

**Beneath Joseph's Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat:  
The story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38)**

Reading the Biblical story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar can give us the distinct impression that we're trespassing into the forbidden pages of someone's personal diary. Not only does this illicit account appear out of place in the Bible, it also seems to be nothing more than a rude interruption to the story of Joseph (which just got underway in the previous chapter). But this narrative is not just an unfortunate literary accident. It has been carefully crafted and strategically placed within the account of Jacob's family in order to produce maximum impact and insight. For example, when the saga of Joseph recommences in the next chapter we'll see how Joseph's resolute determination to be faithful in the face of Potiphar's wife's persistent temptation now stands out in more stark contrast against his older brother's casual pursuit of sin (compare 38:13 – 18 with 39:6 – 10). But ironically, as the Joseph story progresses we'll also see Judah slowly but surely emerging as the leader of Israel's family (e.g. Genesis 37:26 – 27; 43:1 – 5; 44:14 – 34). In fact, before this narrative reaches its conclusion Jacob will bless his fourth son as the tribe through whom Christ will eventually be born (Genesis 49:9 – 12).<sup>1</sup> It may seem incredible that the world's saviour would be born of the fruit of Jacob's corrupt family tree. But this embarrassingly honest story succeeds in exposing any false notions that the people of God is anything more than a group of ordinary sinners who are desperately in need of a Saviour.

1. Read Genesis 38:1 – 5. Why is it significant that Judah left his family and went to live, marry and raise his family among the Canaanites?
2. Read verses 6 – 8. In the context of God's promise to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:1 – 3), why is it significant that Judah's first born son, Er, died childless?
3. Read verses 9 – 10. Why was it considered evil that Judah's second son, Onan, refused to produce children for his older brother?
4. Read verse 11. Why did Judah send Tamar back to her own father rather than having her live in his house until his youngest son, Shelah, was old enough to marry her?
5. Read verses 12 – 16. Why do you think Tamar was so confident that if she disguised herself as a prostitute, Judah would proposition her?
6. Read verses 17 – 25. Why was Tamar determined to collect a pledge from Judah?
7. On what basis did Judah proclaim that Tamar was more righteous than him? (38: 26)
8. Why does this story conclude by telling us of another case of sibling rivalry within Jacob's family?
9. As sordid as this story may seem, what spiritual lessons you can glean from it?

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<sup>1</sup> If it seems odd that Jacob should give this blessing to his fourth son it should be noted that his oldest Son Reuben disgraced his father by sleeping with Jacob's concubine Bilhah (Genesis 49:3 – 4); and his second and third sons, Simeon and Levi, brought serious trouble on Jacob and his family when they launched a deceptive and murderous revenge attack against a neighbouring city (Genesis 49:5 - 7).