

The Story of Joseph

Lion on the Lam

Part 10 – April 1, 2012

Be warned: today we begin an R rated chapter of our story! Most of us don't even associate chapter 38 with the story of Joseph, because it's censored out of the Sunday school versions. It highlights how we can assume we know a Bible story when in fact we *only* know a heavily edited, G-rated version that undermines its ability to mess with our minds, reveal our sin, challenge our faith, and overwhelm us with God's sovereign control and loving grace.



By the end of chapter 37, Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt, and his father, Jacob, is deceived into believing he's dead.

Now Judah (#4), who proposed selling Joseph, and helped deceive dad, can't take the grief, won't face his guilt, and flees into chapter 38, where he spends 20 years as a fugitive.

This is a disturbing chapter in Judah's life ... literally.

It's *somewhat* disturbing to read! Chapter 38 reminds us that God certainly isn't shy when it comes to sin ... *or bodily functions!* We're the ones who try to isolate Him from our humanness and earthiness, to *our* detriment. You know that reluctance you feel when you have to reveal an embarrassing symptom to a doctor? The physician is the *one person you can* tell. Yet, people *die* because of that reluctance.

God doesn't cover His eyes when you're on the toilet, or blush when you're making love. And He's not even *slightly* embarrassed. This is *especially true* with our secret sins and depravities. Can you imagine a surgeon being embarrassed by cancer? Even though what he has to say might embarrass or disturb you, the physician's chief concern is your healing.

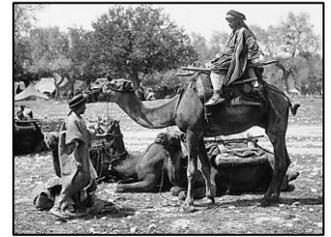
Have you ever lied to your doctor? "Are you exercising?" [Nodding] "Right now I am." "And you've been cutting back on fat/cigarettes/alcohol?" "You said it." Chapter 38 underscores how radically honest we need to be about our sin and selfishness and depravities. And what happens when we flee the failings that the Great Physician wants us to face.

Judah is the prodigal son of the Old Testament. And we get to see the lengths that God will go, in order to force us to face those failings, so that we can come home and be healed.

On the heels of losing Joseph, grieving Jacob, now loses Judah.

At that time, Judah left his brothers [in Hebron] and went down [from the central mountain ridge to the lowlands] to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah. – *Genesis 38:1 NIV*

The royal Canaanite city of Adullam (Josh 12:15) sat on a hill, about 10 miles (as the crow flies) from Judah's home in Hebron. On the east side you can see the hills of Hebron and Bethlehem.



I wonder how many times Judah sat right here and looked over and pondered what he had done and thought to himself, "I can never go home." even as God is calling him to return and repent. Instead, he partners up with a pagan pal named Hirah: good friend, bad influence. The Apostle Paul later warns the Corinthians, "Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." (1 Cor. 15:33)

All of Jacob's sons were *thoroughly warned* against relationships with the epically immoral Canaanites who occupied the Promised Land. Flashback 127 years to Abraham instructing his chief servant ...

"... swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son [Isaac] from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living ..." ["Are we flexible on that?"] – Genesis 24:3 NIV

Now Flash-forward 96 years to Isaac instructing his son, Jacob ...

... Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him and commanded him: "Do not marry a Canaanite woman." – Genesis 28:1 NIV

Now Flash-forward 31 years to Judah, about 21, on his own, in Adullam, a Canaanite city, with Hirah, a Canaanite friend ...

There Judah met the [totally hot] daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. [Figuring this exotic beauty would help him forget his troubles] He married her and lay with her ...
- Genesis 38:2 NIV

Did you notice that her name isn't even mentioned? It emphasizes the inappropriateness and the impulsiveness of Judah's decision.



Basically, he ran off to *Vegas* and married a showgirl! And Hirah was his best-man. Rebellion against the family has quickly become rebellion against God. But then, wasn't it *God* who *put* him in *that* family, with the unfair father who favored his half-brother? So, to numb the pain of his suffering, he's adding sin upon sin. I wonder how much of our suffering is the direct result of *us* trying to numb the pain of other past suffering and sin?

[One error leads to another, and] she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, who was named Er. [It's actually pronounced UHR, but I so wanted that pun to work; it's Hebrew for watchful] She conceived again and gave birth to a son and named him Onan. [Hebrew for virile one] [They settled in Kezib, a little village near Adullam and] She gave birth to still another son and named him Shelah. [Yep, Sheila; it's Hebrew for request. "Uh, could I request a man-name?"] It was at Kezib [KEE-zib] that she gave birth to him. – Genesis 38:3-5 NIV



Kezib comes from the word for *deceived*. And when we refuse to face our failings we deceive *ourselves* and infect those we love, in ways we can't foresee. Mom most likely retained her Canaanite customs and taught 'em to her boys, because God rejected all three sons from the line of the Messiah. And the two oldest boys were so *inexcusably* wicked that their early and untimely deaths were attributed to the Lord's holy judgment.

It's disturbing to see our sin displayed in our children. It's worse yet to see them become the logical, dysfunctional, toxic conclusion to our ongoing lack of repentance.

Now the story does a little flash-forward of its own ...

Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. [We'll assume she's a Canaanite; there's no doubt Moses would've recorded if she was a Hebrew] But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the Lord's sight; so the Lord put him to death. – Genesis 38:6-7 NIV

We don't know what he did or how he died, because that's beside the point that's being made; it's enough to know that Er's death was viewed as a divine judgment and a fitting end. Curiously, in Hebrew, Er spelled backwards is the word for evil. But the point is that Judah's sons grew up with mixed messages from a mom who trusted false gods, and a dad who distrusted the True God, in a pagan land of ritual sex and shrine prostitutes.



And now Tamar is widowed and childless, which was seen an *even bigger tragedy*. For a man to die without leaving a son was an incalculable loss; it prevented his memory and his *birthright* from being preserved. Uh-oh, did someone just say "*birthright*"?

Then Judah said to Onan, "Lie with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother." – Genesis 38:8 NIV

This was called levirate marriage. Levir is Latin for "husband's nearest kin". And if we flash-forward about 435 years, we can see that it was incorporated and codified in the Law of Moses.

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel. – Deuteronomy 25:5-6 NIV

In Tamar's day a woman *literally* married the family. It was like acquiring land, you had rights as well as obligations. The woman was *entitled* to a son, if she so desired. It was *her choice*. A son could provide an inheritance, property, livelihood, and protection. With no type of social safety net, many a childless widow was reduced to begging or prostituting herself.



So, Tamar accepts the Levirate marriage. But Onan is a *psychopath!* He exploits the law by repeatedly, selfishly, disgustingly using his brother's grieving widow for sexual gratification while denying her any chance of having a child.

But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so whenever he lay with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother. – *Genesis 38:9 NIV*

Ironic that the *virile one* refuses to be! But Er was Judah's firstborn; therefore, a son who carries his name will inherit Er's position and double portion of the estate. However, if Er has no son, the birthright will go to Judah's second-born son ... Onan! Tamar is sleeping with the enemy!

Onan is disobeying and deceiving Judah (his father), betraying Er (his brother), by robbing his birthright *and* his memory, and abusing Tamar (a poor, helpless, vulnerable widow). Plus, there's solid biblical evidence that he's just a real jerk!

What he did was wicked in the Lord's sight; [See, I told you He doesn't cover His eyes] so [with no embarrassment whatsoever] he put him to death also. – *Genesis 38:10 NIV*

Two down! You think that's getting Judah's attention? It doesn't matter how wicked they were, you know it's crushing his spirit and breaking his heart. But, there's a big difference between getting "to" and getting "through".



On some level Judah has to be thinking, "I'm responsible. This is my fault. I didn't even try to instill in my sons what my father tried to instill in me. It's tough to raise sons. He may have favored Joseph, but he loved all of us; and he took time to speak into each of us. He wasn't perfect, but at least he wrestled with God instead of forsaking Him. What kind of legacy am I leaving? I've betrayed my brother, my father, and my God. The sins of my sons are simply a reflection of me."

That would be getting "through". But, sadly it didn't. Truth is, Judah has been enslaved ever since he suggested selling Joseph. When we fail to reveal our true condition, we can't receive the healing we so desperately need.

To receive God's grace at the most profound depth of our lives, we have to push past a face-saving level of honesty, and reveal to God and others, those secret, embarrassing, symptoms of sin. Until then, we'll just stare at the land that's beyond our reach.