

AN INTERLUDE OF WICKEDNESS

Genesis 38: 1-30 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

In my 50th year of pastoral work, I have never preached on Genesis 38. Genesis 38 reminds me of words spoken by Charles Haddon Spurgeon in his book, “Plain Advice for Plain Men.” In chapter 21, on pages 108 to 111, he writes on the chapter title, “Things I Would Not Choose.” His words remind me a bit of my reticence to preach on Genesis 38. I am willing to preach on it, even compelled by the Holy Spirit of God to preach on it, but it would never have been one of my top choices. That’s the value of preaching through the scriptures. Here are a few excerpts of Charles Spurgeon’s words, “I should not choose to be a bob-tailed cow in summer, nor a servant with a score of masters, nor a minister with half-a-dozen tyrants for deacons. Nor should I like to try the truth of the old saying, “Two cats and one mouse, two women in one house, Two dogs to one bone, Will not agree for long.” I had rather not be a dog with a tin kettle tied to his tail, nor a worm on a fisherman’s hook, nor an eel being skinned alive, nor a husband with a quarrelsome wife. I would much rather not fall into the jaws of a crocodile or the hands of a lawyer. The only suit that lasts too long is a lawsuit, and that would not suit me at all. I should be very hard up before I should choose to sleep with pigs, or live in some people’s dirty houses. Who would go under the waterspout to get out of the rain? I should not choose to be a hen who has hatched ducks. Worse off still is a preacher to drowsy hearers; he hunts with dead dogs and drives wooden horses. I would not choose to make myself a doormat nor a poodle, nor a fellow who will eat dirt in order to curry favor with great folks. I would rather have truth on my side, if I go barefoot. Independence and a clear conscience are better with cold cabbage than slavery and sin with roast beef. I would not choose to be plucked like a goose, nor to be a shareholder in a company; nor to be fried alive. I would not choose to go where I should be afraid to die, nor could I bear to live without a good hope for the hereafter. I would not choose to sit on a barrel of gunpowder and smoke a pipe. That is what those do who are thoughtless about their souls while life is so uncertain. Neither would I choose my lot on earth, but leave it with God to choose for me. I might pick and choose and take the worst, but His choice is always best.” Today, by God’s choice, we are in Genesis 38.

This is a passage of Scripture that most preachers, teachers and expositors pass over. For them, it is a chapter to preach on which they would not choose and which they will not choose. Perhaps, one of the most famous commentators on the Book of Genesis, H. C. Leupold, on page 990 of his Volume II, states, “Genesis 38 is entirely unsuited to homiletical use.” In common language, this good doctor who was the Professor of Old Testament Exegesis when he wrote his commentary in 1942 at Capital University Seminary—now known as Trinity Lutheran Seminary,

in Columbus, Ohio, --what he was saying, was, “Preachers, stay away from preaching Genesis 38, for it is unadvisable for preaching.” I respect Dr. Leupold’s opinion much, and if we could pick, and choose, which chapters of scripture are unsuitable to preach, I might agree with him. But the Word of God answers the question of which chapters are unsuitable. Paul wrote under divine inspiration, II Timothy 3: 16-17 which says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Let’s jump into this chapter, remembering that Moses, to whom we attribute the first five books of the Bible, Moses told us in Genesis 37: 2, “These are the generations of Jacob, and Jacob’s fourth son was Judah. In these 30 verses, I have entitled, “An Interlude of Wickedness,” I want to venture 3 solid reasons the Holy Spirit must have wanted us to stop in the Joseph story, long enough to catch us up on Judah’s life. These 3 solid reasons for including Genesis 38 in the Bible, could well change many of our lives. What does God want to show us all today?

GOD WANTS TO SHOW US THE GRAVE DANGER OF LIVING IN THE WORLD AND CHOOSING TO YOKE OURSELVES TO IT. (I.) Notice

Genesis 38: 1-5. This happening to Judah is shocking to read and it shows us the difficulty of remaining pure and holy while mixing and yoking ourselves the society we live in. This marriage of Judah to a Canaanite woman was a total dishonoring of his father, Jacob. All 12 sons of Jacob were warned not to marry pagans, like their uncle Esau did—Genesis 26: 34. But what did Judah do? We read in 38: 1, “It happened at that time.” Sin happens in all our lives. Judah saw her, this daughter of an Adullamite named Shua. He saw her, took her, and quickly was intimate with her. It happened so fast, and the warnings of his father, Jacob, did not stop Judah from having life his way, yoking himself to an unbeliever. Judah and Shua’s unnamed daughter had three children, all boys—Er, Onan, and Shelah. As you know, children grow up with a mother’s care and spend many more hours with their Mom usually, than with their dad. Judah was a hard worker every day, a shepherd out with the sheep, and doubtless his wife, this Adullamite taught Er, Onan and Shelah about her Canaanite gods.

You notice in verse 1 that Judah was impulsive, and he didn’t seem to think twice about not marrying a Canaanite woman. I struggle as a pastor when I share with you as young people, if you start to date or court an unsaved young man or woman. So often I am told, “We’re pretty close; we kind of believe the same thing. He believes in God. She’s okay with going to church with me. I think I’ll be able to lead him or her to the Lord. There are rare exceptions when this happens, but not often. But I tell you all, if you are married to an unbeliever, you know how hard

the struggle was for Judah. Yet, God honors marriage and He wants us to remain married, if we do marry, disobeying God's command. You ask, "What is God's command?" II Corinthians 6: 14-16 is clear, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever. What agreement has the temple of God with idols?" There is no yoke in the world that is more a yoke than the yoke of marriage. Dating or courting an unbeliever is playing with fire and it almost always gets us burned. Judah was burned, because his two eldest sons, Er and Onan especially, didn't grow up to be grandsons of Jacob, spiritually. It appears from the Word of God, that they rejected Judah's side of their heritage. Notice, it is possible to have a first-generation believer on fire for Jesus, with a son or daughter in the second generation who is lukewarm spiritually, at best, and the grandchildren, the third generation, can easily grow up as if they have never known the Lord or followed His Word. Secondly,

GOD WANTS TO SHOW US CLEARLY THAT HE JUDGES SIN AND THAT THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH. (II.) Notice Genesis 38: 6-11.

Although Judah picked his own wife, he did an arranged marriage for Er, and her name was Tamar. Most Bible scholars say Tamar was a Canaanite woman too, and Er was half-Canaanite. Yet, as I study the marriage, and Er's sin, we are only told he did wickedly in God's sight, so God put him to death. Some people say Er's sin was that he did not want to raise up seed for Judah, his father, because the marriage was arranged. It could be, but the Bible is silent. Some say his sin was that he wanted no children so he would not consummate the marriage. That's possible, but the Bible is silent. Whatever the sin was, God didn't take a lot of time to act. God said, "Enough," and He put Er to death.

God's promise to multiply His people was over now with Er and Tamar, whatever his sin was. But in such dire situations, God had a plan for the Jews, just as we find with Naomi, in the book of Ruth. Naomi was married to Elimelech, who died, after she bore him two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. After migrating to Moab during a famine, the two boys married two Moabite girls, Ruth married Mahlon and Orpah married Chilion. Then both of Naomi's two sons, died early, just as their father had. Ruth, you remember, chose to stay with Naomi and go back to Bethlehem with her, at the time of the barley harvest. All four chapters of Ruth are built around a custom of that day that was part of the Mosaic Law—levirate marriage and a kinsman-redeemer, which is a type of Christ being our Kinsman-Redeemer, redeeming us from sin. In such a situation, the widow of the dead man was not to remarry a stranger, Rather, the dead man's brother was called upon to marry his sister in law (a levirate marriage) and count the first son this widow of his brother,

bore to him as his dead brother's child. This levirate law kept the brother's name from vanishing from the earth, and it gave the imperiled woman an inheritance. In a similar way to Ruth, but many years before Ruth, Tamar was the imperiled widow with no inheritance. With this levirate law, Judah acted honorably and asked Onan to marry his sister in law, Tamar and raise up a son for his brother Er. Notice that this was a Mosaic law, and wasn't necessarily a law Onan respected with his Canaanite background. Though we don't know Er's sin, we know Onan's sin. He violated God's intent in levirate marriage. You ask, "What is this law? Turn to Deuteronomy 25: 5-10. It reads, "If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.' Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, 'I do not wish to take her,' then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, 'So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, 'The house of him who had his sandal pulled off.'"

Now what was Onan's sin? Now there was in the book of Ruth, a closer kinsman to Naomi's husband Elimelech than Boaz. This man chose not to marry Ruth, for he said he would ruin his inheritance. So why was God so angry with Onan that He put Onan to death also. Certainly, Onan rebelled against God's law, but he did appear to Tamar to be willing to do the duty of the dead husband's brother. They married. But though Onan was willing to enjoy the intimate pleasure of being married to Tamar, he was unwilling to bear the burden and responsibility of raising up a son for his brother. Each time he shared intimacy with Tamar, he acted to prevent Tamar from conceiving. In essence, he raised his fist in protest against God in heaven. By this choice of birth control, Onan attempted to block God's promise to give Jacob many grandsons as He promised in Genesis 35: 11. Now, the sin on Onan is often mistaken as a one-time act. No way. The Hebrew is clear—**im**, a once used word meaning more than when, but **whenever**, as the ESV rightly translates it. This was a persistent act of appearing to answer Tamar's dream of giving Judah a grandson, but interrupting those times of intimacy to effectively dash Tamar's hopes over and over again. The Hebrew word is whenever. God had enough and said, "No more."

We know from the New Testament that God can see wickedness like Er's sin, whatever it is, and swiftly judge one sin as He did in Acts 5: 1-11 when the couple, Ananias and Sapphira, independently both lied to the Holy Spirit. If God did that all the time, how many of us would be alive today? That's why Jesus took our sin and its penalty for us on the cross. He bore our sin and its penalty, our iniquities and our transgressions. Yet, believers sometimes play with sin, and persistently sin, ignoring God's warnings, even though we are born again believers, there can be physical weakness, sickness and premature death as Onan experienced. Ignoring God's warnings at the time at the Lord's Supper when we are to examine ourselves and getting right with God and each other, can be deadly. I Corinthians 11: 29, 30 gives us the deadly warning about persisting in unrepentant sin. "For anyone who eats and drinks (at the Lord's Supper) without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill or sick, and some have died." Persisting in a known disobedience, even for believers is deadly. Don't be an Onan and continue to ignore God's plan and purpose, and continue to ignore the hopes and dreams of others you intend to thwart. It can be deadly. Thirdly,

GOD WANTS TO SHOW US THAT HE WANTS US TO CLAIM HIS PROMISES AND NOT ABANDON THEM, BUT THAT HE NEVER WANTS US TO USE DECEIT AND LUST TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WILL.

(III.) Notice Genesis 38: 11-30 that this woman, Tamar was unwilling to drop her faith in being the mother to carry on the godly line, as the wife of Er, Judah's firstborn. She had more faith in God's Word than Judah. When two of Judah's sons died, married to Tamar, Judah saw the marriage of his last son, Shelah to Tamar as a sure bet for being the death sentence on his last son, Shelah. Judah asked Tamar to remain a widow and wait on Shelah—vs. 11, but vs. 15 makes it clear Judah didn't intend to give Shelah to Tamar to raise up a son to Er. Tamar would not give up seeking to give Judah and Er an heir. In that levirate hope, which was God's promise in the law, she clung to that promise and hope. Judah abandoned all hope of having any son to be born as a levirate child to Er. Judah abandoned his faith in God's plan, and he wickedly withheld his last son from Tamar. Meanwhile Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua died, so Judah would have no more sons by her.

After some time, when Judah was comforted and the time of mourning was over, it was the time of sheep-shearing in Timnah, a time of festivities, celebration, drinking, and often a time of carousing. Even temple prostitutes would come down to add to the festivities. Part of the idolatrous worship of the Canaanite idols including ritual fornication with temple prostitutes which was said to be fertility magic, a form of fornication mixed with worship. Here's where Tamar, with her deep desire to bear a son for Er and Judah, without a chance to conceive by Shelah,

contrived a plan. This was a scheming, deceitful plan—as she contrived to help God out. God doesn't design evil to make His will work. She would take off her clothes of mourning and put on the garb of a temple prostitute and plop herself by the crossroads from Enaim to Timnath with a veil over her face. As Tamar hoped, Judah who was starved for affection, after the death of his wife, succumbed to the temptation of whoredom. Tamar drove a hard bargain, as Judah promised her a young goat from the flock, the going price prostitutes in that day asked for. But not having the goat beside him, Tamar asked for a pledge until the goat was given to her, in exchange for intimacy with Judah. This is so ironic and strange. Remember Jacob deceived his father Isaac by wearing Esau's forest-smelling clothes and by having Rebekah, his mother make the two young goats his mother cooked. Judah and his brother deceived their father Jacob by stripping off of Joseph, his coat of many colors, and then, the brothers dipped the coat in goats' blood.

Now Judah was deceived, how? It was by the clothes that Tamar wore to make him think she was a prostitute and she agreed to the price of prostitution being a young goat. Sin is so similar—so common to man. Now Tamar demanded Judah's signet, cord, and staff—his unique identifying marks, the equivalent of today letting Tamar hold his driver's license or passport until he brought her the young goat. The signet and cord were a garment worn around his neck that Judah wore, like special doctoral hoods and cords men and women wear for graduations. Tamar wanted them to prove that Judah was the father of her child, and to prove in her understanding, that she did not commit adultery with Judah, but had conducted herself through the rules of Levirate marriage. Judah said yes to the required price of a young goat and he gave her the pledge. The lustful deal was done, as the two of them then became one in deceitful sexual sin. Judah sent a young goat to the temple prostitute but no one else had seen her but him. Judah wanted his valued identity back, but the temple prostitute disappeared, and he feared becoming the laughing stock of the land if they asked too many questions about her.

Tamar meanwhile hurried home after playing the temple prostitute and she dressed again in her widowhood garb, until three months passed when she was showing. Judah got the news, and he demanded she be burned alive. When the burning was to occur, Tamar sent the pledges back to him saying, "By the owner of these pledges, I am pregnant." Judah was shocked, but he understood, in his sin, "Tamar is more righteous than I am, for she longed for an heir for me, and I refused to give her Shelah,"—v. 26. By this pregnancy between Judah and Tamar, God in grace, redeemed Tamar's dream to bear a son for Judah. Then, God also covered Judah's neglect and refusal to give Shelah to Tamar, by providing two more sons to Judah. Even in all this sordid wickedness, God had an eternal plan for Judah that He would not erase. That plan was fulfilled in the firstborn twin of Judah by Tamar,

Perez, who was born before Zerah. How great is God's grace! We turn to Matthew 1: 1-7, and we gasp at the godly line including four women—2 of them prostitutes, Tamar, and Rahab, one a woman a Moabite who was not to enter the congregation of the Lord, and one, a wife deceitfully taken by David in adultery--Bathsheba, and we say, "My, oh my oh my...!" What amazes me most is how God changed this heartless and lustful brother of Joseph, Judah, and turned him into a sacrificial servant, a leader and an example later to his brothers when they faced Joseph and Joseph demanded to keep Benjamin in Egypt. We know that Messiah Jesus was to come from which tribe? It was the tribe of Judah. Jesus would be a descendant of Judah, the son of Jacob. Judah's willingness to lovingly sacrifice himself to become a servant to Joseph in the place of his little brother, Benjamin, in Benjamin's stead, so as not to finish crushing the broken heart of his aged father, Jacob, what a change this was in Judah. This beautiful example of Judah in Genesis 44: 14-34 is a type of Jesus who came and sacrificed His life in our place on the cross. Jesus took our punishment, and by taking our punishment, He set us free. Listen to the Lord today. God is saying to each of us, "Quit saying I can't use you. It's my kindness that leads you to repentance. Come to Jesus today. Whoever you are, a Tamar, a Judah, a Rahab, a Boaz, a Ruth, a David or a Bathsheba. I am ready and able to use you if you will believe My promise and come by repentance and faith to Me. Let Me show you how I will use you as you repent in faith today." Amen.