

## Genesis (2011) 38A

- I've been making reference to Chapter 38 since we began the *toledot* of Jacob at the start of Chapter 37
  - At that time, we learned that this final section of Genesis told the story of Jacob's sons, specifically the sons Judah and Joseph
    - These sons are the focus because Joseph will receive the birthright
    - But Jacob will receive the seed promise
    - The birthright will give rights to a double portion of the inheritance and the right to rule over the family
    - The seed promise is that unique aspect of the inheritance that God Himself gave Abraham and his family by virtue of a promise
      - This promise said that through the seed of Abraham, all the nations of the world would be blessed
      - This Seed, Paul tells us in Galatians, was a veiled reference to the Messiah Jesus
  - Obviously, the story of Joseph dominates the section, but Judah's story is no less important
    - In fact, these two stories are closely related
    - The story of Judah makes necessary the story of Joseph
    - The story of Joseph tells us how God sent Joseph into Egypt to obtain the birthright over his brothers
      - First, Joseph earned it through suffering
      - And later he exercised it in glory and power
    - But the story of Judah tells us why God had to send all Israel into Egypt after Joseph

**[Gen. 38:1](#)** And it came about at that time, that Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.

**[Gen. 38:2](#)** Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her and went in to her.

**[Gen. 38:3](#)** So she conceived and bore a son and he named him Er.

[Gen. 38:4](#) Then she conceived again and bore a son and named him Onan.

[Gen. 38:5](#) She bore still another son and named him Shelah; and it was at Chezib that she bore him.

- To fit Chapter 38 into the overall narrative of Genesis, we have to appreciate a couple of timing idiosyncrasies
  - First, the events of this chapter last at least 20 years
    - They begin at the same point when Joseph was taken to Egypt, which was when Joseph was 17 years old
    - At about this time we're told Judah departs from his brothers, which means he moved out of the house and moved away from Jacob's family
    - It's not hard to imagine that after selling Joseph and watching his father's intense mourning that Judah couldn't stand to stick around the house
    - So he moves on to help put away the guilt and remove the burden of carrying the secret
  - Secondly, this chapter runs concurrently with the events in later chapters of Genesis describing Joseph's time in Egypt
    - Chapter 38's timeline ends roughly at the same point that the seven year famine begins in the story of Joseph
    - That happens when Joseph is 37 years old, 20 years after he is sold into slavery
    - So as we study this chapter we need to appreciate that these events are running concurrently with the years Joseph spent in Egypt
      - His time in Potiphar's house
      - And then in prison
      - And then ruling over Egypt during the seven years of plenty
    - Finally, the stories of Joseph and Judah merge again in Chapter 42

- When Judah leaves his family in the hill country he visited an Adullamite named Hirah
  - Adullam was a settlement in the Shephelah, a plain to the west of the hill country leading to the sea
    - While Judah is living there, he takes notice of a Canaanite woman, who is the daughter of a man named Shua
      - We're never given the name of Judah's Canaanite wife
    - In v.2 we're told he marries this girl and then they begin to have sons
  - This is the first time that a man in the line of the seed promise had dared to marry outside the family
    - We remember that the Canaanites are a cursed people according to the Lord's word through Noah
    - And the Lord reiterated this judgment when He spoke to Abraham declaring that the iniquities of the Amorite would be judged but not until a future day
    - So what does it mean when one of the sons of Israel begins to intermarry with the Canaanite women?
    - Judah is just the first son to make this move, but can the others be far behind?
  - Since Judah will be the son to carry the seed promise of Israel, can the Lord tolerate this intermarrying with a cursed people?
    - Any sons Judah might bear will be cursed as well
    - So this move has the potential to doom the line of the Messiah
    - His three sons to carry this Canaanite curse are Er, Onan, and Shelah
      - Er means "watcher"
      - Onan means "strength"
      - Shelah means "weak"
    - They are born in Chezib, which confirms that he has remained in the Shephelah away from his family

[Gen. 38:6](#) Now Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.

[Gen. 38:7](#) But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life.

[Gen. 38:8](#) Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother."

- After some number of years, the boys reach marrying age, probably in their late teens
  - So Judah arranges their marriages
    - He chooses wives from among the Canaanites as well
    - It's clear that Judah is fully vested into the Canaanite culture
    - Imagine Judah living among a cursed pagan worshipping people while all the while he is carrying the promise to bring the Messiah
      - The Lord Himself will come through this line
      - But in the meantime the current holder of this promise has become Canaanite and is moving his family toward pagan living
  - The woman he chose for his son was a girl named Tamar
    - Her name means "palm tree" and she was also a Canaanite
    - Within a short time, however, the Lord visits the curse of the Canaanites upon Judah's Canaanite sons
      - Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil through and through
      - And as a result, the Lord took his life
      - The wording in Hebrew makes clear that the Lord caused His death directly
  - This is a simple but often forgotten principle of scripture
    - The Lord can – and does – take a person's earthly life when it suits Him as a result of intense sin
    - I can't say what criteria God uses to decide when to end an evil man's life and when to allow it to go longer

- But scripture tells us that God may take a life to demonstrate that sin has consequences
- And He will even take this step against believers if necessary

[Acts 5:1](#) But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, [Acts 5:2](#) and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet.

[Acts 5:3](#) But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land?"

[Acts 5:4](#) "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

[Acts 5:5](#) And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it.

- Men cannot sin with impunity, at least not forever
  - God may permit a man to live a long life of sin, but if God does so, it will only be to the person's disadvantage in the long run
    - To the unbeliever, the extra time just means more wrath stored up for the day of judgment
    - To the believer, it means more loss of reward when our works are evaluated at the judgment seat of Christ
  - Instead, the Lord may choose to cut a life short as an example in the case of Ananias
    - His sin was made an example for the early church, so that others would learn to fear the Lord and respect the Apostle's authority
    - On another occasion in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul directs that a man be set outside church fellowship and allowed to experience "the destruction of his flesh" as penalty for a terrible sin
  - And this principle didn't end when the last apostle died
    - Even today there remains the possibility that those who sin showing no fear of the Lord are risking an untimely death

[Heb. 10:26](#) For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,

[Heb. 10:27](#) but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES.

[Heb. 10:28](#) Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

[Heb. 10:29](#) How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

[Heb. 10:30](#) For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE."

[Heb. 10:31](#) It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

- In the case of Er, we don't know what specific evil prompted his early death by God's hand, but his specific sin doesn't matter
  - We know that it served God's eternal purposes to put an end to his life so he could stand as an example by his death
  - And so that his sin couldn't do damage to the family of Israel and the future seed of Messiah
  - More over, Er was under the curse of the Canaanites, and therefore he simply could not be party to the seed promise
- Er's sin left him dead at an early age and his young bride a widow
  - When a man died leaving his wife without an heir, the law of the day required that the oldest unmarried brother of the deceased man take the man's widow as wife
    - In this new marriage, the first son produced by the woman is legally considered to be the son of the deceased man
    - The child is raised by the surrogate father, but the child takes the name of the deceased man and becomes the legal heir to his inheritance
    - Any future sons belong to the natural father in the normal way
      - Only the first born son belongs to the deceased brother
  - Today, we call this arrangement a levirate marriage, coming from the Latin word *levir* which means "husband's brother"

- After this time of Jacob and Judah, the Lord included a levirate marriage requirement in the Law
  - Probably the best example of a levirate marriage was the marriage of Boaz to Ruth
- Obviously, this marriage is taking place prior to the Law of Moses, so it was already a matter of custom in the land
- This is the expectation that Judah had for his son, Onan
  - Onan was to marry Tamar and the first son that Onan produced would belong to Er
- But Onan had other ideas

**Gen. 38:9** Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother.

**Gen. 38:10** But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He took his life also.

- While Onan gladly took Tamar as his wife, when the time came to produce a son for his dead brother, Onan took action to prevent his new wife from conceiving
  - The Hebrew verb tense in v.9 indicates that this was an ongoing behavior on Onan's part
    - Every time he had relations with Tamar, he would prevent Tamar from becoming pregnant
    - He was willing to take her and enjoy the fruits of marriage
    - But he was unwilling to fulfill his duty to Tamar to the full extent
  - Moses tells us exactly why Onan kept up this behavior
    - He knew that any son born of Tamar would not belong to him
    - The son would be considered Er's offspring, and so the son would receive Er's part of Judah's inheritance
    - But the law held that if Tamar never produced a son, then Onan himself would receive Er's part of Judah's inheritance

- So Onan is preventing Tamar from becoming pregnant to ensure he received not only his portion of the inheritance, but also Er's double portion
- As Moses says in v.10, the Lord was not pleased with Onan's behavior
  - "Not pleased" is an understatement
    - The Hebrew word is *raa*, which means wicked and evil
    - The suggestion is that Onan was working the purposes of evil
    - Perhaps without knowing it, Onan was an agent of Satan, working in concert with the enemy's plan
  - And why would the enemy want to prevent Tamar from giving birth?
    - Judah is the line of the seed promise
    - Should the enemy somehow succeed in stopping the line of Judah, then theoretically the Messiah can never come to defeat Satan
      - Already, Er has been killed
      - And now Onan is preventing his wife from having children
    - Satan sees an opportunity to fight against the Lord in this way
  - And who gave Satan opportunity for this fight in the first place?
    - It was Judah's willingness to bind himself with the Canaanites, who were an evil people destined to judgment by the Lord
    - Remember, the Bible teaches that we are in a war with the enemy

**[Eph. 6:12](#) For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.**

- The people who obstruct God's purposes are made of flesh and blood, as Paul says, but they are not the source of the fight
  - The fight is a spiritual fight directed behind the scenes by a host of powers that have as their goal disrupting and frustrating the plans of God



- And when we ignore the word of God, we are ignoring orders from the commander of our forces
  - We then may unknowingly play right into the enemy's hands
  - The Lord forbid Abraham's line from intermarrying with Canaanites because doing so meant giving ground to the enemy
  - Once Judah made that mistake, the consequences soon followed
    - Judah has produced three sons who are pawns of the enemy, and they are being directed to act against God's plan
- As a result of Onan's disobedience, the Lord took his life as well
  - While it's clear that Judah's sons died as punishment for their wicked ways, we must also remember that these boys were living under the curse of the Canaanites
    - They could never become a part of the line of Judah
    - Their offspring would likewise carry the curse
    - The children of God and the children of the enemy can never find a common path, according to Scripture

**2Cor. 6:14 Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?**

**2Cor. 6:15 Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?**

- The answers to Paul's questions are clearly "nothing"
  - Judah carries the seed promise, and his line can have nothing in common with the evil Canaanites
  - They do not share the same future
  - One is cursed, one is blessed
  - There simply could never be a successful union between Judah and Shua's family...God would never permit it
- Therefore, we must conclude that God's sovereign power was at work to ensure that Judah's sons were unsuccessful in producing heirs

- Once again, the Lord harnessed the sin of their hearts to direct their evil behaviors
  - And then the Lord acted to destroy them justly
  - Ironically, the enemy probably thought he was succeeding in stopping the line of Judah
  - In reality, the Lord was working to ensure the seed promise would carry forward in the right way
- So with two sons dead, and one son left, Judah begins to recognize a pattern that concerns him

**Gen. 38:11** Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, “Remain a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up”; for he thought, “I am afraid that he too may die like his brothers.” So Tamar went and lived in her father’s house.

- Since Er and Onan have died, Judah’s third son Shelah bears the responsibility to raise up sons for both his dead brothers
  - Shelah may have been too young to marry at this point, or perhaps he was just barely of marrying age
  - Regardless, Judah tells Tamar to move into her father’s house and become part of his household because Shelah wasn’t ready to marry
- But v. 11 gives us the real reason Judah delayed in marrying his third son to Tamar
  - Judah sees that two sons died early, and both died shortly after marrying Tamar
  - So he concludes that Tamar is the reason for his first two sons dying
    - Judah had mistaken correlation with causation
    - Tamar didn’t cause their death
    - If anything, it was Judah who caused their death by choosing to marry a Canaanite against God’s counsel
  - The real cause for their death was the Lord acting to preserve the seed promise

- Nevertheless, Judah doesn't want to take any more chances, so he holds back his last son
  - According to the Law, if Shelah is to marry he must marry Tamar
  - So Judah is simply preventing him from marrying at all
  - Judah is probably planning to wait long enough for Tamar to age past childbearing years
  - Once Tamar is too old to bear children, then Judah would be permitted to marry Shelah to another woman
- So as we end the opening of Chapter 38, Jacob's fourth son is faced with a sad situation
  - He has broken the family rule to marry a Canaanite
    - He has placed the seed promise at risk
    - And were his brothers to follow suit, the entire family of Jacob would be in danger of coming under a curse
  - But since God has declared that Israel will be blessed, then it follows that this situation simply cannot stand
    - Israel must remain separate from the Canaanites until the day comes for them to conquer these people and take over the land
    - In the meantime, the Lord must act to preserve His promise and His people
    - He has taken the first step in that direction by eliminating two of Judah's sons, thus preventing the line from continuing
  - But there is still the need to produce a godly heir from the line of Judah