Tamar: A Summary

Reference: Genesis 39

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Judah, second eldest son of Jacob, had three sons with his Canaanite wife. Their names were Er, Onan, and Shelah. Judah found a wife for Er named Tamar, but Er was so wicked that God killed him. This was before the kinsman laws in the time of Moses, but Judah instructed Onan to marry his brother’s wife, to raise up seed to his brother. Onan through pride and hatred for his brother refused to give his seed to his brother’s name, despite being married to Tamar. The Lord slew Onan because of this.

Judah’s youngest son, Shelah, was not yet old enough to marry, so Judah promised Tamar she could marry him when he was old enough. In the meantime, she was to stay a widow at her father’s house. As time passed, Shelah grew old enough to marry, but Judah refused to heed his promise to Tamar. Some time after Judah’s wife died, Judah went up to Timnath, for it was time to shear his sheep.

Tamar heard that Judah was now a widower and had gone up away from his home. She put away her widow’s garb, dressed herself in a veil, and sat by the way she knew Judah would come. When Judah came along, he didn’t recognize her, and though she was a prostitute. He asked to sleep with her, but Tamar asked what he would give her in return. Judah promised to send a kid from his flock of sheep. Tamar accepted the offer, but required a pledge until he was able to send the kid: specifically, his bracelets, signet, and staff. Judah, blinded by lust, agreed to this offer and went in to her, and she became pregnant.

Tamar left Judah, removed her veil, and put on her widow garments. When Judah sent the kid to her, he was told there was no prostitute in that area. Three months later, someone told Judah that his daughter-in-law was pregnant through sin. Judah, in an ultimate show of hypocrisy, ordered her to be brought forth and burnt. When Tamar was brought forth, she showed the staff, bracelets, and signet, saying that the man who made her pregnant gave them to her.

Judah recognized the items immediately and confessed that Tamar had been more righteous than him, for he refused to fulfill his promise to her. He let her go. The day Tamar was to give birth, it was revealed she was carrying twins. They were named Pharez and Zarah. Pharez’s descendants included Boaz, Jesse, David, and Jesus.

This story illustrates how God responds to broken promises and his mercy toward sinners. Judah’s first two sons were killed because of direct disobedience to God. Judah himself committed two sins in this story: one of promising his youngest son to Tamar and not fulfilling it, and the other of sleeping with his daughter-in-law. Tamar sinned by taking matters into her own hands, not trusting in God, and seducing her father-in-law. However, God had mercy upon Tamar when the truth of the matter was revealed. She was allowed to live and bear twins, but would remain a widow and have no more children the rest of her life.

As for Judah, God could have killed him for refusing to keep his promise, but once again had mercy upon him. Through his sinful encounter with his daughter-in-law the King of Kings was eventually born. God’s great wisdom and mercy are revealed when he takes a situation like this. All parties involved were motivated by pride, fear, hatred, and vengeance, but despite all that God turned it into the greatest good we could ever receive by him.