

WIDOWS OF THE BIBLE

TAMAR: LESSON THIRTEEN

by Sandy Harber

"And he turned unto her by the way, and said, Go to, I pray thee, let me come in unto thee; (for he knew not that she was his daughter-in-law.) And she said, What wilt thou give me, that thou mayest come in unto me? And he said, I will send thee a kid from the flock. And she said, Wilt thou give me a pledge, till thou send it? And he said, What pledge shall I give thee? And she said, Thy signet, and thy bracelets, and thy staff that is in thine hand. And he gave it her, and came in unto her, and she conceived by him." Genesis 38:16-18

Judah stopped his journey to Timnath in order to visit with the temple harlot he saw along the road. Was this a spur of the moment thing or did Judah plan to "worship" with a temple prostitute before the shearing of his sheep? Did he believe this would bring him success? Was it his custom before shearing?

Someone told Tamar when Judah left for Timnath to shear his sheep (v. 13). As a Shepherd shearing sheep was routine. It was part of the job. Everyone around him would have known he went to Timnath at that time of year for the sheep shearing. It seems like Tamar was waiting for him to leave. She had a friend on the inside who kept her informed.

As a Canaanite woman, Tamar knew that farmers and shepherds engaged temple prostitutes prior to planting and shearing. Perhaps Tamar knew that Judah participated in this aspect of Baal worship. It fell right in line with her desire to fulfill her duty to her deceased husband by producing an heir with his close kinsman. So she set her trap.

Tamar dressed as a temple prostitute and sat by the road she knew Judah would travel (v. 14). She probably waited near one of the shrines to Baal since that is where a temple prostitute could normally be found. She must have been elated (and scared!) when Judah requested her services. Her response was a request for payment. Since Judah was not surprised by her request, and he responded readily enough, payment for these services must have been the usual practice.

Tamar was smart enough to realize that if her scheme were to be successful and she became pregnant her life would be forfeit because she was betrothed to Shelah. A betrothal to the Hebrew people was binding, unlike being engaged is today. To get out of a betrothal Tamar would need to get a divorce. To be unfaithful to her fiance was the same as betraying a husband and was worthy of death. Therefore, Tamar bargained with Judah to obtain something tangible that she could use later to prove that he was the father of her baby.

Judah offered her a baby goat. Since he didn't have the goat with him, Judah had to pledge with his signet ring, bracelets, and his staff. He expected to redeem his personal items later with the baby goat. But Tamar had another use for Judah's pledges in mind. The deal was struck and Tamar played her part so well that Judah never suspected that he was dealing with anyone other than a temple harlot. They concluded their "act of worship" and Judah went on his way.

By this one encounter with her father-in-law Tamar conceived the son she wanted so badly. God in His sovereignty allowed Tamar's plan to succeed. Why? Why did God allow this unsavory story to be part of the history of the Christ-child?

Some Bible scholars speculate that it was to demonstrate His grace. God took pity on a Canaanite woman who had been twice widowed and, then, cheated out of her chance to marry again by her father-in-law. He granted her the son she desired. In fact, He gave her more than she hoped for by providing twin boys!

God does that for us, too. He extends His grace to us when we don't deserve it. And He grants our request, providing over and above what we asked for. Have you experienced the abundance of God's grace?

"And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you." John 16:22