

**Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church**

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DHW

**LESSON 29**

**THE BOOK OF GENESIS**

**Chapter 38**

**INTRODUCTION**

Chapter 38 seems out of place for it interrupts the account of the life of Joseph, but, as explained below, there are reasons why the God-inspired chronicler inserted it here.

First, it is a continuation of Jacob's story. Chapter 37:2 states, *These are the generations of Jacob* and Judah is one of Jacob's more significant sons. One bible scholar sees it as the most logical place to include the account of Judah.<sup>1</sup> In chapter 37, Judah was a single young man pasturing his father's flock with his brothers and living at home. In chapter 38, he was older and married with three sons. According to chapter 37, Joseph was 17 years old when he was brought to Egypt (v.2). By the time Joseph was exalted by Pharaoh, he was 30 years old (41:46). When Joseph called Jacob's family out of Egypt, it was after another seven years of plenty and two years of famine; adding up to a total of twenty-two years. Chapter 38 reports the happenings in Judah's family during this period of time: his marriage, the birth of his three sons, the marriage of Tamar to his first son, and eventually his fathering of Tamar's twin sons.<sup>2</sup> It would

be inappropriate to insert chapter 38 anywhere else or even at the end of the account of Joseph's life. Chapter 46:12 records Tamar's twin sons as part of Jacob's family who joined Joseph in Egypt.

Secondly, Judah was singled out for mention here because the human ancestry of Christ comes from the line of Judah through Pharez (Perez). The narrative relates Judah's separation from his brothers and his joining with the Canaanites. His two sons died under the direct displeasure of God. When Judah failed to fulfil his promise to give Shelah to Tamar, she took great courage by single-handedly "fight for her right to remain in the family of Judah and to protect the family."<sup>3</sup> So, another plausible purpose for this chapter is the contrast in the conduct of Joseph and Judah. Joseph exercised strong resistance to sexual temptation, whereas Judah picked up a "prostitute with as much ease as a person today might hail a taxi."<sup>4</sup>

This chapter shows God's unconditional love and providential care and concern for His people. God will not allow man's foolishness to subvert His plan and purpose for He is true to His word and promises. There are sobering lessons on God's condemnation of the wicked, and the consequences of man's evil ways. The chapter can be divided into the following sections:

- 1) Judah married the daughter of a Canaanite (38:1-5);
- 2) Judah arranged the marriage of his firstborn son Er (35:6-11);

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<sup>1</sup> Ross, 611.

<sup>2</sup> Hamilton, 431.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 612.

<sup>4</sup> Boice, II:40-41.

- 3) Judah was deceived by Tamar her daughter-in-law to produce children for her husband (38:12-23);
- 4) Judah was too quick to pass judgment on Tamar his daughter-in-law (38:24-26);
- 5) Judah fathered twins with Tamar (38:27-30).

### STUDY THE WORD

#### Judah Marries the Daughter of a Canaanite

*And it came to pass at that time* would refer to the period from the time when Joseph was taken by the Midianites to Egypt to probably when he was sold as a slave and served in Potiphar's house. During that time Judah left his brothers and went down to Adullam, which was about 5 kilometres south-west of Bethlehem. There he met a man by the name of Hirah. In Adullam he married the daughter of a Canaanite named Shuah. The name of the daughter is not given. In this regard, Judah committed two wrongs. Firstly, he left his family and brothers in Hebron where God was honoured and worshipped. Secondly, he associated himself with pagans and unbelievers. Their immoral influence on him was inevitable and he ended up in marrying a woman, who was not of his own tribe and also an unbeliever. His forefathers had shown concern about being unequally yoked. Abraham sent his servant to find a suitable wife for Isaac from among his own kindred (24:3). Later Isaac sent Jacob to Padan-Aram to get a wife from among his own kindred. It was also recorded that Esau grieved his parents when he married Hittite women (26:35). Through the

marriage to this unknown woman, Judah had three sons. The eldest was named Er, and the second son was named Onan, and the third son was called Shelah, who was born in Chezib, which was located south-west of Adullam.

#### Judah Arranges the Marriage of His Firstborn Son, Er

When Er, the eldest son, was about sixteen years old, his father Judah arranged for Tamar to be his wife. *Er was wicked in the sight of the Lord* (v.7). What were his wicked deeds is not mentioned. The LORD was not pleased with his wickedness, and He took his life away. After his death, Judah instructed Onan, his second son, to do his part to ensure the continuance of his brother's family name. This custom was called a *levirate* marriage. The word "levirate" is derived from the Latin word *levir*, which means "brother-in-law." This was later incorporated into the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Onan took Tamar but instead of producing children for his elder brother, he deliberately spilled his sperms whenever he had sexual intercourse with Tamar. In this way Tamar could not be pregnant. His intention is quite clear. He did not want Tamar to produce children that would be given to bear the name of his brother. That would mean that Tamar's son would inherit the firstborn blessing of the father. Onan wanted to enjoy the pleasure of having Tamar but deliberately denied her the rights of being a member of the family. This behaviour on the part of Onan was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, who also took his life away. Judah was left with his third son, Shelah, who was then too young to be married to Tamar. Judah then told Tamar to return to her father's

house and remain as a widow. Judah promised her that when Shelah was of marriageable age, he would give Tamar to him to bear children for his eldest brother. This action by Judah was unbecoming of a father-in-law. He should let Tamar remain in his house instead of shirking his responsibilities to others thus denying her status in the community and her rightful place in the family. Tamar obediently listened to Judah and went to live with her father.

### Judah Is Deceived by Tamar

It seems that Judah had no intention of asking Shelah when he was of age to marry Tamar to produce children for his deceased elder brother. He feared that Shelah too might die. So some years had passed and Shelah was of marriageable age. But Judah did not keep his promise to Tamar. Realizing that Judah did not keep his promise, Tamar, who was living in her father's house was determined to have her rightful place among the people of God and to be linked with Judah's family. Her desire was to enhance the progeny of Judah. Surely her desire fell within God's plan and purpose. That she believed in Judah's God and His promises should not be doubted. However, she resorted to her own stratagem to achieve her honourable desire to produce children for her first husband.

Sometime later, Judah's wife died. There was word that Judah was going to make his way to Timnath, with his friend Hirah, for the sheep-shearing season. Tamar learned about this. The name of her informer is not revealed. Tamar saw that an opportunity was open to her to reclaim her rightful place in the family. Sheep-shearing was a time of festivities and usually the owners of the flock of sheep

participated in the joyful celebration. Tamar knowing Judah's sexual vulnerability, decided to seduce Judah. During such festive times, it was the practice of the Canaanites to have cult prostitutes (or temple prostitutes) superstitiously believing such practices would increase better produce in the following year. These prostitutes would station themselves in prominent places to catch the men.

Tamar positioned herself strategically so that Judah was bound to notice her on his way to Timnath. She disguised herself so that Judah could not recognize her. Accordingly, Judah was on his way, saw her and thought that she was a prostitute. He wanted to sleep with her but Tamar wanted to be compensated. Judah, being quite well-to-do promised to pay her a goat for her services. But Judah did not have a goat at that time. Tamar then asked for some collateral or a guarantee-pledge. Tamar asked for three personal items that belonged to Judah. She asked for his *signet*, his *bracelets*, and his *staff*, which was carved. The signet was not a ring but a cylindrical seal worn around the neck with a cord. Judah willingly gave her the three items which Tamar asked for. He then came in unto her (v.18). After that Tamar quickly left Judah. She put off her disguise and put on the garments of her widowhood. The divine record reveals that Tamar conceived and became pregnant with child (v.18).

On returning home to Adullam, Judah quickly sent the goat, which he had promised "the harlot" so that the three items he had given as a pledge could be returned immediately to him. He sent the goat through the hand of Hirah, his friend the Adullamite. But Hirah could not find "the harlot." He asked the men there and

they told him that they knew not of a harlot in that place. Hirah returned to Judah and told him that “the harlot” could not be found and contacted. There was nothing Judah could do but to resign to the fact that “the harlot” was now in possession of his personal belongings. The fact that there was no such harlot in Timnath seemed to comfort Judah that the likelihood of being shamed was quite remote. The matter seemed to be settled insofar as Judah was concerned.

### **Judah Is Too Quick to Pass Judgment on Tamar**

Three months passed, and Judah was informed by an unknown informer, that Tamar had played “the harlot” and became pregnant. Without hesitation, Judah commanded that Tamar be brought out and be burnt for her act (v.24). Judah without investigating imposed the most severe judgment on Tamar. Why did Judah act so hastily? Was it his intention to get rid of Tamar once and for all? It is plausible. Tamar on the other hand defended herself by sending the signet, bracelets and staff to him. Judah recognised his belongings and was convicted of his greater guilt. He acknowledged the three personal items which he gave to “the harlot” as a pledge. At least we can commend Judah for his integrity and bravery in acknowledging that he was the other party who slept with “the harlot.” Straightaway he was convicted of his sin for not giving Tamar to Shelah. Tamar was saved from being burned to death. Upon this revelation, Judah did not have any more sexual relationship with Tamar.

### **Judah Becomes the Father of Twins with Tamar**

The time came for Tamar to give birth. She had twins. When she was in labour, one baby put out his hand and then retracted back into the womb. Before he retracted, the midwife tied a scarlet cord around the wrist. Then the other baby, the younger, came out of the womb. This younger one was named Pharez. The other baby then came out with the scarlet thread around his wrist. He was named Zarah.

### ***PRACTICAL VALUE***

God’s abounding grace and mercy is evident in His dealings with sinful men. God can take the lives of anyone, when he or she sins against Him or when he commits wicked deeds. In some cases, He does but in others He does not. This is clearly seen in the life of Er and Onan. Why some are taken away and not others is not for us to question. God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy. He took the lives of Er and Onan, but He spared Judah. Out of the depths of spiritual darkness and sin, there shines a ray of hope. This is to teach us that God is merciful desiring that we should repent and turn a new leaf in our life. But if we persist in pursuing our sinful ways, He will take away our life.

There are some other lessons which we can learn from this chapter. Firstly, when a person commits a sin, it will usually lead to another, and eventually most of the sins which are committed will be found out. Secondly, our sins often affect others. Judah’s sin of immorality caused the public disgrace of Tamar and put her in great danger. Thirdly, we must not be too quick to judge others without knowing all the facts. Judah should have

investigated further the pregnancy of Tamar instead of condemning and sentencing her to death by burning. Scripture teaches us that in judging others, we must have two or three witnesses.<sup>5</sup> Remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ to the scribes and Pharisees of His day (John 8:7): *He that is without sin among you let him first cast a stone at her.*

Judah's careless behaviour is a warning for us. He left his brothers and family to live among the uncircumcised in Adullam. He developed a friendship with Hirah, an unbeliever; married the daughter of an unbeliever, failed to discipline his sons; and failed to keep his promise. He passed sentence on Tamar without any second thought and in so doing in fact condemned himself. However, he had some redeeming qualities. He was willing and brave enough to acknowledge his wrongdoings and to truly repent.

While we may judge Judah for his other misdeeds, we may commend him for his integrity and bravery. He kept his promise to give a goat to "the harlot" as payment for the pleasure that he had. And

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<sup>5</sup>Deuteronomy 19:15 *One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.*

Matthew 18:16 *But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.*

2 Corinthians 13:1 *This is the third time I am coming to you. In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.*

1 Timothy 5:19 *Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.*

when his guilt was unravelled, he readily acknowledged it. This is a lesson which many today ought to follow and emulate. The modern man is in dire need of such courage and honesty. Breaking a promise made in the name of God dishonours and displeases Him. And when this leads to denying what factually transpired it makes it worst. God teaches us that we should keep our word even if it results in a loss on us.

Last but not the least, it is important whom we choose to be our friends and associates. Judah should have stayed with his family and not moved away from them to stay in Canaanite territory. How dangerous it is to leave the fellowship of brothers and sisters in the Lord who are able to provoke one another to good works and love!<sup>6</sup> Staying away from Christian circles where God is acknowledged, where His Word is referred to, and where His work is a subject of conversation deprives us of the spiritual ballast which is so necessary to a victorious Christian life. How many have been spiritually shipwrecked because they have strayed away from God! God knows what is best for us. Let us obey and keep His Word. May all those who think that they are strong enough to resist the temptation to sin beware, lest they fall. AMEN

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<sup>6</sup>Hebrews 10:24 *And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: 25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.*