

Judah and Tamar

Genesis 38:1-30

Twenty-two years passed from the time Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt until Jacob finally came into Egypt as well, which we'll study in chapter 46. During those twenty-two years, we have only one account in the Bible of Joseph's family back in Canaan, and that's the tale we have before us this morning. It's a story from the life of Judah, the brother of Joseph most likely to be considered righteous. Judah was the one who had saved Joseph's life, by suggesting to the other brothers that they sell him into slavery rather than kill him.

Judah would be the one from whose line Jesus the Messiah would come. So you might expect to find in the biblical record something good that he did. But we don't. Instead, we find a story about which my one commentator who consistently declares particular chapters unusable for preaching can simply say this, "entirely unsuitable for use in preaching." And, of course, I disagree with him.

Even so, be assured, I don't want to offend your senses and I do not intend to explicitly explain the acts which we find in this chapter. The point of this chapter isn't a focus upon the acts of sexual immorality, but upon the overriding blessing of God. The foolishness of human ways, which we see so clearly, is magnified by its contrast with God's blessing. And yet we still see God's grace.

And so in this text, we see God's blessing. We see man's foolish rejection of that blessing. And we God's incredible grace to provide his blessing anyway. Let me begin with an explanation of the blessing. Put simply, it is,

I. THE BLESSING OF A GODLY HERITAGE.

Children. Grandchildren.

v.1-6

Jacob's line continues, through Judah. Judah separates himself from his brothers, which is perhaps a very good thing, after the evil they had done to Joseph. He finds a wife, and has three sons. Er, Onan, and Shelah. Judah's wife was a Canaanite, which certainly isn't a good thing. But the line of God's people continues. Two more generations.

But we really don't see the emphasis upon the blessing of a godly heritage until,

v.8

That verse refers to a law which we find in Deuteronomy 25, the so-called Levirate law, or the law of the levirate marriage. That law doesn't have anything to do with the tribe of Levi, though it might sound similar. Rather, the levirate law is described here as the duty of the brother-in-law. It was the duty of an unmarried man whose brother had died without children. He was to marry his brother's widow, in order that his brother, though childless when he died, would still be able to have a godly heritage!

Levir is a Latin word meaning brother-in-law. And this regulation, as I read in my commentaries, was a common part of the legal codes of the nations even before Moses. It is specified in Deut. 25.

Deut. 25:5 "If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the widow of the dead man shall not be married to a stranger outside the family; her husband's brother shall go in to her, take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. 6 And it shall be that the firstborn son which she bears will succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name

may not be blotted out of Israel.”

And I want to emphasize this morning that the levirate law is a great blessing! Stated in general terms,

A. God’s law is given as a great blessing.

What a great blessing and incomparable honor for a man who has died without children to be able to have a child to continue his heritage. Presumably, the reference is to a son, since the promise was for an inheritance and the name. What a tremendous blessing for a man who suffered a tragically untimely death to be granted a child! And what a joyful duty that should be for the brother who remains alive! What greater act of honor could you possibly give your brother, than to give him a child, and heir. A son who could continue his line. And what a dishonor it is for the whole family if the brother refuses!

Deut. 25:7 “But if the man does not want to take his brother’s wife, then let his brother’s wife go up to the gate to the elders, and say, ‘My husband’s brother refuses to raise up a name to his brother in Israel; he will not perform the duty of my husband’s brother.’ 8 Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him. But if he stands firm and says, I do not want to take her,’ 9 then his brother’s wife shall come to him in the presence of the elders, remove his sandal from his foot, spit in his face, and answer and say, ‘So shall it be done to the man who will not build up his brother’s house.’ 10 And his name shall be called in Israel, ‘The house of him who had his sandal removed.’”

Now, let me emphasize. There was nothing unnatural or immoral about this. The two brothers would have to be already living together, that is part of a large family unit already sharing some responsibilities. The woman would be childless, or at least without a son. And the brother would have to be unmarried. Under those conditions, the woman should not look to find a

husband outside of the family, but the brother should assume his responsibility and marry her himself. Then the firstborn son would represent his dead brother’s name. The deceased man would have a posterity. And that was, of course, so important, since God’s covenant with his people was for “you and your descendants after you.”

The fulfillment of God’s covenant promises would continue. What a blessing! This law was to be that blessing. So keep the context of this whole chapter as it should be, upon the blessing of a godly heritage, a blessing granted through the law of the levirate marriage.

The conditions were all met with the sons of Judah. The firstborn, Er, died, without an heir. But what we see here is not God’s blessing, for the law is rejected. The contrast is what is made so obvious, and it really goes from bad to worse. Starting with Judah’s second son, Onan, we see that,

B. The rejection of God’s law brings great harm.

Again, let me emphasize. The law was a blessing. The trouble came only when the law was ignored. Er himself represents the rejection of God’s law, and his death is directly attributable to God.

v.7

That’s astounding, and terrifying. Yet don’t forget that in the NT, we also have an example of a man’s life being taken by the Lord as discipline. Actually, a man and his wife, Ananias and Sapphira, are both struck dead for lying to the Holy Spirit. Here we don’t know the exact circumstances of Er’s death, but his obituary was short and to the point. “Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD killed him.”

Need I say it any more clearly? The rejection of God's law brings great harm.

But that rejection continues, for sadly, sinfully, Er's brother refuses to fulfill his duty as a brother-in-law. Only, he does so with horrible hypocrisy, because outwardly he seems to obey. But his sinful heart is exposed. And ultimately his refusal to keep this law and to fulfill his duty.

He married Tamar, as the law required, but hardly with an eager spirit to be a blessing to his dead brother by providing a son. Instead, he was filled with such selfish, self-centered, self-interest that he refused to impregnate her. He knew the provisions of the levirate law, and intentionally prevented its realization. The Scripture specifically condemns the attitude of his heart in doing so.

v.9

What horrible sinfulness on his part, degrading and perverting the act of marriage itself, failing to consummate that most intimate of all physical acts between a husband and a wife. And what a humiliating experience that must have been for her. I appreciate the rather gentle language of the New King James. The actual words are unmistakable explicit.

And God was not pleased, to put it mildly.

v.10

Onan died, too. The rejection of God's law brings great harm. Sadly, that rejection continues. Though Judah promises Tamar his third son, when he comes of age, he fails to keep that promise. He sends Tamar back to her own father. And when Shelah comes of age, she is not brought back to be his wife.

v.11

Judah's intentions certainly became obvious to Tamar, and we read what drastic action she took because of it.

v.13-14

And we're left with no doubt about Judah's action, for he confesses his own sin.

v.26

Again, perhaps we could understand Judah's reasoning and justify what he did. It would certainly appear in his eyes that Tamar was a jinx. Talk about bad luck. Two of his sons died as her husband. Dare he risk the third, tempting fate? Perhaps, to put it as in as good a light as we possibly could, he was simply forgetful, failing to keep his promise simply because he forgot about Tamar in his own grief upon the death of his own wife. He's still guilty of breaking his word.

The point is simple. God's laws are good. Rejecting them brings great harm. And so, in this rejection of God's laws, we see clearly,

II. THE FOOLISHNESS OF HUMAN WAYS.

You have to ask yourself that question which we've considered before, "How could this be?" How could these early descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob become so wicked? How could God create a nation consisting of such sinful men?

The answer is simple. God's grace. And that's where we will again focus this morning. But first let's look more closely at man's foolishness. We'll come back to Judah himself, but let's begin with Tamar. She sees that the blessing of the levirate marriage is not going to be hers, so she takes the matter into her own hands, thus demonstrating,

A. The foolishness of seeking God's blessings through human effort.

And this was human effort at its worst. She had been sent away, back to her father.
v.11

But after Judah's wife died, when Tamar found out Judah was joining the sheepshearers in Timnath, she came up with a plan.
v.12-14

She took the matter into her own hands, and devised her own scheme. Since it became obvious to her that Shelah wasn't going to be her husband, she would have to arrange a way to be impregnated by him or by Judah himself. She is determined to bear a child to carry on the name of her deceased husband. And her motives are praiseworthy. She could have remarried, outside the family, and no doubt bore any number of children. But this was the family she married into, and this family would provide the father for her child.

But her method were entirely human. And her ways were immoral. So we see,

B. The foolishness of seeking God's blessings through immorality.

v.14

She clothed herself as a harlot.
v.15

And she no doubt made herself visible when Judah came along, and succeeded in her plan.
v.16-19

I'll talk about Judah in just a minute, but first Tamar. She clearly wasn't prostituting herself with any man that came along.

In fact, she was not even noticed by anyone else. When Judah went looking for her later, no one knew of her.
v.20-21

But that doesn't excuse the immorality of her intercourse with Judah. It doesn't excuse her disgusting bargaining, effectively selling her body to a man for the price of one young goat from the man's flock, a customary price one might have paid for such services in those days.

She is trying to assure the fulfillment of the marriage covenant which Judah had made with her in the first place. She is trying to gain the rightful opportunity to become the mother of Judah's successors in the covenant plan of God. She was not motivated either by lust nor money. And she succeeded, or so it seemed.
v.27-30

Yet it was still immoral. And it was still foolish to seek God's blessings through human efforts. We've seen this before, haven't we? With Abraham and Hagar, bearing the firstborn son Ishmael. And with Jacob and his concubines. It's such a prevailing tendency in the human heart, to take God's promises into your own hands, often even through immorality.

The end justifies the means, doesn't it? If we do something good, if we further God's purposes and plans, then that is good, isn't it? Not if we depend upon human effort. And most assuredly not if we employ immorality. There would be all sorts of applications to our own lives today, thinking even subconsciously that we can advance God's purposes with our own foolishness and even immorality.

So let's get back to Judah, for we can't begin to let him off the hook. Judah shows us,

C. The foolishness of seeking God's blessing through hypocrisy.

The immorality went both ways. It was immoral for Tamar to pose and perform as a prostitute. It was immoral for Judah to purchase her services. The recent death of his wife didn't justify it either. It was horribly wrong. Horribly immoral. And Judah goes one step deeper into this quagmire of sin. He adds hypocrisy to immorality.

He pays Tamar what she asks, the young goat.
v.16-17a

And he gives her a pledge, since he didn't have the goat with him.
v.17b-18

But when he determined to pay up his debt, he couldn't find her. And that seemed to end the matter for him.
v.20-23

But then,
v.24a

This was a grave moral offense. He was immediately prepared to inflict the harshest punishment prescribed by the law.
v.24b

Perhaps there was a sense of relief at being freed from his obligations to Tamar, and to be rid of any guilt which came from knowing he had promised Shelah to her, as he rightfully should have done. We don't know the motive. But we see the hypocrisy.
v.25

Those items were irrefutable proof of Judah's guilt. And

Judah, at this point to his credit, doesn't hide from his guilt. He doesn't parse words nor does he offer cheap rationalizations. He blames no one else. He accepts the verdict of self-condemnation, and seems to respond with the appropriate humility of one caught in such immoral hypocrisy. His guilty conscience shines forth, and he doesn't blame Tamar in the least. He accuses her of no wrongdoing, but in an honorably manly way, accepts the responsibility for himself.

v.26

All of which magnifies the foolishness of human ways.

Again, let me say with conviction, this passage is a worthy subject for preaching, for the things spoken of here are real. They are real examples of human sinfulness, not very far removed from the types of lives which people live today. And these examples of human sinfulness ought rightly to prick your heart, so that your response not be that of the self-righteous Pharisee, the one who,

Luke 18:11 "...stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men —robbers, evildoers, adulterers —or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

May we be much more like the tax collector in that parable, the publican, about whom we read,

Luke 18:13 "The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"

No doubt that some measure of self-righteous hypocrisy lurks in all of us, to one degree or another. The inclination to trust in our own devices and to lean upon our own understanding is likewise a constant temptation against which we must fight. And

the sinfulness of immorality dwells deep inside our hearts as well, as must be cut away by the sharp knife edge of God's Holy Spirit.

The point is, there is a lot of Judah and Tamar in each of us. But back to the context. I want to end with one great contrast, one point that brings us right to the heart of the gospel.

Remember, this is the line of Judah. And despite that fact that this line continues through horrible immorality and flagrant hypocrisy, the line does continue. And the firstborn of this line, the one whose name indicates that he broke out of the womb, was the one who would be in the line of the promised Messiah. Jesus Christ would come in the line of Judah, the lion of Judah. Jesus Christ would come in the line of Perez, born to Tamar, begat by his own grandfather, Judah.

The ultimate irony of all of this is that Tamar obtained the very promise she sought, the continuation of her line and that of her dead husband. But the fulfillment was far greater than she must have even dreamed to imagine. The Messiah.

And so, despite man's repeated folly, we see,

III. THE GRACE OF GOD IN CHRIST.

We read in,

Luke 3:31 "...the son of David, 32 the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Salmon, the son of Nahshon, 33 the son of Amminadab, the son of Ram, the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, 34 the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor."

But not only Judah, Tamar as well, is mentioned in the line of Jesus Christ. The line is even more explicit in,

Matt. 1:2 "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."

A woman who conceived as a consequence of posing as a prostitute to deceive her own father-in-law, Tamar is included in the line of Jesus Christ. So of course Genesis 38 is suitable for preaching, for this chapter leads us directly to Jesus. By the grace of God!

And so it is that everything in the OT points to Christ. Everything points to the ultimate fulfillment of God's covenant promise, that his own son would be the Messiah, the perfect high priest who would offer his own life as the penalty for our sin, satisfying the wrath of God in full payment for all the sins of his people.

And God's grace couldn't possibly be more greatly magnified than to be shown to us in this account of human foolishness, gross immorality, and shameless hypocrisy. So as we read a passage describing human sinfulness, we are drawn to Christ. We're drawn to the cross. And we behold the glory of God in showing mercy to sinners such as you, and such as me, show to us a grace that truly is amazing. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.