

The Wonder Of God's Grace

I wrestled for a long time on whether to include Genesis chapter 38 in our series of messages on Genesis.

Genesis chapter 38 is in some ways a very ugly chapter of the Bible. By that I mean it deals with some very ugly circumstances of life. It deals with open, outright sin, and it also deals with the consequences of that sin.

Many of the more sermonic types of commentaries skip over this chapter entirely. The homiletical suggestions in Leupold's commentary on Genesis says, "Entirely unsuited for homiletical use."

Chuck Swindoll in his Bible study guide to his series on Joseph skips over this chapter that at first seems like an intrusion in Joseph's life story.

I was tempted to do the same, to skip over this passage and move on into the life of Joseph. I wondered, what could I say about a story of incest and rebellion against God, or should I even say anything about it?

Two things pointed me back to chapter 38. Number 1, my commitment to verse by verse exposition of the Bible. The reason I'm committed to a verse by verse, or in this case a passage by passage exposition of Scripture is because of context. Context makes all the difference in the world in understanding the Bible. Verses taken out of context are the things that give such seeming authority to the cults.

Two guys in white shirts show up on the doorstep and quote the Bible and people who don't know any better say "Gee, it sounds like that verse is teaching that" because they don't know the flow of the passage and the subject that is being dealt with.

Context in a narrative book like Genesis is very important when it comes to seeing the relationship of people and events to the whole book and how those events fit in with the whole biblical story.

To skip over chapter 38 would bother me because in a sense we'd lose an important part of the story of Joseph. Not that Joseph is dealt with directly or even mentioned, but we'd fail to see some things that help us to understand why God worked like He did in

Joseph's life.

The second thing that pointed me back to this chapter was what we call verbal plenary inspiration. The word translated "inspiration" in the Bible means God-breathed. "Verbal refers to the words. It's not that the writers were inspired or the Bible is inspiring. It's the words that were breathed out by God through those human authors. And "plenary" means "all." When you go to a conference and they have a plenary session that means it's for all. It's for everyone. So all the words of the Bible are God-breathed.

The Bible makes these claims for itself: *all scripture is God breathed. It says, holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. The word of God is alive and powerful and sharper than any two edged sword. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord endures forever. God has exalted His Word above His name.*

There's something here in chapter 38 for us! It may be couched in some unpleasant circumstances. It may be woven together with human ugliness but it is here.

So these things were written for our admonition just as sure as chapter 37 and chapter 39. And so for those reasons I didn't want to abandon chapter 38 even on Father's Day.

It may not be pleasant, but it's reality. It's part of the history of God's working in the world. And out of the darkness of Genesis 38 we are going to see the brightness of God's grace come shining through.

Open your Bible to Genesis chapter 38 page 37

Read verses 1-6

Many years before this, God had chosen a man out of a dark, sin-sick world, to fulfill His plan for mankind. The man's name was Abraham and God called him out of idolatry and paganism and promised to make him a great nation.

In the 430 years since God had destroyed all but Noah's family by the flood, the world had all but forgotten the true God and was steeped in idolatry and heathenism. Abraham listened God's call and came out from his society to be a worshipper of Jehovah. God led him to the land of Canaan which was corrupt and perverse and promised it to Abraham's offspring as their possession.

Of course, Canaan is Palestine and the land of Israel. God, through Abraham

established a people to worship him, to write and preserve His Word to us, and to bring His Son, the Savior of the world.

The sad story of the scriptures is that God's own people were unfaithful to Him. The Jews rebelled and when Jesus Christ came they failed to see who He really was.

The Bible says, *He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.* (John 1:11)
Blindness in part has come upon Israel. (Romans 11:25)

And yet the really exciting thing about all of this is, it didn't take God by surprise. It didn't send Him back to the drawing board. God didn't have to come up with "Plan B" because His people failed to cooperate.

The sovereign God of the universe accomplished His plan in spite of His people. In fact, even though He didn't cause it, He used their rebellion to bring about His plan of salvation through the crucifixion of Jesus.

God is able to carry out His plans for man in spite of man. God is able to use human beings in their rebellion to accomplish His purpose.

Now by that I don't mean to say that it doesn't matter how we act or what we do. Because God is able to overrule our sin and use it to bring about good isn't an excuse for sin.

God still hates sin. Sin put Jesus on the cross. The wages of sin is still death. There is always a personal price to pay when we sin. *Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.* (Galatians 6:7)

But our sin, as serious as it is, can never cause God's plan to fail.

In Genesis 38 we have a vivid illustration of man's sin and God's sovereignty; of man's rebellion and God's grace.

Judah, Abraham's great, great grandson had been involved in the events of chapter 37. There Joseph's brothers plotted to get rid of him. Joseph was blessed by God and honored by his father and so his brothers in jealousy and envy decided to kill him.

His brother Reuben talked them out of committing murder and then brother Judah came up with the idea of selling Joseph as a slave to some Midianite traders who were on their way to Egypt.

That would get rid of Joseph, avoid bloodshed and put a couple of shekels in everybody's pocket.

Here's what's so fascinating, even in this very ugly situation of family hatred God was at work. God's plan was that Joseph go down into Egypt where he would one day be a ruler in Pharaoh's court.

Eventually all of Joseph's family would be brought down to Egypt because of a famine in Palestine and in time would grow into the nation of Israel.

God's plan was not only *not* thwarted by the sin of His people, their sinful actions even became the channels of God's plan being carried out.

Now, we find Judah leaving home. We are not told but I'm sure his conscience bothered him seeing his father grieve over Joseph, thinking he was dead. Moving out on his own was one way to try to forget what happened so off he went.

Actually he didn't go far away from the family headquarters and pasture land. Adullam, where he went, wasn't nearly so far away as Shechem or Dothan. Adullam was a small and long established Canaanite settlement about 8 miles northwest of the family home.

Judah was also evidently looking for a wife. He found one, the daughter of a Canaanite named Shuah, who bore him three sons.

The Canaanites, as we've so often see in Genesis, were corrupt and vile people. Their religious worship was filled with immorality, licentiousness, even human sacrifice.

Not exactly the girl every mother wants her son to marry. Especially not Judah.

Judah and his brothers were the forefathers of the tribes that would make up the nation of Israel. That made them significant, but Judah was the forefather of Jesus Christ. It was through Judah's descendents that the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, the Lion of the tribe of Judah was to come. That made him the most significant of all.

If anything, being in this privileged position Judah should have been more all the more careful in choosing a wife.

Shuah's daughter turned out to be a true Canaanite and I believe refused to worship Jehovah.

The reason that I think she wouldn't worship God was that she bore Jacob three sons and God rejected each one from carrying on Judah's patriarchal line.

Two were struck dead by God for wickedness and the third married later in life.

The two older brothers had both been married to a girl named Tamar. First, the older son, who died because of his wickedness and then the second son.

By the time that second son was struck dead by the Lord Judah was ready to blame shift.

He says in verse 11... **(Read vs 11)**

Whatever Judah may have preached to his family from time to time, his own personal example was deplorable.

Having buried his two sons, Judah tried to place the blame for their deaths on Tamar. Talking about his 3rd son Judah says, "Remain a widow until he's grown lest he also die as his brothers did." In other words, "Don't follow the custom of the land and marry the next brother in line. If you do he'll end up dead like the first two." As if it was her fault they died.

It's so easy to blame others for our problems rather than seeing our own faults. Judah was really the one to blame. Judah was the father. He was accountable for his family.

If he wouldn't have married a pagan, if he hadn't left the training of his sons to her, if he had been an example of godliness, if he had been faithful in a thorough teaching of the truth about Jehovah God to his wife and sons, things might have been different. Dad's our kids need us to teach them and model God's truth.

Well, in time Judah's wife died and his old friend Hirah the Adulamite tried to cheer him up.

Read verse 12

Hirah said, "It's sheep shearing time at Timnath." That's always lots of fun with partying and celebrating. Let's go up and have a good time and get your mind off things."

The rest of the story rapidly goes down hill from here.

Read verses 13-15

Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, realized that Judah was not going to give her his third son in marriage as he had promised. She had waited as a widow at least several years to follow out the custom of marrying her deceased husband's brother.

The whole idea of marriage and bearing children was extremely important in the ancient near east.

But Judah hadn't kept his promise. It seems Tamar is determined to have offspring and if her father-in-law has outmaneuvered her then she'll outmaneuver him.

She dresses in the garments of a temple prostitute. The Canaanite religion not only employed vile symbols and pornography but temple prostitutes. Worship of Baal and was carried out by committing immorality.

There was plenty of wine drinking at the sheep shearing festivities and Tamar sets herself up by the highway as a priestess of a local temple.

This lets us know a little more about Judah's character. She knew her father-in-law well enough to know that he would be a likely candidate for the services such a woman would offer.

Sure enough, before long Judah came that way and with a total disregard for the calling of God stopped at her invitation.

Her price was a kid of the goats, something Judah obviously didn't have with him. As a guarantee that he would pay the price, she demanded that he leave his signet ring, his bracelets and his shepherds' staff, which Judah did willingly.

Now... read verses 20 - 24

Hirah takes the goat down for Judah but the woman is nowhere to be found. Judah gets upset. Not because he had transgressed the law of God, not because he had acted immorally, but because he was afraid that his reputation as a man of his word might be ruined.

He fussed for awhile and then forgot the whole thing, or at least he thought he could forget the whole thing.

Three months came and went, and the incident faded completely from Judah's mind. Then came the startling news that Tamar was pregnant.

And what was Judah's response? "Get the stake, tie her to it, and let her be burned!" She's disgraced the Judaic law and dishonored the family.

Even though she was back in her father's home, she was still under Judah's authority, still nominally engaged to his youngest son.

The penalty for adultery in such a case even in an ungodly society like Canaan was often death. In most ancient systems there seems to have been a double standard, with much more severe penalties being imposed on the woman than on the man, evidently on the basis of the shame attached to a man having some other man's child born in his family.

Judah immediately judges Tamar to be guilty and orders her killed. Underneath all of this might be the added unexpected opportunity to avoid her marriage to Shelah.

In the process of this arrest and confrontation, something very surprising takes place.

Read verse 25

Whoops! Judah's sin had found him out. I can picture the whole local population gathered together to see the events and suddenly self-righteous Judah is shown to be the adulterer. She had the proof in her hand.

Now the mystery of the disappearing prostitute was answered and since the very uncomfortable shoe was on the other foot there was no more talk of burning.

If there's anything at all that we can say in Judah's favor it's that he finally admitted his guilt and provided for Tamar and treated her sons as his heirs.

Tamar gave birth to twins. And both brothers, as well as Judah's other living son, Shelah, eventually became ancestors of families in the tribe of Judah.

The New Testament genealogy of Christ in Matthew chapter 1 lists 4 women. That in itself is interesting because Jewish genealogies seldom listed women.

But what is even more amazing is that none of those 4 were Jews. They were all Gentiles with questionable circumstances going on in their lives who were brought to faith in the true God. 2 were prostitutes, 1 adulterer, 1 Moabitess. The Moabites were under a curse from God.

The first of the four listed is Tamar.! Her first born Perez was an ancestor of King David and eventually Jesus Christ.

What can we possibly learn from a chapter of scripture like this? Is there any redeeming value in studying Genesis chapter 38? There's four things that stand out as we study out this passage and its relationship to the chapters around it.

I. There Is No Sin That Each One Of Us Is Not Capable Of Committing

Judah was a man raised in a home where the promises of God were well known. This was a family that God had preserved and prospered and lead. Judah was an heir to the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and yet he sinned big time.

And the lesson there ought to hit home to all of us. It doesn't matter who we are. It doesn't matter how we've been brought up. It doesn't even matter how long we've known God. We are capable of sin if we don't walk day by day with the Lord.

And not only that, but given the right set of circumstances and a far enough walk away from the things of God and we're capable of most any sin in the book.

We can pride ourselves on our morality and ethics. We can say we'd never commit the sins and vices we see around us but we have the capacity.

That's why we need to come to God by faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and then walk with him. We need a closeness to the Lord every day because we never know what situations we are going to find ourselves in.

In the very next chapter Joseph is going to be tempted with the very same sin as his brother Judah. The difference is Judah went after Tamar while Joseph ran from Potapher's wife.

This chapter is here to show us the awful possibilities of human sin, but to also draw a contrast with the possibilities of righteousness in chapter 39.

I. There Is No Sin That Each One Of Us Is Not Capable Of Committing

II. The Rebellion Of Mankind Becomes The Justification Of Divine Providence

It is abundantly clear from this narrative how low the moral condition of the Canaanite world had gotten. It was essential that the family of Jacob be safeguarded from the corruption around them because they were so bent on being a part of it.

When Jacob and his family were in Shechem there was sin and heartache. Now the next contact with the Canaanites opens the door to more corruption.

In the last chapter we learned how Joseph's brothers had sold him to the Midianite caravan who in turn sold him to an officer of Pharaoh's guard.

On the surface that whole thing looked arbitrary and immoral. The hatred of men who were supposed to be worshippers of the true God venting their anger against their own brother.

But God was overruling the evil to use it for God. God wanted Joseph in Egypt, in Pharaoh's court so that he could provide a safe haven for his father and his brothers and their families.

It was absolutely necessary for Israel to "come out and be separate." The way things were going here, they were just going to be absorbed into the culture and the line of Abraham would vanish.

They needed to be isolated and in this chapter we have proof of it vividly and awfully brought out before us.

- I. There Is No Sin That Each One Of Us Is Not Capable Of Committing*
- II. The Rebellion Of Mankind Becomes The Justification Of Divine Providence*
- III. God's Divine Righteousness Judges All Sin*

The candidness of the Bible is amazing. The stamp of divine authorship is all over this book.

No Jew seeking to concoct some history about his people would show us the sinfulness of his ancestors in such an open and revealing way.

This is God's book. And the openness rests on the absolute justice of the God whose book it is.

Here is the sin of one of the key men in God's program for the world depicted in all its hideousness. Here is a human ancestor of the Messiah himself shown as he really is.

The New Testament book of Romans challenges us to *consider the goodness and severity of God.* (Romans 11:22) He's no respecter of persons. He deals with the sins of His people just as pointedly as He deals with anyone else's.

There aren't any favorites with God. Sin is sin always. Judah suffered the consequences of his wrong. And not only that, but the whole story is there on the pages of the Bible and has been read by millions of people.

I. There Is No Sin That Each One Of Us Is Not Capable Of Committing

II. The Rebellion Of Mankind Becomes The Justification Of Divine Providence

III. God's Divine Righteousness Judges All Sin

IV. God's Grace Can Weave The Tangled Threads Of Our Rebellion Into His Divine Pattern

This looks like the most tangled up mess you'd ever want to see. But God took all the threads and made something out of them.

First of all, He dealt with Judah. In Chapter 44, which is set several years later we find Judah a changed man.

Second of all, He worked through Joseph to set him in the highest position in Egypt so that he would provide the place of refuge for Joseph's family in the land of Goshen. And then third and the greatest wonder of all, God brought the line of Christ, not only through Judah, but even through Tamar.

I'd like to leave you with the words of the English commentator W. H. Griffith Thomas. Now it is clear as it can be that no man would have done this, even if he could. Only divine grace could dare to take up these sorry elements of human life and use them for its own blessed purpose. There is nothing more marvelous than the power and possibilities of grace. Grace forgives, uplifts, transmutes, transforms, and then uses for its own glory. "Shall we then sin that grace may abound?

God forbid." We may not, must not, dare not. And yet, "If any man sin we have" the blessed assurance that grace will not leave us in the mire of degradation, defeat and despair. While it is eternally true that what is done can never be undone, it is equally true that what has been broken can be mended and the glory of grace is its power to heal broken hearts and mend broken lives.

While life can never be as though sin had not been committed, yet the alchemy of grace has wonderful transforming power. Nature knows nothing of this, and can only tell of law broken and penalty exacted. But the Gospel comes to hearts broken by sin and despairing of redemption, and tells of pardon, peace and purity, in the blessed healing and transforming influences of divine mercy, love and grace.

Donald Grey Barnhouse prayed, "Lord crush us with a sense of your grace!"