

Judah and Tamar

38: 1-30

Why is this story here? The conclusion of **Chapter 37** would lead beautifully into **Chapter 39** without the seeming intervening story of **Judah** and **Tamar**. The human author **Moses** takes us to the edge of our seats with **Joseph's** abduction and sale into slavery. But just as **Yosef** is chained and dragged off to Egypt, **Moshe** diverts our attention with the far less interesting subplot about **Judah's** family. But the **Judah** storyline is crucial, and the Holy Spirit skillfully weaves it into **Joseph's** story with powerful effect.

First, the narrative at the end of Chapter 37 leaves us in suspense. No sooner are we informed that **Joseph** has been sold to Potiphar in Egypt than suddenly we are left to wonder what happened to **him**. The **Judah-Tamar** narrative is a detour that takes us, like **Joseph's** family, far from **him** and back to Canaan. **Yosef** is left alone, where **he** grows up without **his** family as **Judah** marries, raises **his sons** and **they** marry as well.

Second, it creates a sharp and unmistakable contrast between Judah's behavior and Joseph's character in the next chapter. There **Judah** marries a **Canaanite** woman whom **he** should not have married, then has sex with **his** ex-daughter-in-law who **he** thinks is a prostitute, but to draw a distinction, **Yosef** refuses to fall victim to sexual sin. In contrast to the exemplary moral character that **Joseph** exhibits in faraway Egypt even though no one was watching **him**, **Judah** is in a spiritual free fall.

Third, this chapter gives us perspective in the development of Judah's character. The impact of **Tamar's** actions on **Judah** adds an unexpected twist to **her** story. For a man whose life was spinning out of control, **his** collision with **Tamar** was more like hitting a cement wall. Twenty-two years later, at the end of **Genesis** when **Judah** meets **Joseph** again, **he** is a changed man as **he** pleads for the life of **his** youngest brother Benjamin and sacrificially takes **his** place as a slave.

Fourth, this chapter gives us some insight into why the children of Israel needed to spend four hundred years as slaves in Egypt. The sins of **Judah** in this chapter are merely representative of all the brothers. But because **Jesus Christ** would come through **him**, **he** is the most prominent, and thus used as the example. In this chapter we find that the chosen family begins to intermarry with the Canaanites and to participate in their sins as well. This

is exactly what **Abraham, Isaac and Jacob** were careful not to do. So the four hundred years of slavery in Egypt were necessary for the preservation of the Jewish nation and of the Jewish faith. Because the Egyptians would have little to do with them, they were kept separate, they multiplied, and in their persecution they were forced to rely on **God**.

Finally, the story points us forward with the birth of Perez, who will become the forefather of both King David and **the Messiah Himself**. The point is that **the Lord** will carry out **His** purposes of **3:15** and the seed of the woman no matter how people act. Even though they may be unfaithful, the sovereign will of **the Lord** will accomplish **His** purpose for **His** people.⁵⁷⁹ Once again the name of **God** is absent from this chapter.