

**SOVEREIGN GRACE ONLY  
RESCUES WICKED PEOPLE  
Genesis 38: 1-30**

*Please review this week's catechism question.*

Did anyone meet a new person after worship last Sunday?

### INTRODUCTION

I was at the funeral of an older, distant relative that I did not know very well. I overheard several family members who knew her well say, "If anyone makes it to heaven, she certainly will. She was the best person I ever knew." When you think about the relative goodness of various individuals, does it appear to you that some are more likely to go than others due to their "goodness" quotient? Does it appear to you that some people deserve heaven more than others?

Several years ago the notorious mass murderer, Ted Bundy, professed faith in Jesus. He granted an interview to Dr. James Dobson in which he confessed his faith in Christ and talked about the dangers of pornography. It is quite possible that this evil, cruel mass murderer may be enjoying the glory of Christ right now and forever. How does that make you feel? Does that seem fair to you? Does the thought of human beings who have committed such heinous crimes enjoying the love of God forever disturb you?

While the Bible argues that it is indeed a shocking and surprising thing for wicked people to be accepted into God's kingdom, yet when you and I are shocked and angered that other sinners are welcomed into heaven we are revealing hearts and heads that are not in touch with who we are. When other sinners entering heaven disturbs us, we show that we do not view ourselves as sinners. We reveal that we view ourselves as better than, more deserving than others.

In today's study we are confronted with the horrible reality of human sinfulness and the astonishing grace of God saving perverse humans. This chapter is included in the Bible to humble us and to fill us with

hope. Let's ask God to do those two works in us as we discuss this sordid story.

### STUDY

1. Verse 1 begins by saying, "It happened at this time..." What time did these events transpire? Identify how long a period of time chapter 38 covers and summarize what we know is happening in the lives of the key players in the story from 37: 34-36.

*The events recorded here happened after Judah and his brothers sold their brother Joseph into slavery and deceived their father Jacob into believing that Joseph was dead. It covers a period of about 20 years. These events end just before Jacob's sons make their first journey to Egypt for food as recorded in chapter 42. It is in these days, while vicious Judah and his brothers go about the business of having families and increasing their wealth and Jacob mourns the "death" of his son and Joseph lives in slavery in Egypt. In the days when evil goes unpunished and father's despair and the innocent suffer. In the days when it appears all of God's promises to make Jacob's family into a great nation that will bless all the other nations of the world have ended. During these days, we see Judah's sin grow to full maturity. The length of time covered by this story is around 20 years (The marriage of Judah to the Canaanite to the birth of the twins from Judah's sons widow, Tamar.) This story covers the entire period of Joseph's slavery in Egypt.*

2. What is your gut reaction to the story contained in chapter 38? Compare 37:36 with 39:1, do we need this story in order to understand what happens to Joseph, the main character? *No.* Why then did Moses include this story in his history of Jacob's family? *To answer that we need to look at Deuteronomy 9:4-6.*

3. Read Deuteronomy 9: 4-6. What error is the Lord through Moses warning the Jewish nation to avoid as they prepare to go in and take over the land of Canaan as God promised?

*He is warning them not to think that the reason God chose them and is going to bless them is because they are good and righteous people. The*

*reality is that they are stiff-necked people and so the reason he is going to bless them is not due to their righteousness but to his choosing them.*

4. Moses wrote the history of the Jewish forefathers (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) for the people of Israel as they prepared to go into the land of Canaan. Why did he record Genesis 38 for them?

*Moses is out to convince the Jewish people of their sinfulness so that they will understand the greatness of God's grace. God is the hero of these stories, not the humans in them so Moses wants to make crystal clear that the reason for any success in the life of the Israelite nation is not due to their own goodness but rather due to God's gracious concern for them, which they never did anything to deserve or earn. This passage then seeks to make plain the depth and reality of human sin and the greatness of God's grace.*

5. Identify the sin(s) committed by the people in this story in each of these verses.

A. Verses 1-6 (Clues: Gen. 3:6, 12:15, 13: 10-13, 24: 1-4, 28: 6-8, Deut. 7:1-6)

*Judah, the cruel and greedy brother who joyfully led his brothers in the sale of Joseph and in the deception of their father leaves his father's camp and goes to live among the Canaanites at Adullam. His best friend, Hirah, is a Canaanite. Judah leaves behind the people of God and goes to live among the enemies of God. Then, like Eve seeing the fruit and taking it to eat, like Pharaoh seeing the beauty of Sarah and taking her into his harem, like Ishmael taking two Canaanite wives against the wishes of God and his parents, like Shechem seeing Dinah and taking her and raping her, he sees a Canaanite woman and takes her to be his wife. This unnamed wife bears him three sons in rapid succession. Years go by and when the oldest son is in his teens, his father, Judah, gets a wife for him, named Tamar, presumably a Canaanite wife for his son. Thus, Judah, rather than living as one of God's people, becomes like the nations who live in hostility to God.*

B. Verses 7-10 (Remember it is God's will for the descendants of Jacob to have many children.)

*We discover that cruel and faithless Judah has raised a faithless and wicked son. Shortly after his oldest boy, Er, is married to Tamar and before they have children we are told that God killed him because he was "wicked in the Lord's sight." According to ancient law when a brother died without having any sons then it was the duty of his brother to have a son by his brother's wife so that his brother would have an heir. Therefore, Judah gives Tamar to his second son, Onan, in order for Onan to impregnate her so that Er would have a descendant.*

*However, the evil that is in Judah has spread throughout his family. Onan knows that if Tamar has a son for the oldest brother, then that son will inherit the rights of the firstborn of Judah. However, if there is no son born to Tamar, then he, Onan, will be able to take all the rights of the firstborn. Onan regularly seeks sexual gratification with Tamar but he refuses to impregnate her. However, Onan's evil is greater because he knows, as the grandson of Jacob, that God has promised to make the descendants of Jacob more numerous than the stars in the sky. He knows it is God's will to raise up descendants for the sons of Jacob and yet he refuses to believe the promises or to obey the commands of God. He despises God and God's promises. So God strikes him dead, just like his older brother.*

C. Verse 11 (Who does Judah blame for the death of his sons?)

*Judah works out a scheme to protect his retirement account, his youngest son, Shelah. His youngest son is still too young to be a husband and so he tells Tamar to go live with her father until Shelah is old enough to marry. However, as we see in v. 11, he does not intend to ever give Tamar to Shelah as a wife. As he deceived his father, so he ruthlessly deceives Tamar. He blames Tamar for his sons' deaths. He does not acknowledge their evil or God's justice in killing them but rather blames the helpless widow of his oldest son for their deaths. He has the authority to release Tamar from her vows so that she can marry into another family. However, he does not release her. He lies to her and intends for her to remain in a perpetual state of widowhood and childlessness while he pursues other options for his son Shelah. He abuses his power and authority and leaves his daughter-in-law to live in poverty and shame.*

D. Verses 11-19 (Lev. 20:12)

*Tamar knowingly engages in incestuous relations with her father-in-law in her lust for revenge and for a child. Judah willingly engages in sexual immorality because he knows no other way to live.*

E. Verses 20-23, especially v. 23. (See Luke 12:4-5)

*He cares what people think about him while caring nothing of what God thinks about him. He cannot bear the thought of being shamed in public when he knows God has seen his every action and he feels no shame at that reality. Here is human perversity on display. All of us know how this feels. All of us seek to keep our sins hidden out of fear of what people would think of us and yet we have no fear of God who fully knows all our secret sins.*

F. Verses 23-25 (See Romans 2: 1-3)

*What a spectacle this is; the lust-filled, greedy, hateful, cruel-hearted Judah, like a righteous judge, calling for the execution of the widow for committing adultery. Imagine it, Judah full of offended righteousness, calls for the death of his daughter-in-law! What a hypocrite!*

6. Have you ever committed any of the sins of which the men and women in these stories are guilty? For example: Have you disobeyed your parents as Judah disobeyed Jacob? Have you sought to gratify your sexual appetites outside of monogamous marriage, the only place that God permits the expression of sexual desire? Have you done evil in order to pay back those who have offended you? Have you feared what humans would think if they knew your sins but have not feared what God thinks, who sees all your sins?

7. Identify the evidences of God's grace in each of these verses:

A. Verses 1-5 (see Gen 28:14, 35:11)

*God promised Jacob that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. Judah is one of his sons and so when he has three sons by the wife of his lust and disobedience we are to see God's faithfulness to his promise. In spite of Judah's disobedience in living among the enemies of God and marrying into their family, God does not*

*forget his promise but graciously, against all expectation gives children to Judah.*

B. Verses 6-10 (Compare what Er and Onan do and what happens to them with what Judah and his 9 brothers do and what happens to them)

*When Er and Onan are killed by the Lord, don't you wonder why it is that Judah and his ten brothers are not dead? Er and Onan did evil in the eyes of the Lord and are summarily executed for their evil. Surely, the evil that Er and Onan did cannot be greater than what the ten brothers did? Why does God justly punish Er and Onan but permit Judah and his brothers to live? We see God's grace evident in the fact that Judah is not killed, as he deserves. Yes, he loses his sons and he is put to shame, but he deserves to be dead and in hell. God, in compassion, gives life and all the joys of living to Judah who deserves to be dead.*

We are told that Er and Onan did evil in the eyes of the Lord and so the Lord killed them. I know that I have done evil in the eyes of the Lord, so why am I not dead? How should I feel about this reality and respond to it (Rom. 1:4)?

C. Verses 12-36: How is it that Judah did not recognize his daughter-in-law when he was with her in the most intimate ways a man could be intimate with a woman? How is it that he gave away the signs of his authority and wealth to a prostitute? How could he be so stupid? How is it that he could be so completely oblivious to what was going on? How could the plan of Tamar work out so perfectly? How is it that Tamar's evil scheme should have such a happy ending?

*God graciously vindicated the oppressed but evil widow by exposing her oppressor and rewarding her with her heart's desire, children. There is no way Judah would have been deceived or that Tamar's plan would have succeeded without divine intervention. No human could have made this plan and carried it out with such precision on his own. God defends the oppressed widow by blinding Judah with lust and so giving her what she desperately wanted, children.*

D. Verse 26 (Ezekial 36: 26-27, Acts 11: 18, 13:48, 16:14, 2 Tim. 2:25-26, Eph 2:10, 5: 3-5, 1 Cor 6: 9-11)

*This story emphasizes that God does not make promises, keep promises and work in the lives of humans because they deserve to have him work in their lives. “God saves sinners” is the message of this chapter. Yet, we also know that the Bible clearly says that the sinners that God saves turn from their sins and trust him. In v. 26 we see the first indication that Judah is changing. He openly confesses his sin against Tamar. He acknowledges that it was wrong for him to not give his third son to Tamar. It was wrong for him to believe the death of his first two sons was her fault. It was wrong of him to enslave her to widowhood for life. Then, notice that while she and her sons come to live in his house, he does not have sexual relations with her again. The implication of the text is that he never has sex again, for the rest of his life. Why does Moses tell us that? It is because the audience to whom he wrote, the Jewish nation in the desert, knew that God forbids father-in-law—daughter-in-law sexual contact. It was incest and according to God’s law as recorded in Leviticus those who engage in this relationship are to be executed. Therefore, Judah, for the first time in this story chooses to live in obedience to God. He had lived life gratifying the lusts of his heart and now he lives a life of restraint. This is always the impact of God’s grace in a sinner’s life. The way you know that God is working in your life is that you openly confess your sins, you trust God’s word and seek to live in obedience to him because obeying God is more pleasing to you than the pleasures of sin.*

E. Verses 27-30 (see Gen 25: 21-26, then note that in Gen 28: 14 & 30:30 & 43 the verb that Perez comes from is used to describe the way Jacob’s wealth and descendants will “burst forth”.)

*In recording the birth of these twins to Tamar we see that God is graciously dealing with Judah and Tamar. First, God gives Judah the twins to replace the two sons that he justly killed for their sins. But second, notice the details we are given concerning the birth of these two boys. Again, you have to ask, why does Moses give us these details? The second born son, Perez, in a surprising, even miraculous way usurps the rightful place of the firstborn son. This is the point of the surprise of the midwife. Perez, somehow overcomes his brother, who stuck his arm out of the birth canal first, to be born first. Thus, we are*

*to see that this boy, Perez, like his grandfather, Jacob, the younger twin who overcomes his older twin, is destined to be a key player in God’s program to save the world. This point is further emphasized in the original language because the verb, “break forth”, from which Perez’s name is taken is only used three other times in Genesis. It is used on every other occasion to describe how the descendants of Jacob are going to burst forth into a great nation, with multitudes of people and wealth.*

F. Verse 29, “He was named Perez.” (See Matthew 1:3) The biggest question this chapter raises is how can God justly be kind to such wicked people? How does the birth of Perez point to the answer to that question?

*The birth of Perez is pointing ahead to the birth of one of Perez’s descendants who will be the one who dies for the sins of Judah and Tamar. When God is accused of playing favorites, of being unjust by killing and sending to hell Er and Onan while he blesses Judah and rewards him with eternal life he merely says, “I punished my Son for all the sins of Judah and therefore it is just for me to reward Judah with all this kindness, for the sake of my Son.”*

8. How does this story humble you? How does it give you hope?