

Judah Vs. Joseph: What a contrast!

Text: Gen. 38:1-30

Introduction:

1. The narrative concerning Joseph's life is now abruptly interrupted with this account of Judah and some key events that take place in his life.
2. The chapter almost appears out of place and deals with some pretty sordid sins and yet we know the Holy Spirit includes it right here for a reason. As we study the account, those reasons will become apparent.
3. "This chapter appears to be out of place in that it interrupts the record of Joseph. But it is not out of place, for it parallels the record of Joseph and shows the history of the son of Jacob who received the Divine-prince portion of the birthright (Joseph got the double portion part of the birthright). This Divine-prince portion of the birthright is the part of the birthright that includes the promise and lineage of the Messiah, which is why this chapter is included in the Scriptures." (John Butler)
4. Timeframe: About 22 years intervene between the sale of Joseph and the settlement in Egypt (13 years till Joseph's promotion + 7 years of plenty + 2 years of famine).
5. The account not only serves as a warning against the sins of the flesh, it is also a testament to the triumph of God's grace out of the wreckage of man's sin and depravity. We will divide this passage into **5 sections** for our lesson.

I. THE SEPARATION OF JUDAH (VS. 1-5)

A. His Moving (Vs. 1)

1. The timing of the move – "at that time". This is a clear reference to the events that had just transpired with Joseph (Gen. 37). It is likely that the strife and division in the home was the catalyst for Judah's departure. He was probably filled with guilt over his own role in the Joseph saga. After all, it was his idea to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:25-28).
2. The direction of the move – "Judah went down". As the account develops, he certainly went down spiritually. If there is one principle we encounter again and again in the Bible it is this: **think about your spiritual direction. Are you going up or down spiritually?**
3. The destination of the move – "turned in to a certain Adullamite". "Adullam was not nearly so far away as Shechem or Dothan. Adullam was a small, and long established, Canaanite settlement about 8 miles (12 kms) northwest of the family home." (Morris)

B. His Marriage (Vs. 2-5)

1. The identity of his wife (Vs. 2). Her name is not given but she is simply noted as the "daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shuah".
2. The progeny by his wife. Three sons are born to Judah from this woman:
 - a. Er (means "watcher") – named by his father (Vs. 3).
 - b. Onan (means "strong") – named by his mother (Vs. 4).

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- c. Shelah (meaning uncertain) – named by his mother (Vs. 5). It is noted that he was born at a place called “Chezib” believed to be a small town near Adullam.
- d. Note: All three sons are prominent in the drama that follows.

II. THE SONS OF JUDAH (VS. 6-10)

Sadly, Judah’s sons (at least the first two) are noted in Biblical history for their wickedness.

A. Er’s Wickedness and Judgment (Vs. 6-7)

Judah arranges a marriage for his firstborn son with a woman named Tamar. The specifics of Er’s sin are not given. Some suggest it was similar to that of Onan but we don’t know for sure. What we can say is that for God to directly take his life as an act of judgment, Er must have been very wicked. God’s dealing with Er reminds us of two truths in relation to sin:

1. The seriousness of sin to God. Er was wicked “in the sight of the LORD”. We are reminded that sin does not escape the all-seeing eyes of God and that it is offensive to him. God has perfect knowledge of every sin
2. The sentence against sin by God. God “slew” Er because of his wickedness. Er’s sin brought a death sentence.
 - a. Sin brings a death sentence upon our lives. Romans 6:23 “For the wages of sin *is* death; but the gift of God *is* eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” We all deserve separation from God for our sins and until we receive God’s free forgiveness through Christ, we are under the Divine death sentence.
 - b. Christ paid sins penalty for us when he died in our place on the cross. Romans 5:8 “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

B. Onan’s Wickedness and Judgment (Vs. 8-10)

Unlike Er, the Bible provides the details of Onan’s sin and why God slew him.

1. The custom of Onan’s time (Vs. 8). What we see in this section is the duty of “Levirate marriage”. The word is from the Latin word ‘levir’ which means “brother-in-law”. It was already a custom in those days, that if a man died without children, his next younger brother should marry his wife and “raise up seed to his brother”. This was later incorporated as a part of the Mosaic Law (Deut. 25:5-10; Matt. 22:24).
2. The character of Onan’s sin (Vs. 9)
 - a. The motivation of his sin – selfishness. Onan selfishly did not want to help beget a child for his deceased brother. This is stated clearly twice – “And Onan knew that the seed should not be his”, “lest he should give seed to his brother”. It wasn’t that he outright refused to take Tamar as a wife. He was happy to enter into the pleasure of the one flesh union but at the same time deliberately prevent his wife from conceiving.
 - b. The perversion of his sin. Onan departed from the natural order of the one flesh union and engaged in coitus interruptus, spilling the seed on the ground to prevent conception and child birth.

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The seed carries life potential and Onan was wilfully seeking to thwart the possibility of conception. The Hebrew grammar indicates that this was not a one-off occurrence but something he engaged in repeatedly each time he entered into the one flesh union with Tamar. Modern commentators often try to downplay the spilling of the seed as not being Onan's primary sin but the plain sense of the passage says otherwise – “the thing which he did **displeased** the LORD”. It is interesting to read the comments of older commentators from a bygone era where matters pertaining to the one flesh union between a man and his wife were viewed in a much more sacred light compared to the sexualized culture we live in today. Here are a few examples:

i. Martin Luther (1483 – 1546)

“Onan must have been a malicious and incorrigible scoundrel. This is a most disgraceful sin. It is far more atrocious than incest and adultery. We call it unchastity, yes, a Sodomitic sin. For Onan goes into her; that is, he lies with her and copulates, and when it comes to the point of insemination, spills the semen, lest the woman conceive. Surely at such a time the order of nature established by God in procreation should be followed. Accordingly, it was a most disgraceful crime to produce semen, excite the woman, and to frustrate her at that very moment... He preferred polluting himself with a most disgraceful sin to raising up offspring for his brother.”

ii. Matthew Poole (1624 – 1679)

“Two things are here noted: 1. The sin itself, which is here particularly described by the Holy Ghost, that men might be instructed concerning the nature and the great evil of this sin of self-pollution, which is such that it brought upon the actor of it the extraordinary vengeance of God, and which is condemned not only by Scripture, but even by the light of nature, and the judgment of the heathens, who have expressly censured it as a great sin, and as a kind of murder (Of which see my Latin Synopsis). Whereby we may sufficiently understand how wicked and abominable a practice this is amongst Christians, and in the light of the Gospel, which lays greater and stricter obligations upon us to purity, and severely forbids all pollution both of flesh and spirit. 2. The cause of this wickedness; which seems to have been either hatred of his brother, or envy at his brother's name and honour, springing from the pride of his own heart.”

iii. Keil and Delitzsch (commentary first published in 1861)

“This act not only betrayed a want of affection to his brother, combined with a despicable covetousness for his possession and inheritance, but was also a sin against the Divine institution of marriage and its object, and was therefore punished by Jehovah with sudden death.”

iv. English conformist Andrew Willet (1562-1621) in his Hexapla upon Genesis (1595)

“It was against the order of nature, using the act of generation for pleasure only, and not for generation; it was against God, whose institution he brake; against his wife, whom he defrauded of the fruit of her womb; against himself, in preventing his issue; against mankind,

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which should have been increased and propagated... this sin of envy [was] against his brother, to whom he should have raised seed.”

- v. Reformed commentator Johann Peter Lange (1802-1884)

“Onan’s sin, a deadly wickedness, an example to be held in abhorrence, as condemnatory, not only of secret sins of self-pollution, but also of all similar offences in sexual relations, and even in marriage itself. Unchastity in general is a homicidal waste of the generative powers, a demonic bestiality, an outrage to ancestors, to posterity, and to one’s own life. It is a crime against the image of God, and a degradation below the animal. Onan’s offence, moreover, as committed in marriage, was a most unnatural wickedness, and a grievous wrong.”

- c. We need to remind ourselves of the three main purposes established by God for the one flesh union:
 - i. Procreation – it is for conception and childbearing (Gen. 1:28, 9:1, 35:11; Mal. 2:15).
 - ii. Pleasure – it is for the mutual joy, comfort, bonding and enjoyment of husband and wife (Gen. 18:12; 24:67, Song of Solomon). God created it to be a pleasurable experience for a married couple.
 - iii. Protection – a happy marriage helps the believer avoid the sin of fornication (1 Cor. 7:1-5).
 - iv. Note: Modern society has made sex all about pleasure and disconnects it from the sacred duty, responsibility and privilege of procreation. When you divorce the one flesh union from one of its primary purposes (conception and child bearing), it loses meaning. Most Bible believers today are against abortion but very few question the practice of birth control in the light of the Scriptures. But we must be prepared to check all our thinking by the Word of God to make sure we haven’t adopted the philosophies of the world.
- 3. The condemnation of Onan’s sin (Vs. 10)
 - a. Man’s perspective on the seriousness of Onan’s sin is of no consequence. The only perspective that matters is God’s and if he slew Onan for what he did, then his sin was serious in the eyes of God. Onan’s sin clearly went beyond just his refusal to provide his deceased brother an heir as later in the Mosaic law, a refusal to fulfill this duty did not carry the death penalty. Rather, the individual would be publicly shamed (See Deut. 25:5-10). His unclean act of spilling the seed was also offensive to a Holy God.
 - b. Note: This is an important passage to encourage unmarried men to avoid the sin of indulging in wilful self-gratification.

III. THE SIN OF JUDAH (VS. 11-26)

A. The Season of his Sin (Vs. 11-12)

Look at what was going on in Judah’s life at this time.

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1. It was a time of uncertainty (Vs. 11-12a)
 - a. Judah had lost two sons. He promises his daughter in law Tamar his third son Shelah but inwardly had no intention of following through, fearing that he would also die like his two older brothers. Judah wrongly attributed his sons' deaths to Tamar when in reality their death was due to their own sin.
 - b. Judah loses his wife (Vs. 12a). This would have been a trial for Judah. Times of sorrow can make us more vulnerable to temptation.
2. It was a time of festivity (Vs. 12b).
 - a. His mourning over, Judah goes to join his friend Hiram the Adulamite for the sheep shearing season. In the ancient world, these were often times of festivity.
 - b. The various seasons of life with their joys and sorrows present certain challenges and temptations. Walking closely with God is the key to not falling into one of Satan's traps in times of trial or rejoicing.

B. The Seduction of his Sin (Vs. 13-23)

Tamar hears that her father-in-law Judah is on his way to Timnath to shear sheep and concocts an evil plan to seduce him in the hopes she will be able to conceive by him. We cannot justify Tamar's actions but we do have to note that Judah shared some responsibility for this as he had not followed through on his promise to give Tamar to his son Shelah. This was cruel to this dear lady who was left destitute in her father's house with no marriage prospect. We note four aspects to Tamar's seduction of Judah.

1. The apparel of the seduction (Vs. 13-15)
 - a. Tamar dressed according to how harlots of her day would dress in order to entice Judah. We are reminded that clothing communicates a message. Judah clearly got that message from Tamar's attire – "When Judah saw her, he thought her to be an harlot; because she had covered her face". Proverbs warns of the attire of a harlot – "And, behold, there met him a woman *with the attire of an harlot*, and subtil of heart." (Prov. 7:10)
 - b. God's Word **DOES** have something to say about the Christian's apparel and it is important that our clothing doesn't communicate a contradictory message to our Christian profession. 1 Timothy 2:9-10 "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in **modest apparel**, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works."
2. The appeal of the seduction – "in an open place" (Vs. 14). Sitting in the open was the practice of harlots in those days (See Prov. 7:12, 9:14; Jer. 3:2; Ez. 16:24-25). Satan is very good at putting temptation before our eyes as we journey through life. You don't have to go looking for temptation. Satan will put it right in front of you!
3. The arrangements in the seduction (Vs. 16-18a)

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- a. Negotiations are entered into between Judah and Tamar as to what the price would be for the encounter. Judah promises to give her a kid from the flock in exchange for her services.
 - b. She asks for a pledge, a guarantee, that he would follow through on the promise. She requests his signet, staff and bracelets. These were Judah's personal effects and would feature later in this sordid story. Henry Morris explains, "These items probably were, respectively, his seal, the cords by which the seal was strapped to his arms, and a rod with his own particular insignia attached to its head. In any case, they were items which were particularly his, and thus would be identified with him and no other."
 - c. A kid from the flock probably seemed to Judah like a small price to pay to indulge his lusts but in reality, he would pay a whole lot more for this sin! Sin always comes with a heavier price tag than what is presented. Sin claims to be cheap, free even, but in reality, sin will cost you dearly. Knowing Christ and living for Him brings real blessings.
4. The acceptance of the seduction (Vs. 18b)
- a. There is no sign of resistance from Judah to this temptation at all. He can't say yes to the seduction quick enough. He would "commit fornication as casually as a man today would buy a cup of coffee." (Barnhouse)
 - b. No doubt one of the purposes for the inclusion of this chapter is to provide a contrast to the life of Joseph. Here we have Judah saying yes to temptation and in the next chapter Joseph saying no to temptation.
 - c. "While Joseph was standing true and faithful to the Lord in a strange land, Judah was floundering in foul behaviour in the homeland. The contrast of Judah's behaviour in Genesis 38 with Joseph's behaviour in Genesis 39 is very pronounced. One yielded to immorality; the other spurned it. These two men were the recipients of the two parts of the Abrahamic birthright." (Butler)
 - d. "It is no accident that the story of Joseph is interrupted by chapter 38. The disreputable behaviour of other members of Joseph's family makes his conduct, by contrast, shine like a bright light in a sordid world." (William Macdonald)
5. The abomination of the seduction
- a. God's Word is crystal clear on the sin of harlotry (prostitution). To monetize God's sacred gift of sex is evil, wicked and depraved.
 - b. God's Word warns repeatedly about the sin of fornication (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:16-20; Eph. 5:3, 1 Thess. 4:3). Interestingly the Greek word is πορνείαν (porneia) The related word πορνή is translated 'harlot(s)' 8 times in the N.T. and 4 times as 'whore'. Our English word 'pornography' comes from two Greek words πορνεία and γραφή meaning, "to write about a whore or harlot." It is a broad term encompassing any form of illicit sex.

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- c. The Canaanites had elevated harlotry to the level of something sacred. Temple prostitution was common and was viewed as an act of devotion to the pagan gods. When a society promotes prostitution as an honourable profession, you know it is sinking fast into paganism!

IV. THE SEQUEL FOR JUDAH (VS. 19-26)

A. Judah's Helper (Vs. 19-23)

1. Judah attempts to send the promised payment by the hand of his friend, Hirah the Adulamite. Hirah inquires in the area as to the whereabouts of the harlot but the men of that place reply that there was no harlot in that area.
2. Hirah returns to Judah and tells him the story. Judah decides to not pursue the matter further, hoping that this would be the last of it. He would soon discover the truth – “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23).
3. Note: Hirah the Adulamite is the perfect example of the wrong kind of friend. A friend who is happy to support and help you in your sin is not a real friend at all!

B. Judah's Hypocrisy (Vs. 24)

1. Three months pass and Judah receives word that his daughter in law Tamar is pregnant from playing the harlot.
2. Judah pronounces a swift and severe death penalty upon her. What rank and wicked hypocrisy from one who was guilty of the same sin. In fact, he was the man who had been involved with Tamar!
3. Judah was probably suffering from a guilty conscience at this time over his own sin.

C. Judah's Humility (Vs. 25-26)

1. The exposure of his sin (Vs. 25). Tamar sends Judah's signet, bracelets and staff with the message “By the man, whose these are, am I with child”. The Tamar trap is sprung and Judah is caught and exposed.
2. The acknowledgement of his sin (Vs. 26). There seems to be an attitude of repentance in Judah's response.
 - a. He accepted the greater share of responsibility for what had happened – “she hath been more righteous than I”.
 - b. He admitted his wrong in not giving Tamar his son Shelah as promised.
 - c. He acted differently towards Tamar after this and did not repeat the sin with her.

V. THE SEED OF JUDAH (VS. 27-30)

A. The Birth of Judah's Seed (Vs. 27-30)

1. At the time of birth, it is discovered that Tamar has twins. An interesting thing happens where one of the baby's hands came out and the midwife ties a scarlet thread to the hand to identify it as the firstborn but then the baby withdraws his hand and the other twin comes out forth.

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2. The midwife exclaims “How hast thou broken forth?” Therefore, he was called Pharez meaning “breaking through”. Then Tamar gives birth to the second twin and he is named Zarah meaning “rising”.

B. The Grace Towards Judah’s Seed (Matt. 1:3)

We read this sordid scandal and ask, “what good could God possibly bring out of a mess like this?” The amazing, abounding grace of God is seen in the fact:

1. Pharez became a part of the lineage of Christ (Matt. 1:3; Luke 3:33). In fact, there are four women mentioned by name in Christ’s genealogy.
 - a. Tamar (Matt. 1:3).
 - b. Rahab (Matt. 1:5; Josh. 2, 6). Rahab was a harlot and yet she became a believer in the One True God of Israel, was spared in the overthrow of Jericho and married a Jewish man named Salmon and gave birth to Boaz whom we read about in the Book of Ruth. Rahab is even given the high honour by being included by the Holy Spirit in the great catalogue of the heroes of the faith in the New Testament (Heb. 11:31).
 - c. Ruth (Matt. 1:5). Ruth was a woman of upright character but she was a Moabite and therefore a Gentile.
 - d. Bathsheba (Matt. 1:6). Bathsheba committed adultery with king David.
 - e. Note: In no way is God’s Word glorifying or encouraging sin but we see the demonstration of the truth of Romans 5:20 “...But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” We live in a world full of brokenness because of sin. The grace of God in salvation is the only answer! Only God has the power to take the broken pieces of our sinful lives and make something out of us for His honour and glory.
2. Christ is called “the lion of the tribe of Judah” (Rev. 5:5).
3. Griffith Thomas writes, “It is simply astonishing that God could take up the threads of this very tangled skein, and weave them into His own pattern. First of all, He dealt with Judah, and we know how great was the transformation of his character. And then, greatest marvel of all, God permitted the human descent of the Messiah to come not only from Judah, but even from Tamar. “It is evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah” (Heb. 7:14), and “Judah begat Pharez and Zarah of Tamar” (Matt. 1:3). No man could have done such a thing. 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 marvellous than the power and possibilities of grace. Grace forgives, uplifts, transmutes, transforms, and then uses for its own glory...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.”

Conclusion: Have you experienced God’s saving grace?