

# GET BACK IN THE STORY

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



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Genesis 38:1-30  
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*Genesis 38:1-30*

What should I do?

You're always asking yourself that question, aren't you? How do you know what you are to do?

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre answers this way: "I can only answer the question, 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question, 'Of what story do I find myself a part?'"

If you are a follower of Jesus, you are part of the grandest story of all: the biblical story of redemption. Finding yourself in this story will help you know what to do.

Genesis 38 features Judah, who we met in Genesis 37. Judah is part of the biblical story, but he leaves the story to write his own story. Apart from the larger story, Judah loses his way. He fails—in multiple ways. In fact, we've already seen him fail twice in Genesis 37, first by selling his brother Joseph into slavery and second by deceiving his father Jacob into believing that Joseph had been killed. In Genesis 38, we will see him fail in many more ways.

Will we find ourselves in the story of redemption, or, like Judah, will we write our own stories and lose our way? For us, the story of Judah in Genesis 38 is not only a cautionary tale; it also serves to awaken us to the ways in which we may have failed.

## The generations of Jacob

If you've read Genesis 37 and start reading Genesis 38, you might think that the author of the narrative has lost his way. At the end of Genesis 37, Joseph's brothers sold him to some Midianite traders, who took him to Egypt and then sold him to a man there. Genesis 38 features the story of Judah and Tamar, which at first glance seems unrelated to the story of Joseph. Then, in Genesis 39, the author picks up the story of Joseph again.

At this point we must remind ourselves how the author begins in Genesis 37: "These are the generations of Jacob" (Genesis 37:2). The story in Genesis 37-50 is the story of Jacob's family. Moreover, the story of Jacob's family is part of the story of Abraham's family (Genesis 12-50), which itself is part of the human story (Genesis 1-11).

Joseph, one of Jacob's sons, is the leading actor in the story of Jacob's family, but Judah, another of Jacob's sons, plays a supporting role. Thus, a story that features Judah (Genesis 38) comes right on the heels of a story that features Joseph (Genesis 37). Joseph and Judah, who went their separate ways in Genesis 37, will be reunited later in the book, much the way their father Jacob and uncle Esau went their separate ways but were reunited later in the book. Everything that happens to Joseph and Judah after their separation will prepare them for their reunion.

Multiple thematic links between Genesis 38 and what comes both before and after it indicate that it is an integral part of the author's overall story.<sup>1</sup>

The central theological problem in Genesis 38 is childlessness. If there are no children, the story of redemption ends. If there are no children, there is no redemption.

## Judah turns aside

**Genesis 38:1-5:**

**It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. 2 There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, 3 and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. 4 She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. 5 Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him.**

At the outset of this story, there are multiple indications that Judah is going outside of the Lord's design for him and his family.

First, he separates from his brothers, the people of God. Second, he turns aside from his brothers in favor of a Canaanite from Adullam, a pagan. Third, both Judah's great-grandfather, Abraham, and his grandfather, Isaac, went to great lengths to ensure that their sons would not marry Canaanites, who worshiped other gods and wouldn't give them up (Genesis 24:1-4, 28:1; Deuteronomy 7:3-4). Judah, however, sees a Canaanite woman and takes her for a wife.<sup>2</sup>

Having left the story in order to write his own story, Judah fails by leaving the people of God in favor of a pagan and by marrying a pagan woman.

It's all too easy to throw in your lot with those who don't know the Lord because they won't stop you from having the fun you think you should have. It's all too easy to decide to become involved with someone based on what you see and feel without respect to spiritual depth. Have we failed in these ways?

What comes of Judah's three sons?

## Two sons die

**Genesis 38:6-11:**

**And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. 7 But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. 8 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." 9 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. 10 And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. 11 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.**

Judah's first son by the Canaanite woman, Er, turns out to be so wicked that the Lord puts him to death. If a man died without having children, his brother would be

expected to marry his wife and produce children so that his line would continue. This custom was later codified in the law of Israel (Deuteronomy 25:5-6).

However, Onan, Judah's second son, refuses to raise up children for Er, knowing that he could be displaced in the birth order by a son who would come from his union with Tamar and that the inheritance of any of his own offspring could be diminished. Nevertheless, Onan manages to gratify his sexual desires while ensuring that he would not impregnate Tamar, thus shaming her.

Onan's refusal is especially grievous because, as a descendant of Abraham, he is supposed to be fruitful and multiply. This is the family that is commanded to bless all the families of the earth through its descendants (Genesis 12:2-3). Onan, like Er, is wicked, and the Lord puts him to death also. In that Judah is seen in both Genesis 37 and 38 as spiritually insensitive, it seems likely that his sons picked up a few things from him. Judah's sons, like their father, leave the story to write their own stories.

## Judah shames Tamar

Judah, who along with his brothers triggered his father Jacob's mourning for the apparent loss of a son, loses two sons in rapid succession. However, whereas Jacob was beside himself with grief when he believed that his son Joseph had been killed, Judah is not said to mourn the death of his sons (Genesis 37:34-35). The line of God's people is in jeopardy, and Judah seems unconcerned.

Moreover, Judah treats Tamar, his daughter-in-law, with contempt. He instructs her to remain a widow while waiting for Shelah, Judah's third son, to come of age. However, as the narrative will show, Judah has no intention of giving his son to Tamar.

Judah is worried that Tamar is something of a femme fatale and that Shelah would also die if he married Tamar. The narrator tells us the truth: Judah's first two sons died for their sins, not Tamar's sins. Judah, however, is oblivious. Moreover, he shames Tamar, who is innocent, by sending her back to her family and consigning her to perpetual widowhood.

Having left the story to write his own story, Judah fails by deceiving Tamar and shaming her. It's all too easy to deceive people in order to force our will upon them. Have we failed in this way?

What will Tamar do?

## Tamar's audacious plan

Genesis 38:12-19

**In the 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. 13 And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," 14 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. 15 When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. 16 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?" 17 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—" 18 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. 19 Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.**

The comfort Judah experiences after losing his wife is in contrast to the pain that his father Jacob experienced when he "refused to be comforted" after concluding that he has lost his son (Genesis 37:35). Judah is done with mourning, and he's ready to party. He goes with his pal, Hirah the Adullamite, to visit his sheepshearers, who would be partying, with much food and drink, after finishing their work (1 Samuel 25:11, 36; 2 Samuel 13:23, 28).

Judah is done with mourning, but Tamar, loyal to her deceased husband and waiting on Judah's son, still wears her widow's garments. Eventually, she reasons that Judah has no intention of fulfilling his promise.

Therefore, Tamar takes matters into her own hands. In contrast to Onan and Judah, who are more concerned with other matters, Tamar wants to raise up children for Abraham's family so that all the families of the earth can be blessed. She hatches an audacious plan.

Tamar removes her widow's garments and covers herself with a veil, concealing her identity. Judah takes her for a prostitute, and they negotiate the terms. Judah takes after his son Onan in that he is more concerned for his sexual gratification than the perpetuation of the people of God.<sup>3</sup>

Instead of fulfilling his promise and making arrangements for Tamar, Judah forces her into this goods-for-services exchange. Tamar drives a hard bargain, and Judah agrees to leave his signet ring, cord, and staff, which were akin to a credit card and a driver's license, in order to guarantee that he will pay up with the promised goat.<sup>4</sup>

Tamar's plan works: she conceives.

Having left the story too write his own story, Judah fails by debasing himself and paying a high price for fleeting sexual pleasure. It's all too easy to pursue fleeting sexual pleasure without regard to the price you're paying for it. Have we failed in this way?

It's time for Judah to pay up.

## What happened to the prostitute?

Genesis 38:20-23:

**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. 21 And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute[a] who was at Enaim at the roadside?" And they said, "No cult prostitute has been here." 22 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.'" 23 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."**

Judah, more intent on keeping his promise to a prostitute than to his daughter-in-law, sends his fixer to pay up and retrieve his pledge. However, the Adullamite can't find the prostitute anywhere, not least because Tamar has gone back to being Tamar, widow's garments and all.

Judah concludes that it's better to let her keep the pledge lest he become a laughingstock for parting with his valuables in exchange for a fleeting pleasure. He had no problem shaming Tamar by lying to her and

consigning her to perpetual widowhood, but he is very much concerned with not exposing himself to shame.

## Report of immorality

**Genesis 38:24:**

**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.”**

Instead of investigating the report that Tamar is pregnant, Judah immediately deems her guilty and orders her to be burned, a sentence reserved for the worst crimes. Judah, of course, is a hypocrite, for if Tamar deserves to be burned, Judah deserves the same fate.

Having left the story to write his own story, Judah fails by condemning Tamar while turning a blind eye to his own sins. It's all too easy to see failure in others while screening out our own failures because we're afraid of what we'll see in ourselves. Have we failed in this way?

Tamar never got the goat she was promised. Instead, she held on to Jacob's signet ring, cord, and staff. What does she do with them?

## Tamar plays her trump card

**Genesis 38:25:**

**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.”**

Tamar plays her trump card, producing the signet ring, cord, and staff. What will Judah do now?<sup>5</sup>

## Judah gets back in the story

**Genesis 38:26:**

**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.**

Judah's sin has found him out. And when it finds him out, he comes clean. The word “righteous” was often used in connection with the Lord's covenant with Abraham and his family. Judah is not simply vindicating Tamar; he is also saying that she has been more faithful to the covenant than he has been. She has been more concerned with producing children of Abraham than he has been. In fact, Judah concludes that Tamar was right to do what she did because he withheld Shelah from her and thereby placed the covenant at risk.

By contrast, Tamar has succeeded in securing the covenant heritage, albeit by unconventional means. She has also succeeded in awakening Judah to his covenant responsibilities in the family that will bless all families. Enaim, the place where Tamar waited for Judah, is a Hebrew word for “eye.” Tamar opens Judah's eyes.

The next time we meet Judah in Genesis, he is a changed man. Judah, who shamefully gave Tamar a “pledge” to secure sexual favors, later offers himself as a “pledge” to secure his brother's safety (Genesis 43:9, 44:32).

Tamar is the hero of the story. She rescues Abraham's family, and she rescues Judah, Abraham's great-grandson.

Judah confesses and gets back in the story. And think about this: At the end of the story, his name is written on the gates of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:12).

Judah left the story of redemption, wrote his own story, and lost his way. He failed in multiple ways. Have we failed in some ways? It's all too easy to get stuck in sinful patterns and not even know it or to be so embarrassed by what you've done that it feels all but impossible to come clean, even to God. Perhaps Genesis 38 is doing for you what Tamar did for Judah. Maybe it is awakening you to some way or some ways in which you have failed. If so, what then should you do?

Come clean! Remember, God wants honesty as much as anything else, “truth in the inward being” (Psalm 51:6). Confess! Get back in the story! If Judah, who was a moral failure many times over, can get back in the story, you can too. Remember, it's a story of redemption.

## More awesome than we know

Why does Judah leave the story? Why does anyone leave the story? Part of the reason has to do with misunderstanding the story and not appreciating how awesome it is.

Anyone who stormed the Capitol in the name of Jesus on January 6 has misunderstood the story by a galaxy. And because so many people who claim to follow Jesus have misunderstood the story so badly and believed so many lies, we have to ask ourselves, “How have we as the church in the United States failed to understand the story, teach the story, and live out the story?”

The story is far more awesome than we know. But we can at least begin to know. God has given us the Scriptures—the story!—and the Spirit to help us understand the story and appreciate the story.

Scholar Alister McGrath observes, “Many of those who think that they are dissatisfied with Christianity are really dissatisfied with something else—their own grasp of Christianity. For most of us, we have scraped the surface and nothing more, yet we mistakenly believe our superficial encounter represents the gospel in its totality.”<sup>6</sup>

Missionary Don Richardson, on the other hand, seems to have done much more than scrape the surface: “To see oneself as an instrument in God’s now-4,000-year-old purpose to impart blessing to all peoples is to jettison at once all feelings of insignificance, indecision and purposelessness.”<sup>7</sup>

I have the sense, especially when the story takes my breath away, that I’m only getting a glimpse of it. But at least I’m getting a glimpse! And when I get a glimpse, I know the story is so much greater than I know. And knowing that it’s so much greater than I know keeps me in the story and keeps me looking for more.

How does the story in Genesis 38 end?

## Tamar bears twins

**Genesis 38:27-30:**

**When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. 28 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.” 29 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. 30 Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.**

Tamar bears two sons, replacing the two sons Judah lost. Judah has confessed his sins, and the births herald that his sins, which are many, have been forgiven. Tamar, a two-time widow, is rewarded with children whom she had not been able to bear because of the sins of her two husbands.

The births echo the births of Esau and Jacob. Esau was born first, but Jacob was clinging to his heel, and eventually emerged, through conflicts with both men and the Lord, to advance the Lord’s promises. In this case, technically, Zerah was the firstborn, but Perez, who made a “breach” for himself, would be the one to carry God’s promises forward. For the people of God, the births mark a major turning point in the book of Genesis. The problem of childlessness is solved.

Perez made a breach for himself, but Judah did too, by facing into his sins, which begins his transformation. Are you ready to make a breach for yourself, face into your sins, and be transformed?

## The rest of the story

The story of redemption, of course, is not finished with the book of Genesis. It only starts in Genesis. The sordid story of Judah and Tamar is part of the larger story. What comes of the mess of Genesis 38? This takes my breath away.

Remember how Genesis 37 begins the final chapter of the Genesis story? “These are the generations of Jacob.” Who made a breach for himself at the end of Genesis 38? Perez, the son of Tamar.

Now, move forward in the story of redemption to the book of Ruth, and to the final verses of that book: “Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David” (Ruth 4:18-22).

What comes of the mess of Genesis 38? King David! Oh, but that’s not all. Move forward in the story of redemption, all the way to the very beginning of the New Testament: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron . . .”

Keep reading: “. . . and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ” (Matthew 1:1-16).

What comes of the mess of Genesis 38? Jesus Christ! Remember, it’s a story of redemption. What part does Christ play? The apostle Paul answers the question: “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Ephesians 1:7).

Get back in the story!

## Endnotes

- 1 Notice how the author begins both Genesis 38 and 39 in similar fashion: “It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers . . .” (Genesis 38:1). “Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt . . .” (Genesis 39:1).
- 2 The combination of the verbs “see” and “take” in Genesis are used of illicit taking, beginning in Genesis 3:6, when the first woman “saw” the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and “took” of its fruit. See also Genesis 6:2, 12:15, 34:2.
- 3 Notice the link between Genesis 37 and 38: Judah, who deceived his father with a garment, Joseph’s coat, is now deceived by a garment, Tamar’s veil.
- 4 Judah and his brothers used the blood of a goat to deceive their father into thinking that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.
5. Likewise, Judah and his brothers presented evidence to their father, Joseph’s bloodstained goat. The difference, of course, is that Tamar’s evidence is true.
- 6 Alister McGrath, *The Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 2-3.
7. Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1981), 164.