

# GENESIS 38:1-30

## A TANGLED WEB OF SCARLET THREAD

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Every so often in the studying the Bible you come across a chapter or section of scripture that is referred to as parenthetical. That means that the chapter or section of scripture is in a sense in parentheses. It means that it is contained or book-ended. You could take that section or chapter out and the flow of the story would flow as if nothing had been removed. You could do that with chapter 38 of Genesis.

Joseph is not mentioned at all in chapter 38. It is as if chapter 38 is out of place. You could skip chapter 38 altogether and move straight to chapter 39 and never miss a beat. Chapter 39 takes us right back up with the story of Joseph being sold into slavery and heading to Egypt.

That begs the question then of why is chapter 38 even in the Bible. If you study the Bible seriously you will soon come to find that nothing is in there for no reason. As Jesus would say every jot and tittle means something. If the Bible was written by men and was of no supernatural origin, then I would not expect chapter 38 to be there. However, this chapter is not a commercial break from the main story. It involves one member in particular of Joseph's family, that being Judah. The deeper you dig, the more you find. So if chapter 38 is in there for a reason, what is the reason?

I have told you before that the OT is a genealogy from Adam to Jesus. This chapter gives us one of the links from Adam to Jesus. Why is every link so important? Because if they weren't there the scholars and lawyers of Jesus' day would have been able to contest His lineage and dispute His claim to be from the House of David. They couldn't then, and they can't now. But this chapter also

shows us the reason for the Israelites to be sequestered in Egypt. While in Canaan, the descendants of Abraham were intermarrying with the Canaanites. They were in danger of being swallowed up in Canaanite culture. Whereas in Egypt, they would be kept as a separate people seeing as how foreigners, particularly shepherds were disliked. (Gen. 46:34)

But there is another reason for this chapter being recorded. It gives us a contrast of the conduct of Joseph as a servant of Potiphar, (next chapter) and the conduct of Judah in Canaan. After all, Joseph was in Egypt and could have been expected to do as the Egyptians. He could have taken Potiphar's wife. In one sense he had much to gain by succumbing to her charms. In contrast, Judah had nothing to gain from a dalliance with a prostitute, other than perhaps a few moments pleasure, yet he did succumb to temptation. He went into a "prostitute" with no more trepidation than one goes through the drive-thru at McDonalds.

**If Joseph was God's man in Egypt then Judah was every man's man in Canaan. While he was in the land of Promise, he was as unlike his God as the pagans surrounding him.**

Chapter 38 is a chapter of intrigue and betrayal. It reads like another episode of a soap opera. One warning, there is some adult content here.

***Gen 38:1*** *It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers, and visited a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah.*

***Gen 38:2*** *And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and went in to her.*

***Gen 38:3*** *So she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er.*

**Gen 38:4** *She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan.*

**Gen 38:5** *And she conceived yet again and bore a son, and called his name Shelah. He was at Chezib when she bore him.*

We pick up here shortly after Joseph has been sold into slavery. Judah, the brother that suggested that they sell Joseph instead of kill him, left the company of his brothers and visited an Adullamite named Hirah. Most likely he didn't want any part of seeing his father's grief. He had a daughter that Judah took a shine to and they got married. They eventually had 3 sons: Er, Onan and Shelah.

So now Judah has taken a wife of the very group from which he wasn't supposed to be cavorting. I empathize with them though, in the sense that they are surrounded by nothing but Canaanite women. As parents of a generation of kids surrounded by nothing but the world we have to be careful what and who we allow our children to be around. There are times when you have to sequester them and there are times when we have to be wise and give them more choices than they had previously, and by more I mean better, godlier choices.

At any rate we have Judah now going off on his own path, seeking to raise his own family. So Judah got married and had 3 sons.

**Gen 38:6** *Then Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.*

**Gen 38:7** *But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD killed him.*

**Gen 38:8** *And Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother."*

**Gen 38:9** *But Onan knew that the heir would not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in to his brother's wife, that he emitted on the ground, lest he should give an heir to his brother.*

**Gen 38:10** *And the thing which he did displeased the LORD; therefore He killed him also.*

**Gen 38:11** *Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house till my son Shelah is grown." For he said, "Lest he also die like his brothers." And Tamar went and dwelt in her father's house.*

The first thing we need to note here is that a good bit of time has elapsed from the beginning of the chapter until now. It would have taken at least three years to get to the point of having 3 sons. Now we are at the place where at least two of the boys are old enough to be married. This parenthesis fits nicely into a 22-year period between the sale of Joseph into slavery and the departure of Jacob's family into Egypt. **(There were 13 years between Joseph's promotion to Prime Minister, followed by seven years of plenty and 2 years of famine.)**

We don't know what Er did that was so wicked, but it must have been really bad! (Jasher says he also emitted in the ground.) People will say, that doesn't sound like a loving God! It is however, a gracious God that spared those around Er of his evil. God knows all things, so He knew there was nothing in Er that wanted to be redeemed. So, if we are still walking around there is still hope. If there is someone you think is evil and they are still walking around, there is still hope for them so pray for them.

The next thing that sounds strange, unless you are familiar with the OT is that Judah told his second son, Onan to "go in unto her."

This would later become known as the Levirate marriage once God codifies the Law in Exodus and Leviticus.

One of the 10 commandments says to honor your father and mother. This does not mean simply to be nice to them or acknowledge them, but it means that in their old age you are to take care of them. There were no nursing homes back then. There was no social security back then. The children took the parents in and took care of them once they were too old to take care of themselves.

But what if the couple never had children? If a woman was widowed with no children she was usually destitute unless someone else took her in and took care of her. Therefore, if the husband died it was his brother's responsibility to give her a son. He would take care of the widow until she had a male child that was old enough to support her. The boy would be considered the son of the brother that had already passed away. This would allow for the dead son's share of the estate to pass to his family. It was seen as an honorable thing, not as a one-night stand.

However, Onan didn't care to raise up a boy that wouldn't be his. This would reduce his inheritance by a third. Greed is a powerful thing. Therefore he emitted on the ground so that Tamar would not become pregnant. If he didn't want to take that responsibility then he shouldn't have slept with her. He saw it as an opportunity for sex, but not as one to honor his brother with a son. So God killed him also. We aren't told how He killed him. We just know He did.

You might say man, this is heavy-duty stuff, God killing folks and all, but there is a reason that it is important for Tamar to have a son. We will see this later.

So Judah is left with only his youngest son and a daughter-in-law and probably a widow of Onan's, possibly with children herself.

Judah may not be aware of why his son's are dying, but there is a trend. Whoever is married to Tamar dies! So Judah pacifies Tamar by telling her to go live with her father until Shelah is old enough to marry.

**Gen 38:12** *Now in the process of time the daughter of Shua, Judah's wife, died; and Judah was comforted, and went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite.*

**Gen 38:13** *And it was told Tamar, saying, "Look, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep."*

**Gen 38:14** *So she took off her widow's garments, covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place which was on the way to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown, and she was not given to him as a wife.*

**Gen 38:15** *When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, because she had covered her face.*

**Gen 38:16** *Then he turned to her by the way, and said, "Please let me come in to you"; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. So she said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?"*

**Gen 38:17** *And he said, "I will send a young goat from the flock." So she said, "Will you give me a pledge till you send it?"*

**Gen 38:18** *Then he said, "What pledge shall I give you?" So she said, "Your signet and cord, and your staff that is in your hand." Then he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him.*

**Gen 38:19** *So she arose and went away, and laid aside her veil and put on the garments of her widowhood.*

Over the course of time, Judah's wife died, and after a period of mourning, Judah and his friend Hirah the Adullamite went on a business trip. Tamar got wind of this and hatched a plan. It had become clear to her that Judah had no intention of giving Shelah to her in order that she may have a child. She didn't like the thought of living in poverty as an older woman or depending on her father, so she planned a trap for Judah. Sheep-shearing time was a big payday. The economic windfall, the celebratory atmosphere and the isolation of the men from their families lent itself a boom in the prostitution business.

She got out of her widow's clothes and got all dolled up, covered her face with a veil and waited along the roadside for Judah to come along. When he saw her he couldn't resist. They negotiated a price for services rendered, a goat, and then she negotiated a pledge or collateral because he didn't have a goat on him at the time. After the rendezvous he went on his way and she returned home, put her widow's clothes back on and waited.

**Gen 38:20** *And Judah sent the young goat by the hand of his friend the Adullamite, to receive his pledge from the woman's hand, but he did not find her.*

**Gen 38:21** *Then he asked the men of that place, saying, "Where is the harlot who was openly by the roadside?" And they said, "There was no harlot in this place."*

**Gen 38:22** *So he returned to Judah and said, "I cannot find her. Also, the men of the place said there was no harlot in this place."*

**Gen 38:23** *Then Judah said, "Let her take them for herself, lest we be shamed; for I sent this young goat and you have not found her."*

So Judah sends his trusted friend Hirah back to pay the girl and get back his ring and staff. The only problem is that she isn't there and no one even knows whom he is talking about. Apparently there were no prostitutes that frequented that stretch of road. Judah tells Hirah not to worry about it lest they be shamed.

Meanwhile Tamar is sitting, grinning and incubating.

**Gen 38:24** *And it came to pass, about three months after, that Judah was told, saying, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; furthermore she is with child by harlotry." So Judah said, "Bring her out and let her be burned!"*

**Gen 38:25** *When she was brought out, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "By the man to whom these belong, I am with child." And she said, "Please determine whose these are—the signet and cord, and staff."*

**Gen 38:26** *So Judah acknowledged them and said, "She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son." And he never knew her again.*

Tamar begins to show and someone notices. They bring it to Judah's attention and he responds with all the self-righteousness he can muster, saying bring her out to me so we can burn her!

She then produces his ring, his staff, and his cord. He immediately knows why it happened and owns up to it. Tamar would now have a son, two actually, and wouldn't have to be destitute in her old age.

Judah now has to face up to his sin. But his sin wasn't an isolated event. **If we look carefully we can see how it was actually progressive – as most sin is.**



Judah is guilty of three sins in this chapter and they are all related to each other. They fall one behind the other just as dominoes standing upright, in line on a table. And as they progress, each one is worse than the one preceding it.

1. **Judah married an unbelieving pagan wife. (Many Christian failures can be traced to an unbelieving partner. This is why it s forbidden. (2 Cor. 6:14 - 18)**

**2Co 6:14 *Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?***

**2Co 6:15 *And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?***

**2Co 6:16 *And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.***

**2Co 6:17 *Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,***

**2Co 6:18 *And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.***

2. **Judah was unfaithful to his most solemn commitments. Judah failed to give Tamar to his youngest son. (Out of sight, out of mind.)**
3. **The longer Judah lived in Canaan, the more he was becoming like the people of the land.**

**1Co 15:33 *Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners.***

**Gen 38:27** *Now it came to pass, at the time for giving birth, that behold, twins were in her womb.*

**Gen 38:28** *And so it was, when she was giving birth, that the one put out his hand; and the midwife took a scarlet thread and bound it on his hand, saying, "This one came out first."*

**Gen 38:29** *Then it happened, as he drew back his hand, that his brother came out unexpectedly; and she said, "How did you break through? This breach be upon you!" Therefore his name was called Perez.*

**Gen 38:30** *Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand. And his name was called Zerah.*

**This is why this chapter is so important. Perez is listed as the ancestor of Jesus in both Mt. 1:3 and Luke 3:33.** This gives us the lineage of Jesus Christ. Though He had no earthly father, His lineage had to be traced back to the line of Judah in order to fulfill prophecy. But we do need to ask ourselves a question here. Is it not strange that Jesus would choose to trace His ancestry through this illicit son of Judah? Actually, it isn't any stranger than when He had compassion on that other woman of Judah who wrestled with Him and would let go until He blessed her. That in his genealogy He should be mixed up with human sorrow, and human sin is a fitting type of His being. After all, didn't He come as a man of sorrows, a friend of publicans and sinners, calling not the righteous but sinners to repentance?

In all this, we see the grace and mercy of God.

We have to understand that our everyday decisions effect others in ways we cannot imagine. Judah's fear of giving Shelah to Tamar put her in a position of possible poverty and destitution. His going in to a prostitute produced a child. If the situation was different, the child could have grown up without a father. In this instance,

the children had a father, but there was shame involved and a stigma the boys had to carry their entire lives.

**Finally, we see what great lengths God will go to in order that His will be done.** Er could have been the ancestor of the Messiah. Onan could have also, but they forfeited their chances due to their evil. **How many blessings have we forfeited because we didn't follow God's will?**

**God wants use us for His purpose and His glory.** Often times however, we are too busy chasing our own purposes, our own glory and our lust.

- **Can we trace one sin back to another?**
- **Are we able to see how sins tend to fall like dominoes in a progression of larger and larger indiscretions?**
- **Can we see how being unevenly yoked to an unbeliever can effect our lives and those of our children for years and generations to come?**
- **Finally, can you see God's grace working through all of these sins when they are finally confessed and forgiveness has been asked?**

Thank God for His grace and mercy.