

Five years ago... a study was done that concluded: *our brain blinds our mind to the unusual*. ... Researchers put a clown on a unicycle in the path of pedestrians of a busy city. The researchers asked people who walked passed the clown if they had noticed anything unusual. ... Everybody saw him... unless they had been on their cell phone. ... Three out of every four people who had been using their phone... did not see the clown. ... They looked back in astonishment... unable to believe they had missed him. They had looked straight at him... but had not registered his presence. The unicycling clown crossed their paths but not their minds.

There is a reason why I cite that study... just before we turn to our passage this morning in Genesis 38. **This** is a dangerous passage. It contains just as horrific scandalous material in it... as you will find in any R rated movie out of Hollywood. Genesis 38 is one of those chapters of the Bible rarely read in public... (rightly so perhaps)... for it contains the record of deeds of darkest shame... Several things **jolt** us. ... J. Vernon McGee writes:

This is another chapter that seems to be about as necessary as a fifth leg on a cow. After you have read the story, you may wish that it had been left out of the Bible. Many people have asked me why this chapter is in the Word of God. I agree that it is one of the worst chapters in the Bible...

But... before we read it... I must say that the Bible does not avoid telling the whole... sad... **truth** - about human nature. ... Human nature... as a result of the Fall... is **raw**.

But now... let me tell you why I cited the clown study. Let's **not** be so *focused on the wrong things that we miss what God has for us in it*. We will need to actively use our minds to allow the lurid details of this chapter to

immediately drive us to the far... far loftier thoughts and principles... that God would have us focus upon. So... I am going to read the chapter... in its entirety... and then I want to immediately shower your minds with several majestic tenets... which explain why it is in our Bibles. ...Are you ready?

Genesis 38:1-30

Last week... we studied Genesis 37... and it started the narrative about Joseph. He was just sold into slavery and sent off to Egypt. Next week... we will be in chapter 39... and it picks right back up with Joseph... as he arrives in Egypt. ... So what is this chapter doing here? It interrupts the entire flow of Joseph's narrative...? ... Well... "no!" it doesn't.

Let me propose four reasons for it being included... and being perfectly placed right here.

#1. – A major purpose for the book of Genesis is to show the fall of man... and God's plan for redeeming us. Genesis traces the family through Whom He will send the Savior... Jesus Christ! (This is why we have Genesis.) ... But without this chapter... we would all be wondering at this woman's name (Tamar)... when we read the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:3. ... Why is a woman's name in this listing...? Men are usually the only ones listed in a Jewish genealogy. ... But in Matthew 1... there are five women who are listed.

Tamar is the first of five women in the genealogy of Christ as we have it in Matthew 1. There is Tamar (v. 3), Rahab (v. 5), Ruth (v. 5), Bathsheba (v. 6), and then Mary (v. 16). ... Now this is what is so fascinating (Don't miss this...) Notably absent are the great mothers of Israel: Sarah, Rebekah,

Leah, and Rachel. ... Why are **these** four women listed (and then Mary)...? Because... all four were Gentiles. ... Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites... Ruth was a Moabitess... and Bathsheba was a Hittite. ... So Tamar and the others loudly proclaim that Jesus is not only for the Jews! There is hope for the Gentile nations. ... Without Genesis 38... the context of Jesus' birth line... and its inclusive message would not be as clear! ... (And by-the-way... don't let anyone tell you that the Bible is anti-women! Including 5 women in an official genealogy... was extremely progressive.)

#2. – Genesis 38 shows how dangerous it was for God's people to be in the land with the Canaanites. God was developing a people for Himself through Jacob's family. ... And there was always the temptation to live like your neighbors instead of like the people of God.

Beginning with the next chapter... we go down to the land of Egypt with Joseph. ... God is sending Joseph ahead... to preserve the family through which the Messiah would come... it would get them out of the land of Canaan (from the deplorable Canaanites) into the seclusion of the land of Goshen in Egypt. God had to incubate this fragile family... so He could use them. ... Had Jacob and his family continued on in Canaan... they would have dropped down to the level of the Canaanites. Genesis 38 reveals the necessity of getting the family of Jacob away from the degrading influence of the Canaanites.

Now here is a third reason for Genesis 38...

#3. - Judah got himself into trouble when he separated himself from his brothers and started to make friends with the Canaanites in the land. ... A loud warning is sounded within this chapter. ... A son or a daughter can go

astray within a family. (A young man or woman can leave a godly home to go out into the world... spending years living a worldly life... a life away from God.) ... In fact... the world is always standing ready to swallow up a person who turns away from a godly influence because they decide not to trust and follow God. ... The person will become worldly... seeking the pleasures... possessions... and comforts of this earth... paying no attention to God.

Chapter 38 is perfectly placed between 37 and 39... because there's a dramatic contrast between Judah and Joseph. ... In chapter 39... we will see Joseph refuse to compromise himself with Potiphar's wife... but in 38... Judah casually slept with a strange woman he thought was a prostitute. This chapter vividly contrasts the immoral character of Judah... with the moral character of Joseph. ... Judah's lack of integrity resulted in family strife and deception. ... Chapter 39 shows how Joseph's integrity and wise choices reflect his godly character. ... And his faithfulness will be rewarded with blessings greater than he could imagine... both for himself and for his family.

#4. – (and perhaps this is my favorite reason) ... The story of the patriarchs in Genesis reminds us of the grace of God... and His sovereignty in human life. ... That God would pick a man like Judah and make him a prince in Israel... and then send His own Son into the world... not merely from Judah's descendants... but from the very outworking of these very disgusting events recorded in Genesis 38... is nothing less than a miracle of grace. ... This doesn't mean that God approved of these behaviors... because these sins were ultimately revealed and judged. ... But it does

mean that God can take the weak things of this world... and accomplish His purposes.

So with these four noble purposes of this chapter in mind... let's dip back into the passage... with a high purpose.

Genesis 38:1-2

Judah actually moved only about eight miles from his father... to the village of Adullam. ... But note... it was a Canaanite village... a village of the world... where there were no true believers. ... Judah moved out into a worldly environment... out into a place where there would be no godly influence whatsoever. ... This seems to have been an act of willful indiscretion in Judah.

Judah forsook his godly family... well... he left the influence of his godly father... anyway. ... Notice how Scripture says that he left his brothers... not his father. ... Normally in describing a moving away... it would say the head of the household... UNLESS there is a point being made... (and I think there is!) ... What is being expressed here is the idea is that he was leaving - to get away from his brothers.

Judah just could take no more. He had to get away from it all... so he left... trying to flee his guilt and the entire situation.

Joseph had been sold into slavery. Judah had pocketed his share of the loot... but he had an overwhelming nagging conscience. ... Day by day he had to look upon his aging father's grief... which he would not allow any of them to console. ... And night after night Judah would awaken with Joseph's despairing cry ringing in his ears. ... It made him so restless that

he did what many people do when they can no longer stand the results of their misdeeds. He moved out... to a worldly environment... where there was no godly influence. How many people leave the church today... fleeing a bad situation there... or in their home... and they try to soak up their problems... by seeking pleasures where there is little (if any) godly influence)...?

Judah sought the companionship of the ungodly. He went out into the world... because it seemed a change for the better. ... He made friends with Hirah... who soon became Judah's evil genius. Hirah turns up three times in the chapter. ... First we see him as Judah's acquaintance... then as Judah's associate... and he ended up by becoming Judah's accomplice.

This friend did not have any wholesome influence upon Judah. ... Worldly friends will not encourage you spiritually or morally. (LISTEN!)... Whom we choose as friends... can help or hurt us.

It was while staying with his unsaved friend that one thing led to another. Judah was an independent... robust young man... so the inevitable happened: he became attracted to a young lady. Evidently it was **lust** at first sight... ("a union based on chemistry rather than principle") — because the language describing their relationship is minimal and abrupt. Judah married an unbeliever. She was "the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shuah." ... That is to say... she was a raw pagan and a pagan of the very worst kind... (a **Canaanite** pagan)... a member of a sin-cursed race that practiced a religion of utter **vileness**.

And notice how the name of this Canaanite woman is not even given. She is not afforded the most basic dignity whatsoever! She is merely identified as the daughter of Shua (whoever he is...) so we are told enough to know that she was a literal person in history... but we get the idea that the writer of Scripture did not see any respectability in her.

All Jacob's sons had long known that both Abraham and Isaac had warned against marrying the daughters of the Canaanites. Abraham had solemnly charged his servant Eliezer, "*Swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites*" (24:3). And when Isaac sent Jacob off to Mesopotamia, he "*called Jacob and blessed him and directed him, 'You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women'*" (28:1). ... So Judah... (Jacob's fourth-born son)... who now occupied the place of birthright... because his older brothers sinned against their father... knew full well that he must not marry a Canaanite. Yet despite his position and knowledge... Judah did just that.

Here Judah acts more like Esau... the non-elect line... by not keeping separate from the Canaanites. ... This act of intermarriage should cause great concern for the future of Judah... who may be forfeiting his role in the family by acting in this way. ... And remember – the future Messiah was to come from him.

Now look and see how Judah's Canaanite wife influenced Judah's household.

Genesis 38:3

The first son was Er (which means "the watcher"). His bright little eyes watched father and mother alike and took in everything—including his

father's neglect of spiritual things... and his mother's dedication to the vile practice of her pagan religion.

Genesis 38:4

The second son was Onan (and it means "strength"). But what is KEY here is that he was named by his mother. ... I think that the author of Scripture wants us to see that... and mentions (very purposefully) that she named him. Fathers were the ones who named their children... but she was the dominant influencer of that household. ... Onan would grow up to be "strong!" He was strong in wickedness.

Genesis 38:5

Shelah means "he that breaks." And the mother once again is the one who names him. ... With a pagan woman exercising increasing influence in his family affairs... it is not surprising that from here on... we are contemplating *Judah's wicked boys*.

Genesis 38:6

Hmmm... Judah found his own wife. He did not want Jacob's help. But Judah did not leave the choice up to his son. Judah selected the wife for him. ... Some have looked at this and have concluded that apparently Judah has learned the value of a father's counsel and wisdom. Judah in all probability knew the evil of his son. (It doesn't suddenly come.) Judah probably wanted to find a wife who could perhaps straighten him out.

The woman he chose for his son was Tamar. Her name means "Palm Tree"... suggestive of beauty... slenderness... grace... and usefulness. From the rest of the story... (mainly the fact that she really wanted to

produce the heir of Judah... suggesting her belief in the promise of God)... and from the position God gave that woman in the Messianic line... we conclude she must have been a woman of some character and noble aspirations based on faith... despite her pagan birth and worldly ways.

Genesis 38:7-8

The custom that informs this episode is an ancient custom that had been around (even) before God put it into the Law of Moses. It is called the law for levirate marriage (*levir* is the Latin term for a woman's husband's brother). According to this custom... if a man died without children... his brother (or nearest relative) was to marry his widow for the purpose of having a child who would carry on the family name of the deceased and who would inherit his property.

In a society that is subject to disease and warfare... it was not uncommon to find widows. ... Ancient societies dealt with this problem through levirate marriage (to insure an heir for the deceased husband.) That heir would ensure that the widow would be provided for... because he would grow up and take care of her in her old age. ... But Onan couldn't care less.

Genesis 38:9-10

Now, what was the sin of Onan that caused such a severe judgment?

#1. Onan just did not care or love enough to look after his brother's wife and family. This... of course... is a serious sin in any generation.

#2. Onan was greedy and selfish. He wanted all of his father's inheritance for himself... or at least as few heirs as possible... so that the divided portions when his father died would be larger.

#3. Onan was gripped by a spirit of rebellion. He tried to prevent children from being born to his brother. This was a serious wrong. Why? Because the growth and expansion of Israel was important during this period... and Judah was a son of Israel. A multitude of people had been one of the promises God had given to Abraham and Israel. ... Thus to deliberately prevent the growth of family life was a serious offense (rebellion) against God.

#4. Onan was being a hypocrite. In public he gave the appearance of doing what was right. He took his brother's wife behind closed doors. But in private... he acted selfishly. ... Therefore God judged him.

Genesis 38:11

Having buried his two sons... Judah tried to place the blame for their deaths on the innocent Tamar. She brought death and might kill his last and only boy. So Judah never really intended to give his last son to her.

Genesis 38:12

It was at that point that his unsaved friend... (the Adullamite)... showed up again... and instead of seeking comfort in the God of his father... Judah found comfort in his unsaved friend. ... Hirah knew how to cheer him up. *"It's sheepshearing time at Timnath," he said. "That's always a barrel of fun, Judah. Why don't we go up and have a good time? It'll take your mind off things, my friend."*

Judah agreed to go. Instead of asking God why the disasters had come into his home... he once again did what so many do - he sought to drown his troubles in the amusements of the world.

Sheep-shearing time was a time of celebration. ... The celebrating would lead to drinking and other evil conduct... as such celebrating often does. The celebrating would not strengthen Judah's character... but make him vulnerable to temptation.

Genesis 38:13

The promise by Judah to give Shelah to Tamar never materializes. Time passes and the wife of Judah dies. Tamar has been biding her time in her father's house but nothing happens. She realizes the promise Judah made will not be fulfilled. ... Tamar takes matters in her own hands. When she is told that her father-in-law is shearing sheep at Timnah... she dresses like a temple prostitute... and sits at a prominent place on the road. Her intention is to deceive Judah... and it works because he thinks that is what she is.

The Canaanite culture utilized cult prostitution... making its believers think it would promote better crops and better herds. ... Temple prostitutes presented themselves as the symbolic bride of the god Baal or El. ... Men would visit the shrine and use the services of the cult prostitutes prior to planting their fields... or during shearing season or the period of lambing.

Tamar... therefore... set herself up by the highway as a symbolic bride of a false god. She knew her father-in-law well enough to know that he would be a likely candidate for the services such a woman would offer. ... She had probably seen Judah doing this before. ... And sure enough... before long Judah came that way. ... With the loose morals of the world to guide him... and with a total disregard for the calling of God... he stopped and propositioned Tamar... not knowing, of course... who she was.

In arranging payment for services... Tamar protects herself by receiving as a pledge Judah's signet ring... cord... and staff to ensure that he would later send a young goat from the flock. (These were personal identity instruments... much like a drivers license or social security card today.)

Tamar becomes pregnant by Judah and then puts on again her widow's garments. When Judah tries to send payment to the prostitute and get his property back... Tamar is nowhere to be found because she had gone back home to her father's house.

Three months later... Judah hears that Tamar is pregnant... and he is outraged... partly because this would be an act of unfaithfulness to the family... and partly because her pregnancy is the result of immorality.

"Bring her forth and let her be burnt," was his harsh and hasty word.

Of all the world's prating hypocrites... it would be hard to find a worse one than Judah. ... Talk about the double standard! The only difference between himself and Tamar was that Tamar had been caught and he had not. ... *"Let her be burnt!"* he said... throwing dust and stones in the air... which showered back on his own head. ... We can imagine him continuing: *"Get the stake, get the kindling, get the fire, fetch the woman. Where is she, the immoral wretch! She has disgraced my family, she has dishonored the Judaic line!"*

As the executioners hurried off to Tamar's house... the news of a public burning spread throughout the town. ... Soon Tamar was dragged from her house and down the village street. ... *"Hold it,"* she may have cried. *"Hold*

everything. I have a confession to make. I should like to incriminate the partner to my crime."

What a sensation that announcement must have made. She was probably hurried back home to get the evidence she said she had. ... Then she was dragged back down the street to the square. ... The stake may have been already set up... and an excited crowd gathered to sympathize with Judah (and enjoy the sight of Tamar's death.) ... The shameless woman was hauled up before Judah... so that her death sentence might be ratified and her partner named. ... Then... we can see Judah's leathery face suddenly grow pale beneath his tan... his eyes stare in utter disbelief... at what Tamar had in her hand. ... *"By the man, whose these are, am I with child,"* she said. *"Discern... I ask you... whose are these... the signet... and chord... and staff."*

There was no more talk of burning. The shoe was now on his foot and a very uncomfortable shoe it proved to be.

And note the Scripture: he knew why she had done it. Because he had refused to give her to his son Shelah. She had wanted to obey the law of the land (the Levrite law), but he had kept her from doing it. She had wanted to be a part of Judah's family and fulfill her childbearing function, but he had not allowed her. She had wanted to give a son to Jacob's family, but he had been unreasonable and prevented her.

She had been more righteous than he. What does that mean...? She wanted the promised line of Judah to go forward... So... rather than slaying her and her unborn child... Judah would care for them as his own. He could

no longer give her to Shelah... nor would it be right for him to live with her as husband and wife... but he would at least acknowledge her son as his heir"

This is the best part of the story in this chapter. It reports Judah truly repenting of his evil. When confronted with the evidence, he acknowledged his sin... and even blamed himself more than Tamar. True repentance does not look for excuses nor does it blame others for one's sin. True repentance also forsakes sin, for *"he knew her again no more."*

Genesis 38 is a significant turning point in the character of Judah. He separates from his brothers and shows a lack of spiritual discernment by marrying a Canaanite woman. Such a marriage also demonstrates callousness toward the covenant. He is spiritually blind to the character of his sons and his life reflects the Canaanites among whom he lives by paying for the services of a prostitute. His confession of guilt and recognition of the faithfulness of Tamar to his own family is a turning point in his character... which will be significant for his role later in the Joseph story. ... When we get to chapter 44... we'll see Judah act as a righteous man before Joseph... pleading for the welfare of Benjamin... and offering his life as a pledge to save his little half brother. ... By God's grace Judah had become the man.

The last part of the chapter tells the outcome of this pregnancy and in so doing gives the reader the reason for this interlude being placed at this point in the narrative. The grace of God overruled Judah's moral mess and out of it produced Judah's successor. The Messiah would eventually come through Perez (the second born of the twins.)

It should be clear that the sovereignty of God is being manifest at every turn... throughout the book of Genesis. ... He is in absolute control. He chose Abraham. He is providing a family that shall become a nation. He has acted to maintain the purity of that family until it is fully established as a nation. This... he has accomplished... even though the family has consistently acted in ways that might destroy that purity. He has turned every action of humans who sought to control their own destiny into proof of his sovereignty.

In this way it is possible to see all of life as the medium of God's activity. He is not just active when we read our Bible and pray. ... He is also active when we live in our world... and we don't make the best decisions. ... So... when we wake up tomorrow... we don't wake up to a day without God. Tomorrow is God's day... for He made it... He formed it... and He will work in it. ... (LISTEN!) You may have blown it in the past... but He wants you to enter tomorrow determined to be His person in it... and to let Christ be formed in you as you allow his word to interact with your situation.

I close today with a verse that ought to encourage you... to this end. This is for every believer within the sound of my voice...

Philippians 2:13 (ESV)

for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.