

## Genesis 38:1-30

### *The Sins of Judah's Household*

Have you ever sinned and got away with it?

- No one saw you
- No one caught you
- No one knows

It is easy to deceive ourselves into thinking that we can sin without anyone knowing about it

- But there is Someone who knows

In Hebrews 4:13, the writer gives some frightening words about man's inability to hide anything from God, "And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do"

Friend, do you realize that you can't hide anything from the all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful God?

- Do you realize that He knows your thoughts before you even form them?
- Do you realize that He knows your motives?

This is a frightening thought

- But it is also an encouraging thought
- It all depends on what side of the fence you are on

For those of you who think that you can sin without consequence, God's sovereign knowledge should frighten you to the bone

- He knows you, inside and out
- You can't hide anything from His ever-watching eye

But those of you who think that your commitment and character go unnoticed by men, then God's knowledge should be a tremendous encouragement

- No good deed goes unnoticed
- No act of righteousness gets by Him

This morning, we will take a brief survey of the life of Judah

- His decision to leave home
- His impulsive marriage
- His three children
- His encounter with who he thinks is a harlot
- His attempt to hide his sin

This morning, the ancient book of Genesis speaks loud and clear

- This is a warning to all of us here
- *No one can sin and get away with it*

### **Let's read Genesis 38:1-30**

Genesis 38 teaches us three (3) important truths about sin

- The LORD will punish sin (38:1-11)
- The LORD will reveal sin (38:12-26)
- The LORD will override sin (38:27-30)

## I. The LORD will punish sin (38:1-11)

And it came about at that time, that Judah departed from his brothers,

Genesis 38 seems to be out of place

- At least from our perspective

For the past two weeks, we looked at Joseph

- How his father gave him preferential treatment
- How his brothers hated him, were jealous of him, and plotted murder against him
- How his brothers ultimately sold him to a traveling caravan of Ishmaelites heading down to Egypt

The last verse of Genesis 37 told us, “**Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard**” (37:36)

- Joseph was sold again

So we would expect to read more about Joseph, right?

- Wrong

Back up to Genesis 37:2 for a moment

- There we read, “**These are the records of the generations of Jacob**”

Much of this last portion of Genesis deals with Joseph

- But not all of it

Jacob had more than one son

- He had 12 sons altogether

So it shouldn't surprise us to read about some of the other sons of Jacob in Genesis 37-50

- That's exactly what we find in Genesis 38

As a matter of fact, Genesis 38 is exclusively about Judah

- Not about Joseph
- Not about any of the other sons of Jacob

Genesis 38:1 tells us the timeframe of these events, “**And it came about at that time, that Judah departed from his brothers**”

- This chapter picks up right where Genesis 37 left off

Soon after the sons of Jacob had sold Joseph, Judah decides to leave home

- Perhaps he wanted some time by himself
- Perhaps he felt guilty around his father, since Judah knew the truth about Joseph
- Perhaps he didn't want to be around if the truth was ever made known about what happened to Joseph
- *We don't ultimately know why Judah left home*

and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.

But Judah didn't travel far from home

- The city of Adullam was about 8 miles from the family home<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her and went in to her.

While Judah was visiting Hirah, he saw a beautiful young lady

- She was the daughter of Shua

We don't know much about this lady

- We don't know her name
- We don't know her background or ethnicity
- All we know is that she was the daughter of Shua

Moses tells us that Judah “**took her and went into her**”

- Was this another instance of rape, like Shechem had done to Dinah?
- I don't think so
- But I do think that Judah's choice was rash, unwise, and dangerous

We can probably assume that this woman was a Canaanite

- Up to this point, we are very familiar with the warnings from fathers to their sons about not marrying Canaanite women
  - o Abraham didn't want Isaac marrying a Canaanite (24:3)
  - o Isaac didn't want Jacob marrying a Canaanite (28:1)

But here we find Judah, a son of Jacob, having relations with a Canaanite

- We learn from Genesis 38:12 that Judah ended up marrying this woman
- This does not please the LORD

<sup>3</sup> So she conceived and bore a son and he named him Er. <sup>4</sup> Then she conceived again and bore a son and named him Onan. <sup>5</sup> And she bore still another son and named him Shelah; and it was at Chezib that she bore him.

The result of this marriage was the birth of three sons

- Er
- Onan
- Shelah

It seems that these sons were born rather quickly

- One after the other

<sup>6</sup> Now Judah took a wife for Er his first-born, and her name was Tamar.

Many years are passed over in silence between verses 5 & 6

- Judah's firstborn son, Er, is now grown up

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record*, 547.

- He is old enough to be married

But what we find is intriguing

- Er doesn't select a wife for himself
- Judah arranges a wife for Er

Judah didn't follow these rules with his choice of a wife

- Jacob didn't select a wife for him
- No doubt, Jacob would not have selected a Canaanite wife for his son

But Judah selects Tamar for his firstborn son, Er

<sup>7</sup> But Er, Judah's first-born, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life.

We would expect to read about the children born to Er and Tamar

- But we don't

We are told that “**Er, Judah's first-born, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life**”

- Er was wicked

The mere mention of “**evil**” takes us back to some memorable events in Genesis<sup>2</sup>

- In the Garden, after disobeying the LORD, Adam and Eve came to know both good and evil (3:22)
- The awful events of Genesis 6 caused there to be great wickedness on the earth, so much that “**every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually**” (6:5)
- We learned from Genesis 13 that the men of Sodom were “**wicked exceedingly**” (13:13)

Now we read that Er was “**evil in the sight of the LORD**”

- Er is not in good company with Adam and Eve, mankind immediately before the Flood, and the men of Sodom

We read that because of the severity of Er's wickedness, “**the LORD took his life**”

- We are not told what Er did that caused the LORD to take his life
- Part of the explanation could be due to his Canaanite background
- Many of our questions will have to remain unanswered

God certainly has the right to take someone's life

- He is the Judge of all the Earth
- His judgments are perfect and righteous
- He is the Creator

<sup>8</sup> Then Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother's wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.”

After the death of Er, Judah asks his second-born son, Onan, to do something abnormal

- At least, it is abnormal to us

---

<sup>2</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 615.

There was a custom referred to as levirate marriage<sup>3</sup>

- The second-born son would raise up offspring so that the name of the first-born brother would not perish
- The first son born to Onan and Tamar would be named after Er, to continue his legacy<sup>4</sup>

<sup>9</sup> And Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so it came about that when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground, in order not to give offspring to his brother.

Verse 9 gives us insight into the character of Onan

- He knew that the children born through Tamar would not be his
- He knew that the children would belong, in essence, to Er, his older brother

Because of this, Onan hatches a plan that he thinks will solve the problem

- Every time that Onan and Tamar had marital relations, he “wasted his seed on the ground”
- He refused to impregnate Tamar

The Hebrew language is clear that this was a repeated process with Onan<sup>5</sup>

- Not just a one-time event

Onan was using the law to gratify his fleshly desires

- But he was not taking the responsibility to raise up offspring for his deceased brother<sup>6</sup>

This verse has been erroneously used by some to teach against birth control

- Onan was not practicing birth control
- Onan was refusing to honor his older brother by raising up seed through Tamar
- He was refusing to fulfill his responsibilities

<sup>10</sup> But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He took his life also.

But Onan soon realizes that the LORD was aware of his actions toward Tamar

- What Onan did was “displeasing in the sight of the LORD”

“displeasing” is from the same root word as “evil”

- The actions of both of these brothers were not acceptable to the LORD

In both cases, the LORD took their lives

<sup>11</sup> Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, “Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up”; for he thought, “I am afraid that he too may die like his brothers.” So Tamar went and lived in her father's house.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ross, 616.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, 549.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Kidner, *Tyndale OT Commentaries, Genesis*, 188.

<sup>6</sup> Ross, 616.

Judah had three sons

- Er, the firstborn, had been killed by the LORD
- Onan, the secondborn, had been killed by the LORD
- That only leaves the thirdborn son, Shelah

Apparently, Shelah was too young to marry Tamar

- So Judah tells Tamar, “**Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up**”
- In other words, wait a few years and I will give him to you

Judah promised that he would give Shelah to Tamar

- You might say that they were betrothed to one another
- They were committed to one another

But Judah thought to himself, “***I am afraid that he too may die like his brothers***”

- Judah wrongly thought that Tamar was responsible for the deaths of his two sons
- But we the reader know that it was the LORD who was responsible for the deaths of Er and Onan, since they were evil and displeasing in the sight of the LORD

In the meantime, however, Tamar went to live with her father

- But she was still under the authority of Judah

God punishes sin

- He has to!

God is holy, righteous, and perfect

- He hates that which is unholy, unrighteous, and imperfect

This is why God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden

- After their sin, they were unfit to remain in the place of perfection and delight

We have learned that the LORD put Er and Onan to death

- They were wicked
- God had to punish their sin

The reality is that God will punish your sin as well

*But there is a second truth about sin that this chapter highlights...*

## **II. The LORD will reveal sin (38:12-26)**

<sup>12</sup> Now after a considerable time Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died;

Once again, we fastforward a number years into the future

- We learn that Judah's wife died

Apparently, she died pretty young

- Their three sons are still pretty young

and when the time of mourning was ended, Judah went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite.

Judah mourned for his wife for some time

- In contrast, there was no mention of his mourning for his two sons when they died

When the time of mourning had ended, Judah and his friend Hirah went to Timnah for the sheepshearing

- This was a time of celebration, almost like a party
- There was a lot of drinking
- There would have been occasion for sexual temptation

Since Judah owned much livestock, it made sense for him to attend

<sup>13</sup> And it was told to Tamar, “Behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep.”

Around this time, someone tells Tamar about Judah’s plans to go to the sheepshearing

- We don’t know who gave her this information
- But Tamar put a plan into action

<sup>14</sup> So she removed her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in the gateway of Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah;

Tamar took off her widow’s garments

- Apparently, she had been wearing these since the death of her two previous husbands
- This had been several years

She then put on a veil and wrapped herself

- The clear intent of this was to disguise herself

Tamar wanted to put herself in a position where she would have contact with Judah

- So she disguised her appearance so he wouldn’t recognize her

Tamar also “sat in the gateway of Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah”

- This way, she would be able to see Judah when he walked past
- And she hoped that she might catch the eye of Judah

for she saw that Shelah had grown up, and she had not been given to him as a wife.

Why did Tamar do this?

- Because she realized that Judah was not planning on allowing Shelah to marry Tamar

By this time, Moses tells us, “Shelah had grown up”

- He was old enough to be married
- But Judah didn’t allow him to be married to Tamar

This put Tamar into a situation where she had to make a decision

- A decision that is hard for us to understand fully

<sup>15</sup> When Judah saw her, he thought she *was* a harlot, for she had covered her face.

Just as Tamar had hoped, Judah noticed her

- Of course, Judah thought that she was a harlot
- We the reader know her true identity

<sup>16</sup> So he turned aside to her by the road, and said, “Here now, let me come in to you”; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law.

Judah approached Tamar and brazenly asked to have sex with her

- Moses is very clear to tell us that “**he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law**”

If Judah knew what we know, he would not have gone through with his impulsive desires

And she said, “What will you give me, that you may come in to me?”

Tamar responds with a rather blunt question

- In essence, she asks, “How much will you pay me?”

After all, she is posing as a harlot

<sup>17</sup> He said, therefore, “I will send you a kid from the flock.”

Judah proposes that a goat would be appropriate payment

- This was a rather generous payment<sup>7</sup>
- But then again, he was probably well off

She said, moreover, “Will you give a pledge until you send *it*?”

The problem was that Judah didn’t bring a goat with him

- So he wasn’t able to pay her then

Once again, Judah was acting impulsively

- He had married a Canaanite wife in a rash manner
- Now he is having illicit relations with what he thinks to be a harlot

Tamar asks for a pledge from Judah

- A sort of down payment
- A guarantee that he would pay later

---

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, *NAC, Vol. 1B*, 720.



<sup>18</sup> And he said, “What pledge shall I give you?” And she said, “Your seal and your cord, and your staff that is in your hand.”

Tamar proposes that Judah give her his seal, cord, and staff

- Each of these would have been a means of identifying Judah
- These were personal items that did not belong to anyone else

So he gave *them* to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him.

Three consecutive verbs describe the scene

- Judah gives the items to Tamar
- They have sex
- She becomes pregnant as a result of their illicit encounter

<sup>19</sup> Then she arose and departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow's garments.

Tamar arises, leaves, removes her veil, and puts her widow's garments back on

- Her plan has succeeded
- She goes back to her father's life to resume a “normal” life

<sup>20</sup> When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to receive the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her.

After the sheepshearing festivities were over and Judah is back home, he decides to make good on his offer with the harlot

- He sends his friend with the payment for the harlot

Judah is too ashamed to travel back and be seen with this harlot

- He was too concerned for his reputation

Judah was really wanting his personal items back

- They would be evidence of their illicit encounter
- It may be used against him

Funny, isn't it, that Judah wasn't ashamed to have sex with a harlot, but now he doesn't want to be seen with her in public!

- This is hypocrisy
- This is the shame of sin

<sup>21</sup> And he asked the men of her place, saying, “Where is the temple prostitute who was by the road at Enaim?” But they said, “There has been no temple prostitute here.”

But his friend doesn't find the harlot

- Judah's friend tries to make the situation appear better than it really was

Hirah asks, “Where is the temple prostitute?”

- In some false religions, even today, sexual relationships are a part of the worship of various gods

Judah's friend tries to make it seem that Judah had visited a temple prostitute, as part of some religious experience

- In reality, Judah had lusted and committed incest

<sup>22</sup> So he returned to Judah, and said, "I did not find her; and furthermore, the men of the place said, 'There has been no temple prostitute here.'"

Judah's friend returns to him and informs him of what the men of the city had told him

- There had never been a temple prostitute in that area

<sup>23</sup> Then Judah said, "Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. After all, I sent this kid, but you did not find her."

Judah shrugs off the matter

- The more that he makes a big deal about this, the more likely that the truth will be made known
- Then Judah will become a "laughingstock"

Judah salves his conscience by saying, "I sent this kid, but you did not find her"

- In other words, "I tried to pay my debt, but she wasn't around to accept it. I have done my part!"

<sup>24</sup> Now it was about three months later that Judah was informed, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot, and behold, she is also with child by harlotry."

Once again, we fastforward in time

- About three months pass and some news comes to Judah's attention, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot, and behold, she is also with child by harlotry"

By this time, Tamar is three months pregnant

- She was beginning to show signs of being pregnant

Then Judah said, "Bring her out and let her be burned!"

Judah responds in a very abrasive and rough manner, "Bring her out and let her be burned!"

The normal penalty for adultery was death by stoning

- Only in the case of adultery by the daughter of a priest would the woman be burned<sup>8</sup>

Judah called for the worst possible punishment to be brought upon Tamar, his daughter-in-law

- He had already assumed her guilt in the matter

This is much like how King David responded to the parable that Nathan told to him

- David responded rashly, calling for judgment on the man who would take away the poor man's lamb (2 Sam 12:1-14)

---

<sup>8</sup> John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison*, 269.

<sup>25</sup> It was while she was being brought out that she sent to her father-in-law, saying, “I am with child by the man to whom these things belong.” And she said, “Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?”

Then Tamar plays her wild card

- She tells Judah that she knows who the father is
- She has personal items that would help to identify who the guilty party is

She tells Judah, “**Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?**”

- She knew that Judah couldn’t deny the truth of this accusation

<sup>26</sup> And Judah recognized *them*, and said, “She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not have relations with her again.

Sure enough, Judah recognized the personal items

- He responds, “**She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah**”

Judah immediately acknowledges that her actions were more in the right than his own actions

- Judah is to be blamed for not giving Shelah to Tamar
- This could have all been avoided

Judah does not have any further sexual conduct with Tamar

The Bible makes no comment about the morality of Tamar’s actions<sup>9</sup>

- All we have are the words of Judah himself

**We have seen two truths about sin thus far...**

- **The LORD will certainly punish sin**
- **The LORD will certainly reveal sin**
- ***Thirdly...***

### **III. The Lord will override sin (38:27-30)**

<sup>27</sup> And it came about at the time she was giving birth, that behold, there were twins in her womb.

We are told that when Tamar was about to give birth, she had twins

- This reminds us of Rebekah who had twins in her womb
- Both of these ladies had very unusual deliveries

<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it took place while she was giving birth, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet *thread* on his hand, saying, “This one came out first.”

As Tamar was giving birth, one of the babies put out his hand

- The midwife put a scarlet thread on his hand to mark him as the firstborn

---

<sup>9</sup> Kidner, 188.

<sup>29</sup> But it came about as he drew back his hand, that behold, his brother came out.

But behold, the hand went back in and the other son was born

- Can you imagine this bizarre delivery?

Then she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” So he was named Perez. <sup>30</sup> And afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet *thread* on his hand; and he was named Zerah.

The secondborn son was the one who had the scarlet thread on his hand

- Although his hand emerged first, he was not the firstborn
- His name was Zerah

Once again, we have an example of how the younger gained the upper hand over the elder

- This has been a repeated them in Genesis<sup>10</sup>
  - o Abel over Cain
  - o Jacob over Esau
  - o Joseph over Reuben

This theme of the preeminence of the younger over the older will emerge throughout the rest of Genesis<sup>11</sup>

- The sons of Jacob will soon realize that those dreams of Joseph were destined to become true

Sin will always be an issue with us, until we are in the presence of the Lord

- Heaven will be wonderful because of the absence of sin
- We will revert back to Garden-like conditions where we only know good – not evil
- But until then, we must deal with sin

This morning, we have seen three truths about sin

- The Lord will punish sin
- The Lord will reveal sin
- The Lord will override sin

I am glad that God is not limited by our sin

- He is much more powerful and strong than our evil and wickedness
- He oftentimes shows His sovereignty in very creative ways

Over the next few months, we will see how God used the situation of Joseph’s slavery for good

- Joseph himself will confess to his brothers, “**And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive**” (50:20)
- This is an incredible statement of trust in God’s sovereignty

We think of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ

- It was the worst example of injustice the world has ever seen
- An innocent man was pronounced guilty and killed by crucifixion

Acts 2 records these words about God’s ability to override the sinful actions of mankind, “**this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and**

---

<sup>10</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 2*, 364.

<sup>11</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Genesis*, 232.

put Him to death. <sup>24</sup> And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power” (2:23-24)

- Godless men put Him to death
- But God the Father raised Jesus Christ from physical death

But there is another example of God’s ability to override the sinfulness of mankind

- Let’s turn to Matthew 1

Matthew 1 is the human genealogy of the line of Jesus Christ

- It has some interesting characters

First, look at Matthew 1:2-3, “To Abraham was born Isaac; and to Isaac, Jacob; and to Jacob, Judah and his brothers; <sup>3</sup> and to Judah were born Perez and Zerah by Tamar; and to Perez was born Hezron”

- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah – we have studied the lives of these men

But then verse 3 mentions “Perez and Zerah by Tamar”

- Tamar?
- After what she did in order to conceive?

Yes, Tamar is listed in the royal lineage of Jesus Christ, the Messiah

Second, look at verse 5, “to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab”

- We would affirm Boaz – a man of integrity and commitment
- But Rahab?

Rahab is a harlot!

- She was an unfaithful woman whose life was all about immorality and unfaithfulness!

Yet God saw fit to include Rahab in the genealogy of Jesus Christ

Third, verse 5 records “to Boaz was born Obed by Ruth; and to Obed, Jesse”

- As you know, Ruth was a Moabitess
- She wasn’t from the right family or background!
- But God chose to include her!

Fourth, look at verse 6, “to Jesse was born David the king. And to David was born Solomon by her *who had been the wife of Uriah*”

- Ah, King David – there is someone who deserves to be in the royal line, right?
- Wrong!

David was a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14)

- But he was also a murderer and an adulterer

Bathsheba’s name isn’t mentioned specifically

- Only she “*who had been the wife of Uriah*”
- There is that reminder, David, of your sin

Fifth, look at verse 16, “to Jacob was born Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ”

- Here is Joseph and Mary

Joseph thought that Mary's pregnancy was the result of her unfaithfulness

- It took an angel to convince Joseph of the truth

Five ladies are mentioned in Jesus' genealogy

- Tamar – acted like a harlot in order to conceive children by her father-in-law
- Rahab – was a harlot
- Ruth – a Moabite
- Bathsheba – committed adultery with King David
- Mary – was suspected of being unfaithful, yet was the human mother of Jesus Christ

Do you need further proof that God can override sin?

- Do you need further evidence of God's sovereign ability over sin?

You and I sin every day

- Sometimes we immediately reap the consequences of our actions
- Other times, it seems that we get away with our sin

But rest assured, friends

- God will punish your sin
- God will reveal your sin
- God will override your sin

What a great time for you to think about where you stand with God

- Do you have a relationship with Jesus Christ?
- Have you come to a point in your life where you realize that you are a sinner in need of forgiveness?

Friend, if you die today without trusting Jesus Christ, you will spend eternity separated from God

- Two of Judah's sons, Er and Onah, were killed by the Lord for being evil
- Do you think that you deserve to live any more than they?

We have all sinned and come short of God's glorious standard of perfection

- You need Jesus Christ
- You need forgiveness of sin

Jesus Christ said this of Himself, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6)

- He is the Way to heaven
- He is the Truth, not a lie
- He is the Life, not just a fantasy

Won't you trust Him today?

- Won't you turn from your sin right now?