

JUDAH AND THE ERROR OF OUR WAYS
GENESIS 38

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Clyde Wormer was the treasurer of Christ Episcopal Church of Ramapo, New York. One day in 1982 he disappeared. He left town without leaving a clue as to where he had gone. The authorities did figure out what he had taken with him. For \$267,000 turned out to be missing from the church's accounts. The police looked long and hard without learning anything about where Clyde had gone.

Eight years later a woman from the church just happened to be visiting Taos, New Mexico, when she just happened to visit the J. C. Penny store in town, and she just happened to bump into an assistant manager. He didn't recognize her, but despite the new beard on the assistant manager, she happened to recognize him as the former treasurer of her church in New York. When she got back home, she happened to tell her pastor, who happened to tell the police, who happened to contact the law enforcement officials in Taos, who happened to arrest Clyde Wormer. The district attorney from Rockland County in New York told reporters, **"It must have been an act of God, putting that woman in Taos, a town of 5000."**

God is a just God. Eventually He sees to it that the evil get what they deserve. But what about people who are truly part of the family of God? What about genuine believers? What happens when we stray from the straight and narrow? Can we escape from the Lord? How far will He let us go without intervening? Our passage today addresses those questions as it describes part of the life of Judah, the brother of Joseph.

We have been looking at the life of Joseph on these last four Sundays. Joseph lived roughly 2000 years before the time of Jesus. He was the great grandson of Abraham. We have seen that he came from a difficult family background. He grew up in a home that had four mothers. His parents and his brothers operated on the basis of the principle that the end justifies the means, and they freely used deceit to achieve those ends. But Joseph broke away from those influences. He chose to take responsibility for his own actions and to trust in a gracious God.

Last week we saw that his jealous brothers sold Joseph as a slave to traders heading down to Egypt. Now in this chapter the scene shifts to one of Joseph's older brothers.

I.

The question we first need to consider is: WHY CHAPTER 38? (PROJECTOR ON--- I. WHY CHAPTER 38?) The story about Joseph had just begun to give a more detailed description about him, and now the action suddenly shifts to one of Joseph's brothers. There is no mention in this chapter of Joseph at all. A famous German scholar by the name of Von Rad says, **"Every attentive reader can see that the story of Judah and**

Tamar has no connection at all with the strictly organized story at whose beginning it is now inserted.” (*Genesis*, p. 351)

Von Rad rejects the notion that the Bible is divinely inspired. His conclusion is that some later editor stuck the story about Judah here where it doesn't belong. Even many conservative Bible scholars omit this chapter in their study of Joseph. Part of the reason may be that this is one of the R-rated chapters in the Bible. This is pretty steamy stuff. Lutheran professor H. C. Leupold, for example, who wrote a widely used commentary on Genesis, says, “[**Chapter 38 is**] **entirely unsuited to homilectical [i.e. preaching] use.**” (*Expositions of Genesis*, Vol. 2, p. 990) So he thinks that I should not be preaching on this today.

But #38 is here for a reason. For us who believe that the Bible is divinely inspired no chapter is so easily written off. Moses had a reason for putting it here, and so did the Lord. I find at least four reasons for why #38 belongs in its present location in the Book of Genesis.

First, and perhaps most importantly, this chapter is put here to show the necessity of getting the Chosen People out of Canaan into Egypt. Jacob's family is being corrupted. They are taking on the morals of the Canaanites, and they are marrying into the Canaanites. They are in danger of being sucked up by this corrupt culture. God had called this family to maintain a distinct identity in the world in which they lived because of the unique relationship that they had with the God who is really there.

Being corrupted by the surrounding culture is always a danger which the people of God face. There is a general recognition by most of us that the mainline Christian denominations in our country have largely accepted the standards and values of our culture. But this is becoming a problem even in evangelical churches, especially some of the larger ones.

I will give you one example. (ANDY STANLEY) Andy Stanley is the son of Charles Stanley. He went to the same seminary which I did. He is pastor of a church in Atlanta which at one point was regarded as the largest church in the US. Last fall his church hosted a conference to reach out to the families of LGBTQ individuals. That is not necessarily a bad thing. But some of the speakers spoke out in favor of this lifestyle. One Christian apologist who attended the conference by the name of Alan Shlemon said, “...**the hidden premise that permeated the conference was that walking with Jesus can include same-sex marriages as well as transgender ‘transitioning.’**” (Stand to Reason online, 10/12/2023) How does this fit with the message of Jesus and the Bible? It seems to me that this is an example of conformity to the culture rather than the offer of new life in Jesus through spiritual transformation. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Joseph's family was not maintaining a separate identity. In #37 we saw that Joseph was being taken away into slavery in Egypt. Now we are given an explanation as to why that was necessary and as to why the family of Jacob needed to be removed from Canaan.

Chapter 38 was placed here first because it shows the necessity of getting the Chosen People out of Canaan. **Second**, #38 also provides a dramatic contrast between the character of Joseph and the character of Judah. Next week we are going to see how Joseph resists sexual temptation. Today we see how Judah caves in to it. We see as a result how fitting it is that the Lord blesses Joseph eventually with a position of great authority.

Third, #38 shows that God's providential hand is at work--- not only with godly Joseph but also with his less than godly brothers. The Lord providentially sees to it that an heir is provided for Judah's oldest son according to the Old Testament law.

Then **fourth**, this chapter reveals something about the ancestors of Jesus Christ. For it is Judah who will be an ancestor one day of the Messiah of Israel and the world. It will be through the child of Judah and Tamar that this ancestry will happen.

II.

Let's look then at our story, beginning with vv. 1-23. Here we find that STRAYING FROM GOD'S PATH IS DANGEROUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. STRAYING FROM GOD'S PATH...) Verse 1 indicates that soon after Joseph was sold as a slave and after the brothers told their father that he had been devoured by a wild beast, Judah moved away from home to live among the Adullamites. The family of Jacob was living at Hebron. (HEBRON AND ADULLAM) Adullam was a Canaanite town about ten miles northwest of Hebron. There in Adullam he apparently took a Canaanite woman as a wife.

That was not good. God's purpose for Abraham's descendants was that they maintain a distinct identity as a people. Abraham and Isaac and Jacob had all recognized the need to marry people in their extended family. For the surrounding Canaanites were not worshippers of the true God. Throughout the Scriptures there are several references made to the need for true followers of God to marry fellow believers and not unbelievers. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Judah and his Canaanite wife proceeded to have three sons. Judah arranged for a woman named Tamar to be the wife of his first-born son. My guess is that she was also a Canaanite woman. This first-born son turned out to be a loser. He was so bad that the Lord took his life.

There was an ancient custom in that part of the world that when a man died and left a widow without a son, the next younger brother had to take the widow as his wife. The first son from that marriage was then to carry on the name of the deceased uncle, and he was to inherit his estate. Other sons that were born in this second marriage would inherit the name and the estate of this second husband. This custom was endorsed by God, and it was later made part of the Torah that Moses received from God. It is found in Deuteronomy #25. It is known as the law of Levirate marriage.

So Tamar was given to the next brother Onan. But v. 9 tells us that Onan refused to carry out his responsibility to do his part in providing a child for Tamar. Tamar had brought with her into the marriage the estate of Onan's older brother. Onan didn't want to see it leave his family. If he had a son by Tamar, that son was going to take the estate with him. So apparently he did not want to have a child by Tamar. This was evil in God's sight. So the Lord had Onan bumped off, also.

The reaction of Judah, recorded in v. 11, shows how he had become more influenced by a Canaanite worldview than a godly worldview. For Judah saw this and concluded that Tamar was bad luck. He was blind to the fact that the conduct of his sons was way out of line with God's standards and that the justice of God might have been involved in the deaths of his sons. Judah had not done a good job as a father in raising his sons in the ways of the Lord. He had strayed from God's path.

So Judah sent Tamar off to live with her parents and hoped to be rid of her. He was using that favorite family tool of deceit. For he told Tamar that she would have to wait until his youngest son grew up, but he had no intention of letting his youngest son marry Tamar.

Time went by, and Shelah grew up. But Tamar was not given to him. Judah's wife died. Tamar saw that Judah had no intention of giving his last son to her. Tamar knew that this was wrong. She wanted to have a son who could claim a rightful share in the Judah family inheritance. This would probably also mean a better living situation for her.

Another factor in Tamar's thinking could have been awareness of the Hittite and Assyrian versions of this custom of Levirate marriage. According to this variation of the custom of other ancient people in the general area the father of a dead husband had a responsibility in some circumstances to take the daughter-in-law as a wife.

So Tamar set out to get Judah, and she knew how to do it. According to v. 13 Tamar found out that Judah was going to be shearing sheep further to the northwest of Adullam in Timnah. (PROJECTOR ON--- TIMNAH ADULLAM MAP) She knew that Judah would be drinking wine in conjunction with the festivities that occurred at sheep shearing time. She knew that Judah's wife was dead. Probably she knew that Judah's sexual standards were not especially high.

So Tamar dressed up like a prostitute, saw to it that she was located along the road to Timnah, where Judah would see her, and wore a veil so that he would not recognize her. She succeeded in getting his attention and agreed to accept his seal and cord and staff as a pledge of payment of a young goat for her services. Despite the statistical odds, she also succeeded in getting pregnant. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Notice that a kid, a young goat, is again involved in deception. Grandpa Isaac was deceived when Jacob disguised himself with the skin of a young goat. Father Jacob was deceived when Judah and his brothers used the blood of a kid to deceive Jacob into thinking that the special robe was covered with the blood of Joseph. Now Judah is

deceived into promising payment of a young goat for someone whom he thinks is a prostitute. Tamar is deceptively seeking to participate in the blessing of the first-born son, as was Judah's father Jacob seeking to do with his father.

Judah tries to deliver the payment through his friend. But he doesn't have any success. So Judah and his friend give up looking for Tamar.

It is a sad story about the moral decline of a family. In three generations we have gone from Abraham, who was called the friend of God, to Judah, who is the friend of prostitutes. A family which saw nothing wrong with the philosophy that the end justifies the means has slid from not only using sleazy means but also to choosing sleazy ends, and Judah seems to have little guilt about it.

Christian psychologist Larry Crabb, commenting on the last part of Romans #1, says, **“When people turn from God, the first thing they pursue when God removes His restraining hand is sexual pleasure. Soon they reflect their damaged identity by perverting their sexual desires in homosexual relations (Romans 1:26). Then, springing from the root of threatened identity as men and women, people engage in all kinds of sinful practices that corrupt their relational style (Romans 1:29-32).”**

Unfortunately, we Christians can stray from God's path and choose the same downward route. We live in a culture and in a particular metropolitan area which makes many appeals to our passions and appetites. Our culture pressures us to compromise our standards. In 1996 27% of Americans, according to the Gallup Poll, agreed that gay marriage should be legal. Last year the Gallup Poll found that 71% of Americans believe that gay marriage should be legal. According to that recent survey 41% of regular churchgoers agree. But straying from God's path is dangerous.

III.

What happens to God's people who stray and buy into the world's standards? In vv. 24-26 we find that **GOD GETS HIS STRAYING PEOPLE WITH THEIR OWN MEDICINE**. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. GOD GET HIS STRAYING PEOPLE...) Judah finds out three months later that his daughter-in-law is pregnant as a result of immorality. Notice his response in v. 24: **“Bring her out, and let her be burned.”** What a great father-in-law, right?

I can imagine his initial reaction: “I knew that Tamar was a problem all along. It sure was good that I didn't let her have my third son. What a disgrace she is to our family!”

Ever notice how people often get especially angry when they encounter people who have the same weaknesses or sins that they do? Years ago when Jim Bakker was caught messing around with a woman who was not his wife, one of the first people to condemn him was Jimmy Swaggert. Shortly after that Jimmy Swaggert was caught messing around with a prostitute.

Proud people tend to get really mad at other proud people. Stubborn people often get really upset when they encounter other stubborn people. Manipulators get worked up when they come across other manipulators. Liars get burned up when they become victims of other liars.

Judah in his angry response was calling down judgment upon himself. So when Tamar was called out of her house, she calmly sent Judah his own signet ring and cord and staff. In v. 26 it says, **“Then Judah identified them and said, ‘She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.’”** Give Judah credit for at least recognizing and admitting his own sin.

Oswald Chambers says, **“The essence of sin is the refusal to recognize that we are accountable to God at all.”** (*The Moral Foundations of Life*) Judah thought that his brother Joseph was long gone. Judah thought that his momentary affair with a prostitute was without consequences. Judah thought that once Tamar was sent back to her parents, she was out of his hair for good. But God sees, and God holds His people to account. He may let us stray for a while. But when we persist in our waywardness, He will bring us up short.

Often the Lord uses our own sin as a means of disciplining us. Judah the deceiver was brought to account by another deceiver. Judah the immoral person was brought to account by his own immorality. God disciplines His people who turn from His plan to pursue their selfish lusts, often by means of their own medicine.

When I was a youth pastor, there was one family in the church that was often giving me difficulty. I was frequently having to bring their kids into line because they kept challenging the rules that we had in our youth group. Instead of backing me up, the parents often sided with their kids.

A number of times I had to break up the oldest daughter and her boyfriend when they were running off somewhere to make out. The parents thought that my standards in the youth group were too strict. Their daughter and her boyfriend could be trusted. By the parents' actions they encouraged disrespect for legitimate authority.

One day when her parents were out, this teenage daughter had her boyfriend over at her house, and she got pregnant. Eventually she gave birth to a baby boy. Her life became difficult. The sins of the parents came back to haunt them. The lack of respect on the part of the parents for authority and for good moral values was absorbed by the daughter who rejected her own parents' authority and moral values. Their sins came back to haunt them just as Judah and Jacob's sins came back to haunt them.

My generation was largely responsible for promoting the sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies. The advent of effective contraceptives and readily available abortion led to looser standards. Now the parents of my generation and the next generation are finding challenging situations in places like California. Governor Newsome recently signed a law prohibiting school officials from telling the parents of students when their

kids change their gender identity. I wonder how parents who bought into looser standards think about this. Such is the craziness which straying from God's path produces.

IV.

In vv. 27-30 we find that GOD GETS HIS OWN WAY IN SPITE OF HIS PEOPLE'S FAITHLESSNESS. (IV GOD GETS HIS OWN WAY...) It turned out that Tamar had twins in her womb. When it came time to give birth for Tamar, one of the twins stuck out a hand. The midwife tied a scarlet thread on his hand because, in her opinion, this was the first-born child. But that little boy drew his hand back in, and the other boy came out first. That other boy was named Perez, and he would be in the line of promise and the ancestor of Jesus Christ. Perez would be the special child, not his brother Zerah, who was deemed the first-born son by the midwife.

Remember, Judah's own father had been a twin. Jacob had been the younger twin. But God had declared that Jacob was the son who would carry on the line of promises given to Abraham. Jacob didn't trust God to fulfill His promise. He used deceit to help God out. There were negative consequences that resulted from that. But God's will was fulfilled.

Now Judah was having twins, and the Lord was reminding him in a vivid object lesson that God's will would be accomplished with or without Judah's cooperation. The apparent first-born son was not really the son whom God had chosen to be the child of promise. Esau had been the older twin, but Jacob was God's choice to receive the blessing. Reuben was the first-born son of Jacob, but it was Joseph whom God had chosen to achieve a position of authority over the family. Judah and his brothers had tried to change that. But God always gets His way. His plans are never thwarted, even when His people are not cooperative.

It was also God's plan that Judah would be the leader of one of the twelve tribes of Israel and an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Judah's decision to intermarry with the Canaanites and to mistreat Tamar threatened that plan. Judah did not yet have any grandchildren to carry on the family line. But God's plan was fulfilled through the actions of Tamar. God always gets His way, even at times when His people are lacking in faith. In 2 Timothy #2 v. 13 (2 TIMOTHY 2:13) the Bible declares, **"...if we are faithless, he remains faithful--- for he cannot deny himself."**

Jonah is another Old Testament example of this principle. Jonah was called by God to bring a message about the true God to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrians. They were enemies of the Israelites. Jonah did not want to go. He took off in a ship away from Nineveh. But God got his attention through a big storm and a recognition by the sailors that he was the problem. They threw Jonah into the water. But God had a special fish prepared that would eventually vomit him up on dry land. God finally got Jonah to deliver a message of deliverance to the people of Nineveh.

Pilgrim's Progress was an allegorical story written by John Bunyan in England in the 1600s. John Bunyan was a dissenter. He preached the gospel apart from the Church of England. For that he was jailed. In jail he wrote this story. It has resonated with Christians in many lands for many centuries. It is the story of a pilgrim named Christian who leaves the City of Destruction and undertakes a journey to the Celestial City. He carries with him a burden, which represents the weight of his sins. Along the way he encounters many challenges. Some of the difficulties are unavoidable. But sometimes he makes unwise decisions that take him away from the proper path. But in spite of these wrong decisions God gets His own way with Christian.

Early in the story he encounters Mr. Worldly Wiseman, who encourages him to visit the village of Morality and seek out Mr. Legality. It is an unwise decision to seek to remove his burden by following laws and rules. Christian finds that his burden only gets heavier. So a godly man called Evangelist helps him to get back on the right path.

At another point Christian tries to take a short cut, as if to avoid some of the necessary challenges of the Christian life. It is another unwise decision, lacking in faith. The route that he and his companion take is through By-path Meadow. There they are caught in a storm and end up on the grounds of Doubting Castle. They are caught and imprisoned and beaten by the Giant Despair. Fortunately Christian remembers that he has a key called Promise which he uses to unlock his prison door and allow himself to escape. In contemplating his escape he utters a profound spiritual truth. He says, **“Then I thought that it is easier going out of the way when we are in, than going in when we are out.”**

Christian, like most of us, makes some unwise decisions that lead him astray from the right path, and they lead to problems for him. But the Lord gets him back on the right track. In the same way Judah made some major decisions and chose a lifestyle that led him apart from the Lord. These things caused him grief in the end. But the Lord still accomplished His purposes with Judah and with his family.

The lesson for us is that we do better for ourselves and for the people around us if we stay on the right path. Getting on that right path requires us to make sure that we have connected with the God who is really there. Like Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress* that requires an initial decision to trust in Jesus as our Savior. Then we need to continue to trust in Him as we make our way through life. He will ultimately accomplish His purposes. But we do better, by God's strength, to stay on the right path. For it is easier going out of the way when we are in, than going in when we are out.