

## Introduction

It was the social practice of families in Israel and other Eastern peoples to marry a deceased brother's childless widow. It is called Levirate Marriage, from the Latin word *Levir*, meaning "brother-in-law." The oldest surviving brother was to take the widow as a wife for the purpose of producing a male heir. The firstborn son by this union took the name of the *deceased* brother, continuing that name in the register of families so that it would not perish out of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

Thankfully, we are not under any such obligation today in God's family of believers! But we are still a family; we are born-again, with God as our heavenly Father, and are considered *brothers* and *sisters* in Jesus Christ.

As brothers and sisters in God's family we do not follow the social practice of Levirate Marriage, but we ought to follow the spiritual principle behind it. The spiritual principle is this: Brothers and sisters in God's family have certain responsibilities towards one another. In Genesis Thirty-eight, the brothers and sisters had social and sexual responsibilities towards one another. We are a different kind of family, a spiritual family. Since we are a spiritual family it should come as no surprise that we have spiritual responsibilities towards one another.

As we comment on this interesting and unusual text, we want to highlight certain spiritual responsibilities we have towards our brothers and sisters in God's family.

### #1 You Have A Responsibility To Be In Fellowship With Your Brothers And Sisters In God's Family (v1-5)

The sexual content of these verses has a tendency to dominate our thinking about them. Onan's violation of Levirate Marriage was a sexual sin; Judah's fornication with a woman he thought to be a prostitute was a sexual sin; Tamar's prostituting herself was a sexual sin. But before any of those sins occurred, Judah did something that made all of those sins possible:

Genesis 38:1 It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers...

Judah removed himself from fellowship with his brothers! Compared with the sexual sins listed in these verses, this removal from fellowship seems insignificant. I submit the obvious: None of the sexual sins listed would have occurred if Judah had remained in fellowship with his brothers and sisters. His decision to leave the family set everything else in motion.

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<sup>1</sup>Unger's Bible Dictionary, p. 700

Let's look together at Judah's decision to break fellowship with his family.

Genesis 38:1 It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers, and visited a certain Adullamite whose name *was* Hirah.

The verse says "at that time...Judah departed from his brothers..." It was right after he had participated with them to sell his brother Joseph into slavery. Rather than dealing with his sin through confession and repentance, he sought to distract himself in the world.

Why do believers sometimes break fellowship with their brothers and sisters? Because of unconfessed sin...

Genesis 38:1 ...and visited a certain Adullamite whose name *was* Hirah.

Judah preferred his friendship with Hirah, an unbeliever, to his fellowship with his brothers. Looking at his brothers you might be tempted to agree with him! Their faults and failures did not excuse him from his responsibilities towards them.

The family of believers, your brothers and sisters, *can* be a discouraging place. Look beyond them to your Father, not to the world; look up, not out and down!

You read in 1 Corinthians 15:33 that "Evil company corrupts good habits." Judah, keeping company with the world, moved from friendship to marriage and became unequally yoked with an unbelieving wife.

Genesis 38:2 And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name *was* Shua, and he married her and went in to her.

Perhaps Judah reasoned that there were no women to marry from his own extended family. God's family wasn't meeting his needs, so he went outside to find companionship.

It is often reported by those who break fellowship that their "needs" weren't being met. Many times the "need" that isn't being met is their need for patience as they trust God to supply all their needs in Jesus!

Genesis 38:3 So she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er.

Genesis 38:4 She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan.

Genesis 38:5 And she conceived yet again and bore a son, and called his name Shelah. He was at Chezib when she bore him.

Sons were born to Judah. He had his own family now and he settled in Chezib, away from his brothers and sisters.

A spiritual "Chezib" is the destination of all those who break fellowship with God's family. The name means "falsehood."<sup>2</sup> You break fellowship, and all seems well as you settle in. It is a falsehood and you are fooling yourself - hard times are ahead.

It seems all too natural that Judah would leave his brothers. There were many seemingly good reasons for doing so. It was not supernatural; he ought to have stayed and faced what was, in all honesty, his own responsibility towards them and towards his father.

The Church of Jesus Christ is a supernatural fellowship of brothers and sisters.  
*Stay in fellowship!*

## #2 You Have A Responsibility To Be Faithful Towards Your Brothers And Sisters In God's Family (v6-9)

Again I would remind you to see the spiritual principle behind the social practice of Levirate Marriage. Brothers and sisters had responsibilities towards one another in the family. Onan's responsibility was to be faithful in producing an heir for his deceased brother, Er.

Genesis 38:6 Then Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name *was* Tamar.

Genesis 38:7 But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD killed him.

You are nowhere told what the "wickedness" of Er was for which God killed him. It is useless and unprofitable to speculate. It is interesting to note that God actively intervened to kill him. He still does this today in His family!

One of the problems in the New Testament church at Corinth involved the Communion Table. Some of the believers were acting in an unworthy manner towards the Lord and towards one another. In 1 Corinthians 11:30 the Apostle Paul said, "For this reason many *are* weak and sick among you, and many sleep." "Sleep" is a common New Testament metaphor for the death of believers. In Corinth, God was putting to death some of those who had partaken of

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<sup>2</sup>see Nelson's Bible Dictionary, under "Achzib," p. 14

Communion unworthily. In other words, God still kills as a discipline in His family when He so chooses!

Genesis 38:8 And Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother."

Genesis 38:9 But Onan knew that the heir would not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in to his brother's wife, that he emitted on the ground, lest he should give an heir to his brother.

Genesis 38:10 And the thing which he did displeased the LORD; therefore He killed him also.

We are often asked about birth control; is it right or wrong for Christians to practice birth control? This passage of Scripture, in which Onan practiced a form of birth control to prevent pregnancy, is often cited by those who believe that birth control of any kind is always sin. After all, God killed Onan for what he did!

I would suggest that birth control is a secondary issue in these verses. While the Scripture here is explicit with regards to Onan's actions, is even moreso with regards to his motives. His heart motive is said to be that he "...knew that the heir would not be his..."; he prevented pregnancy "lest he should give an heir to his brother." His motives were evil and God killed him.

What about his method? Is birth control sin? The answer is both "yes" and "No."

^ All birth control can be sin for you as an individual Christian.

The Bible says that "whatever is not of faith is sin" *for you*. If you are not biblically convinced that you have freedom and liberty to use birth control, then to do so is sin for you.

%o Some birth control is always sin.

Any form of birth control that kills a fertilized egg is murder, and it is sin. Human life begins at the moment of conception. Abortion, I.U.D.'s, and certain other methods of controlling birth cannot be justified ever from Scripture.

%o Not all birth control is sin.

Why not? Because the Bible teaches that *both* procreation and pleasure are expressions of human sexuality that glorify God. Procreation is not always necessary as a motive for God-honoring sex within heterosexual marriage; pleasure is also a biblical mandate and motive! Since it is, birth control that prevents conception is an area of Christian liberty to be decided by the individual.

{ Pleasure is a biblical motive for sex in marriage:

Proverbs 5:18 Let your fountain be blessed, And rejoice with the wife of your youth.

Proverbs 5:19 *As a loving deer and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; And always be enraptured with her love.*

Read The Song of Solomon, especially Chapters 4, 5, and 7.

{ Pleasure is also a biblical mandate for sex in marriage:  
In The Song of Solomon, after their sexual intercourse God is quoted as saying,  
"Eat, O friends! Drink, yes, drink deeply, O beloved ones!" (5:1).

Since both procreation and pleasure glorify God, I can see no clear biblical reason why certain forms of birth control are Scripturally wrong. As you might rightly guess this is a highly emotionally charged area of controversy among Christians. If you disagree, please do so agreeably.

Onan was not faithful to perform his responsibilities towards his deceased brother and his sister-in-law. You and I are to be faithful towards our brothers and sisters in God's family. There are many exhortations in the New Testament to faithfulness. Some believers are identified as being "faithful brethren," indicating that not all are!

How has God gifted and called *you* to serve His family? If you withhold your service, you are a spiritual Onan. You are in fellowship and receive its benefits, but you yourself are unfaithful.

### #3 You Have A Responsibility To Be Fruitful For Your Brothers And Sisters In God's Family (v11-26)

Er and Onan had been married to Tamar. Er and Onan had been killed by God! Judah was hesitant to give his youngest and last son, Shelah, to her.

Genesis 38:11 Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house till my son Shelah is grown." For he said, "Lest he also die like his brothers." And Tamar went and dwelt in her father's house.

Genesis 38:12 Now in the process of time the daughter of Shua, Judah's wife, died; and Judah was comforted, and went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite.

God was working to bring Judah to repentance, but Judah was resisting God's grace. Rather than return to family and fellowship, he sought out Hirah. The two of them went to the sheepshearing at Timnah. This would be the ancient equivalent of Mardi Gras, or of a business convention held in Las Vegas. It was a time of distraction and, therefore, decadence.

Genesis 38:13 And it was told Tamar, saying, "Look, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep."

Genesis 38:14 So she took off her widow's garments, covered *herself* with a veil and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place which *was* on the way to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown, and she was not given to him as a wife.

We cannot condone or excuse Tamar's methods. The story is simply told. God's people, with good motives, choose bad methods. God can overrule for His glory, as He does here.

Genesis 38:15 When Judah saw her, he thought she *was* a harlot, because she had covered her face.

Genesis 38:16 Then he turned to her by the way, and said, "Please let me come in to you"; for he did not know that she *was* his daughter-in-law. So she said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?"

Genesis 38:17 And he said, "I will send a young goat from the flock." So she said, "Will you give *me* a pledge till you send *it*?"

Genesis 38:18 Then he said, "What pledge shall I give you?" So she said, "Your signet and cord, and your staff that *is* in your hand." Then he gave *them* to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him.

Genesis 38:19 So she arose and went away, and laid aside her veil and put on the garments of her widowhood.

It is frightening what a man or a woman will sacrifice for what is only a few moments of sexual pleasure. Judah's signet ring represented his person. His "cord" is translated "bracelets" in the King James Bible; they represented his possessions. His staff represented his position. His person, his possessions, and his position - everything he was he sacrificed for a moment of sex with a prostitute.

Sex outside of marriage always robs you of these same things...

Genesis 38:20 And Judah sent the young goat by the hand of his friend the Adullamite, to receive *his* pledge from the woman's hand, but he did not find her.

Genesis 38:21 Then he asked the men of that place, saying, "Where is the harlot who *was* openly by the roadside?" And they said, "There was no harlot in this *place*."

Genesis 38:22 So he returned to Judah and said, "I cannot find her. Also, the men of the place said there was no harlot in this *place*."

Genesis 38:23 Then Judah said, "Let her take *them* for herself, lest we be shamed; for I sent this young goat and you have not found her."

Judah was more worried about his status with others than his sin before God, more worried about his reputation than his repentance.

Genesis 38:24 And it came to pass, about three months after, that Judah was told, saying, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; furthermore she *is* with child by harlotry." So Judah said, "Bring her out and let her be burned!"

Being "burned" is a reference to a woman's being branded on the face to indicate she had committed fornication. Tamar was legally considered Shelah's wife, even though he was withheld from her. Being found pregnant it was obvious she had slept with someone other than he.

Genesis 38:25 When she *was* brought out, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "By the man to whom these belong, I *am* with child." And she said, "Please determine whose these *are*; the signet and cord, and staff."

Genesis 38:26 So Judah acknowledged *them* and said, "She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son." And he never knew her again.

This public humiliation reminds you of the verse that promises, "be sure your sin will find you out."<sup>3</sup> God's grace finally broke through to Judah's hard heart.

Judah and Shelah had a responsibility to Tamar to be fruitful. Tamar knew that it was her responsibility to her deceased husband, Er, to be fruitful.

You and I are to be *fruitful* for our brothers and sisters in God's family. Not sexually, of course, but spiritually. In your contact with one another you should strive to be a vessel God can use to minister things that are excellent, encouraging, and edifying.

#### #4 You Have A Responsibility To Forbear With Your Brothers And Sisters In God's Family (v27-30)

The chapter ends with the story of a struggle in Tamar's womb between brothers.

Genesis 38:27 Now it came to pass, at the time for giving birth, that behold, twins *were* in her womb.

Genesis 38:28 And so it was, when she was giving birth, that *the one* put out *his* hand; and the midwife took a scarlet *thread* and bound it on his hand, saying, "This one came out first."

Genesis 38:29 Then it happened, as he drew back his hand, that his brother came out unexpectedly; and she said, "How did you break through? *This* breach *be* upon you!" Therefore his name was called Perez.

Genesis 38:30 Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet *thread* on his hand. And his name was called Zerah.

Perez and Zerah struggled against one another for preeminence and it caused the midwife confusion.

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<sup>3</sup>Numbers 32:23

There are struggles between brothers and sisters in God's family. Those who look on, both believers and unbelievers, are confused and become critical.

When there are struggles among brothers and sisters in God's family, you must *forbear* one another in love, meaning to "bear with" each other. Ephesians 4:2 reads, "With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love." There is an awful lot we all need to put up with towards each other! When things go too far, and there is sin against one another, forbearing gives way to forgiving one another.

### Conclusion

You and I are brothers and sisters in God's family. When we act like brothers and sisters sometimes do, we ought to remind ourselves to act like brothers and sisters should! Our relationships to one another in God's family bring with them certain responsibilities: Fellowship, Faithfulness, Fruitfulness, and Forbearance.

These four characteristics seem to build on each other:

It begins with fellowship. None of the other responsibilities can be carried out if you are not in fellowship!

In the fellowship, you learn to be faithful in service.

As you serve, you have opportunity to be fruitful for your brothers and sisters.

Eventually there will be struggles; you can forbear and forgive.

There are two verses in Hebrews that pretty well summarize all that we have been saying:

Hebrews 10:24 ...let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,  
Hebrews 10:25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Jesus is coming for *His* brothers and sisters - for you and I! Don't forsake your responsibilities towards your brothers and sisters.