

NO ONE CARED WHO I WAS 'TIL I PUT ON THE MASK

GENESIS 38:1-30 NOVEMBER 2, 2022

Moviegoers love a good reveal. Whether it's Oz, The Great and Powerful, or Verbal Kint, or Darth Vader, we relish when a character's mask comes off and their true identity is brought to light.

The *Mission: Impossible* franchise might take the character reveal too literally. In six movies, they've had *fifteen* scenes when a character dramatically tears off a mask to show who is underneath.¹ My favorites are the 'masks' that somehow *also* change Tom Cruise's height and weight.

There's a dramatic unmasking, a shocking reveal, in Genesis 38. The text is sordid, but the story isn't being told to scandalize us - the Bible isn't a tabloid. Why has God included this embarrassing episode for us? As we've seen many times already in the Book, the Lord doesn't shy away from telling us the truth, even when it's ugly. But this text isn't just about uncovering sin. It's about revealing God's grace and His irrepressible accomplishing of good, even when man is doing all the wrong he can. Let's take a look at those reveals, starting in verse 1.

Genesis 38:1-5 - At that time Judah left his brothers and settled near an Adullamite named Hirah. ²There Judah saw the daughter of a Canaanite named Shua; he took her as a wife and slept with her. ³She conceived and gave birth to a son, and he named him Er. ⁴She conceived again, gave birth to a son, and named him Onan. ⁵She gave birth to another son and named him Shelah. It was at Chezib that she gave birth to him.

The year is around 1,900 B.C.² Our text will cover a little more than 20 years, starting after Joseph is sold into slavery. While Genesis 38 plays out, Joseph is serving in Potiphar's house, then spends years in jail, and then finally ascends to his place of leadership in the government of Egypt. Moses wants us to keep Joseph's story in the back of our minds as we read this text. We can contrast the struggles of the Godly, self-controlled son with the scandals of the ungodly, selfish son.

Judah is making very consequential decisions in these verses. He leaves his brothers and settles in a Canaanite community. This is what Lot and Esau did to their own ruin. Judah marries a Canaanite woman. This is a purposeful choice to operate *outside* of the covenant. Judah is going out on his own and, at this point, he has no significant belief or morality to speak of. It was *his* idea to sell his own brother for a few ounces of silver. And he somehow gets worse from there.

Genesis 38:6 - ⁶Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.

There is no great love story for Tamar. This Canaanite girl will be treated terribly by this family and from start to finish, it's as if she has no friends or help, no one watching out for her.

¹ <https://variety.com/lists/mission-impossible-mask-reveals-ranked/henchman-reveal-mission-impossible-ii/>

² Andrew Steinmann *Genesis*

Genesis 38:7 - ⁷Now Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the Lord's sight, and the Lord put him to death.

Er's evil must have been remarkable. Consider the fact that God did not put Cain to death, or Lamech, or Ham, or, as we'll see, even Judah after this passage!

This is the first time in the Bible where God executes an individual for their sin.³ There were wider judgments, like the flood and the destruction of Sodom. This was the first individual judgment but it wasn't the last. Even into the New Testament, we see God, at times, bringing terminal judgment on specific unbelievers (like Herod Agrippa in Acts 12), and also Christians who are in sin (like Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 and some of the believers in 1 Corinthians 11). God reserves this right and it reminds us that we are to take sin seriously because God takes it seriously.

Genesis 38:8-10 - ⁸Then Judah said to Onan, "Sleep with your brother's wife. Perform your duty as her brother-in-law and produce offspring for your brother." ⁹But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, so whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he released his semen on the ground so that he would not produce offspring for his brother. ¹⁰What he did was evil in the Lord's sight, so he put him to death also.

When you study the Law of Moses, you encounter what is referred to as "Levirate Marriage," where a man provides children for a deceased brother. It's not referring to Levites or Leviticus. 'Levirate' comes from the Latin word for brother-in-law. This custom is most famous in the Hebrew tradition, but it was also part of the law for the Assyrians, the Hittites, and other Canaanite cultures.⁴

We're grossed out by the idea, but in these tribes, you didn't want a family line to go extinct. On top of that, there was a very real social-welfare aspect to consider. In these eras, women couldn't just go out and get a job. A woman was protected and provided for by her *father* until she was married. Then she would be safeguarded by her husband. If *he* died, she would be looked after by her children. It was a real problem, not just socially, but *economically*, to be a widow with no kids.⁵

Onan shows *appalling* selfishness and cruelty. He was happy to use Tamar for his own gratification but *refused* to help her have children, sentencing her to total bankruptcy for the rest of her life. As things stood, Onan would get a double portion of inheritance from his father. If he sired a son for his dead brother, *that* baby boy would receive the greater inheritance.

The Lord sees this wickedness and responds justly. Now, we know great things are going to come from the line of Judah. But that does not give these men free rein to disobey and dishonor God. He did not have to use these two wicked men - He would raise up others. The question is: How would *Judah* respond as the pressure increased?

³ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

⁴ Kenneth Mathews *The New American Commentary Genesis 11:27-50:26*, Gordon Wenham *Genesis*

⁵ Susan Niditch *The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38*

Genesis 38:11 - ¹¹Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, “Remain a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up.” For he thought, “He might die too, like his brothers.” So Tamar went to live in her father’s house.

Judah responds with a selfish, dishonorable solution. First, he assumes it’s *Tamar’s* fault, somehow, that his sons are dead. Second, he lies outright - he has no intention of giving Shelah to her. And third, he expels Tamar from his home, refusing to give her any protection or provision. She does not belong in her father’s house - Judah had transacted to bring her into *his* family.

There’s another layer to his disgraceful behavior here. Judah has decided to throw in with the Canaanites. He lives with them, marries with them, does business with them, is friends with them. It is interesting that in the Hittite and Assyrian laws, Levirate customs extended to the father-in-law. Meaning that, in the culture he had joined, it was now *his* duty to bear a child with Tamar.⁶ Obviously, we come at this from a very different perspective, but according to the choices Judah has made, that was his responsibility legally and culturally and morally. There was no Law of Moses yet. And he had said to his son, “Do your duty!” But now *he* is not only unwilling to do *his* duty under the Canaanite system, he won’t even offer his third son as he should.

Genesis 38:12 - ¹²After a long time Judah’s wife, the daughter of Shua, died. When Judah had finished mourning, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers.

We live in such a different day and age, it’s hard for us to understand the plight Tamar was facing. She has no future. She’s left in bankrupt isolation as a widow forever. Meanwhile, Judah - a man of wealth and freedom - mourns for a while, but then *he* gets to be done. He goes over to Timnah to party and make a bunch of money and carry on his life.

Genesis 38:13-15 - ¹³Tamar was told, “Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep.” ¹⁴So she took off her widow’s clothes, veiled her face, covered herself, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the way to Timnah. For she saw that, though Shelah had grown up, she had not been given to him as a wife. ¹⁵When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face.

There’s a lot of debate over this mask she wore. Was it the universal bandana of harlots? The point is Judah did not know it was Tamar. The fact that she was hanging out by the road was the greater signal that she was looking for a John. Now, Tamar was making a very calculated decision. We don’t know a lot about her, but she spent *years* waiting. She didn’t return to her Canaanite people to find a husband. She was like Ruth in that sense. She seemed to believe that she belonged in *this* family and that it was her right to have a son and that was being wrongly denied her by her father-in-law.

It’s also interesting to note this piece of historical trivia: In this era, the veil was the garment of a *betrothed* woman. Think of Rebekah putting on her veil as she approached Isaac. In fact, scholars

⁶ See *Waltke*, Martha Roth *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*

point out that there was an ancient Assyrian Law that forbid an unmarried woman from wearing a veil.⁷ That may *not* have been in effect at the time, but either way, her disguise should've signaled to Judah that she was betrothed to another man and that he had no business hitting on her.

Isn't it sad that Tamar could *count* on Judah visiting a harlot? The question is asked: Why didn't she set the trap for Shelah? We're left to speculate, but the simple answer may be she knew Judah would take the bait.

Genesis 38:16-19 - ¹⁶He went over to her and said, "Come, let me sleep with you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me for sleeping with me?" ¹⁷"I will send you a young goat from my flock," he replied. But she said, "Only if you leave something with me until you send it." ¹⁸"What should I give you?" he asked. She answered, "Your signet ring, your cord, and the staff in your hand." So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she became pregnant by him. ¹⁹She got up and left, then removed her veil and put her widow's clothes back on.

Judah immediately solicits her in a coarse and vulgar way.⁸ His offer of a youngling from his flock is ironic. She needed a kid, but not of the goat variety.

Not only did Tamar assume he would take the bait, she assumed he would lie about it later. And so she asks for these items. The signet ring was used in official contracts, like a notary. The staff was also usually personalized.⁹ He shouldn't be giving these things up. One scholar noted this was like giving up your driver's license and credit cards.¹⁰ But Judah has nothing but self on the mind. He's unwilling to wait, even when he's *in the place where all his flocks are!* It would've taken a very short amount of time to fetch a single goat, but his sinful heart is leading him to ruin, like it always does.

Genesis 38:20-23 - ²⁰When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite in order to get back the items he had left with the woman, he could not find her. ²¹He asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute who was beside the road at Enaim?" "There has been no cult prostitute here," they answered. ²²So the Adullamite returned to Judah, saying, "I couldn't find her, and besides, the men of the place said, 'There has been no cult prostitute here.'" ²³Judah replied, "Let her keep the items for herself; otherwise we will become a laughingstock. After all, I did send this young goat, but you couldn't find her."

Judah takes his payout to a prostitute more seriously than the welfare of his own daughter-in-law. Beyond that, we see the corruption of his thoughts: "Oh man, what will the lads think? I don't want them to laugh at me." What about what the *Lord* thinks? God was *actively judging* this family and Judah is blind to it. He ignores his sons' sins. He doesn't think twice about his own sins. He says, "I

⁷ Mathews

⁸ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

⁹ Derek Kidner *Genesis*

¹⁰ Alter

don't want to become a laughingstock." Your version may say, "lest we be shamed." The word is someone who is worthless, foolish, and disreputable.¹¹ Spiritually speaking, he's *all* of those things.

Genesis 38:24 - ²⁴About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law, Tamar, has been acting like a prostitute, and now she is pregnant." "Bring her out," Judah said, "and let her be burned to death!"

So, Judah is told, "Tamar has been acting like a prostitute" and his reaction is, "Well, we can't have *that!* She's betrothed to my son!" His hypocrisy is *stunning!* He immediately sentences her to death, revealing that she still fell under *his* authority. But he had spent years neglecting her and cheating her and refusing to show her basic decency. Now, he hears a rumor *secondhand* and he quickly calls for her execution. He wants to get rid of her and this seems like a convenient solution.¹²

Genesis 38:25-26 - ²⁵As she was being brought out, she sent her father-in-law this message: "I am pregnant by the man to whom these items belong." And she added, "Examine them. Whose signet ring, cord, and staff are these?" ²⁶Judah recognized them and said, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not know her intimately again.

Judah is exposed for all he has done. The staffs of that era sometimes even had the *name* of their own inscribed on them.¹³ What a scene this must have been. In this climactic moment, the masks come off both Tamar and Judah. All is laid bare. To his credit, Judah repents. He acknowledges and confesses and does what is right. This is a turning point for Judah.¹⁴ The next time we see him, he's back with his brothers and he acts as a servant leader, speaking truthfully and living sacrificially.

Was Tamar right in what she did? It seems like Judah is saying she was. He doesn't necessarily speak for God, but looking forward, we see that God *did* bless Tamar's efforts. Through *this* pregnancy came David and Christ Jesus, Himself. In the book of Ruth, Tamar is praised. The people say, "*May your house become like the house of Perez, the son Tamar bore to Judah.*" It's a tough ethical dilemma when we look at all the Biblical comments. Obviously, the whole thing is very icky to us because we live in such a different time and have so much more revelation, particularly when it comes to personal conduct. We shouldn't do what she did, but that doesn't mean she was doing something purely evil.

Tamar could have found herself a Canaanite husband. Judah would've been fine with that. Instead, she risked her life because she seemed to believe that she had a place in this Hebrew family.¹⁵ Her scheme wasn't done out of irrational ignorance, like Lot's daughters. What she did was within the legal and cultural boundaries that she grew up in. *But* her act was one of deception and, once the Law of Moses was established, it wouldn't have been an acceptable arrangement.

¹¹ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

¹² *Waltke*

¹³ *Mathews*

¹⁴ *ESV Study Bible Notes*

¹⁵ *Waltke*

Judah is correct that the *real* fault was his. His sin drove Tamar to a place of desperation. And the scene not only helped him recognize his sin but to remember his place in the plan of God.

Genesis 38:27-30 - ²⁷When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb. ²⁸As she was giving birth, one of them put out his hand, and the midwife took it and tied a scarlet thread around it, announcing, "This one came out first." ²⁹But then he pulled his hand back, out came his brother, and she said, "What a breakout you have made for yourself!" So he was named Perez. ³⁰Then his brother, who had the scarlet thread tied to his hand, came out, and was named Zerah.

Once again, we have an instance in Genesis where the younger son is chosen over the older. God would use the line of Perez to bring the kings and the Redeemer, not Zerah.

We learn a lot about the grace of God through this uncomfortable story. First, it shows us that God is not afraid or unaware of our sin. We live in a culture where people are constantly canceled and abandoned by their friends because of things they did in the past. God doesn't do that when our sin is discovered. He's not afraid to associate with you.¹⁶ Judah and his tribe would become major players in the rest of the Testament, but God doesn't paper over his sin - it's on display in all its shocking awfulness. Of course, God isn't cavalier about that sin. This story is about the Lord bringing Judah to repentance and turning him *back* from sin. But the Lord's love for Judah, and for us, is constant, even though we are wretched sinners who don't deserve His love.

In addition to that love, Judah's story shows us how God can redeem and transform *really* wicked people. Judah was a despicable person in chapters 37 and 38. By chapter 44, he's a hero. And there's a lovely moment of restoration in chapter 49. See, by his sin, Judah had lost his staff. In chapter 49, God gives the staff back to Judah and says, "It's never going to depart from you again." God's restoration of our lives is everlasting, and He attends to the smallest details.

We are also reminded of how God helps the helpless. Tamar, like Hagar, found herself in a desperate situation. She had no friends. There was no one standing up for her or trying to shield her. But *God* was there. He treated her kindly and generously. She was robbed of sons twice, so He gave her twins. She had nothing to do with His family of faith, but He brought her in to be a part.

God's grace for Tamar, this outsider Canaanite, reminds us of how He has grafted *us* into His family. Tamar had been 'bought' by the father and therefore had the right to bear a child in this family. God agreed. And we're reminded of how, by His grace, He has given those who believe the right to be children of God.¹⁷ And, unlike Judah, God will *not* withhold any provision or protection from us. He has brought us in and made us His own. His grace is unfailing and unstoppable and unmatched.

¹⁶ John Goldingay *Genesis (Baker Commentary On The Old Testament Pentateuch)*

¹⁷ John 1:12