

GENESIS—WEEK 30

DECEPTION



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Judah and Tamar by Arent de Gelder (1645–1727)
Not on display anywhere. It's in a private collection.*

Joseph's brothers hatch a scheme to deceive Israel over the "disappearance" of Joseph. He's certainly deceived, but the result isn't what they hoped for.

Then Judah deceives Tamar about his plans for her, and she deceives him right back. Judah gets his bell rung big time but responds in righteous repentance. A key righteous genealogical line begins in sin.

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Thank you.

Genesis 37:25–38:30 — Deception
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1 Genesis 37:25–36 (ESV)

Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him. Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes and returned to his brothers and said, “The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?” Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, “This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not.” And he identified it and said, “It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father wept for him. Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

Reuben is stuck. He's responsible for Joseph but has failed to keep him safe. What's he going to do now? *“The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?”*

One obvious possibility is to do nothing—to just go home and say, “I don't know where Joseph is.” Technically, that's not a lie—he doesn't know where Joseph is—but then Reuben and his brothers would spend the rest of their lives on a manhunt. The last thing they want is a lifelong Amber Alert for Joseph. They need a plan that brings closure.

So they don't say anything about what happened to Joseph. They just bring his robe and ask Jacob to identify it. This works, sort of. Jacob concludes on his own that Joseph has been killed by a wild beast (which wasn't all that far-fetched back then).

But the plan still backfires; Jacob becomes inconsolably grief-stricken. The brothers don't get the closure they want and they can't fix it.

Sin disappoints again.

Put the words “sin” and “disappoint” together in a sentence and politics comes to mind. We should pray more often for our nation and its leaders. Yes, they are incredibly sinful at times.

And we're not? Who can count the blessings we enjoy because we live in the USA?

Pray that God would heal our nation. Please pray specifically for those leaders you don't agree with.

They all need God's wisdom—and His blessing.

2 Genesis 38:1–11 (ESV)

It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him.

And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death. Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. And what he did was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also. Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up"—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father's house.

Remember how Abraham didn't want a Canaanite wife for Isaac? Remember also how Esau's wives made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah? Looks like Judah doesn't remember.

That's odd; he must know the history. This is straight-up rebellion, and it's not going well. His first two sons have died, and he's scared that he's going to lose Shelah too. He could end up with no heirs. But how does having Tamar live in her father's house help that? What is he up to here?

It looks like he wants to protect everyone until Shelah is ready to marry Tamar. But, as we shall see later, that's not it. In fact, the truth may be just the opposite.

It's more likely that Judah sees Tamar as the cause of his two sons' deaths and he wants to prevent Shelah and her from ever coming together. This fits very well with what happens next.

But the LORD killed Er and Onan; Tamar had nothing to do with it. In fact, Tamar ultimately becomes the hero of the whole story. She will end up being the mother of the Davidic line.

Judah is being set up for a whopper of an attitude adjustment.

As long as we're on the subject of women who make important contributions, let's lift up the women in our churches. We often don't appreciate the extent to which they seem to carry everything.

Praise God for their dedication, leadership, and initiative. Pray that God will continue to bless the women's ministries. Pray for growth.

Pray that they will be drawn closer to the LORD and to each other.

Pray that the men will learn to fellowship as tightly as the women do.

3 Genesis 38:12–19 (ESV)

In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" He answered, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." And she said, "If you give me a pledge, until you send it—" He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him. Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

Some Bible passages have extra layers in them. If you read them over and over, eventually you see stuff you didn't notice at first—great stuff. Today's passage is like that; so is tomorrow's.

Tamar's plan is brilliant and will glorify God wondrously, but for it to succeed, she needs some kind of proof that it was Judah who had sex with her. The signet ring seals that perfectly. But what's up with the cord and staff? She doesn't need it. It isn't all that valuable either; the ring is what's worth a young goat. Why does she want the staff?

There's no direct answer, but the symbolism here is fascinating. When she later gives the staff, cord, and signet ring back to Judah, she's handing him the symbols of a shepherd-king. This foreshadows both David and Christ.

Maybe this is just a coincidence, but if so, it's a whopper. The staff seems otherwise purposeless and unimportant. How could Tamar know this was in the future?

She didn't. This is all God's doing. Tamar, as great as she is, still isn't a prophet. She isn't even thinking about being a prophet. She has another agenda.

This is just God being God.

He always seems to have something extra up His sleeve.

Judah is about to get a big dose of humility. He needs a big dose of humility.

So do we. The sure-fire way to get humility is to pray for it.

But I must tell you that every time I've prayed for humility, the result has been incredibly painful.

So, take my recommendation with a grain of salt.

Whatever you do, don't take it lightly.

4 Genesis 38:20-26 (ESV)

When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute who was at Enaim at the roadside?" And they said, "No cult prostitute has been here." So he returned to Judah and said, "I have not found her. Also, the men of the place said, 'No cult prostitute has been here.'" And Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her."

About three months later Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant." And she said, "Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." Then Judah identified them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not know her again.

Tamar doesn't trust Judah any farther than she can throw him. Yet she delivers all the evidence to him in a way that gives him a perfect opportunity for a cover-up. He's threatening to burn her, and yet she implements a high-risk defense strategy. From a secular point of view, it looks stupid.

But it's both smart and one of the greatest examples of faith in the entire Bible. Yes, it's a high-risk strategy, but high risk of what? If Tamar's goal is to "look out for number one," then her strategy is insanely risky. But if her goal is to glorify God and advance His kingdom, then her strategy is brilliant.

Tamar's willingness to lay everything on the altar is the key. Notice that Judah's reaction is totally out of character. In an instant, his attitude reverses. This looks supernatural; God blesses Tamar's plan, but it's her plan that set the stage. The shock of seeing his own signet and staff jolted Judah into repentance.

Tamar was wise to have this moment not be a public confrontation. Even if Judah was not alone when he saw the evidence, all the action was in private—inside his head. Repentance is almost always a private moment. People keep their guard up in public, and a public challenge can lead to a hardened heart.

God and Tamar make a gloriously great team here, and Tamar's obedient heart is the secret sauce.

Tamar displayed a courageous and pure heart. She stuck her neck out, making God's agenda her agenda. Pray that God will grow that kind of heart in us. Pray that He will give us the courage to model the gospel to even the most unlovable of our neighbors.

But Tamar's greatness wasn't just courage; she cleverly depended on God. She took necessary risks, not unnecessary ones. One of the challenges in following Christ is separating obedience from recklessness. Sometimes God wants us to do things that look stupid from a secular point of view. How can we know?

There's no easy answer. Pray (obviously). Seek the advice of others. Be willing to make mistakes.

5 Genesis 38:27-30 (ESV)

When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, "This one came out first." But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" Therefore his name was called Perez. Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.

Chapter 38 is a detour from the story of Joseph and his unlikely rise to a position from which he can save his whole family. This short and seemingly unimportant note about the birth of Perez and Zerah is the end of that detour, and presumably the point. Perez is the great⁷-grandfather of David.

Okay, but that genealogy could have been included without all the drama about Tamar. And what's the point of the scarlet thread?

Actually, all this drama is needed to get the genealogy right. The midwife clearly sees this firstborn as the household heir (i.e., Er's firstborn). Her excessive attention to that feels like she was told to track it. If merely a child of Judah, it would be "behind" Shelah, and 1 Chronicles 4:21 notes many descendants of Shelah.

This means Judah confessed his sin fully to his household and also concluded that the firstborn counts as Er's as per Deuteronomy 25:5-6. This is essential to the genealogy of David and of Christ.

The fact that the thread is scarlet may signify something, but that's not essential. Scarlet threads are mentioned in Exodus 26:1, 28:6 and Joshua 2:18, but the color isn't specifically called special. Besides, it's Zerah that ends up with the thread, not Perez.

What matters is why the midwife used the thread.

But Judah isn't Israel's firstborn, so how significant can this be anyway? Therein lies a deeper lesson.

While the culture emphasizes genealogy, and the Bible includes copious accounts of it, God makes a point of not following the "rules." All this copious accounting serves to precisely record how God's plans ignore (or even mock) man's rules.

This is yet another way that ancient scripture looks supernaturally wise in modern light. Judah's the fourth born of Jacob. Jacob's the second born of Isaac. David will be the eighth son of Jesse. The LORD doesn't think much of man's rules about firstborns.

Scripture will go on to record women as the first eyewitnesses of the resurrection, mocking the first century culture's disrespect for the testimony of women.

People who are a generation ahead of their time are counted as super-wise. The Bible's a hundred generations ahead of its time.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever had a plan work, only to realize in the long run that the way it “worked” wasn’t so great after all?
2. Whose contribution to the church is under appreciated? If this is in a group discussion, avoid mentioning someone present.
3. Have you ever noticed something odd, curious, or out of place and wondered if that meant something—then later found out that it did?
4. Have you ever taken a risk (“stuck your neck out”) for God?
5. Recall something or someone that was way ahead of its/his/her time.