

JUDAH'S SHAMEFUL STORY

TEXT: GENESIS 38:1-30

INTRODUCTION:

1. Genesis 38 is a very sad chapter. The great expositor, H. C. Leupold, said the events recorded in Genesis chapter 38 “show a decline to a low moral plane. Things positively offensive to good taste are here recorded. But every attentive reader will have to admit that the manner of relating these events is calculated to produce a deeper abhorrence of sin. It is just as true to state that a remarkable impartiality pervades the entire account. Israel’s past was not glorified at the expense of truth” (*Genesis*).
2. W.H. Griffith Thomas said, “Here is the sin of one of the chosen race depicted in all its hideousness. Here is the human ancestor of the Messiah revealed in all his blackness. Behold, therefore, the severity of God. He is no respecter of persons” (*Genesis*).
3. This story of Judah’s sin and shame runs parallel to the story of Joseph, and when we study it carefully, we see that Genesis 38 fits into the context of the development of the history of the nation of Israel.
4. Genesis chapter 37 tells us how Joseph (and eventually the entire nation of Israel) wound up in Egypt rather than in Canaan. Chapter 38 tells us why this Egyptian sojourn was necessary.
5. G. Campbell Morgan said that placing the story of Judah at this point in the history of Israel is “suggestive and important.” He said, “The conditions which made possible Judah's sin, and the sin in itself, revealed the necessity for another new departure. A marked tendency toward the corruption of the chosen people by unhallowed intercourse with the people of the land was apparent. Had there been no divine over-ruling and had these people been left to themselves, the chosen seed would have inevitably been utterly corrupted and the purposes of God defeated...Joseph was already in Egypt, and so the segregation of the chosen people for a long period was already being prepared by keeping them separate from other people and by the rigid exclusiveness of the Egyptians.”

6. Genesis 38 (like chapter 34) emphasizes the grave moral dangers that surrounded Jacob and his family as long as they remained in Canaan.
7. If the Israelites would have stayed in Canaan, they would have been totally corrupted as we see in Genesis 38. But God preserved them in Egypt. There was no danger of them mixing with the Egyptians because the Egyptians would not eat bread with the Hebrews; “for that is an abomination unto the Egyptians” (Genesis 43:32).
8. Chapter 38 provides a strong contrast between Joseph and his older brother Judah. John Phillips said, “The bright light of Joseph’s high morals brings into even sharper relief the sordid nature of Judah’s unprincipled behavior” (*Exploring Genesis*).
9. In Genesis 39, we see that Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Joseph, but Joseph ran away from her. Chapter 38 provides a backdrop against which the purity of Joseph in chapter 39 stands out all the more plainly. It is quite a vivid contrast!

- I. JUDAH’S SONS
- II. JUDAH’S SINS
- III. JUDAH’S SEED

I. JUDAH’S SONS

1. As soon as Jacob got settled in the Promised Land, contact with the Canaanites seems to have started (38:1).
2. This contact quickly led to contamination and corruption.
3. The trouble began with Judah going out of his way to associate himself with the people of Canaan.
4. The Old Testament has much to say about the moral condition of the Canaanites, and how important it was for the family of Jacob to be safeguarded from their evil influences.
5. If Judah had remembered his father’s and his grandfather’s unhappy experiences with their heathen neighbors, he would have saved himself and others from much grief and trouble.

6. The message of the Old Testament, and the message of the New Testament is very clear – “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord” (II Corinthians 6:17).
7. But Judah did not think it was necessary to separate from his heathen friends. This is because there is no indication that Judah had a heart for God.
8. In Genesis 38:2, we are told that Judah saw “a daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shuah; and he took her, and went in unto her.” Judah’s interest in her was strictly physical, not spiritual.
9. Judah’s wife (her name is not given) was a pagan Canaanite, and apparently her sons took after her worldly ways (38:3-10).
10. Their first son was Er (38:3). He “was wicked in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD slew him” (38:7).
11. What this wickedness consisted in, the Bible does not say, but the phrase “in the sight of the LORD” indicates that it was some very great evil.
12. Matthew Henry said, “Sometimes God makes quick work with sinners, and takes them away in his wrath, when they are but just setting out in a wicked course of life.”
13. It is one of the great mysteries of life why God allows some wicked sinners to reach the age of one hundred, while others He kills while they are very young.
14. After the LORD killed Er, Judah told his second son, Onan, “Go in unto thy brother's wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother” (38:8). This was an ancient custom, later referred to as “levirate marriage.”
15. This is the first record of this custom, which was afterwards incorporated into the law of Moses, that when a husband died leaving a widow, his brother was to marry her, and the children, if there were any, were considered heirs of the deceased (cf. Deuteronomy 25:5-9).
16. Genesis 38:9, 10 says Onan deliberately disobeyed his father, and therefore the LORD was displeased, and so “He slew him also.”

17. Onan did not fear God. He knew what happened to his older brother Er, but apparently he ignored that warning.
18. The sin of Onan was his selfish refusal to sire a son on behalf of his deceased brother. Furthermore, the Messiah was to come through the line of Judah. Onan's seed, which he wasted, should have served for the propagation of the Messiah.
19. This is not an easy story to preach about, and it is quite unnecessary to dwell upon the details.

II. JUDAH'S SINS

1. We move now from the sins of Judah's sons, to Judah's sins.
2. The sin of Judah and of Tamar is the culminating crime in this sad chapter, and the only redeeming feature about it is Judah's eventual repentance, when he eventually acknowledged his guilt.
3. It is not that clear, but it looks like Judah tried to place the blame for his sons' deaths on Tamar (38:11). It never seemed to occur to Judah that it was his sons who were the problem, not Tamar.
4. And Judah really had no one to blame but himself. Had he been more careful in teaching his wicked sons about the ways of God, things may have turned out much differently.
5. Eventually, Judah's wife – "the daughter of Shuah" – died, "and Judah was comforted, and went up unto his sheepshearers to Timnath, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite" (38:12).
6. By this time, Judah's youngest son, Shelah, had grown up into manhood, but apparently Judah had forgotten all about his promise to Tamar (38:11).
7. Or perhaps he never intended to keep his promise. In any event, Tamar decided to take matters into her own hands and she followed Judah up into Timnath (38:11-14).
8. Tamar took off her widow's garments and disguised herself as a harlot (38:14, 15). Back in those days, it was the custom of harlots to cover their faces (38:13, 14).
9. Matthew Henry said "they were not ashamed, yet they might seem to be so. The sin of uncleanness did not then go so barefaced as it does now."
10. Matthew Henry wrote that over 300 years ago! "The sin of uncleanness did not then go so barefaced as it does now."

11. Tamar sat in “an open place,” that is, in a noticeable place on the way to Timnath (38:14). Judah assumed she was a prostitute and he propositioned her (38:15-18).
12. Notice how it started – “When Judah saw her...”(38:15). Compare Genesis 38:2, “And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite...”
13. Genesis 34:2 says, “And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country, saw her (Dinah), he took her, and lay with her, and defiled her.”
14. This is how it started with David and Bath-sheba. Second Samuel 11:2 says, that from the roof of his house David “saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.”
15. The Bible has many warnings about looking. Jesus said, “But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:28).
16. Tamar agreed to Judah’s price – a kid (a young goat) from his flock (38:16, 17). Since Judah did not have the kid with him at the time, Tamar wanted a pledge, and Judah freely gave her his signet, and his bracelets (a cord by which the signet-ring was suspended), and his staff (38:18).
17. Soon Tamar “went away,” and put her widow garments back on (38:19).
18. Meanwhile, Judah sent the kid by the hand of his friend the Adullamite, in order to get his things back, but the Adullamite could not find her (38:20-23).
19. Judah decided to drop the matter, lest his sin should come to be known publicly. He didn’t want the people in his community to find out that he had patronized a prostitute, and start talking about it.
20. Matthew Henry said, “He expresses no concern about the sin, to get that pardoned, only about the shame, to prevent that. Note, there are many who are more solicitous to preserve their reputation with men than to secure the favour of God and a good conscience.”
21. Three months passed, and Judah was told that his daughter-in-law Tamar was pregnant out of wedlock. Judah responded by saying, “Bring her forth, and let her be burnt” (38:24).
22. Judah had the power and the authority to execute this cruel punishment because Tamar was his son’s widow, therefore her life was in his hands.
23. Stoning was the usual mode of punishment by the law of Moses, but burning was done for certain serious cases.
24. Of course, Judah didn’t think his sin was all that serious.

25. Matthew Henry said, "It is a common thing for men to be severe against those very sins in others in which yet they allow themselves and so, in judging others, they condemn themselves."
26. The Bible says, "Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things" (Romans 2:1).
27. John Phillips said, "Of all the world's prating hypocrites, it would be hard to find a worse one than Judah. Talk about the double standard! The only difference between himself and Tamar was that Tamar was a woman and he was a man, that Tamar had been caught and he had not" (*Exploring Genesis*).
28. Evangelist Sam Jones said, "I can stand anything better than I can a hypocrite. I always did have a hatred for shams and humbugs and cheats, and of all the humbugs that ever cursed the universe, I reckon the religious humbug is the humbuggest."
29. Tamar was able to "turn the tables" on Judah when she showed Judah his signet, and bracelets, and staff (38:25, 26).
30. Judah admitted his sin, and said, "She hath been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son."
31. "And he knew her again no more" (38:26). Judah's words and conduct indicate genuine repentance.

III. JUDAH'S SEED (38:27-30)

1. Like their grandfather Jacob and his brother Esau, Tamar's two boys struggled for the birthright. And Pharez obtained it, and from him Christ descended (38:27-30).
2. In God's providence, it was through Pharez that the line of the Lord Jesus Christ proceeded. Matthew 1 gives us the genealogy of Christ, going back to Abraham.
3. (Luke goes all the way back to Adam.)
4. Matthew 1:3 says, "And Judah begat Pharez and Zarah of Tamar..."
5. Revelation 5:5 refers to Christ as, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah."
6. Hebrews 7:14 says, "For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah."

7. In describing how Christ is descended from Tamar, W.H. Griffith Thomas refers to the “alchemy of grace” and “the Marvel of Divine Grace.” Referring to the sin of Judah and Tamar, he said, “It is simply astonishing that God could take up the threads of this very tangled skein, and weave them into His own pattern” (*Genesis*).
8. Consider for a moment God’s grace in our Lord’s genealogy– Tamar, who disguised herself as a harlot; Rahab, who was a harlot; and Bathsheba, who committed adultery with King David.

CONCLUSION:

1. When Zerah’s hand appeared, the midwife took and bound upon his hand a scarlet thread, saying, “This came out first” (38:28).
2. We read later on, in the book of Joshua, that the two spies told Rahab the harlot that in order to escape the judgment of God, she was to bind a line of scarlet thread in her window (Joshua 2:18).
3. God’s mercy and forgiveness of Rahab was signified by this rope of scarlet thread, which symbolized the blood of Christ – “the scarlet thread of redemption.”
4. The scarlet thread of redemption runs all the way through the Bible from Genesis through the book of Revelation, where we read in Revelation 1:5, “Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood.”