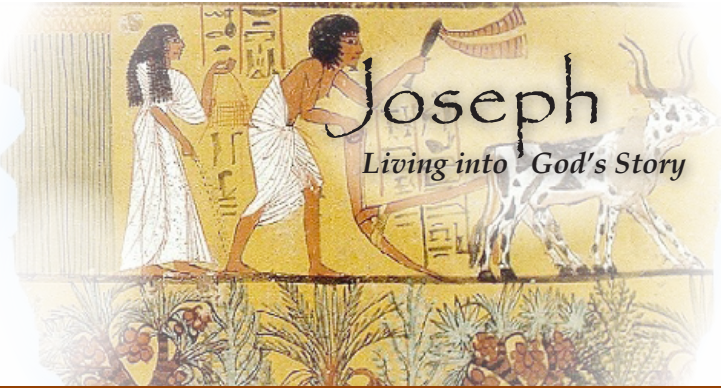


Weekly  
Discussion  
Guide

February 14,  
2010

Genesis 38:  
Things Get a  
Bit Messy



*Where we start . . .*

What bothers you most about being interrupted when you are on a project? Why?

What helps you move from thinking about something as an intrusion into your life to embracing the interruption?

*What we read . . .*

We've begun our journey through the life of Joseph. What do you recall about what we have discovered so far?

Read Genesis 37:36. How does this verse leave the story of Joseph hanging? What would you want to know next?

Read Genesis 38. What is your initial reaction to this story? How does it "fit" with the account of Joseph's life?

What possible reason(s) might the author have in telling us these details? What does it add to what we are learning about Joseph?

The account of Judah's troubles ends with the birth of two boys. Why tell us this?

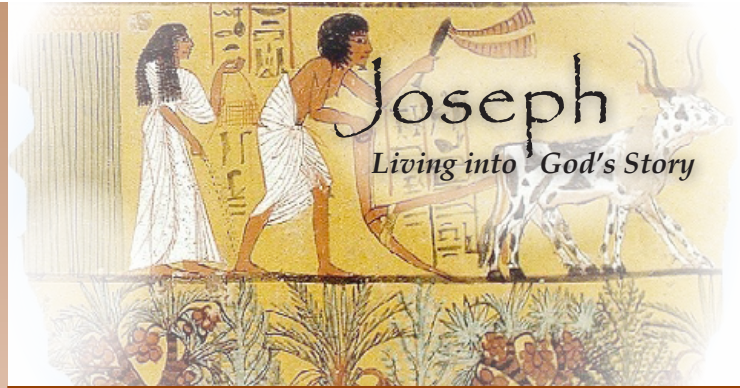
*Why this matters . . .*

To get a sense of what is going on, read Ruth 4:17-22 and Luke 3:23-33. With this "larger frame" for the story of Genesis 38, what do you understand about what is happening? Why does it help to see that?

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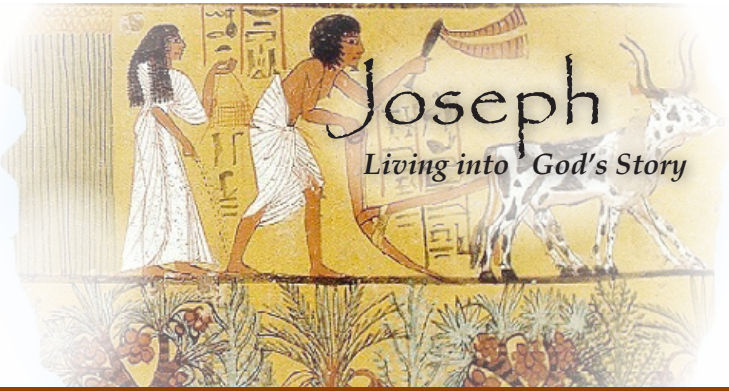
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*What are we focusing on?*

Unfortunately, many commentators skip over Genesis 38. Why? Because it turns our attention away from Joseph, because what we are told about Judah in this chapter is so very disturbing, and because it's hard to make sense of why we need these details. But, we don't want to overlook even such a sordid tale as the one we find in Genesis 38, seeing as the Spirit inspired these words as well.

In the midst of such trouble and sadness, in spite of the bad choices made by Judah and his family, God is still at work. And that is what we want to see, in the midst of all that Genesis 38 tells us.

*What will we be discussing?*

It almost seems that you could read the story of Joseph by going from Genesis 37:36 and turning right to Genesis 39:1. You wouldn't miss a beat if you read the account that way. Seeing that, it's easy to see why some think that Genesis 38 is nothing but an interruption.

That's what prompts the opening questions. Why do some things strike us as interruptions? An interruption is what we feel breaks into the flow of the day, the flow of the work, the momentum we have going. What changes the way we respond to such an intrusion? When we realize that maybe this interruption is part of something bigger, we find it easier to think differently. That's how we want to approach the "interruption" of Genesis 38.

As you read the passage, there is much that could be commented on. Lots of details are only touched on by the author in a passing way. Many questions are left unanswered. Don't feel you have to unpack every line and phrase; focus on getting a feel for the section as a whole.

There are a couple of observations that might be of some help in grasping what is being told us.

Judah "went down from" his brothers (38:1); that seems to imply a bit more than merely heading off to work. He ends up taking up with a foreigner living in the land. And, he ended up taking a wife from among the pagans there. We are not even given her name. Why not? Perhaps because *who* she was didn't really matter. Judah just "took" her. Nearly identical language is used to describe what Shechem did to Dinah, Jacob's daughter (Genesis 34:1-2). Both Shechem's actions and Judah's actions are described as "seeing" and "taking" a woman that leads to a sexual act. What Shechem did was seen, by Jacob's sons, as offensive. What does this suggest about Judah's actions?

In the Old Testament times, because of the need to perpetuate a family line to preserve wealth and property, it was considered appropriate (and later explained in the Law) for a widow to have a child by her deceased husband's brothers or, if necessary, even by her father-in-law. Thus, what Judah wanted of his sons was appropriate. But two of the boys were "wicked" and God took their lives. Apparently, Judah was troubled enough by the death of his first two that he withheld his youngest from Tamar.

It is not hard to grasp what is being pictured for us in Genesis 38. Judah turns from his brothers. Judah takes a pagan woman for a wife. Judah isn't even around when his last son is born. Judah apparently is unaware of the wickedness of his own sons. Judah's sons not only did wicked things, they "were wicked" from God's perspective. Judah ultimately even sees that he has been less than "righteous" (38:26), although his admission is not nearly as full a confession as one might want.

Why does the author share these details with us? There could be a few reasons that make sense with Joseph's story.

First, by showing us how Judah lived--a brother who grew up in the same home as Joseph--the Spirit-inspired author might well be providing us a startling contrast that will come into focus when we see how Joseph ended up living in Egypt. "Family of origin" issues do not dictate how one will live--as is clear in the contrast between Joseph and Judah.

Also, the author might want us to get a bit more insight into why it was a *good thing* for Joseph to be removed from his family. If this is the kind of guys his brothers were, to be out from such an influence might actually be to his benefit--even if it meant being sent to Egypt.

But when we step back from this close up of Judah and look at the bigger picture, some amazing things come into focus. When you read Ruth 4:17-22 and Luke 3:23-33, you will notice that one of the sons of Judah born to Tamar is not only in the lineage of David, Israel's great king, but is also in the lineage of Jesus, the Messiah. Amazing!

What opens before us? A simple yet profound insight. God is neither stymied nor frustrated by the wickedness and bad choices people make. He still carries forward His plans and works His will in the face of terrible choices and hard consequences. This shouldn't encourage us to make sinful choices, but should encourage us that He is big enough and good enough to work His will--for our good and for His glory--even when we are in the midst of a seemingly bad story.