

Genesis 38:1-30, No. 62
“Where sin abounded...”
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Text Comment

- v.1 Judah’s leaving the family and “going down” from the higher country of Hebron to the foothills is probably itself some indication of the spiritual disintegration of the family. There was no longer a sense of the importance of their being together as the covenant people of God. There was no transcendent value holding the family together. [Waltke]

The events of this chapter overlap with the events of the following chapters that give an account of Joseph’s life in Egypt. The events of this chapter span approximately twenty years and so leave room for what will be happening to Joseph, who was in Egypt twenty-two years before being discovered there by his brothers.

- v.2 To marry a Canaanite, we have already learned on a number of occasions in the narrative, was a betrayal of the covenant. Judah must have known that in doing so he was going against his father’s wishes. The very thing Abraham had feared regarding Isaac and took steps to prevent and that Isaac had feared regarding Jacob and took steps to prevent, Judah did apparently without a thought. The family had lost its spiritual identity and was intermarrying with the Canaanites, which would, of course, completely destroy that identity in a relatively short time. The peremptory way in which this marriage is described, literally, “Judah saw and took,” suggests that the marriage was based on physical attraction primarily, as the combination elsewhere in Genesis of “saw...and took” suggests an illicit taking (Eve saw and took the fruit; Shechem saw and took Dinah; etc.). The woman’s name isn’t even mentioned! Such a view of women will now run in his family, as we shall see.

The tendency to plunge immediately from grace as soon as faith is no longer an active principle is demonstrated often enough in the Bible and certainly here.

- v.7 Er is evil spelled backwards in Hebrew. There is a play on words here. One commentator seeks to bring it into English by translating “Er erred.” The narrative is filled with such plays on words. I pass by most of them because they are too hard to appreciate for non-Hebrew speakers like us. But they are an indication of how expertly the narrative was written and how the author’s purpose is so suggestively conveyed down even to the details of the text.

The Lord does do this, you know: end the life of people for reasons of his own – judgment or salvation. Even in our age. Remember those who had fallen asleep in Corinth because of their profanation of the Lord’s Supper. What will eternity tell of the reasons for the death of people!

- v.8 This is the ancient custom of levirate marriage (from the Latin word *levir*, which means brother-in-law). It was already a fixed custom of this culture as is indicated by the fact that the phrase “perform your duty as a brother-in-law” is a single verb in Hebrew. By this

custom, Tamar's first child, though sired by Onan, would legally have been born to Er; heirs would bear his name and receive his property. It was a sacred obligation. This was the widow's protection in the ancient near east. The OT law enforced it, so that a man's name would not be blotted out, as we read in Deuteronomy 25:6, though the law did give a brother-in-law a way of opting out.

- v.10 Onan's behavior was the worst of all possible behaviors. He had sex with his sister-in-law, many times – which was incest if it was not levirate marriage – but refused to give her and his brother the heir that she was seeking. His behavior was sensual and selfish. He abused the situation for the satisfaction of his own lust while betraying the sacred responsibility he had. And, of course, it was worse still for Tamar, who became the mistress of the man who never leaves his wife for.
- v.10 There is no mention of Judah's grief over the death of his two sons, so soon after the account of Jacob's inconsolable grief over what he thought was the death of Joseph. Judah was an unfeeling man. Later in this chapter he will order his daughter-in-law to be burned to death. This is the same man, of course, whose idea it was to sell Joseph into slavery and make some money while ridding themselves of their pest of a brother.
- v.11 Judah told Tamar he would provide for her marriage, but the narrator tells us that he had no real intention to do so. Judah was so spiritually blind that he did not suspect that his sons were the problem and imagined that Tamar was. He didn't want to give Shelah to her for fear he might also die. The man was driven by nothing but superstition, he thought Tamar was ill-omened, a curse. He was no longer capable of moral reasoning. What is more, he had the responsibility for her, but was handing her back to her father, indicating again how little sense of the holiness of the family bond or of his obligation as the patriarch of the family Judah had. As one commentator puts it, Judah was like a modern American, who in the matter of morals can't put one and one together to reach two. Americans cannot see the connection between our sexual immorality and the woe that has befallen our land. Oh, no, we think, it must be something else that is causing our problems. We've lost our moral sense as Judah had lost his.
- v.14 Tamar's action reveals two things. First, she knew enough of Judah's character to believe he would consort with a prostitute. Second, she knew that Judah, despite his assurances, would never make provision for her. She knew that she had been lied to and that the obligation that Judah owed to her meant nothing to him. She was left a widow, though technically still betrothed to Shelah.
- Tamar herself was consumed with her right as matriarch of the line of Judah's eldest son. Judah's admission in v. 26 will indicate that, whatever the justice of her means, her effort to secure what was hers by right was to her credit. She was, for all our doubts about what she did, the heroine of the story, the only one who cared about what a covenant family member ought to care about.
- v.16 While sex with a prostitute was sinful, sex with a daughter-in-law was a crime punishable by death. The fact that there was characteristically a lot of wine-drinking at sheep-shearing

time (they made a Mardi Gras like festival out of it) may explain why Judah did not see through Tamar's disguise.

- v.17 Judah didn't want to wait to satisfy his appetites, though he was quite willing for Tamar to wait years on end to receive what was rightfully hers!
- v.18 Tamar's hard bargaining, together with Judah's lust, resulted in his giving her a very serious pledge, what one commentator (Wenham) refers to as a kind of ancient near eastern equivalent of all of one's credit cards. Or, perhaps better, one's passport or driver's license. (Waltke) These things would have unmistakably belonged to Judah, clear evidence that he had given them to her. Each seal had a design on it that was individual to its owner.
- v.24 An extreme penalty, in other words, worse than other forms of execution that the law allowed. Tamar's sin would have been adultery because it was infidelity during betrothal, she still being betrothed to Shelah, even if Judah had no plans to give her to him. The ultimate double standard here, of course! But under OT law, if Tamar was culpable, so was her partner! The OT explicitly forbids a different moral standard for men than for women.
- v.25 A close parallel to 37:32. Judah was deceived as he had deceived his father regarding Joseph, as Jacob had long before deceived Isaac. You may have noticed that in all three episodes goats and items of clothing figure in the deceit. It is a subtle, not yet overt indication, that God knows what has happened and that justice *will* finally be done; that, in the end, no one will get away with his crimes. Judah deceived, but will succeed no more than his father before him.

At first glance, chapter 38 seems to have nothing to do with the developing story of Joseph in Egypt. It is easy to think that the flow of the narrative is interrupted by it and scholars used to think of it as a kind of irrelevant digression. The reader expects to go from the last verse of chapter 37 to the first verse of chapter 39. But the narrator does not do that. He interposes this account of Judah and his family. Why will become clear only later, but when it does we will see that chapter 38 is fundamental to our understanding of the entire history of Joseph and Judah, that we could not really appreciate its climax and conclusion without first having heard of the events reported in chapter 38, what one commentator calls "the most sordid chapter in the OT." [Waltke] Remember, as we read in 37:2 this is the family history of Jacob; it concerns all his sons, not just Joseph. What is more, as we said last week, the real hero of the story is not, as I always thought, Joseph himself, but Judah, the very Judah who is described in such despicable terms here in chapter 38. It is to Judah at the end of the story that the great promise will be made: it will be from Judah that will come the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent, from Judah that will come the Messiah, through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed.

What we have here is an account of a thoroughly disreputable man, utterly blind to his own corruptions, treating others with contempt and cruelty. He was a member of the covenant family, but that covenant meant nothing to him. Sensual pleasures and his reputation with the world were what motivate this man. He would rather betray every article of God's covenant than become a laughingstock among the Canaanites. He was a hard-hearted man, a calloused man, and getting more so by the year: selling his brother into slavery, making his way among the Canaanites, raising

sons so evil that the Lord had to execute them while they were still comparatively young men, arranging marriages for his sons with Canaanite women, lying to his daughter-in-law. A man can live this way only so long before his conscience is seared and silenced. At last only selfish interest remained to guide Judah. It is no surprise then, that in such a moral universe a man like that should find himself committing incest without even knowing it! He was a despicable man.

But, then, at the end a wonderful surprise! We have the evidence of the first beginnings of a turn, a turn that when complete will make of Judah the one son of all the twelve sons of Jacob – including even the worthy Joseph – who ought to become the ancestor, the progenitor of the Savior of the world.

We see this first in v. 26, in Judah's acknowledgement of his sin and of the justice of Tamar's cause and even of her action, left as he had left her, with little alternative.

“She is more righteous than I,” he admits.

The confession is more forthright even than it sounds in the ESV. The two principle Hebrew grammarians and the best commentators agree that the Hebrew should not be read as a simple comparison, but as what is called a “comparison of exclusion” in which the subject alone possesses the quality of the adjective. In other words, Judah did not say “she is more righteous than I” but “she is righteous, not I!” [GKC, 133b n.1, p. 430; Waltke, O'Connor, p. 265] So there is no claim to righteousness at all on Judah's part; he was not asserting merely that she was more righteous than he, but that she has been righteous while he had not been. A far better thing for a man to say who had behaved as Judah had behaved!

In Proverbs 28:13 we read:

“He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”

Well, for the first time, we find Judah in the way of God's mercy, because for the first time we find him acknowledging his sin, honestly and openly. And, then, we find him renouncing his sin, at least to the extent that it was possible for him to do so in this particular case. We read in v. 26 that “he did not sleep with Tamar again.”

Though he had done so before, though the ice had been broken as it were, though we have found Judah so thoroughly a sensual man and a man with little regard for the sacred honor of the family or for his responsibilities to preserve that honor and purity, though we might well have expected Judah to do something with Tamar similar to what his son Onan had done, Judah did nothing of the kind.

The Lord was at work in his heart. His conscience had been awakened. His behavior now troubled him. He stood self-condemned on account of what he has done. Finally he could not live as he had before. Sin had become sin to him! And that, as would be the case for so many multitudes of others, was the beginning of something new for this man. When sin became sinful to him; when he began to reckon with his moral failure; his need for the forgiveness of God his life changed. He had been a moral failure, of course, for long years; but he had never admitted it or reckoned with that fact until now.

As Alfred Lord Tennyson has it in *The May Queen*,

“He taught me all the mercy for he showed me all the sin.”

And as Pascal wrote:

“There are only two kinds of men: the righteous, who believe themselves sinners, and the rest, sinners who believe themselves righteous.”

Which is to say, the great turning point is reached precisely when a man or woman, boy or girl, realizes, recognizes, knows for a certainty that he or she is a sinner in desperate need of the forgiveness of God. God may have to do great things to bring a man to that recognition, as he did here with Judah; a man’s life, a woman’s life may well have to fall into ruins before he or she is ready to turn, but turning is all that God requires of him. Or as another wise man has it, “Convictions [of sin] are not needed to make us welcome to Christ, but to make Him welcome to us.” [Duncan, *Just a Talker*, 51]

And so what do we find here in this “most sordid chapter in the Bible”? We find the grace of God and grace abounding where sin has abounded and God’s grace beginning to cover a multitude of sins. That Jesus Christ himself in his physical line through Joseph and Mary descends from this disgusting incest is as grand a picture of God’s grace overcoming man’s sin as can be imagined.

What can possibly come of lives like these? Of history like this? Of cruelty, infidelity, hardness of heart, sexual promiscuity, even incest, and the worst form of *moral* stupidity. What can come of that? By the grace of God, by the blood of Jesus Christ and heaven itself can come of that!

When you think of Genesis 38 and then read Revelation 21:10-12 you gain some sense of the astonishing world of divine grace, the power and the glory of God's saving love and work. John gives us there a vision of heaven.

"And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shown with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel."

In other words, Judah’s name is found on the gate of heaven! This Judah, this ugly man, this cruel and hateful man, who became by the grace of God, a new man, a man of grace and love and goodness himself, as we shall see.

Do you remember the marriage of Ruth to Boaz? Ruth was from a pagan family, just as Tamar was; but she cared about God’s covenant, and joined herself to it and to God’s people. And when she married Boaz, the elders prayed for him, “May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman.” [Ruth 4:12] “...like Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah!” That incestuous relationship between Judah and

Tamar had become a proverb, a lesson in the mercy and the blessing of God, a famous illustration of the measure of God's blessing. Godly folk wished for the blessing of others by invoking the history of Judah and Tamar! Remarkable!

What we have in Genesis 38 is a picture of what we all are without the grace of God – all of us, whatever our sins, however polite, however little we or anyone else takes notice of them. No one took notice of Judah's sins either in that corrupt day, until the Lord himself brought them to light. But no matter our sins, ugly as they are, the rest of the Bible tells us what that grace can make of us. But for it to be so, there must be the honest admission of our sin and a serious reckoning with it; no excuses.

There is a doctrine in Christian spiritual theology that one rarely hears about, in part because, I suppose, it is considered to be too dangerous. It goes by the Latin name *O felix culpa*, "Oh, happy guilt." It is the recognition of the truth revealed in this chapter. Part of the doctrine, perhaps the main part, is the teaching that had there been no sin, no fall, there would never have been an atonement, a cross; and so we would never have known the love of Christ. As Augustine wrote, "God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to suffer no evil to exist." [*Enchiridion* 8.27] The truth is, we will be happier in heaven than we ever could have been had there been no sin and no salvation from sin.

But this same general principle applies equally on the personal level. George Fox was so bold as to say that he thanked God more for his sins than for his good works. And John Bunyan said the same thing, if more tartly, "The guilt of sin did help me much." Samuel Rutherford reminded one of his correspondents that "Christ has a use for all of your corruptions." Is it not true with you, as it is with me that our sins have done me more good than our graces? It is my sin that has taught me to trust the Lord Jesus through thick and thin; my sin that has again and again humbled me and made my pride seem ridiculous to me. It is my sin that has, more than anything else, kept me at work on my salvation, watching, praying, reading, and obeying. And it is the forgiveness of my sins – experienced times without number – that keeps the greatness of the love of Christ and the power of his cross alive in my heart. Is it not so with you? Saint after saint has confessed it to be. Would not Judah say that his sin broke the back of his sin and so did him more good than all the blessing of God that he had enjoyed to that point in his life? His sin, in that way, was his salvation! Would not David and Peter have said the same thing? And would we not say, must we not say, that Judah's sin, and David's sin, and Peter's sin have meant the world to us. They have taught us the lessons we most desperately need to learn and they have given us hope as sinners ourselves when nothing else could. *Look at these men, sinful as they were, and look what God did for them, look what he made of their lives, how thoroughly he forgave their sins.* All of this is obvious to a thoughtful Christian.

But the danger of such thinking is obvious. If we allow ourselves to think that our sins serve holy purposes in our lives, will we not relax our moral guard, will we not stop caring about sinning against God and man, will we not be tempted even to think that the more we sin the better? We know better than that, of course. Sins committed for the purpose of daring God to make some good and holy use of them must be the most dangerous and deadly sins of all. Sins committed by a person who knows better than to think he can toy with sin, with what the Bible says is "the abominable thing that God hates" must destroy more lives than they save!

It is a mystery to be sure how sin can be so terrible and so harmful to us and to others and, yet, in the goodness of God, can do so much good and lead to what is so beautiful and noble and transforming in human life. But it is so; explain it how you will. And it was so in Judah's life. It was his sin that slapped him awake and changed his heart and transformed his life.

It is the most fabulous thing in all the world. Most people in the world live their entire lives without a thought of this, without any realization that this is the great thing that is happening all around them, the most fascinating thing, the most beautiful thing, and by far the most eternally important thing. A man like Judah should find his name on the gate of the City of God! Remarkable! That single thought is a magnificent compression of the entire message of the Bible and the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Judah, of all people. And it is the most revealing thing in the world that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of sinners, should be called in Holy Scripture, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. He is so much the ruler of all that he can use even our sins to do his good work in our hearts. Hope for sinners if ever there was hope!