

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS CHAPTER 38

This chapter gives us an account of Judah and his family, and such an account it is that one would wonder that, of all Jacob's sons, our Lord should spring out of Judah, **#Heb 7:14**. If we were to form a character of him by this story, we should not say,

"Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise,"

#Ge 49:8. But God will show that his choice is of grace and not of merit, and that Christ came into the world to save sinners, even the chief, and is not ashamed, upon their repentance, to be allied to them, also that the worth and worthiness of Jesus Christ are personal, of himself, and not derived from his ancestors. Humbling himself to be

"made in the likeness of sinful flesh,"

he was pleased to descend from some that were infamous. How little reason had the Jews, who were so called from this Judah, to boast, as they did, that they were not born of fornication! **#Joh 8:41**. We have, in this chapter,

- I. Judah's marriage and issue, and the untimely death of his two eldest sons, **#Ge 38:1-11**.
- II. Judah's incest with his daughter-in-law Tamar, without his knowing it, **#Ge 38:12-23**.
- III. His confusion, when it was discovered, **#Ge 38:24-26**.
- IV. The birth of his twin sons, in whom his family was built up, **#Ge 38:27-30**.

Ver. 1.

Here is,

1. Judah's foolish friendship with a Canaanite-man. He went down from his brethren, and withdrew for a time from their society and his father's family, and got to be intimately acquainted with one Hirah, an Adullamite, **#Ge 38:1**. It is computed that he was now not much above fifteen or sixteen years of age, an easy prey to the tempter. Note, When young people that have been well educated begin to change their company, they will soon change their manners, and lose their good education. Those that go down from their brethren, that despise and forsake the society of the seed of Israel, and pick up Canaanites for their companions, are going down the hill apace. It is of great consequence to young people to choose proper associates; for these they will imitate, study to recommend themselves to, and, by their opinion of them, value themselves: an error in this choice is often fatal.
2. His foolish marriage with a Canaanite woman, a match made, not by his father, who, it should seem, was not consulted, but by his new friend Hirah, **#Ge 38:2**. Many have been drawn into marriages scandalous and pernicious to themselves and their families by keeping bad company, and growing familiar with bad people: one wicked league entangles men in another. Let young people be admonished by this to take their good parents for their best friends, and to be advised by them, and not by flatterers, who wheedle them, to make a prey of them.
3. His children by this Canaanite, and his disposal of them. Three sons he had by her, Er, Onan, and Shelah. It is probable that she embraced the worship of the God of

Israel, at least in profession, but, for aught that appears, there was little of the fear of God in the family. Judah married too young, and very rashly; he also married his sons too young, when they had neither wit nor grace to govern themselves, and the consequences were very bad.

(1.) His first-born, *Er*, was notoriously wicked; he was *so in the sight of the Lord*, that is, in defiance of God and his law; or, if perhaps he was not wicked in the sight of God, to whom all men's wickedness is open; and what came of it? Why, God cut him off presently (#Ge 38:7): *The Lord slew him*. Note, Sometimes God makes quick work with sinners, and takes them away in his wrath, when they are but just setting out in a wicked course of life.

(2.) The next son, *Onan*, was, according to the ancient usage, married to the widow, to preserve the name of his deceased brother that died childless. Though God had taken away his life for his wickedness, yet they were solicitous to preserve his memory; and their disappointment therein, through Onan's sin, was a further punishment of his wickedness. The custom of marrying the brother's widow was afterwards made one of the laws of Moses, #De 25:5. Onan, though he consented to marry the widow, yet, to the great abuse of his own body, of the wife that he had married, and of the memory of his brother that was gone, he refused to raise up seed unto his brother, as he was in duty bound. This was so much the worse because the Messiah was to descend from Judah, and, had he not been guilty of this wickedness, he might have had the honour of being one of his ancestors. Note, Those sins that dishonour the body and defile it are very displeasing to God and evidences of vile affections.

(3.) *Shelah*, the third son, was reserved for the widow #Ge 38:11, yet with a design that he should not marry so young as his brothers had done, *lest he die also*. Some think that Judah never intended to marry Shelah to Tamar, but unjustly suspected her to have been the death of her two former husbands (whereas it was their own wickedness that slew them), and then sent her to her father's house, with a charge to remain a widow. If so, it was an inexcusable piece of prevarication that he was guilty of. However, Tamar acquiesced for the present, and waited the issue.

Ver. 12.

It is a very ill-favoured story that is here told concerning Judah; one would not have expected such folly in Israel. Judah had buried his wife; and widowers have need to stand upon their guard with the utmost caution and resolution against all fleshly lusts. He was unjust to his daughter-in-law, either through negligence or design, in not giving her his surviving son, and this exposed her to temptation.

I. Tamar wickedly prostituted herself as a harlot to Judah, that, if the son might not, the father might raise up seed to the deceased. Some excuse this by suggesting that, though she was a Canaanite, yet she had embraced the true religion, and believed the promise made to Abraham and his seed, particularly that of the Messiah, who was to descend from the loins of Judah, and that she was therefore thus earnestly desirous to have a child by one of that family that she might have the honour, or at least stand fair for the honour, of being the mother of the Messiah. And, if this was indeed her desire, it had its success; she is one of the four women particularly named in the genealogy of Christ, #Mt 1:3. Her sinful practice was pardoned, and her good intention was accepted, which magnifies the grace of God, but can by no means be admitted to justify or encourage the like. Bishop Patrick thinks it probable that she hoped Shelah, who was by right her husband, might have come along with his father, and that he might have been allured to her embraces. There was a great deal of plot and contrivance in Tamar's sin.

1. She took an opportunity for it, when Judah had a time of mirth and feasting with his sheep shearers. Note, Time of jollity often prove times of temptation, particularly to the sin of uncleanness; when men are fed to the full, the reins are apt to be let loose.
2. She exposed herself as a harlot *in an open place*, #Ge 38:14. Those that are, and would be, chaste, must be *keepers at home*, #Tit 2:5. It should seem, it was the custom of harlots, in those times, to cover their faces, that, though they were not ashamed, yet they might seem to be so. The sin of uncleanness did not then go so barefaced as it does now.

II. Judah was taken in the snare, and though it was ignorantly that he was guilty of incest with his daughter-in-law (not knowing who she was), yet he was wilfully guilty of fornication: whoever she was, he knew she was not his wife, and therefore not to be touched. Nor was his sin capable, in the least, of such a charitable excuse as some make for Tamar, that though the action was bad the intention possibly might be good. Observe,

1. Judah's sin began in the eye (#Ge 38:15): *He saw her*. Note, Those have eyes, and hearts too, full of adultery (as it is #2Pe 2:14), that catch at every bait that presents itself to them and are as tinder to every spark. We have need to make a covenant with our eyes, and to turn them from beholding vanity, lest the eye infect the heart.
2. It added to the scandal that the hire of a harlot (than which nothing is more infamous) was demanded, offered, and accepted--*a kid from the flock*, a goodly price at which her chastity and honour were valued! Nay, had the consideration been thousands of rams, and ten thousand rivers of oil, it had not been a valuable consideration. The favour of God, the purity of the soul, the peace of conscience, and the hope of heaven, are too precious to be exposed to sale at any such rates; the Topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal them: what are those profited that lose their souls to gain the world?
3. It turned to the reproach of Judah that he left his jewels in pawn for a kid. Note, Fleshly lusts are not only brutish, but sottish, and ruining to men's secular interests. It is plain that whoredom, as well as wine, and new wine, takes away the heart first, else it would never take away the signet and the bracelets.

III. He lost his jewels by the bargain; he sent the kid, according to this promise, to redeem his pawn, but the supposed harlot could not be found. He sent it by his friend (who was indeed his *back-friend*, because he was aiding and abetting in his evil deeds) the Adullamite, who came back without the pledge. It is a good account (if it be but true) of any place which they here gave, *there is no harlot in this place*; for such sinners are the scandals and plagues of any place. Judah sits down content to lose his signet and his bracelets, and forbids his friend to make any further enquiry after them, giving this reason, *lest we be shamed*, #Ge 38:23. Either,

1. Lest his sin should come to be known publicly, and be talked of. Fornication and uncleanness have ever been looked upon as scandalous things and the reproach and shame of those that are convicted of them. Nothing will make those blush that are not ashamed of these.
2. Lest he should be laughed at as a fool for trusting a strumpet with his signet and his bracelets. He expresses no concern about the sin, to get that pardoned, only about the shame, to prevent that. Note, There are many who are more solicitous to preserve their reputation with men than to secure the favour of God and a good conscience; *lest we be shamed* goes further with them than *lest we be damned*.

Ver. 24.

Here is,

I. Judah's rigour against Tamar, when he heard she was an adulteress. She was, in the eye of the law, Shelah's wife, and therefore her being with child by another was looked upon as an injury and reproach to Judah's family: *Bring her forth therefore*, says Judah, the master of the family, and *let her be burnt*; not burnt to death, but burnt in the cheek or forehead, stigmatized for a harlot. This seems probable, #Ge 38:24. Note, It is a common thing for men to be severe against those very sins in others in which yet they allow themselves; and so, in judging others, they condemn themselves, #Ro 2:1; 14:22. If he designed that she should be burnt to death, perhaps, under pretence of zeal against the sin, he was contriving how to get rid of his daughter-in-law, being loath to marry Shelah to her. Note, It is a common thing, but a very bad thing, to cover malice against men's persons with a show of zeal against their vices.

II. Judah's shame, when it was made to appear that he was the adulterer. She produced *the ring and the bracelets* in court, which justified the fathering of the child upon Judah, #Ge 38:25,26. Note, The wickedness that has been most secretly committed, and most industriously concealed, yet sometimes is strangely brought to light, to the shame and confusion of those who have said, *No eye sees*. A bird of the air may carry the voice; however, there is a destroying day coming, when all will be laid open. Some of the Jewish writers observe that as Judah had said to his father, *See, is this thy son's coat?* (#Ge 37:32) so it was now said to him,

"See, are these thy signet and bracelets?"

Judah, being convicted by his own conscience,

1. Confesses his sin: *She has been more righteous than I*.

He owns that a perpetual mark of infamy should be fastened rather upon him, who had been so much accessory to it. Note, Those offenders ought to be treated with the greatest tenderness to whom we have any way given occasion of offending. If servants purloin, and their masters, by withholding from them what is due, tempt them to it, they ought to forgive them.

2. He never returned to it again: *He knew her again no more*. Note, Those do not truly repent of their sins that do not forsake them.

III. The building up of Judah's family hereby, notwithstanding, in the birth of Pharez and Zarah, from whom descended the most considerable families of the illustrious tribe of Judah. It should seem, the birth was hard to the mother, by which she was corrected for her sin. The children also, like Jacob and Esau, struggled for the birthright, and Pharez obtained it, who is ever named first, and from him Christ descended. He had his name from his breaking forth before his brother: *This breach be upon thee*, which is applicable to those that sow discord, and create distance, between brethren. The Jews, as Zarah, bade fair for the birthright, and were marked with a scarlet thread, as those that came out first; but the Gentiles, like Pharez, as a son of violence, got the start of them, by that violence which the kingdom of heaven suffers, and attained to the righteousness of which the Jews came short. Yet, when the fulness of time is come, all Israel shall be saved. Both these sons are named in the genealogy of our Saviour (#Mt 1:3), to perpetuate the story, as an instance of the humiliation of our Lord Jesus. Some observe that the four eldest sons of

Jacob fell under very foul guilt, Reuben and Judah under the guilt of incest, Simeon and Levi under that of murder; yet they were patriarchs, and from Levi descended the priests, from Judah the kings and Messiah. Thus they became examples of repentance, and monuments of pardoning mercy.