

EXPOSITION OF GENESIS

Message #81

Genesis 38:1-30

There have been many attempts to figure out the purpose of Genesis 38: 1) Some say since we are in a “generations” section of Jacob (37:12), this is part of What happened to his generations; 2) Some say this forms the basis for the tribal organization and separation in Judah - Israel/Judah 3) Some say this sets the stage for the need of God to take Israel to Egypt- a moral mess; 4) Some say this chapter speaks of the ferocious judgment of God against sin (38:7, 10); 5) Some say it speaks of Judah’s repentance (38:26); 6) Some say it speaks of Tamar’s desire to risk her own life to be a key figure in Judah’s line; 7) Most assuredly this chapter speaks of God’s Grace. There are valid points made by all these suggestions, but there can be no question that **contextually the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate a contrast between Joseph and Judah.** Judah was a man who yielded to his lustful passions whereas Joseph refused to yield to his lustful passions.

WHEN ONE IN GOD’S FAMILY YIELDS TO HIS OWN LUSTFUL PASSIONS, HE WILL BRING TERRIBLE HURT AND TRAGEDY TO HIS FAMILY, BUT WHEN ONE REFUSES TO YIELD, HE WILL EVENTUALLY BRING GOD’S BLESSINGS AND HONOR TO HIS FAMILY.

Joseph is a hero for Israel, whereas Judah is a reproach.

HISTORICAL REALITY #1 - Terrible tragedies occur from refusing to obey God. 38:1-11

Adullam was a city located about 20 miles south of Bethel. It was a Canaanite city, which eventually became a home of a Canaanite king (Joshua 12:15). In the aftermath of selling Joseph, Judah left his brothers and went to this city to visit his friend, Hirah (38:1, 12, 20). While he was visiting him, he saw Shua, a Canaanite woman, and he took her and she produced Er (38:3) and Onan (38:4) and Shelah (38:5). **We must remember that God forbade marriages between one in Abraham’s family and a Canaanite (Genesis 28:1). So this entire mess is the result of disobedience.**

When Er, Judah’s firstborn, was older, Judah selected a wife for him, Tamar (**38:6**). But because Er was evil and wicked in God’s sight, God executed him (**38:7**). After Er died, Judah requested that Onan, his second son, go into Tamar, marry her and produce an offspring, which would preserve Judah’s line (**38:8**). This custom would later become part of the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Ruth 4:5-6; Matthew 22:24) and was important until Christ came, for it was imperative that the firstborn son continue to produce a family lineage.

Onan was not interested in obeying God and could care less if the line of his brother continued. In fact, he wanted the inheritance so during the act of intercourse, he purposely wasted his seed on the ground (**Genesis 38:9**). God was so angered by this that He executed him also (**38:10**). Judah’s family was a mess. The section ends with Judah telling Tamar to wait in her father’s house until Shelah, his final son was old enough to marry her, to which Tamar favorably responded (**Genesis 38:11**).

HISTORICAL REALITY #2 - Terrible tragedy comes to one who yields to his own passions.
38:12-23

Judah's wife, Shua, died and Judah and his friend Hirah decided to make a journey to Timnah to where his sheepshearers were located about 23 miles southwest of Bethel. **Verse 13** informs us that Tamar heard about this and saw that Shelah was grown and she had not been given to him to be his wife (**38:14**). So she decided to situate herself on the road to Timnah and make herself look to be a harlot (**38:15**). That Hebrew word "harlot" means she made herself look like one who was a sexually immoral woman (William Gesenius, *Hebrew Lexicon*, p. 249).

Since Judah is traveling with Hirah, a Canaanite, sexual immorality was not discouraged, but encouraged. In fact, they "encouraged ritual fornication as a kind of fertility magic" (S. L. Johnson, *Genesis*, Study #54, p.4). It is interesting that the NASV translates the word "harlot" in verses 21-22 as "temple prostitute," which indicates that festivals, such as was common at sheepshearing time, would feature sanctioned, religious immorality (Charles Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible*, NASV, p. 66).

Put a lonely Judah in a godless environment and he would not walk away from temptation.
Put a lonely Joseph in a godless environment and he did walk away from temptation.

Verses 17-18 inform us that Judah negotiated the sexual sale price, which turned out to be a goat. However, since Judah did not have one with him, he agreed to leaven his seal ring, his neck chord and his staff. When he had agreed to this, he went into to her and committed immorality and she conceived.

Tamar left and went back to her house and Judah went and took a goat and gave it to his friend to take to her (**38:20**). However, when he took it back to where she had been, he could not find the harlot so Judah said, let's go, let her keep what she has (**38:22-23**).

HISTORICAL REALITY #3 - Believer's in immoral sin will eventually be discovered.
38:24-26

I have yet to see one of God's people get involved in sexual immorality without God eventually surfacing it. When God says, "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32:23), you may know this is certainly true with sexual immorality.

Judah learned Tamar was pregnant and everyone was talking about the fact that she had played the part of a harlot, which is somewhat true (**38:24**). Judah was so angry that he was going to burn her in fire (**38:24**). Talk about your double standard. But when Tamar appeared before Judah and produced his ring, neck chain and staff, he realized he was the guilty sinner (**38:26**). Tamar was actually more righteous than Judah because her motive for her act was to be in God's family line and his motive was sexual lust. His sin found him out and things between him and Tamar would never be the same (**38:26**). The contrast between Judah and Joseph is remarkable. In Judah's case, his sin found him out, in Joseph's case his righteousness found him out.

HISTORICAL REALITY #4 — God can even use sinful tragedies for His purposes. 38:27-30

Tamar gave birth to twins and when the first boy's hand came out, a scarlet thread was tied on it and his name was Zerah. The second born who did not have the thread was named Perez. In the chronology of this, it would appear that Zerah would be the son of blessing and promise. However, God saw to it that Perez was the son of promise for he ended up in the lineage line of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:3). God was sovereignly involved in every phase of this situation.

If ever there is a lesson to be learned from this text it is that yielding to one's base passions eventually bring a person into many negative things. It ruins family relationships and causes big problems.

The good news is that God is in the business of straightening out big problems. Walk away from the sin, run from the temptation as Joseph did and you will be greatly honored.