

The Sovereign Securing of the Savior Seed

Genesis 38

Intro: The Freeness of Grace

“I am a complete idiot. But my future is incredibly bright. Anybody can get in on this.” That’s a quote from a pastor I heard recently spoken to those who’ve hit rock-bottom... who’ve done such shameful things, they think there’s no way out, no way forward.

But it’s also a message for ALL of us. We must come to terms with how sinful we are, and that, apart from Jesus, we are at rock bottom. But because of Jesus, our future is bright because our eternity is secure.

Any ANYONE can get in on this! It doesn’t matter how big of an idiot you are!...how bad of a sin you’ve committed...how shameful your sin is...There is no one (and I mean NO ONE!) too sinful to be *redeemed* by God AND used by God.

The story in Gen. 38 paints a picture of gross, wicked sin and hypocrisy that tends to evoke a

response from the reader like: “What is wrong with these people? They’re sooo bad!” And implicitly we think, “I’m not like that.” OR “I would never be like that.”

And that’s the moment we lose sight of the power of the grace of God. *God’s free and sovereign grace preserves his plan to bless all peoples of the earth through his chosen seed.* That’s what this passage is about.

It’s hard to see how this passage fits into the Joseph narrative. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt (37:36) and then that story breaks to focus on Joseph’s older brother, Judah and his sons. Why?

It seems God really cares about continuing Judah’s seed/offspring. This is one of the main themes of Genesis. God promised Abraham land, SEED (offspring), and worldwide blessing *because* Adam and Eve brought curse through sin. So God said to them in Gen. 3:15, “A seed/offspring of the woman/Eve would one day crush the head of the serpent/Satan, undoing the curse of sin on the world.

Genesis is all about this coming seed. Who is it? Who make all things right and restore blessing to the world? At this point, it looks like it will be one who comes through Joseph's line, because Joseph proves his faithfulness to God. AND by the time we get to the end of Genesis, he's the second most powerful person in the known world.

BUT there's surprising turn. It's NOT the seed of Joseph who will bring redemption; rather it's the seed of Judah. That's why God is so committed to persevering Judah's seed/offspring. But the way he does it is shocking. Let's watch it unfold in six scenes.

Scene #1: Perceived Preservation

It *looks like* Judah's seed is preserved because he has several sons. But look who he joins himself to. **[v1]** That language *turned aside* has spiritual connotations. He's making the wrong decision here. He attaches himself to a guy name Hirah, and they become best buds. And we'll come to find, he's not a friend who helps Judah walk in with the Lord. **[v2]**

So this Canaanite woman (whose dad is named Shua) Judah *saw* and *took*. What does that language remind you of? “Eve *saw* and *took* the fruit.” The sons of god in ch6 *saw* and *took* women for themselves. Lamech in ch6, *saw* and *took* wives. This is an expression that highlights hasty lustful pursuit.

Judah, in his lust, marries a Canaanite outside of the bounds of God’s covenant people. And he has kids with her. **[vv3-5]**. He’s not even with her at the time of his third son’s birth of; he’s in another city called Chezib, which ironically means “deceit,” which we’re gonna see a whole lot of in this story.

But the future looks good for Judah. He’s got three sons, plenty of opportunity to build a lineage, while Joseph is locked up in Egypt. But Judah is not fit to be the one through whom the promised seed would come! He’s no different than Esau, who went away from his brother and married Canaanite women. There’s no way God would choose Judah to be the one through whom blessing to the world would come, right?

Doesn't God's choice based on how good a person is? That unbiblical concept is about to get obliterated by this story.

So there is perceived preservation of Judah's seed. But in...

Scene #2: Apparent Obstruction

It looks like the seed of Judah is threatened.

[vv6-7] Wow. We don't know what he did that revealed his wickedness, but it must've been bad for the Lord to say, "You're done."

So Tamar's first husband died, and when that happened in the ANE, there was a practice in place to preserve the seed of the dead husband (Deut. 25). His brother was required to marry his wife and thus continue the family line. That's what happens. **[v8]** How does Onan feel about this? **[v9a]** Yes, biologically his, but because of this ANE practice, Onan's offspring would be *regarded* as Er's offspring.

Now, do you know why Onan would have a problem with that? If he has a son that's regarded as Er's son, then double portion of

inheritance would bypass him and go to that son. So what does Onan do? **[v9b]**

The language indicates this was a regular practice, not a one-time thing. “*Whenever* he did this...” Get this: Onan is happy to get physical pleasure from Tamar without bearing the responsibility of children that may come.

This is one reason why this act should not be reduced merely to pleasure-seeking. This is why it’s wrong to do this outside of marriage. And why it’s wrong for it even to be done in marriage in a self-seeking way.

Onan is unwilling to bear the responsibility of having children, but he’s perfectly willing to keep receiving pleasure in the act that’s designed to bring children, with no regard for his wife Tamar who longs for children.

How do you think the Lord feels about this? **[v10]** Why? For reasons I already gave—Onan is acting totally selfishly here. But also, God really cares about preserving the seed of Judah. He will ensure Judah’s line continues.

But with the death of both Er and Onan, there's only one son of Judah left to continue his seed. **[v11]** Shelah is not old enough to marry Tamar, so Judah promises to give him in marriage to her when he grows up. BUT, did you catch that caveat. **[v11b, “for he feared”]**

So really, he's just telling Tamar he'll give Shelah to her when he grows up, but he's not going to BECAUSE he thinks *Tamar* is cursed, since her first two husbands died. It didn't occur to Judah that they died because of something wrong with them!

This where the story turns. How is Judah going to preserve his seed/offspring with two dead sons and the other whom he plans NOT to marry Tamar. Well, Shelah could marry someone else. In fact, later biblical texts imply that he did because there are lists of his descendants (Num. 26:20; 1 Chron. 4:21).

But it really seems like Moses is telling this story in such a way that the seed needs to come through Tamar, not some other wife that Shelah marries. Why does Judah's offspring

need to come through Tamar, if it doesn't even seem like Judah is worthy to be the one to have a lineage through whom the serpent crusher will come? His unworthiness is really highlighted in...

Scene #3: Deceitful Depravity

[v12a] So a son with her is out of the question. Perhaps he'll get married again and have another son who can grow up for Tamar to marry...but the clock is ticking. Tamar won't be young forever to have children. So what does she do? **[v12b]**

So this buddy of his takes him to another town to do some sheepshearing, which was an annual activity that included very hard work, often followed by hard partying. So Judah is in the mindset of pleasure-seeking. **[vv13-14a]** She disguising herself as a prostitute. They would sit at the entrance of a city and wear a veil like this. Why's she doing this? **[v14b]**

Judah lied to her and her biological clock is ticking. So what's her solution? Not to get just any child, but to ensure Judah is the dad!

Isn't it amazing the sinful measures people are willing to take to get what they want? Beware of this! Even a good desire, like having kids, can so overtake you that you are willing to do (perhaps) grossly sinful things to get what you want!

Tamar's gonna get what she wants and she knows *how* to get it because she's familiar with Judah's lustful impulsiveness, as one who SEES and TAKES what he wants. **[vv15-16a]** Implying, he wouldn't have said this if he knew she was his daughter-in-law.

Which tells us a couple of things: 1) His moral standard is rather low. If he knew it was his daughter-in-law, he would've kept walking, but since he thought she was a prostitute, it was fine. His moral standard is really low.

BUT the other thing Moses hints at in saying he would not have done this if he knew who she was, is this: Judah's misperception is what led him to do what he does, and thus, Judah's seed is preserved *through* the deceit of Tamar AND his sinful lust. **[vv16a-17a]**

So they're haggling a negotiation price which further highlights his bent on sinning. He's not stumbling into this; he's having a conversation about it first. He's making plans. This is why it is so important to be diligent BEFORE the opportunity of sin presents itself.

Don't be like Judah who impulsively acts on his sinful instincts. "Look! A caravan! Let's make a few bucks and sell Jospheh into slavery!" "Oh, a Canaanite woman! Who cares if she worships false god, I wanna marry her!" "Hmmm...a prostitute. This sounds like a good time that no one will have to know about, except my good buddy Hirah, the Adullamite who will keep it quiet for me."

Resolve NOW to obey the Lord. Don't wait until temptation is right before you. You'll fail like Judah who negotiates with sin.

In this back-and-forth, negotiation, Tamar acts like she needs assurance he will pay her the goat. Look at her request. **[v17b-18a]** See what she's doing? She's basically asking for his ID.

A “signet” was a cylinder-shaped imprinter used to seal documents or mark objects that belonged to you. *It’s like the imprint I use for the books in my office that mark the books with my initials “JDH.”* So she asks for a signet/seal hanging around his neck by a cord...

AND she asks for his staff, which would’ve had distinct carvings associate with Judah’s family. So these are objectively verifiable objects of Judah’s identity. Tamar is smart. This would be her way to expose him.

And dumb Judah is just ruled by his own lusts, so he hands the stuff over! WHY would hand over his ID cards to one he thinks is a prostitute? What’s he thinking? That’s the problem, isn’t it? He’s not thinking. He’s only feeling! This is what happens when you let sinful desires take over. You do dumb stuff!

[v18b] She got exactly what she wanted—pregnant. Since Judah was unwilling to give her his seed in his son Shelah, she decided to get his seed directly from him. **[v19]** Like nothing happened. Judah’s no better...

Scene #4: Self-Preservation [v20] Judah is more committed to keeping his promise to a “prostitute” of a goat than he is to keep his promise to his own daughter-in-law to give her his son in marriage. Clearly his motive is self-preservation. She’s got his stuff! She can expose what he did she wants to.

So he sends his buddy to get his ID back! The problem is, she’s nowhere to be found! **[vv21-22]** Notice how his response reveals a kind of self-preservation—like he’s wiping his hands clean. **[v23]** “I did what I said I would do. My hands are clean.” No, they’re not. Sending a goat does not atone for what you did!

Plus, he thinks if they keep looking for her, he’ll be laughed at because a prostitute outwitted him. That’s what bothers him—looking dumber than a prostitute. He should be bothered by what he did with a prostitute.

It is so easy to justify our sin with artificial self-atonement. Judah feels justified and so he puts this whole thing behind him. Then, we come to...

Scene #5: Exposed Hypocrisy [v24a-b]

That word “immorality” is the same word for prostitution in v15. So get this: Judah hears, “She’s committed prostitution.” You would think, then, he would recall that he did the same thing three months before! **[v24b]**

You’re supposed to feel how outrageous his hypocrisy is! His statement in the original language is just two words, “Bring, burn.” No hesitation, showing how quick he is judge her for the very sin HE KNEW HE also committed!

Now, he didn’t know it was *his* sin that caused her pregnancy, but he did know, three months prior. As Alex Duke puts: “Hypocrites are often legalists when it comes to other people’s obedience.” (Duke, 181) And I would add, they’re often far harsher with other people’s sin than they are their own.

And I think he wants her dead so he could hand off his son (Shelah) to someone else in marriage so he can pass down his family seed. Little does he know, he already passed on his seed! And it’s Tamar’s womb!

She knows it. Guess what she does? **[v25]** Got em! He's caught. **[v26]** He owns up, not only to his immorality with her, but also his sin of withholding his son from her.

Sometimes it takes public exposure of sin to bring true repentance. It's a grace of God. From here on out, Judah is a different person. In chapter 44, there will be a scenario where he'll offer *himself* into slavery *instead of* his little brother Benjamin; the exact opposite of he did with Joseph.

True repentance makes a big difference. But does it qualify Judah to be the seed bearer? This takes us to...

Scene #6: Sovereign Gracious Preservation

Look at the names of Judah and Tamar kids. **[vv27-30]** Interesting. The one thought to be the first born—and therefore, the favored—isn't. Zerah pulled his hand back inside! And then Perez came out. Do you know who he is?

Perez is great [7x] grandpa...of king David. And king David is the great, great, great (+25 more

greats) grandpa...of Jesus. That's why we read the genealogy of Jesus from Matt. 1. Jesus comes from the line Judah. He is the promised seed who came to crush the head of the serpent.

There's a reason why it is promised to Judah that a king would come in Genesis 49:10, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."

Do you see why there such an emphasis on the promised seed coming through Judah in this passage. And it came in the wildest way, showing NO ONE (and I mean NO ONE!) is too sinful to be redeemed and used by God.

Like, "Judah? After everything he did? Why him?" To prove this point: God's grace is so sovereign, and his sovereignty is so gracious that he incorporates into his plan the most unlikely people. Judah is the worst. But he repents. God forgives him. On what basis?

Think about it: Jesus was born to die for the very sin that was the means by which he was to be born in the first place! **[Repeat]** Jesus died on the cross for Judah's immorality. And it was Judah's immorality that brought about the birth of Jesus so that he could die!

You can't make this stuff up! God's grace is so sovereign and his sovereignty is so gracious that it is scandalous...and it is glorious!

Oh Christian, do you know that? God doesn't choose the best and the brightest and the most buttoned-up and the spotless. He welcomes the worst, the filthiest, the ugliest, and shows off how he can use even them.

May this be the mantra of your life: "I'm a complete idiot. I'm no better than Judah. But like him, because of Christ, my future is incredibly bright. And *anybody*—no matter what you've done or how bad you are or how stuck you feel—anybody can get in on this."

My question for you is: Why wouldn't you get in on that? Come to Christ today.