

WIDOWS OF THE BIBLE

TAMAR: LESSON FIFTEEN

by Sandy Harber

"And it came to pass about three months after, that it was told Judah, saying, Tamar thy daughter-in-law hath played the harlot; and also behold, she is with child by whoredom. And Judah said, Bring her forth, and let her be burnt." Genesis 38:24

Three months later it was confirmed that Tamar was pregnant. It was too soon for Tamar to be showing so who would know? Members of her own family perhaps. If her father was wealthy her family would have had servants so some of them probably knew. Someone told Judah. The Bible never tells us who that is.

Why would someone tell Judah if it was certainly a death sentence for Tamar? Who hated her that much? Or, if hate was not the motive, what was? Could anyone have been so zealous (or self-righteous) that he/she believed sin should be openly named and judged? Or, maybe another lady had eyes for Shelah and wanted to get rid of Tamar.

Why was Tamar's secret revealed to Judah? Everyone knew that she was betrothed to Shelah due to the Levirate Law. Perhaps that someone knew that Judah was reluctant for the marriage of Shelah and Tamar to take place. Maybe the talebearer wanted to do Judah a favor by giving him an excuse to terminate the relationship with Tamar.

Judah was certainly anxious to get rid of her. Normally the crime of adultery carried with it a sentence of death by stoning. Burning was the punishment prescribed for the daughter of a priest. If Tamar's father was a priest it is not mentioned in Scripture. It seems like Judah was just going for the most extreme punishment that he could.

Tamar had deliberately put herself in this position. She plotted against Judah. She tricked him into fathering her child. She knew that when her condition was discovered her life would be in peril. She must have known also that Judah was looking for a way to stop her marriage to his son. He would be anxious to make a public example of Tamar so that no one would blame him if Shelah didn't marry her. It was the perfect answer to his dilemma.

Did she ever think about what would happen if Judah didn't acknowledge his signet or staff? What if he tried to cover it up? Or substitute a strange seal and staff if that was even possible. What if he accused her of stealing his signet and staff and denied he ever encountered a temple prostitute? So many things could have gone wrong with her plan. Did Judah have a reputation for being the kind of man who would acknowledge his sins? Did Tamar trust that he would be honest and treat her fairly? A lot rested on the kind of person Judah was.

What kind of a reputation do you have? Can people trust you to do the fair and honest thing even if it is not in your best interest? Certainly this is exactly the kind of a reputation every Christian should have. But, we are all sinners. We all do things we later regret. And once a reputation has been damaged it is hard to regain people's trust.

What about Tamar's reputation? She must have known that even if Judah acknowledged her child, her reputation would still be ruined. Everyone would know that she slept with her father-in-law at the very least. Some might even know the whole story about how she disguised herself as a temple prostitute and tricked Judah.

Tamar must have felt like she was in a no-win situation. She was twice widowed and childless. She was betrothed to a man who would probably never marry her. She chose to risk her life and reputation to fulfill the widow's duty to produce an heir with her deceased husband's near kinsman. Of course she was supposed to marry the kinsman first.

Nowhere does the Bible indicate that Tamar went to God with her problem. It does not appear that she sought His direction. I hope when we find ourselves in a desperate situation we seek God's help and guidance before making any decisions. He will help us, but we need to ask first.

"What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee." Psalm 56:3