

Genesis 38 Does it matter whom you date?

Introduction

The Beatles had a hit song that began with these lines: ‘Love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love. There’s nothing you can do that can’t be done. Nothing you can sing that can’t be sung. Nothing you can say but you can learn how to play the game. It’s easy... If you say you love someone and it doesn’t hurt anyone then you can do whatever you like can’t you? This kind of reasoning seemed so persuasive in the 1960s. The old public moral standards based on the Bible were ridiculed in the age of the contraceptive pill and so-called free love. Everyone is so much happier than ever before –really? What a load of nonsense! The rich and famous indulged their whims even of the basest variety and only in more recent years has the truth emerged about the abuse and heartache caused in the free-love era. An older minister who had pastored in mainly urban ministries, outside of wartime service reflected in my hearing in the 1990s about the differences he and colleagues had experienced as pastors of local churches. A minister retiring around 1960 could have played a full-part in church and community and never had to face the pastoral challenges of assisting a couple whose marriage was breaking down, despite having served for several decades in local congregations. Fifty years later four in ten marriages fail –though the majority still succeed. However, the killer statistic is the one relating to couple living together. The overwhelming majority of unmarried couples who have a child together and choose not to marry have gone their separate ways by the time their son or daughter is eighteen. When you throw into the mix the fact that in 2011 51% of babies were born to unmarried parents, the first time in the modern era when this category of parents were the majority, it raises serious concerns about the future of the family structure in our country. 34% of children in our schools have parents who co-habit and 21% of babies as early as ten months old have no contact with their non-resident parent –usually their dad (statistics obtained from www.scotland.gov.uk/publications/2013) Then, when we add to this mix the recent Westminster Government marriage bill (July 2013) that allows either partner in a ‘marriage’ to be called the ‘husband’ or the ‘wife’ the potential for confusion is very serious. Is morality totally relative –whatever feels right for you? Or does God have a better way for us and other people? Genesis chapter 38 and 39 together make a powerful statement to our contemporary society. Two sons of Jacob, Judah and Joseph will face some moral choices that will have a profound impact on their future. The pressures they faced are remarkably similar to those faced by many younger and some not-so young people in contemporary Scotland. Whose example will you and I follow –Judah’s or Joseph’s?

Genesis 38 is not an accidental inclusion by the author or editor of Genesis? The choices we make about relationships are profoundly significant in shaping our lives. Equally for the ancient Israelites such choices had to be made correctly to secure their future in the land of Canaan. The pressures to intermarry with local pagan Canaanites would have caused the family of Abraham to disappear within a few generations had they continued in Canaan. The example of Judah makes this very clear. In Egypt, by contrast, the Israelites lived in segregated communities because Egyptians in the north of that country disliked foreigners, especially shepherds (Genesis 46:34). As a result for the 400 years they were in Egypt God allowed them to develop their own cultural and faith identity and become a Jewish nation that under Joshua was ready to enter the Promised Land. Genesis 38 shows what can happen when wrong choices are made, but by contrast in Genesis 39, where Joseph is under far more pressure than his brother Judah, this young man takes a remarkable stand for his moral principles, at the risk of his life. The challenge to us in our generation is this: am I going to be like Judah or Joseph in my moral judgements?

1. The sins of Judah

(a) **In his relationships** (i) **A mixed marriage** (Genesis 38:1-2) *At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah. ² There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. He married her...* Where did it all go wrong? Why *at that time* (Genesis 38:1) did Judah make such a choice? Why was the exciting story of Joseph's life interrupted by this less than thrilling one in Genesis 38? The reason is very clear too many people then and in this generation make the choices Judah made and similar consequences can also follow. The timing relates to Joseph being sold to the nomadic Arab tribesmen for twenty pieces of silver –not very much at all when divided between the guilty brothers. I wonder how many were happy with their blood money? It was Judah's idea to get rid of Joseph but his conscience bothered him and he couldn't look his suffering father in the eyes and keep on lying to him. There are many people like that who have committed some serious sin or crime who really struggle with their conscience afterwards. They know what they did was wrong –no ifs or buts. But it doesn't bother them enough to put right the wrong they have done. In one of the daily Bible reading notes this month I read an illustration of a man who had confessed in his will in 2012 to stealing a significant sum of money many years earlier and also confessing to 'awarding' himself a fake doctoral degree which presumably had advanced his career –possibly at the expense of someone else better qualified for the post or posts he had held [*Our Daily Journey with God* 3 August 2013] In this life he had evaded justice being done, but till his dying day he had gained no pleasure from his misdeeds. The tragedy we must acknowledge is that some people who behave in this way profess faith in God, as has been acknowledged this month by the Roman Catholic Church with respect to a number of former priests who were posted to two of its now closed boarding schools. How many more people have evaded justice concerning such crimes in our land God alone knows. Moses uttered some famous words to the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh after they swore to keep a promise to back the other tribes across the Jordan until they too had received their inheritance. He said: ²³ *'But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the Lord; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out.*

Judah had to leave his family moving to a place called Adullam where he met and married a local girl. Twenty-two years passed between Joseph's sale as a slave and the removal of Jacob's family to Egypt as the guests of Pharaoh when Joseph was Vizier (Prime Minister of Egypt) [J.M. Boice, *Genesis*, Vol.3, p. 894]. Thirteen of those years were to pass before Joseph was called to the high office in his adopted country; thirteen painfully dark years when hope and a future for him appeared to be non-existent, followed by nine years addressing the social and economic woes of Egypt before this family were reunited. Meanwhile Judah and his wife had three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah. The time came when the eldest son was of age to marry that Judah followed the social pattern of the era in arranging a marriage for him. Genesis 38: 6-7 records God's view of this development: *Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. ⁷ But Er, Judah's firstborn, was **wicked in the Lord's sight; so the Lord put him to death.*** The Bible gives no hint as to the nature of this young man's misconduct, but it had to be incredibly serious as this was the first individual specified in the Bible whom God directly executed [V.P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, Vol.2, p. 434]. There had been the worldwide judgement in the days of Noah (Genesis 6:7) and the punishment of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24-25), but never an individual punished in this way, not even murderers like Cain or Lamech (Genesis 4:9-15; 4:23-24). Whatever Er was doing must have caused grief to his father's heart, but might his behavioural choices have been different had his father faced up to his shortcomings? We will never know the answer to that question.

Judah's first sin was with reference to his brother Joseph. Then, unwilling to deal with his sin, he moves away from people of faith prioritising socialising with unbelievers and marrying someone who had no interest in the God of Israel. This was in breach of both Old

and New Testament practice. The most familiar verse cited on this subject is II Corinthians 6:14: *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?* A committed follower of Jesus Christ must not marry someone who does not share their faith. I understand that ten per cent of such marriages result in the other person coming to faith but that leaves the other ninety per cent. There are many complex situations – a colleague in a Christian ministry some years ago told privately of his heartache that his wife no longer shared his faith and was having a negative influence on their older children. It is not a new problem; the most influential Evangelical preacher in Britain at the start of the twentieth century, F.B. Meyer, could be preaching at Church on a Sunday evening while his wife Jeannie was presiding over card parties in the manse. It is possible that his daughter and grandchildren also had no interest in Christian things (I.M. Randall, *Spirituality and Social Change: F.B. Meyer 1847-1929* pp. 157-158). To be the first person converted in a family can be very difficult as it introduces something radically new into a family that an unconverted spouse might find difficult to accept. Often we have to make the best of life's challenging circumstances- but where there is an issue of conscious sin our responsibility is to seek to address it. If marriage to an unbeliever is not appropriate should a Christian date a non-Christian in the hope they will come to faith, prior to marriage? This is a most dangerous strategy because as a potential marriage date draws closer the tension regarding choices to be made can become a serious problem. God wants to spare us the heartache of problems that could have been avoided. Every pastor in ministry over a number of years can recall examples of relationships that ought never to have begun and the grief caused by mistakes people made, despite the good contrary advice given in advance to them. Our relationships do matter. We can feel the deepest sympathy for Christian women and men who long to be married but never find a suitable life-partner. However, the more painful situation by far is the plight of the person who married in haste outside of God's will for their life and spends the remainder of it living with the unfortunate consequences. Pastorally, this is a deeply sensitive and difficult issue. As a church family let us look out for one another, especially those whose relational circumstances are difficult for them. Judah was unwilling to address the mistakes he had made and as a result his children and daughter-in-law would suffer the consequences.

(ii) **Mixed parenting** A short time later, in line with local customs the unfortunate widow was asked to give herself to the second son Onan. Genesis 38:8-10 records what happened next: *Then Judah said to Onan, 'Sleep with your brother's wife and fulfil your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother.'* ⁹ *But Onan knew that the child would not be his; so whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to avoid providing offspring for his brother.* ¹⁰ *What he did was **wicked in the Lord's sight; so the Lord put him to death also.*** Notice what happened here. Judah dispensed with the marriage formalities and told the second son to cohabit with his brother's widow, at least for a limited period of time to ensure she had at least one children or children who could be legally registered as 'belonging' to his dead brother Er. Onan had little respect for his father or his cultural obligations and declined to do his duty, thus humiliating both the unfortunate teenage widow and by extension the honour of her family, together with his own parents and family. For God to intervene once in a family in this way was unique, to do it twice was incredibly serious. Would Judah sit up and take notice of what was going on? This is not just an Old Testament issue. In the apostle Paul's explicit guidelines for the observance of the Lord's Supper and the participation of individuals in it, I Corinthians 11:29-32 states: *For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.* ³⁰ *That is why many among you are weak and ill, and a number of you have fallen asleep.* ³¹ *But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment.* ³² *Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally*

condemned with the world. These instructions suggest that God had caused some in the Church at Corinth to suffer health issues and others premature deaths as a direct result of His intervention, in order that they might be spared the loss of their eternal salvation due to their wrongdoing. What does Paul mean by this reference to *the body of Christ* (v29)? I Corinthians 12:27 states: *Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.* To participate in a communion service while consciously refusing to be reconciled to or have fellowship with a known brother or sister in Christ is to risk the direct judgement of God upon us. This is incredibly serious and thought-provoking and reminds us that one deliberate conscious act of sin, if it is not addressed will likely be followed by others in due course.

Two sons dead and the third some years later approaching adulthood how did Judah deal with this one? Genesis 38:11 records the advice Judah gave to Tamar: *Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, 'Live as a widow in your father's household until my son Shelah grows up.' For he thought, 'He may die too, just like his brothers.'* So Tamar went to live in her father's household. However Judah had no intention of honouring Tamar. The years passed by and the injustice festered in her heart. A man brought up, however inadequately, to follow the God of Israel was steadily slipping into lower standards of behaviour than even the pagans around him. What was the underlying problem here? Judah had not only failed in his relationships but also failed to honour his promises. Character as well as conduct was becoming problematic for him.

(b) **In his promises** (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) *If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to her. ⁶The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.⁷ However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to me.'⁸ Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, 'I do not want to marry her,'⁹ his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, 'This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line.'¹⁰ That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandalled.* Judah knew how he ought to have behaved once again but failed to do the right thing. This issue was not only a pastoral problem in the Old Testament but also for Jews of Jesus' day. He was quizzed by sceptical religious leaders about the marital challenges that might potentially be faced in the life to come if a woman had been married to more than one brother in this life (See Luke 20:27-38). Their example was plainly ridiculous but it indicated that this custom was taken seriously by believing Jews at that time. Judah is not only damaging himself but also engaging in behaviour that is problematic for his whole family. If our conduct is out of line with God's Word it will soon affect our speech; if that is not addressed then our character will be shaped by the justification of wrong choices. One sin that is not dealt with leads to others as surely as one weed pops up in a garden hot on the heels of another one! May God help us honour Him in our character and behavioural choices.

(c) **In his folly** (Genesis 38:12-24) Judah's moral standards slip further. First he fails to guide his youngest son Shelah with respect to his responsibilities for Tamar. Judah decides to abdicate his moral responsibility here. Secondly, although we are sympathetic to his loneliness after the death of his wife, his use of a prostitute (or prostitutes?) is less than appropriate for a man in his position. The fact that he has no hesitancy in propositioning a woman he thinks is a prostitute in a prominent public place reveals that he doesn't care who has noticed what he has done. What is particularly nauseating is his response to the claim that Tamar has been working as a prostitute. Genesis 38: 24 states: *About three months later Judah was told, 'Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant.'* Judah said, *'Bring her out and let her be burned to death!'* His inconsistency is breathtaking, but it is a sober reminder of how far we too can fall when we go away from God's standards. Our

issues may never be of the variety that Judah faced, but the principle remains the same. How am I going to live my life in terms of the standards of conduct I will uphold in my personal life? Will I practice in private what I proclaim in church and amongst my Christian friends and family? The range of integrity issues in our homes, our workplace or anywhere we spend time with other people is deeply affected by the foundational moral principles we lay down ahead of time. Are you /am I investing in strong spiritual foundations so that when difficult times come we can maintain solid biblical standards?

2. **The Grace of God** (Genesis 38:25-30)

(a) **God can work in all situations for good** *As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. 'I am pregnant by the man who owns these,' she said. And she added, 'See if you recognise whose seal and cord and staff these are.'* ²⁶ *Judah recognised them and said, 'She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah.'* *And he did not sleep with her again.* ²⁷ *When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb.* ²⁸ *As she was giving birth, one of them put out his hand; so the midwife took a scarlet thread and tied it on his wrist and said, 'This one came out first.'* ²⁹ *But when he drew back his hand, his brother came out, and she said, 'So this is how you have broken out!'* *And he was named Perez.* ³⁰ *Then his brother, who had the scarlet thread on his wrist, came out. And he was named Zerah (Genesis 38:25-30).* Judah now has his conviction moment when he grasps that his Canaanite daughter-in-law had been operating with a higher moral code than he had. Yet although now sorry for his serious error of misjudgement two little boys had been born in circumstances that were less than ideal. Yet read these words in Matthew 1:3: *Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram...* This is the genealogy of our Lord in Matthew 1. Here are a number of surprises. First of all in the line of redemption are children conceived out of wedlock. Secondly here is the naming of a woman when genealogies were usually restricted at that time to highlighting the male members' names. God was honouring this woman Tamar. We too can face bleak and challenging personal and pastoral situations that admit of no easy resolution. If God could bring a redemptive outcome from this situation then no situation we experience is beyond hope and resolution. Do you need that encouragement this evening? What other lessons can we learn from this story?

(b) **Guard against presumption** Never assume that you or I can never fall into any particular sin, however unlikely that may be. If we spend significant time for the wrong reasons in unsuitable places; if we choose as close friends inappropriate people negative influences will corrode our judgement over time until our conscience is steadily dulled and unable to listen to the voice of God challenging us about our choices. Although the passage makes a particular plea to us not to contemplate marrying outside the faith it addresses a wider issue of the necessity of thinking, speaking and acting wisely in daily life to the glory of God. This necessarily encompasses all areas of our lives. A couple of decades ago approximately in the USA the senior pastor of one of the largest Baptist Churches preached a sermon against committing adultery strongly emphasising that he would never ever commit such a sin. I wonder what made him so vehement that day? What is profoundly sad about the story was that exactly twelve months to the day his leadership team met with him to request his resignation from his post because he had committed the very sin he had declared he could never contemplate committing. Paul wisely reminds us in some words in I Corinthians 10:12-13, how we ought to conduct ourselves in daily life. ¹² *So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!* ¹³ *No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* All of us may sin; all of us can resist the temptation to sin as Christians because of the empowering presence of the Holy

Spirit. But may we always be humble enough to recognise that but for the grace of God go I...

(c) **Guard against despair** Paul in Romans 7:21-24 declared: *So I find this law at work: although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²²For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?* No-one is beyond the grace of God. No-one is beyond the redemptive purposes of God in this life. The Bible is full of people who messed up. Abraham's dealings with his wife; David's carry on with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah; Peter who denied Jesus; Thomas who doubted him; Paul of the blazing temper who split off from the gracious Barnabas; and many more besides; to look within our own hearts with honesty is the best preventative measure to avoid 'holier than Thou' attitudes! God's amazing grace to sinners such as you and me is truly astonishing. Yet this is the reality that is experienced by the child of God. God looks upon us, in Christ as if we had never sinned. That is, as we shall be one day when we stand before Him perfect. All of us are a work in progress –God is not finished with us yet. Has He begun a work in you? Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus? If you have not done so may the Holy Spirit prompt you to say yes to Him tonight? If you are a Christian then remember with joy the words of Philippians 1:6: *being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus, Amen.*