

Genesis Chapter 38 - Commentary By Mike Wells

Chapter 38 Overview: This chapter is placed in Genesis in the middle of the story of Joseph and discusses the immorality of Judah. It explains both the immoral conduct of Judah and its consequences.

Genesis 38 : 1-6 – *1 And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went down from his brethren, and turned in to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. 2 And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shuah; and he took her, and went in unto her. 3 And she conceived, and bare a son; and he called his name Er. 4 And she conceived again, and bare a son; and she called his name Onan. 5 And she yet again conceived, and bare a son; and called his name Shelah: and he was at Chezib, when she bare him. 6 And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, whose name was Tamar.*

- The focus shifts to the less than righteous Judah.
- He left his brothers and went to live in a town called Adullam and made friend there with Hirah.
- There, Judah “*went in unto*” a woman, the daughter of Shuah.
- It is not clear if he married her or just had a sexual relationship with her (most likely).
- Either way, she was a Canaanite.
- Over time, she bore three sons to Judah, *Er*, *Onan*, and *Shelah*.
- As they matured into adulthood, Judah, as was middle-eastern custom, selected a wife for his first-born Er.
- Her name was Tamar .

Genesis 38 : 7-10 - *7 And Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD slew him. 8 And Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother’s wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother. 9 And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother’s wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother. 10 And the thing which he did displeased the LORD: wherefore he slew him also.*

- The bible specifically notes that Er “*was wicked in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD slew him.*”
- His sin is not specifically noted, but his sin was such that God killed him!
- As was middle-eastern custom (later codified in the law of Moses in Deuteronomy 25:5),
- So Judah urged his second son, Onan to marry his widowed sister-in-law that she might bear children in her first husband’s name.
- However, Onan knew the “*seed should not be his.*”
- He knew any children born of this marriage would be accounted to his brother.
- Therefore, “*when he went in unto his brother’s wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother.*”
- This means that he ejaculated on the ground rather than vaginally.

- Therefore, he had taken advantage of his brother's wife, had ignored his father's instructions, and in short had simply rebelled.
- Because of his sin, the Lord "*slew him also.*"
- What clearly is implied is that there is such a thing as a sin unto death.
- God can and very well may take the life of one whose sin messes with His purpose.
- Another aspect to remember is that both Er and Onan were grandsons of Jacob of which God intended to build a people.
- God clearly drew the line here and stopped even worse wickedness from prevailing.

Genesis 38 : 11-13 - *11 Then said Judah to Tamar his daughter in law, Remain a widow at thy father's house, till Shelah my son be grown: for he said, Lest peradventure he die also, as his brethren did. And Tamar went and dwelt in her father's house. 12 And in process of time the daughter of Shuah Judah's wife died; and Judah was comforted, and went up unto his sheepshearers to Timnath, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. 13 And it was told Tamar, saying, Behold thy father in law goeth up to Timnath to shear his sheep.*

- Judah instructed his daughter-in-law, Tamar, to wait for Shelah to be of age to marry and he would give him to her and she agreed.
- Meanwhile, Judah's wife/common law wife died.
- After a time of mourning, Judah '*left town*' with his friend Hirah and went to Timnath to shear his sheep.
- What clearly is implied is that though Judah had promised to give his youngest son Shelah to Tamar, he had not.

Genesis 38 : 14-18 - *14 And she put her widow's garments off from her, and covered her with a vail, and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place, which is by the way to Timnath; for she saw that Shelah was grown, and she was not given unto him to wife. 15 When Judah saw her, he thought her to be an harlot; because she had covered her face. 16 And he turned unto her by the way, and said, Go to, I pray thee, let me come in unto thee; (for he knew not that she was his daughter in law.) And she said, What wilt thou give me, that thou mayest come in unto me? 17 And he said, I will send thee a kid from the flock. And she said, Wilt thou give me a pledge, till thou send it? 18 And he said, What pledge shall I give thee? And she said, Thy signet, and thy bracelets, and thy staff that is in thine hand. And he gave it her, and came in unto her, and she conceived by him.*

- Tamar, apparently in frustration and perhaps spite, decided to take matters into her own hands.
- She posed as a common prostitute.
- The mention of a vail was not unique to an harlot as most women of the day were so attired in public.
- However, it did hide her identity.
- She sat by a public trail or open area frequently traveled and must have advertised herself so that it was clear that she was a prostitute/harlot as she was pretending to be.
- As she had hoped, Judah returned and thought she was a harlot.
- He propositioned her and she agreed.

- Judah agreed to pay her a kid-goat for her services.
- However, she insisted on a pledge in the meantime.
- So, he agreed to leave with her his signet, bracelets, and his staff until he could send her the kid-goat.
- Because she kept her face covered, he did not know who it was.
- She conceived by him.
- Both were guilty of fornication.

Genesis 38 : 19-23 - *19 And she arose, and went away, and laid by her vail from her, and put on the garments of her widowhood. 20 And Judah sent the kid by the hand of his friend the Adullamite, to receive his pledge from the woman's hand: but he found her not. 21 Then he asked the men of that place, saying, Where is the harlot, that was openly by the way side? And they said, There was no harlot in this place. 22 And he returned to Judah, and said, I cannot find her; and also the men of the place said, that there was no harlot in this place. 23 And Judah said, Let her take it to her, lest we be shamed: behold, I sent this kid, and thou hast not found her.*

- After sex, Tamar put back on the garments of a widow.
- Judah attempted to find the prostitute to obtain his jewelry.
- But no one knew of a prostitute in that area.
- Judah therefore had been robbed by what he thought was a common whore for considerably more than what he had agreed to pay her for her services.

Genesis 38 : 24-26 – *24 And it came to pass about three months after, that it was told Judah, saying, Tamar thy daughter in law hath played the harlot; and also, behold, she is with child by whoredom. And Judah said, Bring her forth, and let her be burnt. 25 When she was brought forth, she sent to her father in law, saying, By the man, whose these are, am I with child: and she said, Discern, I pray thee, whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff. 26 And Judah acknowledged them, and said, She hath been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son. And he knew her again no more.*

- Three months later, Judah found out Tamar was pregnant.
- He ordered her to be burned.
- However, when confronted she simply said, “*By the man, whose these are, am I with child.*”
- “*Discern, I pray thee, whose are these, the signet, the bracelets, and staff.*”
- Judah's sin and treachery was made open.
- He could only acknowledge that “*she hath been more righteous than I.*”
- He had reneged on his promise to give her Shelah as husband.
- She had obtained her desire in having a child.

Genesis 38 : 27-30 – *27 And it came to pass in the time of her travail, that, behold, twins were in her womb. 28 And it came to pass, when she travailed, that the one put out his hand: and the midwife took and bound upon his hand a scarlet thread, saying, This came out first. 29 And it came to pass, as he drew back his hand, that, behold, his brother came out: and she*

said, How hast thou broken forth? this breach be upon thee: therefore his name was called Pharez. 30 And afterward came out his brother, that had the scarlet thread upon his hand: and his name was called Zarah.

- As it came to pass, Tamar bore twins.
- As they came to birth, the first stuck his hand out.
- A midwife promptly tied a scarlet thread around his wrist, noting who would be the first-born.
- As it turned out the other baby was born first.
- They therefore named that baby boy, Pharez which means '*a breach*' because he had breached his brother.
- The other son was named Zarah.
- Thus Judah became father of two sons, Pharez and Zarah.