarrassment. But it needs to happen in your life or you'll miss Christmas altogether.

Do you have despair? Even the greatest sinner can find redemption in Christ. Social sin, personal sin, inward and outward sin, thought and deed sin – all can be forgiven by Christ when we claim his promises and believe in his redemptive power in our lives. We must stand and admit our faults and claim the redemption he offers – our social graces often keep us from admitting our weaknesses and that must not be so. I have students who have been saved from all sorts of sins and don't want to share them for fear of exclusion from others. That should not be so. Come to Christ today. Do not tarry.

Absolute freedom and acceptance and love. Go after justice like Tamar, and go after self-discovery through grace to become someone great like Judah.