



## Parkway Fellowship

Family Feuds • Judah vs Tamar: Selfishness Leads to Self-Destruction • Genesis 38:1-30 • 11/11/2018

### Main Point

God is faithful to show His love and fulfill His promises, even in familial situations where selfishness has led to self-destruction.

### Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

**When you were a child, what was the most fantastic thing you dreamed about being or doing in life? How much was your dream shaped by TV shows, movies, or books? What other factors shaped your dream?**

**What are some things that can keep people from realizing their childhood dreams? How would you compare your life now to what you imagined in your childhood?**

God has a destiny in mind for you and I, one that we can discover and embrace. Yet there are distractions that can keep us from fully embracing our God-given destiny. We can get off track through selfishness and disobedience, lose focus on what is best, and get tangled in the web of a sinful lifestyle. This is what happened to a man in Scripture named Judah. Through Judah and Tamar's story, we will learn that God's grace is the one remedy that can restore a family steeped in generational sin to its God-given destiny.

# Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 38:1-11.

**What do you know about Judah from these verses?**

**What do you know about Tamar?.**

The phrase “at that time” primarily refers to the years immediately following the brothers’ sale of Joseph into slavery on Judah’s recommendation (37:26-28). We aren’t told if or how that event continued to weigh on Judah’s mind.

The culture of ancient Israel at this time had some ingrained features that serve as background for Judah’s actions in these verses. The culture was patriarchal (male-dominated). Every husband and wife desired to have children—especially sons—to secure the family name into the future. It also meant that a father and his sons were responsible to protect and provide for the family. Moreover, the patriarch was in charge of obtaining wives for all of his sons when they reached the appropriate age. Marriages were arranged for the overall benefit of the larger family rather than the individual. The practice of “levirate marriage” (pictured in Gen. 38:8) provided continuing family protection and care for a widow whose husband died without offspring.

**What are some practices in modern culture that help strengthen families? In contrast, what are some attitudes and practices that divide or harm families?**

**Where do you see dishonesty in this passage? How would uprightness and honesty from any of the three men—Er, Onan, or Judah— have changed things for Tamar?**

**Why did Judah—after trying to do the right thing by his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar—decide to send her back to her father’s house? What does Judah’s decision say about the struggle we often have between fear of our circumstances and trust in God?**

When Judah saw that two of his sons died, he must have blamed Tamar. Now Judah had one son remaining, and he feared that son might also die because of Tamar, leaving him without a male heir. He sent Tamar back to her father’s house—but without releasing her to marry into another family. Judah gave Tamar a half-hearted promise that his youngest son Shelah would take her as a wife when Shelah came of age.

| Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 38:12-26.

These are very difficult verses for us to read, especially in view of the New Testament's call for believers to live pure, holy lives and to put away the deeds of the flesh. Judah disregarded his family responsibility toward his daughter-in-law, engaged in deceit, slept with a prostitute (as far as he knew), jeopardized his family credentials by giving away his signet ring and staff, and hypocritically condemned Tamar when she was discovered to be pregnant. For her part, Tamar also engaged in deceit, playing the part of a prostitute in order to get pregnant by her father-in-law. Yet when the truth finally came out, Judah confessed his wrongdoing and admitted that Tamar was "more in the right" (38:26) than he was. Part of the destiny God had in mind for Judah was to continue a line of descendants through Tamar that would one day include Israel's greatest king, David, and eventually to the King of Kings, Jesus the Messiah.

**Which of the following is more true of you: I always take responsibility for my actions or I hate admitting wrong so I tend to deny, deflect, or double-down on my wrong actions?**

**Why is it always unwise to try to cover up one wrongdoing with another wrongdoing?**

**How do the verses show that God will forgive and continue to use repentant people in His kingdom work?**

| Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 38:27-30.

To fully appreciate these verses, we must read them along with Ruth 4:12,18-22 and Matthew 1:1-16. Taking all three genealogies together, they show the amazing destiny that God had in mind for Judah. He was to be the one son of Jacob who would continue the covenant line from Abraham, the father of faith, to Jesus Christ.

**In what ways was the birth of Tamar's twins similar to the birth of Jacob (Judah's father) and Esau in Genesis 25:21-26?**

**How does the sovereignty of God, as displayed in this passage, give you confidence regarding your future?**

Judah had marginalized Tamar. He lied to her, and he used her for sex. By all cultural norms, Tamar was done for, with no husband, no son, and a father-in-law who didn't follow the custom. But God took care of Tamar. He will take care of you. No matter how you've been wronged. No matter how your family treats you or has treated you. God has plans for you; a purpose for you; a legacy for you; and will always come through for you. Honor Him above all else.

## Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

**How have you seen selfishness bring disaster in relationships? How does this passage give you hope in spite of any relational disaster you've already experienced?**

**What practical advice would you give someone who hates to admit they are wrong and struggles to take responsibility for their actions?**

**What is your biggest hindrance to embracing your God-given destiny? How has this study helped you recognize and overcome that hindrance?**

## Pray

Thank God for His sovereignty and grace, forgiving you when you falter and setting you back on the course He has for you. Ask Him to give you strength to walk with Him by faith and to speak with honesty when your circumstances make you fearful about the future.

## Commentary

| Genesis 38

38:1-5. This account revolves around Judah; moreover, Jacob's name does not even appear in the chapter. This will be important later because Jacob will bless Judah, and the tribe of Judah will be given the right to rule (Gen. 49:8-12). Judah was the fourth son of Leah. He developed a friendly relationship with a man named Hirah from Adullam (a town southwest of Jerusalem; 2 Chr. 11:5,7). Judah voluntarily left his brothers, in contrast to Joseph, who was forced to leave. Judah married a Canaanite woman named Shua who bore him three sons named Er, Onan, and Shelah. The last son was born at Kezib, perhaps the town also known as Aczib (Josh. 15:44), which was three miles west of Adullam.

38:6-11. Judah's responsibility in this story continues. He got a wife for Er. In the patriarchal era parents were often involved in obtaining wives for their children (see Gen. 21:21; 24:3-4). Er, however, was disciplined by God, resulting in death, for an unrecorded act of wickedness. Apparently this act did not involve Tamar, because she was left untouched. Judah then commanded his second-born son Onan to marry Tamar in order to fulfill his duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for his deceased brother. This custom is suggestive of the later biblical law of "levirate marriage" as found in Deuteronomy 25:5-6 and practiced in Ruth 4:10. The purpose of this law was to produce a son for the dead brother so his name would not disappear and his son could inherit all of his father's property.

Onan, not wanting to share anything with a son who would not be regarded as his, practiced a form of birth control sometimes called "onanism." This method of birth control involved withdrawal prior to male orgasm in order to avoid pregnancy. Onan revealed a selfish heart toward his dead brother, toward Tamar, and

ultimately toward the Lord. God's plan included the multiplication of the descendants of Abraham and the birth of the seed whose offspring would bring deliverance from Satan.

This action by Onan was a persistent practice as signified in the English by the word whenever. The Lord regarded this as wickedness, so he put Onan to death like his older brother Er. Some people believe that any form of birth control is wrong, but this issue is not specifically addressed in this passage except in the context of levirate marriage.

Judah then instructed his daughter-in-law to live as a widow, but in her father's house, until his third son Shelah matured. This request that Tamar return to her father's house was a selfish act on the part of Judah and perhaps explains to some extent why his son Onan had developed into such a selfish person. But the Scriptures reveal that his real motive in asking Tamar to return to her father was to avoid the possible death of his last son. Obviously Judah was either unaware of the wickedness of his sons, or he assumed that Tamar was somehow responsible for their deaths, since he thought that Shelah may die too, just like his brothers. Judah's refusal to take responsibility for the welfare of his daughter-in-law shows a callous and irresponsible attitude toward someone who had married into his family.

38:12-26. After a long time, during which Judah's wife died and Shelah matured, Tamar realized that Judah had no intention of giving Shelah to her as a husband. Hearing that Judah was going to Timnah, she decided to act to obtain a child from Judah's family. This was something that she obviously believed was her right (Gen. 38:14).

Tamar disguised herself as a shrine prostitute (Gen. 38:21). This required her to take a great risk. If she had been discovered engaged in such conduct, Judah could easily have had her killed. Having enticed Judah by way of her dress, although the formal approach seems to have been made by Judah to her (Gen. 38:15-16), Tamar demanded a pledge for the payment of a goat to be sent later. She received Judah's seal and its cord, as well as his staff.

Tamar became pregnant by Judah as a result of their intercourse. Meanwhile, Judah's friend Hirah was unable to find any shrine prostitute to whom he could make the payment of a goat, so Judah gave up trying to find her in order to save himself embarrassment.

Three months later, Tamar revealed that she was pregnant. Judah, in a fit of hypocritical indignation, ordered her burned to death for her sin. In later times in Israel, burning was the penalty for prostitution practiced by the daughter of a priest (Lev. 21:9). Tamar produced the items taken in pledge to reveal that it was Judah himself who was the father of her unborn child. A remorseful Judah declared that Tamar had acted more righteously than he had, since he had refused to give her to his son Shelah.

The notation that Judah did not sleep with Tamar again shows that their act did not create a marriage between the two of them. We see perhaps some change in Judah from a man who sold his brother into slavery to one

who acknowledged his sin and then one who determined not to pursue this sin further. It is possible Judah's repentance here later allowed Jacob not to exclude Judah from receiving a special blessing—as happened with Reuben, Levi, and Simeon, Judah's three older brothers (Gen. 49:3-7).

38:27-30. Tamar gave birth to twins and called them Perez and Zerah. The midwife thought Zerah was going to be born first, but Perez ended up “breaking out” before him. The name Perez means “breaking out.” Zerah can mean “brightness” or “scarlet.” He may have received this name after the scarlet thread that had been tied around his hand when it appeared that Zerah would be the firstborn. Perez became the person through whom the chosen line to David developed (Ruth 4:18-22) and of course, ultimately, to Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:1-16).

This story of Judah and Tamar cannot be disconnected from the story of Joseph. It illustrates the need for Jacob's family to leave the corrupt and tempting culture of Canaan for a place where they could develop their culture without significant pressure from the surrounding people. Judah's actions of hedonistic willfulness contrasted sharply with Joseph's self-control.