

Beginnings in Genesis
Genesis 38 - 'The Chain of Events'

Genesis 38 ¹ It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. ² There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, ³ and 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 Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him. ⁶ And 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 put him to death. ⁸ Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." ⁹ But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. ¹⁰ And what he did was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also. ¹¹ Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up"—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father's house. ¹² In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. ¹³ And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," ¹⁴ she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage. ¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. ¹⁶ He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" ¹⁷ He answered, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." And she said, "If you give me a pledge, until you send it—" ¹⁸ He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him. ¹⁹ Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood. ²⁰ When Judah sent the young goat by his friend

the Adullamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. ²¹ And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute who was at Enaim at the roadside?" And they said, "No cult prostitute has been here." ²² So he returned to Judah and said, "I have not found her. Also, the men of the place said, 'No cult prostitute has been here.'" ²³ And Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her." ²⁴ About three months later Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." ²⁵ As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant." And she said, "Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." ²⁶ Then Judah identified them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not know her again. ²⁷ When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. ²⁸ And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, "This one came out first." ²⁹ But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" Therefore his name was called Perez. ³⁰ Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.

Tonight we move on from the introduction of Joseph in chapter 37, whose life we will follow in the next chapters.

Having introduced us to Joseph, and led us into the story of his desperate plight, Genesis promptly interrupts the story to recount a sad tale relating to his brother, Judah.

At first sight this interruption might appear unfortunate and arbitrary, but reflection shows that it is carefully placed in the record both to show Joseph's life in stark contrast to what was normative and also to show the ways in which the Lord was continuing to work toward His stated purpose.

So we will follow this chapter along two headings:

Links in the chain.

Lessons from the links.

LINKS IN THE CHAIN

When the Lord promised Eve at the time of the Fall that her seed would bruise the serpent's head, He promptly set in motion a series of events which would continue until the final victory of Messiah in the eternal future.

Abraham became a major link in the chain of the Lord's activity.

As we have seen, the next link was Isaac, not Ishmael, followed by Jacob, not Esau. It would be natural to assume that either Reuben, the firstborn son of Jacob, or Joseph, his outstanding son, would be the next link in the chain of divine succession. But that was not to be the case.

Judah was the Lord's choice and like some of His other choices it was surprising to say the least.

Compared to the care which Isaac exercised in choosing a bride for Jacob, Judah's approach to marriage was totally irresponsible.

Genesis 38:1-2 ¹ It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. ² There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her,

The Lord had placed a definite prohibition on marriage to a Canaanite, but Judah, assuming he was aware of the ruling, paid no attention to it and did what he wanted to do.

The marriage produced three sons, one of whom, whose name as ER, married a woman called Tamar. We are not given details

about ET's lifestyle, but it was: Genesis 38:7 ⁷ But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death.

The bluntness of the statement and the lack of detail serve only to point out the dramatic nature of God's intervention in the affairs of man, when God decides it is necessary.

Judah reminded his son ONAN: Genesis 38:8 ⁸ Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother."

But Onan was not at all enthusiastic about raising a son who would not be his although he was not at all reluctant to engage in sexual activity with His brother's widow. And so he found a convenient way of making sure that Tamar was not impregnated.

You can research on your own the definition of 'onanism' – but let me make clear here that Onan's sin for which he too received the ultimate penalty was not onanism or deviant sexual behaviour, but simple refusal on his part to perpetuate the line of his brother.

His reasons for this were that he: Genesis 38:9 ⁹ But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his.

So he decided to have no part in the procedure although he repeatedly had relations with the widow.

Tamar had every reason to expect that she would be given a husband to replace the one she had lost and the one she never really had, but apparently Judah who had lost two sons who had been related to her was not prepared to risk losing his sole remaining son, Shelah.

Remember the line through which the Serpent-bruiser would come was at this point precarious and vulnerable. Sensing that Judah was not going to help her, despite his promise that she

could marry Shelah eventually, Tamar took matters into her own hands.

Judah, who had recently lost his wife, who incidentally is never named, finished his period of mourning and went with his friend to a local village to join in the festival related to sheep shearing.

Tamar knew he was coming so: Genesis 38:14-16 ¹⁴ she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage. ¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. ¹⁶ He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law.

She agreed on promise of payment which he pledged by leaving his seal and his staff, they engaged in intercourse from which she became pregnant, and when Judah was informed he said: Genesis 38:24 ²⁴ About three months later Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned."

The ancient double standard has never been better illustrated. The culture felt it was perfectly alright for Judah to have sex with a harlot, but totally improper for his daughter-in-law to become pregnant through harlotry.

When Tamar was brought out for her execution she asked only that the owner of the seal and the staff should be identified. Genesis 38:26 ²⁶ Then Judah identified them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not know her again.

Eventually twin boys were born to Tamar, but not without a touch of drama. One child's hand appeared, a scarlet thread was

fastened around the write to identify him as the firstborn, but then the other brother pre-empted him and was born first!

Zerah wore the thread, but Perez took precedence. The startling truth which attaches to this strange story is that the Lord not only chose Judah, but also appointed Perez to be the one through whom the line of descent would be preserved until Messiah would come in the fullness of time. Matthew 1:3³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram,

LESSONS FROM THE LINKS

1. The first lesson is that man cannot escape responsibility for his actions.

ER and ONAN discovered this in the most dramatic fashion as did their father, Judah, in less dramatic terms. They died; he was simply shamed.

Man is free to make his choices, but he is not free to determine the consequences of his choices.

The truth of eternal security – that salvation is a free gift through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ does not confer with it a freedom simply to make choices to sin without repercussions in time.

Illustration in 1 Corinthians – within a church which had all kinds of other issues which Paul overlooked – he rebukes the man living with his stepmother, and commits his body to Satan so that his soul will be saved. And the example in 1 Corinthians of the health and early death consequences from their behaviours.

2. The second lesson is one that reverberates throughout Genesis, namely that the Lord is sovereign.

Nothing will thwart His purposes which invariably offer man the opportunity to cooperate in the outworking of His eternal plan.

Should man decide not to cooperate, then he alone is the loser for the Lord marches on relentlessly to His ultimate goal.

3. The third lesson has to do with the remarkable grace of God and the humility of Christ.

We are all familiar with the choice that Messiah should be born in a stable rather than a palace, but His genealogy portrays even more graphically the humility of Christ.

Only five women are mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Christ. They are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba [identified only as 'her who had been the wife of Uriah' [Matt 1:6], AND Mary.

Tamar posed as a harlot, Rahab was a harlot, Ruth was a Moabitess, Bathsheba was an adulteress, and Mary was regarded as immoral by her contemporaries because they did not believe her story.

Perhaps Matthew carefully included these women in order to counter Jewish criticism of his story by showing that God had moved in unusual ways to achieve His ends and had shown that He was not averse to using those who were outside the pale of respectability. Whatever he may have had in mind, we cannot escape the fact that the Lord graciously reached out to all manner of people and offered them the chance to be part of what He was doing.

He still performs in the same wonderful ways.