



The Sermon

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Genesis 38:1-30

"Judah and Tamar"

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TRANSCRIPT

We are in Genesis 38, one of the most strange chapters in all of Genesis; so another word of thanks to Steve Lawson for intentionally going out of town so that he wouldn't have to preach Genesis 38. It is a story that is – well, you'll hear it. It has violence, and it's quite a chapter. It actually reminds me of how most people think about catfish. I like catfish. My dad doesn't like catfish – like most God-fearing humans – doesn't like the muddy taste. But he called yesterday because he'd heard Owen caught 28 catfish in about 30 hours.

So, we got up early, really early LA time; and loves to fish. Caught all these catfish, we're frying them up. My dad called and offered his favorite catfish recipe. He said, "The key to it is you get the catfish, you nail it to a board, and then you put it in the smoker and you smoke it and smoke it, smoke it beyond what you think you should, you keep smoking the catfish, and then you take it out of the smoker, take the catfish off, throw it in the trash and eat the board. He thinks that's kind of the best way to deal with that.

Genesis 38, I think people view it kind of as a catfish of a chapter, pretty undesirable stuff in here. Judah and Tamar: there's prostitution, there's cultic ritual, Canaanite worship, there's God striking multiple sons dead. There is deception and subterfuge. It's quite the chapter. But, I'm here to tell you it's good, and it's powerful, and the reminder that God gives us, whenever we open Scripture and study it is always there's so much more there than you realize. It's so much more rich. All Scripture, the Bible testifies to itself, "All Scripture is inspired by God," – right? – "useful
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for teaching, rebuking, correcting, training in righteousness so that the servant of God would be thoroughly equipped for every good work. And that's my prayer today as we read Genesis 38. You'll see that in spite of all the mess that goes on in Genesis 38, the Lord is at work even in Judah's life to accomplish all His purposes. And that's what's I think glorious about this chapter. So let's dive right in. I think the best way to approach it is to read this thing in its entirety. So let me read to you Genesis 38, starting in verse 1.

"And it came about at that time, that Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her and went in to her. So she conceived and bore a son and he named him Er. Then she conceived again and bore a son and named him Onan. She bore still another son and named him Shelah; and it was at Chezib that she bore him.

"Now Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the sight of Yahweh the LORD, so the LORD took his life. Then Judah said to Onan, 'Go in to your brother's wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.' Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother. But what he did was displeasing in the sight of Yahweh; and so He took his life" - the LORD took his life - "also. Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, 'Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up'; for he thought, 'I'm afraid that he too may die like his brothers.' So Tamar went and lived in her father's house.

"Now after a considerable time Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died; and when the time of mourning was ended, Judah went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. It was told to Tamar, 'Behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep.' So she removed her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in the gateway of Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah had grown up, and she had not been given to him as a wife. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, for she had covered her face. So he turned aside to her by the road, and said, 'Here now, let me come in to you'; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said, 'What will you give me, that you may come in to me?' He said, therefore, 'I will send you a young goat from the flock.' She said, moreover, 'Will you give a pledge until you send it?' He

said, 'What pledge shall I give you?' And she said, 'Your seal 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. Then she arose and departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow's garments.

"When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite, to receive the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. He asked the men of her place, saying, 'Where is the temple prostitute who was by the road at Enaim?' But they said, 'There's been no temple prostitute here.' So he returned to Judah, and said, 'I did not find her; and furthermore, the men of the place said, "There has been no temple prostitute here."' And then Judah said, 'Let her keep them, otherwise we will become a laughingstock. After all, I did send this young goat, but you did not find her.'

"Now it was about three months later that Judah was informed, 'Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot, and behold, she is also with child by harlotry.' And then Judah said, 'Bring her out and let her be burned!' It was while she was being brought out that she sent to her father-in-law, saying, 'I am with child by the man to whom these things belong.' And she said, 'Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?' Judah recognized them, and said, 'She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.' And he did not have relations with her again.

"It came about at the time she was giving birth, that behold, there were twins in her womb. Moreover, it took place while she was giving birth, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, 'This one came out first.' But it came about as he drew back his hand, that behold, his brother came out. Then she said, 'What a breach you have made for yourself!' So he was named Perez. Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand; he was named Zerah." This is the very Word of the living God.

[Prayer] Father, will You speak to Your people by Your Spirit through Your Word, in Jesus' name. Amen. [End]

The Puritan John Flavel in a sermon titled "Navigation Spiritualized" has a memorable sentence. He said, "The providence of God is like Hebrew words; it can be read only backwards." And like the Hebrew script which is read from right to left, God's providence in Flavel's understanding is best

understood not in the moment of crisis, in the time of trial or sin or temptation, in the time of provision, but down the road looking back. And we all understand that, right? We understand how choices we made, good or bad, wise or unwise, looking back over the decades of our lives have been instrumental in bringing our lives to the place where they are today. We can think of our marriages and our children, the home we live in, the job we have – all examples and reminders that where we've been in life so far, looking back we see the hand of God's providence that we may not have seen as clearly in those certain hours.

Well, if God's providence is like Hebrew words and can only be read backwards, I think that's the best approach to understand a difficult chapter like Genesis 38. So I invite you to join me on a bit of a journey before we even get into Genesis 38 where we work backwards. Let's go to the future and find out the fate of this certain son of Israel who's on display in Genesis 38, this man by the name of Judah and the clan he represents.

Now if you're familiar with the Bible, his name, and the Judahites, are important to you, and the place where they're featured most prominently, most significantly, is their greatest descendant in the book of Revelation 5:5. You remember this climactic scene where the scrolls cannot be opened because there is no one worthy to break open the seals. The words of the angels are, "Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?" And the answer that breaks John's heart is, "No one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the book and to look into it." Revelation 5:4, "Then I began to weep greatly, because no one was found worthy to open the book or to look into it. And then one of the elders said to me, 'Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals.'"

What he sees next is, "A Lamb standing, as if slain, with seven horns and seven eyes, the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth. And the creatures and the elders bowing down and worshipping this Lamb, this Lamb of the tribe of Judah, and in worship they sing to Him, 'Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe, and every tongue, and people, and nation. And You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign upon the earth.'"

This is the crowning destiny of the tribe of Judah. It culminates in the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lord Jesus Christ, presented to us in the book of

Revelation, not as an infant in the manger in His incarnation, but as God of very God, in exaltation in future heaven in the eschaton. the end of all things, as He unfolds human history, to bring glory to Himself, as He redeems men from every tribe and tongue and nation, accomplishing all His purposes in the world. This is the cumulative moment of the tribe of Judah, and it starts in this dark chapter in Genesis 38.

You understand that Jesus in His human lineage was of the tribe of Judah; you can see that in both genealogical accounts. In the book of Matthew He is Number Four in line. In Jesus' genealogy, the fourth name listed is "Judah and Tamar." In Luke's lineage, going all the way back to Adam, 24th on the list, you see that name "Judah," because Jesus and His family were from the tribe of Judah, a tribe that was prominent, a tribe that was significant.

How did that happen? Well again, we're trying to read this chapter backwards, we're trying to move from the end of everything to what we learn in Genesis 38. And so will you take a brief journey, having looked at Revelation, and then just referencing the genealogy of Jesus, we could stop in the book of Ruth, if we wanted to, to remind ourselves that Ruth was married into this same tribe through God's providence – a remarkably similar story to Genesis 38, the bereavement of a widow who was a foreigner married into a family in Israel, the levirate marriage of a relative being required to redeem her, being turned down, all of those things. And then the ultimate end of the book of Ruth is the birth of a child, and then a line that would lead to king David, right?

David was of the same clan, the tribe of Judah, a son of Judah, because of a Moabitess woman named Ruth. How did this all come about? Well, we got to do a little spoiler alert here. My apologies to whoever's preaching Genesis this week; but, spoiler alert. You can say anything as long as you say "spoiler alert" first.

Genesis 48: Israel, you know him as Jacob, gives a blessing to Joseph's sons Manasseh and Ephraim, really gives them this firstborn blessing, which makes very little sense, because as you know, Joseph is not the firstborn. But he blesses the sons, crossing his hands and gives a blessing to the second born – kind of a theme in Genesis, God's reversing those normal expectations with Joseph's two sons: Ephraim and Manasseh. But as you get to Genesis 49 – and I would encourage you to turn there with me, what you see is Jacob's last will and testament. But it's far more than just probate

law, it's far more than, "You get this many camels, the firstborn gets twice as many, and the other sons get this." Instead, Israel utters words of prophecy over each of his sons. Inspired by the Spirit of God, he speaks to their future.

Genesis 49: "Then Jacob summoned his sons" - verse 1 - "and said, 'Assemble yourselves, that I may tell you what will befall you in days to come. Gather together and hear, O sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel your father.'" Now this helps us understand who Judah would become, why his tribe would have such prominence, not only in Israel's history, but in all of redemptive history.

Now remember, Israel had twelve sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah (that's the fourth son), Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph, and Benjamin - twelve. And he's going to speak over all twelve. I'm not going to look at all twelve, I just want to look at the first four.

"Reuben," - verse 3 - "you are my firstborn, my might and the strength of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent power. Uncontrolled as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it - he went up to my couch." Instead of a blessing, this son, though a recipient of the strength and power of his father, does not receive the firstborn as is his birthright. Instead, he had disqualified himself, and what Israel is referring to in this moment, what Israel is driving at in this moment, is that this first son Reuben has disqualified himself, and that story is in Genesis 35:22. He slept with his father's concubine - a horrible defilement that disqualified him from being the firstborn son.

What about Simeon, the second born; or Levi, the third born; because if the first is disqualified, it moves to the second son. Well, what prophecy does Israel utter over them? Verse 5 of chapter 49: "Simeon and Levi are brothers; their swords are implements of violence. Let my soul not enter into their counsel; letting all my glory be united with their assembly; because in their anger they slew men, and in their self-will they lamed oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel. I will disperse them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel." Yet another son, two more actually: son Number Two and son Number Three - also disqualified from receiving the promise, from receiving the blessing.

And again, I need to emphasize this. This is not about camels and tents and servants primarily, this is about that promise that you have been tracing through your journey in Genesis, right: the promise of God's covenant love that He set upon His servant Abraham, calling him out of Ur, away from being a moon-worshiper, to being a true follower of God. And Abraham would hold on to that trifold promise of a land that would be his own land given by God; a people that would be his generation, his descendants that would outnumber the stars; and then that third corner of the promise, the most magnificent corner, that that land and people would become a blessing to the entire ends of the earth – a glimmering reminder of that messianic hope that God would redeem not only His people, but the nations through His people.

That's the big promise. That's what's being passed on, not just the priority of the firstborn, but the blessing that comes from being in covenant with Yahweh Himself. And these two sons, Simeon and Levi, join their brother, Reuben the firstborn, in being disqualified: him for lacking control and going after his father's concubine, Simeon and Levi for the vengeful scene that unfolded in Genesis 34. Their sister was raped and attacked, and they, in an act of rage and vengeance, destroyed an entire village of people. And God says through Israel, "They're not the ones."

Now I know what you're thinking: "Got to throw out Judah, too," Number Four, because I just read a chapter, Genesis 38, where he's bad news. He's sleeping with prostitutes, he's saying she should be burned. There's all kinds of grievances you should have against Judah right now, because you just met him. And you know from the chapter preceding Genesis 38 – they call that one 37 – in Genesis 37, remember Judah was the one that turned the whole thing for profit. They're going to kill the brother. Reuben intercedes and says, "Wait, don't kill him; let's just throw him in this hole, and that way he can die of natural causes." Judah's the one that says, "Hey, there's some traders there, Midianites. Let's sell him, and we can make a little bread on the deal."

So Judah is not an impressive character at this point. But what's the prophecy spoken over Judah? Reading providence backwards, Genesis 49:8, "Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's son shall bow down to you. Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches, he lies down as a lion, as a lion who dares rouse him up? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, into him shall be the obedience of the peoples. He ties his foal to the vine,

his donkey's colt to the choice vine; he washes his garments in wine, and his robes in the blood of grapes. His eyes are dull from wine, his teeth white from milk."

No son will be given a blessing like this son. No son will be given a word of prophecy that involves a continual rulership, a power and a blessing and a preeminence that is alongside of even Joseph. Joseph's the favorite. His two sons received an extraordinary blessing in their inheritance, and will be the primary recipients of the father's will. But here you have Judah; and eventually in biblical history Judah will rise above. It's Judah where King David will come. It's Judah that will be the line of kings. The glory will depart from Joseph's tribe and it will go on to Judah's tribe just as the father prophesied. And it's the burden of Genesis 38.

It's the agenda of Moses, as he pens this chapter under the Spirit's inspiration, to not give you some cute moral lessons that you inflict on this chapter, like you should avoid prostitutes. I think we can all agree with that, OK. That's not the message of this text. Reading a text like this is we're so apt to go into it and go, "This guy's bad, this guy's good." We turn it into a comic book. But the agenda of this author is the tension that's been built up in this text, "Where will the promise land?" And what we found out is it's going to land on Judah in a powerful, impressive way, in a historical way, in a royal way, in a righteous way that will lead all the way to the Lord Jesus Christ, to the Lion of Judah, in the culmination of all of human history.

How does that come out of Genesis 38? And it's this. This chapter is not some yucky catfish that needs to be thrown back; instead, it is an integral part of biblical history, crucial, indispensable, perfectly woven into the Joseph story, not some interruption, as the liberals say, some insertion into the Joseph story that started out so well, and then all of a sudden we have a chapter about Judah and Tamar, and then back to Joseph. Instead, it's perfectly woven into the Joseph story, which is the larger story of the tribes of Israel.

You cannot understand the promise that Yahweh gave to Abraham, the promise of the seed to his children, the redemption and continuance of God's covenant promise apart from Judah's story. He is the first of Jacob's sons to realize God's providence. He's the first of Jacob's sons to watch God bring good from evil. This story of Jacob's son Judah shows how he remains a son of favor, how God can transform an unrighteous man into a righteous

man, and how God will use that man as a portrait of His grace as He displays him as one worthy of inheriting the blessing by the grace of God, as one who will hold on to the continuity of the promise, and ultimately the line of Judah, a line of kings, and the line of the promised Messiah.

And so you ask, "How are you going to get that from this mess in Genesis 38?" And we'll do it in three acts, OK, three acts, like a play. Act One, verses 1 through 11, we'll dive right in: "Judah's line is in jeopardy." Act One: "Judah's line is in jeopardy."

We enter into Genesis 38:1, "It came about at that time." The drama of Genesis is so beautiful. This is not an interruption, this is a correlation that Joseph's story began with such intrigue, and then he's in a pit, and then he's in a caravan, and now he's sold to someone with a foreboding name: Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard. I mean, for the reader at this point, Joseph is off the scene. For his father, Joseph is dead. And so the question is, "With Reuben disqualified, Simeon disqualified, Levi disqualified, the favorite son Joseph dead and gone in their understanding, what of Judah?" because he's next in line.

And so as the caravan pulls away making a deal to sell this man into slavery to Potiphar, the screen fades to black, and as it comes back to us, the camera pans across and it goes to Judah. And like Joseph, he's left home as well, but willingly, to start his family. The same time as Joseph's adventures in Egypt begin, Judah makes out on his own, "departing" - verse 1 - "from his brothers and visiting a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah."

Judah becomes friends with the inhabitants of the land, godless men. And one of the primary concerns of Genesis is on display here, isn't it? I think the technical word for is endogamy, endogamy. It's God's desire that His people would be separate and that they would not intermarry. Endogamy is, "Stay within the family of God, marry within the family of God." And we have lots of examples out in Genesis so far, don't we? Abraham forbade his servant from finding a wife for his son Isaac among the Canaanites. He was very serious about it. Isaac, likewise, carried that same torch, and forbid Jacob from marrying a Canaanite. I mean, Judah's father Jacob made that arduous journey all the way to Paddan Aram to find Rachel, and gets the Leah swaparoo disaster.

But this concern would have been something that Judah knew, because it was his own family history. Yet he moves off to be among the Canaanites, to befriend them, to be like them. And sure enough, verse 2, he finds a woman, unnamed in our story, that becomes his wife, and she's a Canaanite. This is a sin. This is an act of dishonoring God. He did not employ the faith of his father or his father's father in finding a wife within the covenant family of God. Instead, he married Shua's daughter.

Using the language of the Adam and Eve story of Eve's taking the fruit, the same phraseology is in verse 2: "He took her and went in to her." This was forbidden fruit; yet apparently, he receives the blessing of God. The fruit of the womb is a blessing of God; they understood that. And he doesn't just have one son, he has three sons. And so Jacob's family grows through Judah's line, and he has a son named Er, and a son named Onan, and a son named Shelah; and we see his tribe beginning to grow, all of them intermarrying Canaanites, all of them living in Canaanite land. This chapter is rife with Canaanite terminology of cultic worship, from the veiling of the prostitute, of her pretending to be a prostitute, of Tamar, the way she wears a veil, the sheep shearing and fertility rights. All of this is very Canaanite. And these sons marry Canaanite women just like their father.

But God intervenes in a surprising dark providence for this family in verse 7. The firstborn son, the one who would carry Judah's line forward, Er, is assessed by God, in verse 7, to be evil, and the LORD takes his life. What did he do? We don't know. We have no idea, and the text doesn't tell us. But somehow God strikes him dead.

One of my favorite sermons I've ever heard in my life was – listened to it when I was probably in college – it was a recording from Donald Grey Barnhouse, the great Philadelphia presbyterian pastor. Donald Grey Barnhouse, he talked kind of like a bulldog with a cough. And the name of the sermon is "Men Who God Struck Dead." And he does a survey of the whole Bible showing you everyone that is killed directly by God – Uzzah, Ananias and Sapphira – and he includes these characters in Genesis 38. It's a powerful sermon because it's a reminder, just as this text is a reminder to us, of the holiness of God, that the word in Galatians is this: it's, "Be not deceived: God will not be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." You don't mess with a holy God; and Er is an example of that.

Now it's so important that we dial in here and understand the threat to the lineage being the author's agenda here, because after the first son dies, it

says, the text says in verse 8 that "Judah tells Onan his second born to go into his brother's wife "and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." Please understand that this is not how things work in Texas. Maybe in some of the more rural areas, but it's not how it should work. It is how it's supposed to work in the ancient times of the Hebrew people. This is something that was God's will for the preservation of the family and the protection of the most disadvantaged in all of society, which were widows. God has a great concern for widows all over the Scriptures, that's very clear; and that's why this portrait is a prelude to the book of Ruth. Here we have a woman, a foreign woman married into an Israelite family, who loses her husband. God's desire is that she would be cared for, and that that dead son, firstborn son's line, his generations would be guarded, insured, and protected. And so it was the brothers duty to bring her into his family, if he was unmarried, to marry her and that be his wife.

Now this put the brother, the levirate - it's called the levirate marriage - in a disadvantaged position, because the children that came from his brother's wife were not technically his children, but his brother's children. Biologically they're his children; by way of inheritance blessing and family name and line, they're his dead brother's children. This is exactly how God wanted it to be, and Judah knew that, and so he did the noble thing, the righteous thing, and he ordered a levirate marriage: "Your brother's dead; take care of her." If he were not to do this, she would be left destitute, she would be in danger from other men in society. This isn't a time of police or 911 or laws or rights; this is a wild world in the wilderness, and a widow is very unsafe. And so bringing her into this brother's home was for her good and for the proliferation of the dead brother's line. Everybody follow that? You want more information on it? Read the book of Ruth, or Deuteronomy 25 which describes the laws for levirate marriage.

Now, Deuteronomy 25 isn't written yet. But like so much of God's law, it was given to the people even way back in Genesis, things like sacrifices, things like holy implements. All of those are in existence in some form, including levirate marriage. So that's maybe too long on levirate marriage, but you've got it, right? You got it, good.

And so Onan doesn't fulfill his duty. He was told to, he knew it was the right thing, but he intentionally would not impregnate his brother's wife, his wife now; and God was displeased. This wasn't about the relationship between Onan and Tamar, this is only and simply about a dishonoring of God's will for the protection of the brothers line, which is ultimately

Judah's line, which is ultimately Jacob's line, which is ultimately Abraham's line. He is sinning against his dead brother, he's sinning against his father, he's sinning against his wife, he's sinning against the entire generations to follow, and ultimately by doing this, he's sinning against God. And so God takes him out, too. "Men Who God Struck Dead": In that sermon Barnhouse goes, "Men who God struck dead," and every time he says "dead" he hits the thing. It's a great recording.

And so now we have two sons dead, and we still have a widow, and we don't have a family line for Judah. And so, what is to take place? Verse 11, "Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, 'Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up'; for he thought, 'I am afraid that he too may die like his brothers.'" So Tamar went and lived in her father's house." End of Act One.

Curtain opens on Act Two. Let's call it, "Tamar's desperate scheme. Tamar's desperate scheme." Judah's words are right. In God's requirement the third brother needs to step up to the plate. It is his duty before God and his family to marry this widow. Judah is hesitant for obvious reasons. Instead of thinking, "This is what happens when you live in Canaanite land, and marry Canaanites, and live among cultic practices, and don't stay faithful to Yahweh, bad stuff happens to your family," which is what he should have been thinking. Instead, he thinks, "This girl is bad luck. My son died, my second son died. I am not signing up my third son. No Bed Bath & Beyond registry for this one; we're out. Send her away!" By doing that, Judah is now sinning against God in a grievous way, a way to the same level that killed his two sons. But in word he says, "We just got to wait for him to get a little bit older, the third brother. Just go to your father's house and stay a widow." He dishonors the law of God, he dishonors Tamar in doing this, and so Tamar gets desperate.

Verse 12, "Now after a considerable time." She had waited, and waited, and waited, because she knew this family as well. She knew the stories about Abraham. She knew about Isaac. She knew about Jacob. She knew about the promise, she knew about the covenant. She was a Canaanite, but now she was part of Israel. She's grafted into this family, and she's suffered loss, too. So before you get all judgey on her little prostitute act here, which is not commendable by any means, but before you get distracted and condemn her the way Judah is going to, put yourself in her desperate shoes. She's the only one concerned about what God was concerned about, which is the preservation of this godly line and the covenant of promise. Her concern is

the right concern, "Where is my husband? Who will protect the family line? How will God fulfill His purposes?"

And so she finishes her time of mourning, and another tragedy strikes, verse 12, "Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, dies." So now Judah is a widower; and as he goes to do commerce in Canaanite land to shear his sheep, this is a time of fertility rituals and cultic practices for the people outside of Israel, the people that Judah and his family have chosen to live among. Part of those rituals would have been cultic prostitution – sexual, deviant acts of worship in order to ensure fertility for the crops and for the lambs. And she knows this, being a Canaanite, and she dresses herself up like a Canaanite prostitute, and she positions herself on the road strategically in order to deceive Judah, because Judah didn't do what he was supposed to do – keep that in mind.

Judah sees her, assumes she's a harlot, talks to his knucklehead buddy Adullamite and says, "I'm going to visit her." And she says, "How are you going to pay?" and he says, "I'll give you a goat." And she, so crafty, says, "You don't have a goat; why don't you give me a pledge." And he says, "What do you want?" She says, "How about that seal and that cord and that staff in your hand. I'll hang onto that until you get your payment to me."

In disguise, in deceit, she takes his staff – some recognizable, finely crafted, likely walking stick with the family line and engraving on it. It was something that was recognizable as Judah's staff. The cord likely hung around his neck, probably something made of fine materials. And then the signet ring – don't think medieval king with the wax thing, think like a big ol' medallion that hung on that cord. That was distinctive to his tribe, distinctive to his family line, something that was his identifying marker. It's similar to when you, I don't know, rent golf clubs and have to leave a credit card. It's not exactly similar to that, but you see what I'm saying.

She's got his credit card. She's got a surety, a deposit guarantee, and she takes it. And he goes into her and he gets her pregnant. You see, she was supposed to be pregnant. She was supposed to be married to the third son Shelah. And in this act of deceit she fools her father-in-law into doing what he was unwilling to do with his son. Now Canaanite practices often would have levirate marriages too, which would include the father-in-law. That was not how it was supposed to work in Israel. But this is how she accomplishes her purposes.

It's a difficult scene, and then it turns almost comic. After being somewhat vulgar and grotesque – and I'm trying to keep it biblical here – it becomes comic, because he sends his friends with a goat to go pay the prostitute, and he's wandering around the village going like, "Has anybody seen the prostitute? I got this goat." I mean, it couldn't get more awkward than this. And now she's out of her disguise. Everybody's sending him, "She's not here, I don't know what you're talking about." He comes back to Judah. Judah is rightly embarrassed and says in 23, "Let her keep them, otherwise we'll become a laughingstock. After this, I tried to send the goat, but we couldn't find her. Let's just wash our hands of the whole ordeal," or so he thinks.

Act Three, verses 24-30, "Judah's turning point." Act Three: "Judah's turning point." And here's where we see the magnificent grace of God on display, verse 24, "Now it had been about three months, her pregnancy is showing, and Judah was informed, 'Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot, and behold, she's also a child by harlotry.'" This is the rumor that came, because this is a widow, a single woman, unmarried. She was living in her father's house dressed as a widow, but somehow she had gotten pregnant.

"Judah" – in partial agreement with the law – "says, 'Adultery is punishable by death.'" But Judah, in an act of vengeance that is far too zealous, on par with Simeon and Levi in its unrighteousness, on par with Reuben in his sexual immorality, says, "Let her be burned! Bring her out and let her be burned." That's egregious; that's evil; that's wicked. No due process. No taking into account who's the father. This is an inappropriate, vengeful act on his part; and I wonder if in his mind he thought, "There, that gets Shelah out of this situation permanently and solves our problem with this unlucky woman."

And as they drag her out to be burned publicly at Judah's bequest, verse 25, "It was there she was being brought out that she sent to her father-in-law, saying, 'I am with child by the man to whom these things belong.' – and then she shows receipts; she's got his credit card, the signet ring, the cord, the staff, and she says – 'Please examine and see whose signet ring and cords and staff are these.'"

And in verse 26 we see what becomes a turning point in Judah's life. Judah recognized his stuff obviously, and all the pieces come together, all the memories of his daughter-in-law Tamar, his dead son, his second dead son,

in the grief over his lost wife when he visited the prostitute on the way to shear the sheep, the veil, the realization of what he's done, the awareness that he didn't do what he was supposed to do by handing over his third son to be married to this girl, because she was part of his family, and he didn't do her right. And in this moment as he sees his staff and his signet ring and his cord, the conviction over his sin comes to him with these words, verse 26: "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah."

I don't know if it's when he said, "Bring her out to be burned," or when she said, "Whose ring and cords and staff are these?" I don't know if it's both of those moments or sentences, or one of them that remind me so much of those same kind of words that brought David to repentance when he was deep in his egregious sin. Remember, he slept with Bathsheba, covered up her husband's murder. And Nathan the prophet pays him a visit and tells him a story about a lamb, a family that had this pet lamb. And the rich guy next door that had tons of sheep, tons of lambs, goes and confiscates their lamb, kills it and feeds it to his guests. David is enraged, and he basically says, "Let him be burned. Bring him out here, I'm going to deal with him as king." His righteous indignation on parallel with Judah's righteous indignation about his daughter-in-law's egregious sin of adultery, he says, "Let her be burned!" Nathan looks at David and he says, "*Attah haish*," in Hebrew, "You are that man!" And it hits David, doesn't it, and he realizes his sin, that he can't cover it up anymore. And God gives him repentance.

And here's Judah: "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her my son Shelah." And so he does right by her. He doesn't marry her because that would be inappropriate. That's not love, right? She's now holding the family line in her womb. But in a remarkable turn of God's providence, God shows Judah his sin, his lack of righteousness, and then gives Judah a blessing through such a convoluted, sinful scenario. But still the grace of God's on display, because Tamar doesn't have one son, she has two twins, and they reenact the Jacob and Esau story right in their birth time, a reminder. Remember, this story started with Judah having how many sons? Good, three sons. Two of them die. He only has one son, and his preeminent concern is, "I don't want my son to die. I only have one son, I don't want him to die. I don't want him to be given to this woman. I know it's what God wants, but it's not what I want." And then in recognizing his own unrighteousness through the deceitfulness of Tamar he sees it now, and he sees God's blessing, because this chapter ends with him holding his two twin boys, and he's got three sons again, and the promise will carry on through Perez. Awesome providence when it's read backwards.

The question was, "Is Judah morally fit to carry the promised seed?" It's the theme of Genesis. And instead of writing Judah off, as the reader may be prone to do after hearing the first half of his life, we get to this turning point. He's thought of evil, his sons are evil. Like father, like son in Genesis. One's been killed for an unstated reason, the other's sin exposed, flagrant, repeated, dishonoring to honor his marital responsibilities owed to his dead brother, his father, his family line, and God; and God put a stop to it – intentional, selfish, dishonorable sin. Judah wrongly blames Tamar, a cursed woman in his mind, unable to see the moral decay in his own boys. He blames his daughter-in-law, because sin is so blinding like that. It makes fathers care more about their sons than righteousness. It prioritizes family over faith. That's what Judah is doing. Holiness took a second place to his apparent happiness, and God's revealed will was put aside for a plan that seems right unto a man, but in the end is the way of death.

Judah begins his story unconcerned and dishonest as Er and Onan, unwilling to endanger his last son. He knows that this marriage is to be arranged as the patriarch's responsibility, but he's unwilling to obey God, because the cost seems so great. He postpones, he put off, he delayed, never intending to obey God's design. He walks by sight, not by faith; and it takes the beguiling treachery of a Canaanite daughter-in-law to get his head on straight, because he finds out that God means every word He says.

After he'd lied to Tamar and said he was going to bring her back but didn't, he showed that he was weak and compromising to tell his grieving and mistreated daughter-in-law that he will not do the righteous thing. Look, Judah's a bad guy. He got tricked. This isn't a lesson about the wrongness of prostitution, he got tricked by his daughter-in-law in a suspenseful scene where he's confronted; and his response ultimately is honorable. Judah does not discount himself or disqualify himself here; instead, he gains the reader's interest, because he does the hard thing. And like every true repentance, like every display of gospel in someone's life, it bears fruit.

The scene ends. It goes back to the Joseph story – spoiler alert – and Joseph is made ruler of Egypt through all the adventures that you'll be on in coming weeks. And Joseph isn't a perfect man either, by the way. He's a righteous man, but he's got flaws – you've seen him on display already. And when he is face to face with his brothers, and he holds Simeon hostage, and he's trying to figure out what he should do with these brothers who did him so wrong, he decides a little subterfuge, doesn't he. He hides a cup in Benjamin's bag, his father's new favorite son, the youngest son, precious to him. He made the brothers bring Benjamin back, because the first time they

came he wasn't with them. And Reuben says, the firstborn, "I knew we shouldn't have done this."

Simeon gets bound up; it's a disaster. But when the brothers all come back in chapter 44, one brother rises up. In the most climactic moment in the Joseph story where it looks like perhaps Joseph will be stealing a brother to pay back his brother, to find some way to get back for what happened to him; because at this point in the story, I don't think Joseph has the "God meant it for good, and you meant it for evil." It's not on his mouth yet. Instead, he's still tricking his brothers, and he's still trying to steal one brother away and do them some harm. And Joseph says, "This you've stolen from me." All subterfuge.

And Judah stands up. the first among his brothers, Genesis 44:16. And what does he say? "What can we say to my lord? What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; behold, we are my lord's slaves, both we and the one in whose possession the cup has been found."

He's willing to assume the guilt. The crazy thing is that Benjamin didn't even do it, this was all Joseph's trick. But Joseph doubles down and says, "Far be it for me to do this. The man in whose possession the cup has been found, he shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father." He's sending them away again.

But Judah continues his speech, verse 18: "O my lord, may your servant please speak a word in my lord's ears? Do not be angry with your servant; for you are equal to Pharaoh. My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father or a brother?' And we said to my lord, 'We have an old father and a little child of his old age. Now his brother is dead, so he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him.' And then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me that I may set my eyes on him.' And we said to my lord, 'The lad cannot leave his father; if he should leave his father, his father would die.' And you said to your servants, 'Unless your younger brother comes down again, you will not see my face again.'"

Thus it came about in their desperation to get grain in the famine, "When we went up to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. Our father said, 'Go back, buy us a little food.' But we said, 'We cannot go down if your youngest brother is not with us; we will go down. For we

cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us.' Your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons; and the one went out from me, and I said, "Surely he's torn in pieces," and I have not seen him since. And if you take this one also from me, and harm befalls him, you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow.'"

And so Judah continues this incredible speech and says, "Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father the lad is not with us – since his life is bound up in the lad's life – when he sees that the lad is not with us, he will die; and thus your servants will bring the gray hair of your servant our father down to Sheol in sorrow."

Listen to what Judah says in verse 32 of Genesis 44: "For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then let me bear the blame before my father forever.' Now therefore, please, please, let your servant, myself, let Judah remain instead of the lad, a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. For how shall I go to my father if the lad is not with me; for fear that I see the evil that would overtake my father."

What a speech, a speech that's not only noble, confessional, true, repentant, aware of all that God has done. This is a speech of a man who's starting to read providence backwards, a man whose back was against the wall and made the wrong choice, a man who understood what it was like to lose one son and then another son, and to have this one precious son and to see him threatened. This man understood. Judah has been changed, and Judah has been changed so much that he now is willing to sacrifice himself. He puts himself to Joseph for his own harm. He intercedes as a substitute for Benjamin. And this, this act of substitution, of intercession, breaks the heart of Joseph in chapter 45.

Joseph breaks down and starts to cry, dismisses all the Egyptians from the room, and lets himself be known to his brothers. There is weeping; there is reunion; they are holding each other. There is so much emotion. And it's then that Joseph finally says, "It was not you who sent me here, but God, and He made me a father to Pharaoh. It was what you meant for evil, God meant for good."

Where did he learn that speech? He learned that from Judah. Judah's repentance was displayed. Judah is showing that he understands the

providence of God, that his life is worth laying down for the life of Benjamin. Judah swore to his own hurt. Judah trusted in the sovereignty of God, no longer scheming, willing to lay his life down – a reminder that one day someone in his tribe would become a righteous king, a man after God's own heart, who would have an even greater son, a king like no other who will fit in David's throne, and rule and reign forever; a perfectly righteous Judean, who would not just offer to lay down His life, but would be a sacrifice for the sins of the unrighteous, the righteous in their place. By this we know love, because He laid His life down for us.

Judah is here functioning like a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ when he looks at Joseph, this powerful Egyptian ruler, in his eyes, and he sees trembling Benjamin, and thinks of the harm it would do to the father, and he says so Christlike, "Take me instead." It's that kind of noble sacrifice that will mark the tribe of Judah and the scepter that they carry.

A chapter like this reminds us to fix our minds and hearts on God's good, gracious, wise, sovereign providence and rule. It gives us the assurance that even sinners like us can be changed and saved and redeemed and used to accomplish God's amazing sovereign purposes; that He can overcome the sin and darkness in our own lives, and choices, families, and experience, and use them to accomplish His ultimate good. That's the lesson that Judah learned, and I pray that's the lesson we learn today as well.

[Prayer] Father, thank You for Your truth. Your Word always amazes us with its richness. There's so much more here we could say; but, Father, continue to do Your work in our hearts, as we meditate on the good providence of God, as we know that when our lives draw to a close, and we look back in that sunset and see all Your provision and all Your accomplishment, that You and You alone will receive the glory.

Father, through this story, You brought about the Savior of all mankind, who died in our place, who rose from the dead, that if we would trust in Him, we could be saved from the consequence and penalties of our sin, and have eternal life with Him in heaven forever. May we join the likes of Judah, bad men who find in You an exposure of our unrighteousness, and are transformed by the grace of God. Thank You for our substitute Jesus. In His name we pray. Amen.