



Judah The Coward

Rachael Suddarth

Matthew:

***Abraham was the father of Isaac,
Isaac was the father of Jacob.***

Jacob was the father of Judah and his eleven brothers.

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, whose courage preserved herself and her sons when she had been rejected by arrogant men.

Genealogies hardly make compelling reading at bedtime – or at any time for that matter. Perhaps you welcome them with a yawn, or skip over them entirely as you read the bible. But even reading a long list of names can reveal insights into God’s plan for his people and redemption for the world.

Take the genealogy in the first chapter of Matthew. It lists a grand total of 41 male ancestors of Jesus, beginning with Abraham and a mere 5 female ancestors, three of whose stories (Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba) are colored with incest, prostitution, fornication, and murder. Jesus the perfect son of the perfect Father had plenty of imperfect branches on the family tree. That women should be mentioned at all in his genealogy is surprising, let alone that three of the five got pregnant out of wedlock and 4 of them were foreigners.

The Bible is frank about human nature, it is upfront about the sad, shameful truth about who we really are. The Bible tells the kind of stories we don’t want our friends to know about, the secrets we hope no one finds, the darkest shadows in our hearts.

The story of Judah's family is certainly not one to be proud of. It is sandwiched between Judah selling his brother Joseph into slavery and Joseph's success in Egypt. The glowing example of Joseph, fleeing from evil, giver of God's wisdom, savior of a nation—the seemingly perfect son. But God picked Judah, not Joseph, to be the family line of Jesus. Out of this terrible story, new life came and with that new life came a hope for a Savior.

Last week we talked about Jacob and his family. Jacob loved one of his sons more than the others. Joseph was his favorite and he gave gifts only to him. Joseph also was a prophet of God, Joseph had visions in which his entire family would bow down to him one day. Needless to say Joseph's brothers hated him. Their youngest brother was their father's favorite and he told them they would bow before him. The brothers decided to kill Joseph, so they threw him down a well. Judah saw a slave caravan coming and convinced his brothers that they should sell their brother – that way they can make money and don't have to live with the guilt of killing their brother.

So Joseph was sold into slavery, Judah had taken his two pieces of silver, and had become overwhelmed by nagging guilt. I am sure Judah walked among the family tents and could see the look of anguish on his brothers faces → Judah was the leader of the family and he led them in the sale of Joseph. I am sure Judah heard the wails of his father – not only was his favorite wife dead, but his favorite child was gone.

This guilt and anguish made Judah restless, so he did the thing all cowards do – he ran away.

So Judah made his first mistake.

About that time, Judah separated from his brothers and hooked up with a man in Adul-lam named Hirah.

Hirah is mentioned 3 times in Genesis 38, 1st as an acquaintance, then as an associate, then as an accomplice. Hirah was a pagan who did not know the ways of God. So while Judah was staying with Hirah he met a woman he wanted to marry.

While there, Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite named Shua. He married her, they went to bed, she became pregnant

God was clear with the family of Jacob, he did not want them to marry pagans. Getting into bed with a pagan meant that Judah would move away from God. This is shown over and over again in the bible – Sampson, Solomon, Ahab. When a man of God marries a woman who is corrupt, the marriage destroys the man's relationship with God. Judah is on a path of destruction that is paved with a hot woman and sex.

Shua was a Canaanite and their religion was based on infant sacrifice and temple orgies. She was part of a world that was disgusting and vile, but Judah didn't care. It is easy to turn away from God when you are guilty – if I don't have to confess it to God then it didn't happen, Right? It is much easier to ignore our sin and continue down that path than to ask God to forgive us. Easy is rarely right and rarely the best.

So Shua and Judah got it on

She conceived and he named him Er.

Judah picks the name of their first born, a Hebrew name.

She got pregnant again and had a son, she named him Onan. She had still another son; she named this one Shelah. They were living at Kezib when she had him.

Shua's influence and power over the family had grown. Judah did not name his sons, Shua did. Onan and Shelah had Canannite names. The naming of the boys by his wife indicates that Judah had abdicated the headship of the family and home to his wife and that the boys' instruction was in her hands. Judah was too much of a coward to accept the role of spiritual leader that God had given him. Judah was apathetic about God – he had to be. How can you face a holy God when you know you sold your brother into slavery and broke your father's heart out of pride and jealousy?

Judah was not serving the one true God and his wife's false religion had filled the void. Judah lived in a household where human sacrifice and temple sex were okay. This is the household he raised his sons in. Is it any wonder that things did not work out well for the family?

6-7 Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn. Her name was Tamar. But Judah's firstborn, Er, grievously offended God and God took his life.

The wife chosen for Er was a pagan named Tamar. Her name means "palm tree" suggestive of grace, beauty, slenderness, and usefulness. Tamar, though a pagan, must have been a woman of high noble character and a heart that sought God. She is the first woman listed in the lineage of Christ and is honorable throughout this Genesis account. Without a doubt Tamar knew of Judah's God, his brothers did not live that far away. Aren't they the family who worships the one God? Look how prosperous they are, so many sons, so much money.

Tamar's family knew it was politically wise to marry her into the large Hebrew family. Judah however, did not expect Tamar to follow his God; he certainly never made that request of his own wife.

Er knew of his father's God and was disrespectful. Do we know what kind of man Er was? All the bible says is

Er, grievously offended God and God took his life.

– well we can imagine – maybe he beat women, was often drunk, angry, without purpose, and mocked God. Er was evil and God destroyed him because of it.

Could you imagine being Tamar in this household? Er probably treated her terribly, and then died. I imagine Shua was a terror, blaming Tamar for the destruction of her family: Tamar killed my oldest son, Tamar you must be a witch, Tamar why do you not pray to my gods for forgiveness.

Judah was a coward and certainly wouldn't stand up for God or his daughter-in-law now. So what happens, Tamar goes from one terrible man to another.

8-10 So Judah told Onan, "Go and sleep with your brother's widow; it's the duty of a brother-in-law to keep your brother's line alive." But Onan knew that the child wouldn't be his, so whenever he slept with his brother's widow he spilled his semen on the ground so he wouldn't produce a child for his brother. God was much offended by what he did and also took his life.

Onan was guilty of a calculated insult against his father, against his wife Tamar, and against God. So why did Onan have to sleep with Tamar anyway? Well, during that time period to protect widows without children, the closest relative to their deceased husband was to marry them and give her a child. This child would inherit the possessions of the first husband.

Of course Onan hated this idea – if his sister-in-law remained childless than he would inherit everything. Why should his brother who is dead get more than he has? So Onan was more than willing to have sex with his brother's wife, but would not ejaculate inside of her. Onan intentionally denied his sister-in-law her God-given right. But also, he used her body, in essence raping her and further insulting his brother. Onan was evil, so God killed him!

Okay, so imagine being Tamar. Now not 1, but 2 of your husbands have been killed unexpectedly. And to admit that it was God would be admitting that there was a God and what the family was doing was wrong. Shua certainly would have none of that and Judah was too cowardly to acknowledge his role in his sons' deaths.

11 So Judah stepped in and told his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow at home with your father until my son Shelah grows up." He was worried that Shelah would also end up dead, just like his brothers. So Tamar went to live with her father.

Now whatever Judah may have taught his family about God, it certainly was not the example he lived out. Judah's life was one of perverted values and pretended virtue.

Having buried his 2 sons, Judah tried to place the blame for their deaths on the innocent Tamar. For Judah to insinuate that she was to blame for the death of his sons was not only unjust, it was a complete failure to recognize that he himself was really to blame. If he hadn't married a pagan woman and allowed her to raise his sons in her religion, had he been a godly example to his family, if he had thoroughly taught the truth about God things could have been different. To blame Tamar showed how he had perverted his values to cope with betraying God.

Tamar was sent to her father's household. Tamar would have been an embarrassment to her father. So they probably kept her as a slave and disowned her so the rest of the family could maintain political and social validity. For Judah to send Tamar home for an indefinite amount of time was a devastating, insulting, despicable thing to do. Tamar had no guarantee that Judah was going to man-up and give her to Shelah. Tamar was stuck in a miserable situation with no power to change it.

12 Time passed. Judah's wife died.

Lucky for Judah his wife died before he destroyed his life completely. It was at this point his pagan friend Hirah showed up.

When the time of mourning was over, Judah with his friend Hirah of Adullam went to Timnah for the sheep shearing.

Hirah basically said, "Hey, the sheep-shearing festival is always fun – lots of drinking, plenty of women to sleep with, it will get your mind off of Shua." Judah could have asked God why his family had been destroyed – of course this was off the table because Judah would have to recognize that he was screwed up. Instead Judah decided to do the cowardly thing and drown his troubles in a party.

13-14 Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law has gone to Timnah to shear his sheep." She took off her widow's clothes, put on a veil to disguise herself, and sat at the entrance to Enaim which is on the road to Timnah. She realized by now that even though Shelah was grown up, she wasn't going to be married to him.

15 Judah saw her and assumed she was a prostitute since she had veiled her face. He left the road and went over to her. He said, "Let me sleep with you." He had no idea that she was his daughter-in-law.

16 She said, "What will you pay me?"

17 "I'll send you," he said, "a kid goat from the flock."

She said, "Not unless you give me a pledge until you send it."

18 "So what would you want in the way of a pledge?"

She said, "Your personal seal-and-cord and the staff you carry."

He handed them over to her and slept with her. And she got pregnant.

19 She then left and went home. She removed her veil and put her widow's clothes back on.

20-21 Judah sent the kid goat by his friend from Adullam to recover the pledge from the woman. But he couldn't find her. He asked the men of that place, "Where's the prostitute that used to sit by the road here near Enaim?"

They said, "There's never been a prostitute here."

22 He went back to Judah and said, "I couldn't find her. The men there said there never has been a prostitute there."

23 Judah said, "Let her have it then. If we keep looking, everyone will be poking fun at us. I kept my part of the bargain—I sent the kid goat but you couldn't find her.

Now at this point in the story Shelah is old enough to be married, but Judah has not kept his promise to Tamar. She is still living in her father's house and is a slave. She has to do something to protect herself from Judah's cruelty and despicable values.

Seeing that Judah had no intention of fulfilling his promise Tamar decided to take matters into her own hands. It was not a desire to be remarried (who would want to live in that family?); it was a desire for a child. Tamar seems to understand the importance of Judah's family. We do not know what God may have revealed to her. We do not know what Judah may have told her in passing, what we do know is that Tamar was chosen to be a mother in this family. Tamar knew she needed to protect the family line and was willing to do anything to fulfill her obligation – her only obligation was to have a child.

Tamar disguised herself as a temple prostitute. The Canaanites worshipped through sexual acts with young women donated to the temples by their families. Tamar knew Judah, knew that his wife had died, and knew that he would stop for a prostitute.

Judah stopped and propositioned her, never knowing it was Tamar. Tamar intentionally asked for something Judah would have to go home and get, a kid goat. Tamar also knew that Judah could not be trusted to keep his word so she asked for his personal seal and cord and the staff he carried. This was an unbelievably high price for Judah to pay, but he was so horny that his brain stopped working. He agreed to everything she asked because he just had to have sex – right now!

Judah's seal was highly valued because it was his signature in all business matters. The staff was a sign of his status and wealth. He gave away his credibility and respect for a role in the hay.

So Judah had sex with Tamar and went on his way to the festival. Hirah offered to take the kid goat to the temple prostitute and retrieve the seal and the staff. Judah perhaps told Hirah how good Tamar was in bed and Hirah probably wanted a taste for himself.

When Hirah got to the grove of trees the temple prostitute was gone. No one knew who she was and no one had seen her leave. Now Judah was not upset because he had slept with a prostitute, he was not upset because he was willingly mocking God, he was upset because his friends and business associates might find out that he had been tricked by a prostitute. Judah was more concerned with appearances than reality. He was a coward, fearful of what would happen or how others would see him if they found out how foolishly he had acted.

And as an unrepentant, vile man does, Judah forgot all about it – just didn't seem important in the long run. Judah covered his tracks and ensured his reputation was safe.

Then came startling news, Tamar was pregnant.

24 Three months or so later, Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law has been playing the whore—and now she's a pregnant whore."

Judah yelled, "Get her out here. Burn her up!"

Judah heard the news and commanded his men to burn her. Judah probably saw this as the perfect opportunity to get rid of the woman who killed his sons. If she committed adultery Shelah didn't have to marry her and all of Judah's problems would go away. If Tamar was dead because she sinned he wouldn't have to feel guilty about not fulfilling his promises.

25 As they brought her out, she sent a message to her father-in-law, "I'm pregnant by the man who owns these things. Identify them, please. Who's the owner of the seal-and-cord and the staff?"

So Tamar is dragged from her father's house – probably by her own brothers – to be executed. But she screams, wait, I can prove who did this.

She gets the seal and the staff out of hiding and prepares to meet Judah. Judah would have had to pass judgment on her and would have to order the execution (She was a daughter in his family afterall).

And here is a turning point in Judah's story.

26 Judah saw they were his. He said, "She's in the right; I'm in the wrong— I wouldn't let her marry my son Shelah." He never slept with her again.

Judah could still have had Tamar killed, but he didn't. He saw everything he had ever done to hurt her and all of the inaction he took to destroy his family. Judah knew his sin and acknowledged it.

Even though we don't typically think that dressing as a prostitute and having sex with your father-in-law is a prudent choice, God took her side. Judah and his sons had treated her unjustly and God's heart is with the oppressed. God blessed Tamar, and through her Judah was also blessed. God gave Judah sons who would worship God and be the forefathers of Jesus.

27-30 When her time came to give birth, it turned out that there were twins in her womb. As she was giving birth, one put his hand out; the midwife tied a red thread on his hand, saying, "This one came first." But then he pulled it back and his brother came out. She said, "Oh! A breakout!" So she named him Perez (Breakout). Then his brother came out with the red thread on his hand. They named him Zerah (Bright).

After all of this Judah returned to his family and reestablished his relationship with God. Judah's heart was on the mend and he was a different person shaped by God and life.

The next we hear of Judah in Genesis 43. There was a great famine in the land and the only place that had food was Egypt. Previously, Judah and his brothers went to Egypt to get food and were met by an Egyptian ruler who gave them food and said the next time you come back you must bring your youngest brother Benjamin. This ruler was their brother Joseph who was testing them. Joseph wanted to see if his brothers had changed over the last few decades – were they still scheming, rotten scoundrels, or were they real men who recognized their faults and were willing to be selfless. So we read in chapter 43.

1-2 The famine got worse. When they had eaten all the food they had brought back from Egypt, their father said, "Go back and get some more food."

3-5 But Judah said, "The man warned us most emphatically, 'You won't so much as see my face if you don't have your brother with you.' If you're ready to release our brother to go with us, we'll go down and get you food. But if you're not ready, we aren't going. What would be the use? The man told us, 'You won't so much as see my face if you don't have your brother with you.'"

6 Israel said, "Why are you making my life so difficult! Why did you ever tell the man you had another brother?"

7 They said, "The man pressed us hard, asking pointed questions about our family: 'Is your father alive? Do you have another brother?' So we answered his questions. How did we know that he'd say, 'Bring your brother here?'"

8-10 Judah pushed his father Israel. "Let the boy go; I'll take charge of him. Let us go and be on our way—if we don't get going, we're all going to starve to death—we and you and our children, too! I'll take full responsibility for his safety; it's my life on the line for his. If I don't bring him back safe and sound, I'm the guilty one; I'll take all the blame. If we had gone ahead in the first place instead of procrastinating like this, we could have been there and back twice over."

So Judah is willing to pledge his own life to protect Benjamin, a selfless act that is proof that Judah is being made into a new man. Judah was becoming a man of courage instead of a man of cowardice. They go to Egypt, they get food, and on the way out of the city a silver chalice is found in Benjamin's bag, secretly put there by Joseph. Judah knew that this crime would be punishable by death or slavery, and he could not leave his brother Benjamin in Egypt.

18-20 Judah came forward. He said, "Please, master; can I say just one thing to you? Don't get angry. Don't think I'm presumptuous—you're the same as Pharaoh as far as I'm concerned. You, master, asked us, 'Do you have a father and a brother?' And we answered honestly, 'We have a father who is old and a younger brother who was born to him in his old age. His brother is dead and he is the only son left from that mother. And his father loves him more than anything.'

21-22 "Then you told us, 'Bring him down here so I can see him.' We told you, master, that it was impossible: 'The boy can't leave his father; if he leaves, his father will die.'

23 "And then you said, 'If your youngest brother doesn't come with you, you won't be allowed to see me.'

24-26 "When we returned to our father, we told him everything you said to us. So when our father said, 'Go back and buy some more food,' we told him flatly, 'We can't. The only way we can go back is if our youngest brother is with us. We aren't allowed to even see the man if our youngest brother doesn't come with us.'

27-29 "Your servant, my father, told us, 'You know very well that my wife gave me two sons. One turned up missing. I concluded that he'd been ripped to pieces. I've never seen him since. If you now go and take this one and something bad happens to him, you'll put my old gray, grieving head in the grave for sure.'

30-32 "And now, can't you see that if I show up before your servant, my father, without the boy, this son with whom his life is so bound up, the moment he realizes the boy is gone, he'll die on the spot. He'll die of grief and we, your servants who are standing

here before you, will have killed him. And that's not all. I got my father to release the boy to show him to you by promising, 'If I don't bring him back, I'll stand condemned before you, Father, all my life.'

33-34 "So let me stay here as your slave, not this boy. Let the boy go back with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? Oh, don't make me go back and watch my father die in grief!"

When the time came, Judah stood up for what was right. He could no longer live the life of a coward, running away and refusing to see the hurt and pain he caused. Judah was the leader of the brothers, Judah had told his father he would take responsibility – and he did.

It took the death of his children and being tricked by his daughter-in-law to bring him back to God.

Judah was a man who hit rock bottom and had nowhere else to go. Have you ever felt like that? I know I have. We all run away and hide from God, we all hide from each other and the reality is, fear is a powerful motivator. Hiding seems to be a good idea, no one will find out, I don't have to admit I was wrong, I don't have to stop what I am doing. But hiding is time consuming a soul-sucking. All of our time and energy is put into the lies we tell ourselves and others, so we move further and further from God. Cowardice builds false relationships and false community. Cowardice destroys not only ourselves, but also everyone around us.

And this is not what God wants for us and he has given us the opportunity to change. God desperately calls us to be courageous. Courage restores relationships and builds powerful friendships. Confessing our sins to God and others sets us free. We can see in Judah's story that his cowardice had major ramifications – he knew pain and hardship. We too will know pain and hardship if we do not step up and do the courageous thing. God did not punish Judah, Judah punished himself. He was the author of his own misery.

God is amazing grace. When Judah was ready, God transformed him. He cast off cowardice and accepted bravery. Why was Judah the forefather of the Messiah? – Because he sought out God and he changed. We can change, we can be a powerful force in God's story, we can be the authors of hope in our world.

The nice thing about the Bible is that it is filled with people, just like us, screwed up and trying to figure out how to live their lives in the imperfect mess they created. The power of the narratives is that we can clearly see the problems of those in the story that we can't always see in our own lives. Much like Tamar pointed out Judah's sin by tricking him, his story can touch our lives as well.

I read the genealogies because it reminds me that the perfect son of God did not just appear. His story begins with sin, but is also filled with hope.

Know that no matter what dark secrets you are keeping, God sees them and wants to remove that burden from you. Judah struggled and was almost crushed under the weight of his behavior. God stepped in and let a young woman, a nobody, change the course of Judah's life. God has put people in your life right now to challenge you and to change you. Join a small group, get an accountability partner – make sure that you are willing to open your heart and your ears to your community. Judah truly transformed himself when he returned to the community of his family; see community as transformational for you. Confess to each other, love each other, extend grace to each other. Let Damascus Road be a place that embraces forgiveness. Let's be a community where it is okay to be truthful, where courage is respected, and our hearts do not have to be fearful of rejection.