

GOD PORTRAYS MORE WOMEN

by

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CHAPTER TWO

TAMAR

(Genesis 37, 38)

THE STORY OF TAMAR is associated with Judah, the fourth son of Jacob and Leah. Judah had eleven brothers and one sister. Things were not dull in that home. What mischief one did not think of the others did. The rivalry between Jacob's wives who were living under the same roof did not contribute to peace and harmony. Before Rachel the favored wife had a son, the other children were well grown and some of them had proved very unruly.

In this portion of the Word we see how God, through distress, caused Jacob to realize his mistakes and his failures in family responsibility. It was not, however, until God wrestled with him that Jacob submitted and resolved that God should have His way with him. Then he sought to rectify things at home. This was not easy to do with boys who were full grown, undisciplined and willful. He determined that he would begin earlier to train his two youngest motherless boys in spiritual things. His heart was gladdened by Joseph's love and respect and acknowledgment of God.

Joseph at seventeen was a normal boy—a bit officious, who talked about himself, his importance, his dreams, and what he was going to do. All this irritated his older brothers. They delighted to put him in his place. Jacob made the mistake of giving Joseph a distinctive coat worn by the chosen heir of a family. The sight of this garment created jealousy in Jacob's other sons so that **“they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him”** (37:4).

One morning when the older boys were tending the sheep, Jacob sent Joseph to see how they were getting along. The brothers saw him coming and **“they conspired against him to slay him”** (37:18).

When Joseph arrived, they fell on him and stripped him of his coat of many colors. Reuben, the weak eldest brother who was more compassionate, objected to the slaying and suggested that they put him in a pit instead, intending to return later and take him out. And they took him and cast him into a dry empty pit.

Poor Joseph did some thinking in that pit. He was cured of all his boasting. He pleaded with them in vain. Twenty years later these brothers recalled this scene and said, **“We saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear”** (42:21).

Reuben went off and the others callously sat down to eat bread. As they were enjoying their lunch they observed a caravan approaching. Judah said: **“What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood? Come, and let us sell him . . . And his brethren were content”** (37:26, 27). And they sold him to the Midianites for twenty pieces of silver. Each received two pieces of silver as their share.

How did they face their father? They killed a kid and dipped the coat in the blood. Then they carried the bloodstained coat to their waiting father and said, **“This have we found; know now whether it be thy son’s coat or no”** (37: 32).

They did not refer to Joseph as their brother. Jacob drew the desired conclusion and wailed: **“It is my son’s coat: an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces”** (37:33). Jacob, in anguish, rent his clothes and mourned for his son many days. **“And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted: and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him”** (37:35).

Judah daily witnessed his father’s grief and tears, heard him praise Joseph’s virtues, and saw him fondling the treasured coat. As he tried to comfort Jacob, his hypocrisy and the memory of his deceit got on his nerves. His conscience worried him because it was at his suggestion that Joseph was sold. He thought that he was now perhaps suffering great cruelty as a slave. The situation became intolerable.

“And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went down from his brethren, and turned in to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah” (38:1).

Here we have the Old Testament story of the prodigal son who took his journey into a far country and wasted his substance in riotous living. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon experience. We may try to get away from a pious environment and throw ourselves into the whirl of society, but we cannot get away from ourselves, our sins, our consciences, our memories or from God. In the far country we are always wasted, stripped, and in want. No man can restore what we have lost.

Hirah the Adullamite introduced Judah to a rich man’s daughter, named Shuah. He married her, and they had a family of three bad boys. The first was called Er, meaning *enmity or a rebel*, and the second, Onan, which means *iniquity*. The third was named Shelah. Though Er, true to his name, was so wicked, his father thought that if he married, he would settle down and behave. Judah chose a girl named Tamar for him and persuaded her to marry him. Marriage did not change Er’s character, and he went on in his sinfulness until **“the Lord slew him.”**

Judah then persuaded his second son Onan to marry Er’s widow. He suggested that if there were children, he should call the oldest child after Er in order that the child might inherit the dead man’s property. Think of trying to carry on the name of a wicked man whom God considered unfit to live!

Onan determined he would not accept responsibility for a child. He was not concerned for any child's welfare; neither was marriage nor life sacred to him. The thing which he did displeased the Lord, therefore the Lord slew him also. Two boys in one family slain by the Lord! Was Judah aroused by this second tragedy? Was God teaching him what suffering he had caused his father when he allowed Jacob to think Joseph had been killed?

At that time a widow was not allowed to remarry outside the family unless all the relatives of her husband refused her. Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law: **"Remain a widow. Go home and stay with your father till Shelah my son be old enough to marry lest peradventure he die also as his brethren."** He may have felt that she was safer in her father's house; perhaps he was evading his responsibility toward her.

In process of time Judah's wife died. His grief seemed short-lived. **"And Judah was comforted,"** and went with his friend Hirah to the sheep-shearing. Widowers sometimes seem to lose their stability. They are at loose ends and have need of great self-control lest they act very foolishly. Tamar at this time felt slighted and resentful because Judah neglected to keep his promise and was consigning her to perpetual widowhood. **"For she saw Shelah was grown and she had not been given unto him to wife."**

Sheep-shearing was usually a time of jollity and feasting. Wine makes fools of men, and wine and women generally go together. This old widower had an eye for the young girls. Tamar heard of it and sought to trap her foolish father-in-law with her wiles. He had disappointed her; she would outwit him. She posed as a girl of the streets. She sold the dearest, most precious thing a girl has, her honor, virtue, and purity for **"a kid of the goats."** She sold what could never be regained in this life. She would never forget her folly, neither would others. She demanded as a pledge of the payment from Judah his jewelry and staff.

Tamar went home with the pledges and again donned her widow's garments. Judah sent his friend Hirah, who aided and abetted him in his wicked ways, to carry the kid to the veiled girl of the streets and to retrieve his staff and jewelry. But she could not be found, for the place was one of good reputation. One person's folly can ruin the name of a place. And how much worse it is if that person had known the fear of God and yet became the cause of stumbling to another!

And Judah said, Let her have the pledge lest we be shamed. The loss of jewels was nothing. Judah did not want his loss advertised. He hated to lose his reputation. There was no evidence of shame over his sin or repentance toward God. All was well as long as he was not found out. He was like the evil woman who lives in sin and yet says, "I have done no iniquity." Judah richly deserved to be held in contempt, and he knew it.

And it came to pass after three months it was told Judah, Tamar thy daughter-in-law is expecting a baby. **"And Judah said, Bring her forth, and let her be burnt"** (38:24). He was incensed at this dishonor to his family. How harsh we are in our condemnation of others who are guilty of the same sins that we are ourselves! Is it the effort to throw off the scent of our own misdeeds? Those found guilty of adultery under the law were to be stoned. You remember our Lord's words, **"He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone"** (John 8:7). Condemning Tamar acted like a boomerang on Judah.

When Tamar was brought out to be burned, she quietly sent the pledges to Judah with the message: **“By the man whose these are, am I with child: and she said, Discern, I pray thee, whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff”** (38:25).

Did similar words flash in lightning fire on his brain? **“See is this thy son’s coat?”** Twenty-five miserable years, self-exiled from all godly influence, had left its baleful mark on Judah. He hated his life; he revolted at his own shame; he would have done with it. His own wickedness corrected him. Did he say: **“I will arise and go to my Father and say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee. I am no more worthy to be called thy son?”**

“And Judah acknowledged them and said, She hath been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son” (38:26).

He turned from his sin and sought to make amends to Tamar and her twin babies. But those lost years could never be lived again, nor their painful memory obliterated. Judah went home to Jacob. Do you think when we get to Heaven and hear more of this history, we will find these words added: **“When his Father saw him a great way off, he had compassion and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him”**? From the subsequent history we know Judah tried in every way by his devotion to his aged father to make up the years that the cankerworm had eaten. His father trusted him again, and he proved worthy of that confidence. When Joseph demanded to see Benjamin, Judah offered himself as surety for him. He made an eloquent appeal to Joseph for the life of Benjamin and to have compassion on his aged father (ch. 44), offering himself as bondman.

In Jacob’s dying blessing (ch. 49) he said to Judah, **“Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise.”** Think of the grace of God that can pick up such derelicts and make something of them. Why does the Bible so faithfully record such unsavory episodes? It speaks of sin and uncleanness in such a way to make us hate it.

It is amazing to find the first woman mentioned in the genealogy of our Lord is this same Tamar. Surely the worth and the worthiness of the Lord was not derived from his ancestors. But He who knew no sin, who did no sin, in whom there was no sin, came to seek and to save sinners, even the chief. Judah and Tamar are monuments of God’s pardoning mercy.

O hope of every contrite heart!
O joy of all the meek!
To those who fall how kind Thou art!
How good to those who seek.

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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