

A Turning Towards God

Genesis 38

When we approach a passage like this, there are several things to remember:

This historical narrative was written about 3400 years ago. This means that there are certain cultural norms that seem quite strange to us. We want to develop the original context.

We want to differentiate between what is descriptive (the author telling us what happened) and what is prescriptive (God telling us what we ought to do).

Judah is unwise in his marriage (vv. 2-3).

Judah marries a Canaanite woman (38:2-3). God consistently warns His people against intermarriage (Genesis 24:3, 27:46, 28:6-9). This is not about race, but rather about spiritual alignment.

Thanks to the discovery of Ugaritic texts, we have learned a lot about Canaanite religion. We see a polytheistic system in which the gods El and Baal feature prominently. There is a different code of ethics.

Judah fails to do his duty out of fear (vv. 6-11).

In order to see what is going on here, we must understand the once widely practiced notion of a Levirate vow, the marrying off of a childless widow to a relative.

Tamar was vulnerable in ancient near eastern culture. This custom is in place in order to a.) protect the female and b.) preserve a family line. Verse 10 informs us that it is God's will for this to happen.

Then, out of fear, Judah withholds his youngest son from this duty. Trusting the promises of God and fear are in an inverse relationship.

Judah's hypocrisy reaches its zenith when he finds out Tamar is unlawfully pregnant (by him) and guilty of adultery (though he failed to give her his third son)!

Just like his father Jacob, Judah's "mischief returns upon his own head" (Psalm 7:16).

Repentance leads to blessing (vv. 12-26).

Judah is caught in his sin. He is exposed publicly with irrefutable evidence. We learn from v. 23 that he is concerned about his reputation. Judah has a choice to make:

- Denial: *It did not happen.*
- Rationalization: *It wasn't that bad.*
- Blame-Shame-Shift: *It wasn't my fault, it was hers.*

Instead, we have what appears to be true contrition: *Tamar is "more righteous than I" (v. 26).*

From this point on, Judah appears differently in the history. He sticks up for Benjamin (44:30-34), seems to be the leader among the brothers (46:28), and most importantly becomes the progenitor of the Messiah (Gen. 49:8-12).

Key Take-Away: Turning towards God paves the way for a better future.

Application Questions:

Why does laying hold of God's promises drive away fear?

What makes confession so difficult? In what sense does unconfessed sin hurt our wellbeing (Cf. Psalm 32:3)?

How can we best practice and explain repentance?

What about the birth of the twins reinforces God's plan (vv. 27-30)?