

45. God's grace in the midst of corruption

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If I could dare to eliminate a few chapters of the Bible, chapter 38 would be one of those. Because it is a rather dark chapter that describes human wickedness. But in the middle of this darkness and wickedness, our God's grace still shines so brightly.

I see at least 2 important points we can learn from this chapter:

- 1) **The genealogy of Jesus Christ** – It does not only include great men and women of God but average people, as well as bad ones.
- 2) **The grace of God despite our wickedness**

A. UNGODLY MARRIAGE AND IMMEDIATE PUNISHMENT

Genesis 38:1-10 It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers, and visited a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. 2 And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and went in to her. 3 So she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. 4 She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. 5 And she conceived yet again and bore a son, and called his name Shelah. He was at Chezib when she bore him. 6 Then Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. 7 But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord killed him. 8 And Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother." 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. 10 And the thing which he did displeased the Lord; therefore He killed him also.

Judah knew that God did not approve of the marriage between him and a Canaanite woman. Through an ungodly and unwise marriage to a Canaanite woman, Judah fathered three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. This shows how dangerous it was for God's people to be in the land with the Canaanites. There was always the temptation to live like ungodly people around us instead of like the people of God.

Judah, the fourth son of Jacob through Leah had not yet distinguished himself as someone great among his brothers, but he was the one who suggested they sell Joseph into slavery.

We are never told what Er's wickedness was, but obviously, it was bad enough that God brought immediate judgment upon him. Growing up with a father from such a messed-up family and with a mother who was a Canaanite did not help Er live in a godly life.

According to an old Hebrew custom which turned into a part of the law of Moses, if a man died before providing sons to his wife, it was the duty of his brothers to marry her and to give her sons. The child was considered the son of the brother who died because the living brother was only acting in his place.

This was done so not only the dead brother's name would be carried on but also it was so the widow would have children to support her. Without this, she would likely live the rest of her life as a destitute widow without children.

Onan refused to take this responsibility seriously. He was more than happy to use Tamar for his sexual pleasure, but he did not want to give Tamar a son he had to support but would be considered to be his brother's son.

So why did God strike Onan to death? Onan was defying against God's plan of the lineage for the Messiah.

B. FALSE PROMISE

Genesis 38:11-14 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. 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. 13 And it was told Tamar, saying, "Look, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep." 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.

One can understand Judah's hesitancy to give his last son as a husband to Tamar. God already judged two of her previous wicked husbands. Judah essentially vowed he would not give Shelah as the husband to Tamar as custom and righteousness commanded, but he was putting blames on Tamar instead of the wickedness of his sons.

In the meantime, Tamar has been waiting for all these years at home. She comes to the conclusion that Judah is not going to give Shelah to her as her husband. Tamar did not want to face what would be a very difficult existence in that culture or any culture – life without any husband or children.

You might wonder why Tamar couldn't get married to someone else. She didn't have the option of just finding another man to marry because she was under the headship of her father-in-law Judah, and he had to give her a husband. He determined whom and when she could marry. That was their custom.

We are living in a world that promises mean very little to many. That's why we have to sign so many pages of contracts to promise that we will fulfill our obligations. Jesus teaches us simply – let our promise be kept – whether it is a time to meet someone, a bill to pay, or a promise to pray for someone.

Matthew 5:37 But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

C. JUDAS' LUST ENDS UP IN AN INCEST

Genesis 38:15-19 When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, because she had covered her face. 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?" 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?" 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. 19 So she arose and went away, and laid aside her veil and put on the garments of her widowhood.

When Tamar conceived, it certainly was not intended by Judah, but it was definitely planned by both Tamar and God.

We might wonder why in the world God would allow this kind of incestuous relationship to bring forth the lineage of our Messiah Jesus Christ.

Please allow me to explain this: If Jesus came from a high and lofty family line, could the people who are in ghettos or a rough life relate with our Savior Jesus? Jesus came for the lost and lowly people, not self-righteous ones. Yes, this is an incest case. Yes, it started with Judah's stupidity and lust and his son's wickedness. But God turned it around and used it to bring His grace to mankind.

Romans 5:20 Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more,

Even so, we see that Tamar also is included in the human lineage of Christ in Matthew 1:

Matthew 1:1-3 The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham: 2 Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers. 3 Judah begot Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez begot Hezron, and Hezron begot Ram.

D. JUDAH'S SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS AND GOD'S GRACE

Genesis 38:20-24 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. 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." 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." 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." 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!"

The charge from Judah against Tamar was a double stand. He himself committed sins against God by lying to his daughter-in-law and having sex with a supposed-to-be-harlot. Yet, he gave an order to burn her to death.

This reminds me of what the Pharisees did against an adulterous woman in John 8:1-11.

Jesus exposed the high and mighty Pharisees' double stands by writing down something that many Bible scholars think that it was their names and sins on the ground for everyone to see while they demanded Jesus to decide whether they should stone her to death which was against the Roman government's law or let her go which was against the Mosaic law.

But Jesus extended His grace to the woman who got caught in adultery. As a matter of fact, Jesus extended the same grace to all of us even though He knew exactly what they are:

Have you ever cheated on your income tax? That means you are guilty of robbery.

Have you ever lied to anyone? That means you are guilty of deception.

Have you ever had a lustful thought about someone other than your spouse? That means you are guilty of adultery.

Have you ever been so angry at someone and thought about killing that person in your heart? That means you are guilty of murder.

Have you ever spread gossip about someone? That means you are guilty of lying.

The sinners deserve hell. But Jesus took our sins unto Himself so that we could be declared as guiltless.

We all could chime with Judah that his daughter-in-law was an adulterous woman and let her be burned for what she had done. We all could chime with the high and mighty Pharisees to stone that woman who got caught in adultery and let her be stoned to death. And Jesus our Holy God could say to His Father in heaven, "It is not my concern, Father. Let those humans be burned in hell." But Jesus took the sins of unjust – all of our sins so that we may have eternal life. That is the grace of God.

The story of the patriarchs in Genesis reminds us of the grace of God and His sovereignty in human life. The men and women who played a part in this important drama weren't perfect, and some of them were deliberately disobedient, and yet the Lord used them to accomplish His purposes. This doesn't mean that God approved of their sins because their sins were ultimately revealed and judged. But it does mean that God can take the weak things of this world and accomplish His purposes.

E. TAMAR IS VINDICATED AND JUDAH IS REPROVED

Genesis 38:25-30 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." 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. 27 Now it came to pass, at the time for giving birth, that behold, twins were in her womb. 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." 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. 30 Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand. And his name was called Zerah.

Tamar acted shrewdly and vindicated herself against the charge of harlotry. She makes the logical appeal of noting that the one who hired her is just as guilty as she. Judah finally could see through to the real issue. He was at fault for not providing for Tamar a son through his last son Shelah.

We see the continued "circle" in the family because of deception. Jacob used a garment to deceive his father Isaac; and Judah and his brothers used a garment to deceive Jacob in the previous chapter. Now Tamar used a garment to deceive Judah in v14. We reap what we sow.

As we can see in Matthew 1:3 and Luke 3:33, each list shows that Perez is an ancestor of Jesus the Messiah. God took the son of this ungodly situation and put him in the family line of the Messiah, even though neither Judah or Tamar were examples of godliness.

This is a glorious example of grace. God chose them despite their works, not only to be in the line of the Messiah but also to have a role in God's plan of redemption.

It also reminds us these sons of Jacob were by no means an "all-star team." They were a corrupted and problem-filled family.

G. APPLICATIONS

1) If you make a promise, keep the promise. It's about your integrity and character. But most of all, it is about following the Word of God, whether the promise is big or small.

2) Grace is acceptance without reservation, forgiveness without condemnation, pardon without probation.

It is unrestrained love poured out on the undeserving. That is exactly what God has done for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. While we didn't deserve His love, He poured out His love upon us. While we were sinners, He extended His mercy upon us. While we were His enemy by our wicked nature, He draped us with His grace.