

The Story of Tamar – Genesis 38

The Old Testament stories can be difficult to read – they contain very differing marriage customs (for example the need for a brother to marry his brother's widow), and the way in which women are treated is so far from what we find acceptable today. It is difficult as these are narrative – so there is no commentary on what is good or bad behaviour – it is just told as it is within its cultural setting. However, we mustn't kid ourselves into believing that this is a different world, as we still live in a world of domestic violence, abuse, slavery and sex-trafficking. This is our world too.

Please be aware when reading these stories that some of us may well be personally affected by some of these ourselves or seen them in our own families. Even if we are not personally affected, it is good to be mindful that these are not just issues but people.

Take a quick look at Genesis 37: 12 – end and also Proverbs 28:13. What are some of the reasons that Judah might have left at this time? What could he and should he have done differently?

Er and Onan are described as wicked men. Who does Judah think is responsible for their deaths? Tamar is a Canaanite. How might this have influenced Judah's thinking?

What reasons does Judah give for delaying the marriage of Tamar and Shelah? Do you think he has any intention of fulfilling his promise to her of this marriage? What has Judah still not learned?

Reflection: How do we respond to the things we know we have not done rightly? Confession or cover up? Does it depend upon the things that it is? Why should/shouldn't this make a difference.

When Tamar went back to her father's house do you think she ever expected to return to Judah's household? What kind of person has she been up to this point in the story?

Verse 12 is a turning point in the story. Tamar realises that she is never going to be invited back to Judah's household. Judah no longer has Canaanite worship taking place within his home or family.

What do you make of Tamar's decision? What other options were open to her? Do you think it was the right or wrong thing to do?

Look at Proverbs 16:2. What do you think of Tamar's motives? What motives does the Lord find acceptable in us?

Up until this point in the story, Tamar has been abused, used, abandoned and forgotten. Promises made to her have been completely ignored. What enabled her to take the decisions that she did? What does that say to us about the kind of person she is?

Reflection: Have you ever run ahead of God and tried to fix things yourself? Was it a good thing to do or not?

When Judah heard that Tamar was with child what was his response? How did he justify this to himself?

How did Tamar respond to her death sentence? Why doesn't she just make a public proclamation? What is this revealing to us about her motives and character?

Joseph is faced with a choice – cover up or honesty. He has been here before. He responds differently this time. What has changed in Judah? How do we know things have changed?

What insight does this give us into Judah's growing faith and character? Look at Proverbs 28:13

How does the story end for Tamar? Has she got all that she wanted do you think?

How does the story end for Judah? What has he learned through all of this?

Look at Genesis 43:8. What does this tell us about the journey that Judah has been on?

Look at Ruth 4:12. What does this tell us about how Tamar is seen by her descendants?

As we read the latter part of Genesis, it is easy to think that Joseph is the hero of the story. In many ways, his faith through testing times is exemplary. Yet Matthew 1:2-3 tells a different story. It is Judah who is the ancestor of Jesus, and it is through Perez the son of Tamar, and not through his son Shelah.

Reflection: What does this tell us of God's purposes? Look up Isaiah 55:8.

What is most encouraging for you in Tamar's story? What has been hardest?

Sometimes God expects us to travel faithfully with him through real hardship and suffering. Why do you think he asks so much of us?

It is easy to think that disobedience to God's ways will disqualify us from his Kingdom, yet that is clearly not the case here. Does obedience then not matter?

How should we balance the importance of grace and the fruits of obedience in our church life?