

Judah, Tamar & Ms. Jones

It wasn't too long ago that Marilee Jones was the dean of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, otherwise known as "M.I.T."—one of the most prestigious schools in the country. She became dean of admissions in 1997 and served in that position for the next 10 years when she left M.I.T. in 2007. During that time, Ms. Jones was considered to be one of the most innovative admission deans in the country, and wrote various books about her professional experiences. In one of these books, she wrote: " Holding integrity is sometimes very hard to do because the temptation may be to cheat or cut corners. But just remember that 'what goes around comes around,' meaning that life has a funny way of giving back what you put out." What an interesting comment from Ms. Jones—one that we'll come back to a bit later.¹

But before we do, recall that a couple weeks ago, I started a sermon series focusing on the life of Joseph. And when we last read about him in Genesis 37, his brothers had thrown him into a pit to die, but thought better of it and opted to sell him to some Ishmaelite traders. And it was there that we last saw Joseph as he headed over the sand dunes in the custody of those merchants on their way to Egypt—where eventually he would be sold into slavery. So as we move over into the next chapter, Genesis 38, we are anxious to see what is going to happen to Joseph. But as we turn the page, the narrative isn't about Joseph at all. Rather, it describes what happened to one of Joseph's older brothers, Judah. And it is here that we find one of the most twisted and unseemly stories that you'll ever find in the Scriptures. In fact, the things that go on in this story are quite disturbing. If today's movie rating labels were applied to this story, they would certainly read: "R-Rated for sexually explicit content, disturbing imagery & themes." This morning, I will summarize for you what happened, but will try to keep it to a PG-13 rating.

After Judah and his brothers returned to their father, Jacob, and deceptively led him to believe that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal, Jacob was overcome by terrible grief. Apparently, he was so stricken with grief that Judah could not stand all the noise and sobbing. So, Judah left home presumably to get away from any reminder of his complicity in the wrong he'd committed against Joseph and the pain he'd caused his father. And what is being described in Genesis 38 is the next 22 years of Judah's life.² It tells us that Judah headed west down to Adullam, which today is nothing more than some ruins located about 13 miles roughly southwest of Bethlehem.³ And there, Judah married a Canaanite woman and out of that marriage came three sons: Er, Onan and Shelah.

The oldest son, Er, also marries a Canaanite woman, named Tamar. But, Er was not a good man—we don't know what he did, but he was terribly wicked. And so God allows him to die, apparently at an early age, because he left Tamar without any children. Now imagine what a terrible spot that that left Tamar in. She was no longer married, yet she was not a virgin. And in the ancient world, this meant that if she returned to her original Canaanite clan, she would not be much of a candidate for any new marriage. Without children or a husband to help her to get by, there were not many things that she could depend upon to survive—except for one occupation (some say the world's oldest one) that

we'll talk about in a few minutes. So Tamar is facing a very real social and economic problem—she was certainly a woman in need.

But God's laws anticipated problems like this. In fact, God's people followed a tradition that would later, during the time of Moses, become part of the written law.⁴ It is something that we refer to as *levirate* marriage. *Levirate* comes from a Latin word meaning "*brother-in-law*." Under this custom, if an older brother died leaving his wife without children, then it was the obligation of the next oldest brother to do two things. First, he was supposed to marry his brother's widow; and, second, he was supposed to do his best to have a male child by her. This custom served two very important purposes. The primary purpose was to make certain that there would be a male heir to receive the deceased brother's land—i.e. to carry on this name in possessing his part of the Promised Land. The secondary purpose of levirate marriage was something that women like Tamar depended upon. It preserved their social status in the community as a wife and a mother, and assured them that they would be cared for. This obligation on the surviving brother-in-law's part wasn't supposed to be optional. It was absolutely mandatory. And anyone who failed to comply was very much in God's disfavor. Anyone who did their duty—came in and saved the day for both the deceased brother's surviving widow was a savior indeed. And because of that, the dutiful brother was sometimes referred to as a "kinsman redeemer."⁵

So when Tamar's first husband died, his brother, Onan, was supposed to step up to the plate and marry her and do his duty in seeing that she became pregnant to bear a child—hopefully a male one. Now Onan appears to do his duty because he does, in fact, marry Tamar and you would expect that it was his intention to follow through in producing a male heir. But that's not what happened. What happened is one of those things that would cause this story to get an R-rating. The KJV, NIV, ESV and most of the others are fairly explicit in describing this, but I promised a PG-13 version. So let's hear how the Amplified Version of the Bible describes what happened. It tames things down quite a bit by putting it this way: "But Onan knew that the family would not be his, so when he cohabited with his brother's widow, he prevented conception, lest he should raise up a child for his brother." Genesis 38:9 (AMP)

Now if there is any question about what is going on here from a purely carnal standpoint, then you are welcome to read from the other more explicit versions of the Bible, and I'm sure that you will get the picture. Suffice it to say, that Onan was quite capable of making Tamar pregnant, but he made sure that it never happened. Now why would he do that? Well, it wasn't so much his actions here that are at issue (as bad as they were). Rather, as it was his motivations that were purely evil—so much so that God puts him to death just as He had done with his brother before him. You see, Onan knew that if he fathered a male child by Tamar, then under this concept of levirate marriage, the child would be considered as the child of his dead brother—and not Onan's own child. And because of that, this child would inherit his dead brother's portion of the land. But, if there were no such child, Onan himself (being the next oldest son of Judah) would get it all. So Onan's actions were wicked not only because he shirked his duty, but due to the fact that he was motivated by his own greed and selfishness. He wasn't interested in preserving the line of deceased brother—although he piously tried to make it look that way by marrying Tamar and then sleeping with her. And who

would know about his practice that prevented her from becoming pregnant anyway? What he did behind closed bedroom doors was his own business; it was out of the sight of everyone—everyone, except God. You know, when people try to put on this false appearance of serving God, but they are only serving themselves—well, that makes God very angry. That’s what brought on Onan’s death.

So now, it was up to Judah to step forward and offer his third and final son, Selah, to marry Tamar. But, Judah balked on that. He perceived what he thought was an unhealthy pattern for those husbands of Tamar. Two of his sons had married her and two of his sons had died—so, he didn’t want to take the chance of Selah marrying her and becoming yet a third dead husband. So, Judah started mimicking the same deceptive nature as his recently deceased son, Onan. He told Tamar to head on back to her Canaanite clan, and he’d send Selah over to marry her once he got just a little older. But this was a mere excuse. Judah had no intention whatsoever of sending his third son to marry Tamar.

And after the passage of time, this became clear to Tamar and she was quite desperate. And during her desperation, she heard that Judah was headed to the town of Timnah. So, she came up with her own deceptive plan. She dressed up in the garb of a prostitute and went to sit by the entrance to the town. And when Judah passed by, he took notice of her. But because her face was covered by a veil, Judah didn’t realize that it was his own daughter-in-law sitting there looking so enticing. So, he approached her—assuming her professional status to be that of a prostitute—and they got into an R-rated negotiation. Finally, they settled upon having Judah pay her a goat for her services. The guy on the TV commercial used to ask, “What’s in your wallet?” Well, one thing for sure was that a goat wasn’t in Judah’s wallet. But Tamar didn’t do her business on unsecured credit, so she wanted some kind of collateral before going behind closed doors with Judah. Tamar was no dummy. She knew that prominent business men of her day always carried three forms of identification. Typically, these would include a signet ring that they wore on a decorative cord around their necks that was used to seal their contracts. And many times, these businessmen also carried a walking stick or staff with their own personal brand carved in the wood.⁶ And while Judah didn’t happen to have a goat in his back pocket, he did have these three forms of identification. So, he agreed to give them to Tamar for her to hold as collateral so he could get on with enjoying her services. He’d have a servant bring her a goat the next day, and the servant was to retrieve the collateral so that this sordid business deal with Tamar could be consummated—so to speak.

Accordingly, they proceeded to transact their sexually laden business and, as a result, Tamar winds up getting pregnant by Judah. And then he left. Afterward, Judah sent his servant back to town with the goat in payment of her services, but Tamar was nowhere to be found. Toward the end of Genesis 38, it tells us what happened next:²⁴ About three months later Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant.” [Of course, unbeknownst to Judah, it is his own child that Tamar is carrying.] Judah said, “Bring her out and have her burned to death!”²⁵ As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. “I am pregnant by the man who owns these,” she said. And she added, “See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are.” [Wow! Judah’s jaw must have dropped because it tells us:]²⁶ Judah recognized them and said, “She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not sleep with her again. Genesis 38:24-26 (NIV)

What a twisted, sexually depraved, awful story. We think that we have some dysfunctional families today (and we certainly do!), but this story about Judah—one of the great-grandson's of Abraham—takes the cake. And when we read this, we usually feel like just moving past it to avoid the filth and disgusting subject matter. What possible relevance could this have in the 21st century? After all, levirate marriage and such absurd deceptions as we find in this story are things of the past—right? Well, levirate marriage might be, but deception is just as big a problem now as it was then—and that is what this story speaks to. Deception is usually coupled with wickedness—the kind of wickedness that leads to death. And I'm not just talking about the physical death that God brought upon Onan for his greed-motivated deception. I'm also referring to the *self*-deception that we can become so comfortable with that leads to spiritual death, and ultimately an eternal separation from God in a place called Hell. It's the kind of deception that Judah had come to embrace. As a great-grandson of Abraham, he had come to feel secure in his relationship with God merely by his family heritage. But, God is no respecter of heritage or social status.⁷

The deception that we practice today is patterned on that of Genesis 38. It's the kind of deception that Tamar resorted to as she stooped to prostitution during her time of great desperation. But for those who believe that the ends justify the means—when those means are contrary to God's Word—they only deceive themselves. It's the kind of deception that Marilee Jones, the dean at M.I.T. sank into as well. Remember Ms. Jones comments in her book about the importance of maintaining one's integrity, and that part where she proclaimed: "*Just remember that 'what goes around comes around,'—life has a funny way of giving back what you put out.*" Indeed, it does. You see, the reason Ms. Jones left her position as dean at M.I.T. after holding that position for 10 years was that she had deceived herself into thinking that she could deceive everyone else indefinitely. But she couldn't, because it eventually came to light that when she was first being considered to take the job as the school's dean, she had lied on her resume. All those degrees and qualifications that she'd listed on her resume—she had just made them up. As she left M.I.T. in disgrace, she posted the following statement on the M.I.T. website: "I misrepresented my academic degrees when I first applied to MIT 28 years ago and did not have the courage to correct my résumé when I applied for my current job or at any time since. I am deeply sorry for this and for disappointing so many in the MIT community and beyond who supported me, believed in me, and who have given me extraordinary opportunities." I find it so very interesting that the New York Times reporter who wrote the news article about Ms. Jones' resignation happen to have the name of Ms. Lewin—that is *Tamar* Lewin.⁸ Coincidence?—I don't think so.

But, isn't it true that we are all like Judah, Tamar and Ms. Jones in one way or the other? Haven't we all engaged in seedy, deceptive and death-deserving things in the past? And because of that are we doomed to die in our sin, like Onan? Or must we resign from the pursuit of God's Kingdom, like Ms. Jones had to resign from M.I.T? The answer is no! Though our situation may appear to be as desperate as that of Tamar—we do we have hope! But, hope in what?

Well Genesis 38 provides a clue to answering this question. It doesn't leave us hanging—wondering what ever happened to the pregnant Tamar. It points to our hope by telling us that Tamar gave birth to twins—one of whom was named Perez. Who is Perez? As it turns out, he was one of the ancestors of David. And from the line of David, a Savior

was born—He would be called the Lion of Judah—the Holy One, Jesus Christ.⁹ You see, even out of this sordid story of Judah and Tamar, God eventually brought forth the birth of His Son. We might have expected Jesus' earthly pedigree to have come from Joseph—the Joseph who was sold into slavery in Egypt and became a model of faithfulness to God. But, the fact that Jesus came from a line that runs through Judah and Tamar tells us something important—something that offers us great hope. The fact that Jesus' biological line is so mixed with human sorrow, tragedy and failure reflects the fact that He would be “a man of sorrows—a friend of publicans and sinners—calling not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”¹⁰

Reflecting upon this passage in Genesis 38, the great theologian Martin Luther wrote, “The church of God has great need of these examples. For what would become of us? What hope would be left for us if Peter had not denied Christ and all the apostles had not taken offense at Him, and if Moses, Aaron and David had not fallen? Therefore, God wanted to console sinners with these examples and to say: 'If you have fallen, return; for the door of mercy is open to you . . . [only] trust in my grace and mercy.'”¹¹ God promises us that “where sin [may] increase, grace [shall abound] all the more.”¹² It is a sign of the unlimited love, mercy and grace that Jesus Christ offers to the likes of Judah and Tamar and Ms. Jones—and to you and me, no matter how sin-stained and deceptive our pasts may be.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
September 24, 2017
Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor ©2017

¹ Tamar Lewin, "Dean at MIT Resigns, Ending a 28-Year Lie," *New York Times* (April 27, 2007); submitted by Brian Lowery and Kevin Miller, <http://www.preachingtoday.com>.

² James Montgomery Boice, *An Expository Commentary – Genesis, Volume 3: Living by Faith (Genesis 37-50)*, Paperback ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 894.

³ James Orr, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Chicago: Howard-Severance Co., 1915), s.v. "ADULLAM," WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

⁴ Deuteronomy 25:5-6 (NIV) ⁵ If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. ⁶ The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *An Expository Commentary – Genesis, Volume 3: Living by Faith (Genesis 37-50)*, Paperback ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 896. See also: Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page, Matthew J. M. Coomber, ed., *Fortress Commentary on the Bible – Old Testament and Apocrypha, The*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 133.

⁶ MacArthur Study Bible.

⁷ Acts 10:34 (AMP) And Peter opened his mouth and said: Most certainly and thoroughly I now perceive and understand that God shows no partiality and is no respecter of persons.

⁸ Id. Tamar Lewin, "Dean at MIT Resigns, Ending a 28-Year Lie," *New York Times* (April 27, 2007).

⁹ Matthew 1:3-6 (NIV) ³ Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴ Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife. Revelation 5:5 (NIV)

⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

¹⁰ James Montgomery Boice, *An Expository Commentary – Genesis, Volume 3: Living by Faith (Genesis 37-50)*, Paperback ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 897-898. Isaiah 53:3 (NIV) He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Matthew 11:19 (KJV) The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. Matthew 9:13 (KJV) But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

¹¹ Ibid. James Montgomery Boice, 897-898.

¹² Romans 5:20 (ESV) Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.