The Healing Hand of Grace — Delivery Transcript

Genesis 38 (CSB) · Wes Terry · Sunday, October 6, 2024 · *Living The Dream*

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If you have your Bible, we're going to be in Genesis chapter thirty-eight this morning. And as you're turning there, if you weren't here last week, I tried to give a disclaimer that this is one of those passages of scripture that needs a public service announcement if you have young children, and I see a lot of young-at-heart children but I don't see any young children. It's just one of those chapters. In fact, I was reading this, I guess it was a couple of weeks ago now, one of the commentators said, this is a rude interruption into the story of Joseph that begins in Genesis chapter 37 and it's possible that this is a scribal addition into the Genesis text and so it needs to be considered as such.

And then I read someone else that said, this is one of those chapters that if the maturity of your congregation doesn't warrant it, you might be well served in skipping over it. And I violently disagreed with both of those sentiments. Number one, I don't think it's a scribal addition because there's a lot of connective tissue between Genesis 37 and Genesis 38, and certainly Genesis 38 and the rest of the book. I also sincerely believe that the Word of God is inspired from Genesis to Revelation, every jot and tittle, and so if we say we are committed to the scriptures and believe that every word is inspired, then that means Genesis 38 is included in that realm.

Amen. Now, not all scripture is equally relevant at different times. Different scriptures may be more relevant. So I'm sympathetic to the idea that not everything is pertinent to a congregation at any given time. But as I was really studying Genesis chapter 38, I was amazed just how relevant it is to the culture in which we live and to the struggles that many of us face. From Genesis chapter three onward, what we've been presented with is a contrast usually between two types of people. In Genesis 3:15, the Lord promised Adam and Eve that from the seed of the woman I'm going to bring an offspring that is going to crush the head of the serpent and he's going to basically reverse the curse and make everything right again.

And we've seen that contrast between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent throughout the narratives in Genesis that we've been studying. You see it with Cain and

Abel, obviously. You can see it with Noah and his sons, Ham, Shem, and Japheth. You can see it with Lot and Abraham. You can see it with Isaac and Ishmael. Then we most recently saw it with Jacob and Esau. When you get to Genesis chapter 37, it's easy to assume, well, I guess the contrast is over because all of this is focused on Joseph.

Except for this oddball chapter in Genesis 38 that seems to be about Judah and Tamar. But as I was thinking over it, I really think that is the contrast. It's not just about Joseph, because Joseph, believe it or not, isn't the seed of promise. It doesn't come through the line of Joseph. It comes through the line of another son. Do you know who that son is? It's the line of Judah. And the last time we saw Judah in Genesis chapter 37, he wasn't coming off looking so good. He was one of the other sons of Jacob, who besides Joseph were doing evil in the eyes of God.

Joseph brought a bad report on his brothers, and so they were up to no good. The firstborn, Reuben, thought, I can rescue Joseph from this situation he's in, so let's throw him in a shallow pit. Maybe I can come and rescue him later. But someone else came up with the idea. No, let's make money off our brother and sell him into slavery. Do you remember who that man was? His name was Judah. So Judah is the real source of Joseph's problems in life because he's the one who came up with the idea, let's sell him into slavery.

And when you get to Judah in Genesis chapter 38, he's gone from bad to worse. He has drifted in his relationship with the Lord and in doing the things he ought to have done. And I think the overarching point of Genesis chapter 38 is that God's promise does not depend on a sinless life or a perfect record. At least in terms of who he calls to advance his purposes, God's promise doesn't depend on human achievement, but it depends on a sovereign hand of grace. And we see the sovereignty of God in this chapter beautifully take the imperfections and weakness and sinfulness of a man, break him of those

habits to a point of genuine repentance and rebuild him into someone that the Lord can use to advance his redemptive promise. And in that way I think he's going to be a relevant character for us to study. And so to set the table, Joseph is in Egypt. He's gone from the pit to the palace, you might say, back to the pit. He was confronted with temptation to sexually sin with Potiphar's wife, he successfully resists that temptation. But in Genesis 38 we see a similar temptation, not so well resisted. So let's pick it up in verse 1.

It says, at that time Judah left his brothers, and he settled near an Adullamite named Hirah. And there Judah saw the daughter of a Canaanite named Shua. He took her as a wife, and he slept with her. She conceived and gave birth to a son, and he named him Er. She conceived again, gave birth to a son, and named him Onan. And she gave birth to another son and named him Shelah. It was at Chezib that she gave birth to him. I think it's interesting that the wife is the one naming the children.

In other cases it's the husband and wife together or the husband himself. But the other thing that's interesting is this geographical note that Judah separated himself from his brothers. That separation I don't think was just merely geographical because you also see in his descent away from his brothers a spiritual descent away from God. He leaves his dad and brothers there in the Hebron Valley, which was kind of a region in which the presence of God was dwelling. That was their homeland. That's where they were supposed to be.

And inherit God's promise. He leaves from there and moves near an Adullamite friend of his named Hirah. He's not necessarily a Canaanite, but I'm not sure that he was quite a believer either. We're going to learn a little bit later. He's not of good moral character. But the other thing he does that's the one forbidden thing that he was never supposed to do, the one thing his great-grandfather Abraham said cannot happen, and even his grandfather Isaac said should not happen, is that he married a Canaanite woman.

He married a Canaanite woman named Shua, and he knew better. Go all the way back to Genesis chapter 9, the sons of Noah, two did the right thing, one did the wrong thing. Ham dishonored his father, and as a result of that act, Noah said, Cursed be Canaan, and Canaan was going to carry a curse for the rest of their generations, and the Israelites knew better than to marry Canaanite women, because as a result of them rejecting God's design and living according to their own passions, they had developed a very immoral culture and hostility towards God that you couldn't live alongside of it without yourself becoming corrupted.

And that's exactly what happened to Judah. He marries a Canaanite woman, and gradually his character begins to wane, worse and worse and worse, further drifting from God. And really I think these three children that he has, Er, Onan, and Shelah, illustrate in Judah's life the hardening effects of sin. It's one of the main points of Genesis chapter 38 is how sin hardens the human heart to such a degree that you find yourself in a place that you never thought you would ever end up. And that's what you see happen to Judah, these hardening effects of sin through these three sons.

Now we're going to read about these three sons and I'll just warn you ahead of time it is a little bit graphic. So in verse six it says Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn. By the way, would you ever name your son Er? The way I remember Er is Er erred in who he married. Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. That's an important character in our chapter, Tamar, the wife of Er. Now Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the Lord's sight. We don't know quite why he was evil in the Lord's sight, but he was evil.

So much so that the Lord put him to death. Now that may seem startling. Wow, you know, other people do evil in the eyes of the Lord. He's not striking them with lightning. In fact I've seen a lot of people taunting God. Well if God really cared he'd strike me by lightning and no lightning strikes them. This guy's evil in the eyes of the Lord, and God strikes him dead. I

think if that's startling to you, it's understandable, but it does, I think, illustrate the severity of sin in the face of a holy God.

He is graciously tolerating the sin in many of our lives, but it in no way suggests that he does not violently oppose and would rightfully be able to unleash his wrath on our lives if we were to receive what we truly deserved. And the thing that I think you see with Er and Judah is this idea that I can unite myself to the world or I can love the world without any kind of liability. I don't know why I've been doing this, but I've been getting into Latin.

I know why. It's my sons at ACA and they take Latin. So I'm helping him learn Latin. And the Latin root for the word liability is to bind. Ligare means to bind. And as I think about what Judah is doing here is he's made a conscious choice. I'm going to choose to love the world instead of love the Lord. I'm going to bind myself to an ungodly friend, Hirah, I'm going to bind myself to an ungodly woman, the daughter of Shua. We don't know the wife's name, but daughter of Shua.

And I'm going to act as though that's not going to have any downstream consequences for my life, morally or spiritually or even socially, but you see that is not the case. His sons inherit his sinful heart. They inherit his bent towards resisting the Lord, and his son Er is even worse in some cases than Judah is, because Judah thought I can love the world without liability, and Er thought he could love the world without liability, and he was rudely awakened to the fact that once you bind yourself to the world it invites a hostility from the Lord as James chapter four rightfully warns, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility or enmity towards God?

So he's seeking love of the world without liability. And then the second son does a similar kind of thing in verse 8. He has a brother that just died for being wicked in the eyes of the Lord. I don't know if he knew that was the reason that he died, but Judah says to Onan, the secondborn, sleep with your brother's wife. Now before you get up and go, what in the world kind of church did I come to? I know that sounds shocking, sounds kind of like The Handmaid's Tale, but that was a very common custom in this culture.

It actually gets codified into Israelite law in Deuteronomy chapter 25. It's a thing called levirate marriage, which was the duty that if your brother died and the wife of your brother did not yet have an heir, then it was your responsibility as the brother to provide that woman an heir of a son, because without a son there would be no carrying on of the family name. And in essence, there would be no real economic security or just physical security for that woman. She would be childless and a widow, which was a very dangerous place to be

as a woman in ancient Near Eastern culture. So it was a grace from the Lord to say it's your responsibility as part of that family to provide her an heir. And so that's why Judah says, do your duty. Sleep with your brother's wife, perform your duty as her brother-in-law, and

produce offspring for your brother. But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, and so whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he released his semen onto the ground so that he would not produce offspring for his brother.

And what he did was evil in the Lord's sight, and so he put him to death also. Two down, these boys are dropping like flies. Now, what did Onan do that was so bad? You say what's so wrong about protected sex or family planning and stuff like that, and that's really not what he was attempting to do. He knew that if I provide an heir to my sister-in-law or however it works out, then that child's not going to be mine and therefore I don't really want to do it.

He in my eyes is trying to have the pleasure of the sexual encounter without the responsibility of childbearing. And as I think about our culture, this happens all the time. In fact the whole spirit behind the abortion industry and reproductive rights and that whole discussion of the sexual revolution, so much of that was trying to separate sex from the responsibility, the pleasure of sex, from the responsibility of child rearing. And God designed sex as a wonderful gift to humanity, but he designed it with a certain purpose in mind.

And one of the purposes of sex, not the only, but one of, is to produce children and through the producing of children give children a stable environment in which they can grow up because the sex was engaged in a union of one man and one woman and a lifelong covenant of commitment and love so that an environment of safety and security would allow this child to grow up in a healthy way. Now not all people who engage in sex are able to have children and that's a real burden for many who desire children and are not able to have them.

But the exception to the norm or the difficulty that some have doesn't undermine or undo the reality of God's design. And when you take God's design for sex, which is pleasure, but it's also to create offspring and it's also to create permanence or a oneness between a man and a wife. When you take that and say, no, I don't want the oneness. And I don't want the offspring, I just want the pleasure. Then you're spoiling his design, and you can't spoil that design without consequence.

You can't seek pleasure without responsibility, or the pleasure will make you a slave. It's evil in the eyes of the Lord, and that's why the Lord punishes him. And it's not just with sex. I mean, today we could talk about all sorts of ways in which people seek pleasure without responsibility. I want to have all the fun, but I don't want any of the consequences. I want all the good stuff, but I don't want any of the bad stuff. I want to take, take, take, take, take, but I don't ever want to have to give, give, give.

And it's evil in the eyes of the Lord. And it's the hardening effect of sin. The hardening effect of sin is that I can live this way and get away with it. I can love the world without liability. I can seek pleasure without responsibility. And then you see Judah's response also illustrates a hardening effect. Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, who's had two dead husbands

at this point, to no fault of her own, mind you, that was the evil in the eyes of the Lord that the men were committing that caused them to die.

And then he commits an injustice against Tamar in telling her, Remain a widow in your father's house. In other words, I don't want you to stay with me any longer. I want you to go back home to your dad, which was not his right to do. He was legally responsible for her, but he's shirking his responsibility. And he's saying, I want you to go live in your father's house until Shelah grows up. For he thought he might die too, which I can't blame him for thinking that.

But he thought he's going to die too like his brothers. And so Tamar went to live in her father's house. Now he promises her, I'm going to give you my thirdborn in marriage, but he never really delivers. And after a long time Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, died. And when Judah had finished mourning, he and his friend Hirah, the Adullamite, went up to Timnah to his sheep shearers. And Tamar was told, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep. And so she took off her widow's clothes. She veiled her face,

covered herself and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the way to Timnah. Now that's something a prostitute would do. So she takes off her widow's clothes, she dresses up as a prostitute to try to snare Judah into a compromising position because he had grieved the passing of his wife. He was back on the market, if you will. Why is she doing all this? Because she saw that though Shelah had grown up, she had not been given to him as a wife. Now, I'm not justifying Tamar's actions here.

I think what she did was wrong, but in some ways she's in an impossible situation. She's a childless widow living with her father-in-law in a land where it was very unsafe to be in that kind of position. Judah had not delivered on the promise that he gave to her to give his thirdborn in marriage to Tamar. She takes matters into her own hands and says, if this is the only way I can get an offspring, then this is what I'm going to do. Now the hardening effect of sin is Judah assumes,

well, I can be trusted without accountability. He basically says to Tamar, trust me. Trust me that I will come through on my promise. I'm going to give you my thirdborn, just not now and just not here. And then he never follows through. And now after some time, we don't know how long it was, a decade, five years, could have been more or less. Tamar collects the chit. She says, it's time for you to make good on your promise. And a lot of people today want I want the promotion, but I don't want the extra work.

I want more time on my curfew, but I don't want any tracker on my phone or I don't want you to ask what I'm doing with my business. I want the iPhone, but I don't want to give you my passcode and on and on we could go with the examples, but that's one of the hardening effects of sin that I can kind of play people. I can get them to trust me and believe me, and if

I just present the right front, no one's any of the wiser and I can just live this way indefinitely without any kind of consequence or accountability.

And the reality is, no, you can't. That's sin blinding you. It's making you an idiot. It's making you a fool because that's what sin does. It hardens our heart to think we can love the world without liability. We can seek pleasure without responsibility, and we can have trust without accountability. And the overall effect of that is that it creates in you this foolish comfortability with sin. You become more and more comfortable with living in sin and growing in sin. And pressing deeper and deeper into the sin that you've kind of found yourself enslaved to and you justify it and you kind of develop this Superman attitude that no one can stop me.

I'll never get caught. My sin will never find me out. And the reality is you're wrong. But sin has blinded you to think that you're not. And eventually your sins will find you out. And that's exactly what happens to Judah. And it's so ironic. She's at the front of a city named Enaim, dressed up like a prostitute. The word Enaim means to see. And you see that play on words in chapter 38, verse 15. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face.

In other words, he didn't really see what was going on. He went over to her and said, come, let me sleep with you, for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. Notice the foolish comfortability with sin has blinded him to the reality of the case. And she said, what will you give me for sleeping with me? And he said, I'll send you a young goat from my flock, he replied. That was big business back then. But she answered, only if you leave something with me until you send it.

And what should I give you? He asked. Now this is where she's going to hook him. She says, I want your signet ring, your cord, and the staff in your hand, which was equivalent to saying I want your passport, your credit card number, and your pen. Okay, it's pretty much the same thing. And he should have said, no way, Jose. But he says, okay, so he gave them to her. And he slept with her. And she became pregnant by him. And she got up and left and removed her veil and put her widow's clothes back on.

Now, you don't do that kind of thing unless you're absolutely blinded and deluded into thinking you can't get caught. And it happens all the time with people who live perpetually in a season of unrepentant sin. They develop this mindset. I can't get caught. I can't get busted. It develops this pride and arrogance and folly into thinking I can take incredible risk and it's not going to be a problem. Because I'll find a way to cover it up. I'll find a way to get away with it. But he doesn't.

Tamar gets pregnant and God is going to use it to expose Judah in his sins. Now, one of the takeaways from this is Tamar is never once condemned in this passage. Judah gets

condemned quite a bit, but Tamar never gets condemned. And one of the things we're going to see through this, what I'd call, a spectacular sin, both the deception of Tamar and Judah doing what he should not have done is that the Lord is somehow still going to use this sovereignly to accomplish his purpose. And so the takeaway is it doesn't matter... oh yeah, here's the map.

So here's where he was, here's where he moved to Chezib. This is Timnah where he goes up to shear sheep. So you can see there's not very much distance between these two cities. It would have been easy to get news. Here comes Judah, here's where he's walking, here's how I catch him. The takeaway is in the sovereign plan of God, even the worst sins serve their purpose. And God is going to use this sin in the life of Judah and even in the life of Tamar to accomplish his divine purpose.

But for Judah to experience the grace of God and to have the Lord use this brokenness and wrong in his life for his glory, he had to recognize a couple of important things, and that's what happens in verse 20 to 26. So when Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite in order to get back the items he had left with the woman, he could not find her. That's why I said this Adullamite's not a good man. He has low moral character because he's helping Judah cover up his sin.

So he asked the men of the place, where's that cult prostitute who was beside the road at Enaim? And they say, there has been no cult prostitute here. So the Adullamite returned to Judah, saying, I couldn't find her, and besides the men of the place said, there is no cult prostitute here. And so Judah replied, well, let her keep the items for herself, otherwise we will become a laughing stock. After all, I did send the young goat and you couldn't find her. So he's trying to cover his tracks, but you also see this kind of hardness of heart.

I can take the risk. It'll be no problem. If we make a big stink of it, I'm going to be shamed. And so let's just shut it down. But after about three months later, Judah was told, your daughter-in-law Tamar has been acting like a prostitute. And now she's pregnant. Well bring her out, Judah said, and let her be burned to death, which is kind of over the top. They would stone adulterers with rocks, not burn them alive. So he's upping the ante, and as she was being brought out, she sent her father-in-law this message.

Well, I am pregnant by the man to whom these items belong. And she added, examine them, whose signet ring, cord, and staff are these? And Judah, underline this phrase, recognize them. Judah recognized them and he said, she is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah and he did not know her intimately again. Now that word recognize, you could say it's another word for repent. I think the value of this chapter is it really powerfully illustrates what genuine repentance is.

Judah recognizes, number one, I can't escape my sin. I thought I could get away with being trusted without accountability. I thought I could get away with preserving the life of my youngest and honoring my duty to my daughter-in-law. But I realize now my sin has found me out. I can't love the world without liability. I can't seek pleasure without responsibility. I was a fool to think I could live in sin and not experience brokenness. So he realized he can't escape his sin. He also realized he couldn't erase his sin because he goes, he tries to cover it up, and unsuccessfully.

So he's not able to cover up his sin because some sin you can't cover up. Some sin it's too late to cover it up. It's too far gone, and someone's going to eventually find out. And I think that's what leads a lot of people to continue living in sin is they think their sin doesn't really count because I can cover it up. I can clear the iPhone history. I can delete the text messages, I can twist things and manipulate things so that no one will ever know.

And it leads them to think my sin's not that serious. It is actually very serious, and you can't escape the seriousness of your sin and eventually your sin will find you out. You can't erase your sin, can't escape your sin. And then finally Judah recognized he couldn't excuse his sin. Notice he says, she's more in the right than I am. And he never knew her intimately again, which makes me think maybe it wasn't a one and done. Maybe he was engaging in sexual intercourse throughout the duration of his stay there in Timnah.

I don't know that for sure, but he recognizes I'm wrong. I'm a sinner. I've been living in this sin and he repents. It's not just that I'm sorry I got caught, in other words, it's not just that I'm sorry that there's consequences for my sin. He turns his life around. He says he does not know her intimately again. It's a change of mind that leads to a change of behavior, and that's what genuine repentance really is. And upon his repentance, the Lord begins to use his life and actually uses that mistake

for his glory. In verse 27, when the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb. And as she was giving birth, one of them put out his hand, and the midwife took it and tied a scarlet thread around it, announcing this one came out first. But then he pulled his hand back and out came his brother. And she said, what a breakout you have made for yourself. I don't know what I would say if I was delivering a baby and that happened. I'd say something along those lines.

And so they named him Perez, which means breakout, and then his brother who had the scarlet thread tied to his hand came out and his name was Zerah. Now Perez is going to become the ancestor of another important king. And his name was King David. And through the line of King David was going to come the true King of kings, and that's the Lord Jesus Christ. And what's so fascinating about this chapter, this Perez fellow is mentioned again in Ruth, chapter four, verse twelve, I believe, when the kinsman redeemer Boaz is basically

stepping in to maintain the line of the Messiah, and they say may you have an offspring just like Perez was an offspring.

And when you get to Matthew chapter 1, the genealogy of Jesus, there are only five women mentioned in the genealogy. You have this woman, Tamar. You have Rahab, you have Bathsheba, and I'm missing one. Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba. She's obviously not that important. She was important enough to put in and then you have Mary, of course. The first four, the one I couldn't remember, they're all Gentiles. And they're not just Gentiles, they're all outcasts. They're prostitutes. They're people who did terrible things, like Tamar deceiving Judah. And I think it's a way to really amplify that Jesus came for the outcast.

He came to redeem those who are in brokenness. He doesn't just come for the Jews, but he came for the sins of the whole world and that God can take even your brokenness and even your greatest shame and mistake and use it for his glory because through these women came the Messiah who would save the world. And so Judah is transformed because he recognizes these things. And you know he's transformed because the next time we're going to see Judah in the Joseph narrative a little bit later, Judah doesn't try to sell Joseph into slavery anymore.

He tries to sell himself into slavery to save his brother Benjamin. So he goes from sacrificing his brother to sacrificing himself. Because of the repentance in his heart, God transformed him more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ. And that's what the Lord does. That's why I almost titled this sermon God's healing hand of grace because God can take the most wretched sinner and heal him by his amazing grace. And that's exactly what happens to Judah at the end of Genesis chapter 49. Jacob blesses all of his sons, but Judah gets the blessing of the divine or the messianic promise.

He says, Your brothers will praise you, and the scepter will not depart from Judah, or the staff from between his feet until he whose right it is comes, and the obedience of the peoples belongs to him. And so the King of kings, the Lord Jesus Christ, comes through this broken man who used his staff to pay a prostitute, but did not stay in that state of brokenness, but repented and allowed the Lord to redeem his life from the pit and used him mightily for his glory. And so what does that mean for you and me?

I think on the one hand, if you're here this morning and you've never believed that God can meet you in your mess and transform you and change you. The reality is he can. If he can do it for Judah, he can do it for you. It may also mean for some of us that our tendency to kind of cast people out or to write people off because they're of a particular stripe or they're saddled with particular sins. In God's economy, the ground is level at the foot of the cross.

There is no hierarchy of good people and bad people. We're all wretched sinners saved by God's amazing grace. And maybe this morning the Lord would renew in you a compassion

for the broken and a zeal to share with them this life-giving message that there is grace in Jesus that can be greater than all of their sins and can heal them, bind up their wounds and give them a hope and a future. So if you never made that decision during this time of response, I'd invite you to do so. You can come to the front.

I'd be happy to pray with you. You can also scan the QR code if you want. There's also other responses that you might make and I trust you to the Lord to do those as we spend some time responding in this time of invitation. So Heavenly Father, we thank you for this time in your word and we thank you for Judah. We thank you for your word that even the weird chapters like Genesis chapter 38, they communicate a powerful, relevant message that sin is a disease that blinds us, numbs us to the reality of our brokenness, deceives us into thinking we can continue in this way and life will be okay, but the reality is it isn't and we won't.

We need your grace. And we need the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the source of that grace. And so we pray as we respond, you might help open our eyes so that we can see the reality of both. That we are wretched sinners, but we are loved by our Heavenly Father, and that He can save us through His amazing grace. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.