

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
[Adapted from Bethel Bible-  
Presbyterian Church, 10 Downing St.  
Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

## **DHW BIBLE CLASS**

### **LESSON 29**

## **THE BOOK OF GENESIS**

### **Chapter 38**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Chapter 38 seems out of place for it interrupts the account of the life of Joseph, but, as explained below, there are reasons why it is inserted here.

First, it is a continuation of Jacob's story. Chapter 37:2 states, "These are the generations of Jacob" and Judah is one of Jacob's more significant sons. One bible scholar sees it as the most logical place to include the account of Judah.<sup>1</sup> In chapter 37, Judah was a single young man pasturing his father's flock with his brothers and living at home. In chapter 38 he was older and married with three sons. According to chapter 37, Joseph was 17 years old when he was brought to Egypt (v.2). By the time Joseph was exalted by Pharaoh, he was 30 years old (41:46). When Joseph called Jacob's family out of Egypt, it was after another seven years of plenty and two years of famine; adding up to a total of twenty-two years. Chapter 38 reports the happenings in

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<sup>1</sup> Ross, 611.

Judah's family during this period of time: his marriage, the birth of his three sons, the marriage of Tamar to his first son, and eventually his fathering of Tamar's twin sons.<sup>2</sup> It would be strange to insert chapter 38 at the end of the life of Joseph. Chapter 46:12 record Tamar's twin sons as part of Jacob's family who joined Joseph in Egypt.

Judah was singled out for mention here because the human ancestry of Christ comes from the line of Judah through Pharez (Perez). The narrative relates Judah's separation from his brothers and his joining with the Canaanites. His two sons died under the direct displeasure of God. When Judah failed to fulfil his promise to give Shelah to Tamar, she took great courage "to fight for her right to remain in the family of Judah and to protect the family."<sup>3</sup> So, another plausible purpose for this chapter is the contrast in the conduct of Joseph and Judah. Joseph exercised strong resistance to sexual temptation, whereas Judah picked up a "prostitute" "with as much ease as a person today might hail a taxi."<sup>4</sup>

This chapter shows God's unconditional love and providential care and concern for His people. God will not allow man's foolishness to subvert His plan and purpose for He is true to His word and promises. There are sober lessons on God's condemnation of the wicked, and the consequences of man's evil ways.

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<sup>2</sup> Hamilton, 431.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 612.

<sup>4</sup> Boice, II: 40-41.

## OUTLINE

### A. Judah Married a Canaanite Woman (38:1-5).

1. Judah left his brothers and married a Canaanite woman. (vv.1, 2).
2. Judah had three sons, namely, Er, Onan, and Shelah.

### B. Judah Took a Wife for His Firstborn (38:6-11).

1. Judah got Tamar as a wife for Er, his eldest son (v.6).
2. The Lord took Er's life because he was wicked (v.7).
3. Judah told Onan to take Tamar and bear children for his brother (v.8).
4. The Lord took Onan's life because he displeased Him (vv.9, 10).
5. Judah told Tamar to return to her father. He promised that Shelah would fulfil his duty to her when he comes of age. However, he had no intention of keeping his word (v.11).

### C. Judah Took a Prostitute for Himself (38:12-23).

1. Judah's wife died (v.12).
2. Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and waited for Judah to pass by (vv.13-14).

3. Judah took Tamar and she conceived (v.15-19)
  - a. Judah saw Tamar and thought she was a prostitute (v.15).
  - b. Tamar asked for payment (v.16).
  - c. Judah promised a kid-goat (v.17a).
  - d. Tamar asked for his signet, bracelets, and staff as collateral (17b-18).
  - e. Tamar conceived (v.19).

4. Judah attempted to keep his pledge by sending the kid-goat to the harlot through his friend and retrieving his collateral (v.20).
5. There was no harlot (vv. 21-22).
6. Judah had no choice but to let the harlot keep his personal effects which he gave as collateral (v.23).

### D. Judah Was Told of Tamar's Pregnancy (38:24-26).

1. Judah condemned Tamar when he found out that she was pregnant (v.24).
2. Tamar defended herself by exposing the identity of the man who was responsible for her pregnancy (v.25).

3. Judah acknowledged his guilt for he had failed to give Shelah to her (v.26).

#### **E. Tamar Gave Birth to Twins (38:27-30).**

1. Tamar gave birth to twins (v.27).
2. The midwife tied a scarlet thread around the hand of the one who stuck out his hand (v.28).
3. Pharez was born first. (29).
4. The brother with the scarlet thread came out later and was named Zarah (30).

### **COMMENTARY**

#### **The Sin of Being Unequally Yoked**

The opening statement reports that Judah left his brothers and went down to Adullam, where he met a man by the name of Hirah. In Adullam he married the daughter of a Canaanite named Shuah. The name of the daughter was not given. Judah committed two wrongs. Firstly, he left his family and brothers, where God was honoured and worshipped. He associated himself with pagans and unbelievers. Their immoral influence on him was inevitable and he ended up marrying an unbeliever. His forefathers had shown concern about being unequally yoked. Abraham sent his servant to find Isaac a suitable wife from among his own kindred (24:3). Later Isaac sent Jacob to Padan-aram to get a wife from among his own kind. It was also reported that Esau had grieved

his parents when he married Hittite women (26:35).

Judah's wife gave birth to three sons. Judah named them Er, Onan, and Shelah. When Er was about sixteen years old, Judah got Tamar as a wife for him. Er was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord took his life. After his death, Judah instructed his second son to do his part to ensure the continuance of his brother's line. This custom was called a *levirate* marriage. The word "levirate" is derived from the Latin word *levir*, which means "brother-in-law." This was later incorporated into the Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Onan took Tamar but instead of producing children for his elder brother, he deliberately acted so that Tamar could not be pregnant. He did this probably hoping to get the inheritance for himself. This was displeasing in the sight of God and God also took his life. Judah's heathen marriage resulted in moral corruption of his sons.

There is an important lesson for us. God hates sin. Scripture clearly teaches that there is a relationship between one's misfortunes and one's sin.<sup>5</sup> However, it must be stressed too that not all misfortunes are the result of God's wrath.<sup>6</sup> God sometimes permit difficulties and troubles to happen to His children who are upright before Him, so as to strengthen and build their faith to the praise, honour, and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> It is not for us to judge

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<sup>5</sup> See also 1 Corinthians 11:29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. 30 For this cause many *are* weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.

<sup>6</sup> Job was a case in point.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Peter 1:7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth,

whether others are being punished for their sins against God. That knowledge is the prerogative of God.

### On Being Insincere and Immoral

When Onan died, Jacob ordered Tamar to return to her family while waiting for Shelah to come of age (v.11). However, Judah had no intention of allowing Tamar to marry Shelah. He feared that Shelah too might die. He did not keep his promise to Tamar. Breaking a promise dishonours and displeases God. Psalm 15:4 says that we should keep our word even if it results in a loss for us.<sup>8</sup>

Although Tamar returned to her heathen home, she was determined to have her rightful place among the people of God and to be linked with Judah's family. Surely her desires meant that she believed in Judah's God and His promises. However, she resorted to her own stratagem to achieve her honourable desires.

Some time later, Judah's wife died. There was word that Judah was going to make his way to Timnath, with his friend Hirah, for a sheep shearing season. Tamar learned about this. By this time, Shelah had grown up, and Tamar had realised that Judah did not intend to keep his promise. She took matters into her own hands. She changed her widow's clothes, dressed up like a prostitute, and seated herself along the way to Timnath. Judah saw her, thought that she was a prostitute, and wanted to

sleep with her. When Tamar asked for compensation, Judah promised her a young goat. Since Judah did not have the goat at the time, Tamar asked to keep his signet ring, bracelets, and staff as a pledge (collateral). As a result of this transaction, Tamar became pregnant.

This was an immoral conduct on the part of Judah. He was more immoral than his Canaanite friend, Hirah, who went with him to Timnath. Hirah did not covet to have the "harlot". How dangerous it is to leave the fellowship of brothers and sisters in the Lord who are able to provoke one another to good works and love!<sup>9</sup> Staying away from Christian circles where God is acknowledged, where His Word is referred to, and where His work is a subject of conversation deprives us of the spiritual ballast which is so necessary to a victorious Christian life. How many have spiritually shipwrecked because they have strayed away from God! God knows what is best for us. Let us obey and keep His Word. May all those who think that they are strong enough to resist the temptation to sin beware, lest they fall.

### On Judging Others

Tamar quickly returned home and changed into her widow's garments. When Judah tried to send the young goat to the "harlot" to redeem his pledge, she could not be found. The matter was closed insofar as Judah was concerned. When Judah was informed that Tamar had played the harlot and was pregnant, he pronounced the

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though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:

<sup>8</sup>15:4 In whose eyes a vile person is condemned; but he honoureth them that fear the LORD. *He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not.*

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<sup>9</sup>Hebrews 10:24 And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: 25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting *one another*: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

severest condemnation and punishment on her. Tamar defended herself by sending the signet, bracelets and staff to him. Judah recognised his belongings and was convicted of his greater guilt because he had not kept his promise. He quickly acknowledged that he alone is to be blamed. True repentance is clearly seen in the complete change in Judah's conduct. Tamar was safe and later gave birth to twin boys, Pharez (Perez) and Zarah.

There are some lessons in this episode. First, one sin usually leads to another and eventually most sins are found out. Second, our sins often affect others. Judah's sin of immorality caused the public disgrace of Tamar and put her in great danger. Third, we must not be quick to judge others without knowing all the facts or investigating all possible evidence that will vindicate the accused. Scripture teaches us that in judging others, we must have two or three witnesses.<sup>10</sup> Remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ to the scribes and Pharisees of His days, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (John 8:7).

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<sup>10</sup>Deuteronomy 19:15 One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.

Matthew 18:16 But if he will not hear *thee*, *then* take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

2 Corinthians 13:1 This *is* the third *time* I am coming to you. In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.

1 Timothy 5:19 Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.

## God's Abounding Grace & Mercy

God's abounding grace and mercy is evident in all His dealings with sinful men. God can, if He so wishes, take our lives when we sin against Him. In some cases, He does but in others He does not. Why some and not others, is not for us to question. God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy. He took the lives of Er and Onan, but He spared Judah. Out of the depths of spiritual darkness and sin, there shines a ray of hope. Twin boys were born to Judah. Pharez, the older, became the ancestors of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

## SUMMARY

Judah's careless behaviour is a warning for us. He left his brothers and family, developed a friendship with an unbeliever, married the daughter of an unbeliever, failed to discipline his sons, and failed to keep his promise. He passed sentence on Tamar without any thought and in so doing condemned himself. However, He had some redeeming qualities. He was willing to acknowledge his wrongdoings and to truly repent.

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**LESSON 29**

**THE BOOK OF GENESIS**

**Chapter 38**

**DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION**

**QUESTIONS**

**Daily Readings**

Monday: Genesis 38:1-5; 2 Corinthians 6: 14-18; Hebrews 10:19-25.

Tuesday: Genesis 38:6-11; Proverbs 13:24; 22:6, 15; 23:13-14; 29:15; 1Corinthians 11: 23-30; 1John 1:9-10.

Wednesday: Genesis 38:12-23; Psalm 15:1-5; Philippians 4:8-9.

Thursday: Genesis 38:24-26; James 1:12-19; Deuteronomy 19:15-20; Matthew 18:16.

Friday: Genesis 38:27-30; Psalm 65:2-4; 1Chronicle 17:25-27.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How did Judah establish his family?

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2. What do you think is the initial false step on the part of Judah that resulted in the events of sin and shame in this chapter?

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3. Describe the turmoil in the household of Judah.

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4. What do you think of the custom of levirate marriage?

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5. What do you think of Tamar's plan to get Judah to father her children?

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6. It was recorded that Judah did not recognise Tamar. How do you think that is possible?

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9. What was Judah's attitude toward family ties? Does it throw any light on the leading role he played in selling Joseph?

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7. Why was Judah so quick to sentence Tamar?

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10. Pharez is listed as an ancestor of David (Ruth 4:18) and Joseph, the husband of Mary (Matthew 1:3). How does this fact help us to appreciate the grace of God?

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8. What did Judah mean when he acknowledged that Tamar was more righteous than he was?