

Judah: A Story of Redemption

Rev. Joseph Holstege

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The story of Judah is one of the most beautiful in the Bible. We often overlook this history because it is nestled in the middle of the story of Joseph. All the catechism students and Sunday school kids know about Joseph. What is interesting, however, is that Judah was honored above Joseph by his dying father as the wielder of the scepter and the one whom his brothers would praise (Gen. 49:8–10). The greatest honor of all, however, is that Judah was the father of the Lion, who is also the Lamb, the Redeemer of his people, and the ruler of the world (Rev. 5:5). Who, then, is Judah?

The first thing to know is that Judah was a villain. He was brought up in a troubled home. His older brothers found all kinds of ways to humiliate and anger their father, Jacob. Reuben was a fornicator who went up to his father's bed (Gen. 49:4). Simeon and Levi were murderers who slaughtered an entire city and destroyed Jacob's reputation (Gen. 34:30). Then there was his younger brother Joseph, the tattletale and goody-goody. Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons and made no secret about it, which made Judah and his brothers hate Joseph. They hated his coat of many colors. They hated his dreams. Their hatred made them look for an occasion to get rid of him.

No, they could not quite bring themselves to murder Joseph outright when he showed up in Dothan. They threw him in a pit instead to give them time for a better plan. It was Judah then who had the light go on when he spotted the Ishmaelite caravan heading down to Egypt. "Aha! I know what to do! We can get rid of that insufferable Joseph and even make a little money on the side!" This, then, was the plan that sprang from the murderous heart of Judah: "Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh" (Gen. 37:27). If you think Judah was being merciful because he saved Joseph's life, think again. For all Judah knew, it would be worse for Joseph as a slave in Egypt than if they killed him on the spot. Imagine looking in the face of your brother as you drag him out of a pit and hand him over to chains. He will never see his father or his home again. He will become the property of another, a slave. Judah hardened his heart and set his face. He maybe even whistled a little tune to himself as he jingled the silver in his pocket. With a straight face he told his father that his precious son Joseph had been devoured by a wild animal. A liar and a villain!

Judah did not become any less of a villain as the years went on. You can read Genesis 38 to get the full story, but the long and the short of it is that Judah found his way into the house of a prostitute, or so he thought. The woman in question was actually his daughter-in-law, Tamar, whom he swindled out of a husband and household. Tamar was not so easily put off, however. When she heard that Judah was coming to a nearby town, she put on the clothing of a harlot and a veil on her face and awaited his arrival. Judah was so eager to commit fornication with her that he even gave her his staff, his signet ring, and his bracelets as a pledge to pay for her services. By way of contrast, Joseph was in the land of Egypt around the same time, fleeing the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife. "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9).

At this point, however, the story begins to shift. It is a shift that reveals in a striking way the truth that our God is a God who calls not the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Matt. 9:13). Judah got wind

that Tamar played the harlot and was pregnant. He was so furious that he called for her to be brought to him and burned (Gen. 38:24). Imagine the hypocrisy! When Tamar arrived, however, the staff and ring and bracelets were brought out, and Judah began to realize he had been *had*. Oh, surely there could have been a way out for Judah. He could have denied that they were his possessions or accused her of stealing. But Judah realized in that moment that it was not Tamar who was confronting him, but God. Tamar was not innocent in her harlotry and deceit, but Judah confessed with all sincerity, "She hath been more righteous than I" (Gen. 38:26). The Spirit worked repentance in the heart of Judah, and in the way of repentance, Judah began to taste the sweetness of redemption.

It is clear from the way the rest of the story goes that Judah's behavior has completely turned around. You remember the famine and the brothers' journey down to Egypt. You remember the rough way Joseph dealt with them under the guise of an Egyptian ruler. You remember his demand that they may only return if they bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, with them. And you remember how Jacob under no circumstances was about to allow Benjamin to go on a journey with Judah and the others. "If mischief befall him by the way in the which ye go, then shall ye bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave" (Gen. 42:38).

Yet it was *Judah* who convinced his father to entrust Benjamin to his care. Reuben tried, foolishly, with the offer to slay his own sons should he fail to bring Benjamin home safe (Gen. 42:37). Imagine a grandfather agreeing to kill his grandchildren to protect their uncle! What were you thinking, Reuben? Judah, however, offered *himself*. "Send the lad with me...I will be surety for him; of my hand shalt thou require him: if I bring him not unto thee, and set him before thee, then let me bear the blame for ever" (Gen. 43:8-9).

Then, as if by design, Benjamin was caught in a deep conspiracy in Egypt and threatened with lifelong slavery. The silver cup of the second most powerful man in the world was found in *his* sack. O Judah, will you keep your promise? Is your word good? Or will you allow yet another brother never to see his father again, to be held in the chains of Egypt? Will bitterness and malice continue to rule you, or the Spirit of Jesus Christ who redeemed you? This is what Judah said to the great ruler of Egypt, not really knowing to whom it was that he was speaking: "I pray thee, let thy servant abide instead of the lad a bondman to my lord; and let the lad go up with his brethren" (Gen. 44:33). Let me be the slave. Let him go home to his father's house. Let my life be for his life. Let my freedom be for his freedom.

It was these words of Judah that pushed Joseph over the edge with emotion. He could help himself no longer. The man before him was clearly not the same man who sold him into slavery. He was a changed man. He was a humbled man. He was a man ready to give up his own life for the sake of his brother, even a brother whom his father loved more than him. If you read Genesis 45, you will encounter what in my opinion is the most beautiful example of human reconciliation recorded in the pages of Scripture. By reconciling Judah to himself, the Lord reconciled his people to one another and saved much people alive (Gen. 50:20).

So, what do we learn from the story of Judah? The most important lesson of all is that our faith is in the Redeemer. We may be inclined only to look at the story of Joseph and see in him how badly we all fail. Joseph was a man of extraordinary spiritual character, while most of us identify much more easily with the bitterness, envy, and lusts of Judah the villain. Yet Judah the villain was not Judah the hopeless wretch. He was Judah the redeemed son of God, restored to a godly and deeply sacrificial life by God's

grace and in the way of repentance. The call to you from the story of Judah, then, is the call to faith in the Redeemer who came into this world to save the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).

The story of Judah also says much about the way a redeemed Christian will behave, and ought to behave. Judah the redeemed becomes Judah the redeemer of his brother Benjamin. Having been saved by the grace of Jesus Christ, he was conformed in his own life to the image of his Lord (Rom. 8:29). Did you think the Christian life meant only that you show up in church twice on Sunday and read your *Beacon Lights* now and then? No, Jesus said if he washes our feet, then we ought to wash the feet of one another (John 13:14–15). If Jesus sacrificed himself for us, then we ought to sacrifice ourselves for one another. The redeemed always show forth the character of *the* Redeemer in their own lives—like Judah offering himself for Benjamin.

The story of Judah is also a story that ends with reconciliation, and that too is instructive. Reconciliation is when broken relationships are resolved and restored. What is especially striking in the story of Judah is that reconciliation takes place even when the wounds have been so deep and so painful. Judah, you monster! You sold your brother into slavery! And yet the end of the story has Judah and Joseph weeping in one another's arms. It is not always easy, nor is it always possible, to reconcile human beings. Sin and the damage of sin must be reckoned with carefully and fully. Yet we must never forget that as Christians, our faith and our gospel rest on the idea of reconciliation through the blood of the Lamb that was slain. The gospel is the gospel of redemption and reconciliation! That is the gospel that runs through the heart of the beautiful story of Judah.

Rev. Joseph Holstege serves as the pastor of Zion Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan.

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