

The Scepter Given to Judah

Fall Quarter: God's Exceptional Choice
Unit 1: God Calls Abraham's Family
Lesson 4

Sunday School Lesson for the week of September 25, 2022
By Craig Rikard

Lesson Scripture: Genesis 35:22b-26; 38:12-19, 24-26, 49:8-12

Key Text: The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

Authors note: This is a supplemental lesson for the lesson in the Teacher's Book. The traditional masculine pronouns are used for literary flow. We all must be mindful that God transcends gender.

Introduction and Context

As cited in previous Sunday School lessons, there is a repetitive pattern in Genesis of men and women abusing God's grace, or being unfaithful to covenant. Thankfully, there also exists the pattern of God redeeming the covenant people in spite of their sins and mistakes. Those of my generation might call today's narrative a "soap opera." It is a story sated with self-righteous judgement, sexism, and shame. Let's examine the basic events in this narrative.

Levirate Law

We need to travel historically backward to Jacob. His name has been changed to Israel, but our narrative uses his former name. He had twelve sons, which are later known as the 12 tribes of Israel. Remember, our story predates Mosaic Law. *Grace predates law*. This does not mean the near-eastern people who lived prior to the Mosaic Law were lawless. Customs and laws did exist. Many of them were assimilated in the Mosaic Law. The law governing marriage and families was known as Levirate.

Violation of Levirate Law

Jacob's fourth son, Judah, married a Canaanite woman named Shua. (Note: The Jewish people were never totally of the same bloodline. Many of the men married women from other tribes. It is interesting to note that the male bloodline counted, and the woman's never considered. Yet, if the couple was childless, it was always blamed on the woman). Judah's and Shua's first son was named Er. Later as Er approached adolescence, Tamar was chosen to be Er's wife. These arranged marriages could occur when the children were very young. Tamar is one of the central characters in this tense, unsettling story. The Bible informs us that Er did evil in the sight of the Lord. It is interesting to note that the near-eastern people recognized a state of heart in which the person was evil, prior to Mosaic Law. According to the Bible, Er's sinful life led to his death. Under Levirate Marriage Law, Judah was to give another of his sons to marry Tamar. He was to have a son with her for the purpose of ensuring the continuance of his name and bloodline. It is

difficult to image how important this law was to near-eastern people. They lacked a clear understanding of the afterlife. Thus, they believed a person continued to live through their descendants. If the Hebrew male had no descendants, his name would disappear from the face of the earth. This thought was horrifying for a Hebrew couple. Thus, Judah gave his son Onan to marry Tamar. However, Onan refused to have a child with her. Instead, he is known as “spilling his seed upon the ground.” This was severe violation of Levirate Law, and the act itself was judged as sinful by many into the 1950s. However, the reason Onanism was judged as sinful was because it hindered procreation. Scripture reveals that God was greatly displeased with Onan for refusing to obey Levirate Law. Onan’s rebellion, like Er’s, is understood to have led to his death.

Can you identify the benefits of the Levirate Law in that era? Can identify the weaknesses in Levirate Law?

Mistreatment of Tamar

Now, Tamar is widow for the second time. Judah is required by Law to provide another son to Tamar. However, he commits a judgmental, sexist, selfish act that leaves Tamar unmarried. He told Tamar to remain under the care of his house until his young son Shelah grew up. Then, she could marry him. Asking Tamar to wait ensured she would never marry one of his sons again. Tamar was now most likely near what we call midlife. Let’s examine Judah’s sin against Tamar.

Judah has blamed Tamar for the death of both sons. He was so certain their deaths were Tamar’s fault that he did not want to lose another son. Thus, he devised a plan to promise her the marriage of Shelah. Undoubtedly, Tamar would be too old by the time Shelah reached age to marry. This act ensured that Tamar would live without a husband, and most likely die without one. This was a judgmental act for there was no merit to his accusation. Judah refused to observe the obvious sins of his sons. Er and Onan sinned, leading to their deaths. Judah chose to believe in their virtue (which was mediocre at best) while blaming Tamar.

What role did patriarchalism play in the sin of Judah? Can you identify the “blindness” of Judah to the sins of his son after their deaths? What is obviously human about Judah’s sin as father? Can you identify Judah transferring the real guilt of his sons upon Tamar? In what ways can we transfer known sins that make us so uncomfortable to face unto another?

Tamara’s Quest for Justice

Tamar was a wise person. Tamar used her circumstances to acquire justice. Since Judah refused to give her justice, she would receive justice for herself. Tamar dressed and disguised herself as a harlot. She lured Judah into her trap. Judah had promised Tamar a young goat for payment. Wise Tamar asked Judah to leave his identifying seal and walking stick as collateral. Judah agreed. Weeks later, news reached Judah that Tamar was with child. She had no husband, so to Judah her pregnancy represented a grave sin and violation of Levirate Law. Unknown to him, the child was his own. Judah calls for her death, which would also take the life of her child.

Tamar then reveals the seal and walking stick regarding the father of the child. We can only image the stunned, shamed look that must have covered Judah’s face. His sins have indeed found him out. He has sinned against Tamar in not providing her a husband. He has sinned against her

for blaming her for her son's deaths. He had lain with Tamar, disguised as a prostitute, and he impregnated her. Judah has done what his son Onan refused to do.

Was Tamara's plot to gain justice ethical? If it wasn't, why? What unique circumstances apply to Tamara since she would never receive justice from Judah or the Israelite tribe? Did her circumstances make her actions acceptable?

At this point, Judah is a shamed, broken man. He would have understood King David's cry in Psalm 51, "My sins are ever before me." His confessional statement is honest and genuine, "She is more righteous than I."

Lessons from the Narrative

Our Witness as a Law-Abiding People

Within this "soap opera" dwells so much truth about human nature, sin, and God's grace. Levirate Law, and later Mosaic Law, provided society with a system of order and protection. Breaking law always disrupted society whether that disruption was small or great. This remains true for our modern functioning. We are a people of laws. Law is intended to bring order and protection. When laws are broken people suffer.

As Christians we believe in living orderly for the good of all. However, we also recognize the need to live by spiritual law, especially the law of love. Jesus claimed that if a person loved God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength, and their neighbor as themselves, they would actually obey all law. If I love you, I will not steal from you, I will not kill you (with weapon or words), I will not covet what you have, etc. If I love my wife, I will not commit adultery. If I love myself as the temple of God, I will not harm my body or abuse it. If I love God, I will not take his name in vain or worship other gods.

Our text reveals the consequences of violating law and covenant. When Jesus said in John 13:35, "the world will know us by our love," it also means they will know us through our law keeping, our respect for others, our refusal to harm, etc. There is so much pain in our story, inflicted pain. When Er and Onan sinned they unleashed harm and pain which unfolded like a row of falling dominoes. Tamar is inflicted with terrible, deep pain. She has lost two husbands, has been covertly blamed for their deaths, has been denied a future with a husband, and has been assigned to an existence offering little more than shelter and food. She has been so devalued by Judah that she has to participate in an act she most certainly disdained. Judah, in the end, had been hurt. His sins came home to roost, and they were not pretty. He had hurt so many in his life.

Do you believe our sins indeed eventually find us out? Can you recall an experience whereby you experienced this O.T. truth without calling names? Have you even experienced a time when your sins found you out?

God Uses Our Sins and Failures for Redemptive Purposes

Guilt is an interesting word. It is both an emotion and a fact. All of us have uttered the phrase, "I feel guilty." If we didn't say it, we felt it. There is a difference between "*feeling* guilty" and "*being* guilty." It is possible for us to feel guilty for something that wasn't a sin. Various

branches of Christendom have condemned people for behaviors they considered sin. However, when one honestly studies in context the Biblical text they use to condemn, we discover it isn't a sin at all. This condemnation can damage the spirit of the "guilty" individual and lead to a misunderstanding of God's nature. God is often perceived as an angry God who is difficult to please.

Can you share a list of actions and behaviors once considered sin, that are no longer perceived in the same manner when studied in context? Can you identify the pain caused when people are made to feel guilty about a matter that wasn't a sin at all?

On the other hand, there are behaviors and thoughts that make us feel guilty because we "are guilty." That is fact. If I harm an individual intentionally, as a Christian, I will feel guilty. I will feel guilty because I am guilty. There are individuals in relationship with the Lord who are masterful at burying the feeling of guilt beneath justifications and rationalizations. In actuality, they are postponing feeling the effect of guilt. Guilt does not disappear apart from confession and forgiveness. As stated previously, our sins do find us out! Guilt will weave its way through our insensitivity and manifest itself in a myriad of ways. Years ago, I counseled a member suffering from severe insomnia and physical tics. After a few conversations the member confessed to something. He spoke on his own, and out of the blue. It was actually the soul deeply trying to rid itself of the guilt. After praying for forgiveness, the tics immediately lessened and disappeared. Eventually, the same happened with the insomnia. Guilt is a powerful, serious state of being.

God created us to feel such guilt. The human spirit was created for serenity, creativity, joy and meaning. Guilt stifles all four. The desire for redemption is a gift from God in the conscience that leads each of us to seek forgiveness, restoration, community, and new life. On occasion God uses our experiences to confront us with our destructive sin and guilt. Why? God allows us to experience guilt to draw us toward the Lord and forgiveness.

In our narrative, Judah has to face his sin and guilt. In facing Tamar, he is facing his own unrighteousness. Tamar holds the proof of his sin before him. He cannot deny his own seal and staff.

Judah's sin and hypocrisy stare him in the eye. He condemned Tamar to death, along with the child within her. Now, he cannot run from his part in the awful situation confronting him. Judah is not only aware of his sin in lying with Tamar, he realizes he has sinned against her prior to that moment. This is the rationale behind his saying, "She is more righteous than I."

This painful moment in Judah's life occurred, not because God desires to condemn and punish Judah. It occurs because the Lord desires that Judah become a better man, an honest man of faith. He is the man who will live in covenant, and pass the meaning and call of covenant to his descendants. The Lord is not going to allow Judah to destroy himself or dishonor the Covenant without confronting him and offering incredible grace.

When we experience guilt, and seek to rationalize or justify it, the guilt remains. God is never going to abandon us. Whether we own our sins and repent is our decision. But the Lord's

decision is to hound us. The God who hounds us is the God of Jonah. We cannot run or hide. We can run until we find ourselves in the stomach of sea serpent, God will be there.

Our sins always find us out. However, guilt and its aggravating, even painful consequences are not intended for punishment. They exist to call us to repentance. They call us to experience grace and a new life.

Can you recall a time when your guilt led you to confession and forgiveness? Can you share such a moment? Can you identify the negative aspects of unnecessary guilt? Can you identify the grace of God present in our real guilt?

Covenantal Promises for the Forgiven Who Walk with God

In Gen. 49:10-12, we read poetic prose of God's covenantal blessings. We are given a vision of a rich vineyard, yielding the best of wine. The writer uses God's blessings in covenant to paint the picture of Judah, dressed in the "colors of covenant." His robes are washed in wine. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk. Remember, the Promised Land will yield fruit, wine, and be a land that flows with milk and honey.

What is truly beautiful in this hymn is the reality that the fulfilling of the covenant will continue through Judah in spite of his sins. He is now a man of confession and forgiveness. A new life awaits him. The "scepter" is still planted between his feet. He and his descendants will be used to bring the nations to God.

This is a poem of promise for us. God not only forgives and restores, God leads us toward the promises available in Jesus Christ. We began with a wild soap opera, and we end with forgiveness, redemption, restoration, and promise!

Prayer

Almighty God, grant us humility, the humility to face truth, especially the truth concerning our own heart. We confess our sins, while acknowledging the great guilt we experience. Wash us as white as snow. Though our sins be as scarlet, let them white as wool. Thank you for never giving up on us. Lead us always toward your great, loving promises. In Jesus name, Amen.

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